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Reading Ethics: Modernism, Narrative, Violence

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

READING ETHICS: MODERNISM, NARRATIVE, VIOLENCE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
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PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Reading is often mistaken for a solo endeavor, one of the misconceptions about how and why we read that my dissertation seeks to undo. It is in this spirit that I would like to thank the community who has enabled, supported, and celebrated my reading over the many years it took to write this dissertation.

My parents, Marybeth and Randall Dyson, indulged my desire to read by letting me draw my own stories in the margins of their books before I could read and, who once I could read, kept me in a constant supply of new books through weekly trips to the Ramsey County Public Library. They modelled the value of reading voraciously, widely, and thoughtfully, in profoundly world-expanding ways. Their enduring support and unconditional love is life sustaining.

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violence, exhaustion. Their openness to learning from our shared texts continues to inspire my intellectual and professional commitments to the humanities.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iii

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER ONE: “BAD” READING: VIOLENCE AND VULNERABILITY IN THREE GUINEAS AND BETWEEN THE ACTS 22
   Woolf’s Scenes of Reading 25
   Three Guineas Turn and Turn About 27
   Between the Acts and the Grammar of Response 39

CHAPTER TWO: READING SUBJECTS: NARRATABLE LIVES IN MELANCTHA AND PASSING 55
   The Subjects of Narrative 57
   Melanctha’s Thick Language and Difficult Rhythms 64
   Passing into Narrative 82

CHAPTER THREE: EMPATHIC READING: TRUE FEELINGS AND JUST EMOTIONS IN MISS LONELYHEARTS 100
   Miss Lonelyhearts and the Crisis of Empathy 107
   Miss Lonelyhearts and the Costs of Empathy 125
   Miss Lonelyhearts and the Ambivalence of Empathy 133

CHAPTER FOUR: OPEN CITY, ATTUNEMENT, AND THE ETHICS OF READING 138
   Attunement in Theory 142
   Reading Open City 149
   A Hermeneutics of Susceptibility 168

CONCLUSION: ANXIOUS READING AND THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM 173

BIBLIOGRAPHY 183

VITA 192
INTRODUCTION

In her 1924 essay “What is a Good Novel?” Woolf answers her own question by explaining that a good novel is “any novel that makes one think or feel. It must get its knife in between the joints of the hide with which most of us are covered” (110). This violent metaphor is extended elsewhere in “A Letter to a Young Poet” as Woolf imagines reading as “rather like opening the door to a horde of rebels who swarm out attacking one in twenty places at once – hit, roused, scraped, bared, swung through the air, so that life seems to flash by’ then again blinded, knocked in the head – all of which are agreeable sensations for a reader (since nothing is more dismal than to open the door and get no response) . . .” (222). These scenes of reading seem like a dark departure from Woolf’s earlier vision in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” of the text as a bridge “between hostess and her unknown guest on the one hand, the writer and his unknown reader on the other” or as “a common meeting-place” that can be “reached easily, almost instinctively, in the dark, with one’s eyes shut” (330). Both scenes, the text as the home of the stranger and the text as a violent force, offer a stark departure from how we typically imagine reading. Woolf’s descriptions of reading are far from the scenes of reading we are more familiar with: the confident mastery of a critic, the pedagogical imperative of the teacher, the emotional identification of the student, the pleasure of popular, mass produced fiction, the scrolling digital screen, the fragments, advertisements, and disrupted formats of Twitter, Facebook, and new media. Woolf’s scenes of reading ask us not to think about how to read, but rather how we experience reading. In doing so, she shifts our focus from plot and mastery to questions of
intimacy, vulnerability, and exposure – figured violently in the “horde of rebels” and more hospitably in the figure of the hostess – and how they shape the positions readers take up in relation to the text. Woolf’s metaphors mark a shift from epistemological concerns – what we get out of reading – to ontological concerns – who we get out of reading. These scenes of reading challenge our theoretical conception of reading, situating reading as an experiential and relational practice and opening up ethical concerns about how we come to read and the positions we take up in the process.

In invoking Woolf’s scenes of reading, my aim is to call attention to the ethical dynamics of a less stable understanding of reading, to attend to the scenes of reading that are uncomfortable or difficult to assimilate into our experience of reading, and to resist taking for granted our relationship to the text and its consequences for imagining ethical possibilities. As Woolf’s descriptions so evocatively reveal, the question of reading remains deeply unsettling. Taking its cue from Woolf, this dissertation seeks to unsettle the ways we value and evaluate reading just as reading unsettles us.

Woolf’s essays presciently challenged readers to reflect on the ethical experience of reading, but it is not until the “turn to ethics” half a century later that literary critics and theorists developed a language to reevaluate and reflect on an ethics of reading. Indeed, renewed attention to the practice of reading is one of the hallmarks of the “turn to ethics.” In his introduction for PMLA’s special issue on the ethical turn, Lawrence Buell locates the question of “readerly responsibility” at the center of “ethically valenced theory and criticism” (12). Indeed, for Buell, “the model of reading experience as a scene of virtual interpersonality that enacts, activates, or otherwise illuminates ethical responsibility may nonetheless prove one of the most significant
innovations of the literature-and-ethics movement” (13). But while Buell presciently points to
the centrality of reading\(^1\) for ethical criticism in the twenty-first century, what has emerged is an
ethical criticism that has failed to rethink reading itself along ethical lines. If ethical criticism is
interested in the relationships created by narrative situations, the relationships between story,
storyteller, and listener, it nonetheless relies on a transactional account of the ethics of reading:
texts convey ethical meaning to the reader. Consequently, ethical criticism often figures reading
as an encounter between text and trained reader, the special province of the literary critic attuned
to the “singularity” and alterity of the literary text. But as Adam Zachary Newton notes, ethical
philosophies are consistent projects of decentering, whether subject, speech, discourse,
epistemology, etc. In failing to account for the ways that ethics decenter reader and text, ethical
criticism relies on what Newton describes as the “self-adequating ethos of the critic, who . . .
matches form to content, and content to conduct,” a critical practice “predicated on a set of
metanormative ‘ethical’ principles” (9). Ethical criticism that fails to rethink reading along
ethical lines, decentering the work of critic and reader, retains a rigid relationship between text
and reader, a relationship that forecloses the ethical possibilities of alternative reading practices
in favor of advancing prescriptive ethical or moral norms.

Disciplinary reading practices are deeply invested in a set of methodologies broadly
termed the hermeneutics of suspicion that reproduce reading as the product of a fixed relation
between textual object and reader or subject. Following Ricoeur's discussion of Nietzsche, Freud,

\(^{1}\) Each new “turn” in literary studies reexamines the politics and practices of reading as the central activity
of the discipline. While deconstruction, feminism, critical race theory, queer theory, and other valuable
interventions have transformed and expanded the methodologies of literary study, ethical criticism often
defaults to the content of critical or theoretical reading rather than attending to its methods.
and Marx, scholars have identified a hermeneutics of suspicion by a variety of names, often recognizing the methodological and affective investments in the stance towards reading. Whether symptomatic reading (Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best), paranoid reading (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick), or reading against the grain (Timothy Bewes), these terms identify a reading practice predicated on topological models of depth – meaning is beneath, behind, beyond. This model positions reading as an epistemological practice where the (skilled) reader makes the depths of meaning available beyond the surface of the text known. While this model suggests a kind of “reading between the lines,” Ricoeur traces its impulses to the dynamics of repression, complicity, and truth that shape earlier Marxist and psychoanalytic thought. While Marcus, Best, Sedgwick, Bewes, and Rita Felski offer specific critiques of the hermeneutics of suspicion, I want to focus on the consequences for the ethical dynamics of the reader-text relationship that follow from these critiques. In “Suspicious Minds,” Felski suggests that ethical criticism centered on the singularity and alterity of literary texts displaces rather than dissipates the force of suspicious reading and reproduces the same structures and categories seemingly undone in ethical deconstructive reading (217, 228). Felski argues that in “reading texts against the grain to discover their hidden meanings, critics fashion causal connections, imagine personae engaging in purposeful activity, assign responsibility, and often attribute guilt. In this sense, suspicious interpretation is an exercise not just in meaning-making, but in moral-making” (222).

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2 This cliché might sound familiar to teachers of writing and literature. In my classroom, we struggle to shift our reading practices from “between the lines” to attending to the contours of the lines themselves. I return to the question of reading in the classroom in the conclusion.
How we frame our relationship to the text shapes how and where we locate the ethical consequences of the experience of reading. The slip from meaning-making to moral-making that Felski identifies emerges from a hermeneutics of suspicions that reproduces the subject-object dynamics of humanist epistemology, the very dynamics that Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical philosophy explicitly works to undo. The suspicious stance readers and, particularly critics, take up in relation to a text frames ethics as agential, judgmental, and prescriptive, epistemological rather than ontological. If Levinas posits ethics as the ontological grounds for epistemology – ethics as first philosophy—an ethical criticism based on suspicious reading fails to address the ontological grounds that enable readers to “know” what the text means. Even critics insisting on the radical alterity of the text participate in “thinking through knowing, of seizing something and making it one’s own, of reducing to presence and representing the difference of being, an activity which appropriates and grasps the otherness of the known” (“Ethics as First Philosophy” 76). What is knowable, for Levinas, “is understood and so appropriated by knowledge, and as it were freed of its otherness” (76). Suspicious reading replicates the ethical dynamics of knowing subject and known object – even when that object is figured as radically other – and reproduces an asymmetrical relation between text and reader that locates ethics in the agency and mastery of the reader. In her overview of the “new ethical theorists,” Dorothy Hale explains, “The competent literary reader is . . . the reader who can occupy the position prepared for her by the text by accurately decoding (affectively and morally) the values implied in specific concrete narrative choices” (200). In this model of ethical reading, the reader is positioned as a judge, uncovering and evaluating the ethics of a given narrative. Readers’ discomfort with this position, Hale argues, only becomes “proof of [its] ethical efficacy” (193).
However, if we reimagine ethics as along the lines of a first hermeneutics, to echo Levinas, it would call attention to the ways that we are always already bound in responsibility prior to taking up the kinds of readerly positions Hale and, by extension, a hermeneutics of suspicion identify. Our discomfort emerges, then, in the recognition of the mutual exposure and vulnerability that structures alterity in the first place. As Geoffrey Harpham pithily explains, “Ethics does not solve problems, it structures them” (37). Woolf’s initial metaphors for reading traffic in this kind of hurt – the vulnerability of becoming the stranger or the guest, the risk and potential violence of the reader’s exposure to the text. As Woolf’s language suggests, we are not producing the alterity of the text, but rather subject to it as readers – mutual strangers in a vulnerable and precarious relationship. Ethical criticism that centers alterity and ethical judgment in the reader at its worst reproduces violent cultural forces that Levinas locates in humanist epistemology. Rather, it is the epistemological crisis produced in the encounter with a textual other that necessitates the ontological dislocation of the reader and grounds the reader’s ethical experience. Levinas contends that ethics “does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very mode of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility” (Ethics and Infinity 95). Ethics is the “calling into question of the same . . . by the presence of the other” (Totality and Infinity 43). Questioning the other calls the self into question. In the context of reading, we give ourselves over to the otherness of the text, but we are also dispossessed and displaced by the text. As Judith Butler sums up in Precarious Life, “We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something” (23).

Levinas’ critique of humanist epistemology and contemporary theorists’ critiques of a hermeneutics of suspicion both work to reframe the ethics of reading as relational, resisting the
desire to locate a singular agency on the part of the text or the reader. As Sedgwick suggests, the ubiquity of these modes of reading have made it less possible to “unpack the local contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller” (124). Reading for these “contingent relations” would entail what Tim Bewes broadly terms generous reading – reading where the object is the experience of reading “not simply of the text as encountered material object, but of the event of its production inseparably from the event of its reading, a reading with an eye to the reading that the text itself makes possible” ("Reading with the Grain" 21). The ethics of reading shifts from concerns with content, the text as object and reader as knowing subject, to the ethical potential within the relational dynamics of reading. Bewes argues that a generous reading is self-reflexive; it “is always, in part, a reading of ourselves reading” ("Reading with the Grain" 28). But, as Paul Armstrong argues in his “Defense of Reading,” it is not enough to contest current practices of reading by “disclosing the fallacy of their self-certainties” (92). Rather, reading ourselves reading, reading generously, would entail rethinking “how reading should proceed after its illusions have been exposed” (92). In other words, an ethical critique of the hermeneutics of suspicion and, indeed, an ethico-critical engagement with theories of reading should attend not only to the ethical limits of certain modes of reading but engage the ethical possibilities enabled by alternate reading practices. If reading is to remain at the center of ethical criticism and the central practice of our discipline, we need to ask what it would look like to read differently, read ethically, or, perhaps, read otherwise.

There are two ways we might begin to imagine an ethics of reading not built on a hermeneutics of suspicion. First, we might take the interventions of poststructuralism seriously –
not just in reconceiving the subject or language or power relations, but for how they reconceptualize reading. We might expand what Barbara Johnson writes of Jacque Derrida to the poststructuralist moment writ large: poststructuralism’s theories of writing (and language, subjectivity, and power) are ultimately theories of reading (45). Because poststructuralism asks us to think not about what systems and structures are at work in the world (as structuralism would) but how those systems and structures produce meaning, it privileges meaning as differential and relational. Meaning emerges in/as an effect of a network of differential relations; meaning depends on that network. As Wai Chee Dimock reminds us in “A Theory of Resonance,” what this means for reading, then, is that it is predicated on an “object with an unstable ontology, since a text can resonate only insofar as it is touched” (1061). The literary, then, becomes “not an attribute resident in a text, but a relation, a form of engagement, between a changing object and a changing recipient” (1064). Poststructuralism offers, to echo Dimock, a more resonant, relational understanding of the experience and practice of reading – one that is antithetical to a hermeneutics of suspicion. That, for poststructuralism, reading and its participatory role in meaning-making emerges through relation asks us to think how those relations might also structure ethics.

As Barbara Johnson and Wai Chee Dimock suggest above, texts make meaning only when in relation to readers, activated or resonating when a reader takes up the text. But if this makes writing, the object of literary study, ontologically stable, it does so in advocating for a different kind of reading activity. As Barthes argues in “From Work to Text,” the text becomes a collaborative experience put into play by the reader. Barthes’ reconceptualization of the literary object is what allows us to reconceive readers’ relationship to literature and the practice of
reading. The centrality of the reader for the text implicates the reader in the text – the text “requires an attempt to abolish (or at least to lessen) the distance between writing and reading, not by intensifying the reader’s projection into the work, but by linking the two together in a single signifying process” (Barthes 162). For Barthes, the text resists reading practices “identified with an organic process of maturation or a hermeneutic process of deepening” and instead sparks “a serial movement of dislocations, overlappings, and variations” – a move that echoes Derrida’s insistence that “[w]riting is read; it is not the site, ‘in the last instance,’ of a hermeneutic deciphering, the decoding of a meaning or truth” (Barthes 158; Derrida, Limited Inc 21). Barthes’ spatial language here, his framing of reading not as interpretation but as “passage, traversal,” invokes a central concern with relationality – location in the text in relation to the text. Writing, then, becomes a “social space that leaves no language safe or untouched, that allows no enunciative subject to hold the position of judge, teacher, analyst, confessor, or decoder” (Barthes 164). In conceiving of writing as a social space, the positions we take up in the experience of reading become sites of ethical imagining.

But Barthes goes farther in “The Death of the Author,” arguing that “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin” (142). If Barthes theorizes writing as a “neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away,” this does not mean thinking of writing as an ethically neutral space (142). Rather, the subject might slip away, but only to reveal the intersubjective relation that grounds subjectivity. The text resists moral prescriptiveness and a hermeneutics predicated on depth or suspicion because Barthes’ theory of writing emphasizes the contingent and collaborative relations – relations that allow us to take up positions in language and narrative rather than assume or reinforce the ontological and epistemological
stability of those positions. Writing does not express ethical content; writing engages ethics through the dynamic relationship between reader and text. Levinas argues that to “be in relation with the other face to face . . . is also the situation of discourse” and that “[i]t is language, that is, responsibility” (Entre Nous 10, 35). In trying to fix these ontologically unstable relationships, to fix meaning, we cease speaking to one another, we cease reading in the poststructuralist sense. As Derrida theorizes, echoing Levinas, it is “in this relationship, which is difficult to think through, highly unstable and dangerous, that responsibilities jell…” (Limited Inc 137). In poststructuralist reading practices that privilege a recognition of the ways that we are entangled in and made complicit in the writing of the text, then, the text becomes what Lynne Huffer describes as “the site of an inscriptive relation to an other,” or, in other words, the site of ethics (7). Huffer argues that in asking how “we know, read, and hear the other. . . how we answer [the] question will determine what we find at that site of inscription: the possibility of difference or the vast empty plain of the Same” (7).

Too often, though, reading practices, particularly critical reading practices, slip back to familiar forms and habits, traversing the “vast empty plain of the Same” rather than reflexively acknowledging the difference reading makes. While the discipline has ostensibly internalized and institutionalized the “lessons” of poststructuralism, the question of reading and the kind(s) of reading we teach reveal our failure to incorporate poststructuralism’s intervention in the experience of reading. In flattening the potential of poststructuralism, this mode of criticism reproduces the text as “an object-to-be explained rather than a fellow actor and cocreator of relations, attitudes, and attachments” (Felski, “Context Stinks!” 590). The sociability of the text, Felski explains, emerges from its “embedding in numerous networks and its reliance on multiple
mediators”; it is “not an attrition, diminution, or co-option of its agency, but the very precondition of it” (589). Failing to recognize the multiple attachments and investments in the collaborative act of reading relies on a model of consensus that is “itself the result of the stabilized solidity of numerous contracts, seems only to paraphrase, unveil, reflect, reproduce a text, ‘commenting’ on it without any other active or risky initiative” (Derrida, Limited Inc 146). The commitment to risk that galvanized poststructuralist theory in its initial eruption into the discipline is a commitment scholars have sometimes failed to follow through in critical and pedagogical practices – no more so than in ethical criticism. As Armstrong contends, “Reading is a contradictory, paradoxical experience through which we deploy our agency in ways that can reveal our lack of autonomy even as we may simultaneously feel a liberating playful expansion of our meaning-making powers” (96). Above all, poststructuralist theory calls us to read in a way that reflects on the reader’s positionality as both contingent on and complicit in the text. There is no way to take up a general, objective, and autonomous reading stance when the reader herself is implicated in the text. In holding on to the fiction of readerly autonomy, we limit our efforts to imagine the ethical possibilities enabled by our engagements with/in literature.

Poststructuralist theory has the potential to free us from habitual ways of thinking, reading, and relating – ways that operate on unethical models of asymmetry and appropriation – but that potential remains under-realized. This is in part because, as Pamela Caughie explains, poststructuralism not only shifts our thinking about language, power, and subjectivity, it shifts our critical practices. Poststructuralist theory moves from a model of criticism that “concerns itself with exegesis, determining the meaning of a work or else bracketing its meaning to analyze its form” to critique which “interrogates the effects of designating something as the origin of
meaning or truth, noting how what we think of as an origin or cause is the effect of certain historical, material, and institutionalized practices” (“Postmodernist and Poststructuralist Approaches” 148, 149). Yet Felski remains critical of poststructuralism because poststructuralist models of reading “[do] not automatically free us of the straitjacket of suspicion” (The Limits of Critique 55). Poststructuralist critique’s “self-reflexivity . . . mandates an ironic perspective on one’s own way of life, a deep-etched awareness of the contingency of belief and behavior” (‘Digging Down and Standing Back’ 15). This affective stance towards the text relies on a model of distance rather than depth but remains inextricably bound up in suspicious hermeneutics. Ultimately, for Felski, poststructuralist critique remains committed to a suspicious style even if it poses alternate modes of reading as suspicion’s antidote. We see this in the institutionalization of critique in the decades following poststructuralism’s initial popularity. As Felski and Elizabeth Anker note in their introduction to Critique and Postcritique, “Safely housed in the Routledge anthology and the freshman composition class, critique has become just another familiar pedagogical tool and research method in the neoliberal university” (13).

Critique’s disciplinary and institutional ubiquity, especially when marshalled in the service of the neoliberal university, dilutes its intended effects in the world.³ This disciplinary entrenchment means that while there is plenty of ethical criticism – what Jeffrey Nealon paints as the “tracing

³ We see this institutionalization in high school and undergraduate literature classrooms where theory gets reduced to “lenses” that students learn to apply to a text as if they are neutral ways of looking at a text, prescription glasses that you can take off or trade in if they do not fit the occasion, or as if producing the reading itself is enough to be revolutionary. “Critical thinking” becomes another evaluative category in rubrics, learning outcomes, course evaluations, and the bureaucratic work of higher education.
of preexisting ethical templates” – there’s little ethical critique precisely because ethico-critical work so routinely relies on the very hermeneutics ethics calls into question (xii).

Felski calls for a “recalibration of mood and method,” to “place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible” (“Digging Down” 22, *Limits of Critique* 12). Already evident in Felski’s provocation is a recalibration of spatial metaphors for reading, instead situating reading as a relational encounter.⁴ A less suspicious model of poststructuralist critique enables us to read mediation in terms of relation as Barthes does in framing the work’s operation as a vertical or hierarchical logic of revelation – the critic revealing the author’s meaning – while the text locates the scriptor and reader in the same horizontal plane as the text. Consequently, the task of new methodological interventions in the field might be less one of estranging or distancing readers from the text than one of reading for the ways we are brought together before the text.

If deep reading and distant reading encourages suspicion and estrangement from the texts we read and marshal the critic in service of prescriptive critical labor, Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best’s surface reading offers an alternative methodological recalibration. In their introduction to a special issue of *Representations* on surface reading and “The Way We Read Now,” Marcus and Best look back on the history of reading and critical practice and anticipate future directions for the discipline. In particular, Marcus and Best critique the model of criticism the discipline is built on. They write, “As literary critics, we were trained to equate reading with

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⁴ The idea of standing before the text resonates with Derrida’s “Before the Law” and his deconstructive figuration of justice and of ethics. Derrida’s deconstructive stance opens up a (necessary) relational and experiential space for reflection and self-consciousness before the law – a dynamic whose structural echoes we can read in the shift to alternate stances “before the text.”
interpretation: with assigning a meaning to a text or a set of texts […] not just any idea of interpretation that circulated among the disciplines, but a specific type that took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter” (1). They highlight the ways that this “symptomatic reading” or hermeneutics of suspicion result in an adversarial, antagonistic relationship to the text-as-object, reading, as I do above, a problematic retrenchment into the autonomy and agency of the critic. Rather, they propose that we might reevaluate and reimagine our critical practices in order to engage in scholarship “that attends as much to the complexities of the critic’s position as to those of the artwork but seeks to occupy a paradoxical space of minimal critical agency” (17). For Marcus and Best, that means attending to the surface of the text as resistance to models of interpretive depth. Defining surface reading in contrast to symptomatic or suspicious reading, they “take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through” (9). In elaborating the various reading styles that might be grouped under the rubric of surface reading, Marcus and Best position an “[e]mbrace of the surface as an affective and ethical stance” as an avenue for alternative critical practice (10). This stance “involves accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects…” (10). In resisting the models of depth, reading predicated on subject-object relations, Marcus and Best’s critique of ingrained reading

5 This echoes Felski’s arguments in The Limits of Critique. Felski aims her critique at both the topological depth model and the model of ironic distance or “standing back” from the text that she argues has become the paradigmatic style of poststructuralist reading.
practices gesture towards what an ethics of reading might look like when texts are freed from their objectivity.

In recent years, following Felski’s call for postcritical reading methods, Marcus and Best’s surface reading has been positioned alongside Heather Love’s thin description, Timothy Bewes’s generous reading, Eve Sedgwick’s reparative reading, and others as part of a broader postcritical turn which calls into question ubiquitous modes of reading while exploring and expanding disciplinary practices of reading. While I am not interested in tracing the contours of yet another disciplinary turn, I am interested in the ways that the postcritical turn’s participation in the discipline’s ongoing “method wars” prepare the ground for more urgent interventions amid the compounding crises of higher education. Importantly, the postcritical turn disconnects aesthetic value and political virtue, resisting the idea that critical reading practices are inherently emancipatory while also recognizing our complicity in both shaping the objects we study and their effects in the world. The diversity of postcritical reading practices also point to the ways they work to account for the scope and stakes of the humanities by engaging broader publics, new forms, and different modes of social and political work. They continue to put pressure on the political commitments and ethical values of the discipline’s core practice. Ultimately, the postcritical turn offers a crucial intervention in how we assign value to texts, readers, and the work of the humanities.

COVID-19 and the ongoing effects of the pandemic have only further exposed the crumbling infrastructure of higher education - the exploitation of students and student athletes, structural sexism and racism in hiring practices and institutional policies, mass adjunctification, a neoliberal orientation towards profit and profile, refusal to bargain with unions, etc. Already unsustainable and increasingly precarious, higher education institutions have responded to the multiple crises of the pandemic with brutal cuts and cruel policies.
If one critique of postcritical reading is that it encourages an apolitical formalism, it is answered in similar movements across the discipline to engage with the exclusionary and often violent underpinnings of disciplinary methodologies and imagine new approaches to historical archives, cultural texts, and classroom pedagogies. Christina Sharpe’s call to “become undisciplined” emerges from the specific contexts of Black Studies and the archives of slavery while also naming a vital alternative to disciplinary thinking (13). For Sharpe, becoming undisciplined creates space for “new modes and methods of research and teaching” within a climate of anti-Blackness and “epistemic violence” against alternative practices of knowing that continue to shape the academy (13). In taking up Sharpe’s call in the context of reimagining the field of Victorian Studies, Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong caution that un-disciplinarity is not ultimately emancipatory, but, rather, “invokes a set of strategies for living, thinking, and being within a negative ontology . . .” (“Undisciplining Victorian Studies”). Through “ongoing, careful, and deliberate effort,” Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong argue for “develop[ing] a truly relational thinking that does not stop at engaging scholarship across fields and disciplines for a richer cross-fertilization of ideas, but that might extend into coalition-based politics and activism and a refashioning of academic structures to better serve the purposes of equity and justice” (“Undisciplining Victorian Studies”). If postcritical reading initially pointed to the limits and possibilities of the predominant disciplinary practices, Sharpe’s intervention, and the way it has been taken up in Victorian Studies and other scholarly coalitions, including The Bigger Six Collective, #ShakeRace, #Raceb4Race, and others, importantly reorients and anchors the work of reimagining disciplinary methods in questions of justice in and beyond the academy, including the university classroom. Un-
disciplinarity is a call to reimagine the core practices of the discipline and confront the ethical
stakes and political effects of scholarly work inside and outside the academy.

Reading is at the center of those efforts. Kathleen Fitzpatrick opens her argument for
“generous thinking” in higher education with a scene of reading in a graduate seminar, noting
that students’ silence when asked to account for an author’s argument (rather than their critique
of it) is a product of “too little emphasis . . . on the acts of paying attention, of listening, of
reading with rather than reading against” (2). She concludes, “We could do worse than beginning
by revisiting the practice of reading itself, seeking a new understanding not solely of how
scholars read, or for that matter how general-interest readers read, but why all of us read” (90,
original emphasis). For Fitzpatrick, this means reaching past disciplinary boundaries for a more
generous understanding of diverse practices of reading and the diverse readers we might engage,
but, for Julietta Singh, this means “unthinking” the logic of mastery that creates those divisions
through our reading practices. For Singh, reading, in particular, “is vital to this process of
imagining otherwise and dwelling elsewhere, to the relentless exercise of unearthing and
envisioning new human forms and conceptualizations of agency” (6). Productively, Singh
points out that “[i]n order to loosen the hold of mastery, we must learn to read for it” (7, original
italics). Only when we can read for the logics that structure our practices of reading can we begin
to imagine alternative practices, including those texts themselves might offer. If we can unthink

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7 As in this introduction, Singh turns to the interventions of poststructuralism, particularly Jacques
Derrida’s and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s deconstructive reading practices as early models for learning
to read for the logic of mastery and learning to read without mastery (22). For Singh, reimagining our
reading practices also entails building on our inheritances. In this way, we can read Singh’s intervention
and the interventions of scholars in the postcritical reading camp as a continuation rather than a break
with deconstructive or poststructuralist reading practices. I discuss Singh’s alternate practice, vulnerable
reading, in greater detail in Chapter One.
the master practices of our discipline, Singh argues, “these texts, while in no sense offering guidelines for proscriptive future politics, ask us to open ourselves to reimagining ways of relating to each other - to others human, nonhuman, and inhuman to which (even when disavowed) we are mutually bound” (7-8). Reimagining our reading practices allows us to reimagine our relation to texts, readers, classrooms, and communities - work that has ethical value beyond our encounter with the text.

This dissertation takes its cue from the disciplinary interventions of the ethical and postcritical turns as well as Sharpe’s call to “become undisciplined” and Singh’s to unthink our mastery in re-examining the ethical value of reading, especially as embodied in ethical criticism, a set of values we take for granted even as we deploy them in defense of the discipline or as grounds for classroom pedagogy. Undisciplining our reading practices means divesting from beliefs about the inherent ethical goodness or even ethical neutrality of reading and the specialness of different kinds of reading (especially scholarly or critical reading), and, instead, attending more closely to what is made possible through different modes of reading, including “bad” reading and “bad” readers. This dissertation explores how and where we find ethical value in various experiences of reading - vulnerable reading, unnarratable subjects, empathy, and attunement - while offering alternative approaches for considering the ethics of reading. Asking how, why, and for whom we read returns us to the beginning, but it is only from the beginning that we might imagine new possibilities.

In exploring the ethics of reading, this dissertation turns toward modernist novels for its primary examples. While this choice certainly emerges from my training as a modernist scholar, I also turn to modernist novels for the ways they make visible the costs and consequences of the
work of reading. Derek Attridge identifies this narrative strategy as emerging from modernism’s “responsiveness to the demands of otherness” (J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading 5). For other modernist scholars, like Rebecca Walkowitz and Jessica Berman, modernism’s “constellation of rhetorical actions, attitudes, or aesthetic occasions” are motivated by the ethical and political demands of modernism’s historical moment (Berman 7). Modernist formal innovations such as free indirect discourse, unreliable narrators, stream of consciousness, nonlinearity, etc. produce an ethical discomfort with the “profanity of conflicting sensibilities” and ask readers to recognize the “limits of perception and the waning of a confident epistemology, the conflict between the exhausting and the ineffable, the appeal of the trivial, the political consequences of uniformity and variousness in meaning, the fragmentation of perspectives, and the disruption of social categories” (Walkowitz 101, 20). Pushing against the narrative realism of the previous century, modernist writers often explicitly reorient narrative around the problem of reading, or what Berman describes as the "effort, through narrative imagination, to explore the possibilities and limits of ethical connection across irrevocable distance" (40). As revealed in Virginia Woolf’s imaginative visions of reading at the beginning of this introduction, modernism’s shifting terms for the experience of reading - the rebel, stranger, host, exposure, vulnerability - reveal how modernist narratives negotiate the relationships between text, reader, community, and the world beyond, both resisting habitual forms of reading and working trouble, disrupt, and unsettle how we read.

While emerging from modernist studies and the work of modernist scholars like Attridge, Walkowitz, Berman, and others, this dissertation is less interested in making a specific intervention in modernist studies than it is in exploring what these texts have to offer our
understanding of the ethics of reading. Each chapter pairs a modernist novel or set of modernist
texts with a key topic or term in ethical criticism, examining the ways the text works through the
problem of reading and/or explores alternative reading practices. In Chapter One, I turn to
Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts* to explore the reader’s role in the ethical
dynamics of reading, arguing that making space for “bad” readers - those whose reading
practices that can be considered uncommitted, intimate, and vulnerable – can unsettle
conventional ways of reading and responding to violence and enable new ethical configurations
and political aspirations beyond the text. Chapter Two addresses the ethical challenges of reading
fictional characters. Attending to the ways Gertrude Stein’s *Melanctha* and Nella Larsen’s
*Passing* signal the limits of language to account for subjectivity, I contend that recognizing the
limits of narratability allows us to read for both the ethical violence and ethical possibilities
involved in narrating the lives of others. Engaging Nathanael West’s darkly satirical novella,
*Miss Lonelyhearts*, Chapter Three grapples with our ethical and affective investments in
empathy. Tracking the titular Miss Lonelyhearts’s crisis of empathy, I suggest that reading
empathy as an ethical feeling productively reframes our understanding of the ethical value of
empathy around its ambivalence. In Chapter Four, I examine how *Open City’s* metamodernist
portrayal of the flaneur as reader par excellence draws readers into the seductive fantasy of
critical mastery only to expose our complicity in the protagonist's ethical failures. Ultimately, I
propose that a hermeneutics of susceptibility centered on reading as an experience of attunement
can better account for the ethics of reading. I conclude by returning to the scene of reading in the
classroom, suggesting that disciplinary debates about the methods and values of our reading
practices have the most immediate and impactful effect in the literature classroom. How we read matters not because it is already ethical but because it can be.
CHAPTER ONE

“BAD” READING:

VIOLENCE AND VULNERABILITY IN *THREE GUINEAS* AND *BETWEEN THE ACTS*

In 2015, Virginia Woolf became an unwitting ally in a debate about the value of reading. Participating in the list-making machinery of digital publication, *GQ* sparked widespread controversy when it published a list of 80 “essential” books for men, a list only noteworthy for the near absence of women and non-white writers.¹ Lists like these that populate the web, repackage the old theory that reading cultivates personhood – masculine, rather than moral, in this case – as internet clickbait. Among the most vocal critics, Rebecca Solnit argues persuasively that the *GQ* list functions as a mirror of a particular brand of privileged white masculinity (“80 Books”). Solnit positions reading as an encounter with otherness – reading “lifts you out . . . not locks you down” (“80 Books”). In a second essay responding to criticism of the first, “Men Explain Lolita to Me,” Solnit expands her definition of reading, suggesting that reading demands a mode of sustained attention that becomes a “foundational act of empathy, of listening, of seeing, of imagining experiences other than one’s own, of getting out of the boundaries of one’s own experience” (“Lolita”). In exposing the limitations of GQ’s list, Solnit draws our attention to the role reading plays in how we imagine self and other and how reading shapes how we relate to others. In other words, reading, for Solnit, is an inherently ethical

¹ Flannery O’Connor was a notable exception.
experience. And the danger of perpetuating lists like GQ’s and the kind of reading it advocates for is an ethical risk, a denial of the ethical dynamics of reading and the relationship between text and reader. These prescriptive lists ultimately privilege texts that delimit our ability ethically to account for others. As Solnit reminds us, we read “[b]ecause art makes the world, because it matters, because it makes us. Or breaks us” (“Lolita”).

Tellingly, Solnit appeals to Virginia Woolf to bolster her cause, invoking Woolf’s claim in *A Room of One’s Own* that women “have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (35). But Woolf adapts and expands this criticism of habitual (and patriarchal) reading practices elsewhere throughout her writing. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf preempts the debate, cautioning that if books “are the mirrors of the soul,” they are just as likely to reflect “a tarnished, a spotted soul” as the “anguish of a Queen or the heroism of a King Harry” (12). Woolf’s ghostly presence both haunts this contemporary skirmish and points to its roots in modernism, linking our own cultural moment to the modernist movements of the early twentieth century. After all, Solnit’s injunction to listen and empathize neatly echoes Woolf’s own exhortation to listen to the Mrs. Browns of the world, to “never, never desert Mrs. Brown” as an embodiment of infinite human capacity and variety or, in Woolf’s terms, “the spirit we live by, life itself” (“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” 337). In situating the debate in an ongoing, century-long conversation about how we negotiate and articulate the value of reading amid schisms in publishing, the defunding of arts and humanities programs, institutional, economic, cultural, and political pressures on the humanities in higher education, and racist and misogynist violence, Solnit’s critique suggests the enduring need to reevaluate reading as a model for ethical relation. Like Woolf, Solnit links
aesthetic experience to questions of alterity, identity, community, violence, and vulnerability. The resonant echoes between Woolf’s modernist moment and our own underscore how unsettled and unsettling reading ethically continues to be.

Woolf emerges as a critical touchstone for this debate as a cultural shorthand for modernist critiques of social, political, and cultural practices, but her body of work reveals a deeper, more nuanced, and sustained interrogation of the value of reading. From her early work as an anonymous book reviewer to the notes for unfinished projects left behind after her death, reading surfaces as a persistent theme throughout Woolf’s writing. Indeed, Woolf’s fiction and nonfiction experiments with rhetorical and narrative styles to reveal the failures of conventional literary form to account for early twentieth century experience. That Woolf’s formal innovations are both prompted and sustained by violence highlights the ethical stakes of our relationship to narrative. Whether Septimus’s suicide and World War One in *Mrs. Dalloway*, reports of the brutality of the Spanish Civil War in *Three Guineas*, colonialism and subject formation in *The Waves*, or rape and patriarchal violence in *Between the Acts*, Woolf’s most experimental writing is explicitly and implicitly structured around the challenges of relating violence and our vulnerability as readers.

Woolf’s narrative poses our relationship to violence as a problem of reading, positioning response and responsibility as emerging from our experiences of reading. This chapter maps Woolf’s own scenes of reading in *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*, arguing that Woolf’s narrative disruptions and reconfigurations call attention to the ethical limitations and possibilities of how we read, offering an ethics of reading centered in responses to violence. Both *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts* position representations of violence as an absent refrain; their
narratives perform and prepare alternate reading practices that reconfigure the relations between text and reader in ways that expose the ethical consequences of aesthetic patterns that enable and sustain violence. Finally, I argue that Woolf’s narrative functions as a formal disruption of inherited reading practices, framing our response to violence as directly emerging from the dynamics of reading and offering an alternative ethics of reading centered on vulnerability.

**Woolf’s Scenes of Reading**

In his preface to Roland Barthes’ *S/Z*, Richard Howard quips, “... all telling modifies what is being told, so that ... what is told is always the telling” (xi). Woolf’s scenes of reading perform a similar reflexivity, shifting our attention from the content of the story to the experience of reading. Rebecca Walkowitz suggests these narrative strategies are evasive, explaining that it is Woolf’s evasiveness, a willingness to disrupt, divert, and redirect attention, that allows Woolf to “imagine models of social critique that would resist social codification” (80). But Woolf’s narrative evasions also work to center the experience of reading and its ethical consequences. In both *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*, Woolf offers both scenes of reading and scenes of ourselves reading, reframing the narrative experience not as a unidirectional “telling,” but reflexively around the relational experience of reading. If hermeneutic models of depth and suspicion produce the reader as a stable position, Woolf’s narrative modes call attention to readers’ instability, locating the reader in the shifting dynamics of reading, an inscriptive relation that foregrounds the ethical.

Both *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts* frame their scenes of reading around moments of profound violence – the Spanish Civil War, fascism, and photographs of “dead bodies and ruined houses” and the specter of World War II and a violent rape (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 83).
In centering these scenes of reading around encounters with violence, however evasively or indirectly, Woolf narrativizes the ethical stakes of reading, demonstrating how reading inscribes an ethical relation between text and reader, reading subject and textual other, and shapes ethical possibilities beyond the text. Emmanuel Levinas’s distinction between the narrative modalities of the Saying and Said offers a useful framework for thinking through the ethical effects of Woolf’s narrative strategies. For Levinas, Saying forms the intersubjective situation of language; it is the “the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification,” the “condition for all communication” (Otherwise than Being 5, 48). The Said refers to the way that language settles into codified meaning, the difference between what is signified and the moment or experience of signification. Narrative, Adam Zachary Newton suggests, is “part ‘Said’ . . . and part ‘Saying,’ the latter – the level of intersubjective relation – being the site of surplus, of the unforeseen, of self-exposure” (3).

Saying then becomes the “dialogic system of exchanges at work among tellers, listeners, and witnesses, and the intersubjective responsibilities and claims which follow from acts of storytelling” (18). Levinas’ distinction between Said and Saying positions a narrative ethics concerned with form or ethical performance over ethical content (105). Reading form as a question of intersubjectivity foregrounds relationality as less a problem of representation than a problem of communication in the gap between the experience of saying (or relating) and what is said (or related). In Levinasian terms, narrative frames ethical relation as a question of space rather than depth; the proximity between text and reader is inscribed in the experience of reading.

Woolf’s scenes of reading work to disrupt the “said” of the narrative, calling attention to the ways that the “saying” is both discursive and interpersonal, the ways that relating narrative is
both relating a story (content) and relating ethically (form). In *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*, Woolf’s narratives perform scenes of reading even as they call attention to the scene of our own reading. This often disruptive reflexivity in Woolf’s writing creates space for what Julietta Singh describes as “vulnerable reading” in *Unthinking Mastery* (22). Positioning vulnerable reading over and against mastery of a text or masterful reading, Singh argues that vulnerable reading is a reading practice centered on openness, susceptibility, and porosity (22, 63). In these terms, we might think of vulnerable reading as a reading practice organized around “saying” and the recognition of our own relationality and, indeed, vulnerability to narrative rather than the closed objectivity of a final narrative “said.” In reconfiguring the dynamics of reading to make space for the eruption of vulnerable reading, Woolf also makes space for alternate ethical possibilities enabled by vulnerable reading’s “[refusal] to restrict in advance how and where one might wander through textual engagement” (22). Over and over again, readers in *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts* are asked to be vulnerable to the places our reading might take us and the ways our reading might move us. By shifting the dynamics of reading, Woolf shifts the dynamics of relating, allowing readers to take up new positions against violence.

**Three Guineas Turn and Turn About**

*Three Guineas* is famous for its narrative digressions. Opening in medias res, Woolf’s fictional letter writer apologizes for leaving a letter so long unanswered, pledging to attempt to answer the question at hand: “How in your opinion are we to prevent war?” (5). In her response, Singh resists reproducing mastery and instead “aim[s] . . . to trace some of mastery’s qualities, drives, corollaries, and repetitions . . .” (1-2). And while Singh is interested in a variety of forms of mastery, she highlights reading, especially disciplinary reading, as a key site for the logic and practice of mastery. We master the text, we produce masterful readings, we teach others to read masterfully. I discuss some of the dynamics Singh references elsewhere in the introduction and conclusion of this dissertation.

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2 In *Unthinking Mastery*, Singh resists reproducing mastery and instead “aim[s] . . . to trace some of mastery’s qualities, drives, corollaries, and repetitions . . .” (1-2). And while Singh is interested in a variety of forms of mastery, she highlights reading, especially disciplinary reading, as a key site for the logic and practice of mastery. We master the text, we produce masterful readings, we teach others to read masterfully. I discuss some of the dynamics Singh references elsewhere in the introduction and conclusion of this dissertation.
the writer quickly shifts her attention to women’s education and professionalization, answering other letters and donating guineas elsewhere. Woolf’s evasions here illustrate the domestic roots of an international political issue, linking women’s education and professionalization to Fascism at home and abroad. While many scholars have read *Three Guineas* in terms of Woolf’s rhetorical style, I am less interested in the voices Woolf adopts throughout the text than I am in the spaces these voices make for readers. As Anne Fernald suggests, “Woolf’s interest in reading that is at once generous and critical teaches us how to read her, allowing us to continue reading even as we hear things that no longer please us quite so well” (15). This ability to address multiple audiences at once in the narrative doubling of *Three Guineas* also teaches us how to read its violence and our own vulnerability to violence’s presence in the text. While Woolf’s letter writer digresses and evades, photographs of “dead bodies and ruined houses” (propaganda from the Spanish Civil War) return as a familiar refrain. For Sarah Cole, violence as “repetition, an endless, regressive experience of return” is the “dominant characteristic” of *Three Guineas* (264). In *Three Guineas*, Cole suggests, Woolf “wants to find some kind of revisionary energy in these patterns of circling and cycling violence” (266). While *Three Guineas* is certainly instigated by and centered on a cyclical question of violence in the abstract (how can we prevent war?), unlike Cole, in this chapter, I read *Three Guineas* as animated not by violence itself but by how we read it. The epistolary narrative of *Three Guineas* positions readers’ responses to violence in narrative terms. In other words, how we read matters for how we imagine our responsibility to respond and where that responsibility emerges from. This shift frames the violence that occasions and fuels *Three Guineas* as a problem of ethics as well as reading, and, as I suggest above, these problems are inextricably entwined.
Three Guineas’ rhetorical conceit of the letter foregrounds the relationship between writer, letter, and reader. Letters, unlike other narrative forms, privilege dialogic relation. The text becomes a vehicle for the often vulnerable relation between writer and reader. Early in the opening letter, the letter writer explains that all writers instinctively draw “a sketch of the person to whom the letter is addressed” (5). Letters, she argues, are “worthless” without someone “warm and breathing on the other side of the page” (5). Woolf’s emphasis here on the embodiment of the reader highlights the intimacy of the reader-writer relationship centered in the experience of writing and reading the letter. Throughout Three Guineas Woolf explicitly invokes this “someone warm and breathing,” a refrain that highlights the letter writer’s dependence on the narrative presence of the reader. The writer drafts and then interrupts letters at the specter of the reader’s affective response: “The letter broke off there. . . It was because the face on the other side of the page – the face that a letter-writer always sees – appeared to be fixed with a certain melancholy” (44). Later, the letter writer sees “an expression, of boredom was it, or was it of fatigue?” and stops the letter (54). This disruptive concern with embodiment and affect not only highlights the vulnerability of this relation to the imagined physical responses of the reader but positions those responses as central to the value of the letter itself.

Woolf invokes the dynamics of epistolary address only to restage them in terms of embodiment, intimacy, and vulnerability. If, as Melba Cuddy-Keane suggests, conversation is “the informing trope of [Woolf’s] critical prose,” Woolf’s dialogic style calls attention to the participatory stakes of reading (“Rhetoric of Feminist Conversation” 138). Woolf’s deployment of the epistolary trope reimagines reading as an ethical event in which the reader plays an active role in the narrative. For Jessica Berman in Modernist Commitments, an ethical event is marked
by the ways its narrative “responds to, intervenes in, and changes its rhetorical and social situation” and “situates ethics in the intimate connection between teller and listener or between narrator and reader” (6, 46). In Three Guineas, the doubling and tripling of narrative layers and the narrator’s reliance on the intimate, imagined presence of the reader centers the “saying” of the text, reworking the dynamics of its ethical event to highlight the letter writer’s awareness of their dependence on the reader. In this way, Three Guineas anchors the problem of reading in vulnerability and the ways that it “brings to the fore subjectivities that are shaped by the intimate awareness of relations of dependency” (Singh 23).

If Woolf foregrounds the “relations of dependency” between narrator and reader, she remains skeptical of its ethical efficacy; intimacy does not guarantee understanding (Singh 23). Addressing the “difficulty of communication” between the fictional writer and reader, Woolf introduces the ellipses to which she returns throughout the triplicate letters of Three Guineas (6).

When we meet in the flesh we speak with the same accent; use knives and forks in the same way; expect maids to cook dinner and wash up after dinner; and can talk during dinner without much difficulty about politics and people; war and peace; barbarism and civilization – all the questions indeed suggested by your letter. Moreover, we both earn our livings. But . . . those three dots mark a precipice, a gulf so deeply cut between us that for three years and more I have been sitting on my side of it wondering whether it is any use to try to speak across it. (6)

Offering a litany of comparisons, Woolf rejects the traditional bases from which the letter writer and reader might connect: accents (language), knives and forks (custom), servants (class), talk during dinner (political and social discourse), etc. And, while Woolf argues in the letter that follows that the gulf is in part formed by gender and education, the final letter's transformation of the ellipses into a repeated refrain - “But here the words falter on our lips, and the prayer peters out into three separate dots…” (109). Ellipses become a textual figure that diverts attention from
the modes of relation built on the conventions of similarity to those built on difference. For Rebecca Walkowitz, Woolf’s evasions expose the “customs and conventions, social and psychological, that control what can be seen and what can be said” and the ellipses in *Three Guineas’* letters do so by disrupting the progress of the text (123). Rachel Bowlby draws our attention to the way the ellipses function as both a break and a continuity, highlighting both what language and the grammar of the sentence can and cannot accommodate (140). As Walkowitz suggests, this evasive narrative strategy “emphasizes the social conditions of blindness rather more than [it] rectifies invisibility” (121). But while ellipses make the limits of narrative visible, they also make our relation to the narrative textual. The ellipses make palpable the readerly desire for narrative access and closure by dislodging the progress of the reader, operating, as Bowlby suggests, “inside the sentences they disturb and deprive of self-evidence” (140). Instead, readers are suspended between sentences, between gaps, our desire for a clear destination foregrounded in the disruption of the syntax. But this suspension also implicates the reader in imagining new ways to “speak across” the “gulf so deeply cut” and to build new sentences “but differently” (Woolf, *Three Guineas* 6, 33). Like the epistolary frame, Woolf’s textual refrain asks the reader to reflect on the experience of reading, to locate their complicity in the “saying” of the narrative alongside their desire for a final “said.” In *Three Guineas*, readers are vulnerable to the ways the narrative shapes our desires.

As much as Woolf’s fictional writer works to locate her readers within the text, we (Woolf’s readers) are nonetheless dislocated by those very efforts. We may be “someone warm and breathing” on the other side of the letter, but we are confronted by the fact that we are not the readers Woolf’s letter writer addresses. *Three Guineas* stages a relationship between a writer
and a reader that is not you but nonetheless implicates you. Beth Rigel Daugherty suggests that Woolf’s narrative strategy works to “both accommodate actual readers external to the text and create the reader [Woolf and her fictional letter writer both] want within the text; they simultaneously address an audience and invoke one” (169). Through the doubled narrative structure of Three Guineas, Woolf builds multiple entry points into the surface of the text, scripting multiple, negotiable roles for readers without prescribing the value of their reading. In doing so, Woolf makes space for an alternate vulnerable reading practice by “refusing to restrict in advance how and where one might wander through textual engagement” (Singh 22). Indeed, the ellipses becomes a literal figure for this openness – an invitation into the narrative that nonetheless resists readers’ desire for closure and mastery, exposing readers’ vulnerability within the narrative. Three Guineas makes literal and figurative space for new configurations between writer and reader without guaranteeing where they might take us.

This reconfiguring, the positioning and repositioning of readers, is what Woolf describes as her “turn and turn about method,” a method Cuddy-Keane renames the “trope of the twist” (Virginia Woolf 35). Woolf’s narrative twists position and reposition readers within Three Guineas’ multilevel discourse, forming the terrain for a critique of habitual reading styles. For Cuddy-Keane, by foregrounding the role of the reader in making meaning, Woolf “disempowers the authoritative stance by situating interpretation within an on-going process of provisionality and exploration” (141). Woolf takes readers beyond “confrontations of differing values to an analysis of the way value operates, by alerting us both to the institutional production of value and to the ‘counter mechanisms’ within the community for challenging, contradicting, and subverting normative claims” (177). Woolf’s criticism of habitual modes of reading and encountering
violence in *Three Guineas* works precisely through confronting the production of value through reading. In other words, Woolf subverts normative styles of reading and political narratives of violence through the reflexive reconfiguration of the reader’s position in relation to scenes of violence. In inviting readers to confront the “texts” of war, the photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses, without the guarantee of a final interpretive value, Woolf’s narrative opens alternative ethical possibilities through the new configurations our reading might produce.

If Woolf’s writing evinces a desire “to imagine models of social critique that would resist social codification,” it does so in its willingness to open up these spaces for ethical questioning and its refusal to provide definitive moral answers (Walkowitz 80). The ethical uncertainty at work in much of Woolf’s writing emerges as a problem of reading. Molly Hite observes that this difficulty often manifests as readers’ inability “to assign what they perceive to be authorially sanctioned feelings and thus values to the main events and characters” (250). Indeed, Hite suggests that “getting lost in these labyrinths allows us to experience the complexity along with the urgency of ethical and political questions” (254). But neither Woolf’s narrative strategies nor the ethical uncertainty they produce are ethically neutral. Rather, they both work to disrupt the relationship between reader and text: “… one of the most obvious consequences of play with conventions of sympathy, indignation, ironic distance inciting condescension, and other affective responses is to prompt attentive readers to question precisely those evaluations that are familiar, habitual, and ready to hand” (266). For Woolf’s fictional letter writer, to respond in conventional terms to letters asking her to “fill up [the] form and join [the] society” would be to “follow and repeat and score still deeper the old worn ruts in which society, like a gramophone whose needle has stuck, is grinding out with intolerable unanimity…” (Woolf, *Three Guineas* 123, 125).
Rather, in *Three Guineas*, Woolf repeats with a playful, evasive difference, working through the form of the narrative itself to find new forms of communicating and rendering readers’ ethical positions uncertain. As Hite suggests, these narrative forms risk creating confusion and frustration alongside ethical uncertainty, but that risk also highlights readers’ active role in assigning value and their susceptibility to “the old worn ruts” of conventional narrative forms. *Three Guineas*’ ethical uncertainties open readers to ways of reading that might reconfigure readers understanding of the world beyond the text.

One way that Woolf retools readers’ response is by translating the problem of reading into visual terms, heightening the ethical dynamics of meaning-making through a different sensory metaphor. Early in *Three Guineas*, the letter writer suggests that “‘we’ . . . must still differ in some essential respects from ‘you’ . . . Though we see the same world, we see it through different eyes” (22). Sight, vision, looking – these terms pervade the triplicate letters of *Three Guineas*. Woolf uses sight and seeing as a figure for the limits of subjectivity. As Woolf’s letter writer explains, we see the world but the differences that determine how we see change how we relate to it. But the dynamics of sight entail different ethical dynamics. “Sight,” Levinas theorizes, “by reason of its distance and its totalizing embrace imitates or prefigures the ‘impartiality’ of the intellect and its refusal to hold to what the immediacy of the sensible would dispose, or what it would constitute” (*Otherwise than Being* 63). Woolf’s fictional letter writer reveals a similar anxiety about the dynamics of looking early in *Three Guineas*: “Photographs, of course, are not arguments addressed to the reason; they are simply statements of fact addressed to the eye” (14). As a shared (and politicized) experience, looking enables “some fusion” through which “we are looking at the same picture; we are seeing with you the same dead bodies, the
same ruined house” (14). Photographs, Woolf’s writer suggests, prompt or script a particular affective and political style of attention and response – “our sensations are the same; and they are violent…” – that limits what we can see (14). Where “speech cuts across vision,” for Levinas, sight commits a kind of “perceptual violence” in appropriating and fixing the other (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 212; Newton 76). Images, photography, sight disclose rather than expose. The gaze can know the other in ways language cannot. Seeing is paradoxically passive and active; we are absorbed by what we see as much as we absorb what we see. As viewers, we are vulnerable to the perceived facticity of what we see and to the limits of our vision. Woolf uses the ethical dynamics of sight – both in the images she presents within the text of *Three Guineas* and the images that remain absent – to explore the ethics of seeing and reading.

Woolf uses the spatial dynamics of *Three Guineas*’ photography to address what Cuddy-Keane contends is the central question for a “non-authoritarian writer”: “[H]ow do you communicate an intense ethical vision (which means imposing a way of seeing), in an ethical way (which means leaving the audience free to see for themselves)?” (“Inside and Outside the Covers” 172). Like Woolf’s multilevel narrative, the photographs constitute multiple viewers inside and outside the text. We see the photos alongside the fictional addressee of *Three Guineas*’ letters while the photos of “dead bodies and ruined houses” that form one of the core refrains remain absent. These absent photos form what Cuddy-Keane describes as a “semiotic counterplot to the procession of literal photographs documenting the social inscription of power . . .” (“Rhetoric of Feminist Conversation” 155). As plot and counterplot, the act or experience of looking becomes an alternate mode of encounter between text and reader. By “encompassing” a narrative’s field of vision “readers ‘take into’ their own – assimilate and become responsible for
– the acts of seeing and narrating which they read” (Newton 78). Referring to without reproducing the photos, *Three Guineas* effectively expands readers’ field of vision and their responsibility for what they can and cannot see.

However, in *Three Guineas*, this readerly complicity risks inaugurating a chain of what Newton terms “contaminated looking” (76). Indeed, the modes of seeing prompted by the photos of dead bodies and ruined houses result in the same sensations, the same words, and the same pictures, collapsing the difference between spectators (Woolf, *Three Guineas* 14). Woolf’s triplicate letters intervene in these models of seeing, transforming the photographs into a mnemonic shorthand. But if the dead bodies and ruined houses are repeated throughout *Three Guineas*, the photograph is invoked and consequently recontextualized in each new context. Maggie Humm reads these “photographic memories” as “a performative process in which aspects of patriarchal culture and subject formation can be screened, refocused, and subverted” (203). Each time the photographs resurface, the relationship between text and reader has shifted. By the time we reach the final letter, the narrator suggests, “it is not the same picture that caused us at the beginning of the letter to feel the same emotions – you called them ‘horror and disgust’; we called them horror and disgust” (Woolf, *Three Guineas* 168). But, the narrator contends, the experience of reading has taught us to see that “another picture has imposed itself upon the foreground” (168). The readerly positions we take up throughout *Three Guineas* prepare us for a different mode of seeing and a different mode of response. Woolf’s narrator explains, “But we have not laid that picture before you in order to excite once more the sterile emotion of hate. On the contrary it is in order to release other emotions. . .” (168). Unlike the “sterility” of hate, seeing and reading differently offer more fertile avenues for response.
Woolf frames these avenues for response in ethically resonant, intersubjective terms. “But the human figure even in a photograph,” Woolf writes, “suggests that the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected . . . that we cannot dissociate ourselves from that figure but are ourselves that figure” (168). Here, Woolf points to the limited modes of seeing that fail to humanize the victims in the photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses even as ethical modes of seeing humanize evil. It is tempting to read the face of the dictator as a Levinasian face, to easily slide from the face (re)presented in the text to the face-to-face encounter that grounds ethics. The Levinasian face, like the “Saying” of ethical discourse, operates in terms of the “very signifyingness of signification” (Otherwise than Being 5). In other words, like the “Saying,” the face of any ethical encounter operates at the limits of representation. For Woolf, ethical possibility emerges in the disruption of habitual forms of representation. The repeated narrative representation of these photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses highlights our own role in the dynamics of humanization and dehumanization that shape the value of the violence they document. As Woolf’s scenes of reading - both visual and textual - throughout Three Guineas reveal, how we relate to the representations of violence can either sustain or work to undo narratives of violence. In diverting our attention to the face of the Fascist dictator, Woolf “returns us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense” (Butler, Precarious Life 151). Throughout Three Guineas, Woolf recasts the role of the reader in order to suggest that we might prevent violence “not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods” (170). It is in confronting the problem of reading, the superimposition of public and private in the face
of the dictator, that “we are reminded of other connections that lie far deeper than the facts of the surface” (169).

In disrupting familiar reading practices, Woolf’s Three Guineas asks readers to take up different and multiple positions in relation to the violence it presents. We might read these stances as working to enable space for a more vulnerable reading. Woolf’s Three Guineas exposes the teleologies of the dictator and the dead bodies and ruined houses of the propaganda photographs by rerouting readers’ attention and redirecting how we recognize ethical relation and where we look for ethical possibility. Possibilities for political action, Woolf suggests, are directly shaped in our narrative encounters of violence. How we read violence shapes our response to it. By scripting multiple roles for readers within the narrative, Woolf disrupts how we read the dead bodies and ruined houses, the dictator, the civil war. In the immediate context of Three Guineas this narrative strategy offers a powerful indictment of the twin powers of patriarchy and fascism, but, in broader terms, this strategy opens up alternate models of reading and responding to violence. Three Guineas’ narrative form demands a reading practice that allows us to recognize the ethical positions we take up in the act of reading. Images of violence become an ethically productive rupture in the relational dynamics of reading, making space within the text for a difference way of responding.

At every turn and turn about, Three Guineas reveals the “relations of dependency” at the center of our practices of reading – both the forms of reading that leave us stuck in the “old, worn ruts” of the gramophone and the alternate forms of reading that enable new ethical configurations (Singh 23). Three Guineas’ narrative dynamics – the letters, the repetition, the photos, the uncertainty – work to undo the logic of violence that creates the “dead bodies and
ruined houses” while also “lead[ing] us toward our vulnerabilities” (Singh 22). By refusing to determine in advance the ethical value of our textual engagement, *Three Guineas* allows readers to “[become] porous to texts in ways that might reshape our subjectivities and political aspirations” (Singh 63). Refusing to recreate practices of reading that reinforce patriarchy, fascism, and exclusionary violence cultivates space for vulnerable reading, a mode of reading that allows for different ethico-political configurations. The experience of reading *Three Guineas* suggests that the answer to Melba Cuddy-Keane’s question – How can you communicate an ethical vision in an ethical way? – lies not only in the hands of the narrator but in the hands of the reader and the dynamics of dependence and intimacy that characterize our experience of reading. The ethics of our reading emerges not in our mastery but in our vulnerability. *Three Guineas’* scenes of reading allow us to imagine what it might look like to “practice another future” (Butler, *Powers of Mourning and Violence* 10).

**Between the Acts and the Grammar of Response**

If *Three Guineas* gives us visions of an alternate future, *Between the Acts* remains poised in the liminal space between past and future, an unstable present. This “state of betweenness,” Cole suggests, is “both capacious and ready to be obliterated,” poised between repetition, foreboding cycles, and rituals of violence (276). *Between the Acts* shares with *Three Guineas* a sense that repetition is “senseless, hideous, stupefying” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 67). But *Between the Acts* trades in the old worn ruts of the gramophone for the bray of the megaphone. If *Three Guineas’* epistolary narrative works to disrupt conventions and find alternate narrative forms that make it possible read violence in ways that resist codifying what that violence means and for whom, *Between the Acts* reveals a metatextual anxiety about the capacity and efficacy of
those narrative forms. Indeed, one way to read *Between the Acts* is as a novel preoccupied with competing modalities of narrative – books, newspapers, drama, etc. Echoing *Three Guineas*, *Between the Acts* offers scenes of reading that play into the ontological instability of the ethical event of reading and the dynamics between text and reader. And, like *Three Guineas*, Woolf’s writing addresses a doubled audience; we read alongside the 1939 audience within the text.

Rather than the “turn and turn about” method of *Three Guineas*, Woolf’s narrative in *Between the Acts* provides what Madelyn Detloff characterizes as a “demystifying counterdiscourse” that chips away at sedimented narratives of history and violence (407). Woolf presents readers with a narrative form that stretches to account for a multiplicity of voices, a disorienting expansion of the formal soliloquies of *The Waves* or the free indirect discourse of *Mrs. Dalloway* that challenge styles of attention and modes of reading. The novel’s engagement with narrative forms oscillates between unity and dispersal, public and private, self and other, situating the experience of reading and aesthetic encounter as its primary vehicle.

Suspended between poles of unity and dispersal, Woolf’s novel reframes the question of ethical response and responsibility in terms of creating and responding to art – textual narratives, painting, and drama. Towards the end of the novel, Isa muses, “Surely it was time someone invented a new plot…” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 146). Rather than being displaced by the text, we find ourselves caught up in the plots of various narrative and aesthetic modes: the play at the heart of the novel, but also histories of England, letters, and newspapers. If *Three Guineas* worked to dislocate its readers’ relation to violence in order to open up new ethical possibilities, *Between the Acts* locates its readers in its plots of violence to trouble our readerly complicity. Woolf’s exploration of different narrative modes reveals the ways that different forms enable
different styles of attention and distraction, delimiting our capacity to respond ethically to the violence they convey. As I have throughout this chapter, I focus on the intimate, interpersonal ways Woolf figures both encounters with violence and scenes of reading. *Between the Acts*, I argue, grounds Woolf’s exploration of reading and ethical response in Isa’s encounter with a newspaper account of rape. While we are reminded by an ominous formation of planes overhead that the novel’s title refers to acts of war, we are also located “between the acts” of violence and response. As a private, individual parallel to the public performance and communal response to Miss La Trobe’s pageant, the novel uses Isa’s encounter to meditate on the relationship between narrative form and ethical response. The involuted structure and layered forms of the novel suggest Woolf’s anxiety about both art’s dependence on audience collaboration and an uneasiness about art’s capacity to ethically respond to violence. In its parallel scenes of reading and visions of artistry, *Between the Acts* explores how encounters with narrative shape the grammar of ethical response.

Amid *Between the Acts*’ “crowded ekphrastic field,” the newspaper first appears as an instrument of violence (Cole 199). Bart Oliver’s voice booms a greeting to his grandson George from “a beak of paper . . . a snout” (*Woolf, Between the Acts* 9). George is startled by Bart’s dog and Bart calls to his hound “as if he were commanding a regiment,” slipping “the noose that [he] always carried with him” over its neck while George bursts into tears (9). Frustrated that “[h]is little game with the paper hadn’t worked,” Bart “find[s] his line in the column” and returns to his habitual reading (9). The language here is startling. Woolf slips from one “snout” to another; Bart brawls and bullies, his hound bounds, bounces, and foams (9). Bart is immediately linked to violence: commanding a regiment and slipping a noose, playing a brutal “game” that terrifies his
grandson. Bart finds comfort in the “line in the column,” a comfort that guides his ability to
survey of the landscape just beyond the “great sheet” (10). This slippage past the page is
particularly telling. For Bart, the clear lines of the newspaper frame his vision of the world
beyond. As Karin Westman explains, the newspaper “offer[s] a direct link to current events
even as it prescribes the readers’ experience of those events” (2). Linked by violent metaphors
(the lines and columns of the newspaper echoes the lines of military regiments), Bart’s
militaristic violence and his masculinist frustration at his grandson’s crying are part and parcel to
his reading practices. In “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin identifies the relational limits of
narrative in form itself, privileging storytelling over novels and newspapers. Benjamin’s
pessimism suggests that we become an extension of the media form itself. The self-given
information of newspaper narratives translates into an objective view of the “prompt
verifiability” of the world beyond the narrative (Benjamin 89). Woolf links the prescriptive fixity
of Bart’s reading practices to his investment in military and patriarchal force even when directed
at his young grandson. In Bart’s reading practices, we can see how Benjamin’s concerns about
narrative form’s effect on the relational dynamics of reading become ethically resonant.
Committed to the prescriptive grammar of the newspaper’s narratives, Bart cannot see the limits
of his mode of reading and its violent investments in military and patriarchal force.

3 In many ways Bart embodies Walter Benjamin’s anxieties about the form of the newspaper in his 1936
essay, “The Storyteller,” which stems from the relational shift from the intersubjective encounter between
storyteller and listener to the communication of information or the “pure essence of the thing” (91).
Storytelling amplifies narrative because it relies on readers’ interpretation where newspapers “come to us
. . . shot through with explanation” (89). “Understandable in itself,” the newspaper “does not survive the
moment in which it was new” whereas the story “preserves and concentrates its energy and is capable of
releasing it even after a long time” (89, 90). Bart Oliver gives palpable shape to Benjamin’s concern
about the shifting form of narrative and the unreflective reading newspaper narratives prompt.
If *Between the Acts* reveals a complicity between Bart’s unreflective mode of reading and the violent ideologies circulating in the news, in Isa, the novel offers an alternate vision of resistance in her uncommitted modes of reading. Isa, already skeptical of other narrative forms (She reflects: “Books are the mirrors of the soul … In this case a tarnished, a spotted soul.”), picks up her father-in-law’s discarded paper and proceeds to read (12).

“‘A horse with a great tail . . .’ which was fantastic. Next, ‘The guard at Whitehall . . .’ which was romantic and then, building word upon word, she read: ‘The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face . . .’

That was real. So real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer.” (15)

Isa’s initial distracted reading provides immediate interpretations of the fragments she initially glimpses; Isa relies on familiar narrative conventions – fantasy and romance like the shilling shockers left behind by bored souls – to make sense of what she reads. But, “building word upon word,” Isa is drawn into the narrative itself, shifting from interpretation to experience. The door becomes a portal to the barrack room and Isa’s reading experience is only interrupted when it swings open to reveal Lucy Swithin. Unlike Bart, Isa’s initial reading experience is destabilizing; where Bart sought to find himself in the line of the column, Isa loses herself in the narrative (Westman 8). If, as Westman suggests, Bart’s mode of reading the newspaper allows him to “slip into” a “universe of ready-made feelings,” here, Isa appropriates the scene of the rape as her own (9). Despite their contrasting modes of reading, both Bart and Isa find themselves appropriating its capacity for violence.
If Isa risks collapsing the distance between self and other in reading the account of rape in *The Times*, her proximity enables a different response to its violence. Instead, its violence disrupts the rhythm of Isa’s thoughts. Isa’s style of reading produces a narrative instability that lasts beyond the original encounter, reverberating among the voices around her. Faced with the familiar seasonal conversations preparing for the community’s pageant, Isa hears a new refrain under “the same chime”: “The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 16). Later, returning from an interlude in the play, Isa encourages herself to return, hearing voices absent from Miss La Trobe’s polyvocal pageant. She thinks, “‘On, little donkey, patiently stumble. Hear not the frantic cries of the leaders who in that they seek to lead desert us. Nor the chatter of china faces glazed and hard. Hear rather the shepherd coughing by the farmyard wall; the withered tree that sighs when the Rider gallops; the brawl in the barrack room when they stripped her naked; or the cry which in London when I thrust the window open someone cries . . . ‘ (107). Isa’s reflexive commands redirect her attention to the quotidian voices of those who are other. As Cole suggests, “the presence of the rape shocks Isa’s language, and the novel’s, into alertness” (283). Isa’s original scene of reading transforms by the end of the novel into a scene of recognition; she becomes vulnerable to the new configurations enabled by confronting the newspaper’s violence. Isa emerges from her textual encounter newly aware of an ethical responsibility. The complex grammar of Isa’s reflection locates herself within the action: “…or the cry which in London when I thrust the window open someone cries” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 107). Isa’s “I” admits a confused complicity into the logic of the sentence. While she struggles with the grammar of response, Isa’s style of reading ultimately opens up new space for ethical reflection. As Julietta Singh explains, “Vulnerable reading rewrites me” (24). And Isa’s
encounter with the rape “shakes up her language” and rewrites her grammar in ways that reconfigure ethical response (Cole 284). Initially, Isa appropriates the violence of the rape, making it a part of her own reality, but the “I” positions her as witness, responsible for listening to the someone who cries when she thrusts open the window. Ultimately, her experience between the acts of Miss La Trobe’s play prompts new questions. By the time the violent refrain resurfaces, she has learned to ask: “What then?” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 147).

While private and personal, Isa’s textual encounter becomes a transformative counterpoint to the circulation of language and narratives throughout *Between the Acts*. Isa’s experiences reading and reflecting on the rape in *The Times* allow her to hear beyond the narratives scripted for her by her roles as wife, mother, woman, and British citizen. Throughout the novel, Woolf uses narrative metaphors to convey the complacency and relational limitations of these familiar scripts. Reflecting on Giles, Isa remarks, “‘The father of my children.’ It worked, that old cliché…” and even William Dodge turns to a similar metaphor to characterize their marital discord: “as people say in novels ‘strained’” (33, 73). Words, for Isa and others, form a connective tissue, they “attach themselves . . . [and] lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating…” (11). Narrative, here figured as cliché and fiction, “works” to map the relationship between self and other. Yet the available narratives, like those Bart finds in *The Times*, fix rather than open ways of relating to others. Similarly, Bart and Lucy’s associative banter is all cliché, following familiar words and phrases to their logical conclusions: “The Swithins were there before the conquest” (22). Their musing reveals the conquest, war, and violence that undergirds the proverbs, myths, and history that populate their banal chatter and “work” to stabilize their relationship to the world around them. Like Isa, they struggle to break
out of the narratives that script their lives. Lucy protests, “We haven’t the words – we haven’t the words” while her brother muses, “Thoughts without words . . . Can that be?” (38). And, like Isa, they are searching for a new plot unbound by the language they have available to them. But breaking the familiar script proves difficult. “Abortive,” the narrative informs us, “was the word that expressed [Isa]” (11).

What then? What comes next? Both Isa and Lucy ask questions that reveal uncertainty about the future as much as they orient us towards new plots. In Giles and Miss La Trobe, *Between the Acts* offers two competing visions of artistry. Giles plays “the surly hero” for Mrs. Manresa or, as Isa sneers, “[o]ur representative, our spokesman,” but he also embodies the representative narrative against which Isa (who hides her own words “in the book bound like an account book in case Giles suspected” [11]), Lucy Swithin, William Dodge, and Miss La Trobe all write (65). As Stephen Barber notes, Giles is the “ethical universal of a history in which all feel imprisoned” (421). If Isa’s encounter with violence makes her language vulnerable in ethically productive ways, language is already threatening for Giles. Recognizing that he “had no command of metaphor,” Giles finds that “[w]ords … ceas[e] to lie flat in the sentence. They rose, became menacing and shook their fists at you” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 37, 41). Instead, Giles finds relief in abstraction. Taking a short cut through a field, Giles finds a snake “choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round – a monstrous inversion.

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4 The difference in Lucy’s vision, of course, is that it is a return or a move to the past to understand her present or, perhaps, to circumvent the future.

5 Giles’ language here, as many scholars have noted, is also an expression of homophobic violence. “Inversion” suggests links to both William Dodge and Miss La Trobe.
So, raising his foot, he stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him” (69). Here, Woolf links violence with creativity. Cole persuasively reads this scene as an allegory of “the process of making painting out of bloodshed” (198). The white canvas of his tennis shoes become an artist’s canvas on which he creates “a blood painting” (199). Like his father, Giles becomes an instrument of violence; his painting provides relief from his frustration. But it is a vision of art and artistic response complicit in and compromised by violence; Giles’ violence responds to violence, a “birth the wrong way round – a monstrous inversion” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 69). Giles becomes the author of an inverted vision of aesthetic possibility, obscuring complicity by framing and fixing the material traces of violence in a “blood painting.”

Miss La Trobe, the domineering director of the community pageant, is likewise a figure of “action” and violence. The language Woolf uses echoes Bart’s early martial violence and Giles’ own artistic violence. While the play proceeds, Miss La Trobe hides behind a tree “gnash[ing] her teeth and crush[ing] her manuscript” worried that the audience (like Bart’s hound) is “slipping the noose” and that (as with Bart’s grandson) her “little game had gone wrong” (84, 122). As she anxiously turns her artistic vision to “present time,” she damns and curses her audience and “[b]lood seem[s] to pour from her shoes” in a figural echo of Giles’ bloody artistry (122). But where Giles and his father remain central to Pointz Hall and English society, Miss La Trobe occupies a marginal position. “[. . .] swarthy, sturdy and thick set . . . with cigarette in her mouth; often with a whip in her hand,” the villagers wonder whether “[w]ith that name she wasn’t presumably pure English. . . her eyes and something about her always made Mrs. Bingham suspect that she had Russian blood in her” (40). They gossip about her life
as a failed actress and her relationships with women. They muse, “…perhaps, then, she wasn’t altogether a lady?” (40). *Between the Acts* positions La Trobe’s queerness as central to the ethics of her artistic practice. In her “passion for getting things up,” as Barber notes, the narrative links artistic productivity to La Trobe’s queerness (40; Barber 425).

As the descriptive echoes of Giles and Bart suggest, Woolf carefully accounts for the potential slippage between director and dictator. But unlike Giles and Bart, La Trobe’s position as stranger and outsider enables her to redeploy narratives of English history that subvert rather than consolidate “old clichés.” Indeed, the narrative describes her as “a slave to her audience – to Mrs. Sands’ grumble – about tea; about dinner…” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 65). Furthermore, her drama cedes space and time to the voices of others (human and animal) and acts of nature, disrupting the syntax and scripting a space for the other within the text of her pageant (and in the text of the novel). La Trobe’s formal experiments engage a queer relationality that introduces new ways of seeing that denaturalize and delegitimize familiar patterns of violence. We might describe the narrative dynamics of La Trobe’s pageant in the same terms Cole describes Woolf’s own: as “a style that pushes, prods, and intervenes rather than erecting its own fixed terms” (201). In an echo of the language of Giles’ violent artistry, Lucy meets Miss La Trobe’s eyes “in a common effort to bring a common meaning to *birth*” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 104, my italics). They fail (they need a “new plot”) and yet Lucy “lay[s] hold desperately of a fraction of her meaning” and exclaims, “But you’ve made me feel I could have played . . . Cleopatra!” (104). Miss La Trobe rearticulates Lucy’s abortive sentiment, explaining to herself, “‘You’ve stirred in me my unacted part,’ she meant” (104). Where Giles “blood painting” fixes and frames aesthetic scenes complicit with violence, La Trobe’s historical pageant disturbs these narrative
frames and fixed scenes. She “twitch[es] the invisible strings” and “makes rise up from [the] amorphous mass a recreated world” (104-5). La Trobe’s artistry’s preference for interruption, discontinuity, and contingency challenges conventional styles of reading and projects a new grammar of response. It is only in La Trobe’s experimental telling of English history that new relations, and a new history, might be told.

*Between the Acts* portrays competing visions of art and response that culminate in the metatextual scene of reading that concludes Miss La Trobe’s pageant and anticipates the novel’s ending. Woolf presents an audience feeling vulnerable, feeling that “[t]heir minds and bodies were too close, yet not close enough. We aren’t free, each one of them felt separately, to feel or think separately, nor yet to fall asleep. We’re too close; but not close enough. So they fidgeted” (*Between the Acts* 45). La Trobe’s postmodern final act addresses an audience between distance and proximity, attention and inattention. She closes her procession through history with “ten mins. of present time” (122). As Cuddy-Keane notes, La Trobe’s dramatic move anticipates John Cage’s *4’33”* in which the composition becomes the ephemeral and ambient sounds of the audience itself (*Virginia Woolf* 204n). Like La Trobe, Cage’s purpose is “to focus his audience’s attention on awareness, rather than understanding, and on responsiveness to the random collective whole” (204). Similarly, Pamela Caughie links La Trobe’s “ten mins. of present time” to the “silent intervals in Beckett’s drama and the silence of a Cage composition” which, as she argues, “makes us painfully aware of our own reactions, and by their very absence the conventions we rely on are brought to our attention” (*Woolf, Between the Acts* 122; Caughie,

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6 Miss La Trobe’s “invisible strings” echo Isa’s earlier reflection that words “attach themselves . . . [and] lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating” and link La Trobe’s artistry to Isa’s response (11).
Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism 55). This shift from understanding to awareness (a style of attention echoed in Isa’s reflection Between the Acts) proves uncomfortable for the audience:

“Our own selves? But that’s cruel. To snap us as we are, before we’ve had time to assume . . . And only, too, in parts . . . That’s what’s so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair” (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 125). The moment fragments both the audience and the play. The audience finds themselves implicated in the play, confronted with their complicity, reading the mirror bearers as “malicious; observant; expectant” but also, tellingly, “expository” (126). The “unprotected, the unskinned” audience experiences a moment of unity: “they crashed; solved; united” (128). The form of La Trobe’s experimental present time reconfigures how the audience relates, poetically figured in spatial terms. They begin too close but not close enough, experiencing collective wholeness only in exposure and fragmentation. The mirrored surfaces of La Trobe’s art reconfigure the audience’s relation to both the art and itself, reframing response as a vulnerability to (literal) self-reflection.

Despite the gramophone’s plea, “Dispersed are we; who have come together. But . . . let us retain whatever made that harmony,” Woolf is just as quick to parody the audience’s failure to successfully “read” the play (133). In the fumbling response of the Rev. G. W. Streatfield and fragments of the audience’s parting reactions, Woolf recounts the audience’s frustrated responses. Rev. Streatfield asks, “what meaning, or message, this pageant was meant to convey?” (130). The audience’s responses echo Streatfield’s, parodying the popular explanatory narratives of the novel’s cultural moment:

“What we need is a centre. Something to bring us all together . . . The very latest notion, so I’m told is, nothing’s solid . . . Did she mean, so to speak, something hidden, the unconscious as they call it? But why always drag in sex? . . . And if we’re left asking
questions, isn’t it a failure, as a play? I must say I like to feel sure if I got to the theatre, that I’ve grasped the meaning . . .” (134-135)

Their frustration – so humorously detailed in the Rev. Streatfield and the audience’s parting comments – is the desire for a clear moral, a prescriptive meaning. The audience’s styles of “reading” rely on depth and suspicion to explain the play, whether relying on aesthetics, psychoanalysis, science, etc. to provide those models. But, as Between the Acts suggests, their responses fail to account for their experience because their models of reading are pre-scripted, foreclosing the ways that their experience might reshape their sense of self, other, and community. Even the fashionable new ways of locating meaning fail to account for and respond to the dynamics of La Trobe’s pageant. Like Isa’s complex grammar of response, the play subverts the conventions of drama to locate its own audience within its narrative and make possible new configurations between art and audience. And, yet, where Isa’s vulnerable reading allows her to rewrite herself into a new form of response and responsibility, the audience’s question – “Whom could they make responsible?” – gestures to the foreclosed possibility of their experience (132). The questions’ awkward grammar and insistence on “making” registers their failure to see the obvious answer (ourselves!) immediately palpable. The audience’s collective anxiety about the participatory stakes of the play ultimately returns them to habitual modes of reading. The anonymous megaphone nonetheless disperses responsibility as well as the pageant’s audience even if their moment of reflection fails to produce anything beyond momentary self-awareness.

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7 As Caughie argues, it is the presence of the audience and their response that, despite its failures, “force us to consider our own needs and desires as readers and to accept our responsibility as well” (Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism 56). The dramatic presence of the audience asks us to reflect on our own participation in the text.
Between the Acts disperses this ethical responsibility to its own readers in addition to those within the narrative. In its final pages, the novel collapses Miss La Trobe’s vision with Woolf’s own as the narrative moves from readers inside the text to those outside. Pondering her failure, La Trobe begins envisioning her next project: “‘I should group them,’ she murmured, ‘here.’ It would be midnight; there would be two figures, half concealed by a rock. The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escaped her” (143). La Trobe’s vision prefigures Woolf’s own final vision: “And Giles too. And Isa too against the window . . . The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks” (149). The ending, like La Trobe’s vision, strips away character. Pointz Hall, Isa, and Giles become elemental, prehistoric forms. But Woolf’s and La Trobe’s vision mark not a return to an idealistic past but, rather, a space of possibility. Ruminating in the pub, La Trobe “drowsed” and “nodded” while “[w]ords of one syllable sank down into the mud. . . The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning – wonderful words” (144). Between the Acts offers a vision of the inadequacy of prescriptive response – figured lovingly in the parodies of the villagers’ response to the pageant and more ominously in Bart’s and Giles’ violent instrumentality. Yet in La Trobe’s contemplative moment Woolf offers a de-scriptive moment where the meanings of words fall away. The concluding vision of the novel becomes an ethical rupture, opening a space of possibility where “words without meaning – wonderful words” might speak a different future. The elision between La Trobe’s final vision and Woolf’s own suggests that we must take up our own positions in the text. The curtain rises on our own scene of reading. “They [speak]” and we are returned to the opening line: “It was a
summer’s night and they were talking. . .” (149, 3). *Between the Acts*’ circularity makes space for its readers to hear what might be discordant in the narrative, a girl’s scream beneath the familiar chime, and resist finding our line in the column. The curtain rises suggesting that as readers we “ourselves” are responsible for imagining a “new plot.”

Woolf’s narrative form in *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts* suggests that countering violence requires a willingness to be open and vulnerable to the ways that reading might unsettle conventional ways of seeing, hearing, and responding. Ethical possibility, for Woolf, emerges in our willingness to read otherwise, to embrace modes of “bad” reading, practices of reading that might be unstructured, uncommitted, intimate, and vulnerable. In *Three Guineas*, “bad” reading allows us to see the problem of reading as a problem of ethics and remain open to the ways our reading makes us vulnerable. Vulnerability becomes a resource, though not a promise, for imagining new futures and resisting the familiar, cyclical refrains of violence. *Between the Acts* offers a more fleeting and skeptical vision of the ethical possibility of “bad” reading amid the violence of Bart’s lines in the column and Giles’ blood painting. All the promise of Isa’s recognition of ethical responsibility, the way her reading rewrites her relationship to the world, remains only momentarily realized in the audience of Miss LaTrobe’s experimental play. And, yet, both *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts* return us to the scene of our own reading as a site of possibility.

In making visible the presence of the reader, Woolf and the artists and writers of *Three Guineas* and *Between the Act’s* search for new forms also necessitate that readers confront their own practices of reading. Ethical possibility, for Woolf, emerges from a differently structured, uncommitted mode of reading, a willingness to dwell in the experience on its own terms.
Woolf’s modernist narrative form provides the grounds for connection, an ethical encounter enabled through shared responsitivity. And it is out of that dynamic structure of response that ethical possibility, human responsibility emerges. As the letter writer of *Three Guineas* explains, "The blame for [writing at all] however, rests upon you, for this letter would never have been written had you not asked for an answer to your own" (170). Woolf’s most polemical political work concludes on a note of exchange, a connection through the mutual commitment to response. Amid the gathering clouds of war and through the refrains of violence, *Between the Acts* teaches ways of reading that might allow us to hear that response in a new grammar, a new plot. Ultimately, by staging the dynamics of reading and response as an ethical encounter, Woolf transforms narrative into ethical possibility and reasserts the centrality of reading in our understanding of ethical relation. Woolf’s critical and political works contend that while we may never fully bridge "a gulf so deeply cut," an ethical political possibility can only emerge from a commitment to reading and responding to voices across the precipice (6).
CHAPTER TWO

READING SUBJECTS:

NARRATABLE LIVES IN MELANCTHA AND PASSING

Early in Nella Larsen’s novel, Passing, the central protagonist Irene wonders what it is like for Clare Kendry to “take one’s chance in another environment,” an environment that’s “not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly” (24). Irene’s musings in the passage evince a frank curiosity about Clare and the otherness of her experiences. But it’s also a formulation that resists clear description and obvious relation. Irene’s careful negative qualifiers – not entirely strange, not entirely friendly - refuse to identify Clare’s experiences as wholly other or wholly familiar, locating Clare in an ambivalent and risky relation to her own otherness and posing an interpretive problem for Irene. Irene desires to hear Clare’s narrative account of herself and yet confronts the danger and impossibility of such a narrative encounter. Irene wishes to “find out . . .[w]hat, for example, one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came into contact with other Negroes. But she couldn’t” (24).

1 This chapter is deeply indebted to Pamela Caughie and her generous and insightful discussions of Passing over the years – first, in the “Contemporary Issues in Literature and Culture” seminar, “Class Acts,” or, as it was fondly renamed, the “class on class,” and, later, in both Passing and Pedagogy and our many conversations about the novel throughout the doctoral exams and dissertation writing process. In particular, Caughie’s chapter “‘Not Entirely Strange . . . Not Entirely Friendly’: Passing and Pedagogy” which situates Passing in the context of classroom pedagogy opened up new ways of reading and understanding my experience with Larsen’s challenging novel. Caughie’s discussion of the dynamics of knowledge and authority and their limits in the multicultural classroom offer an invaluable way of thinking through the ethics of the novel and the practice of reading. While the focus of this chapter remains centered on the problem of narrative in Passing, it is nonetheless shaped by Caughie’s discussions of the problem of ethics, reading, and pedagogy within and beyond the novel.
Navigating this dynamic proves dangerous for both Irene and Clare and difficult for readers of *Passing*. The desire for narrative accountability and its inevitable impossibility at the center of *Passing* offers a model for navigating the not entirely strange and not entirely friendly narratives that shape our capacity to read and ethically respond to otherness.

Ethical criticism has been unable and unwilling to fully embrace such risky and ambivalent positioning in the experience of reading. Oscillating between twin poles of friend and stranger, proximity and distance, intimacy and alterity, mimeticism and estrangement, ethical criticism charts two divergent paths when it comes to accounting for the characters and worlds we encounter. On the one hand, critics like Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum read literary characters as familiar if not friendly companionate sensibilities whose reasoning and judgment we encounter when we pick up a book. This approach to narrative and ethics reads these fictional others mimetically; the ostensible verisimilitude of literary characters offers an opportunity to practice empathy and exercise moral judgment. On the other hand, critics like Derek Attridge highlight the essential alterity of the textual otherness we engage, a slippage from the otherness of the people we encounter to the otherness of literary texts that resists comprehension and foregrounds uncertainty (“Ethical Modernism” 654). This approach centers estrangement, undecidability, and unknowability in a given textual encounter. While these approaches share little in common (their critical and methodological commitments often place them directly at odds), they both rely on a stable understanding of their textual subjects – locating ethical value in either the transparency or opacity of their representations of subjectivity. Rather than resting in a single camp, this chapter seeks to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of ethical criticism,
reading the narratives we encounter as “not entirely strange [but] not entirely friendly” (Larsen, *Passing* 24).

**The Subjects of Narrative**

Wherever we locate the ethical value of the literary encounter, readers’ risky position in the narrative is central to the reading experience even as it is doubled by its grounding in the world outside the text. In *From Text to Action*, Paul Ricoeur describes narrative as having a “double valence,” its reference is “directed elsewhere, even nowhere; but because it designates the nonplace in relation to all reality, it can indirectly sight this reality . . . [which] is nothing but the power of fiction to *redescribe* reality” (175, original emphasis). In other words, literature as a kind of “nonplace” opens up what Ricoeur repeatedly describes as an imaginative laboratory, a kind of ‘as if’ space that enables possibilities for reworking and reimagining the self and the self in relation to others. That “as if” space’s narrative dimension enables action in the world through redescription, its reference to the discursive systems and structures outside the text. This double move enables a reworking of subjectivity within the text but also a reworking of intersubjective relations outside the text. Literature’s double valence, its power to act or, in Ricoeur’s terms, to redescribe the world, emerges from the experience of reading itself – the relationship between the text and reader constituted through narrative. Ricoeur’s double valence has the power not only to redescribe the world but also to redescribe the terms by which we see the world. Reading both stages an ethical encounter with the narrative subject, and, in so doing, reworks, redescribes, and reimagines how we might relate to others beyond the text.

Reading engages both narrative’s fictional possibilities and our own realities, producing an encounter with an other that shapes our relationships beyond the text. As a result, how we
navigate our relationships with narrative subjects poses, following Timothy Bewes, not only “a technical problem but an ethical one” (“The Novel Problematic” 18). This shifts the weight of our critical reading practices from interpretation to description, from identification to relation. The task for readers (lay and professional alike) is less to read characters as models for what is right or good, assessing their activity in a given narrative, than to shift our attention to the activity of the narrative in producing characters and what that activity costs. To approach characters from the perspective of the former is to commit to an “empathetic theory . . . quite familiar to literary criticism,” Adriana Caverero warns in *Relating Narratives*, that “metabolizes the story of the other . . . a recognition in which uniqueness, as such, disappears” (91).² To read from the latter is to read narrative as Jessica Berman does, as “a crucial form of activity, one that expresses subjectivity as it unfolds over time, among and to others, in the human sphere or social imaginary, and in active response to rhetorical and social exigence” (21). Narrative becomes an active field of relation rather than a passive medium of communication. Novels (re)produce subjects rather than disclose identities. Thus, this chapter attends to the specificity of characters’ emergence in the narrative itself – how narrative forms shape their intelligibility as subjects and, in turn, structure our ethical response and responsibility as readers.

Caverero’s figure of the narratable self usefully embodies the tensions and harmonies between narrative dynamics and ethical relations. Caverero argues that when encountering the other shifting our questions from “What are you?” to “Who are you?” works towards a more ethically and politically productive account of the “expositive and relational character of identity” (13, 20). Whereas the former question solicits identity as a kind of epistemological

² Chapter three will address the merits of framing reading as empathy-generating at greater length.
content, the latter question invites a story, a narrative account of ourselves addressed to an other. For Cavarero, the self is interactive and constitutively relational. We are narrated by an other and narrate our own lives for others and for ourselves and, thus, our narratability necessarily comes from outside and beyond the individual self. Narrative, or the act of telling a life, is always already relational. Cavarero cautions that the narratable self is inseparable from the act or form of its telling. Cavarero argues that “the particular contents . . . are inessential,” the narratable self is “captured in the very text itself […] irremediable mixed up with it” (34, 35). The narratable self, then, is a formal possibility even as its central relationality invites ethical reflection. Cavarero’s account of the emergence of the “self” allows for an account that is “able to recuperate the constitutive worldly and relational identity from which the story itself resulted” (36). In other words, we can read the self as always already emerging through a story that both discovers and constitutes the relation of the self to the world.

Cavarero’s narratable self shares much in common with performative theories of subjectivity. In particular, Judith Butler’s later theorizations of the subject explicitly work within and against narrative frameworks for conceiving and constructing the subject. For Butler, our emergence as a speaking “I” reveals the temporal and relational dynamics of the performative subject. The “I” must first be established in language before it can speak intelligibly and be recognized as a subject. We are, in Butler’s terms, linguistically vulnerable, depending on an outside address to bring us into language, to bring us into relation. Only when we are “inaugurated into language . . . brought into the discursive world of the story […] can one then

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3 Butler’s turns toward ethics in Giving an Account of Oneself, Precarious Life, and Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly lean heavily on narrative and linguistic frameworks for negotiating subjectivity.
find one’s way in language, only after it has been imposed, only after it has produced a web of relations . . .” (Butler, *Giving an Account* 63). To take up the position of the speaking subject is to be acting on and within a set of social, narrative, and linguistic relations that precedes and conditions possibilities for acting. In other words, we cannot speak, act, or otherwise understand ourselves outside our “constitutive relations to other humans, living processes, and inorganic conditions and vehicles for living” (*Notes Toward* 130). The performative subject enables a relational understanding of the self and identifies its narrative dimensions. Performativity, then, names the ontological dynamics of reading, the ways in which how we are read by others is shaped by expectations and social norms and, in turn, animates and structures our capacity to respond (*Notes Toward* 29). Our habits of reading are imbricated in our habits of living and, as such, the positions we take up in narrative are freighted with ethical consequences.

Caverero’s narratable self and Butler’s performative subject share an emphasis on the socially and ethically constitutive power of language and narrative but diverge in key ways. For Butler, “the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making” (*Giving an Account* 21). To borrow the language of Cavarero, they work with indifference to the “who” that is named even as they shape “what” form a person’s social existence will take. This indifference can be alienating, even hurtful and traumatic, but it also maps several horizons for narrative and ethical possibility.4

Cavarero insists that a recognition of our own narratability enables a recognition of the others we encounter as narratable selves even if we do not know their stories. Butler is far more circumspect, citing the normative force of the schemes of intelligibility that shape whose lives

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4 Butler’s *Excitable Speech* works through this in legal and political registers.
count as “life.” In other words, the indifference of discourse to life suggests that we always risk unintelligibility, that our life or experience may exceed recognition. Cavarero’s account posits a sense of the other as a narratable self apart from social recognition or intelligibility which fails, I would argue, in serious ways to account for the normative forms and discursive conditions that shape our capacity to see or recognize the other. As Butler cautions, “No matter how much we each desire recognition and require it, we are not therefore the same as the other, and not everything counts as recognition in the same way” (Giving an Account 33). Recognizability is contingent and historically situated, subject to normative forces above and beyond the interpersonal encounter that grounds Caverero’s understanding of narrative recognition. Indeed, Butler asks us to interrogate the norms and conventions that make possible the act of recognition and, importantly, to acknowledge subjects and lived experiences that exceed or resist recognition. Butler offers an important check on Cavarero’s willingness to universalize, insisting that the narratable self is not only contingent on language and narrative convention but also historical schemes of intelligibility.

The narratable self is only narratable according to recognizable norms and, thus, there are experiences and understandings of the self that are unintelligible, inaccessible, or unrecognizable (Butler, Giving an Account 52). While this can be culturally alienating and politically disabling, Butler paradoxically locates ethical possibility precisely in the limits of narrative. The narratable self emerges amid dynamic social, rhetorical, and ethical relations but also participates in and shapes those relations, opening up space for resignification. Our emergence as subjects, as narratable selves, recontextualizes the very terms by which we are produced at the moment we are called to produce ourselves. In doing so, we “act on the schemes of intelligibility that govern
who will be a speaking being, subjecting them to rupture or revision, consolidating their norms, or contesting their hegemony” (Butler, *Giving an Account* 132). The narratable self always already contains the possibility of its own subversion. The normative limits of narrative become a horizon of possibility, a “disruptive site of linguistic impropriety and unrepresentability” that illuminates the failure of normative discourse to fully account for the self (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 25). And yet these moments of narrative contestation and resignification are risky. Pushing the boundaries of recognition risks unintelligibility. The very terms we reinscribe might signify beyond our control. Still, working at the limits of narrative can be ethically productive and politically enabling precisely because our response is implicated in the “resultant shaping of the world” (Adorno qtd. in Butler, *Giving an Account* 133). At the margins of narrative possibility, literary form can render the familiar strange or familiarize difference in ways that re-condition whose stories are told and whose stories are tellable even as we must stretch to hear them.

The narratable self (with Butler’s caveats) is a useful figure for its insistence on the discontinuous entanglement of self and story – neither is reducible to the other and yet we depend on their entanglement and the relationality it implies for existence. Indeed, the term productively points to the “extent to which the agency of the subject is bound up with the agency of language” (Kottman xviii). In this chapter, I want to exploit this term precisely for what it also implies – the unnarratable self, the nonnarrativizeable self, and what remains “other” to both narrative and selfhood. In other words, this chapter adapts and expands Cavarero’s term and the narrative dimensions of the performative subject to point to the self produced on the horizon and at the limit of narrative itself. We are “constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived,
sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us” (Butler, *Giving an Account* 64). The narratable self becomes a departure point for both exploring the nexus of ethical and formal relations at work in producing a “self” through narrative and how particular subjects negotiate the limits of narrative to give an account of themselves. Thus, in reading for the emergence of the narratable self, we must also read for a narrative’s failures, exclusions, abjections, gaps, and silences as sites of ethical possibility that both redescribe existing narratives and work towards generating new narrative horizons.

If the scene of narration is also a scene of ethics, as I suggest above, it is the backdrop against which modernism forges its formal experimentation. Modernist narratives foreground the making and unmaking of subjectivity; remaking the novel’s forms means reimagining how to represent the novel’s subjects. Modernism’s narrative reflexivity calls attention to narrative’s possibilities even as it makes palpable narrative’s limitations. This double impulse to account for subjectivity and register its limits produces a “questioning of representation” alongside modernist narrative’s more familiar formal hallmarks – free indirect discourse, unreliable narrators, stream of consciousness, nonlinearity, etc. (Felski, *Gender of Modernity* 13). Modernism’s “vigorous and persistent attempts to multiply and disturb modes of representation” are precisely what enables its narrative forms to trouble the assumptions and conventions of the worlds they describe (Childs, *Modernism* 24). While I do not want to argue that modernism’s formal innovations are inherently politically progressive or ethically motivated (indeed, history has often revealed the opposite), I do want to argue that the effects of these forms create alternative ethical possibilities and open up new spaces for reimagining ethical relations. In particular, following Derek Attridge, I read modernism’s formal strategies as “open[ing] a space
for the apprehension of otherness” that “deeply held assumptions of transparency, instrumentality, and direct referentiality . . . had silently excluded” (“Ethical Modernism” 669). Modernist narrative forms ask us to see differently, including the limits of our vision, and it is this recalibration of sight that enables ethical reflection.

Gertrude Stein’s *Melanctha* and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* are modernist novels working at the limits of narrative. Where Stein’s *Melanctha* works to re-signify racialized language through circular and repetitive prose, Larsen’s *Passing* works through silences, gaps, and ambiguities. While employing inverse narrative strategies, both texts work to fully narrate the subjectivities of their protagonists, registering the ways in which competing social and cultural discourses pressure, limit, shape, and silence their narratability. The problem of identity in *Melanctha* and *Passing* is both a formal and an ethical problem. Both narratives grapple with multiple frameworks for constituting selfhood. The demand for a cohesive, fully narratable self results in a kind of ethical violence that renders some lives unlivable. For Butler, our inevitable failures to create coherent narratives open up ethical possibility in admitting a “willingness to acknowledge the limits of acknowledgment itself” (*Giving an Account* 42). Larsen and Stein’s inverse narrative strategies expose the ethical violence of the demand for coherent narratives even as they work towards new narrative horizons for the subjects whose stories they tell.

**Melanctha’s Thick Language and Difficult Rhythms**

Stein’s *Three Lives* declares its task in its title. Setting out to account for the lives and experiences of three denizens of the fictional Bridgepoint, Stein’s transitional modernist texts works to make anew inherited nineteenth century narrative forms. While Stein’s narrator struggles to tell all three narratives – beginning again and again, *Melanctha* reveals the ethical
possibilities and failures at the narrative limits of Stein’s modernist project. *Melanctha* offers competing voices, alternate vocabularies, and repetitive, stylized prose that stymies and defamiliarizes the experience of reading. Critics have successfully argued for the influence of cubist painting, African masks, primitivism, scientific and medical discourses, and Stein’s own biography in Stein’s portrait of the titular Melanctha. While these critics have offered vital and enlightening readings of *Melanctha*, I take a more formal approach, reading Stein’s narrative style in relation to the project of telling a life.\(^5\) Indeed, this chapter seeks out the ways that Stein struggles to bring narrative form into harmony with Melanctha’s subjective experiences while acknowledging that this project ultimately fails in crucial ways. *Melanctha*’s distinct narrative style asks readers to give themselves over to the wandering rhythms and difficult wisdom the novel offers, revealing our own investments in narrating the lives of others. In what follows, I isolate some of the disparate and sometimes dissonant rhythms at work in *Melanctha* in order to highlight the ways the novel’s narrative forms delimit our ability to recognize and respond.

Stein’s language troubles readers. “Steinese,”\(^6\) as it was unfortunately dubbed by Stein’s contemporaries, makes it difficult to understand Stein’s narrative and disrupts readers’ ability to make ethical value judgments about the content of Stein’s sentences. Combining deceptively minimal diction and paradoxically complex syntax, Stein’s language in *Melanctha* (and elsewhere in her oeuvre) works to reshape the relationship between readers and the lives she narrates at the level of language itself. Describing Stein’s early biographical writing in *The

\(^5\) This is not to bracket the racial and racist implications of Stein’s language as discussed in previous critical reading and scholarship on “Melanctha” – indeed, this chapter will return to these issues in discussing the failures of Stein’s narrative experiment.

\(^6\) See Natalia Cecire’s “Ways of Not Reading Gertrude Stein” for a detailed discussion of the explicit racism of this sobriquet.
Making of Americans and Three Lives, Sianne Ngai contends that Stein’s language thickens to “produce new individualities” (264). This “thick language” disrupts formal, grammatical distinctions and erodes the value distinctions embedded in syntactical relations of causality and narrative progress. Altering form, Stein’s early projects seem to suggest, can alter the forms of the lives they seek to tell and how readers might respond.

Early in Melanctha, Stein offers a kind of test case, conditioning readers to uncouple narrative causality and ethical value judgments through the brief recounting of Melanctha’s relationship to Rose Johnson and the death of Rose’s child. The narrator describes the child’s death:

Rose Johnson was careless and negligent and selfish, and when Melanctha had to leave for a few days, the baby died. Rose Johnson had liked the baby well enough and perhaps she just forgot it for awhile, anyway the child was dead and Rose and Sam her husband were very sorry but then these things came so often in the negro world in Bridgepoint, that neither of them thought about it very long. (47)

The death of Rose’s child serves as a strange bookend to Melanctha’s narrative (it is repeated nearly verbatim towards the end of the novel). Indeed, both its brevity and the affective flatness with which it is recounted stand out in a story about women, particularly one that features scenes of “bad” mothering. The syntax of this anecdote poses a number of causes for the death of the child even as it resists assigning causality. In the first sentence, we are told Rose is careless, negligent, and selfish, implying that she is a bad mother but resisting a clear connection between Rose’s character and her child’s death. Then, we are told that the death occurs during Melanctha’s absence, establishing a link between Melanctha’s absence and the child’s death. The sentence that follows introduces alternate possibilities: “perhaps [Rose] just forgot it for awhile” and “these things came so often in the negro world in Bridgepoint” (47). Here, the narrator suggests the child’s death may be Rose’s fault though the casual “perhaps” and “just” detract
from the certainty and seriousness of the narrator’s assertion. The narrator goes on to suggest that
the child’s death may also be part of a communal racial failing but presents it as a familiar, easily
dismissed narrative – “these things came so often” – unworthy of further investigation. Rather
than offering clarity, Stein’s conjunctions and adverbs trouble readers’ ability to make sense of
the child’s death. By disrupting the power of language to organize and hierarchize meaning,
Stein’s language resists fixing or determining value even as it offers a multitude of possible
explanations. Ngai explains, “We are used to encountering and recognizing differences assigned
formal values; Stein’s writing asks us to ask how we negotiate our encounters when these
qualifications have not yet been made” (252). However, Ngai cautions, Stein’s “agenda is not to
be confused with an attempt to level or neutralize difference” (252). Rather, Stein’s thick
language and difficult syntax invite us to interrogate our relationship to difference. In posing
multiple causalities, Stein asks readers to confront their investments in the competing accounts of
the death of Rose’s child. Here, Stein’s thick language refuses a singular interpretation and,
instead, asks readers to recognize the shaping force and narrative consequences of their own
ethical judgments.

In shifting the focus from rendering value and difference within a narrative to
foregrounding readers’ relationship to difference, the narrative of the death of Rose’s child offers
in microcosm Stein’s broader project in Melanctha and elsewhere. This shift in focus dislocates
readers from their position in the narrative, necessitating new reading strategies and generating
“new frameworks of sense-making” (Ngai 253). Stein’s insistent repetition, particularly the sets
of descriptive adjectives that follow characters throughout the narrative, operate similarly.
Instead of offering a multitude of possibilities (though they do at the level of the list itself), these
repetitive tags offer a fixed, essentializing description of characters not grounded in narrative progress. For example, Rose is introduced as a “real black, tall, well built, sullen, stupid, child-like, good looking negress” and Melanctha is initially characterized as a “graceful, pale yellow, intelligent, attractive negress” (Stein, *Three Lives* 47, 48). These adjectives repeat and recombine throughout the narrative, following the characters they describe through various life experiences and relationships. In these descriptive tags, Stein repurposes the most reductive and racist discourse to reveal the narrative pressures and shaping powers they deploy within and beyond the novel. As Laura Doyle suggests, Stein’s strategy here is doubled and dialogic, “echo[ing] the audience’s racism in a way that makes readers squirm [. . .] pound[ing] the meaning out of them and alert[ing] us to their inculcative power” (263). Stein’s insistent repetition forces repetition to a point of narrative failure which exposes narrative’s will to force, enforce, and/or reinforce the stability and coherence of identities. And, yet, their repetition throughout the novels draws attention to and emphasizes the experiences and desires that operate beyond their rhetorical boundaries. In doing so, they demonstrate the ways these linguistic taglines form rather than simply reflect life patterns and life experience.

These descriptions are recontextualized with each repetition, resisting stable meaning and producing contingent significance through their relation to the narrative as well as within the narrative. In other words, meaning and significance accrue over time as a result of readers’ “agglutinative” activity rather than through clear causality within the narrative itself (Ngai 251). Ngai explains that this move towards “thick language” and insistent repetition favors weak causal links over strong causal links. These weak links resist clear interpretation, stupefying or paralyzing readers already shocked by Stein’s racialized and racist language (257, 256). Stein’s
difficult grammar and syntax challenge readers’ ability to respond by displacing familiar systems of sense making and refusing to provide comfortable alternatives. Where Ngai develops this readerly paralysis in terms of affective responses – shock and boredom – that “confront us with the limitations of our capacity for responding in general,” I want to stress the ethical consequences of this kind of paralysis in the literary encounter or, in other words, where our response acts on the world (262). At the level of the sentence, Stein’s thick language and insistent repetition point to an exhaustion of possible meanings while foregrounding the limits of meaning itself. This becomes ethically relevant when it becomes the formal vehicle of Stein’s biographical project in *Three Lives* and especially *Melanctha*.

By making readers feel what is in excess of understanding, Stein’s language problematizes narratability as an arbiter of value and a framework for sense-making. But undercutting these narrative frameworks for sense-making does not make Stein’s narrative senseless (though perhaps it is insensitive). Rather, Stein’s troubling of these frameworks highlights the ethical consequences of the distance between apprehension and recognition. For Butler, apprehension marks, registers, or acknowledges “without full cognition” whereas recognition is characterized and conditioned by a “recognizability” or “the more general conditions that prepare or shape a subject for recognition” (*Frames of War* 5).7 If apprehension is bound up with sensing and perceiving without full understanding, recognition stabilizes understanding through qualifying norms. We recognize a life because it has been made recognizable by norms of living and norms of representation. Butler reflects, however, that apprehension exists outside and beyond full participation in those norms of recognition and, as

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7 Butler is careful to note that “recognizability” is not an intrinsic quality of personhood. Rather, recognizability produces recognizable subjects and certain subjects are more or less recognizable.
such, can critique those norms (*Frames of War* 5). By wedging a gap between narrative and interpretation, Stein’s thick language and insistent repetition makes space (and time) for apprehension while resisting full recognition. In doing so, Stein calls normative frameworks for recognition into question by refusing to assign value.

It is tempting to follow Lisa Ruddick in reading Stein’s “careful experimentation” as resulting in an “ethical blankness” (40). For Ruddick, *Melanctha*’s narrators refuse “to bring things to an ethical focus” (34). But Ruddick looks for ethical value in the narrative’s content rather than its form. As I argue in this chapter and throughout this dissertation, reworking narrative form enables new ethical possibilities. Rather than attending to what is already in focus (or, in Butler’s terms, what we can recognize), Stein’s thick language and insistent repetition draw attention to the framing powers and pressures that encourage us to focus on some things and some people as opposed to others. In doing so, Stein draws attention to the activity of framing that shapes but never fully determines what we see, recognize, and apprehend and troubles reality by showing us what exceeds normative frames. We can read Stein’s writing “as an active process of ‘strangering’ its readers” and making narrative space for the ethical possibility that we might come to perceive differently (Ngai 292). *Melanctha*’s difficult rhythms are a call to counterfocalize, reading for what exceeds or conflicts with the narrative as it is told. Stein’s style renders familiar narrative forms – the bildungsroman, the biography, the portrait – strange to make them more hospitable for subjects who exceed normative narrative frameworks and to disrupt our habitual patterns of reading.

And, yet, Stein’s strangering style recycles the explicitly racist language and racial stereotypes that estrange Melanctha from narrative in the first place. For readers, Stein’s
language produces a doubled discomfort – an ethically productive discomfort that disrupts patterns of reading and relating and a discomfort with the violence of Stein’s racist clichés. As Laura Doyle reminds us, we must read Stein’s racializing language “as a piece with, rather than an unfortunate diversion from, [modernism’s] literary innovations” (256). Grappling with the ethically productive and destructive effects of Stein’s language reveals the troubling links between narratability and its investment in racializing language. Melanchtha’s thick language and insistent repetition offer a resource for new, ethically productive reading practices even as they repeat the violence it works against. Dismissing Stein’s language for its racism refuses the lesson it has to offer – namely, that language can critique while it colludes. Stein’s narrative innovations are valuable precisely for their ethical difficulty even while we must grapple with their inevitable ethical failures.

Stein’s thick language and insistent repetition point readers to the limits of narrative to make palpable the surplus meaning we do not have access to, highlighting the relational activity of reading. In doing so, Stein’s wandering rhythms attune readers to the possibility of different voices, a reading strategy that becomes vital for grappling with the multiple, often competing narrative voices at work in Melanchtha. Melanchtha translates conflicting visions of subjectivity into multiple voices that contest the epistemological authority of any narrative voice. Conventionally authoritative narrative voices compete with voices more clearly and distinctly close to characters in language and sympathy. As a result, the narrative toggles between distant and intimate, ironic, and earnest narrative modes, differentially rendering characters and

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8 In particular, Rita Felski suggests that attunement “points to those aspects of aesthetic response that often seem to evade or elude explanation” (“Response” 384). Chapter Four explores the relationship between reading and attunement in greater detail.
complicating readers’ understanding of Melanctha. This formal conflict stages the
(im)possibility of writing and reading particular selves as a question of narratability.

Melanctha is purportedly a life story and, as such, works within and against the narrative
customs of the bildungsroman. As Stein explains in “Composition as Explanation,” her
strategy of “beginning again and again” throughout Three Lives reworks the bildungsroman to
account for contemporary subjectivity (37). And yet embedded in the bildungsroman are
individualist ideologies, privileging an anti-relational, autonomous self. In working to break
down these narrative conventions, Stein attempts to make audible alternate, relational visions of
subjectivity and subjective experience. That the authoritative narrative voice of the conventional
bildungsroman persists among multiple narrative voices registers the power that this narrative
voice has not just on the story but on Melanctha herself.

We can see this conflict play out in the novel’s organization. What little Melanctha offers
in plot centers on a series of formative relationships, including a dialogue with Jeff that
subsumes much of the narrative that is interrupted or disrupted by a conventional narratorial
voice. This voice emerges throughout the narrative without clear rhetorical markers to
distinguish it from the other narrative voices, but its more complex syntax and sophisticated
language set it apart from the rest of the narrative. For example, early in the novel, the narrator
explains, “These years of learning led very straight to trouble for Melanctha, though in these
years Melanctha never did or meant anything that was really wrong” (Stein, Three Lives 54).
Here, the jumbled syntax and qualifiers (“very,” “really”) echo the language of the characters.
But the next sentence shifts in voice and tone: “Girls who are brought up with care and watching
can always find moments to escape into the world, where they may learn the ways that lead to
“wisdom” (54). Where the former narrative voice suggests a kind of sympathy or kinship with Melanctha, purporting to understand her intentions (“Melanctha never did or meant . . .”), the latter jumps to omniscient generalization (“Girls who are . . .”). This narrator quickly turns this perspective towards Melanctha: “For a girl raised like Melanctha Herbert, such escape was always very simple” (54). This narrative voice externalizes and distances Melanctha, objectifying her as a type or category. Speaking from the objective narrative view of the conventional bildungsroman, this makes Melanctha and her world recognizable, organizing peoples, places, and things according to its generic and social sensibility.

We see the narrative force of this voice when it is applied to the novel’s broader world. In a rare extended passage, the narrator explains,

Railroad yards are a ceaseless fascination. They satisfy every kind of nature. For the lazy man whose blood flows very slowly, it is a steady soothing world of motion which supplies him with the sense of a strong moving power. He need not work and yet he has it very deeply . . . Then for natures that like to feel emotion without the trouble of having any suffering, it is very nice to get the swelling in the throat, and the fullness, and the heart beats, and all the flutter of excitement that comes as one watches the people come and go, and hears the engine pound and give a long drawn whistle. For a child watching through a hole in the fence above the yard, it is a wonder world of mystery and movement. The child loves all the noise, and then it loves the silence of the wind that comes before the full rush of the pounding train, that bursts out from the tunnel where it lost itself and all its noise in darkness, and the child loves all the smoke, that sometimes comes in rings, and always puffs with fire and blue color. (55)

As in the earlier example, this narrative voice establishes a clear distance and difference from the characters it describes. Its sophisticated language and confident syntax establish the power and superiority of its vision, easily assigning types and ascribing clear meaning. The epistemological certainty of the conventional narrative voice shores up its position of cultural dominance, organizing and evaluating Melanctha and the community of Bridgepoint. The emergence of this narrative voice here and elsewhere in the novel links sense-making with self-making. The
epistemological certainty of the conventional narrative renders characters narratable – girls who are raised like Melanctha, the lazy man, natures who “like to feel emotion without the trouble of having any suffering, the child “watching through a hole” (55). This omniscient perspective assumes transparency, establishing what is knowable and who is narratable. While Stein destabilizes sense-making through thick language, convoluted syntax, and “beginning again and again,” the novel’s competing narrative voices contest the dominance of the conventional narratorial voice and offer alternate models of self-making.

The far more common and pervasive narrative voice blurs the boundary lines between narrator and character. Speaking in the idiom and syntax of Melanctha and other characters in the novel produces an audible harmony between the narrator and the life they recount. Rejecting the externalizing, taxonomizing distance of the conventional narrator allows this narrative voice to attempt to tell the story internally to Melanctha as a character. In other words, where the distanced gaze of the conventional narrator transformed Melanctha and the people in her life into objects, this narrative voice works to subjectify Melanctha, speaking through her character. For example, early in her relationship with Jane, the narrator explains that for Melanctha “[it] was still the same, the knowing of them and the always just escaping, only now for Melanctha somehow it was different, for though it was always the same thing that happened it had a different flavor, for now Melanctha was with a woman who had wisdom, and dimly she began to see what it was that she should understand” (59). Rhetorically unmarked but signaled by the syntax (always just escaping, dimly she began to see…), this moment collapses the distance between the narrator and Melanctha. The language becomes simpler, resorting to Melanctha’s euphemisms – knowing, always just escaping, having wisdom – for social and sexual knowledge.
And the limits of Melanctha’s vision become the narrator’s limits. Dismissing this narrative voice as naïve or unreliable or, as Lisa Ruddick argues, “obtuse” or “dim-sighted,” misses the blending or blurring of subjectivities that seeks to collapse the distance between narrator and character in order to find a new way to tell Melanctha’s experiences (34). Reading these moments as a careful negotiation between narrator and character allows us to see how this narrative voice works to authorize Melanctha’s experience within and against the constraints of the bildungsroman and surface Melanctha’s dissonant rhythms.

This shift in narrative voice privileges voice over vision. Moving from omniscient gaze to sympathetic listener, Stein’s narrative posits an alternate, relational model of subjectivity. Melanctha’s primary narrative modes are telling and talking, and both are central to Melanctha’s self-understanding. As the narrator explains, “… Melanctha all her life did not know how to tell a story wholly. She always, and yet not with intention, managed to leave out big pieces which make a story very different, for when it came to what had happened and what she had said and what it was that she had really done, Melanctha never could remember right” (57). Memory is clearly a component of Melanctha’s capacity to account for her self in narrative; memories are fragile, easily rewritten by new perspectives or the passage of time. And, yet, the narrator’s emphasis on Melanctha’s inability to “remember right” suggests that this project is not wholly Melanctha’s or a sole project of Melanctha’s memory (57, my emphasis). The “rightness” of Melanctha’s memory and the narrator’s insistence that Melanctha “leave[s] out big pieces” locate the judgment of the narrative as whole or accurate beyond Melanctha (57). For Melanctha, experience necessarily becomes a collaborative narrative act, and we see throughout the novel how Melanctha who cannot “tell a story wholly” relies on her interlocutors to make stories and
herself whole. Melanctha’s dependence on relational story- and self-making makes her failures to find relationships that make space for and sustain her self all the more tragic.

Melanctha’s early relationship with Jane Harden explicitly links relational storytelling with self-making. Melanctha spends “long hours … sitting at [Jane’s] feet and listening to her stories...” (60). While we never learn the content of Jane’s stories, Melanctha finds sustenance in her exchanges with Jane. These stories shore up Melanctha’s sense of self, and she eventually becomes “stronger” than Jane (61). For a brief moment, Jane’s storytelling sustains them both; their reciprocal exchange enables a shared vitality, a shared “strength.” The disintegration of their relationship suggests but leaves unspoken the broader unsustainability of narrative reciprocity. Indeed, the narrator’s circumspect silence surrounding scenes of storytelling between Melanctha and Jane suggests that even if they have discovered a model of relational self-making it remains unnarratable within the broader context of the novel.

Melanctha’s relationship with Jeff literalizes the problem of narratability as their circular, recursive dialogue disrupts the narrative progress of the bildungsroman and stages the conflict between competing visions of storytelling and self-making. Nested within the series of conversations between Jeff and Melanctha is a debate between oppositional models of subjectivity and competing visions of sense- or knowledge-making. This conflict is transposed into a meta-debate about styles of talking. Jeff’s language relies on syntactical constructions of epistemological certainty (verbs like knowing, thinking, and the repetition of right, certainly, always, etc.), establishing a style of “talking truth” that belies the ways that “truth” is established

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9 While many scholars have read this relationship in explicitly sexual and/or romantic terms, I want to emphasize the consequences of the language of storytelling that Stein uses to frame their shared knowledge, sexual or otherwise.
in the talking. Early in their relationship, the narrator explicitly points out that he talks “[n]ot to Melanctha, he did not think of her at all when he was talking. It was the life he wanted that he spoke to, and the way he wanted things to be with the colored people” (67). In contrast, Melanctha’s style of “talking foolish”\(^\text{10}\) destabilizes Jeff’s established epistemological frameworks – the respectability that anchors the politics and social aspirations of Jeff’s middle-class ideology – by insisting on presence, experience, feeling, and relationality (135). Jeff admits to Melanctha that she “makes [him] see things . . . [he] never any other way could be knowing” and yet Jeff consistently reaches for external frameworks and readymade structures of feeling to make sense of his relationship with Melanctha (113). This conflict of styles becomes the engine of their relationship and the cause of its dissolution.

The contest between talking truth and talking foolish is also a contest between the selves or subjects these styles make narratable. Melanctha poses an epistemological problem for Jeff; he spends much time and talk on struggling to understand what kind of woman she is and failing repeatedly to recognize who she is. Melanctha’s alternate models of talking frustrate Jeff’s ability to locate Melanctha clearly in a recognizable narrative. Jeff’s epistemological confusion carries clear narrative and ontological consequences for Melanctha. Early in their conversations, he demands, “Tell me honest, Melanctha, which is the way that is you really, when you are alone, and real, and all honest” (81). Jeff’s frustration with Melanctha reveals his investment in a fully transparent “authentic” self. Jeff’s style of talking truth assumes that a “true” self is always already narratable. Rather than relying on the same categories of “real” and “authentic” that Jeff does, Melanctha’s style of talking foolish troubles \([18]\) Jeff’s assumption that language is fully

\(^{10}\) While it is Rose who accuses Melanctha of talking foolish, Melanctha is repeatedly described as being made foolish by love or joy.
transparent. Melanctha insightfully diagnoses Jeff’s desires, accusing, “You always wanting to have it all clear out in words always, what everybody is always feeling” and asking “[w]hat do you mean by them words, Jeff Campbell” (101). Jeff insists that he “certainly [does] mean them just like I am saying them . . .” (101). Where Melanctha preserves a space between speaking and being, Jeff collapses that space, insisting that language reflects and not simply represents experience. In contesting Jeff’s perspective, Melanctha offers a vision of the self that exceeds and calls into question the normative frameworks that make that self narratable, threatening both Jeff’s sense of self and his sense of the world. When they finally end their circular conversations, Jeff feels “more a strong man, the way he once had thought was his real self, the way he knew it” (121). In contrast, Melanctha struggles to find her place in a world that privileges Jeff’s narrative frameworks and “virtually drowns in the continuum of the world” (Ruddick 29). Talking truth produces an easily narratable self, marking the social boundaries of narratability while also silencing alternate models of selfhood and storytelling.

Melanctha’s relational self and “talking foolish” produce competing ways of knowing which, for Jeff and Melanctha, emerge as a debate about “remembering.” Jeff accuses Melanctha of “never [remembering] right, when it comes to what [she has] done and what [she] think[s] happens to [her]” (Stein, Three Lives 107). Melanctha quickly retorts, “It certainly is all easy for you Jeff Campbell to be talking. You remember right, because you don’t remember nothing till you get home with you thinking everything all over, but I certainly don’t think much ever of that way of remembering right, Jeff Campbell” (107). We see in Jeff’s “remembering” that distance allows him to locate his experience within a narrative framework, shoring up a stable sense of self and ensuring the narratability of his experiences. Melanctha, however, insists on the value of
immediacy and presence, explaining that remembering right is remembering “just when it happens to you, so you have a right kind of feeling . . . its real feeling every moment when its needed, that certainly does seem to me like real remembering” (107). Melanctha’s version of remembering resists the distancing effects of narrative, going home and thinking, as Jeff does, but refusing that distance renders those experiences difficult, if not impossible, to make narrative sense of within the conventions of language and genre. As readers, we experience this proxy debate about storytelling in the competing narrative voices at work in Melanctha, the distant and conventional objective narrative voice and the proximate, intimate, subjectifying narrative voice bending grammar and syntax to make Melanctha’s experiences audible. Importantly, Melanctha links this question of distance and proximity to suffering. For Melanctha, Jeff’s privileged distance causes pain to others caught in space between experience and meaning. Discussing their relationship, Melanctha explains to Jeff, “It’s always me that certainly has had to suffer, while you go home to remember” (107). Melanctha links her suffering to Jeff’s distance – his ability to “go home to remember” (107) – but it is the narrative distance Jeff claims that causes her pain and silences her suffering. Transforming her into a knowable object rather than a knowing subject, Jeff’s “remembering” rejects Melanctha’s understanding of herself and renders that self unknowable and unnarratable. Melanctha’s suffering is a product of both Jeff’s interpersonal failures (he is, at best, a frustrating interlocutor) and broader generic and systemic failures to render her experience narratable. As Stein’s project of telling and un-telling a life reveals, selfhood emerges relationally, in dynamic narrative and social exchanges. Narrative is prescriptive and not merely descriptive. Jeff and Melanctha’s conversation that dominates the
novel reveals that how we talk shapes who we are and who we can be more than what we reveal about ourselves in the talking.

*Melanctha* explicitly frames the narratability of particular selves and experiences in gendered, racialized, and sexualized language, foregrounding the ways identity delimits social recognition. The novel’s transparent euphemisms – wandering, gaining wisdom – both identify and “other” female, particularly queer female, sexuality. This alternate vocabulary renders Melanctha’s queer sexuality and gendered experience visible but unnarratable, a tension Melanctha herself articulates to Jeff. Early in their talks, Melanctha explains, “You see, Jeff, it ain’t much use to talk about what a woman is really feeling in her. You see all that, Jeff, better, by and by, when you get to really feeling. You won’t be so ready then always with your talking” (78). Melanctha draws on a gendered binary between feeling and thinking or talking to contest Jeff’s individualist subjectivity, arguing that through feeling we might learn to recognize alternate models of being and relating, a relational subjectivity. But, as Melanctha’s explanation reveals, language often fails to register these feelings. The novel continually alerts readers to the presence of these feelings and experiences even if we cannot, like Jeff, fully recognize and assimilate those experiences within normative frameworks. But the novel also alerts us to Melanctha’s differential access to the frameworks that might make her experiences meaningful. For example, we can apprehend the ways that Melanctha’s queer relationship with Jane offers an alternate, more sustainable model of relational subjectivity even though the novel renders that relationship unrecognizable and unnarratable through its sexualized euphemisms. Like Jeff, as readers, we are left wondering what is “real” even as the novel conditions us to recognize the relational, narrative production of that reality. Ultimately, Melanctha becomes “too many” for
both Jeff and the narrative, offering a relational excess that cannot be contained and made sensible by either Jeff’s ideological frameworks or the novel’s generic investments in the bildungsroman (103).¹¹

Melanctha’s prescient comments pose a question to Stein’s broader narrative project in *Melanctha* and *Three Lives* – what is the use of telling this story if it cannot be fully told? If Stein’s project is to tell a life, how are we to understand its failure? As the cliché goes, there is much to learn from failure. Stein suggests that we must agree to “not solve [the text] but be in it . . . to understand a thing means to be in contact with that thing” (*The Geographical History of America* 69). Stein’s often frustrating style cultivates new reading practices that break readers out of habitual patterns of reading and response, working to put readers in closer proximity to the life whose story she tells. This is perhaps what so inspires early twentieth century African American writers like Richard Wright,¹² who admires “Melanctha” in an essay for a collection titled *I Wish I’d Written That*, or Nella Larsen who explains to Stein in an admiring letter, “I never cease to wonder how you came to write it and just why you and not some one of us should so accurately have caught the spirit of this race of mine” (Larsen, letter to Gertrude Stein). But the very strategies Stein employs to bring readers closer to her portrait of black womanhood recycle racializing language and primitivist tropes that delimit Melanctha’s narratability and

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¹¹ This sense of Melanctha’s “too much-ness” is predictably gendered but it is also replicated in some of the scholarship surrounding Melanctha as a few scholars have argued that the narrator switches to focalize Jeff, the narrator is Jeff himself, and/or interpret Jeff as a masculinized Stein-ian presence in the text. As Jeff is perceived as the more familiar, conventional, or comfortable perspective, a sizable portion of the scholarship on Melanctha privileges Jeff over and above Melanctha.

¹² In particular, Richard Wright famously highlights Stein’s difficult rhythm, explaining that when reading *Three Lives* he “heard English as Negroes spoke it: . . . melodious, tolling, rough, infectious, subjective, laughing, cutting. . . And not only the words, but the winding psychological patterns that lay back of them!” (qtd. in Weiss 16).
repeat the violence of racist language. Wright and Larsen’s admiration cannot resolve the contradictions inherent in Stein’s narrative project. As readers, we are left to wrestle with the value Larsen, Wright, and others identify alongside the violence *Melanctha* certainly enacts. But we can learn much from Stein’s failures to fully transform syntax and narrative beyond its capacity for violence. Melanctha’s treatment of its black characters remains suspended between imagining them as a narrative function and a full human presence. This in-between-ness produces discordance and discomfort for Stein’s readers, but it is also where we might locate the ethical value of Stein’s narrative innovations. Stein’s narrative dynamism refuses to accept that narratability is a given, instead working to make space for new selves and new narratives within racialized and restrictive linguistic and narrative conventions. In doing so, Stein foregrounds the dynamic, shaping forces of narrative in imagining and encountering the self as well as readers’ complicity in the differential (re)production of narratability. “[I]magining,” Toni Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*, “is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, becoming” (4). Melanctha’s innovative narrative forms foreground the costs and consequences of becoming – both Melanctha’s struggle to become a narratable subject and who we as readers become in the encounter.

**Passing into Narrative**

Writing to Gertrude Stein, Nella Larsen explains that in *Melanctha* she found “some new thing – a great story” (Larsen, letter to Gertrude Stein). And, yet, when turning to her next narrative project, *Passing*, published 20 years after *Melanctha* in 1929, Larsen employs the inverse of Stein’s thick language and difficult rhythms.¹³ Where Stein works within and against

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¹³ Scholars have long used this epistolary exchange and Stein and Larsen’s brief face-to-face meeting in Paris to trace Stein’s influence on Larsen’s novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*. For example, Corinne E.
the narrative conventions of the bildungsroman, Larsen’s *Passing* works impressionistically. The encounter and its dynamics of social reading, recognition, and misrecognition becomes the primary narrative unit of the novel. But if the novel centers on a series of encounters between protagonist Irene Redfield and her long-absent friend Clare Kendry, its narrator remains tethered to Irene, focalizing its account of their encounters through Irene’s struggle to locate Clare and, ultimately, her own self in the racial milieus of Chicago and New York. Larsen’s *Passing* is rigidly structured with three sections (each subdivided into four chapters), repetitive vocabulary, and shared metaphors. In posing narratability as its central problem, these meticulous textual patterns become “a readerly affront,” highlighting the discordance between the novel’s orderly narrative structure and Irene’s inability to make sense of Clare Kendry and her own self (McIntire 779). Indeed, what becomes a problem of reading *within* the novel becomes a problem *for* reading the novel.

Historically, scholars have approached Larsen’s *Passing* as a novel of disclosure. On one hand, there is the obvious drama of racial disclosure at the center of the novel: Clare’s passing, her marriage to a white racist, and the danger she poses to Irene’s middle-class family and social life. On the other hand, there are the acts of critical disclosure that have shaped how *Passing* is read and taught. Like *Melanctha*, *Passing* is often read as being “about” plots undisclosed by Irene and the narrator’s limited insight and left to critics to uncover and expose. For example,

Blackmer opens her article “African Masks and the Arts of Passing in Gertrude Stein's ‘Melanctha’ and Nella Larsen's ‘Passing’” with an extended discussion of the letter and thoughtfully reads Stein’s influence throughout Larsen’s novels. More recently, in “The Modernist Novel in its Contemporaneity,” Pamela Caughie cites this exchange, situating Larsen’s novels in the broader context of modernism. For Caughie, Larsen’s novels not only inherit Stein’s narrative subjects, but also Stein’s break from literary realism in order to capture the subjective experience of modernity. However, in this chapter, I am less interested in tracing specific literary influence or inheritance than I am in the ways that Larsen’s *Passing* poses similar problems of narratability as Stein’s *Melanctha.*
Deborah McDowell’s now classic reading of the novel’s queer subplot depends on both the novel’s inability to fully express Irene’s homosexual desire and readers’ ability to expose the content of Irene’s repression. McDowell’s discussion of the novel’s rhetoric of disclosure, exposure, and revelation has been taken up by the broader scholarship on *Passing* which, as Brian Carr argues, is “virtually unified in its belief that [Irene’s] paranoid apprehensions can be submitted to a proper reading that will furnish the positive knowledge Irene systematically misses” (282). These paranoid critical reading practices with their “faith in exposure” mirror Irene’s own paranoid social reading practices (Sedgwick 130). But where critics supply what Irene ultimately refuses to know, I argue that the drama of the novel and in our reading lies in how the novel calls our attention to what we can and cannot know. As Gabrielle McIntire notes, “Larsen offers a book that seems to ‘pass’ for a readable document and yet ceaselessly withholds resolution on multiple levels at once” (779). While I do not want to diminish the vital and incredibly valuable readings of the novel that McDowell, Claudia Tate, Cheryl Wall, Hazel Carby, and others have contributed, I want to suspend the impulse for resolution endemic to suspicious or paranoid reading and resist the desire to supply or evaluate meaning. In other words, I want to resist reproducing or rehearsing the critical acts of disclosure that have shaped our reading of *Passing*. Instead, in taking seriously the ways *Passing* thwarts readers’ desire to know, I read *Passing* for the dynamic narrative acts of concealment and exposure that shape who is (and who is not) narratable and the costs and consequences of our encounters with otherness.

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14 In some ways, it is unfair to frame McDowell’s reading of the novel in these terms. After all, for McDowell, it is Larsen’s “act of narrative ‘dis’-closure” at the moment of Clare’s racial disclosure that surfaces Irene’s failures to express her queer desire (xxxi). However, scholars all too often elide McDowell’s emphasis on narrative “dis”-closure when engaging with her critical disclosure of the “erotic subplot” concealed by the novel’s exploration of racial identities.
*Passing* opens with a problem of reading. Irene sorts through her “little pile” of “ordinary and clearly directed letters” only to find a letter from Clare, recognizable by its visual difference (9). She observes

… the long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it. A thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender... Some two years ago she had one very like it in outward appearance. Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Purple ink. Foreign paper of extraordinary size. (9)

In the nested temporality of the novel, Irene’s first encounter with Clare is textual, transposing her exotic otherness onto the description of her missive in terms that will explicitly echo Irene’s flashback to their earlier encounter on the rooftop of the Drayton hotel. Calling attention to the letter’s style, Irene carefully notes the letter’s “Italian paper,” “[p]urple ink,” and “extraordinary size” (9). The letter is “mysterious” and “furtive” and “a little flaunting” (9). Clare becomes a seductive text, drawing Irene’s gaze and attention as she “puzzl[es] out” Clare’s language, “making instinctive guess[es]” at her prose (11). The intense attention to the materiality of Clare’s letter literalizes her circulation as a series of “tantalizing stories” consumed by Irene and the black community she leaves behind (19). But if Clare is willing to circulate a particular narrative of her self, she is also careful to control the terms by which she circulates. Irene receives the letter, a “thin sly thing” that immediately links the text to Clare, but there is “no return address to betray the sender” (9). Clare refuses to publicly “authorize” the letter by leaving her signature off the envelope and refusing to (literally) locate herself in a scene of address. Clare’s unauthorized narrative then invites and destabilizes any reading of her textualized self.

In divorcing the narrative she circulates from her self, Clare resists accountability, troubling Irene’s ability to hold her responsible for the perceived threat she poses to Irene’s stable life. This narrative and ethical instability is reinforced when Irene launches into a memory
of Clare as a child and her grammar falters. Irene “seemed to see” a vision of Clare’s childhood, calling into question the accuracy of her memory (9). Irene then struggles to definitively recount Clare’s capacity for violence, explaining that Clare “would fight with a ferocity and impetuousness that disregarded or forgot any danger; superior strength, numbers, or other unfavorable circumstances. How savagely she had clawed those boys the day they had hooted her parent and sung a derisive rhyme . . . And how deliberately she had –” (11, my emphasis). Irene’s suspect vision leaves the certainty of her memory in question – Did Clare fight? Was her violence self-defense or born of a desire to cause harm? It is telling that Irene’s memory dissipates at the very moment she tries to ascribe responsibility: “And how deliberately [Clare] had –” (11). As much as Clare’s ambiguous address resists locating her self, it also troubles Irene and others’ ability to do so as well, even when it is Clare’s own life narrative they seek to tell. If Clare recognizes and exploits others’ capacity to read her self, her refusal to authorize their readings destabilizes her own accountability and others’ authority, allowing her to control her own narratability and, indeed, to pass.

The evocative mirroring of Clare and her letters reveals the ways that the fragility of Clare’s narratable self parallels Clare’s material fragility. Irene determines that Clare’s letter is “a bit too lavish in its wordiness, a shade too unreserved in the manner of its expression” (52). The aesthetic and narrative style Clare deploys troubles the readability of her letters and the narratability of the self she circulates through them by suggesting the existence of inauthentic or multiple selves. Clare’s self both exceeds and undermines the self-narrative her letters circulate. Contrasting all things proper and orderly, Clare’s excessive self threatens Irene’s investment in stable self-narratives (certainly belied by her own willingness to casually pass despite her
investment in being a “race woman”). Clare’s letters prompt not only an inability but a refusal to recognize and respond to Clare – Irene “had only to turn away her eyes, to refuse her recognition” and determine that “it was, after all, better to answer nothing, to explain nothing, to refuse nothing; to dispose of the matter simply by not writing at all” (47, 62). Irene’s response to Clare’s letter foreshadows Clare’s violent erasure from the world of the novel. “Ripping [Clare’s first letter] open,” Irene displaces her violent response to Clare’s excess onto the letter:

> With an unusual methodicalness she tore the offending letter into tiny ragged squares that fluttered down and made a small heap in her black crépe de Chine lap. The destruction completed, she gathered them up, rose, and moved to the train’s end. Standing there, she dropped them over the railing and watched them scatter, on tracks, on cinders, on forlorn grass, in rills of dirty water. . . She dropped Clare out of her mind and turned her thoughts to her own affairs. (47)

Irene’s anger towards Clare is echoed later when she “tear[s] [Clare’s second letter] across” and “[flings] it into the scrap-basket” (62). This violent language – dropping, flinging, tearing, destroying – anticipates Clare’s eventual fate, linking Irene’s desire to silence Clare’s self-articulation and her inability to survive her exposure. Through the doubling of Clare’s textual self and embodied self, Passing illustrates the violent consequences of Clare’s inability to make her self singularly and safely narratable. Both Irene and the racialized world of Passing cannot fully admit the instability Clare embodies and circulates without authority or accountability.

> The violence of Irene’s misreading registers how reading and readability become “a powerful social tool” in the novel, policing whose desires and experiences are publicly narratable (McIntire 789). Irene’s own social reading practices evince a deep hermeneutic drive and a desire to clearly locate her self and others in clear, fixed narratives about racial belonging and middle-class morality. This is most palpable when Irene explicitly intervenes to censor her son’s “queer ideas” about sexuality and news of lynching (Larsen, Passing 59, 103). Irene establishes
and enforces the bounds of what is knowable within the black bourgeois family. “[A]ll other ways,” Irene reveals, are “menaces, more or less indirect, to that security of place and substance which she insisted upon for her sons and in a lesser degree for herself” (61). Irene takes a more active role in enforcing the narratability of her husband Brian’s desires by not simply silencing but overwriting them within familiar domestic and nationalist frameworks. Assuring herself that she has “a special talent for understanding” her husband Brian, Irene misreads his desire to “[go] off to Brazil” as a “disgust for his profession and his country” rather than an expression of frustration with the crowded, segregated landscape of 1920s Harlem (57-58). Like Clare and her letter, Brian’s desire is exotic, alien, and threatening; his discontent “explode[s] into words” that Irene is quick to silence (58). Not content with their chilly marital détente, Irene overwrites Brian’s unspoken desires with her own nationalism. She explains, “For she would not got to Brazil. She belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted . . . Brian, too, belonged here. His duty was to her and to his boys” (107). Irene resists and rejects Brian’s sense of unbelonging with a narrative of national belonging, collapsing visions of modern America (“this land of rising towers”) with domestic responsibility (his “duty . . . to her and to his boys”) in her own nationalist fantasy. In order to make Brian’s dissatisfaction narratable, Irene has to locate it within a narrative of domestic nationalism that contains the threat of Brian’s alien desires. Irene’s suspect reading practices ultimately overwrite what cannot be articulated, rendering the unnarratable safe to narrate.

When Clare and Brian do speak for themselves, they articulate their attitudes and desires indirectly, through mockery, irony, and scorn. In their first meeting, Clare gives Irene “a curious little sidelong glance and a sly, ironical smile . . . as if she had been in the secret of the other’s
thoughts and was mocking her” (23). Clare’s mockery is echoed later when Irene glimpses Clare’s “partly mocking” face at the disastrous tea with her racist husband and remembers the “mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose” at the moment of Clare’s death (45, 111). Similarly, Brian speaks to Irene with a “slightly mocking tone,” taking up a position of “mock seriousness” and offering “slightly mocking smiles” (57, 103, 75). Like their linked foreignness, this shared descriptive language draws Brian and Clare together and unites them in thwarting Irene’s desire to read them with certainty. Mockery becomes a narrative strategy of resistance in that, as McIntire argues, it “condescends, disdains, humiliates, and hides; it forecloses intimacy and precludes others from calling your bluff . . . [speaking] in a supremely private register that prevents others from reading one straight . . .” (785). To varying degrees, both Brian and Clare recognize that their bodies, desires, and selves create surface effects misread by the world around them and take up mockery and irony as a self-protective strategy. Mockery creates a slippery narrative surface on which neither narrator nor reader can gain secure footing.

Where Brian and Clare exploit the difference between the stories they circulate and their own desires and experiences, Irene doubles down in her desire for epistemological transparency – that in carefully reading others she can fully know and understand them. Through Irene’s fraught relationships with both Brian and Clare, Passing repeatedly shows us the impossible fulfilment of Irene’s desires and the failure of her own social reading practices. Indeed, Irene’s deep hermeneutical drive, her desire to know, results only in blindness. Larsen’s obvious visual metaphors consistently undercut the certainty with which Irene seeks to see the world. Irene’s suspect vision is introduced early in the novel:

Chicago. August. A brilliant day, hot, with a brutal staring sun pouring down rays that were like molten rain. A day on which the very outlines of the buildings shuddered as if
in protest at the heat. Quivering lines sprang up from baked pavements and wriggled along the shining car-tracks. The automobiles parked at the kerbs were a dancing blaze, and the glass of the shop-windows threw out a blinding radiance. Sharp particles of dust rose from the burning sidewalks, stinging the seared or dripping skins of wilting pedestrians. (12)

Irene is overwhelmed by the brightness of the city, a blinding light personified in the “brutal staring” of the sun. The familiar order of buildings, train tracks, and lines of parked cars erupts into quivering, wriggling, and dancing. The surfaces of storefronts and people become obscured by “blinding radiance” and stinging particles of dirt and dust. Irene’s “smarting eyes” force her to escape to the hotel rooftop where she meets Clare (12). Despite her careful, desirous catalogue of Clare’s physical presence, Irene’s “unseeing eyes” fail to recognize her (15). Irene’s vision repeatedly fails her, and yet she insists on the reality of her suspect vision.

Irene’s desire to know only results in blindness. At the moment she suspects Brian and Clare of having an affair, she loses her sight altogether: “The face in the mirror vanished from her sight, blotted out by this thing which had so suddenly flashed across her groping mind” (90). Irene deliberately closes her “unseeing eyes” (90). Brian and Clare’s suspected affair belies Irene’s confidence in her own reading practices, undercutting her confident knowledge of Brian and ability to read Clare’s desires and motivations successfully. Irene paradoxically doubles down on a deliberate unknowing, desperately trying to “shut out the knowledge” and to assure herself that she “had no real knowledge” (96). Determined to control public knowledge, Irene works to contain the exposure of the affair and censor what others may know about her marriage. While policing her emotions at a party, Irene sees that “she could bear anything, but only if no one knew that she had anything to bear” (94). Irene’s purported insight into Brian and Clare results in a recognition of her own unseeing and a refusal to admit an alternate truth into private or public circulation. The narrator describes the revelation, “It was as if in a house long dim, a
match had been struck, showing ghastly shapes where had been only blurred shadows” (91). In this strange metaphor, Irene’s capacity to see does not change – “blurred shadows” only gain shape – but the failure of her reading transforms what she does see into a dangerous threat. Brian and Clare have become “remote and inaccessible” and Irene is unable to definitively decipher the “truth” of their affair (97). Irene’s blindness ultimately exposes both the fiction of epistemological certainty and the ethical violence it wields, containing, controlling, and disavowing otherness while demanding others “manifest and maintain self-identity at all times…” (Butler, Giving an Account 42). But what begins as a kind of ethical violence – a willful unseeing, a refusal to recognize – presages real violence. Here again, Irene hurls a displaced symbol of Clare and her whiteness: a teacup shatters and “white fragments” and “[d]ark stains [dot] the bright rug” (Larsen, Passing 94). The unauthorized fictions of Clare and Brian become dangerous and threatening. Confronted by the subjective limits of her knowing, Irene doubles down on the violent reality of her own misreading, affirming both the power of her unseeing and its failures.

In “Betraying the Sender: the Rhetoric and Ethics of Fragile Texts,” Peter Rabinowitz argues that Passing is a “fragile” text, encouraging us “to consider the possibility that some theoretical positions may be incompatible with some texts – not because they don’t expose the workings of the text, but precisely because they do, and, in so doing, inflict significant damage” (206-207). Passing’s fragility lies not in its formal construction but in the fraught position in which it places readers. Like Irene, readers of Passing are drawn into the indecipherability of its narrative but reading as Irene does risks committing the same kinds of ethical violence Passing seems to warn against. The novel’s third person narrator is so anchored in Irene’s subjectivity
that the limits of her knowing often become our own. Butler reminds us in *Giving an Account of Oneself* that the question of ethics emerges at the limits of intelligibility, requiring us “to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness” (21, 136). Through a doubled reading strategy, the intimate linkage of narrator and reader, *Passing* calls attention to what exceeds Irene’s voice and vision, exposing the contingency of knowledge – both Irene’s and our own. *Passing* asks readers to counterfocalize, to read for the sites where the unnarratable disrupts the narrative and listen to what its gaps and silences say about whose stories can and cannot be told.

Early in the novel, Irene loses her self, evocatively literalized in the erasure of the “I” at the beginning of her name. Drawn into conversation with Clare during their first encounter, Irene becomes ‘Rene and struggles throughout the rest of the novel to reclaim the speaking “I.” This early erasure is a graphic reminder that the speaking “I” is fundamentally relational, “its suffering and acting, telling and showing, take place within a crucible of social relations. . .” (Butler, *Giving an Account* 132). We are dispossessed by the language we use, dependent on the schemes of intelligibility and norms of recognition that shape who can speak. Clare embodies both the freedom and the danger of exploiting the fundamental relationality of the speaking “I,” circulating her self in ways that both consolidate and contest racializing norms. In contrast to Clare, Irene struggles to speak within the normative frameworks of American racial hierarchies, frameworks that demand an objective rigidity belied by Clare, Irene, and others’ passing bodies. Lori Harrison-Kahan goes so far as to suggests that *Passing* “is the story of Irene’s attempt to reclaim her ‘I,’ to become a self-making subject instead of a fixed object, or stereotype” (110). Yet the narrator repeatedly calls attention to moments where Irene fails to speak her self into being, where language and self-making becomes inaccessible to Irene. She “could not have told”
what she felt and “could not say why” her instincts rebel (Larsen, *Passing* 23, 28). She becomes “too wrathful for words” (55). Irene’s voice becomes “brittle,” “choked,” and “queer” (66, 74, 89). Irene does not simply struggle to speak but actively avoids giving voice to her desires and experiences, “recoil[ing] from exact expression” and “[shying] away from putting into words” (90, 92). Irene’s voicelessness signals both the limits of what is narratable and her recognition of the risks and consequences of voicing her desires. Looking into the mirror, Irene sees her self “blotted out by this [affair]” (91). In this moment, as Martha Cutter argues, Irene herself “becomes a gap, a blank, an absence” without the stable narratives of wife and mother (89).

Destabilized by the possibility of Brian and Clare’s affair, Irene feels “an almost uncontrollable impulse to laugh, to scream, to hurl things about. She wanted, suddenly, to shock people, to hurt them, to make them notice her, to be aware of her suffering” (Larsen, *Passing* 92). In this moment, Irene voices a deep desire for the recognition, in any form, of her own subjectivity as one who suffers, shocks, hurts and yet that desire is choked back by the prospect that she might be made unrecognizable in the act of telling. Irene speaks most clearly when she is assured in her autonomous agency, participating in the narratives that create order and routine – domesticity, motherhood, racial belonging, nationalism – that shore up a stable, contained self. To admit her desires into language risks rupturing the very schemes of intelligibility that enable her narratability at all and exposing her dependence on others.

Irene’s fraught silences reproduce her unnarratability for us, as readers, signaling the limits of Irene’s self and the possibility of self-making. In drawing attention to these moments of silence and supplying language where Irene cannot, the narrator operates in excess, preserving “a kind of seeing that does not make its way into speech” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 123). This
narrative excess exposes the distance between Irene and *Passing*'s reader which highlights the differentiated costs of such exposures. Where Irene is “choked” by the narrative horizons of her black bourgeois milieu, *Passing* reworks what can and cannot pass into narratability by making palpable the gaps and silences in Irene’s self-making. Operating at the limits of narratability, *Passing*'s doubled narrative strategy reminds us that incoherence can be an ethical resource, an “acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others” (Butler, *Giving an Account* 63). Alternate “truths,” including the social relations that govern intelligibility, “might well become more clear in moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness – in enigmatic articulations that cannot easily be translated into narrative form” (Butler, *Giving an Account* 64). The narrator passes into language what Irene cannot say, exposing both Irene’s limits and the limits of the social world and making visible the ways those limits shape and choke Irene’s narratability. *Passing*'s gaps, silences, and ambiguities mark alternate narratives and multiple modes of being even if the novel cannot fully tell them in narrative form.

*Passing* marks gaps, silences, and ambiguities elsewhere in the novel with language of queering and queerness. Conversation, Butler argues, “constitute the painful, if not repressive, surface of social relations” (*Bodies That Matter*, 130). In *Passing*, queering and queerness mark both the elisions and silences that maintain that surface and the eruptions and disruptions that threaten it. Butler notes the multiplicity of the word as it was used in the early 20th century: “of obscure origin, the state of feeling ill or bad, not straight, obscure, perverse, eccentric . . . to quiz or ridicule, to puzzle, but also, to swindle and to cheat” (130). Signaling a “deviation from normalcy which might well include the sexual,” “queer” names what cannot be narrated fully, cuing readers to the presence of different experiences and multiple or competing meanings that
cannot pass into language (130). When used as a descriptor, “queer” marks the border between what is proper and appropriate and what is not. During a fraught afternoon tea with Clare’s husband, Gertrude responds to his use of a racial slur with “a queer little suppressed sound, a snort or a giggle” (Larsen, *Passing* 41). Clare, Irene, and Gertrude’s presence belies John Bellew’s racist ideologies; withholding their blackness from conversation allows them to pass (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 130). Gertrude’s “queer giggle” disrupts the surface of the conversation, exposing the repressive force of normative whiteness. Later in the novel, Irene encounters Clare’s husband on the street arm-in-arm with her black friend. Astutely reading the flashes of recognition (John Bellew) and deliberate misrecognition (Irene), Felise declares, “Aha! Been ‘passing,’ have you? Well, I’ve queered that” (Larsen, *Passing* 99). Felise’s presence both disrupts and exposes Irene’s passing and the fiction of Bellew’s racist ideology. Passing’s “queer” language reproduces the limits of narratability both within the narrative and between the novel and its readers.

In *Passing*, it is white men who seek the power of naming that establishes and polices the fragile, slippery boundaries of racial identity. Watching “[y]oung men, old men, white men, black men; youthful women, older women, pink women, golden women; fat men, thin men, tall men, short men; stout women, slim women, stately women, small women,” Hugh Wentworth, Irene’s friend and a white Carl Van Vechten-type figure in the novel, seeks out the name, status, and race of the blonde beauty out of the fairytale” (75). Clare, again figured as a “tantalizing story,” poses a problem to Hugh’s human taxonomy. Discussing the act of passing with Hugh, Irene suggests that racial identity is marked by a “thing that couldn’t be registered” (77). Racial
difference, Irene suggests, cannot be narrated, only recognized, and that recognition is socially conditioned. Their exchange continues:

“It’s easy for a Negro to ‘pass’ for white. But I don’t think it would be so simple for a white person to ‘pass’ for coloured.”
“Never thought of that.”
“No, you wouldn’t. Why should you?”
He regarded her critically through mists of smoke. “Slippin’ me, Irene?” (78)

Irene reveals Hugh’s own limited racialized vision – he seeks to learn how to detect blackness but cannot recognize his own whiteness. Hugh’s question – “Slippin’ me, Irene?” – evinces a resistance to both the revelation of his implicit racism (despite his self-styling as a friend of the black community) and the limits of his own vision. Despite his momentary “slip,” Hugh is willing to trouble his vision of racial difference but not the racism that produces it, failing to recognize the socially contingent, relational norms that produce and stabilize the boundaries of race.

If Hugh is willing to consider the limits of his racial knowing, Clare’s husband, John Bellew, violently denies his ignorance. Alternately fetishizing and disavowing Clare’s blackness, Bellew calls her “Nig,” explaining, “When we were first married, she was as white as – as – well as white as a lily. But I declare she’s getting’ darker and darker” (39). The power of Bellew’s naming is contingent on his capacity to “see” race and his privilege as an arbiter of Clare’s intelligibility. Clare’s silence disassociates her from her blackness while Bellew’s vocality enforces his whiteness. As Butler explains, “His name, Bellew, like bellow, is itself a howl, the long howl of white male anxiety in the face of the racially ambiguous woman whom he idealizes and loathes” (Bodies That Matter 126). His degrading nickname relies on his confidence in his capacity to know others. He explains to a horrified Irene, “But I know people who’ve known them, better than they know their black selves. And I read in the papers about them. Always
robbing and killing people. And . . . worse” (Larsen, *Passing* 41). Bellew’s reading transforms black people into objects of his racist knowing – objects essential to the fiction of his white purity. As her nickname suggests, Clare becomes the fetishized object of his knowing and deliberate unknowing. In his first enunciation, surrounded by the social and class signifiers of whiteness, Clare’s nickname names the fetishized relationality that sustains his whiteness. By the end of the novel, surrounded by Clare and Irene’s black friends, his bellow forecloses Clare’s dangerous ambiguity, a violent speech that secures the racial boundaries Clare trespasses.

*Passing* ends with a final moment of dis-closure, a narrative gap and a “confusion of agency” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 127). The narrator who has been able to surpass Irene’s knowledge of her self throughout the novel is finally silenced by Irene’s trauma. Irene “never afterwards allowed herself to remember,” and *Passing* never allows readers to definitively know definitively what happened (111). This final ambiguity draws readers in, doubling the scene of reading that began the novel. Like Irene, we puzzle over Clare’s textual presence and material absence, struggling to resolve her seductive multiplicity into interpretive clarity. *Passing*’s final ethical lesson lies in both our desire for closure and in our failure to satisfy that desire. The final scene’s ambiguous agency leaves open our own agency as readers. To impose a final interpretation is to commit to the same reading practices that lead to Clare’s death – Bellew’s violent naming, Irene’s desires for epistemological certainty, Clare’s inability to find a sustainable self-narrative within the normative horizons of *Passing*’s world. Our task is not to force the text to disclose itself but to track its dis-closures, to read for the lives present but unnarratable and to recognize what makes some lives more or less narratable. Like *Melanctha*, *Passing* challenges our habitual reading practices, revealing the ways they are implicated in and
often reproduce the violence at the climax of the novel. Clare’s “[d]eath by misadventure” disperses ethical responsibility (whose misadventure?) at the moment we are called to respond (114). And, yet, the novel reveals that the registers in which we might respond might also fail us. Irene can only voice a final choked “I –” [117] before she too follows Clare “[d]own, down, down,” “submerged and drowned” in darkness (114, 113, 114). *Passing’s* final acts of narrative silence produce a perverse call for new registers of ethical response: to rethink response and responsibility on the basis of the limits our own and others’ narratability.

*Passing* and *Melanctha*’s reflexive modernist narrative forms trouble our habitual patterns of reading and responding to others. Both texts ask readers to confront the limits of our knowing and recognize our agency in the narratability of the lives of others. Where *Melanctha* works to re-signify language and *Passing* marks its gaps, ambiguities, and failures, readers are drawn into the project of telling the selves at the center of their narratives. In doing so, both novels reveal alternate possibilities for narrating the self and the failures of our habitual reading practices. In calling readers to counterfocalize, to confront the limits of narratability, these texts foreground the ways in which the question of ethics emerges at these limits and call attention to our own responsibility in the making and unmaking of subjects. The task for an ethical reading then is to confront the limits of our understanding, to resist the fantasy that a text might be fully knowable and to recognize our role in determining whose lives are narratable. In this way, the narratable subject becomes a site of agency as well as the site of its circumscription. Melanctha, Clare, and Irene live (and die) in the possibility that we might contest the conventions that make some ways of living unnarratable and unsustainable even as we must rely on them for recognizable social life. Both within the novel and between text and reader, *Passing* and
Melanctha’s narrative contestations become enabling disruptions, exposing a relationality that might form new horizons for being and new horizons for storytelling. Ultimately, Passing and Melanctha propose that new, more ethical practices of reading allow us to account for the complexity of lives within and beyond the text.
CHAPTER THREE

EMPATHIC READING:

TRUE FEELINGS AND JUST EMOTIONS IN MISS LONELYHEARTS

Reading makes us better people. This is a familiar refrain. It is an argument scholars marshal in defense of the humanities, advocating for literacy, and justifying the continuing place of literature in our cultural imagination. Embedded in this ubiquitous slogan is a complicated constellation of reading, empathy, and ethics. Reading, it suggests, makes us better people because reading cultivates empathy and empathy cultivates ethical action in the world. On the surface, the logic tracks. In the runup to his inaugural presidential campaign, Barack Obama threw his political weight behind an ethics of reading, diagnosing American culture’s “empathy deficit” and arguing that books, “more than anything else,” give young people “the capacity to act responsibly with respect to other people” (Obama). Obama gives popular voice to what philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued throughout her career: “[n]arrative imagination is an essential preparation for moral interaction” (90). Both Obama and Nussbaum evince the popular empathy-altruism hypothesis\(^1\) which links empathic concern for others to altruistic action in the world.

Obama, Nussbaum, and others, as avatars of the empathy-altruism hypothesis, understand empathy as a distinctly ethical feeling. Paradoxically, in identifying empathy as an ethical

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\(^1\) Social psychologist C. Daniel Batson hypothesized that empathic concern could produce an altruistic motivation for prosocial action. Batson’s original argument has been distilled into the “empathy-altruism hypothesis.”
feeling, advocates for this popular understanding of empathy often mistake the feeling for its ethics. Empathy circulates as a familiar structure of feeling, a recognizable form of response and responsibility that allows people to skip ahead to its perceived products and outcomes (feeling good) without acting on its altruistic commitments (doing good). Empathy becomes a closed structure, a portable and private experience that allows us to ignore the specific contours of both form and feeling. In privatizing ethics, empathy personalizes, individuates, and internalizes ethical relations in ways that allow readers to assert affective commonality and bracket or ignore the structural, economic, political, and ethical differences that enable or disable participation in the universal. Identification becomes the primary vehicle for this kind of empathy, situating empathetic feeling as both a virtuous and moral response to suffering and injustice. In other words, this form of popular empathy feels good, disguising inaction in a mask of virtue. As Timothy Aubry argues, such “psychological humanism” and its faith in a global humanity risks “appearing to reach beyond the boundaries of what is culturally familiar” while “in fact coloniz[ing] and domesticat[ing] alterity” (203). This view of empathy uncritically grounds its ethical value in the affective agency of the reader without examining how empathy itself operates.

In The Female Complaint, Lauren Berlant argues that empathy (and, especially, its relative feeling, sympathy) operates as a “true feeling,” promising a fantasy that personal identification can be socially transformative (35). In individuating ethical response as affective recognition, empathy replaces suffering’s “ethical imperative toward social transformation” with

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2 Martha Nussbaum and other moral philosophers frequently and often exclusively focus on character as their primary literary examples. As I argue in this chapter, a more complicated understanding of the work of affect and justice challenges the grounds of this model of the moral virtue of empathetic identification.
a “civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy” (Berlant, “Poor Eliza” 641). The empathy-altruism hypothesis and its corollary truisms about the value of reading stealthily advance a model of justice that is bound up in such “true feeling.” Yet we all know that feeling good does not necessarily translate to doing good and that feeling virtuous can excuse inaction. Sara Ahmed warns us that “[n]ot only does this model work to conceal the power relations at stake in defining what is good-in-itself, but it works to individuate, personalise and privatise the social relation of (in)justice” (Cultural Politics 195). Empathy may be a “true feeling” but, as Ahmed suggests, it is not always (and often rarely is) a just feeling. Empathy all too often reifies and reproduces inequities in who gets to feel and who is an object of our feeling.

If claiming too much for empathy’s ethical possibilities risks passivity or complicity, claiming too little elides its affective possibilities. While taking my cue from Suzanne Keen, Sue J. Kim, Paul Bloom, and others and approaching empathy and the ways that it is bound up in the experience of reading with skepticism, I do not want to dismiss empathy simply because it is a feeling. Instead, I want to explore its feeling-ness, its affective work, and the ways that affect can extend and complicate ethical relation. Feelings move us and that movement has ethical dimensions worth mapping. This chapter asks what it would look like to divest from popular

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3 In particular, Paul Bloom’s aptly titled Against Empathy offers a litany of social, cultural, and political examples of “civic-minded but passive” empathy, ranging in scope and scale from the “identifiable victim effect” to global warming. Bloom’s critique of empathy stems from his contention that empathy is too limited and parochial to effect social change.

4 In Empathy and the Novel, Suzanne Keen points to the limited scientific evidence that reading can produce empathy and highlights the limits of empathy’s capacity to motivate altruistic or prosocial action. Paul Bloom famously argues for the dangers of empathy, promoting instead rational compassion as a more effective response to suffering and injustice. Sue J. Kim’s “Empathy and 1970s Novels by Third World Women” explores empathy’s normative dimensions both in terms of prescribing appropriate feelings and in defining who can be a subject of feeling (150). Together, these scholars voice much needed skepticism about the value of empathy even as empathy continues to be uncritically celebrated as a social and civic virtue.
empathy, the ubiquitous empathy-altruism model of empathy, and instead reads empathy as an embodied set of relational practices, a “social and aesthetic technology of belonging” (Berlant, *Compassion* 5). What would it look like to treat empathy as an affect? What kinds of work do ethical feelings do? What happens when ethical relations and affective relations collide? Emphasizing empathy’s affective dimensions, its circulation as an ethical feeling, asks us to theorize the relationship between art and the world differently or, in other words, to read differently.

Popular empathy operates pedagogically; its value is instructive, both establishing and reinforcing who is a subject and who is an object of ethical feeling. Popular empathy is predicated on a psychological model of feeling in which feelings begin internally and become external, moving outwards towards objects and others. In this model, feelings are something we “have.” In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed argues that this is a fundamental misunderstanding of how emotions work, offering instead a model based on the “sociality of emotion” and emphasizing the social and cultural practices of emotionality. Emotions, Ahmed argues, are about or in response to objects and others, but in thinking about feeling, we misattribute the feeling to an object rather than to our encounter with the object. Feelings circulate between subjects and objects, “tak[ing] the ‘shape’ of the contact we have with objects” (5). Feelings are not individual but social and, thus, relational: “[T]hey involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness or ‘awayness’ in relation to such objects” (8). More than circulating between and beyond subject and objects, emotions “produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects” (10). Ahmed argues that “the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others”
Feelings move, slide, and stick to bodies and objects, including transforming others into objects of feeling. A social model of emotions shifts our understanding of feeling from pedagogical to performative or, echoing Ahmed, from asking what feelings are to asking what they do.\(^5\)

Popular empathy teaches us how to feel good about feeling bad without interrogating the conditions and consequences of our affective response to suffering and injustice. Reducing injustice to bad feelings produces a closed loop in which empathy justifies itself while perpetuating the conditions of injustice it responds to. Empathy is, in fact, a bad teacher if the goal is to address systemic injustice. Indeed, in teaching us to feel good about feeling bad, empathy reinforces claims on the interiority of others and often reproduces violent distinctions between the subject and objects of empathy. Locating ethical judgment and response in affect, empathy becomes itself a sign of justice. And yet Ahmed reminds us, importantly, that “justice and injustice cannot be ‘read’ as signs of good and bad feeling: to transform bad feeling into good feeling [...] is not necessarily to repair the costs of injustice” (Cultural Politics 193). Empathy conceals the ethico-affective relations that produce it, becoming a sign of (in)justice and not the conditions that produce it or the conditions that might begin to address it. In reading empathy as a sign of justice, the empathy-altruism hypothesis reveals empathy’s powerful pedagogical loop: empathy becomes a sign of the ethics of reading. Thinking about the ethics of reading through affect theories and the work of Ahmed, Berlant, and others allows us to trace the

\(^5\) As Sianne Ngai argues, distinction is “still intended to solve the same basic and fundamentally descriptive problem it was coined in psychoanalytic practice to solve: that of distinguishing first-person from third-person feeling, and, by extension, feeling that is contained by an identity from feeling that is not” (27). This chapter is more interested in exploring how empathy moves than articulating its distinctiveness or making a case for its categorization.
ways that affective economies intersect with moral economies, (re)producing ethical judgments as affective responses and vice versa. Rather than assuming the ethical value of empathy, reading empathy as primarily affective rather than ethical allows us to attend to the ways that empathy takes on and (re)directs ethical value.6

Feeling is already, in a sense, a mode of reading. Empathy, in particular, transforms the terms and conditions of our affective and ethical response by directing and assigning value. In yoking together the formal and the social, empathy involves a particularly visible and tangible “process of reading, in the very attribution of significance” (Ahmed, Cultural Politics 6). Following Sianne Ngai, we might approach empathic feelings as “unusually knotted or condensed ‘interpretations of predicaments’ - that is, signs that not only render visible different register of the problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner” (3). Empathy’s affective work - directing, conjoining, rendering, assigning, etc. - necessarily shifts our mode of reading from the pedagogical to the performative. In other words, we cannot read for empathy’s ethical work only in authorial intention, characters’ actions, narrative morals, or themes, but, rather, in the dynamic, experiential, affective circuits between reader, text, and world. This introduces a different set of questions, questions that resist taking the objects of empathy for granted - not simply what narratives “show” us about empathy (acting pedagogically) but to show us what empathy makes possible or impossible, what it opens and forecloses. Empathy is representative but also forceful, arranging both senses and subjects. As C. Namwali Serpell argues in Seven Modes of Uncertainty, “literary ethics . . . inheres rather in the rhythms of formal relation we undergo as we read over time” (28). As an affective mode of

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6 As Sara Ahmed argues, “feelings in being directed toward objects become directive” (Cultural Politics 219).
reading, empathy shapes not only how we relate but how the world is reshaped in the act of relating.

The task of this chapter, then, is to offer a critical reading of empathy as an ethics of feeling, describing the forms it takes and mapping its force within and beyond the literary text. Following Ahmed, I want to dwell in affect’s contact zone and track the surfaces and boundaries it produces while also attending to the ways that affect is also local, contingent, and permeable. In offering a critical reading of empathy as one of a constellation of related and ethically charged “humanizing emotions,” my goal is, following Lauren Berlant, not to “destroy its object but to explain the dynamics of optimisms and exclusions” (Compassion 5). Linking affect and ethics through a reading of empathy’s work in the world can extend and expand the critical conversation surrounding literary ethics beyond the empathy-altruism hypothesis. Seeking to jar empathy out of its moralizing (or, alternately, amoralizing) stalemate, this chapter mobilizes affect in order to make empathy readable in a new way and shed light on the linkages between feeling ethical and acting ethically.

To do so, this chapter turns to Nathanael West’s 1933 novella, Miss Lonelyhearts, and the crisis of empathy at the center of its narrative. Following the titular Miss Lonelyhearts, an exhausted writer on a deadline, West’s novella explores the circulation of empathy in the form of the newspaper advice column, satirizing our ethical and affective investments in the fantasies of popular empathy. In inviting readers into the moral mechanics of the advice column, Miss Lonelyhearts reveals how the genre of the advice column shapes, circulates, and mediates private

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7 Like Sianne Ngai’s project in Ugly Feelings, this chapter seeks to “[demonstrate] how feeling can be used to expand the project of criticism and theory,” especially the project of ethical criticism and theory (8).
and public feeling while also revealing the limits of the genre’s affective codes and fantasies. My reading of *Miss Lonelyhearts* traces the affective work and ethical promises of the novella’s central genre as well as the novella’s own complicities and counterstrategies. I argue that, in asking us to read empathy as an ethical feeling, *Miss Lonelyhearts* reframes our understanding of empathy and our investments in its generic fantasies, revealing a more complex and ambivalent vision of empathy’s ethical value. Ultimately, reading empathy’s true feeling makes space for the ways it could become a more just emotion.

**Miss Lonelyhearts and the Crisis of Empathy**

Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* makes a spectacle of empathy. A “moral satire” from a major minor American author, West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* has typically been read as spectacularizing differing visions of America’s decay: consumer culture, mass media, socioeconomic alienation. Earlier critics leaned toward theologically-inflected reading of redemption, suffering, and morality in *Miss Lonelyhearts*’ violent satire of American culture. But both strains of criticism empty West’s novella of feeling, reading the novella’s parodic narrative forms, parable, comic strip, satire, etc., as embodying flat or absent affect. In *The Sentimental Touch*, Aaron Ritzenberg goes so far as to argue that *Miss Lonelyhearts* “endeavors not to feel at all” (94). Far from the absence of feeling, I echo Jonathon Greenberg in reading West as explicitly engaging “the problem of feeling . . . the phenomenon in which the mere experience of particular feelings, particularly in response to scenes or representations of suffering, becomes itself the source of conflict” (590). In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, this conflict emerges as an interrogation of the ethics of empathy at multiple levels within the text - for both Miss
Lonelyhearts and his readers within the novel but also for readers of *Miss Lonelyhearts* the novel.

*Miss Lonelyhearts* intervenes in the ongoing conversation around the affective experience and value of narrative. As a late modernist text, *Miss Lonelyhearts* participates in what Megan Hammond terms the “modernist turn to empathy,” an explicit “restructuring of an already existing set of desires and concerns relating to thinking and feeling with others” (4). Empathy, one could argue, is itself a distinctly modernist feeling. Coined in 1909 by psychologist Edward Bradford Tichener, empathy emerges from the German word *Einfühlung* which means “to feel oneself into” or “in-feeling” (5). While, as a concept, empathy emerges during the same historical period of modernism, modernist narratives mark a conceptual and narrative shift away from Victorian or nineteenth-century discourses of sympathy or “feeling for” and towards empathy or “feeling with.”

In this context, we can read modernism’s narrative innovations like interior monologue, free indirect discourse, stream-of-consciousness, fragmentation and anachrony, focalization, etc. as “empathic forms” (4). Indeed, our arguments about reading as generating or cultivating empathy are deeply indebted to modernist narrative forms and their transformation of Victorian sympathy into our current understanding of empathy. And, yet, while modernism gives narrative form to the conceptual shift from sympathy to empathy, modernist writers like West nonetheless remain deeply ambivalent about the value and ethical potential of empathic relation. Nathanael West’s engagement with empathy reflects its modernist origins and persistent structures.

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8 Confusingly, modernists often used the term “sympathetic imagination” to refer to what contemporary scholars would describe as empathy. However, I think the emphasis on imaginative (and narrative) connection underlines its difference from nineteenth century authors’ deployment of sympathy.
*Miss Lonelyhearts* reframes this modernist ambivalence about the ethical value of narrative empathy in explicitly satirical terms. Published in 1933, West’s novella follows a newspaper advice columnist known only as Miss Lonelyhearts through a series of parodic adventures in 1930s New York City. At the mercy of his brutal editor, Shrike, and considered a pitiful joke by his fellow reporters, Miss Lonelyhearts descends into depression, fantasy, and existential angst while struggling to grapple with the sheer amount of suffering in his readers’ desperate letters. Miss Lonelyhearts grows increasingly alienated from the demands of his advice column, explaining to his girlfriend, Betty, in a meta-precis of the novella itself:

A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke. He welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column, and anyway he’s tired of being a leg man. He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the job begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator. (West, *Miss Lonelyhearts* 32)

Seeking release from the endless stream of suffering and trauma in his inbox, Miss Lonelyhearts develops an increasingly hysterical Christ-complex and violates the professional boundaries of the Depression-era agony aunt. The novella concludes in media res as Miss Lonelyhearts tumbles down a set of stairs, locked in a violent embrace with the jealous husband of one of his readers. As John Dos Passos succinctly and evocatively sums up, West’s novel’s violent satire “packs a wallop” (Dos Passos).

Opening with an incantatory invocation of Miss Lonelyhearts, the advice columnist, as a contemporary deity - “Soul of Miss L, glorify me . . . Amen,” West’s novella satirically
transliterates the newspaper’s Anderson-ian imagined political community\(^9\) onto ritualized religion. Embodied in the bombastic voice of Miss Lonelyhearts’ editor, Shrike (his name itself a clue to his motivations), West ironizes the mechanized and mediating role of the newspaper advice column. In framing Miss Lonelyhearts as priest and readers as disciples, Shrike illustrates the ways in which the advice column has itself become a ritualized genre. Genre, as Lauren Berlant describes, operates as “an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected . . .” (Female Complaint 4). However, genre also “locates real life in the affective capacity to bracket many kinds of structural and historical antagonism on behalf of finding a way to connect with the feeling of belonging to a larger world, however aesthetically mediated” (4). The newspaper advice column promises precisely such an exchange. Shrike’s religious metaphor highlights the ways that the advice column’s circulation naturalizes, neutralizes, and consolidates its own mediation. Private expressions of suffering are anonymized and circulated publicly, stripped of both the possibility of local intervention and of social critique, while simultaneously cultivating a shared community of readers. The ritual of the advice column becomes a mechanized vehicle for empathic catharsis, allowing readers and letter writers temporarily to mistake aesthetic relief for ethical response. The advice column creates rather than merely reflects opportunities for empathic response. For Shrike and, differently, for Miss Lonelyhearts, this affective exchange has become self-reflexive: it is a religion designed to spread religion or empathy for

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\(^9\) In Imagined Communities (1983), Benedict Anderson develops his theory of imagined community, arguing that mass media is central to creating a national community by creating a generalized, shared public readership.
subscription’s sake. In this way, Miss Lonelyhearts’ fictionalized advice column functions as an empathic genre where empathy becomes the currency of affective exchange for readers.

In participating in this affective exchange, Miss Lonelyhearts’ letter writers strike a difficult ethical bargain. While the genre offers a participatory model of social belonging, it is mediated through the conventions and expectations of the empathic genre. As Ritzenberg points out, the letter writers’ voices “can never be truly authentic; their problems must be fitted to the form of the advice letter - a letter that anticipates and invites a certain therapeutic, comforting response” (100). Indeed, West immediately locates readers in this formal relation as we read Miss Lonelyhearts’ stack of letters alongside the novella’s protagonist with their shared refrains: I don’t know what to do. What would you do? What did I do to deserve this suffering? While the letter writers insist on the authenticity and transparency of their language, we see how they are, as Miss Lonelyhearts suggests, “all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 1). The cost of participating in this exchange, of entering this public space of recognition, is a submission to its generic conventions, a heart-shaped stamp. Craving the affirmation of publication and circulation, Miss Lonelyhearts’ readers\(^\text{10}\) transform themselves into anonymized avatars, Sick-of-it-all, Desperate, Broken-hearted, Broad Shoulders, etc. Their self-chosen monikers provide an affective and narrative shorthand for their stories of suffering. In doing so, the letter writers transform themselves into formal objects of public feeling. The affective bargain of the advice column exchanges public recognition of human suffering for a kind of self-objectification even as they might resist or try

\(^{10}\) Miss Lonelyhearts’ readers include both those who participate in the column itself as correspondents but also those who affectively participate in the column, imaginatively identifying themselves in the letter writers’ avatars or creating their own.
to negotiate the terms of this exchange. As Kristen Renzi points out, there’s a deep irony in using “the tasty sign of love” as “a grotesque symbol of the imposition of violence - the violence of suffering, the violence of forced conformity that such suffering implies, the violence of the community feeding off of human suffering and sameness as the fit conclusion to a delicious meal” (58). Broad Shoulders tellingly includes, “P.S. Dear Miss Lonelyhearts dont [sic] think I am broad shouldered but that is the way I feel about life and me I mean” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 43). As Broad Shoulders’ post-script reveals, this negotiation is often explicit and self-conscious. The generic transformation of Miss Lonelyhearts’ letter writers reveals how the advice column does not simply circulate, but actively creates the normative objects of empathy and how recognition is constrained by normative narrative conventions. Those who suffer must participate in and reproduce the conventions of genre in order to be recognized by it. Miss Lonelyhearts’ advice column offers a fantasy of empathic recognition even as it reinvests that fantasy in the social distinctions and generic constraints of the advice column.

If the advice column offers a difficult bargain to letter writers, it offers an attractive ethical fantasy for readers. Heartbreakingly satirized in Miss Lonelyhearts, the genre of the advice column offers a “felt simplicity” that dislocates suffering and violence from unjust structures and institutions (Berlant, Female Complaint 6). While the newspaper has broader and more extensive functions, the advice column and its readers operate as a micro-community both a part of and separate from the broader circulation of news, politics, business, etc. In the feminized domestic space of “human interest,” the advice column functions as what Berlant characterizes as an “intimate public” (10). Offering “a sense of focused belonging,” the intimate

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11 This is replicated tellingly in Miss Lonelyhearts as we only know him as his advice column alias.
public creates an ostensibly emotionally literate community addressing each other’s experiences - suffering and fantasies of belonging in everyday situations - in ways that confirm and affirm needs, desires, and emotional worlds. However ambivalent its letter writers and readers may be, the advice column offers a formal space of recognition otherwise unavailable in daily life. Through the writing, circulation, and reading of anonymized personal narratives, the advice column has the ability to unsettle and rearticulate the public world, offering a visible negotiation of the conditions of public life. Justus Nieland describes Miss Lonelyhearts’ project in similar terms, as a “project of sympathetic publicity - his desire to feel the pain of his mass readership, ‘to love the whole world with an all-embracing love’” (58). Importantly, both Berlant and Miss Lonelyhearts’ configuration of affect and publicity offer relief from the political (Female Complaint 10). Its generic conventions create a generalized readership, an anonymous subject position that serves the economic imperatives of the newspaper (Shrike’s admonishment to add more subscribers) and creates fluency in a shared affective language.

The advice column’s intimate public is both intimate and impersonal. Drawing on Louis Althusser and early twentieth century discourses of newspaper managerialism, Aaron Ritzenberg reminds us that the newspaper circulates a “culture of commodified communication [...] spreading cultural dislocation even as it purports to be simply reporting cultural developments” (97). In particular, the advice column trades the fantasy of a shared community for depersonalization, transforming self, other, and mediator into reader, writer, and Miss Lonelyhearts. The condition of public participation is abstraction precisely at the moment

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12 There are parallels between Berlant’s intimate public and Merve Emre’s definition of “bad readers” in Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America as “individuals socialized into the practices of readerly identification, emotion, action, and interaction” (3). We might also think about Isa’s “bad” reading in Between the Acts in these terms.
reading feels most personal. As Ritzenberg argues, the machinery of mass media maps onto the machinery of social relations through the advice column (98). It is, of course, Shrike, as the sharply ironic newspaper editor, who crassly voices the terms of exchange. In the face of Miss Lonelyhearts’ despairing writer’s block, Shrike quips, “Remember, please, that your job is to increase the circulation of our paper. Suicide, it is only reasonable to think, must defeat this purpose” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 18). For Miss Lonelyhearts, the broken fantasy of the intimate public becomes omnipresent. Searching the sky, Miss Lonelyhearts sees only a gray sky that “looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser. It held no angels, flaming crosses, olive-bearing doves, wheels within wheels. Only a newspaper struggled in the air like a kite with a broken spine” (5). Miss Lonelyhearts’ vision both registers the absence of redemption (no angels or doves or religious symbols) and the ubiquity and contamination of mass mediation. Even the sky is unclean and soiled by the leftover stain of prior narratives, traversed by a newspaper symbolically neutered “like a kite with a broken spine” (5).

As readers, we are uncomfortably positioned as both a part of and apart from the fictionalized intimate public of the newspaper advice column. With brief and sarcastically despairing framing from the narrator, we are immediately thrust into the position of the advice column reader at the beginning of the novella, reading three letters in quick succession. The narrative immediacy of these letters both conveys their mechanicalness (their stamp-like formal similarity) and demonstrates the ease with which we, as readers, slide into the generic position of empathic reader, able to recognize and participate in the genre. Like the fictionalized readers of Miss Lonelyhearts’ advice column, we too become engaged in imaginative and moral speculation. As Jean Lutes explains, the advice column is fundamentally speculative; we are
“invited to ponder possible replies . . . to consider right and wrong behavior and sustain inquiries into principles of conduct, especially toward those we hold dearest” (64). But *Miss Lonelyhearts* suspends the narrative arc of the advice column, withholding the answer or response that completes the exchange. In doing so, the novella foregrounds the “syndicated intimacy” of the advice column while also reframing its ethics as fundamentally speculative (Lutes 67). Any answer columnists and readers might offer is grounded in and mediated by the narrative of the letter rather than any real knowledge of or proximity to the writer. In “recast[ing] intimacy as an act of imagination rather than knowability,” *Miss Lonelyhearts* underscores how the ethical fantasy of the advice column’s intimate public remains a fantasy (Lutes 62). Drawing its readers into the work of the genre it critiques, *Miss Lonelyhearts* asks us to confront our complicity in the ethical fantasy of the advice column and the form of empathy it offers.

*Miss Lonelyhearts* stages multiple levels of reading in order to engage readers in the difficulty of responding to the specificity of human suffering with the available generic, commodified forms of response. Where the typical advice column offers a parallel moment of response and ethical judgement (we read alongside the author’s reading and response to letters), *Miss Lonelyhearts* suspends that doubled reading, foreground the difficult mechanics of response alongside Miss Lonelyhearts’ crisis as the eponymous advice columnist. After reading three short letters already in the excerpted idiom of the advice column (as if the letter writers are already deeply familiar with the form and their audience) in the opening chapter “Miss Lonelyhearts, Help me, Help Me,” readers are confronted with a long, unedited “bulky letter in a dirty envelope” (West, *Miss Lonelyhearts* 39). The letter writer, “Broad Shoulders,” shares a harrowing story of financial precarity, debilitating illnesses, and shocking abuse from her derelict
husband. Taking up most of a brief chapter, the letter is presented with only cursory context - the letter is just one among many in Miss Lonelyhearts’ pile of letters. The chapter ends at the conclusion of the letter, offering no comment before the narrative immediately jumps into the next chapter. The earlier letters, situated as they are in the immediate scene of Miss Lonelyhearts’ column, prime readers to speculate possible responses both as Miss Lonelyhearts and as ourselves. But the letter exceeds the short, answerable, problem-oriented genre of the earlier letters (even if the problems they pose are immense and painful - abortion, suicide, rape, etc.) by asking for impossible help and rhetorical questions (“Every woman is intitled [sic] to a home isn’t she?” [43]) amid the more immediate questions: “Shall I take my husband back? How can I support my children?” (43). It is presented with neither the formal framework nor the affective codes of the advice column. As readers, then, we see the rough dough of Broad Shoulders’ letter before it is stamped into its final, more consumable form. This juxtaposition exposes the mechanics of the advice column; its consumability relies on the manufactured, mediated context. Empathy becomes a problem of form, both as a commodity (how do we sell these stories?) but also in readers’ experience (how do we shape these stories for empathic consumption?). In “Some Notes on Violence,” Nathanael West jokes:

To make the front page a murderer has to use his imagination, he also has to use a particularly hideous instrument. Take this morning’s paper: FATHER CUTS SON’S THROAT IN BASEBALL ARGUMENT. It appears on an inside page. To make the first page, he should have killed three sons and with a baseball bat instead of a knife. Only liberality and symmetry could have made this daily occurrence interesting. (399)

Where the shocking headline requires the formal qualities of “liberality and symmetry” to succeed in inciting interest, the advice column requires generic translation. The juxtaposition of the initial set of letters and Broad Shoulders’ lengthy narrative highlights this generic translation as a process, asking us to confront what gets lost in the translation. In stripping the letter of the
formal framework of the advice column, the novel foregrounds the formal mechanics required to produce empathy while also exposing its limits.

Miss Lonelyhearts’ crisis emerges in the limits of response. As Broad Shoulders’ letter demonstrates, our capacity to respond is a problem of form. The advice column genre delimits the terms of response and, when narrative exceeds the genre, we are confronted with the inadequacy of our response. We see this in the opening pages of the novel, as Miss Lonelyhearts turns to The Brothers Karamazov and its Father Zossima for redemptive reading, determining that “It was excellent advice. If he followed it, he would be a big success. His column would be syndicated and the whole world would learn to love. The Kingdom of Heaven would arrive. He would sit on the right hand of the Lamb” only to have his hopeful response deflated by his colleagues’ mocking salutation: “How now, Dostoievski?” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 8, 25). This formal crisis of response gets parodically reconfigured throughout the novel as Miss Lonelyhearts’ responses to quotidian life are rerouted through mass media and its affective codes. Shrike teaches him to handle the world with “a thick glove of words,” but it is in his relationships with women that his crisis of response becomes parodic and transformative (33). Initially, he shouts at Betty with accompanying gestures “that were too appropriate, like those of an old-fashioned actor” and kneads the body of Shrike’s wife “like a sculptor grown angry with his clay” with “too much method in his caresses” (12, 24). Miss Lonelyhearts’ responses are too invested in the formal terms of the exchange to be effective. They produce what Justus Nieland refers to as “affective stallings” (60). Miss Lonelyhearts overworks his gestures and genres of address such that they stall his feelings. In these evocative similes, West inverts the promise of artistry, parodically highlighting the limits of the form’s affective codes.
This reconfiguration culminates in a critical moment of synecdoche presaging the novella’s violent end. Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty have an earnest conversation after an idyllic weekend away from the city results in a pregnancy. Leaving Shrike’s party, Miss Lonelyhearts tries to coax Betty out for a soda, thinking “[t]he party dress had given his simplified mind its cure and he delighted in the boy-and-girl argument that followed” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 55). Miss Lonelyhearts moves from simile to synecdoche, fully embracing the genre in which he traffics; the party dress becomes representative of a whole system of generic conventions and gendered narratives. Not only does he find pleasure in their performance of the genre, but the genre also transforms Betty into a party dress, symbolic of the trappings of heterosexual courtship. When Betty declares that she’ll have an abortion, he pleads with her to marry him “just as he had pleaded with her to have a soda”: “He begged the party dress to marry him, saying all the things it expected to hear, all the things that went with strawberry sodas and farms in Connecticut. He was just what the party dress wanted him to be: simple and sweet, whimsical and poetic, a trifle collegiate yet very masculine” (56). Like Betty’s transformation into the party dress, Miss Lonelyhearts’ ability to voice the part successfully allows him to become a magazine-worthy love interest. Yet, while this generic transformation brings them superficially close, it also flattens his response into a singular affective code. He proposes in the same terms he begs her to have a soda. They gleefully plan their married life together and yet “[h]e did not feel . . . He could have planned anything. A castle in Spain and love on a balcony or a pirate trip and love on a tropical island” (56). In embracing the generic conventions of romance, Miss Lonelyhearts’ intimacy with Betty ultimately becomes imaginative, speculative, and emptied of affective content. Tellingly, it is this moment, after his vocation has been turned into a party
game by Shrike and his transformation into the masculine analog to Betty’s party dress, that presages Miss Lonelyhearts’ final delusion. He “climb[s] aboard the bed again” only to wake with the belief that “[e]verything else in the room was dead - chairs, table, pencils, clothes, books” (56, 57). For Miss Lonelyhearts, the stakes of generic translation are (symbolic) life and death. What performing the generic conventions allows (the fantasy of three children and a rehabilitated farmhouse in Connecticut) empties the world around him of life. While I do not read the novel as contending that all artistic or even commercial forms are empty of meaning, the novella’s similes and synecdoche do highlight and parodically exaggerate the forceful fantasies of generic conventions and the limits of their affective codes. In trafficking in so many forms - the novel, but also the comic strip, romance, vaudeville, slapstick, etc., the novella’s own form ultimately suggests that while all forms invite affective fantasy no form guarantees an affirmative ethics, even and especially the advice column at the center of the novella.

In Miss Lonelyhearts, genres and their affective fantasies are also coercive and forceful, manifesting in real and imagined episodes of shocking acts of violence. While the central generic engine of the novel is the advice column, the novel’s violence emerges via different genres and aesthetic forms. This registers the immediacy of the pain and suffering of the letter writers while redirecting the novel’s critique of genre from its objects to its often “constitently violent” public affects (Nieland 60). As West explains in “Some Notes on Miss L.,” “Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald” (401). The novel inverts and displaces its violence in order to offer a broader critique of the violence of genre’s moral authority. The novel’s first full scene of violence emerges in a failed dream sacrifice. Miss Lonelyhearts finds himself carousing with college friends. They agree to buy a lamb “on the
condition that they sacrifice it to God before barbecuing it” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 9). As priest, Miss Lonelyhearts works himself “into a frenzy” only to miss the sacrificial lamb clumsily and repeatedly. He flees the altar but returns to find the lamb’s escaped body and finish the bloody sacrifice with a stone. Presented in West’s characteristic deadpan without the clear affective framing of solemn sacrifice or surrealist absurdity, the dream sequence leaves, us, as readers, unsure of how to feel about its violence. As Justus Nieland notes, this episode is “emblematic of the broader emotional landscape of the novel” by offering a world of “uncertain feeling” marked by generic failures and cruel, pervasive suffering (58). Miss Lonelyhearts wakes to find himself “developing an almost insane sensitiveness to order. Everything had to form a pattern . . .” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 10). On the one hand, Miss Lonelyhearts seeks to be the source of order - a priest, like “a conductor calling stations,” or “a magician who [does] tricks with doorknobs” (9). However, on the other hand, when experience exceeds order, he responds with violence. Miss Lonelyhearts recalls accidentally stepping on a frog: “Its spilled guts had filled him with pity, but when its suffering had become real to his senses, his pity had turned to rage and he had beat it frantically until it was dead” (17). Miss Lonelyhearts’ encounters with the lamb and the frog, his real and imagined violence, give symbolic shape to the ways genre violently mediates our encounters with others. The world of Miss Lonelyhearts “hurt[s] the pain”

13 Miss Lonelyheart’s memory echoes a similar scene in Virginia Woolf’s Between the Acts discussed in chapter one. Where Giles turns his act of violence into a “blood painting” which fixes and obscures violence at the center of artistic response, Miss Lonelyhearts turns to violence as a visceral response to the presence of suffering. Both Giles and Miss Lonelyhearts could be considered the cultural inheritors of a racial and patriarchal universal; the violence that authorizes Giles’ “artistry” also authorizes Miss Lonelyhearts’ crisis.
that cannot be contained or ordered, even as those genres that make moral sense of the world continually fail (39).

West offers this critique of the moral authority of genre first in the form of a series of brutally unfunny rape jokes. Miss Lonelyhearts walks into a bar to find a group of fellow male writers “complaining about the number of female writers” and offering a series of violent fantasies:

‘And they’ve all got three names,” he said. “Mary Roberts Wilcox, Ella Wheeler Catheter, Ford Mary Rinehart . . .’

Then some one started a train of stories by suggesting that what they all needed was a good rape.

‘I knew a gal who was regular until she fell in with a group and went literary. She began writing for the little magazines about how much Beauty hurt her and ditched the boy friend who set up pins in a bowling alley. The guys on the block got sore and took her into the lots one night. About eight of them. They ganged her proper. . . .”

“That’s like the one they tell about another female writer when this hard-boiled stuff first came in, she dropped the trick English accent and went in for scram and lam. She got to hanging around with a lot of mugs in a speak, gathering material for a novel. Well, the mugs didn’t know they were picturesque and thought she was regular until the barkeep put them wise. They got her into the back room to teach her a new word and put the boots to her. They didn’t let her out for three days. On the last day they sold tickets to niggers. . . . (14)

The violent jokes begin with a telling transliteration of the names of real women writers - mystery writer Mary Roberts Rinehart, poet and columnist Ella Wheeler Wilcox, and novelist Willa Cather as well as prominent male novelist Ford Maddox Ford, intended to undercut their cultural authority (especially with the added play on Cather/catheter). The repeated phrase, “regular until,” establishes and reinforces the violent terms of the joke. According to this group of male writers, these women occupy male authorial positions, transgressing the “regular”

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14 As Jean Lutes notes, much West scholarship fails to directly address this scene and the novel’s violent treatment of women. Lutes suggests “the very obviousness of [the misogyny of US literary history] accounts for the way it has gone missing from critical commentaries” (73). Like Lutes, I read this scene as central to the novel’s critique of genre and empathy.
conventions of genre. The jokes are intended figuratively to punish women writing in male genres like “the little magazines” or “this hard-boiled stuff” with the participatory spectacle of gang rape. Both the public scenes of the violence, the street and the speakeasy, and the public scene of the joke, the barroom, mark the public circulation of these regulatory conventions and establish who authors certain genres and who authorizes violence. The final beat before Miss Lonelyhearts stops listening - “...on the last day they sold tickets to niggers” - makes the race and gender dynamics of narrative authority explicit. The white women writers are degraded first by white men and then by black men; the jokers’ violent fantasy of authority is bound up in their whiteness and racism in addition to their misogyny.

This is a complex moment for Miss Lonelyhearts. On the one hand, he is sympathetic to his friends, admitting that they “were aware of their childishness, but did not know how else to revenge themselves” (14). He explains that they had lost their belief “in literature. . . in Beauty and in personal expression as an absolute end” (14). In excusing his friends, Miss Lonelyhearts links the authorial success of women writers to his friends’ loss of faith in art and expression. On the other hand, Miss Lonelyhearts himself publicly dons the voice of a woman, writing in a feminized genre as one more sob sister. The perverse jokes expose the violent limits of generic authority and threaten Miss Lonelyhearts’ own masquerade. If his crisis is initially prompted by the generic mechanics and ethical fantasies he authorizes as advice columnist, Miss Lonelyhearts quickly learns his authority is suspect. His crisis becomes “a bomb, a complicated bomb that would result in a simple explosion, wrecking the world without rocking it” (13). He is both an author of violence and subject to genre’s violent authority, impotent in the face of the mass mechanics of popular media. Like the cookie-cutter stamped letters from the public, the
newspapermen are generic, “machines for making jokes” (15). Miss Lonelyhearts explains, “A button machine makes buttons, no matter what the power used, foot steam or electricity. They, no matter what the motivating force, death, love or God, make jokes” (15). Both the jokes and the jokers reveal the stakes of generic authority and the violent mechanics of popular genres.

Miss Lonelyhearts’ indirect complicity in the figurative violence of the rape jokes begins a chapter that concludes with a cruel act of direct violence. Drunk and bruised by an errant punch, Miss Lonelyhearts and an equally drunk friend grab an old man from a public bathroom, singing “If you can’t get a woman, get a clean old man,” linking him to the women writers at the beginning of the chapter (16). They drag him through the cold to a nearby bar and demand his life story under the guise that “We’re scientists. He’s Havelock Ellis and I’m Krafft-Ebing” (17). They proceed to interrogate the old man about his sexuality.

. . . When did you first discover homosexualistic tendencies in yourself?”
“What do you mean, sir? I . . .”
“Yeh, I know, but how about your difference from other men?”
“How dare you . . .” He gave a little scream of indignation.
“Now, now,” Miss Lonelyhearts said, “he didn’t mean to insult you. Scientists have terribly bad manners. . . . But you are a pervert, aren’t you?”

The old man raised his cane to strike him. Gates grabbed it from behind and wrenched it out of his hand. He began to cough violently and held his black satin tie to his mouth. Still coughing he dragged himself to a chair in the back of a room.

[. . .]
“I’ll get the bastard’s life story,” he shouted, and started after him.
[. . .]
“We’re psychologists,” he said. “We want to help you. What’s your name?”
[. . .]
“By what right do you ask?”
“Science gives me the right.”
“Let’s drop it,” Gates said. “The old fag is going to cry.”
“No, Krafft-Ebing, sentiment must never be permitted to interfere with the probings of science.”

Miss Lonelyhearts put his arm around the old man. “Tell us the story of your life,” he said, loading his voice with sympathy.
“I have no story.”
“You must have. Every one has a life story.”
The old man began to sob.
“Yes, I know, your tale is a sad one. Tell it, damn you, tell it.” (17-18)

Here, the violence takes the form of the confessional, mimicking Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s early twentieth century psychological studies of sexuality.¹⁵ When the old man fails to comply, Miss Lonelyhearts becomes increasingly violent, eventually twisting his arm. In doing so, Miss Lonelyhearts feels that he is “twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent. He was twisting the arm of the Desperate, Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband” (18). Offering a critique of the advice column through the related, privatized genre of the institutional confessional, this scene of violence literalizes the brutality of the genre - the demand for a legible life story and the violent consequences of failing to adequately provide one for private or public consumption. As Beth Blum argues, “Such a tactical combination of sympathy and clinical detachment was essential to the success of the advice column, which exploited both the soft voice of compassion and the hard logic of common sense” (189). In “twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent,” Miss Lonelyhearts embodies not only the immediate coercive violence of the confessional genre but the ways its popular public circulation weaponizes empathy (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 18). Together, the episodes that bookend this

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¹⁵ Michael Levenson’s Modernism (2011) explores case studies like Ellis’s and Krafft-Ebing’s alongside Freud’s as part of a uniquely modernist genre, a new way of understanding and narrating character. Interestingly, Levenson notes that Krafft-Ebing’s case studies “offered an affectless and usually nonjudgmental account of intimate desire: its objects and its orbits” even as readers “looked to Krafft-Ebing as a first sympathetic voice” (79). Here, I think, West inverts the affective tensions of the modernist case study in Miss Lonelyhearts’ demand for an already affectively-laden narrative – “Yes, I know, your tale is a sad one” (18).
chapter, aptly named “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Clean Old Man,” offer a brutal critique of the violence of genres that shape and circulate public feeling.

Miss Lonelyhearts and the Costs of Empathy

In Miss Lonelyhearts, empathy’s pedagogical investments in genre have costs for readers and writers alike. The novel oscillates between competing strategies for resisting the pull of the advice column’s empathic form. Initially, Shrike’s counter-sentimental rhetoric proves attractive, offering an ironic, aestheticized position within the broken world of Miss Lonelyhearts. The novel opens with Shrike’s mocking prayer for Miss Lonelyhearts, concluding with “In saecula saeculorum. Amen” (1). As Aaron Ritzenberg notes, this “new doxology” vulgarizes the traditional Latin and highlights Shrike’s position “at the nexus of mass culture and false spirituality” (98). Shrike’s mocking religious rhetoric emphasizes the weight of secular institutions like the newspaper advice column while also emptying them of their meaning. Bursting into a suffering Miss Lonelyhearts’s room, Shrike turns his attention to skewering alternative ideals: the fantasy of rural life is “too dull and laborious,” escapism is “played out and there’s little use in imitating Gauguin,” hedonism costs too much, aestheticism provides only intellectual nourishment, and religion becomes the only hope again, finally reimagined in the form of a letter to Miss Lonelyhearts (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 33-35). His mocking tirade neatly undoes the affective logic of these alternative fantasies, revealing the sentimental narratives at their center. Jonathon Greenberg offers a compelling reading of this moment, arguing that Shrike “destroys Miss Lonelyhearts’s beliefs by ironically redescribing them . . . he aestheticizes them” (595, original italics). In effect, Shrike resists the circulation of these narratives by highlighting their function as narratives and deflating their affective force. In doing so, he also disrupts their
moral authority. As Aaron Ritzenberg argues, “If asserting sentimentality . . . is asserting a moral order, then removing sentimentality removes the moral order” (114). With the violence of his namesake, Shrike brutally empties affective fantasies of their moral value through ironic redescription, disarticulating empathy from ethics.

However, Shrike’s strategy is more complicated than simply refusing to play the empathy game. Shrike’s ironic rhetoric evokes what Lauren Berlant describes as the “countersentimental,” a formal mode that explicitly and aesthetically struggles with the sentimental, “withdraw[ing] from the contract that presumes consent with the conventionally desired outcomes of identification and compassion” (Female Complaint 55, 56). We see this literalized in Shrike’s early advice to Miss Lonelyhearts: “. . . I advise you to give your readers stones. When they ask for bread don’t give them crackers as does the Church, and don’t like the State, tell them to eat cake. Explain that man cannot live by bread alone and give them stones. Teach them to pray each morning: ‘Give us this day our daily stone’” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 5). Here Shrike again punches through religious symbolism, deflating both the material and symbolic value of spiritual nourishment. Bread is rhetorically transformed back into its arbitrary, pre-symbolic material and then the bread becomes cake through Shrike’s sardonic catachresis. However, where his rhetoric reaches for direct critique (“Explain that man cannot live by bread alone. . .”), Shrike inverts the symbolic terms and “give[s] them stones” (5). For Miss Lonelyhearts, Shrike’s joke lands with a thud. He continues to make metaphors with Shrike’s new terms, thinking, “He had given his readers many stones; so many, in fact, that he had only one left - the stone that formed in his gut . . . If he could only throw the stone” (5). Shrike’s rhetoric resists the transformative fantasies of religion and political revolution, replacing the promise of bread with stones. For Berlant, the
sentimental “promises that in a just world *an expressive consensus would already exist* about what constitutes material uplift, amelioration, emancipation, and those other horizons toward which empathy directs itself” (*Female Complaint* 56, original italics). In personally addressing the world’s injustices, the advice column offers its own conventions as tools for building “sentimental alliance” (*Female Complaint* 57). In contrast, Berlant argues “[c]ountersentimental narratives are lacerated by ambivalence: they struggle with their own attachment to the promise of a sense of unconflictedness, intimacy, and collective belonging with which the U.S. sentimental tradition gifts its citizens and occupants, whether or not they are politically exhausted, cynically extended, or just plain diffident” (*Female Complaint* 55). As editor, Shrike occupies a deeply ambivalent position. He throws rhetorical stones at the fantasy of precisely such a public consensus and collective belonging while continuing to circulate (and profit off the circulation of) sentimental forms. Shrike’s appropriation of religious rhetoric and symbolism provides both a vehicle for his countersentimentalism while also tipping his hand to his fundamental complicity in the original terms of popular empathy’s sentimental bargain.

For many readers, Shrike’s fierce rhetoric is a convincing vehicle for the novel’s critique of empathy. Justus Nieland goes so far as to argue that Shrike “demarcates the potential for a noninstrumental, indeed, ethical publicness that only emerges by accommodating, not sentimentalizing, the spectacular emptiness of the modern public sphere” (74-75). For Nieland, Shrike enables readers to see all the way through Miss Lonelyheart’s failures to “a different mode of public belonging” based on emptiness, estrangement, and alienation (75). Nieland’s claim is compelling. Shrike’s countersentimentalism effectively cuts through the “sympathetic violence” of empathy’s sentimental forms, challenging the place of the dominant genres of
public feeling while offering no final alternatives (77). However, as Lauren Berlant reminds us, despite thematizing its crisis, the countersentimental “does not involve the aesthetic destruction of the contract sentimentality makes between its texts and readers, that proper reading will lead to more virtuous, compassionate feeling and therefore to a better self” (Female Complaint 55-56). Indeed, Shrike makes a game of this contract, distributing real letters at a party for Miss Lonelyhearts to “diagnose [guests’] moral ills” and “lead [guests] in the way of attainment” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 52). He finally reads a “jim-dandy” of a letter: “A young boy wants a violin. It looks simple; all you have to do is get the kid one. But then you discover that he had dictated the letter to his little sister. He is paralyzed and can’t even feed himself. He has a toy violin and hugs it to his chest, imitating the sound of playing with his mouth. How pathetic? However, one can learn much from this parable. Label the boy Labor, the violin Capital, and so on . . .” (53). The letter echoes with stamp-like precision the narratives of enormous suffering of earlier letters, a narrative Shrike quickly undercuts with the interjection “How pathetic?” (53). Instead, he reads the letter as a Marxist parable, a gesture as rhetorically empty as Shrike renders the letter’s original sentimental appeal to be. And while Shrike’s cruel comedy laughs at the desire for the right kind of reading, it is cravenly invested in the reproduction of that desire. Earlier in the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts spots crowds of people “with a dream-like violence . . . broken hands and torn mouths . . . He saw a man who appeared to be on the verge of death stagger into a movie theater that was showing a picture called Blonde Beauty. He saw a ragged woman with an enormous goiter pick a love story magazine out of a garbage can and seem very excited by her find” (39). Shrike exposes the mechanisms of the violence Miss Lonelyhearts sees everywhere while reproducing and recirculating the desires and fantasies that sustain such
violence. Miss Lonelyhearts’ advice column takes its place alongside Blonde Beauty and the magazine love story. Shrike takes aesthetic pleasure in dismantling the affective authority of the very fantasies he circulates. For Shrike, the only answer to the failures of public feeling is irony, transforming any kind of ethical response into empty rhetoric and aesthetic pleasure. Ultimately, Shrike’s countersentimentalism operates like “a complicated bomb,” throwing Miss Lonelyhearts’ world into emotional and ethical crisis without breaking the terms of empathy’s narrative contract (13).

Unlike Shrike, Miss Lonelyhearts’ solution is to privatize empathy and take feeling out of circulation. For Miss Lonelyhearts, the crisis of empathy manifests as a crisis of legibility: “No repeated group of words would fit their rhythm and no scale could give them meaning” (11). Intervening in the unhappy marriage of Fay and Peter Doyle provides an increasingly delirious and distraught Miss Lonelyhearts with a meaningful personal quest. When Fay Doyle’s letter arrives asking for advice in person (“I need some good advice bad but cant state my case in a letter as I am not good at letter and it would take an expert to state my case . . . I dont feel so bad about asking to see you personal because I feel almost like I knew you.”), “the cheap paper took on rich flesh tones,” turning into an imaginative embodiment of the letter writer herself (25, 26). Miss Lonelyhearts meets her in person and has an affair. She recounts her story and, for Miss Lonelyhearts, “It was as if a gigantic, living Miss Lonelyhearts letter in the shape of a paper weight had been placed on his brain” (29). In this moment, as Kate Marshall argues, Miss Lonelyhearts “chooses to pursue empathy instead of interpretive relation,” but, as Marshall qualifies, to Miss Lonelyhearts, “empathy represents an opportunity to achieve unmediated connection, but he fails to realize that empathy also perfectly describes the forms of mediation
with which he and his correspondents have been engaged” (144). Fay Doyle’s letter brings with it the promise of a private encounter outside the generic conventions of the advice column and, yet, she becomes “a paper weight . . . on his brain” offering unmediated connection while also weighing down the possibility of any response (West, *Miss Lonelyhearts* 29). Ironically, even in Miss Lonelyhearts’ fantasies, Fay Doyle’s presence is symbolically mediated by the empathic form of the advice column. She becomes a life-size letter. While Miss Lonelyhearts’ encounter with Fay Doyle ultimately fails, making him physically ill, it nonetheless primes him for a fleeting glimpse of an alternative route towards empathy.

In the pivotal episode “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Cripple” late in the novella, Fay’s husband, Peter Doyle seeks out Miss Lonelyhearts in a bar. Moving to a back room, Miss Lonelyhearts studies Doyle, noting: “The cripple had a very strange face. His eyes failed to balance; his mouth was not under his nose; his forehead was square and bony; and his round chin was like a forehead in miniature. He looked like one of those composite photographs used by screen magazines in guessing contests” (45). As suggested by West’s evocative simile, Doyle emerges as a kind of composite figure for Miss Lonelyhearts’ readers. For Kate Marshall, “It matters, then, that Doyle works as a meter reader for the municipal gas company – a wanderer of the hallways and stairwells of buildings, he is simultaneously a stranger to the residents and intimately connected to their infrastructure – and that he, too, is a regular subscriber” (147). Like Miss Lonelyhearts, Doyle circulates in private, intimate spaces, the ideal counterpart to Miss Lonelyhearts’ writer in crisis. They sit in silence “until the strain of wordless communication began to excite them both” (West, *Miss Lonelyhearts* 45). Doyle struggles to speak. Instead he “was giving birth to groups of words inside of him as things . . .” echoing Miss Lonelyhearts’
own struggle with order and legibility (45-46). Despite being in the physical presence of the columnist, Doyle hands Miss Lonelyhearts a letter explaining his struggle navigating the exclusionary politics of American life as a disabled man - Doyle “read where they shoot cripples in Russia because they cant work” and yet he feels he is “lucky to have [a job] at all” (46, 47). Unlike his wife’s letter, Doyle prefers to remain a reader, requesting that Miss Lonelyhearts “write me an answer not in the paper” (47). Amid the struggle to connect through a private version of the mechanism of the advice column – Miss Lonelyhearts is still “puzzling out the crabbed writing” – their hands connect (47). Initially embarrassed, he “drove his hand back and forced it to clasp the cripple’s . . . [and] pressed it firmly with all the love he could manage” (47). In contrast to the illegibility of language, they both immediately grasp “the meaning of the clasp” (47). For Aaron Ritzenberg, this moment bears “the hallmarks of the sentimental touch,” a humanizing trope that “appears to create a utopian space” while functioning as part of sentimentalism’s narrative machinery (110, 95). In the midst of the novella’s idiomatic violence, this moment offers a fleeting glimpse of alternative empathy, a utopian vision of affective legibility through presence and physical touch. Refusing the mediation of narrative affords Miss Lonelyhearts and Doyle an immediate empathic connection. And, yet, this moment remains irreproducible, an unsustainable solution to Miss Lonelyhearts’ crisis of empathy.

In the Doyle’s home, Miss Lonelyhearts tries “desperately to feel again what he had felt while holding hands with the cripple in the speakeasy” only to be shot down by Mrs. Doyle’s cutting remark: “What a sweet pair of fairies you guys are” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 49). For Ritzenberg, this moment evinces West’s critique of the sentimental trope; Miss Lonelyhearts fails to reproduce authentic connection in the face of the Mrs. Doyle’s “corrupting presence”
(112). But where Ritzenberg locates the failure in the touch itself (and a gendered reading of Mrs. Doyle), I would argue its irreproducibility emerges in Fay Doyle’s response. She reads this moment of contact as non-normative, outside the available genres of empathy and connection and, in doing so, attributes queerness to Miss Lonelyhearts and Peter Doyle. Here, we see how the fraught histories of heterosexuality and homophobia shape Fay Doyle’s reading of their intimate contact. Fay Doyle’s affective response reshapes the surface of their empathic connection as a site of private and personal tension. Her remark undercuts the echo of Miss Lonelyhearts’ and Doyle’s utopian moment and reinforces the normative forms of empathy.

When Peter Doyle leaves to purchase more gin, Fay tries to seduce Miss Lonelyhearts, and the moment dissolves into violence: “She tried to pull him down on top of her. He struck out blindly and hit her in the face. She screamed and he hit her again and again. He kept hitting her until she stopped trying to hold him, then he ran out of the house” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 50). Miss Lonelyhearts has fully privatized his attempts at empathic connection by moving his desperate efforts to connect out of the public space of the newspaper and speakeasy and into the personal, domestic space of the Doyles. His failure to reproduce his fleeting connection with Doyle exposes what is otherwise concealed: the personal is also mediated. While for Miss Lonelyhearts, the fantasy of privatizing empathy only further conceals the very same public narratives and systemic inequities that shape his advice column, the novel’s distance from Miss Lonelyhearts allows readers to see the impossibility of his fantasy. Ultimately, this failure spurs Miss Lonelyhearts to feverishly double down on the fantasy of Shrike’s religious rhetoric, the sublime promise of overcoming suffering and achieving redemption. Miss Lonelyhearts’
commitment to believing popular empathy’s fantasy of “true feeling” becomes a moral compulsion.

**Miss Lonelyhearts and the Ambivalence of Empathy**

*Miss Lonelyhearts* leaves readers in media res. Peter Doyle visits Miss Lonelyhearts, meeting him halfway up the stairs with a gun tellingly wrapped in newspaper. Miss Lonelyhearts hears Peter’s shout as “a cry for help from Desperate, Harold S. Catholic-mother, Broken-hearted, Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband” (57-8). They struggle, the gun explodes, and the novel concludes with them rolling “part of the way down the stairs” (58). In some ways, the novel’s symbolic conclusion brings readers to the point of a distinctly modernist empathy, what Eve Sorum describes as “the dangers and promises of empathy,” “the radical and frightening aspects of empathy - the experience that modernist writers both embrace and avoid” (7). Like Peter Doyle and Miss Lonelyhearts, we remain suspended, likewise tangled in the dangers and promises of the novel’s vision of empathy. This ambivalence, the novel’s literal refusal to come down one way or another, is, for Sorum, central to modernist empathy (15). The novel’s ambivalence is neither disinterested nor passive. It is neither the countersentimental ambivalence of Shrike nor a negative portrait of the “civic-minded but passive” ideal of empathy as a “true feeling”, but, rather, it is deeply and actively invested in dwelling in the complexities of empathy and the dangers of empathy’s generic forms. After all, the final image leaves us with a face-to-face confrontation between writer and reader, the newspaper suspended between them wrapped around a gun. Instead, this ambivalence foregrounds empathy as a shared, collective effect rather than the ground of ethics. Empathy may
circulate, mediate, and connect readers and writers, selves, and others, but it offers no final answers for the problems of injustice and suffering it so vividly maps.

Ultimately, *Miss Lonelyhearts* also leaves us at the point of injury, revealing how empathy can be a cause and not simply a consequence of injury. Throughout this chapter, I have shared Sara Ahmed’s animating questions: “How are emotions bound up with stories of justice and injustice? How do emotions work through texts not only to ‘show’ the effects of injustice, in the form of wounds and injury, but also to open up the possibility of restoration, repair, healing and recovery? Is a just response to injustice about having more ‘just emotions,’ or is justice never ‘just’ about emotions?” (191). West’s novel offers clear answers to the first question in its sharp critique of media, genre, and the ethics of form while gesturing towards what complicates our responses to the remaining questions. As Lauren Berlant notes, “the sentimental bargain has constantly involved substituting for representations of pain and violence representations of its sublime self-overcoming, which end up, often perversely, producing pleasure both as a distraction from suffering and also as a figure for the better life that sufferers under the regime of nation, patriarchy, capital, and racism ought to be able to imagine themselves having” (*Female Complaint* 65-66). While empathic responses (often prompted by the act of reading) have long been a key vehicle for social critique and political action, empathy’s function as a “true feeling” and the way it enables readers to *feel* ethical, “muffles the solutions it often imagines, or distorts and displaces these solutions from the places toward which they ought to be directed” (Berlant, *Female Complaint* 66). As West’s novel vividly and violently reveals, empathy often works perversely through the rhythms of its genres and narrative forms, concealing and eliding the contours of the very injustices it seeks to address. Prompted by Miss Lonelyhearts’ crisis of
feeling, we are also left with Berlant’s evocative question: “What does it mean for the struggle to shape collective life when a politics of true feeling organizes analysis, discussion, fantasy, and policy? When feeling . . . takes over the space of ethics and truth?” (“Subject of True Feeling” 58).

In the face of these persistent questions and the novel’s own ambivalence, we might return to Miss Lonelyhearts’ impulse to “hurt the pain” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 39). As West’s novel demonstrates, when paired with the generic demands of institutions, this impulse can be violent. Miss Lonelyhearts twists the arm of the old man alongside the “arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent” under the aegis of medical discourse (18). And, yet, hurting the pain is also instinctive, “the same way an animal tears at a wounded foot” (18). Rather than redirecting or distorting the political effects of suffering as with the syndicated advice column, Miss Lonelyhearts’ desire to hurt the pain gestures towards the potential for an alternative vision of empathy. Hurting the pain asks us to read suffering and injustice in a different key. For Ahmed, this enables the critical work of recognition where recognition is “about claiming that an injustice did happen; the claim is a radical one in the face of the forgetting of such injustices” (Cultural Politics 200). Healing, then, “does not cover over, but exposes the wound to others: the recovery is a form of exposure” (Cultural Politics 200). In this framework, an empathy that enables healing might be one that finds a new way to recognize injury, to make suffering visible in a different register. We get a prophetic glimpse of an alternative empathic form of seeing when Miss Lonelyhearts returns to the city after a respite in the country16: “Crowds of people moved through the street with a dream-like violence. As he

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16 This moment, of course, traffics in a Wordsworthian romantic trope, a respite in the country produces great insight. Like West’s uses of other tropes and genres in elsewhere in Miss Lonelyhearts, this
looked at their broken hands and torn mouths, he was overwhelmed by the desire to help them, and because this desire was sincere, he was happy despite the feeling of guilt which accompanied it” (West, Miss Lonelyhearts 39). The moment slips beyond his grasp quickly when, “[p]rodded by his conscience,” he begins “to generalize” and soon returns to “dreaming the Christ dream” (39). However brief, this moment allows Miss Lonelyhearts to see the injured, the “broken hands and torn mouths” of the walking wounded before the voice of his conscience returns to them to a more normative narrative of empathy (39). In this moment, Miss Lonelyhearts is moved by affect in ways he fails to be elsewhere in response to the missives of suffering he regularly consumes. And it is this empathetic movement that offers the possibility of “a different relation to the norms that we wish to contest, or the wounds we wish to heal” (Ahmed, Cultural Politics 201). For Ahmed, then, the scar becomes a figure for a more just mode of healing: “a good scar allows healing, it even covers over, but the covering always exposes the injury, reminding us of how it shapes the body . . . So ‘just emotions’ might be ones that work with and on rather than over the wounds that surface as traces of past injuries in the present” (Cultural Politics 202). Empathy is complex; it is neither just nor unjust though its political force as a “true feeling” may suggest otherwise. Likewise, Miss Lonelyhearts is complex, undercutting any clear vision of the collective, ethical value of reading and warning of the dangers and promises of empathy. Instead, the novel returns us to the site of injury to show us the limits of empathy and move us in a new direction without deciding the direction in advance. Perhaps, Miss Lonelyhearts suggests, if we

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satirically undercuts the moment even as it offers a productive vision. This balance of satire and earnestness is a central vehicle for Miss Lonelyhearts’ ambivalence about the ethical value of empathy.
learn to hurt the pain, to see our injuries, we might begin to heal the suffering and our “broken hands and torn mouths” might become good scars.
CHAPTER FOUR

OPEN CITY, ATTUNEMENT, AND THE ETHICS OF READING

Teju Cole’s 2012 novel, Open City, reintroduces the modernist flaneur as a critical reader par excellence. At once attuned to the world and apart from it, the novel’s protagonist, Julius, is deeply indebted to and deeply unfamiliar to the legacies of the modernist flaneur. On the one hand, Julius’s persistent walking locates him among the flaneurs of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Djuna Barnes, and Walter Benjamin. On the other hand, Cole’s narrator is a biracial immigrant, a scientist, in America, wandering through a post-9/11 New York City. This doubled vision of the flaneur marks the distance between the moment of modernism and our own. And, yet, it is in these resonant echoes that Cole centers his exploration of reading, deploying a figure from the modernist past to plumb the stakes of reading in the present. In this way, Cole’s novel shifts the central question of this dissertation from “How do we read?” (a question central to the modernist novels that previous chapters have focused on) to “How do we read now?” or, perhaps, to put the question in a more explicitly ethical register: “How ought we to read now?” In this chapter, I argue that Open City revives the modernist flaneur to probe the stakes of reading, attuning readers to the ethical limits of a hermeneutics of suspicion.

The modernist flaneur is foremost a social reader, transforming the world into a text. The flaneur’s walking charts out on foot urban narratives of self and other, city and citizen. In doing so, the flaneur transforms his urban landscape into interpretable, consumable images, oscillating between impressionability and impersonality, sympathy and distance. He (and it is nearly always
he)\(^1\) becomes a “botanist of the asphalt,” reading and recording the city. But the flaneur is not simply a passive observer; he is an active creator. He is sometimes a poet, according to Baudelaire, but “more often he comes closer to the novelist or the moralist” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 5). The flaneur fills “the hollow space created in him . . . with the borrowed - and fictitious - isolations of strangers” (*The Arcades Project* 33). Benjamin likens the flaneur-philosopher to the “workers and engineers” who crafted “the magnificent vistas of the city,” but, in imagining the flaneur as “an independent and, if need be, solitary worker,” he situates the flaneur-reader as a figure of individualized mastery and specialized knowledge (*The Arcades Project* 459). Benjamin’s modernist flaneur is a suspicious reader par excellence, but it is a mode of reading that shapes worlds as much as it reflects the world. This slip from observer to novelist to moralist reveals his role as an architect of social relations. As a narrator, then, the flaneur signals a fraught relationality to the taxonomy of the city: the flaneur is an “artist of social distance,” effacing himself from the city he maps (St. Amour 232). At once of and apart from the narrative he writes as he reads, the flaneur embodies a fraught relationality to the world he interprets.

Modernist scholars have contested the figure of the flaneur, exploring the feminine figure of the flaneuse, but also the ways in which class, race, sexuality, ability, nationality, etc. have shaped the figure of the flaneur/flaneuse and how they read the world around them. Through the work of contemporary scholars, modernist studies has been populated with flaneuses (Rachel

\(^1\) Originally, Benjamin’s flaneur offers a masculine authorial vision, one invested in and constitutive of the powers and privileges of a white, European male body in public spaces. However, other modernist writers, including Virginia Woolf (“Street Haunting”), Jean Rhys (*Good Morning Midnight*), Djuna Barnes (*Nightwood*), Nella Larson (*Passing* and *Quicksand*), etc., offer more expansive and diverse models of modernist flânerie.
Bowlby, Deborah Parsons, etc.), black flaneuses (Jean Scheper, Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega), consumer-flaneurs and spectatrix (Anne Friedberg), journalist-flaneuses (Elizabeth Wilson), photographer-flaneurs (Susan Sontag), stranger flaneurs (Isabel Carrera Suaréz), Afropolitan flaneurs (Patricia D. Fox), and other myriad forms of flaneurie/flaneuserie. With this figural expansion comes questions about what kinds of readings are possible for different bodies in different spaces. In other words, the flaneur becomes less immediately an embodied figure and more a conceptual figure naming the flaneur/flaneuse’s often vexed mode(s) of reading the spaces they traverse.

In *Open City*, the flaneur becomes an ideal vehicle for exploring the ethical consequences of critical reading and the ways that forms of reading are entwined with forms of living. Conjuring both the flaneur of the past and the flaneur of our present, *Open City*’s narrative traffics in what David James and Urmila Seshagiri identify as metamodernism, an emergent genre in contemporary fiction. Metamodernism, they argue, traces how contemporary fiction “reassess[es] and remobilize[s]” narratives of modernism, providing contemporary fiction with an aesthetic apparatus for interrogating and assessing art’s political and ethical failures in contemporary social, political, and historical contexts (89). As a contemporary critical and aesthetic impulse, metamodernism productively gestures towards methodologies that “bridge a

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perceived gap between aesthetic analysis and cultural critique, opening the way for rich
discussion about political and ethical facets of modernist narrative technique” (96).

Metamodernism, then, identifies the ways that contemporary writers take up the forms of
modernism as both an aesthetic and a vehicle for critique (94). While James and Seshagiri are
interested in tracing how contemporary fiction returns to distinctly modernist questions about the
relationships between narrative, ethics, and political efficacy, I am more interested in the specific
ways Cole’s metamodernist flaneur indexes a deep anxiety about our critical and ethical
investments in reading.

Importantly, then, Teju Cole’s flaneur reemerges against the backdrop of what Nicholas
Dames describes as the Theory Generation (“Theory Generation”). Signaling, for Jeffrey Nealon,
“a decisive intensification, rather than a reversal or abandonment, of literary meaning and its
discontents,” “the era of big theory” forged a generation of suspicious readers (131). For Dames,
the Theory Generation is vividly memorialized in a genre of contemporary fiction that is “about
consumers. These are people who are given to consuming books, particularly books about other
books. . . These are receptive people - their characteristic act is taking in, choosing, evaluating,
rejecting. Among the things they are choosing is a framework through which to apprehend the
world” (“Theory Generation”). In Open City, Cole explicitly links the theory-literate Julius’s
“fundamentally diagnostic” impulse to the roving, taxonomizing perception of the flaneur
(“Theory Generation”, original italics). Like the flaneur, the heirs of the Theory Generation take
in the world around them. But, for both the flaneur and the protagonist of the Theory Generation
novel, their capacity to read the world becomes bound up with their ability to inhabit the world.
Through Julius, Cole draws a line from modernist anxieties about how we read to contemporary
anxieties about how we ought to read. If, as Dames suggests, the rationale of the theory novel is “to explore the consequences - in lost urgency, lost feeling, or lost expressiveness - of a life lived as a series of symptoms to be read,” Cole’s resuscitation of the modernist flaneur intensifies the novel’s examination of the ethical failures of critical reading as viable equipment for living (“Theory Generation”). In turning towards a figure of the past to critique the present Open City offers both a cautionary mirror reflecting the ethical consequences of contemporary critical reading practices and a cautious gesture towards an alternative hermeneutics. While the novel ultimately indicts Julius’s mode of reading, it is readers’ discomfort with the unrelenting intimacy of Open City’s narrative form that prompts readers to think about reading in an altogether different key.

Attunement in Theory

In this chapter, I argue that attunement might be a more useful alternative way of thinking about an ethics of reading. If previous models or versions of ethical criticism have elided or ignored the relationality central to both ethics and reading, attunement places relationality at the center of our encounter with literature. Attunement is a richly resonant term for rhetoric and communications, naming the ethically charged social relations of listening. For Lisbeth Lipari, listening enacts ethics; she argues that “ethics speaks by way of listening; and more specifically, it speaks by way of listening for and to the otherness of others” (176).³ If listening becomes a constitutive ethical relation, attunement names the experience and effects of listening - both our capacity to respond and the responsibility implied in our responsivity. Attunement brings ethics by way of listening into the horizon of lived experience. For Matthew Heard, attunement

³ Tellingly, Lipari turns towards Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway to demonstrate this kind of ethical listening. See Chapter Two for a discussion of ethics that center otherness.
“describes a complex process of moving, flexing, reading, and responding” that “amplifies the risks and costs we must assume if we are to stretch our habits of listening to their breaking point” (49, 46). In other words, attunement is positional and contingent, a lived orientation towards others and the world exceeding immediate acts of listening. Attunement posits a problem of attention rather than a problem of meaning, reframing the terrain of listening and the stakes of reading.

However, as Lipari readily admits, attunement has a much wider and more varied valence and, while not diminishing the attunement’s aural resonance, it is in this looser, broader sense that I want to engage with attunement as an ethics of reading. Attunement is an incredibly capacious term. It contains a multitude of dynamics, movements, connections, and relations that offer ways of articulating the complexities of reading and ethics. Here are some of the ways we might think about attunement:

- Attunement is collective. The tune in attunement implies a collectivity created through a shared or familiar melody. To be in tune is to share a world.

- Attunement is a process of bringing into tune. This process foregrounds the stakes of becoming attuned - who brings or is brought into tune? Which tune? What is lost and/or gained in the process?

- Attunement is a making aware or responsive. This making foregrounds relationality, introducing questions of agency and responsibility.

- Attunement is always between. Attunement happens between people, between sounds, between states of being in the world.
• Attunement is a capacity. Becoming attuned in one way might limit or prevent our capacity to become attuned in other ways. As a kind of listening, attunement is as much about what we cannot hear as what we can.

• Attunement is risky. We can be or become out of tune. Differing tunes can be jarring or shocking. As a descriptive term, attunement makes space for dissonance and discomfort.

• Attunement is temporal. Attunement can be sudden and immediate or slow and long. Attunement can fall along a timeline or can be a sudden epiphany or transformation.

• Attunement can be about access. Attunement can be (in)opportune, opening or foreclosing chances to connect.

• Attunement can be habitual. We can become habituated to sounds, voices, and presences.

• Attunement can be an exhortation, as in the demand that we “stay-tuned” to broadcast news and media channels. And, yet, that exhortation can also be refused; we also “tune out” the news.

• Attunement can be reparative. We send our cars in for “tune-ups”; we “fine-tune” our bodies.

• Attunement can echo its close homophone, atonement. The audible echoes link harmony with responsibility. To be attuned is perhaps also to be able to atone.

Reframing reading in terms of this expansive, multivalent language of attunement allows us to locate the critical among many different experiences or acts of reading and attend to the differing values we assign different kinds of reading. Value and evaluation are bound up in one another. In the language of attunement, reading becomes an intersubjective encounter, open to the ways that texts affect and even alter us, including the often unpredictable transactions between texts and readers. Linking value and relationality, attunement reminds us that reading is about orientation,
situation, and relation, connecting the reception of a text to questions of agency and responsibility. Attunement is not about the content of a text, but about the capacity and consequences of our response. I see the language of attunement as offering a way to redescribe the ethics of reading. Attunement brings into being a new way of seeing our encounters with and through literature, not as what reading could or should be but what it is and for whom.

While attunement is at the forefront of theories of rhetoric, communications, and sound studies, it is often a subterranean term in theories of reading. Central to but just below the surface, attunement emerges as a useful descriptor of the modulating, variable, affective, and relational dynamics of reading. As a critical term, attunement is a theoretical mashup, tangled up in a variety of theoretical approaches - form, affect, ethics, often sharing the same constellation of approaches as this dissertation. I want to highlight two particular places that attunement bubbles to the surface.

For Rita Felski, attunement operates as an aesthetic and experiential descriptor. Attunement names the diverse and diffuse dynamics of textual engagement central to Felski’s recuperative effort to expand our understanding of critical, uncritical, and postcritical reading in both The Uses of Literature and The Limits of Critique. Providing “thick descriptions of experiential states,” the language of attunement remains open and attentive to the immediate and mediated orientations toward and responses to reading (Uses of Literature 19). Indeed, we might read the key terms of Felski’s earlier “un-manifesto,” Uses of Literature, alongside her more recent critique of critical moods as themselves modulations or modes of attunement. In Felski’s hands, attunement names the interplay between readers, texts, and contexts in all its affective, critical, and ethical complexity. Attunement, Felski explains in a talk given at Oxford, “is the
result of things, many things, coming together in either expected or unexpected ways . . . The artwork cannot act by itself. It needs allies, helpers, supporters” (“Art and Attunement”). “[That] our experience of art,” Felski continues, “is co-produced in this way does not take away from the value of the work but makes it possible” (“Art and Attunement”). Attunement returns agency to both reader and text in the co-production of aesthetic encounter and the ways aesthetic experience ripples outward and beyond the singular encounter. The collaborative co-production of art has the capacity to produce seismic shifts. Forms of reading can become forms of living via the (re)attunement of affect and attention.

If Felski moves from the aesthetic to the social in her account of attunement, Sara Ahmed begins with attunement’s sociality. For Ahmed, attunement’s careful calibration of affect can be “understood not only as being with, but being with in a similar way” (“Not in the Mood” 16). This “being with,” however is contingent and situational. We cannot know in advance what will happen. Attunement, then, “might register that we are affected by what is around, but it does not necessarily decide how we are affected” (“Not in the Mood” 16). Attunement is particularly useful in that it names social dynamics without foreclosing or predetermining the value of their content. For example, attunement allows us to describe our experiences of literature without assuming that that experience is inherently ethical. Ahmed highlights the ways that attunement’s “being with” is also a reorientation. Attunement reorients us towards one another, sharing in affective valuation, bodily intimacy, rhythms, objects of feeling, etc. and becoming responsive to others. But if attunement offers the promise of sociality, it also risks estrangement.

Ahmed reminds us that “attunement is not exhaustive” (“Not in the Mood” 17). What draws us towards some might turn us away from others. This (re)orientation can become directed
and directive. Attunement can ossify into a pedagogy; to be attuned in one way and not in others becomes what is right or good or how one should feel. Attunement becomes an ideal or an imperative. The experience of misattunement can become an experience of not only being out of sync with the world but also becoming an obstacle in the world. To become out of tune, Ahmed suggests, is to “become what gets in the way not only of attunement, but all that it promises: life, connection, empathy, and so on” (“Not in the Mood” 20). Attunement thus closes us off to what is not in tune or out of tune. Figures and bodies who we do not or cannot register or who “lean another way” become strangers lurking outside our perception (“Not in the Mood” 17). As Ahmed notes, the stranger “becomes a moody figure, charged with estrangement, as potentially causing our loss of ‘with’” (“Not in the Mood” 22). The stranger becomes an obstacle, dangerous and threatening, not only to attunement “but all that it promises: life, connection, empathy, and so on” (“Not in the Mood” 20). Misattunement, or the experience of being out of tune, is not just a question of affective alignment but of worldly alignment. In this way, the ethical stakes of (mis)attunement extend beyond the object and/or experience and into how attunement shapes who we become responsive to and who has access to a shared world.

Together, Felski and Ahmed offer accounts of attunement as both an aesthetic and a social experience, linking forms of reading with forms of living through the affective worlding dynamics of attunement. For both Felski and Ahmed, attunement involves labor. On the one hand, we can see the labor of attunement in aesthetic forms. Forms work to attune or misattune readers: the repetitive rhythms of Three Guineas, the difficult syntax of Melanchta, the gaps and silences of Passing, the deadpan shock of West’s violence. When that attunement is successful, the labor disappears as labor. Indeed, one of the many pleasures of reading can be its
effortlessness. One of the tasks of the critical reader is often to make visible the labor of form and how it works to attune readers. On the other hand, readers also perform affective labor, emotional work that “involves closing the gap between how one does feel and how one should feel” (Ahmed, “Not in the Mood” 21). As Ahmed points out, the “should” of feeling opens up a horizon of normative expectations and ethically charged affective terrains. Ahmed highlights service work and institutional diversity efforts as examples where the relational labor of attunement is made explicit. A flight attendant is responsible for the mood of the flight. A person of color disrupts the prior attunements of predominantly white institutional spaces. As Ahmed illustrates, this affective labor is unevenly distributed both explicitly, in the case of service work, and implicitly, in bearing the unequal burdens of “diversity.” For Ahmed, this affective labor is uneven because “[a]ttunement [is] a matter of precedence” (“Not in the Mood” 22). We do not arrive at the same time; “For those who come after, or who are deemed as coming after (that the arrival of some bodies is noticeable is how they are judged as coming after), attunement becomes work” (“Not in the Mood” 22). I am interested in thinking about the labor of attunement in the context of reading precisely because of the way this work is unevenly distributed - whose labor is required, who is responsible for attunement, which normative horizons ground and condition attunement and the possibility of agency. How we negotiate the work of attunement has consequences for how we negotiate worlds, real and imagined.

Who gets to demand the work of attunement? Who gets to refuse this kind of relational labor? What are the ethical consequences of refusing or committing to the work of attunement? To explore this, I return to the figure of the critical reader both because of the dynamics of labor
bound up in reading critically and because the critical reader returns in the form of the flaneur as a site for reflection and interrogation in *Open City*.

**Reading *Open City***

*Open City* works through the interplay of closeness and distance. Julius’s theory-informed perspective and nocturnal perambulations bring him closer to the cities he inhabits. But his aestheticizing gaze also distances him from the objects of his gaze. We, too, experience this interplay as readers, moving from the hermetically close narrative that leaves little distance between Julius’s reading and our own to moments of disruption that startle us out of attunement with Julius’s perspective. Indeed, *Open City* is structured around these moments of disruption that break the novel’s narrative seal. Cole himself describes the narrative arc as “three vicious thwacks of the hammer, and then a soft exit to strings,” admitting he’s attracted to “things that trouble the complacency of the viewer or reader” (“Palimpsest City”). In *Open City*, we willingly follow Julius throughout New York City and Brussels until he is confronted by a woman from his past accusing him of rape. The final “thwack,” Moji’s confession confronts readers with their complicity in Julius’s worldview, a vision that allows him to elide responsibility for his role in others’ suffering even as he readily consumes their stories. The novel’s “twist” ending asks readers to measure the distance between their own reading practices and Julius’s. *Open City* attunes readers to the limits of Julius’s hermeneutics of suspicion while gesturing toward a hermeneutics of susceptibility.

A psychiatrist by training, Julius cultivates his appreciation for art and music alongside his attention to urban streets and human behavior. Julius readily admits that he works by signs and symptoms. Discussing the German humanist, Paracelsus, Julius suggests that art and
medicine are both concerned with the “play between inner spirit and outer substance” (Cole, *Open City* 238). “Properly read,” Julius explains, nature “informed us what the inner reality of a thing was by means of its form . . .” (238). Recognizing that this model of art and subjectivity fuels racism and eugenics as much as it fuels his own discipline, Julius suggests the problem is less one of kind than degree. What we need, Julius argues, is more light, not a different register of seeing. “What we knew,” Julius explains to his friend, “was so much less than what remained in darkness, and in this great limitation lay the appeal and frustration of the profession” (239). Julius is primarily concerned with the visible signs of internal realities, both personally and professionally, but admits the difficulty in discerning them. Elsewhere in the novel, a conversation with Farouq, a Muslim immigrant Julius strikes up a friendship with in Brussels, provides him with a vocabulary for this critical visibility. Citing Paul de Man, Farouq explains, “His theory has to do with an insight that can actually obscure other things, that can be a blindness. And the reverse, also, how what seems blind can open up possibilities” (127). As Julius’ description of his medical practice suggests, past insights have blinded practitioners to the possibilities of that blindness. And while Julius is willing to admit that “the lens through which the symptoms are viewed is often, itself, symptomatic,” he fails to recognize his own blindness, mistaking symptomatic reading for intimacy and insight (238).

Julius symptomatic reading pretends that all the agency lies in the reader; attunement belies that kind of unidirectional agency. Attunement recognizes the relationality at the center of the encounter and yet the kind of attunement Julius cultivates circumscribes and displaces the work of relating. Julius’s symptomatic reading enables him to relate to the world but only on his terms. He reads dissonance as a threat. For Julius, Farouq comes to embody a kind of
cosmopolitan dissonance, speaking “French, Arabic, English, as was appropriate; with the man who had been calling Colombia, he exchanged a few words of Spanish. His judgment of the right language to use with each person was swift, and his manner so friendly that I wondered why I had the impression, when I first met him, that he was distant” (113). Farouq’s ease with language facilitates connection, translating between cultures and ideologies where Julius can only communicate “in broken French” and make friends in English (101). In responding to Farouq’s “wound” - the Free University of Brussels’ rejection of his master’s thesis on critical theory, Julius claims that he “had brought me too close to his pain, and I no longer saw him” (129). Farouq becomes, in Ahmed’s terms, a “moody figure” fading from Julius’s perception of the world. The more intimate Julius becomes with Farouq, the more threatening Farouq’s dissonance becomes, belying Julius’s cosmopolitan sensibility and critical literacy. Farouq’s pain becomes an obstacle in Julius’s perception of the world.

Julius resolves this moment of dissonance by assimilating Farouq into a ready-made narrative. Rather than allowing Farouq’s experience of racism in the academy to reorient his relationship to the critical theory that suffuses his worldview, Julius replaces the specificity of Farouq’s experience and any claims that experience might make on him with a vision of a “young Vito Corleone” (129). Farouq’s face “resolve[s] itself” into “the very image of Robert De Niro” and, while it begins as a “a meaningless visual counterpoint to whatever else was going on,” it becomes a heuristic for reading Farouq’s “seething intelligence, something that wanted to believe itself indomitable” and forecasting that “[h]is script would stay in proportion” (121, 127). In the midst of a deeply personal conversation about suffering and conflict, Julius’ turn to De Niro and The Godfather feels incongruous, but it highlights the limits and superficiality of his
“insight.” Where Julius compulsively looks for “minor lapses” that reflect “a certain imperfection in Farouq’s recall” of his own history, the reference to DeNiro resolves Julius’s suspicion with a flatter, easier narrative. The comparison illuminates Farouq’s character but only within the familiar boundaries of a cultural narrative. Julius all too easily fits Farouq, a character who comes across as invitingly deep despite Julius’s perspectival control of the novel, in a particular narrative in order keep his pain at a distance and assimilate the dissonance of Farouq’s experiences.

Far from bringing him closer to the world, Julius’s commitment to symptomatic reading estranges him from the world, transforming strangers who are, like Farouq, out of tune with Julius’s worldview into consumable art. Killing time before a dinner, Julius wanders into a cathedral and admires the Baroque music he only belatedly recognizes as being piped in through a sound system. But Julius detects “fugitive notes” that produce “a fractured, scattered feeling . . . unsettling” (138). What begins as a dissonant fracture in a familiar melody becomes a dissonant body, the “moody figure” of a cleaning woman. Yet Julius resists the relational pull of the cleaning woman, resolving her dissonant presence in the cathedral by overwriting her experiences. Like the “organ piece [weaving] around the single, wavering hum of the vacuum cleaner,” Julius weaves a story around the cleaning woman. He links her to an earlier encounter with African immigrants: “The realization that I had been with fifty or sixty Rwandans changed the tenor of the evening for me . . . the space had suddenly become heavy with all the stories these people were carrying” (139). While the presence of the Rwandans affectively reorients Julius, he projects a cliched narrative of trauma, determining that their “quiet faces surely masked some pain I couldn’t see” (139). Likewise, he determines the woman “might be here in
Belgium as an act of forgetting . . . a hiding place from what she might have seen in the Cameroons or in the Congo, or maybe even in Rwanda” (140). For Julius, her impenetrability transforms her into one of “those women that Vermeer painted in this same gray, lowland light; like theirs, her silence seemed absolute” (140). Because he is not interested in hearing what she might say, Julius decides she cannot speak, flattening her narrative into a neat canvas born back into the past. As Rebecca Clark suggests, Julius commits “an act of twofold two-dimensionality,” first projecting “archetypical stories for the dancing Rwandans and vacuuming woman” and “analogically transform[ing] them in turn to flat works of visual art” (193). While attuned to the presence of “moody figures” like Farouq and the vacuuming woman, Julius’s symptomatic reading exerts agency over whose stories are told and how while absolving himself of the responsibility of listening to dissonance.

While, as a psychiatrist, Julius is professionally oriented towards others, his mode of reading is bound up in value. Julius’s symptomatic projection transforms Farouq and others into aesthetic objects worthy of his attention. His evaluation becomes directive, delimiting his capacity to respond to objects and subjects who are out of tune with his world. We see this dynamic at work when Julius turns his gaze on art during a narratively symbolic visit to the American Folk Art Museum. “The key,” he suggests to reading the exhibit of paintings by John Brewster he finds himself contemplating, is the author’s deafness. Julius reads Brewster as an artist who can “communicate the silence of his world” (Cole, Open City 38). The portraits convey “an air of hermeticism. . . a sealed-away world, visible from without, but impossible to enter” (37). In contrast to Farouq whose script stays in proportion or the vacuuming woman whose script Julius writes, Julius grants enormous artistic power to Brewster and the subjects of
his paintings. The deaf children in the paintings are not simply illuminated by Brewster’s artistic vision, but “[b]rought to life by an incisive gaze” (37). For Julius, the paintings communicate beyond their two dimensionality, “[d]aring the observer to be amused” and reflecting “concentration, the suspension of time, an unobtrusive wit” (37, 39). Julius is deeply moved by Brewster’s paintings, falling into their “silent world” and admitting “I lost all track of time before these images, fell deep into their world, as if all the time between them and me had somehow vanished . . .” (37, 39-40). Julius’s responsiveness to Brewster’s painting elides the work of attunement and his relational labor; he frames his aesthetic experience in passive terms, losing, falling, and being drawn into Brewster’s world. This aesthetic encounter proves transformative. Julius reemerges from the museum symbolically deaf and dumb. Startled by the guard, Julius “[f]orges how to speak” and momentarily disremembers his home address after being surprised by the sound of his voice (40). But if Julius is willing to work to access the world of Brewster’s paintings, that labor only widens the gulf between Julius and the world beyond the museum. Julius is deeply affected by Brewster and his subjects but refuses the claims of those he encounters outside that aesthetic world, shouting down a woman asking for a taxi and angrily brushing off the taxi driver’s attempts at connection. Willing to venture into the “silent world” of the museum, Julius refuses to engage the cacophonous world beyond.

*Open City*’s use of sound and sonority gives the clearest shape to the limits of Julius’s attention and the ethical stakes of his mode of reading. Classical music becomes a crucial touchstone for Julius. He cultivates a sophisticated listening, but that listening is solipsistic, calibrating his attunement to the polyvocality of the art of the past rather than the political claims of the present. “[A]n avid listener,” Julius is receptive to the formal attunement of classical
music (4). Mahler’s “Das Lied von der Erde” reorients Julius’s experience of the world. Listening first in a record store and then as he rides the subway and makes his way home, Julius “enters the strange hues of [the piece’s] world,” “a stronger, surer mood” that puts him into a “trance” (17). He explains, “The song followed me home . . . There was some new intensity in even the most ordinary things . . . as if the precision of the orchestral texture had been transferred to the world of visible things” (17-18). The melodic form of Mahler reshapes the texture of Julius’s world, but it also reshapes Julius’s capacity to hear other voices. Julius readily admits he prefers foreign classical radio stations, explaining that he finds “the murmur of the announcers, the sounds of those voices speaking calmly from thousands of miles away” comforting, meeting his “evening mood with great exactness” (4). This sympathy allows him to easily “draw the comparison between [himself], in [his] sparse apartment, and the radio host in his or her booth, during what must have been the middle of the night somewhere in Europe” (5). In tuning into the classical music and tuning out the “disembodied voices,” Julius centers his own voice as the arbiter of cultural value, alternately transcribing the aesthetic value of art like the Mahler symphony or the Brewster exhibit or projecting onto Farouq, the vacuuming woman, and others. As Julius himself explains, “. . . we are no longer at all habituated to our own voices, except in conversation or from within the safety of a shouting crowd” (5). Julius’s language reveals the costs of privileging his solitary voice - the conversation or the shouting crowd and what they might have to say are rendered as noise. As Neumann and Kappel argue in their extended study of music in Open City, "Music thwarts rather than enables connection. And while replacing the single narrative perspective with multiple voices might index plurality and polyvocality, it
primarily reveals Julius’ incapacity to think in relational terms” (45). In cultivating this capacity to listen, Julius hears the sounds of the streets he so willingly traverses as noise.

In contrast to the Mahler symphony that overwhelms his memory and imbues his quotidian life at the hospital with “some new intensity,” Julius struggles to hear a passing Take Back the Night march: “The voice leading the crowd became even louder, but the words did not resolve into meaning, and most of the crowd, marching toward us, remained obscured by darkness” (Cole, *Open City* 18, 22). And, while the women’s political chants eventually come into focus, Julius remains frustrated by their “noisy” intrusion and shuts the window. Whereas the Mahler symphony invigorates his life, the women’s march diminishes his capacity to hear others. On the phone with his estranged girlfriend, Julius reflects, “And how odd it was, hours later, to hear her strained voice, in counterpoint with the protesters down below. . . I tried to imagine her in that crowd, but no image came to mind . . . The voices of the protesters soon faded, as the marchers drifted off with their flags and whistles toward Morningside Park. The heart-altering thump of their martial drum went on, and then that faded too, and I could hear only her diminished voice at the other end of the line” (24). We see in the contrast between Julius’s cosmopolitan cultivation of an ear for foreign radio stations and classical music and the political chants of women and intimate conversation with Nadège that his capacity to listen enables some relationships while disabling others. Julius is much more willing to hear the disembodied global claims of the classical radio stations he listens to than the local political claims of women asserting autonomy over their bodies. And while his failure to hear the latter proves prescient later in the novel, Julius’s finely tuned ear ultimately tunes out the voices of those around him.
Julius’s physical and mental wandering works in service of devising and abstracting narratives from the world around him, alternately locating himself and others in clear cultural narratives or rendering them as white noise. A frequent insomniac, Julius struggles to “release himself from wakefulness” (6). Restless, he “rehears[es] in the dark the numerous incidents and sights [he] encountered while roaming, sorting each encounter like a child playing with wooden blocks, trying to figure out which belonged where, which responded to which. . . [His] futile task of sorting went on until the forms began to morph into each other and assume abstract shapes unrelated to the real city, and only then did [his] hectic mind finally show some pity and still itself, only then did dreamless sleep arrive” (6, 7). What is obvious throughout the novel is that the critical attunement Julius has to art and music translates poorly to human relationships. People are dynamic, responsive, and not so easily read. On hearing that his neighbor’s wife had passed away, Julius reflects, “A woman had died on the other side of the wall I was leaning against, and I had known nothing of it…I had noticed neither her absence nor the change – there must have been a change – in his spirit” (21). Worried that he bothered his neighbor while he was grieving, Julius quickly determines that the timing was not right. He remarks, “I felt a certain sense of relief at this, which was taken over almost immediately by shame. But even that feeling subsided; much too quickly, now that I think of it” (21). Julius is primarily concerned by his failure to fully read his neighbor and not his neighbor’s grief or sorrow – something he shamefully recognizes, but only momentarily. This resistance to the dynamics of response becomes outright frustration in his exchange with the cabdriver after his visit to the museum. The cabdriver, annoyed by Julius’ failure to observe basic social conventions, calls him on it. Julius politely demurs but erupts in resentful anger internally, “I was in no mood for people who tried
to lay claims on me” (40). Moji’s revelation towards the end of the novel reframes Julius’ disengagement as more than an impoliteness or preoccupation. It becomes, as articulated in Julius’ response to the cabdriver here, a refusal to respond to others, a denial of any claims that would penetrate his solitude.

Despite Julius’ disengagement both he and the novel are deeply interested and invested in questions of human suffering. Julius (and, through him, the narrative) collects stories of struggle and trauma. Between his mentor’s, Dr. Saito’s, Japanese internment, Julius’ patient V.’s depression prompted by scholarly work on Native American genocide, Annette Maillotte’s experience in WWII, Farouq’s immigration, and his own mother and grandmother’s history, the novel reads as a veritable catalogue of human pain. Julius recognizes that each person carries with his or herself their own suffering. Prompted by a crowded subway, Julius reflects, “. . . standing close to strangers, jostling them and being jostled by them for space and breathing room, all of us reenacting unacknowledged traumas, the solitude intensified” (7). His one capitulation to human connection is his role as “listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else’s life and struggle,” about which he readily admits, “I had fallen in love with that idea myself” (70). He views the connection as implicit, under the surface, approaching his desire to collect these stories of trauma and suffering with the same critical distance with which he approaches art and music. In the case of his patient V. who suffers from depression, he listens to her personal testimony, “I can’t pretend it isn’t about my life, she said to me once, it is my life. It’s a difficult thing to live in a country that has erased your past,” but defers to her scholarly work in the hopes that “the book might, in those moments when it left the strict historical record and betrayed some subjective analysis, give me further insight into her
psychological state” (27). This drive becomes even more personal and problematic when, confronted with his mother’s autobiographical narrative of being a child of rape and becoming a widow, “mak[ing] of the two pains a continuity” (80); he remarks, “It was an entire vanished world of people, experiences, sensations, desires, a world that, in some odd way, I was the unaware continuation of” (80). Julius mistakes the inaccessibility of their suffering as absolving him of response. For Julius, it is enough or, perhaps, even too much of a burden to simply listen.

This collection of human suffering thus becomes like the site of the 9/11 attacks, “a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten” through which Julius wants “to find the line that connected [him] to [his] own part in these stories” (59). Julius uses his collection of stories of human suffering to attempt to bridge the distance. In a contemplative moment he “sees” the connections between Dr. Maillotte’s, his mother’s, Professor Saito’s, his absent grandparents’ suffering:

I saw her at fifteen, in September 1944, sitting on a rampart in the Brussels sun, delirious with happiness at the invader retreat. I saw Junichiro Saito on the same day, aged thirty-one or thirty-two, unhappy, in internment, in an arid room in a fenced compound in Idaho, far away from his books…also were all four of my own grandparents…I saw them all, even the ones I had never seen in real life, saw all of them in the middle of that day in September sixty-two years ago, with their eyes open as if shut, mercifully seeing nothing of the brutal half century ahead and, better yet, hardly anything at all of all that was happening in their world, the corpse-filled cities, camps, beaches, and fields, the unspeakable worldwide disorder of that very moment. (96)

Julius situates himself as an outside observer, more insightful and perceptive (the obvious product of hindsight) than those “with their eyes open as if shut.” And yet, while positioning himself as listener or observer allows Julius to enter into a relationship with those who have stories to offer, it nonetheless preserves that distance. While Julius sees possibility in these narrative and aesthetic forms, his reliance on symptomatic reading nonetheless refuses him that
connection. As a listener, Julius absolves himself from the need to stake out a position. To locate himself in these narratives as more than practiced psychiatrist or disinterested witness or “compassionate African” would be to admit a complicity in their construction and continuation. Reading from a position of distanced mastery, the vision of the flaneur, Julius sees the world but refuses the claims of the people in it.

More problematically, Julius’ distance prevents him from responding to human suffering and precludes him from action. Julius’ conversations with Farouq and Dr. Maillotte reveal a resistance to claims of scale and uniqueness. Julius is sympathetic to Farouq’s frustration with Israeli claims. Farouq contends that “the six million are not special…All death is suffering. Others have suffered, too, and that is history: suffering” (123). From the opposite end of the sociopolitical spectrum, Dr. Maillotte suggests that “if you’re too loyal to your own suffering, you forget that others suffer too” (143). What begins as an effort to catalogue and account for human suffering becomes, for Julius, a means to disengage. Concerned that suffering begets suffering, that a “cancerous violence ha[s] eaten into every political idea,” Julius suggests that “the only way this lure of violence could be avoided was by having no causes, by being magnificently isolated from all loyalties” (107). He momentarily reflects that this isolationist approach to human suffering might be an “ethical lapse graver than rage itself” (107). This perspective is only corroborated by the friend he visits, prompted by Dr. Saito’s imminent death. He echoes Khalil and Dr. Maillotte, contending, “My man, suffering is suffering. You’ve seen what it does, you see it every day” (181). But this suffering only confirms his philosophy that “we are alone out here” (182). The desire to recognize both the individual and universal relationship between humanity and suffering (in the sense that everyone suffers in their own
way, but suffering is a fact of human life) results in retreating to solitude. To become “magnificently isolated” is to negate the possibility of response or action.

This solitude is so pervasive that it prevents Julius from even imagining a response to historical suffering; it precludes him from recognizing others as independent feeling subjects. Encountering a monument to an African burial ground in the middle of New York, Julius reflects, “How difficult it was, from the point of view of the twenty-first century, to fully believe that these people, with the difficult lives they were forced to live, were truly people, complex in all their dimensions as we are, fond of pleasures, shy of suffering, attached to their families” (221-2). On one hand, Julius articulates the difficulty of historical perspective. On the other hand, however, he reveals the dangers of his solipsistic approach to suffering. Julius’ aestheticizing distance allows him to entirely disengage under the guise of preserving respect for individual experiences of suffering and resisting the glorification of one person or one group’s suffering over another’s. For Julius, human suffering becomes an external sign, object, or symptom to be contemplated from the solitude of his critical or aesthetic distance. But it is also a symptom of privatized pain and not collective responsibility. In this, Julius’s cosmopolitan flaneurie reveals an ethical failure, holding human suffering at an aesthetic distance in ways that resist or refuse to recognize any kind of complicity or responsibility. The limits of Julius’s ethics are precisely the limits of his reading.

But Julius’s limits also become our own. Moji’s revelation at the conclusion of *Open City* ruptures the novel’s composure and our own readerly attunement with Julius. Early in the morning, after a party, Moji confronts Julius. Her voice, as framed by Julius echoes the novel’s own affect: “low and even . . . emotional in its total lack of inflection. . . .” (244). The passage
moves from Julius’s recounting – “Moji went on in this vein . . .” – to her own voice, moving from a she to an I. She explains, “I don’t think you’ve changed at all Julius. Things don’t go away just because you choose to forget them” (245). She concludes, demanding, “But will you say something now? Will you say something?” (245). Throughout the novel, dialogue is not set apart by quotation marks or typography, collapsing Julius’s perspective and the world of the novel. As readers, we cannot know whether Julius’s account of conversations and experiences are accurate. This narrative strategy inevitably draws us into Julius’s vision; we cannot see apart from Julius. In this moment, as the novel transitions from Julius’s “I” to Moji’s, we also become answerable. Moji’s imperatives address a doubled “you,” demanding a response from both Julius and the reader. If the novel interrogates the limits of Julius’s mode of reading, it is this final “thwack” that offers the novel’s clearest ethical indictment, unsettling readers and recasting the narrative.

In this moment, as Albert Wu and Michelle Kuo argue, “the genre of the work has shifted” (“Imperfect Strollers”). The revelation that Julius has most likely committed rape when he was fourteen sends readers reeling and rereading, searching for some cue or response from either Julius or the narrative. Upon crossing paths in a grocery store Julius registers Moji’s unusual interest: “It was clear she expected me to remember her. I didn’t” (Cole, Open City 156). Later, at a picnic with friends, he notes the “dark curve of her breast” (199). He finds her defensiveness “appealing, and even sexual,” imagining them “in a sexual situation” (203). Julius admits to “having such a difficult time reading her” (204). But we also have a difficult time reading Julius. Retrospectively sinister, these moments nonetheless fail to signal a capacity for such violence. Moji’s revelation pulls readers in only to cause them to commit the same errors
Julius does, reading Julius himself symptomatically. The novel refuses readers the kind of aesthetic distance Julius deploys. And, in refusing to definitely confirm the rape, there is no way as readers to disentangle ourselves from the narrative – no final closure or judgment that would leave us unimplicated. The novel’s hermetic narrative form trades readers’ intimacy with its narrator for complicity, shifting from Julius’s reading practices to confronting us with our own.

Moji’s revelation functions as a litmus test for both Julius and the novel’s readers. Moji anticipates Julius’s failure to respond: “I know you’ll say nothing. I’m just another woman whose story of sexual abuse will not be believed. I know that” (245). Julius’s “contempt for pain” is both excused and enabled by his critical apparatus, allowing him to elide the rape and its impact (on both Moji and his own life) (246). Julius explains that “we are not the villains of our own stories…we play, and only play, the hero, and in the swirl of other people’s stories, insofar as those stories concern us at all, we are never less than heroic” (243). In a moment of self-consciousness, he asks, “what does it mean when, in someone else’s version, I am the villain?” (243). Julius reveals the problem even before he fails to respond to Moji’s accusation. He frames human experience as a narrative, allowing for the critical or aesthetic distance that enables him to disengage. Experience becomes an aesthetic object rather than a competing narrative, a narrative that can be told convincingly or unconvincingly, empathetically or not, a narrative that can be read and dismissed. Suffering becomes a problem of form. Reflecting on mass death, plague, war, famine, the traumatic events of human history, Julius remarks, “Even in the way we speak about what little has happened to us, we have already exhausted ourselves with hyperbole” (201). In reading suffering as form, Julius absolves himself of response. Julius elevates the narrative over the (inter)personal, negating the reality of the event and its impact on Moji’s world and his
own. Julius’s formal relation to the suffering he confronts and catalogs allows him to efface himself from the narrative and deny his own culpability.

To return to Cole’s own description of the novel, it is the “soft exit for strings” following Moji’s revelation that is most surprising (“Palimpsest City”). Julius declines to address Moji’s claim; he silently watches the sun rise and returns to his thoughts. The novel returns to its abstract meditation. And, yet, Cole insists on the centrality of the rape for both Julius’s character in the novel. Asked about the veracity of Moji’s accusation in the novel in an interview with Max Liu for 3am Magazine, he explains, “Oh, it’s absolutely true. I can’t imagine Julius’s story without it. . . I’m attracted, in art, to things that trouble the complacency of the viewer or reader. . . Many people were upset that I put Julius through that. But there’s no such thing as a right to remain untroubled” (“Palimpsest City”). Disturbingly, however, critics and reviewers seem to have taken their cue from Julius rather than the novel. Many fail to reference the rape in the discussion of the novel or, if they do, discuss it only as an overzealous editor’s or a young writer’s misstep in an otherwise finely wrought early novel. If we take the author at his word, at least in part, the gaps between the novel’s, author’s, and reviewers’ accounts of the rape opens up a disturbing disparity. In her review for The New York Times, Michiko Kakutani declines to reference the rape at all, commenting instead on the novel’s “decidedly lugubrious narrator” and Cole’s own writerly ambitions (“Roaming the Streets”). For James Wood at The New Yorker, however, the novel creates a “productive alienation” (“Arrival of Enigmas”). At one point Julius suggests that “[e]ach person must, on some level, take himself as the calibration point for normalcy” (Cole, Open City 243). While this sensibility (one that pervades his aesthetic responses) enables Julius’s ethical lapse, Wood reads “this selfish normality, this ordinary
solipsism” as “an obstacle to understanding other people” that nonetheless “enables liberal journeys of comprehension” ("Arrival of Engimas"). He concludes that the novel is both “a brave admission about the limits of sympathy” and “a beautifully modulated description of a certain kind of solitary liberalism” ("Arrival of Engimas"). Kakutani’s dismissal and Wood’s equivocation belie the centrality of the rape and the engine of the novel’s critique. Far from marking the limits of sympathy, the encounter between Julius and Moji indicts Julius’s hermeneutics. Kakutani, Wood, and others’ failure to adequately grapple with the way Moji’s revelation disrupts the narrative reveals the seductive ease of our attunement to Julius’s limited vision and a will to remain complacent and “untroubled” (Cole “Palimpsest City”).

*Open City* disrupts rather than enables “liberal journeys of comprehension” ("Arrival of Enigmas"). As Aaron Bady notes at the beginning of his interview with Cole for *Post-45*, “the one consistency in all of [Cole’s] work is a refusal to let Art, with a capital A, stand in the way of being fully human, as well as a sustained attention to the ways it sometimes does” (“Interview: Teju Cole”). Ironically, Julius himself voices a deep skepticism about the ethical potential of form itself. Describing W.H. Auden’s defense of the French collaborationist poet Paul Claudel, Julius “wonder[s] if indeed it was that simple, if time was so free with memory, so generous with pardons, that writing well could come to stand in the place of an ethical life” (Cole, *Open City* 144). But if we cannot excuse a poet for “writing well,” neither can we forgive Julius or ourselves for “reading well.” The novel’s “soft exit for strings” is not a cautious endorsement of Julius’s worldview as Wood and other critics who elide the accusation of rape would suggest (“Palimpsest City”). Rather, the final passages of the novel subtly undercut Julius’s faith in the transformative potential of art and reorient our task as readers.
The final chapter of *Open City* offers a series of encounters and meditations that mark the distance between Julius and readers after the rupture of Moji’s revelation. Julius returns to Mahler, this time in person, and we are treated with Julius’s now-typical meditations on the space of the concert hall, the whiteness of the concert-goers, and the experience of listening to Mahler’s symphony with, of course, a healthy dose of Mahler’s own biography interwoven. The formal echoes between Julius’s experience at the American Folk Art Museum and Carnegie Hall are clear. But Julius’s contemplation of the symphony is interrupted by the sight of a frail, older woman walking up the aisle. Julius describes her in clichéd terms – her “thin crown of white hair . . . became a halo” backlit by the stage as she moves as though “summoned. . . leaving into death, drawn by a force invisible to us” (Cole, *Open City* 253). The metaphors are elaborate; she becomes “a mote suspended inside the slow-moving music” and “a boat departing on a country lake early in the morning, which . . . appears not to sail but to dissolve into the substance of the fog” (253, 254). Julius goes so far as to project himself into her experience, reading the scene “as though I was down there with my oma, and the sweep of the music was pushing us gently forward as I escorted her out into the darkness” (253). Where Julius’s earlier aesthetic encounters seemed profound, full of insightful readings and philosophical connections, his representation of this encounter falls into a familiar formula. Pieter Vermeulen argues that we can read this moment and the scenes that follow Julius’s encounter with Moji as the novel’s “resistance to its own aesthetic achievements,” a resistance that “remind[s] readers of the insufficiency of the merely aesthetic pseudo-solutions that the novel on a superficial reading seems to invite” (43). The moment is hardly transformative though Julius’s narrative framing of the moment encourages us to read it in those terms. As a hollow repetition of the novel’s narrative patterns,
this moment tempts readers to fall back into the mode of reading that they have been habituated to. But to return to those habits would be to dismiss the ways that Moji’s revelation ruptures our complacency as readers. The symphony scene’s formulaic narration highlights the hollowness of Julius’s aestheticism.

The novel intensifies the wedge between Julius and the reader through the “situation of unimprovable comedy” that follows (Cole, Open City 255). An ostensibly profound moment of aesthetic experience quickly turns to farce. Looking to escape the post-concert crowds, Julius finds himself locked outside the hall on a precarious and slippery fire escape, exposed to the world he so routinely shuts out. As perhaps only Julius could, perched so perilously above the city, he pauses to contemplate the surprisingly visible stars. At first, he reads the stars on a human scale. The sky “was like a roof” and the stars “a distant cloud of fireflies” (256). But Julius quickly recognizes that the scale exceeds the human. He collapses the foreground and the background of the night sky – the stars you can see with the darkness of the stars you cannot. Julius pulls the darkness forward, reading the “dark spaces between the dead, shining stars” as “blank interstices” (256). “To look into those dark spaces,” Julius suggests, “was to have a direct glimpse of the future” (256). For Julius, who is so obsessed with his connection to the past, this moment of futurity temporarily shatters his solipsism and produces a rare moment of self-consciousness. Recognizing that his “entire being was caught up in a blind spot,” Julius reflects, “My hands held metal, my eyes starlight, and it was as though I had come so close to something that it had fallen out of focus or fallen so far away from it that it had faded away” (256, 257). This is the closest Julius comes to responding to Moji’s accusation of rape: an oblique, tacit
admission of his faulty vision. Julius’s vision blurs, but this moment gives readers a way forward, changing the stakes of how we read.

A Hermeneutics of Susceptibility

*Open City* opens with an elliptical epigraph: “Death is a perfection of the eye” (1). The distinction Julius makes between the dead stars we can see and the still living stars we have yet to see offers an alternate mode of reading even if it is a mode Julius himself cannot see. As Pieter Vermeulen details, the novel, as the epigraph anticipates, links death “with an optic that is too intent on perfecting, completing, and purifying whatever comes into its purview” (52). Julius points us to the blank spaces even if he cannot finally see what is written there. In the distance between Julius’s blindness and readers’ insights, *Open City* “keeps the bits of life that it collects radically imperfect, incomplete, and therefore – as the tagline suggests – visible and undead” (Vermeulen 52). The novel’s “unheroic operation,” Vermeulen contends is “[t]he work of rendering things visible” (52). In foregrounding the distance between its readers and its narrator, I argue that the novel succeeds where Julius himself fails.

Indeed, Julius recedes from the novel’s final moments as he recounts the curious case of the thousands of bird deaths caused by the Statue of Liberty. He explains, “Although it has had its symbolic value right from the beginning. . . that same light, especially in bad weather, fatally disoriented birds. The birds, many of which were clever enough to dodge the cluster of skyscrapers in the city, somehow lost their bearings when faced with a single monumental flame” (Cole, *Open City* 258). It is tempting to read this moment allegorically: the symbolic formal power of the Statue of Liberty, the inability of the birds to read a new route in the city skyline. But Julius continues, detailing how, after a particularly deadly night, the military
commander intervenes and develops a formal system accounting for each bird. Rather than selling the bodies to local milliners as the city had in the past, Colonel Tassin “determined that any birds that happened to die in the future would not be disposed of commercially but would be retained in the service of science” (259). “With this strong instinct for public-spiritedness,” Colonel Tassin delivers “detailed reports on each death, including the species of the bird, date, hour of striking, number striking, number killed, direction and force of the wind, character of the weather, and general remarks” (259). The closing lines of the novel remark on the limits of this system of accounting: “Nevertheless, the sense persisted that something more troubling was at work. On the morning of October 13, for example, 175 wrens had been gathered in, all dead of the impact, although the night just past hadn’t been particularly windy or dark” (259).

This impersonal recounting of mass death recalls the novel’s opening moment as Julius watches the skies “like someone taking auspices” (4). Where Julius’s wonderment at “how our life below might look from [a bird’s] perspective” leads him to “[doubt] . . . whether these birds, with their dark wings and throats, their pale bodies and tireless little hearts, really did exist” – he “couldn’t trust [his] memory when they weren’t there,” this final narrative is deeply impersonal, rendering the birds in neither imaginative nor natural terms (4). In these parallel moments, as Rebecca Clark suggests, the novel “begs or baits us to associate with Julius and his mode of narration” the cosmopolitan fantasy of a bird’s eye view, transcendent and universal (186). For Madhu Krishnan, these parallel moments expose the fiction of Julius’s cosmopolitanism which “masquerades as a universalism in which everything is connected and subjects are freed from the imperatives of local attachments” (689). But, in linking Julius’s interpretive fantasy with the organized violence of an expansive military science project that can neither fully account for nor
fully explain the deaths it records, I contend that the novel offers a more damning indictment of Julius’s critical practice. To record, to witness, to observe from the fantasy of a universal point of view, the novel suggests, is to ignore and erase local attachments - the impact of the monument on the communities of birds but also the labor of the milliners and the transformative beauty of the hats they fashion out of death. It is also an interpretive fiction haunted by its complicity in violence - both the local violence of Julius’s rape and the large scale, state-sanctioned violence of the military. The echoes between the mass death of birds and the mass death of historical traumas are palpable in a novel driven by the persistence of historical loss. The novel’s final moments register both the need to account for such losses and a deep suspicion of the forms those accounts take. These echoes between traumas highlight the ethical consequences of the forms – aesthetic or otherwise – that make them legible. We cannot finally place our faith in their explanatory power or our own.

We are left then not with the open city of the bird in flight but with the open city of World War II. Julius explains,

Surrender, of course played a role in this form of survival . . . Had Brussels’s rulers not opted to declare it an open city and thereby exempt it from bombardment during the Second World War, it might have been reduced to rubble. It might have been another Dresden. As it was, it had remained a vision of the medieval and baroque periods, a vista interrupted only by the architectural monstrosities erected all over town by Leopold II in the late nineteenth century. (Cole, *Open City* 97)

This shift relocates the reader and reorients the scale of reading, moving from the bird’s eye view above and apart from the city to peopled streets laden with history. But this shift also reframes the role of the reader. No longer above and apart from what they survey, the reader becomes, like an open Brussels, vulnerable, complicit, and permeable, bound up in local and global currents of violence, imperialism, history, surrender, and coercion. *Open City* asks its readers what Anne
Anlin Cheng asks in NOVEL’s forum on reading: “Can we read with the recognition of our own complicity?” (4). Deeply invested in the interpretive power of suspicious reading, Julius, the novel suggests, cannot. But can we?

_Open City_ tempts readers otherwise, inviting us into the seductive fantasy of Julius’s purported interpretive mastery before revealing the violence of its limitations. Felski reminds us that “[c]ritique does not simply cut off, estrange, or isolate but also collects, composes, and gathers together; it creates imagined or real communities around a sensibility, ethos, and practice of reading” (_Limits of Critique_ 49). Through Julius’s seductive flaneurie, we become a part of Julius’s community, a community centered around shared pleasures and practices of suspicious reading. But as Cheng elaborates, this kind of “reading-for-what-is-underneath has produced a stable object/subject, reader/text dyad that is not only illusory but has also blinded us to what the complicity of those terms might teach us” (4). Moji’s revelation disrupts the stability of our reading and disrupts our habituation to critique. If, as readers, we are drawn into the narrative pleasures of Julius’s practice of reading, his violence comes as an uncomfortable surprise. But where Julius refuses to answer to or for Moji’s story, as readers, we are confronted with the possibility of our complicity with Julius. In this relational shift, the novel reattunes our own reading to an alternate hermeneutics, what Cheng provisionally describes as a hermeneutics of susceptibility. For Cheng, a hermeneutics of susceptibility is “willing to follow, rather than to suppress, the wayward life of the subject and object in dynamic interface . . . to read promiscuously: to step outside the moral economies of the visual, the categorical, the critical, the political; to be led by and to attend to what the ‘objects’ have to teach [readers]” (4). Reading becomes a problem of attention rather than interpretation. A hermeneutics of susceptibility
attunes us to the wayward, the vulnerable, the contaminated, the permeable. The figure of the open city alerts us, then, to the palimpsestuous presence of other communities. *Open City* registers this presence at the margins of Julius’s narrativizing field of vision in the stories of trauma and suffering he collects - Farouq, Dr. Maillotte, V., Professor Saito, his mother, but also Moji, strangers on the subway, slaves, protestors, indigenous peoples, undocumented immigrants, victims and perpetrators, birds and bedbugs. In doing so, *Open City* also registers our complicity in whose stories we attend to. *Open City*’s hermeneutics of susceptibility reminds us that our attunement to the presence of other subjects and other stories is susceptible too.

How ought we read now? For Nicholas Dames, *Open City*, like other novels of the Theory Generation, offers “a funny, eminently realist kind of warning: Forget the hermeneutics of suspicion. Remember what you’ve suspected all along - what looking around you, you can hardly avoid suspecting. Be one of those on whom nothing, not even Theory, is lost” (“Theory Generation”). But, in *Open City*, so much is lost. Perhaps the warning is less that we become readers on whom nothing is lost and more that all reading is susceptible to loss. How ought we read now is a provocation without a final answer.
CONCLUSION

ANXIOUS READING AND THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM

Like Teju Cole’s *Open City*, this dissertation offers no final answers to the question of how we ought to read. As I noted in the introduction, we often take it for granted that our reading practices, especially scholarly or critical reading practices, are inherently ethical. We show off our #shelfies and analyze others’ personal libraries.¹ When public figures admit or expose their cultural or intellectual failings, we admonish them for not reading more books.² When we experience shared historical, political, and/or cultural events, we create and circulate reading lists and syllabi. As a scholar and a life-long reader, it is tempting to fall into this trap. After all, I want to believe that reading books makes me a better person, that the books I recommend to others or give as gifts have the capacity to change people’s lives, that my personal library reflects my character and my values. We invest incredible ethical value in the objects of our reading while often eliding or ignoring the actual practice of reading.³

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¹ During the pandemic, the Twitter account Room Rater (@ratemyskyperoom) emerged to analyze news interviewee’s Zoom and Skype backgrounds, scoring rooms on a variety of categories including, importantly, the presence, prominence, and curation of books. Similarly, the opening monologue of the documentary about antiquarian booksellers, *The Booksellers* (2019), announces, “[Books] are a way of being fully human.”

² Interestingly, it is always books and not other objects or forms that are the basis of this kind of rhetorical response, suggesting a kind of virtue-calculus about the objects of our reading and the quality of our attention.

³ The exception, of course, is “critical reading” despite the defunding and devaluing of the humanities across both higher education and American culture. I discuss critical reading in the classroom later in this conclusion.
pointedly notes in her essay on the ubiquitous presence of the anti-racist reading list, “They feel
good to solicit, good to mete out, but someone at some point has to get down to the business of
reading” (“What is an Anti-Racist Reading List For?”).

The business of the ethics of reading, I have shown, is more complicated than our
rhetorical shorthand and popular evaluations of reading would suggest. In the first half of the
dissertation, I explored how modernist writers used form both to show us the limits of our
habitual practices of reading and how different approaches to reading might enable us to think
differently about our ethical position in the text and in the world. For Virginia Woolf in *Three
Guineas* and *Between the Acts*, this means recognizing that what we might dismiss as “bad”
reading – uncommitted, inattentive, distracted – might allow us to become more vulnerable
readers, open to the ways a text might unsettle us and, in turn, give us new ways to account for
our ethical responsibility to others. *Melanctha* and *Passing* ask us to recognize our limitations in
both the stories we tell and how we approach reading. After all, the fictional people whose
stories we read are not real people and, yet, confronting what we do not know or cannot know
about others in our reading reveals both our capacity for ethical violence and new forms of
ethical relation. While these first two chapters and the texts they engage remain aware of the
risks of reading as well as the failures of our dominant or habitual reading practices, they
nonetheless share a faith in the ethical possibilities of reading even as they locate that value in
vulnerable or limited and unknowing ways of reading.

The final two chapters complicate a faith in the possibility of an ethics of reading. In
Chapter Three, I turn to Nathanael West’s novella, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, to track the ways our
affective investments in reading allow us to feel ethical without committing to being ethical.
While offering new ways to understand the affective work of empathy, *Miss Lonelyhearts’* ultimate ambivalence about the ethical value of empathy returns us again to the problem of reading and the ethics of reading. In *Open City*’s Julius, we encounter a sophisticated, intellectual reader, a reader steeped in the protocols and practices of critique and one, perhaps, familiar to scholars. For all his ability to read well, Julius cannot see his own act of violence or the limits of his vision. Miss Lonelyhearts’ crisis of empathy and Julius’s critical mastery reveal the dangers of believing that reading, even “good” or “critical” reading, is enough to be ethical or act ethically in the word beyond the text. Indeed, our affective, personal, and political investments in good reading can be a seductive fantasy that blinds us to the complicities, vulnerabilities, exclusions, and even violence we reproduce in the act of reading.

The problem, then, is not whether reading can or cannot be ethical, but that our assumptions about the ethical value of reading can be totalizing, collapsing our practices of reading with ethical value in ways that fail to account for the complexity – ethical and otherwise – of our experiences of reading as well as the ethical possibilities that might emerge from other modes of reading. Reading does not make us better, more ethical people, but it can open us to new configurations of self, other, and community beyond the text. But we also cannot guarantee in advance where our reading might take us or whether and how our reading might change us. In Chapter Four, I point towards attunement and Anne Anlin Cheng’s hermeneutics of susceptibility as strategies for dwelling more deeply in the ethical complexity of reading and for reorienting our understanding of the ethics of reading around attention and vulnerability rather than interpretation. Admittedly, this asks us to approach reading with a humility and generosity that is often at odds with the demands of our discipline where we are asked to perform and ask
students to perform reading as a kind of mastery. Instead, approaching reading and its ethics in terms of attunement and susceptibility enables us to embrace modes of reading that center different kinds of connection and attachment without assuming the value of those connections or attachments in advance. In doing so, we might relocate the ethical value of reading not in specific practices of reading, but in the complexities and capacities of its effects on us. Opening ourselves to the ways that reading may rewrite us, for better or worse, allows us to reimagine our relation to texts, readers, classrooms, and communities - work that has impact beyond our encounter with the text.

I see the primary impact of this work as diversifying the kinds of reading practices we teach and encourage in the literature classroom. In the remainder of this conclusion, I explore the stakes and consequences of this dissertation’s arguments about reading for literary pedagogy. Indeed, this dissertation grew, in part, out of my experiences as a student and teacher in the literature classroom and a persistent anxiety about reading that I both experienced as a student and recognized in students in my introductory literature courses. The recent debates about reading in the discipline I discuss in the introduction and engage throughout the dissertation reveal a similar deep and pervasive anxiety about the kinds of readers that literature scholars have become. Reading is, in other words, always already anxious. But what remains missing from conversations about our disciplinary reading practices is how these new or different

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4 I recognize the irony of writing this in a dissertation, one of the many institutional forms of performing disciplinary mastery.

5 This section of the conclusion appeared as “Resonant Reading: From Anxiety to Attunement,” *Pedagogy*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2019, pp. 537-542. I am deeply indebted to Shawna Ross and Douglas Dowland for organizing the original MLA panel on anxious pedagogies and for their invaluable feedback during the editing process.
approaches to reading translate to the classroom. College literature classrooms remain deeply rooted in teaching suspicious methods of critical reading. And while we have compelling and insightful accounts of how critique and critical reading shapes our disciplinary practices, we are missing analogous accounts of how critical reading shapes our pedagogical practices. Probing the stakes of what we do as a discipline should recalibrate what we do in the classroom. If critique creates anxious scholarly readers, it also creates anxious student readers, and it is worth exploring the pedagogical consequences of critique and critical reading’s dominance.

As a teacher, I quickly discovered that, following Eve Sedgwick’s description of critique as a “strong theory” which “blot[s] out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding things or of things to understand,” critique can also operate as a “strong pedagogy,” blotting out alternative literary pedagogies and shaping literature classrooms in counter-intuitive ways by creating, rather than resolving or engaging with, students’ anxieties about reading the “right” way (131). Like many graduate instructors, I began teaching introductory literature courses with an inherited set of course materials, learning objectives, and pedagogies. I quickly found that, rather than inviting students deeper into texts, the very critical language I was tasked with teaching was alienating students and fueling anxious silences in the classroom. Class discussions inevitably stalled on questions about what a text means rather than what a text does and for whom. Encouraged by exam questions on passage identification and literary vocabulary, students were learning that the stakes of what we were reading and discussing resided only in the text (and in their grades).
It was only when we began approaching texts “sideways” that we began having deeper, more rigorous, and less anxious discussions about the literature we were reading. In a core literature course, Exploring Fiction: The Ethics of Storytelling, we read Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* alongside contemporary advice columns and podcasts. In another core course, Women in Literature: Fashioning the Self, we reflected on our own place in the marketing and reception history of Ann Petry’s novel, *The Street*, through its racialized and sometimes racist book covers. These discussions grounded our conversation in our relationships to the texts we were reading and heightened the stakes. Literary language came later as a tool for refining our descriptions of what texts were doing in the world. These discussions were successful because they shifted us away from prescriptive or evaluative questions of interpretation (what a text means) towards questions of attunement (what is worth paying attention to and the conditions of our attention and the ways that forms, genres, contexts, cultures, histories, experiences, materialities, etc. shape how and why a text resonates and for whom). Both students’ and my own palpable relief and excitement in finding alternative approaches to our discussions threw into vivid relief the way suspicious reading continues to shape the expectations and horizons of our work in the classroom.

Recognizing critique’s pedagogical forces in my own teaching, I want to briefly sketch out some of the costs and constraints of critical reading in the college literature classroom.

**Critical reading is exclusive.** At a basic level, critical reading requires a specialized language that creates boundaries between insiders and outsiders and reinforces exclusionary

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6 By “sideways,” I mean that rather than facing the text head on we begin with something adjacent to the text, moving sideways into the text through paratexts, historical mashups, current news, fandoms, remakes, and other media. I have found that this kind of lateral move helps make texts more accessible and less daunting for students.
power dynamics. Critique’s exclusivity frames alternate vocabularies as suspect. Students learn
to internalize “the assumption that whatever is not critical must therefore be uncritical,” too
emotional, too naive, or too personal, raising the personal and affective stakes of students’
encounters with literature (Felski, Limits of Critique 2, original italics). Critical reading’s
exclusivity encourages students’ anxieties about reading in the classroom.

**Critical reading encourages students to consume rather than engage texts.** As
Timothy Aubry argues, students’ anxieties about whether they are “getting it” promotes
consumption because it “analogizes the act of interpretation with the act of consumption” (47).
Reading becomes a high-stakes game of comprehension: either the text remains impossibly
other, alien and inaccessible to you, or you “take possession of it, view it as your property” (47).
“Getting it” becomes a myopic version of learning, closing both reader and text to the kinds of
learning that comes from more generous and exploratory modes of reading. Critical reading
stokes students’ anxieties about being wrong in ways that limit their capacity to be open to
intellectual risk. Anxious about being wrong, students miss all the ways they can be “right.”

**Critical reading is impersonal.** We ask students to occupy neutral, objective positions
of critical distance even as we acknowledge the impossibility of objectivity and the fiction of
neutrality. The pretense of critical distance brackets the specificity and diversity of students’
motivations and responses while reading, foreclosing the possibility of forging connections with
broader communities of readers (including other readers in the classroom) and denying the often
unpredictable and unruly resonances of our encounters with literature. Neutrality can be passive-
aggressive, demanding a specific orientation towards the text while limiting readers’ sense of
agency.
In mapping a few of the pedagogical limits of critique, my goal is not to get rid of critical reading altogether, but, like my effort across this dissertation, to reimagine critical reading as one approach among many possible approaches to engaging literature, each with their own set of choices, investments, and relationships. Rather than disciplining alternate orientations towards the objects of our study, we should embrace the full range of attachments and orientations to the texts we read. In doing so, we invite different, less anxious affects into the classroom. Diversifying our models of what counts as “serious” reading can engage the kinds of readers and reading already at work in our classrooms. The task then becomes to build a classroom pedagogy in which students can explore the pleasures and anxieties of reading without necessarily becoming anxious readers.

By way of concluding, I want to highlight some of the strategies and practices already reimagining reading in the college literature classroom.

**Collaborative reading.** *Hypothesis* (web.hypothes.is), *Genius* (www.genius.com), digital forums, and online blogs all provide dynamic platforms for making students’ reading visible, social, and collaborative. While each platform and digital tool has its own affordances and constraints, collaborative classroom reading makes visible the diverse ways readers engage and respond to a given text. Students’ engagements with a text become a meta-text in the classroom, allowing students to reflect on their own reading practices more deeply. We read ourselves reading in the classroom, reframing the anxiety-fueling power dynamics of textual mastery as a dynamic, experiential, and intersubjective process of learning.

**Responsive reading.** The college literature classroom is often invested in taking apart a text, but formal and informal assignments asking students to recombine texts in new forms for
different audiences place creativity alongside critique as an intellectually rigorous form of responding to what we read. These assignments can range from in-class discussion activities, such as rewriting difficult sentences as Buzzfeed article titles (@MJPhillips)\(^7\) or summarizing a text as a Hemingway-style six-word story (Ardam 47-49) to formal, culminating projects like the popular un-essay assignment or remixing or remediating projects. These kinds of assignments invite students to engage texts on their own terms while also foregrounding the social dynamics of reading. Embedding texts in acts of transmission and translation more deeply connects literature to its diverse communities of readers and facilitates connections among readers that live beyond the immediate experience of reading.

**Public reading.** Through blogs, website, magazines, films, public syllabi, and other artifacts, we can create assignments and experiences that break down the boundaries of the classroom, engaging broader publics, cultivating student voices, and making the work of the classroom more open and accessible. In doing so, we invite students to think critically about the broader stakes and consequences of knowledge production and how literature shapes and enriches public life. We also make the knowledge we produce in the humanities and in humanities classrooms accessible, allowing us to better advocate for the public value of the humanities. We can and should reframe reading as not only participating in the immediate work of the classroom but as participating in the work of building communities beyond the classroom.

I offer these approaches to reimagining reading in the classroom not only to highlight new possibilities for postcritical or undisciplined reading pedagogies but also as strategies for making the value of the humanities visible and more accessible to students. Instead of rewarding

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\(^7\) Unfortunately, this tweet has since been deleted.
institutionally-bound reading practices and perpetuating anxiety-inducing fictions of mastery, reading collaboratively, socially, and publicly engages literature’s resonance beyond the classroom. While critical reading’s defensive posture speaks to very real anxieties about de-professionalization and the value of humanities education that are only heightened in our contemporary political climate, it also creates unnecessary boundaries between reader and text, student and teacher, institutions and publics. Critical reading all too often denies the ties that bind readers and texts to the world. Instead, as Rita Felski argues, “We need a critical vocabulary that is more attuned to the complexity of ties - as not just chains of domination, but also indispensable forms of relation. Bonds do not only constrain, but also sustain: they enable, create, make possible” (“Postcritical Reading” 4). Rather than building borders around what counts as critical reading, embracing the social, collaborative, and public nature of reading might build pedagogies of sustentative, ethical attachments, pedagogies that recognize the ways that reading creates communities and brings us closer not only to the text, but to each other and the world.
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