

THAT TEENAGE FEELING: AFFECT AND QUEER ADOLESCENCE IN THE MID-
TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN NOVEL

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"That Teenage Feeling: Affect and Queer Adolescence in the Mid-Twentieth Century American Novel," examines three queer coming-of-age novels: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*. At first blush, these works may not seem "traditionally" queer, as the protagonists are not explicitly gay characters. Yet these characters participate in non-heteronormative, even deviant, sex acts, display gender mutability or instability, and, most significantly, fail to "grow up." Their thwarted development is paralleled by the stalled narrative movement of the texts. These novels are derailed coming-of-age stories whose queer characters never reach maturity, and their narratives reflect the delayed temporality of perpetual adolescence. The teenage angst found in these works is not merely a character trait, but a narrative device. The "weak" emotions Lolita, Bigger Thomas, Frankie Addams and John Henry West experience, which include boredom, indolence, and disaffection, perform the narrative work of stalling the linear, forward progress of the text. Although a growing body of literary criticism is informed by affect studies—the interdisciplinary study of the way human feelings are socially and culturally understood and constructed—current scholarship has yet to account for the role weak affects play in literature and culture. While weak affects are often read as feelings that fail to effect political action, I follow Roland Barthes's classification of many of these emotions as manifestations of what he names the "Neutral," a figure for the disruption of meaning-producing paradigms—the social, cultural, and linguistic mechanisms

through which interpretations of human experience emerge. As contemporary queer theory has noted, non-progressive, atemporal, non-reproductive narratives are often unintelligible in a society that values cultural narratives of progress, productivity, and reproduction—narratives queer sexuality disrupts. Rather than simply gazing at the ruined lives and bodies of queer kids in the U.S., well-trodden critical ground, “That Teenage Feeling” investigates the relationship between queerness, affect, and narrative temporality in these works in order to argue for a way of thinking of queerness as temporal.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jessica Metzler earned her undergraduate degree in English with a minor in Women's Studies from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and holds master's degrees in English from Florida State University and Cornell University. Her major fields of study include Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Queer Theory, African American Literature and Performance, and Film Studies.

For Kadejah Mervil

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CL	<i>Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography</i> (1980) by Roland Barthes
ES	<i>Elements of Semiology</i> (1964) by Roland Barthes
GV	“The Grain of the Voice” (1972) by Roland Barthes
MD	<i>Mourning Diary</i> by Roland Barthes
MOW	<i>The Member of the Wedding</i> by Carson McCullers
NS	<i>Native Son</i> by Richard Wright
PT	<i>The Pleasure of the Text</i> (1973) by Roland Barthes
RB	<i>Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes</i> (1975) by Roland Barthes
TF	<i>Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity</i> (2003) by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick
TN	<i>The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France</i> (1977-1978) by Roland Barthes
WDZ	<i>Writing Degree Zero</i> (1953) by Roland Barthes

INTRODUCTION

THE QUEER TEMPORALITY OF ADOLESCENCE: ROLAND BARTHES, AFFECT, AND NARRATIVE

“That Teenage Feeling: Affect and Queer Adolescence in the Mid-Twentieth Century American Novel,” examines three queer coming-of-age novels: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, and Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding*. At first, these works may not seem “traditionally” or canonically queer as their protagonists are not explicitly gay characters. Yet these adolescents participate in nonheteronormative, even deviant, sex acts, display gender mutability or instability, and, most significantly, fail to “grow up.” I figure queerness in these novels broadly to include instances of homoerotic or homosexual behavior, as well as nonheteronormative behavior, including rejections of or exclusions from the domain of reproductive futurity. The thwarted development of these adolescent characters is paralleled by the stalled narrative movement of the texts themselves. These novels are derailed coming-of-age stories whose queer characters never reach maturity, and their narratives reflect the delayed temporality of perpetual adolescence. In each novel, the text finds its narrative duration in the lack of developmental progress of its youthful characters. Their nonheteronormative desires and behavior delay or prevent entrance into a dominant, heteronormative social order in the plot, and the narrative pace reflects this delay. Scholars Heather Love and Kathryn Bond Stockton, among others, have argued that a cultural focus on linear and reproductive progress models has led to the historical and literary

characterization of queer figures and narratives as “backward” or “sideways.” The queer adolescents in these novels, however, are closer to static figures; they fail to progress or reproduce and actively eschew productivity.

These narrative and textual delays frequently correspond with the ineffectual affects experienced by the characters. The teenage angst and stubbornness found in these works is not merely a character trait, but a narrative device. The “weak” emotions Lolita, Bigger Thomas, and Frankie Addams experience, which include boredom, indolence, anxiety, and apathy, also perform the narrative work of stalling the linear, forward progress of the text. Unlike strong emotional states, such as anger, which often prompt powerful, immediate (re)actions, weak feelings of annoyance, weariness, laziness, or nervousness are largely states of inaction that simply endure. Sianne Ngai claims such “ugly feelings” “tend to interfere with the outpouring of other emotions. Moods like irritation and anxiety, for instance, are defined by a flatness or ongoingness entirely opposed to the ‘suddenness’ on which Aristotle’s aesthetics of fear depends. And unlike rage, which cannot be sustained indefinitely, less dramatic feelings like envy and paranoia have a remarkable capacity for duration” (7). The adolescent affects I examine in these novels share this “capacity for duration,” which in turn establishes the narrative duration of the text.

Reading the relationship of affect to narrative temporality in these texts from Roland Barthes’s work on feeling and narrative to recent queer theory and criticism on the function of literary affect by scholars such as Love, Ngai, Stockton, Sara Ahmed, Lee Edelman, Elizabeth Freeman, and Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick shows how the figure of the perpetual adolescent paradoxically serves both generative and disruptive narrative functions in these novels. Although weak affects are often read as feelings that fail to effect political action, I follow Roland Barthes's classification of many of these emotions as manifestations of what he names "the Neutral," a figure for the disruption of meaning-producing paradigms—the social, cultural, and linguistic mechanisms through which interpretations of human experience emerge. As contemporary queer theory has noted, non-progressive, atemporal, non-reproductive narratives are often unintelligible in a society that values cultural narratives of progress, productivity, and reproduction—narratives queer sexuality disrupts. Rather than simply gazing at the ruined lives and bodies of queer kids in the U.S., well-trodden critical ground, "That Teenage Feeling" investigates the relationship between queerness, affect, and narrative temporality in these works in order to argue for a way of thinking of queerness as temporal. Reading the temporality of these novels as both influenced and constituted by the queerness of the narrative offers a fuller, formal understanding of these adolescents in ways unaccounted for by genre-based, biographical, nationalist, or historical critiques.

As the objects of study in this dissertation are grouped under a historical conception of time—the mid-twentieth century—questions of history and nationhood loom large. Indeed, a wide range of questions might be addressed in terms of the historical conditions that brought about the emergence of the category of the teenager and the (re)definition of adolescence in the United States in the twentieth century. Thinking through the

distinctions between the three types of adolescents at work in these texts helps contextualize the figure of the twentieth-century queer adolescent. These three types of adolescents include the actual lived lives of “real” *historical* adolescents, the *fictional* adolescent characters that exist in the world of the novels I address, and the *figural* adolescent that haunts these works.

There is no shortage of sociological studies, psychological case histories, government commission reports, or historical surveys on the topic of “real” twentieth-century adolescents. Despite this volume of scholarship, however, no one seems to agree on the conditions for the historical emergence of the American adolescent, the significance, or usefulness of the category. Most believe the societal invention of the adolescent or teenagers¹ to have taken place at some point in the past between the late-nineteenth century and the 1950s—a rather broad historical range—due to factors such as industrialization, economic changes to society, shifts in family size, changing attitudes toward debt and consumerism, and the role of children within the labor market. More slippery, however, is the significance (or necessity) of discussing adolescence as a social category. While there are, objectively, twelve to twenty-year-old individuals who exist at any given point in history, the characteristics, motivations, and societal roles of this group is still up for debate.

A cursory perusal of sociological texts published in the early and mid-twentieth century reveals that certain perceived characteristics of youth stood

out as distinct or troublesome. In 1927's *What Ails Our Youth?*, George A. Coe writes, "[young people] are getting on the nerves of many members of the older generation, though on different nerves and for very different reasons" (vii). Coe goes on to list, "The faults that everybody notices—the baggage," which include "Craze for excitement; immersion in the external and the superficial; lack of reverence and of respect; disregard for reasonable restraints in conduct and for reasonable reticence in speech; conformity to mass sentiment—'going with the crowd'; lack of individuality; living merely in the present, and general purposelessness" (2). Sound familiar? Such complaints might be just as easily applied to the 1920s young people who populated Theodore Dreiser's fiction as to today's youth as a recent (April 25, 2011) *New York Times* article demonstrated when it proclaimed the current generation of young people to be narcissists. According to University of Kentucky psychologist Nathan DeWall, "Late adolescents and college students love themselves more today than ever before" (Tierney D1). Tell it to Clyde Griffiths. Coe does wonder whether there is anything "new" about any of this, but proceeds to outline what is ailing 1920s youth and ends with a call to make Christianity more appealing to young people in order to fix their priorities.

By 1940—the same year *Native Son* was published—the question shifted to "Youth—Millions Too Many?" in a book of the same name by Bruce L. Melvin. Melvin's text features a Foreword by Eleanor Roosevelt who invokes

¹ Some critics use these terms interchangeably, while others use adolescence to mark a wider age range than 13-19 year olds, showing that the very category

the language of futurity in regard to adolescents: “No one who studies the world picture today can fail to see that youth is the determining factor in the civilization of the future. Whether our democracy succeeds depends on cooperation with youth” (5). Melvin addresses the effect of unemployment on youth in the wake of the Great Depression and warns:

The clamor of youth is increasing. For some years now young people have believed that conditions would be righted; they were told that the inability to secure gainful work was a temporary episode. They no longer believe this statement; their experience before the factory doors and on the farms belies it. Their temper is such that they could easily respond to demagogic leadership. (9)

Appearing at the height of Hitler’s organization of German youth during World War II, the book evinces a fear of unemployed and otherwise unoccupied young people. The evilness of idle hands in this worldview ranges from “Thrill seeking [which] is bad medicine for young people” (116) to the threat of mobilization by a demagogue such as Hitler.

In 1957, two years after *Lolita*’s publication, *The American Teenager*, a book based on studies by social scientists at Purdue University and published by H. H. Remmers and D. H. Radler, attempts to “delineate a serious problem—the problem of the American teenager and the beliefs he holds” (7). These problematic beliefs, according to Remmers and Radler, primarily seem to be a susceptibility to McCarthysim by virtue of their easily impressionable nature: “The typical teenager believes himself incapable of deciding what’s

of adolescence is unfixed and malleable.

best for him. He thinks behavior can—and should—be scrutinized by police, using wiretapping as a legitimate source of evidence. He endorses censorship of books, newspapers, magazines and other media as protection of the public against improper ideas” (7). Teenagers in all of these depictions become a blank slate upon which a society projects its fears about brainwashing and susceptibility to external influences, from Nazism to McCarthyism to the implied, but unstated risk of engaging in sexual deviance, including homosexuality. As Stockton writes, “the gay child lights up the problem of History. Lying outside of historians’ focus—not yet ‘in’ it—the gay child illuminates precisely what histories have not seen” (8-9). It is true that none of these works explicitly addresses queer adolescents, yet all speak directly to heteronormative societal expectations, including marriage and reproduction as key to retaining the fabric of democracy and a productive society.

The problem of History is not simply that of queer invisibility—an issue tackled by numerous queer theorists over the past twenty years. It is what this invisibility itself highlights—that history sees what it wants to see, the *figurative* teenager. These historical, sociological texts seem to point, paradoxically, to a figurative adolescent apart from “real,” historical ones. Even as these texts cite surveys and interviews with actual teenagers, the picture that emerges repeatedly is that of a figurative compilation of the “typical” adolescent as impressionable, disagreeable, emotionally volatile, and generally unpleasant. Such a figure forms a potential counterpoint to the figure of the innocent Child who must be protected at all costs. The imaginary Child for whom the future is held in “perpetual trust,” as Edelman argues

(11). The adolescent is the figure of a dangerous, temporary state of uncontainment where the normative linear trajectory from an assumed asexual childhood to adult reproductive sexuality is threatened with the possibility of derailment and haunted by the specter of teens who might choose, or be pressured, tricked, or otherwise lured off this normative path. While children must be protected from everyone, teenagers must be protected from their own impressionable natures, and others must be saved from their volatility. The figure of the queer adolescent then, is the figure for both uncontained, non-linear growth, to borrow from Stockton's formulation of "sideways" growth in children, and a non-progressive form of spreading that threatens reproductive futurism through its stalling of the heteronormative progress of "growing up."

Adolescents are sponges or indiscriminate consumers in the sociological works I have cited—eagerly absorbing momentary diversions or prettily disguised ideology without the wisdom to be circumspect about their influences. The significance of having such easily influenced teens, however, is always the same, and frequently expressed using a rhetoric of futurity: "The present generation of youth of high school age will be responsible for carrying on the business of life tomorrow. It is, therefore, of great practical importance to obtain if possible a continuous inventory of their views on matters of common concern" (Remmers 9). The business of tomorrow—the business of democracy—is, of course, predicated on "the teenage boy or girl's ultimate development into a responsible husband or wife, father or mother. It's only a short jump from high school to marriage and parenthood" (Remmers 79).

Each successive generation frets about a future left to the youth of today—a population seemingly apart from, if not actively hostile toward the norms and expectations of a dominant social order. This is what makes fictional adolescents such interesting objects of study. They are stuck in time, while the novels that contain them are not. As such, we are forced to understand these adolescents both as they were and as they are now—a challenge that ultimately tells us more about the reader’s conception of adolescents than the figures themselves.

Both contemporary and historical accounts of adolescence posit a prelapsarian past devoid of difficult teenagers and an imagined future now dependent upon the choices they make. This formulation of adolescents links their “in-between” state—not quite children, not yet adults—to a larger conception of time in which the desires of the present must be contained in order to ensure the future good of society. It also sacrifices any investigation of adolescence *not* in relation to the past or the future, because the very category is defined by its temporal relationship to both. Adolescents cannot exist without a relationship to a futurity that anticipates their maturation—the point at which they cease to be adolescents at all. Queer adolescents with their stalled, thwarted, or otherwise nonnormative developmental progress, can scarcely hope to obtain any sense of intelligibility within such conditions, as the following chapters will explore. The fictional adolescents in these novels share much in common with the twentieth-century figural queer child who embodies the kind of non-linear growth that paralyzes forward progress and stalls a narrative of growing up into reproductive adulthood. Significantly,

many of the characteristics attributed to both “real” and figurative teenagers hinge upon their emotional states. In the novels I examine, the affective lives of teenagers inform the stalled narrative movement of the texts themselves.

Literary critics have primarily addressed children in nineteenth and twentieth-century literature, rather than adolescents or teenagers specifically, though there is significant overlap in these porous categories. The 2004 edited volume of essays, *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* specifically addresses how “There is currently a dominant narrative about children: children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions. At the same time, however, children are also officially, tacitly, assumed to be heterosexual” (ix). However, as Stockton notes, “scholars of childhood were turning the child even queerer, even as they didn’t see, or never said they saw, the ghostly gay child (in the fictions) around them. In point of fact, there has been no monograph yet on the queer child—no historically layered, theoretical view of this matter in Anglo-American literature, film, theory, or even cultural studies” (10).

Rachael McLennan claims in *Adolescence, America, and Postwar Fiction*, her study of post-1950 American novels, that adolescence is often figurative and notes:

In many critical discussions and dominant constructions of the subject, adolescence bears little resemblance to a stage of development experienced differently by individuals (which it is), but is in effect employed metaphorically in academic discussion as a figurative container for the uncontainable [. . .] adolescence has been made to

mean that which it is not—American identity, or the world. (27)

It is surely tempting to read adolescence as a metaphor for a young nation or a relatively young national literature, especially in a text like *Lolita* where its theme of old world European sophistication (or pretension) meeting callow, gaudy Americanness is, as many have argued, made manifest in the figures of Humbert and Lolita respectively as they chase different sorts of amusements and delights across the geography of a United States vividly evoked in descriptions of roadside attractions, diners, and motels. Likewise in criticism of *Native Son*, Bigger has frequently been read as a symbolic figure for the state of U. S. race relations. Yet reading these adolescent characters solely as symbols or metaphors does little justice to them, just as the plots of the novels they inhabit. In some ways, thinking of *Lolita*-as-metaphor or *Bigger*-as-symbol is easier than thinking through the other kinds of narrative work these characters do, which is what my emphasis on affect, queerness, and temporality investigates in the following chapters. In exploring the temporality of adolescence in terms of stalling or narrative delay, I focus on the paradoxically active work accomplished by weak or neutral affects in terms of prolonging this “in-between” time and how it feels to live there.

As Edelman notes in *No Future*, the symbolic figure of the child as representative of the future of a dominant social order does not correspond to real children, historical or otherwise. In an undergraduate course I have taught on coming-of-age narratives, I often pair J. D. Salinger’s novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, with Audre Lorde’s semi-autobiographical biomythography, *Zami*. These works concern the same time and place (a

postwar New York City), yet the characters are worlds apart. Although both are teenagers temporarily on their own in the city during the same historical time period, the experiences of an economically disadvantaged queer black girl and a wealthy white boy are so radically different that it becomes nearly impossible to imagine these characters interacting with each other or responding to the same cultural or social forces. Such is the trouble with historical or sociological studies of adolescence in general. Trying to explain “kids these days,” necessitates a certain amount of generalization that is ultimately unhelpful in understanding specific teenagers, let alone fictional ones, which is why the turn to the figural is important to an understanding of these works.

Roland Barthes, Affect, and Narrative Temporality

Contemporary queer theory that engages with questions of affect often relies upon psychoanalytic readings of trauma, or Kleinian theories of object relations, or, via Sedgwick, investigations of Silvan Tomkins’s theories of affect and response. While these analyses are undeniably valuable, outside such readings lies an underutilized source for thinking feelings—Roland Barthes’s poststructuralist work on language, affect, and meaning.

Barthes’s insistence upon choosing the pleasurable as the most important, if not the only, object of study has threatened to render him a suspect scholarly figure even as it makes his work all the more appealing to queer theory.² His 1973 work, *The Pleasure of the Text*, like his later book, *A*

² See D. A. Miller’s *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (1992) for a sustained queer engagement with Barthes’s work.

Lover's Discourse (1977), takes a disavowed affect and brings it into intellectual discourse. Richard Howard, Barthes's frequent translator, describes *A Lover's Discourse* as "a way to speak pleasure" and asserts that in *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes creates a "difficult (because supposedly inexpressible, apparently ineffable) achievement, an *erotics of reading*" (PT viii).³ In his 1977-1978 Collège de France lecture course on "The Neutral," his notes for which were published as *The Neutral* in 2002, Barthes chooses his vacation home library as the source for the readings through which he will describe his desire for the Neutral. This seemingly arbitrary library of intertexts constitutes "a place-time where the loss in methodological rigor is compensated for by the intensity and the *pleasure of free reading* [my emphasis]" (9). In each case, emotional states serve as the basis for critical interpretation.

Camera Lucida (1980) takes a different culturally circumscribed affect as its subject matter—grief. Barthes embraces pleasure and boredom (even considering one a type of the other), and love and mourning as ignored or unthinkable discourses and positions them as intelligible sites of meaning production. For Barthes, weariness and grief specifically, are affects rendered unintelligible by society. In *The Neutral*, Barthes identifies weariness as "an intensity," but asserts, "society doesn't recognize intensities" (TN 18). Society discourages the expression of intense affects, especially those construed as ineffectual. In terms of grief, society "codifies mourning in order to assimilate it: after a few weeks, society will reclaim its rights, will no longer accept

³ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973). Page references follow the abbreviation *PT* in the text.

mourning as a state of exception [. . .] Today the right to mourning [is] very reduced—right to mourning: to be inscribed in the social claims (utopias?): sick leave for pregnancy, for mourning . . .” (TN 17). Society makes specific expressions of grief intelligible in order to control them. Barthes chafes at such restrictions on intense feelings, frequently choosing them as his object of study.

In *Mourning Diary*, the recently published text of the diary Barthes began keeping after his mother’s death until nearly his own (from 1977-1979), he writes of the intensity and duration of the non-productive emotions experienced in his state of mourning: “The *measurement* of mourning. (Dictionary, Memorandum): eighteen months for mourning a father, a mother [Barthes’s emphasis]” (19). This entry highlights the arbitrariness of the length of time society (represented by the dictionary, an agreed-upon authority that exists to codify meaning) will recognize feelings of grief, a duration that bears little relationship to the feelings experienced by the subject. Yet Barthes sees a paradoxically productive core to intensely weak, non-productive, or neutral affects writing, “Weariness is thus creative, from the moment, perhaps, when one agrees to submit to its orders” (TN 20). Such Neutral affects can be generative as well as paralyzing. A meditation on mourning, *Camera Lucida*’s genesis is noted in a 1978 diary entry: “My haste (constantly verified in recent weeks) to regain the freedom (now rid of delays) of getting to work on the book about Photography, in other words, to integrate my suffering with my writing. Belief and, apparently, verification that writing transforms for me the

various ‘stases’ of affect, dialectizes my ‘crises’” (*MD* 105).⁴ Here Barthes aligns his feelings of intense grief with inactivity, stasis, but also ascribes generative capabilities to them—they allow the production of writing. The “weak” affects Barthes describes as figures of the Neutral share these qualities: they are intense feelings (though are not recognized by society as such) with a long duration, which seem ineffectual because they are not associated with action or (re)production. They also, paradoxically, are generative in the sense that they “baffle” paradigms through their suspension of conflict. In other words, they accomplish something by accomplishing nothing for a long period of time. In *Camera Lucida*, intense feelings of grief form the basis for a new epistemology after Barthes grew weary and frustrated with available interpretive practices that failed to offer a viable method for addressing intense, weak emotions. This mode of affective reading and the affirmation of the critical efficacy of such practice permeates Barthes’s late works. This focus renders Barthes a particularly compelling figure for the reading of desire and loss.

Barthes provides us with a way of thinking about affect and desire through a formalist approach that privileges aesthetics and accounts for the role of narrative structure and its relationship to temporality. In this, Barthes’s work on the concept of “the Neutral,” one that he continually revisited and revised in myriad formations throughout his work, from *Writing Degree Zero* in 1953 to *Camera Lucida* in 1980, holds particular promise as a reading

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary* (October 26, 1977-September 15, 1979). Page references follow the abbreviation *MD* in the text.

practice. Barthes defines the Neutral as “that which outplays {*déjoue*} the paradigm, or rather I call the Neutral everything that baffles the paradigm. For I am not trying to define a word; I am trying to name a thing: I gather under a name, which here is the Neutral” (TN 6). For Barthes, the desire for the Neutral is the desire to suspend the meaning-producing conflict between two oppositional terms (or subjects, or bodies, etc.). An early example he provides is the case of grammar in languages which have only masculine and feminine nouns, where a neuter (neutral) third term would destabilize the masculine/feminine binary that requires a choice and produces meaning—the word must be one or the other in order to be intelligible as a concept (things that are masculine cannot be feminine and vice versa, thus we know the essential property of both is an exclusion from the other). The desire for the Neutral is the desire to temporally suspend such a choice or conflict; a desire that Barthes acknowledges might be impossible.

For Barthes, locating the figure of the Neutral constituted a mode of “looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time” (TN 8).⁵ With this statement, Barthes assigns a political potential and ethical sensibility to the Neutral, any third term that destabilizes or “baffles” an oppositional binary or paradigm, thus upsetting both conventional meanings and ways of making meaning (TN 6). Barthes used the figure of the Neutral to articulate an ethics of living guided by pleasure and nuance, and a corresponding reading practice rooted in affect. Barthes describes the “non-

⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*. Page references follow the abbreviation TN in the text.

progressive” affects I’ve touched upon, including anxiety, weariness, and boredom, among others, as figures of the Neutral. These feelings and the thoughts and behaviors that accompany them (silence, retreat, and oscillation, to name a few) signify a stalled cultural narrative. They are the paradoxical feelings with the potential to evacuate meaning from dominant paradigms. Barthes sees a potential to disrupt or unsettle progress narratives in the dilatory affects he aligns with the Neutral.

Affects associated with the Neutral are both passive and intense; boredom becomes a type of “hysteria” and weariness has an intensity to it in his readings of “weak” affect. He notes that the passive (in)action he associates with the Neutral is not positively received: “everywhere in the *doxa* the Neutral has a bad press: the images of the Neutral are depreciative. Each bad image is locked into a bad adjective” (TN 69). Barthes lists these “bad adjectives” as “thankless,” “shirking,” “muffled,” “limp,” “indifferent,” and “vile”—all adjectives that can also be applied to the teenage protagonists in the novels I examine (TN 69-72). Similarly, Ngai argues that ugly feelings “can be described as ‘semantically’ negative, in the sense that they are saturated with socially stigmatizing meanings and values (such as the ‘pettiness’ one traditionally associates with envy); and as ‘syntactically’ negative, in the sense that they are organized by trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction, by phobic strivings ‘away from’ rather than philic strivings ‘toward’” (11). What I refer to as “neutral” affects then are not neutral in the sense that they have neither positive nor negative connotations, but rather in the Barthesian sense of the Neutral as a disruption with intensity

and duration. Thus in noting that anxiety, for example, is often considered a “weak” affect as it is not an emotion that leads to swift physical, political, or narrative action, I am also arguing that the sheer duration of a bout of anxiety itself performs the action of delaying action. In other words, these feelings that do not appear to do very much politically or otherwise are actually performing the work of narrative stalling. Barthes’s work on the Neutral and his oeuvre in general thus provides a useful lens through which to view the recent turn to affect in literary theory, a turn which significantly finds much of its force in contemporary feminist and queer theory, as I discuss in the final section of this introduction.

Throughout his oeuvre, Barthes moves from discussing figures of the Neutral as objective, “innocent” writing that exists in absence, in negative space, or as a pure mathematical equation or algorithm in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) to positioning it as the impossibly messy space that unsettles binaries and destabilizes meaning—the structural third term that “baffles paradigms” and becomes both a site for and source of pleasure in his 1977 lecture series. Barthes’s shifting methodologies, both in sync with theoretical movements of the time and otherwise, were a result of a constant search for the ineffable, for the utopic alternative to currently understood or fashionable ways of creating, experiencing, and expressing meaning. Locating this hypothetical space of the Neutral was an enduring objective of Barthes’s work. In his experimental autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), he writes:

Evidently he dreams of a world which would be *exempt from meaning* (as one is from military service). This began with *Writing Degree Zero*,

in which is imagined 'the absence of every sign' [. . .] Yet for him, it is not a question of recovering a pre-meaning, an origin of the world, of life, of facts, anterior to meaning, but rather to imagine a post-meaning: one must traverse, as though the length of an initiatic way, the whole meaning, in order to be able to extenuate it, to exempt it. (87)

The next section explores the ways a desire for the Neutral permeates many of Barthes's texts in order to show the usefulness of the concept for reading the relationship of affect to narrative temporality. Tracing Barthes's recursive reflections on the figure of the Neutral in its myriad constructions through several key texts including *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), *Elements of Semiology* (1964), "The Grain of the Voice" (1972), *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), and *The Neutral* (1978) with recourse to several interviews given by Barthes and collected in *The Grain of the Voice* (1981) allows a fuller understanding of the Neutral's relationship to temporality. In the last section, I focus on *A Lover's Discourse* and *Camera Lucida* to show how the temporal qualities of the Neutral as related to certain affects, and in conjunction with contemporary queer theory related to these concepts, provides a useful theoretical framework for my readings of queer desire and narrative in *Lolita*, *Native Son*, and *The Member of the Wedding*.

Mapping the Neutral: 1953-1980

Barthes's desire for the Neutral first emerges in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), his response to Sartre's 1947 work, *What is Literature?*, where the Neutral is named "zero-degree writing," which is writing "basically in the indicative mood, or if you like, amodal" or a "transparent form of speech"

(WDZ 76, 77).⁶ Zero-degree writing exists outside of ideology (or mythology in Barthes's parlance), "it achieves a style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style; writing is then reduced to a sort of negative mood in which the social or mythical characters of a language are abolished in favour of a neutral and inert state of form" (WDZ 77). Barthes briefly summarizes the trajectory of the history he means to trace, with its emphasis on semiotics and linguistics, from inception to the envisioning of a "utopia of language" (or the logical end of said trajectory) predicated on the (im)possibility of escaping an existing literary sign system:

From an initial non-existence in which thought, by a happy miracle, seemed to stand out against the backcloth of words, writing thus passed through all the stages of a progressive solidification; it was first the object of a gaze, then of creative action, finally of murder, and has reached in our time a last metamorphosis, *absence*: in those neutral modes of writing, called here 'the zero degree of writing', we can easily discern a negative momentum, and an inability to maintain it within time's flow, as if Literature, having tended for a hundred years now to transmute its surface into a form with no antecedents, could no longer find purity anywhere but in the absence of all signs, finally proposing the realization of this Orphean dream: a writer without Literature [my emphasis]. (WDZ 5)

In this passage, writing comes into existence because it is capable of being the

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953). Page references follow the abbreviation WDZ in the text.

passive receptor of action—another’s gaze, the figural victim of murder. As object, it receives the action of the subject, yet when writing-as-object eventually reverses this trend toward solidification, erasing its antecedents, it begins to disappear, moving backwards into an erasure of presence, into the void of its origins. The Neutral shares a close relationship with temporality—it is always the province of a moment, unsustainable and destined to be rewritten as history. The “negative momentum” Barthes describes here characterizes the potential of neutral writing to hinder the forward movement of narrative and, I argue, stymie progress narratives. For Barthes the Neutral is not passive, it “doesn’t refer to ‘impressions’ of grayness, of ‘neutrality,’ of indifference. The Neutral—my Neutral—can refer to intense, strong, unprecedented states. ‘to outplay the paradigm’ is an ardent, burning activity” (TN 7).⁷ Thus while affects such as boredom or anxiety are passive in nature, they perform the paradoxically active behavior of disrupting dominant paradigms. Barthes seems to envision a writing that moves from something to nothing, but sees this as a *significant* nothing as he clarifies in *Elements of Semiology*: “The second problem arising in connection with privative opposition is that of the unmarked term. It is called the *zero degree* of the opposition. The zero degree is therefore not a total absence (this is a common

⁷ The link between *Writing Degree Zero* and *The Neutral* has not gone uncommented upon. Barthes himself answers the question, “What have you become in relation to the author of *Writing Degree Zero*?” in a 1974 interview by stating, “I will say that I don’t think I’ve changed much. I love and comment on the same things, the same values that appeared in *Writing Degree Zero*: language, literature, and that very notion of ‘degree zero’ which refers to the utopia of a lifting of signs, an exemption from meaning, an indivision of language, a transparency of social relations” (GV 194-195).

mistake), *it is a significant absence*. We have here a pure differential state; the zero degree testifies to the power held by any system of signs, of creating meaning ‘out of nothing’ [Barthes’s emphasis]” (77). “Zero” operates here as a placeholder—an absence with meaning.

Just as Barthes claims that zero-degree writing exists in the absence of signs in *Writing Degree Zero*, in *The Neutral* he asserts: “the Neutral is the shedding of meaning: all ‘planning’ (thematic grouping) on the Neutral would fatally lead to an opposition between the Neutral and arrogance, that is, to reconstituting the very paradigm that the Neutral wants to baffle: the Neutral would become discursively the term of an antithesis: in displaying itself, it would consolidate the meaning it wanted to dissolve” (TN 12). This is exactly what happens to the Neutral—it reconstitutes paradigms by becoming part of one, only to fall again at the introduction of a new Neutral in a seemingly endless cycle. He writes, “The paradigm, what is that? It’s the opposition of two virtual terms from which, in speaking, I actualize one to produce meaning” (TN 6-7). Throughout his career, Barthes investigated the ways in which oppositional binaries and paradigms create meaning in language. In 1964, he wrote:

The internal arrangement of the terms in an associative or paradigmatic field is usually called—at least in linguistics, and more precisely, in phonology—an *opposition*. This is not a very good denomination, for on the one hand it presupposes too much the antonymic character of the paradigmatic relation (Cantineau would have preferred *relation*, and Hjelmslev *correlation*), and on the other hand, it seems to connote a

binary relation, about which there is no certainty that it is the foundation of all semiological paradigms. We shall, however, keep the word, since it is accepted [Barthes's emphasis]. (*ES* 73-74)⁸

He began to find such divisions, or the desire for them, pleasurable by 1975:

For a certain time, he went into raptures over binarism; binarism became for him a kind of erotic object. This idea seemed to him inexhaustible, he could never exploit it enough. That one might say everything *with only one difference* produced a kind of joy in him, a continuous astonishment. Since intellectual things resemble erotic ones, in binarism what delighted him was a figure. Later on he would find this (identical) figure again, in the opposition of values. What (in him) would deflect semiology was from the first the pleasure principle: a semiology which has renounced binarism no longer concerns him at all. (*RB* 51-52)⁹

In 1977, he makes the disruption of paradigms the focus of his lecture course:

[A]ccording to the perspective of Saussure, to which, on this matter, I remain faithful, the paradigm is the wellspring of meaning; where there is meaning, there is paradigm, and where there is paradigm (opposition), there is meaning → elliptically put: meaning rests on conflict (the choice of one term against another), and all conflict is generative of meaning: to choose *one* and refuse the *other* is always a

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (1964). Page references follow the abbreviation *ES* in the text.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975). Page references follow the abbreviation *RB* in the text.

sacrifice made to meaning, to produce meaning, to offer it to be consumed [Barthes's emphasis]. (TN 7)

Barthes displays a fascination with the ways in which paradigms create meaning within language and with the possibility that a neutral third term could temporarily delay the choice demanded by an either/or proposition, which would both reaffirm the system (since the essential paradox is that one cannot upset binaries without simultaneously affirming the existence of said binaries to begin with and simply reinscribe them), and briefly transcend it. Barthes's desire for the Neutral is the desire to identify a concept that would constitute language and meaning by existing outside of language and meaning.

The figure of the Neutral, or the desire for the impossibility of the Neutral, inhabits different formulations at different points in Barthes's work. Always transient and amorphous, the Neutral can be most clearly glimpsed behind the following terms: "zero-degree" in *Writing Degree Zero*, "Bliss/jouissance" in *The Pleasure of the Text*, "the grain of the voice" in the essay of the same name, and "punctum" or "time" in *Camera Lucida* (though these last two terms become slippery). All of these concepts are, of course, not equivalent, nor do they reference the same thing, but they exist as multiple representations of the same desire.

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes elaborates on his notion of a significant absence and the way such an absence is, in a sense, unlocatable. Since it can represent both the beginning and the end—pre-origin and post-destruction—it does not exist at a fixed point in linear, narrative time. *The*

Pleasure of the Text is in many ways one of Barthes's most elusive texts: its self-reflexivity confounds, its paradoxes and contradictions abound, its deceptively neat binaries ensnare, its erotics both create and disavow desire, and its subject matter—hedonism—is intellectually suspect. The work's twin key concepts are "pleasure" (*plaisir*) and "bliss" (*jouissance*). The text conflates these terms from the beginning, acknowledging in a parenthetical:

"*Pleasure/Bliss*: terminologically, there is always a vacillation—I stumble, I err. In any case, there will always be a margin of indecision; the distinction will not be the source of absolute classifications, the paradigm will falter, the meaning will be precarious, revocable, reversible, the discourse incomplete" (*PT* 4). Thus the reader is specifically warned not to view the categories of "pleasure" and "jouissance" as separate, stable, definable, or even intelligible, yet the text seduces us into doing so through Barthes's contradictory examples of each term and the ways he consciously positions the terms within unstable paradigms in order to continually disassemble and reinscribe them.¹⁰ The frequently contradictory categorization of texts of pleasure and bliss reveal glimpses of the Neutral at work, since the potential for encountering the Neutral exists wherever paradigms (particularly unstable paradigms) are erected.

¹⁰ In a 1975 *Le Magazine littéraire* interview, Barthes speaks to the artificiality of his pleasure/bliss distinction: "The opposition 'pleasure/bliss' is one of those voluntarily artificial oppositions for which I've always had a certain predilection. I've often tried to create such oppositions: for example, between *écriture* and *écriture*, 'denotation' and 'connotation.' These oppositions shouldn't be taken literally; for example, by asking if such and such a text belongs to the order of pleasure or of bliss. These oppositions are intended

With his caveat about not expecting “absolute classifications” firmly in place, Barthes offers the following “split”:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories brings to a crisis his relation with language. (PT 14)

As a result of this formulation, many critics parallel Barthes’s pleasure/bliss formulation with the readerly/writerly division he posits in *S/Z*: the traditional, readerly text, which imparts its (pre-determined) meaning to the reader brings pleasure whereas the avant-garde, postmodern, writerly text, which relies on the reader for the creation of a multiplicity of meanings, brings the reader bliss.¹¹ Such a neat divide also seems to parallel a pleasure/bliss binary with Barthes’s doxa/paradoxa binary where those traditional, pleasurable texts represent doxa (bourgeois ideology, public opinion) and texts of bliss are the paradoxa (that which confounds doxa). These comparisons are imperfect, however, for the text of bliss is repeatedly aligned with the loss of self, the significant absences created by the reader that

above all to clear more ground, to make headway—just to talk and to write” (GV 206).

¹¹ In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes upsets this readerly/writerly binary with the addition of a third term: “the receivable,” another figure of the Neutral (RB 118). The “receivable” text would be “unreadable” and “would

structure the text—a void that possesses an unsustainable temporality. If we understand the relationship between pleasure and bliss as a binary, then the Neutral would figure as any occurrence that disrupts or disturbs this paradigm (which could include a term that combines pleasure and bliss, or one that is neither pleasure nor bliss). The difficulty lies in the fact that pleasure/bliss is not an *oppositional* binary. These are not mutually exclusive categories; this binary does not produce the conflict that making an either/or choice does and therefore does not produce meaning within Barthes's structural framework. Under such a system, the paradigm could more provocatively be expressed as: pleasure/displeasure with *jouissance* (bliss) acting as the third, disruptive term—functioning as the Neutral.¹² This is similar to the way Barthes illustrates the concept of the Neutral in terms of color in *The Neutral*, positioning gray as the unmarked term standing in opposition to black and white as the marked binary. If pleasure and displeasure are known values, then *jouissance*, in its unknowability and unattainability becomes the unmarked term. It possesses the “shimmer” of the desire for the Neutral.

Barthes's assertion that the text of bliss provokes an intense state of boredom resonates with his description of intense neutral affects as figures of the Neutral. Boredom as an affect is defined in part by duration and inaction, as to be bored is to have nothing to do for a period of time. Boredom causes a

require the following response: I can neither read nor write what you produce, but I *receive* it, like a fire, a drug, an enigmatic disorganization” (RB 118).

¹² One way of seeing the Neutral more clearly is to remember that bliss *can* be a figure of the Neutral, but is not always positioned in such a way.

discontentment associated with an inability or refusal to act or to progress. Boredom is an intense form of waiting for some external stimulation to alleviate the mental condition that allows for its existence. Barthes describes the Neutral as a state of bodily awareness, as “kinesthesia,” the “shimmering state of the active and affected body” (TN 73, 228n25). It is the bodily state of experiencing intense feeling without engaging in physical action. The Neutral is “*to pathos* = what one feels, as opposed to what one does [. . .] *to pathos*: in the neutral: both active and affected: withdrawn from the will-to-act but not from ‘passion’” (TN 73). The text of bliss creates a state of disaffectedness in the reader because the state is intensely discomfiting. The text of pleasure is comfortable precisely because it does not disrupt familiar, knowable cultural norms and narratives. The affects associated with the text of pleasure are positive: euphoria, contentment, happiness, fulfillment, while those associated with bliss/*jouissance* are intensely neutral or vaguely negative due to the upsetting disruption of cultural narratives. The text of bliss/*jouissance* causes discomfort, unease, and feelings of loss, confusion, and boredom. None of these are intensely negative affects—there is no anger or shame—they are passive states that occupy the temporal moment that occurs between the disruption of one cultural narrative or paradigm and its reabsorption into the next. Anger, in fact, is precisely the type of strong affect that Barthes excludes from the category of the Neutral: “Mythologically, the Neutral is associated with a weak, unmarked ‘state’ (*pathos*). It breaks away from, is distanced by every strong, marked, emphatic state (which is, by the same token, allied with ‘virility’) → *anger* is an example of a strong state of marked *pathos*: it functions

perfectly as an anti-Neutral" (TN 74). The Neutral is associated with weak affect and occurs in the moment of confusion that takes place between receiving and processing new information into a dominant narrative that supplants the previous one. The Neutral is an unsustainable interruption.

Barthes places the text of bliss within the realm of paradox stating, "With the writer of bliss (and his reader) begins the untenable text, the impossible text. This text is outside pleasure, outside criticism, *unless it is reached through another text of bliss*: you cannot speak 'on' such a text, you can only speak 'in' it, *in its fashion*, enter into a desperate plagiarism, hysterically affirm the void of bliss (and no longer obsessively repeat the letter of pleasure) [Barthes's emphasis]" (PT 22). Here, once again, bliss is described as a "void" that can only be imitated, but never discussed. The text of bliss is unintelligible to an extent: "The text of bliss should be on the side of a certain illegibility. It should unsettle us, not only on the level of our imagination, but on the level of language itself" (GV 207). As a figure of the desire for the Neutral—a desire that might be impossible—bliss upsets the linguistic binaries that create meaning within language. Barthes asks, "How can a text, which consists of language, be outside languages? How *exteriorize* the world's jargons without taking refuge in an ultimate jargon wherein the others would simply be reported, recited?" (PT 30). Barthes seems to face the same quandary faced by zero-degree writing in *Writing Degree Zero*. He first envisions the potential of neutral writing: "If the writing is really neutral, and if language, instead of being a cumbersome and recalcitrant act, reaches the state of a pure equation, which is no more tangible than an algebra when it

confronts the innermost part of man, then Literature is vanquished, the problematics of mankind is uncovered and presented without elaboration, the writer becomes irretrievably honest" (WDZ 78). Yet he then acknowledges if not the impossibility of achieving it, at least the unsustainability of its presence:

Unfortunately, nothing is more fickle than a colourless writing; mechanical habits are developed in the very place where freedom existed, a network of set forms hem in more and more the pristine freshness of discourse, a mode of writing appears afresh in lieu of an indefinite language. The writer, taking his place as a 'classic', becomes the slavish imitator of his original creation, society demotes his writing to a mere manner, and returns him a prisoner to his own formal myths. (WDZ 78)

Thus Neutral writing is not "innocent" of ideology or doxa or history forever. If a writer is able to achieve a colorless, organic style, it soon becomes codified and brought into cultural discourse.¹³

The connections between the descriptions of neutrality in *Writing Degree Zero* and *The Pleasure of the Text* are striking. Barthes concludes *Writing Degree Zero* with a utopic fantasy of the Neutral where "The writers of today [. . .] search for a non-style or an oral style, for a zero level or a spoken level of writing is, all things considered, the anticipation of a homogeneous social state; most of them understand that there can be no universal language

¹³ Jonathan Culler refers to this state of events as a "semiotic law: neutralization becomes a style and signifies" (*Spiralling* 112).

outside a concrete, and no longer a mystical or merely nominal universality of society” (WDZ 87). Similarly, Barthes notes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “There is only one way left to escape the alienation of present-day society: *to retreat ahead of it*: every old language is immediately compromised, and every language becomes old once it is repeated [. . .] Confronting it, the New is bliss (Freud: ‘In the adult, novelty always constitutes the condition for orgasm’) [Barthes’s emphasis]” (PT 40-41). While Barthes locates bliss in absence and in encounters with the new, he also correlates the bliss found in absence with its opposite—excess:

[T]o repeat excessively is to enter into loss, into the zero of the signified [. . .] In short, the word can be erotic on two opposing conditions, both excessive: if it is extravagantly repeated, or on the contrary, if it is unexpected, succulent in its newness [. . .] In both cases, the same physics of bliss, the groove, the inscription, the syncope: what is hollowed out, tamped down, or what explodes, detonates. (PT 41-42)

Here Barthes counts acts of repetition and surprise—the expected and routine as well as the unanticipated—as “excessive.” Reading the text of bliss/jouissance as a figure of the Neutral reveals both absence and excess as serving the purpose of disruption and, significantly, delay—a temporal intervention. These states are correlated with the neutral affect surprise.¹⁴ An “Addendum to *The Pleasure of the Text*” appears in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* and clarifies this point: “Bliss is not what *corresponds to* desire (what

¹⁴ I discuss surprise as a neutral affect in relation to Sedgwick’s work on Silvan Tomkins in the last section of this introduction.

satisfies it) but what surprises, exceeds, disturbs, deflects it" (112). Thus the relationship between bliss and desire is that the text of bliss performs the work of the Neutral in its upsets, surprises, and bafflements that suspend the production of meaning.

This discussion of bliss (*jouissance*) as a figure of the Neutral leads us to what initially seems to be the resolution offered at the conclusion of *The Pleasure of the Text*: "the grain of the voice." First articulated in his 1972 essay, "The Grain of the Voice," Barthes here refers to the utopic notion of "an aesthetic of textual pleasure," which would involve "writing aloud": "This vocal writing (which is nothing like speech) is not practiced, but it is doubtless what Artaud recommended and what Sollers is demanding. Let us talk about it as though it existed" (*PT* 66).¹⁵ This mode of writing has a texture, a materiality to it, it "allow[s] for the corporeal exteriorization of discourse":

Writing aloud is not expressive; it leaves expression to the pheno-text, to the regular code of communication; it belongs to the geno-text¹⁶, to

¹⁵ Of course, "talking" about this non-practiced writing brings "it" into a type of existence, and Barthes uses the verb "talk," referring to a specifically oral mode of communication, even though he is specifically *not* "talking," but writing about it—both slight paradoxes staged knowingly in service of his argument.

¹⁶ In "The Grain of the Voice," Barthes classifies music by its two registers: its "pheno-song" and its "geno-song" (following Julia Kristeva's formulation of pheno-texts and geno-texts). The "pheno-song" is constituted in the symbolic. It includes, "all the features which belong to the structure of the language being sung" (182). The pheno-song offers no access to *jouissance*. In contrast, the "geno-song" "forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression [. . .] the *diction* of the language [author's emphasis]" (182-3). Ultimately, Barthes identifies geno-songs with writing: "The French are abandoning their language [. . .] as a space of pleasure, of thrill, a site where language works *for nothing*, that is, in perversion [author's emphasis]" ("GV" 187). The "grain," Barthes elaborates,

significance; it is carried not by dramatic inflections, subtle stresses, sympathetic accents, but by the *grain* of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language, and can therefore also be, along with diction, the substance of an art: the art of guiding one's body [. . .] the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language [Barthes's emphasis]. (PT 66-67)

Barthes distinguishes between experiencing the material body and occupying the realm of language. Questions of materiality become increasingly urgent to Barthes from this point in his work forward. Barthes hypothesized that the material body is a site different from, apart, beyond the sign system that constitutes language, straddling the line between the intelligible and the unintelligible. Likewise, "the thought of the Neutral is in fact a borderline thought, on the edge of language, on the edge of color, since it's about thinking the nonlanguage, the noncolor" (TN 52). The grain of the voice, in its ability to convey meaning outside of the expressiveness of language—through materiality alone—occupies the impossible space of the Neutral.

In what initially seems to be a confusing theoretical move, Barthes provides the cinema as an example of a site where the grain of the voice can be found:

[I]t suffices that the cinema capture the sound of speech *close up* (this is, in fact, the generalized definition of the 'grain' of writing) and make us hear in their materiality, their sensuality, the breath, the gutturals, the

has a distinct materiality: "The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs" ("GV" 188).

fleshiness of the lips, a whole presence of the human muzzle [. . .] to succeed in shifting the signified a great distance and in throwing, so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss [Barthes's emphasis]. (*PT* 67)

The use of cinema as an example, as opposed to theater, which has a more immediate connection to physical texture and material bodies seems odd in that film is image divorced from referent—the sound of the cinema is recorded, disembodied. Indeed, in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he notes:

The erotic function of the theater is not accessory, for the theater alone of all the figurative arts (cinema, painting) presents the bodies and not their representation. The body in the theater is at once contingent and essential, you cannot possess it (it is magnified by the prestige of nostalgic desire); contingent, you might, for you would merely need to be momentarily crazy (which is within your power) in order to jump onto the stage and touch what you desire. (*RB* 83-84)

Yet, Barthes explains a crucial difference: “The cinema, on the contrary, excludes by a fatality of Nature all transition to the act: here the image is the *irremediable* absence of the represented body [Barthes's emphasis]” (*RB* 84). Thus, that which is remarkable about film is the (often fetishized) *absences* it allows us to experience.¹⁷

¹⁷ In *The Imaginary Signifier*, Christian Metz identifies cinema as an “imaginary signifier” predicated on Lacanian notions of loss. For the cinema spectator, the process of viewing a film is that of encountering an essential lack or

Due to this “irremediable absence” of the material body, we hear the gap, the void, the disconnection between actor / image and vocalization: “what pleasure wants is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the *dissolve* which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss” (PT 7). The key, however, is that the grain of the voice (which is not exclusively cinematic) constitutes “bliss” through acts of nearly fetishistic interruption, division, delay, and orgasm, and the reader has already been directed to “recognize bliss wherever a disturbance occurs in amatory adjustment” (PT 25).¹⁸

Barthes’s affective critical posture towards music in “The Grain of the Voice” begins to show clear links to the Neutral as a reading (listening) practice:

I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic—but in no way

absence: “everything is *recorded* (as a memory trace which is immediately so, without having been something else before) . . . For it is the signifier itself, and as a whole, that is recorded, that is absence: a little rolled up perforated strip which ‘contains’ vast landscapes, fixed battles [. . .] and yet can be enclosed in the familiar round metal tin, of modest dimensions, clear proof that it does not ‘really’ contain all that” (43-44). Film, for Barthes, is *figurative* rather than directly representational: “the text itself, a diagrammatic and not an imitative structure, can reveal itself in the form of a body, split into fetish objects, into erotic sites. All these movements attest to a *figure* of the text, necessary to the bliss of reading. Similarly, and even more than the text, the film will *always* be figurative (which is why films are still worth making)—even if it represents nothing” (PT 56). Thus film always offers the possibility for bliss in its essential pleasurable fragmentation and presentation of fetishized loss.

¹⁸ Barthes frequently refers to certain processes of writing (fragmented, interrupted) and reading (skipping around, dipping in and out of the text) as fetishistic (and therefore pleasurable): “the fetishist[ic reader] would be matched with the divided-up text, the singling out of quotations, formulae, turns of phrase, with the pleasure of the word” (PT 63); “I’m content to read

‘subjective’ (it is not the psychological ‘subject’ in me who is listening; the climactic pleasure hoped for is not going to reinforce—to express—that subject but, on the contrary, to lose it). The evaluation will be made outside of any law, outplaying not only the law of culture but equally that of anticulture, developing beyond the subject all the value hidden behind “I like” or “I don’t like.” (“GV” 188)

Compare the description of this affective relationship to music with Barthes’s discussion of the Neutral, as previously discussed, where he describes it as “an affect” that “outplays {*déjoue*} the paradigm” and states: “The paradigm, what is that? It’s the opposition of two virtual terms from which, in speaking, I actualize one to produce meaning” (TN 6-7). The opposition of two virtual terms, the affective registers “I like” and the “I don’t like,” are disrupted by the relationship that seeks to experience “climactic pleasure” or *jouissance* through the loss or destruction of the subject. The desire for this visceral relationship between “I like” and “I don’t like” that potentially offers access to *jouissance* is the desire for the Neutral.

How then is one to speak of the impossible? To write outside of language and meaning? To identify or quantify the Neutral? Barthes resolves this quandary by writing not of the Neutral, but of his *desire for* the Neutral throughout his corpus. Barthes concludes *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* by answering a final question (displayed as an image of handwriting—a representation of linguistic expression, a reproduction of writing, a copy of a

the text in question, in a rather fetishistic way: writing down certain passages, moments, even words which have the power to move me” (GV 181).

copy): “What to write now? Can you still write anything?” with the answer, “One writes with one’s desire, and I am not through desiring,” thus affirming the generative force of the failure inherent in desire (np). Continually thwarted desire produces both writing and rewriting. Barthes’s (re)writing and (re)reading of desire offers queer theory an alternative reading of affect and narrative, an attention to an aesthetic of desire resulting from the ethical imperative of impossible desires to structure all the rest.

Barthes and Queer Theory

Barthes’s desire for the Neutral resonates with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s call for an alternative reading practice based on an examination of the role of affect in learning to think “nondualistically” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Both Barthes and Sedgwick wish to question forms of knowledge that spring from oppositional binaries and identify “negative” and neutral affects as potential loci of new epistemologies and pedagogies. Sedgwick calls for a “reparative” reading practice (one contrary to the “paranoid” reading practices she describes) based on viewing the relationship to affect as the primary human response to stimuli (as opposed to a Freudian drive theory).¹⁹ Sedgwick describes “paranoid” critical reading practices as those that rely upon the drama of exposure. She argues that the “unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance of paranoia,” which “reparative” strategies serve to highlight and interrogate, is “paradoxically, a complex relation to temporality that burrows both backward and forward: because

there must be no bad surprises, and because learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be always already known" (130). This linking of emotions with narrative delay and repetition recalls the Neutral's concern with temporality. The Neutral exists, by its nature, in the creation of a temporary structural position during the brief moment between the destabilization of a meaning producing oppositional binary and its nearly instantaneous absorption into a new paradigmatic structure—the interrupting of a series of pure interruptions. In this sense, the Neutral relies upon narrative interruptions and suspensions both occasioned by and resulting from emotions. For Sedgwick, alternative "reparative" readings acknowledge the primacy of a different set of affects in relation to both "everyday knowledge and experience" and academic theory—a reading practice that might just as easily describe Barthes's privileging of a set of neutral affects in his work (*Touching Feeling* 144-5). While Sedgwick asks us to think outside of a framework that structures meaning and knowledge around notions of repression and prohibition, Barthes's corpus embraces contradiction and paradox—he wishes to "baffle paradigms," yet admittedly finds pleasure in locating and constructing artificial binaries (*TF* 8-9). Sedgwick does not look to move *beyond* current epistemologies, specifically situating her ideas "beside" other theories while Barthes explicitly expresses his desire to move beyond other ways of knowing. Barthes's goal is to use the figure of the Neutral to articulate a new ethics of living, and both he and

¹⁹ See chapter four in *Touching Feeling*, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About

Sedgwick desire a new reading practice that takes negative and/or neutral emotions into account.

The element of surprise paranoid readings attempt to circumvent and disavow is at the very heart of Barthes's *Neutral*. While Sedgwick invokes the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins on the uses of positive and negative affect, specifically the uses of shame, she does not make much of the affect Tomkins first described as positive, but later reclassified as neutral—surprise. Tomkins identified the brief moment of surprise (or startlement in its more intense form) as the neutral affect that operates as a precondition for all the others—positive and negative. This neutral affect functions as a kind of “reset” switch, a “circuit breaker” that momentarily suspends or interrupts any state of feeling and creates the possibility for a change in affect. Barthes's description of affects as figures of the *Neutral* works in much the same way. The *Neutral* creates the potential for change by subversively suspending meaning derived through paradigmatic substitution. Paranoid readings, on the other hand, reinscribe a logical, linear narrative trajectory through monolithic textual interpretations that do not account for pluralities (in the search for the truth of the text, interpretations are either right or wrong) and seek to subsume the *Neutral*'s uncertainties into new paradigms.

In terms of the political efficacy of affect, Sedgwick writes, “Shame interests me politically, then, because it generates and legitimates the place of identity—the question of identity—at the origin of the impulse to the performative, but does so without giving that identity space the standing of an

You” (124-151).

essence. It constitutes it as to-be-constituted, which is also to say, as already there for the (necessary, productive) misconstrual and misrecognition" (64). Sedgwick values the possibilities affect holds for constituting one's identity. She speaks to the specificity of shame as a productive, interpretive experience, attributing a foundational status to it as the affect that influences others (64). According to Sedgwick, while shame is traditionally seen in psychoanalytic terms as a negative affect or one which serves the purpose of maintaining social order and control, she argues "that at least for certain ('queer') people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that, as [Henry] James's example suggests, has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities" (64-65).

While Sedgwick's focus is largely on shame, Barthes's most compelling analyses describe the numerous and complex emotions that accompany mourning and love and offer examples of the desire for the Neutral as both a reading and a writing practice: *A Lover's Discourse* and *Camera Lucida*. In the chapters that follow, these works serve as a model for reading the relationship between affect and temporality in *Lolita*, *Native Son*, and *The Member of the Wedding*. The affects and emotional states represented in *A Lover's Discourse* and *Camera Lucida* work to delay the realization and acceptance of the now absent other. *A Lover's Discourse* is a text whose existence is predicated upon the lover's solitude in the absence of the loved one. In it, Barthes rejects doxa's (society's) assignment of a linear narrative progression to the ubiquitous "love story," which assigns it a narrative with a predefined beginning, middle, end,

and satisfactory moral that serves to curb the intense, chaotic feelings associated with being in love. As an alternative, Barthes offers a depiction of the lover's unruly discourse in his fragmented text. The externally imposed social narrative transforms the lover's discourse into "a painful, morbid crisis of which he must be cured, which he must 'get over' ('It develops, grows, causes suffering, and passes away' in the fashion of some Hippocratic disease): the love story (the 'episode,' the 'adventure') is the tribute the lover must pay to the world in order to be reconciled with it" (7). Barthes's text, however, affirms a different lover's discourse. It translates the disorganized, random fragments of a non-linear, disavowed or invisible mode of being normally subjugated to the linear narrative of the universal love story into the form of non-linear text.

A Lover's Discourse is formally constructed of fragments that present individual arguments placed in alphabetical order so as to confound narrative logic: "the figures are non-syntagmatic, non-narrative; they are Erinyes; they stir, collide, subside, return, vanish with no more order than the flight of mosquitoes. Amorous *dis-cursus* is not dialectical; it turns like a perpetual calendar, an encyclopedia of affective culture" (7). The text mimics the affects and emotional states of the inaction it describes: waiting, anxiety, hiding, embarrassment, jealousy, languor, silence, and solitude, in its starts, stops, and stutters. The discourse of the lover is itself not without narrative, but it finds this narrative paradoxically constituted by its resistance to linearity. This paradox—the ways interruptions and delays serve to constitute the very narrative they aim to hinder—is also a foundational component of the

Neutral. These suspensions of meaning or delays of narrative conclusions and certainties stem from a “manipulation of absence” within the text: “This staging of language postpones the other’s death: a very short interval, we are told, separates the time during which the child still believes his mother to be absent and the time during which he believes her to be already dead. To manipulate absence is to extend this interval, to delay as long as possible the moment when the other might topple sharply from absence into death” (*LD* 16). Various tactics of narrative delay serve as formal manifestations of the absent other whose disappearance from or invisibility within the text provides the occasion for discourse while suspending narrative progress.

The desire for the Neutral is not concerned with assigning an importance to affect, but rather insists upon an affirmation that certain types of affect matter, specifically those that accompany this paradoxical inactive movement. Grief has a duration and an intensity, but these are qualities achieved through delay—through a resistance to the certainty of death. This resistance is only recognized by society for a short period of time. Likewise, the lover adopts the societal imposition of a progressive, linear narrative onto the experience of actively loving another in order to gain a cultural intelligibility. The love story, or narrated version of the experience, does not care about the passive state of being the loved object or the aimless drift that knows no end point and characterizes the experience of being in love. In their socially defined, progressive narrative states, the tortured lover and the grief-stricken mourner must “get over it,” preferably sooner rather than later. Those who resist this tightly structured cultural narrative face, at best,

pathologization and, at worst, unintelligibility. In the face of such strictures, Barthes's work on the Neutral applies structuralist principles to denigrated emotional states of being. The terms assigned to affects that resist or hinder progressive narratives are nearly always deprecatory and serve to code them as unfavorable emotional positions to occupy. Anxiety is the state of perpetual waiting or anticipation; laziness is that of non-productivity; weariness stalls through its slow movement. While some or all of these may, in fact, be pleasurable experiences, they are all viewed as negative within a culture that values progress and continual reproduction. The Neutral affirms those affects associated with non-progressiveness and failure as essential to the experience of desire and pleasure and, ultimately, the desire for the *jouissance* that constitutes the Symbolic in its exclusion from it.

Barthes describes his growing sense of frustration at not possessing the right analytical tools for his chosen emotional object of study in *Camera Lucida*: "this disorder and this dilemma, revealed by my desire to write on Photography, corresponded to a discomfort I had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical [. . .] I was bearing witness to the only sure thing that was in me (however naïve it might be): a desperate resistance to any reductive system" (8). Disavowing accepted critical language (just as he had disavowed accepted critical objects of study in *The Pleasure of the Text* and *A Lover's Discourse*), Barthes articulates a critical, affective reading practice as a new means of approaching those texts that bring us individualistic, subjective pleasure. Barthes writes, "[I was] determined to be guided by the

consciousness of my feelings" (CL 10). His methodology in the first part of the work is clear: "my phenomenology agreed to compromise with a power, *affect*; affect was what I didn't want to reduce; being irreducible, it was thereby what I wanted, what I ought to reduce the Photograph *to*; but could I retain an affective intentionality, a view of the object which was immediately steeped in desire, repulsion, nostalgia, euphoria?" (21). Barthes identifies a critical void and seeks to fill it: "Classical phenomenology, the kind I had known in my adolescence (and there has not been any other since), had never, so far as I could remember, spoken of desire or of mourning" (CL 21).²⁰

Barthes creates a new terminology (to complement his new reading practice) with which to speak of the effect of certain photographs upon him. He refers to the "studium" of a photograph as that which gives it its cultural intelligibility²¹, its "average affect," while the "punctum" is that which ruptures or punctures the studium by virtue of the effect it has on the spectator: "The *studium* is of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*; it mobilizes a half desire, a demi-volition; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds 'all right'" (CL 26-27). Such a division allows Barthes to become a resistant reader in his deliberate disregard for a photograph's "intent" or its studium, caring only for its punctum: "I am primitive, a child—or a maniac; I

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980). Page references follow the abbreviation *CL* in the text.

²¹ "To recognize the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself, for

dismiss all knowledge all culture, I refuse to inherit anything from another eye than my own" (CL 51). In reading for the punctum—reading for affective response—Barthes desires a way to remove himself from culture and its attendant mythologies.²² The punctum functions as a figure of the Neutral when Barthes discusses its reliance on serendipity, on its dependence upon the photograph's capture of a specific, unsustainable "right moment," which he describes as "the *kairos* of desire" (CL 59). Barthes also uses "Kairos" as a figure of the Neutral in his lectures: "*Ho kairos* = right, appropriate measure. Appropriate, timely moment, opportunity [. . .] The idea is useful to signal the asystematic character of the Neutral: → its relation to occasion, contingency, conjuncture, extemporizing" (TN 169). The punctum, as a figure

culture (from which the *studium* derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers" (CL 28).

²² *Camera Lucida* at first seems to present us with another binary: studium/punctum, but we soon realize that we have another false paradigm similar to *The Pleasure of the Text*'s pleasure/bliss divide. While the studium represents cultural intelligibility, the punctum is not the opposite: cultural unintelligibility—for it aspires to exist *outside* of culture entirely: "Absolute subjectivity is achieved only in a state, an effort, of silence (shutting your eyes is to make the image speak in silence). The photograph touches me if I withdraw it from its usual blah-blah: 'Technique,' 'Reality,' 'Reportage,' 'Art,' etc.: to say nothing, to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness" (CL 55). It is the ineffable, unknowable, unnamable, for which we have no system to render it intelligible. It disrupts—punctures, not unerotically, the surface of culture and its mythologies: "What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance" (51). The punctum here functions as another form of the desire for the Neutral as that which disturbs and disrupts. The punctum is variable and shifting, and always personal to the individual experiencing it: "it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*" (55). "[T]he *punctum* could accommodate a certain latency (but never any scrutiny)" (53). The punctum contains a certain excess, it "is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see" (59).

of the Neutral, offers us a transient “kairos of desire.”

Barthes establishes the basis of his reading practice in the first half of *Camera Lucida*, only to upend it in part two: “I had not discovered the nature (the *eidos*) of Photography. I had to grant that my pleasure was an imperfect mediator, and that a subjectivity reduced to its hedonist project could not recognize the universal,” yet Barthes maintains that the answers he seeks are located deep within himself and turns to personal photographs in search of the universal (60). In a photograph depicting his mother as a child that he examines after her death, Barthes discovers that that specific photograph “was indeed essential, it achieved for me, utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*” (CL 71). Using this photograph of his mother, Barthes “decided to ‘derive’ all Photography (its ‘nature’) from the only photograph which assuredly existed for me, and to take it somehow as a guide for my last investigation” (73). Barthes’s desire for an affective reading practice in this work shapes itself through the temporality of the narrative in which it is constructed:

At the time (at the beginning of the book: already far away) when I was inquiring into my attachment to certain photographs, I thought I could distinguish a field of cultural interest (the *studium*) from that unexpected flash which sometimes crosses this field and which I called the *punctum*. I now know that there exists another *punctum* (another ‘stigmatum’) than the ‘detail.’ This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (‘*that-has-been*’), its pure representation. (CL 95-96)

The desire for the Neutral changes shape from one half of Barthes's book to the other. It is both the detail that disrupts (the first punctum—one of form) as well as a state of intensity, the very essence of photography for Barthes—the pure representation of Time.

Barthes records the relationship between his experience of grief and time throughout his diary. At one point he writes, "(How) long everything becomes without her" (MD 202). At another he remarks, "What I find utterly terrifying is mourning's *discontinuous* character [Barthes's emphasis] (MD 67). Barthes eventually finds that his grief confounds the linear temporal narrative assigned to it by society. He does not grieve a little less each day until he's at last "over it," as he notes: "Explained to AC, in a monologue, how my distress is chaotic, erratic, whereby it resists the accepted—and psychoanalytic— notion of a mourning subject to time, becoming dialectical, wearing out, 'adapting.' Initially this mourning of mine has taken nothing away—on the other hand, it doesn't wear out in the slightest" (MD 71). Barthes recognizes both the paralyzing and generative aspects of his grief: "Not to suppress mourning (suffering) (the stupid notion that time will do away with such a thing) but to change it, transform it, to shift it from a static stage (stasis, obstruction, recurrences of the same thing) to a fluid state" (MD 142). He further finds that he constantly fears his mother's death even though it has already occurred: "I am suffering from *the fear of what has happened*" (MD 122) and that "At each 'moment' of suffering, I believe it to be the very one in which for the first time I *realize* my mourning. In other words: totality of intensity" [Barthes's emphasis] (MD 75). The temporality of mourning is

“chaotic,” intermittent, enduring, and always intense (MD 31). There comes a point when “it [death] is no longer an event, it is another *duration*, compressed, insignificant, not narrated, grim, without recourse: true mourning not susceptible to any narrative dialectic [Barthes’s emphasis]” (MD 50). This experience of grief as an emotional state that is intense, enduring, and simultaneously static and generative is repeatedly reflected in his course on the Neutral.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes locates the affective, universal reading of photography in its relationship to death: “It is because each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death that each one, however attached it seems to be to the excited world of the living, challenges each of us, one by one, outside of any generality (but not outside of any transcendence)” (CL 97). Such a relationship reaches its conclusion in the photograph’s reiteration of subjecthood:

Such would be the Photograph’s ‘fate’: by leading me to believe (it is true, one time out of how many?) that I have found what Calvino calls ‘the true total photograph,’ it accomplishes the unheard-of identification of reality (*that-has-been*) with truth (*‘there-she-is!’*); it becomes at once evidential and exclamative; it bears the effigy to that crazy point where affect (love, compassion, grief, enthusiasm, desire) is a guarantee of Being. It then approaches, to all intents, madness; it joins what Kristeva calls *‘la vérité folle.’* (CL 113)

Barthes still desires the Neutral, but here it is in the face of an intense emotional response to death. His grief over the death of his mother becomes

his affective response to the death he sees in every photograph regardless of the subject. The central question of *Camera Lucida* is ultimately and simply: What now? What is one to do when one can no longer trust old epistemologies and is left with only the certainty that “In the end, its [the Neutral’s] essential form is a protestation; it consists of saying: it matters little to me to know if God exists or not; but what I know and will know to the end is that He shouldn’t have simultaneously created love and death. The Neutral is this irreducible *No*: a *No* so to speak suspended in front of the hardenings of both faith and certitude and incorruptible by either one” (TN 14). *Camera Lucida* takes this question and builds from it an affective interpretive practice narrated from its origins through the construction of its methodology, through several formulations of the strategy at work. The work offers an example of a reading practice founded in affect (one that goes beyond “I like it/I don’t like it” readings), and one that has critical currency for contemporary queer theory in light of current work on queerness and affect.

The Neutral holds promise in its potential to “undo” language and culture. If we follow Barthes’s lead, an affective reading practice offers access to a new truth, but one that may deny us written expression—one located outside of language. Sedgwick similarly offers an epistemology that thinks intelligibility and subjectivity within a different, affective framework, and she also experiences the frustration of the inexpressible. In *Touching Feeling*, she writes of her feelings of identification with a photograph of sculpture artist Judith Scott. In this photograph, which appears on the front cover of her book, Sedgwick finds something akin to Barthes’s “truth” of Time in *Camera*

Lucida. The subject, Scott, creates meaning through art even though she “does not use language” (Scott is deaf and has down syndrome) (23). Sedgwick admires in Scott the “obvious fullness of her aesthetic consciousness, her stubbornly confident access to autotelic production, her artist’s ability to continue asking new, troubling questions of her materials that will be difficult and satisfying for them to answer” (24). Sedgwick reaffirms her own subjectivity through her identification with this photograph. She articulates her own artistic production by noting that Scott “convey[s] an affective and aesthetic fullness that can attach even to experiences of cognitive frustration. In writing this book I’ve continually felt pressed against the limits of my stupidity, even as I’ve felt the promising closeness of transmissible gifts” (24). In looking at this photograph, Sedgwick encounters that “crazy point” for Barthes “where affect (love, compassion, grief, enthusiasm, desire) is a guarantee of Being” (CL 113). Yet Sedgwick also articulates a desire to *become* Scott in some way—a desire for the intelligibility associated with “senile sublimity” (24). It is this desire for an intelligibility gained through material texture and affect that exists outside of language (for Scott’s process of making and experiencing meaning is located outside of language) that, paradoxically, allows us to write of it.

The Neutral provides an alternative to paranoid critical reading practices that rely upon the drama of exposing pre-determined, linear truths. We can see the Neutral at work in textual reflections of ineffectual actions that paradoxically constitute narrative through interruptions and delays. The Neutral offers the possibility of thinking and being outside normative cultural

narratives. This altered relationship to what Barthes would call doxa and the disruption of heteronormative binaries serves explicitly political ends in this passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*: “Who knows if this insistence on the plural is not a way of denying sexual duality? The opposition of the sexes must not be a law of Nature; therefore, the confrontations and paradigms must be dissolved, both the meanings and the sexes be pluralized” (69). He continues:

Similarly, *difference*, that much-vaunted and insistent word, prevails because it dispenses with or triumphs over conflict. Conflict is sexual, semantic; difference is plural, sensual, and textual; meaning and sex are principles of construction, of constitution; difference is the very movement of dispersion, of friability, a shimmer; what matters is not the discovery, in a reading of the world and of the self, of certain oppositions but of encroachments, overflows, leaks, skids, shifts, slips . . .” (69)

In its suspension of conflict, the Neutral dissolves the normative binaries of sex and heteronormativity. In rejecting narratives of progress and discovery, the Neutral asserts an atemporal trajectory that attempts to sidestep what Edelman describes as “the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism” in *No Future* (21). The Neutral offers up a queerness of affect and narrative through its desire to baffle heteronormative doxa. Thus the Neutral has much to say to contemporary queer and affect theory and offers a formal critical practice with the potential to make absences visible in those narrative pauses Neutral affects perpetuate by virtue of their failure to reproduce.

In her introduction to a 2007 *GLQ* special issue on “Queer Temporalities,” Elizabeth Freeman argues for a “porous” queer studies that “reimagine[s] ‘queer’ as a set of possibilities produced out of temporal and historical difference, or see[s] the manipulation of time as a way to produce both bodies and relationalities (or even nonrelationality),” claiming that redrawing such boundaries allows queer studies to engage in the process of being “shaped by and reshaping not only various disciplines but also the studies of race, nation, migration, and postcolony” (159). Freeman asserts that “one of the most obvious ways that sex meets temporality is in the persistent description of queerness as temporally backward, though paradoxically dislocated from any specific historical moment” and further notes:

Queer critics tend to identify the residual as specters, ghosts, or copies and to think of “production” in terms of culture rather than merely economics [. . .] These kinds of intellectual forays are histories not just of emotion but of sensations that do not even count as emotions in a particular historical moment, such as the feelings of uncanniness, untimeliness, belatedness, delay, and failure that suffuse so many queer performances. (162-3)

By thinking through the “sensations that do not even count as emotions in a particular historical moment,” the following chapters examine the relationship between Barthes’s *Neutral* and the disavowed affects that thwart linear narrative and produce instances of “queer time,” given that the *Neutral* is often associated with “images of *failure* or *impotence* [Barthes’s emphasis]” and delay (*TN* 72). I read these two modes of relating to the *Neutral*—as a weak or

passive affect and as a failure to produce or reproduce—as connected to its temporal dimensions. If the Neutral serves an interrupting function as it “baffles” dominant paradigms, then it also causes narrative delays of varying degrees and intensities. In his lecture course summary Barthes writes, “The argument of the course has been the following: we have defined as pertaining to the Neutral every inflection that, dodging or baffling the paradigmatic, oppositional structure of meaning, aims at the suspension of the conflictual basis of discourse” (TN 211). This “suspension” of meaning points to both its inevitability and to the temporary nature of the Neutral. It, as Barthes frequently claims, “shimmers” with impermanence, with what I argue we can call “queer time.”

Barthesian thought, with its critical mode that combines poststructuralist semiotics and narratology with affective response and ethical responsibility can also fulfill a certain desire on the part of queer theory today. As Barthes desired the Neutral (and could *only* desire, not possess it in its intrinsically impossible form) and wrote through his desire, queer theory paradoxically desires both a queer subjectivity and a queer unintelligibility. These respectively affirmative and negative turns in queer theory create a field at odds with itself as it seeks to unsettle heteronormative culture and create a more inclusive mainstream while still looking for sources of pride and political agency in negativity and abjection. Barthes’s Neutral in its subversive yet constantly compromised state resonates with queer theory’s contradictory temporal impulses to look forward to a happier tomorrow and backward in an embrace of the antisocial.

The privileging of a future-oriented linear temporality associated with heteronormative sexualities and certain affects—frequently couched in the language of “progress” or “improvement” and production and reproduction—has been recently explored in Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling* (2003), Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* (2007), Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), and Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child: or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009), which seek to question, resist, or reject heteronormative progress models while offering alternative understandings of “non-progressive” narratives and negativity. In terms of affect, negative emotions may lead to direct political action in the case of anger, be used as a way of defining subjecthood or subjectivity in the case of shame, or can serve a diagnostic function by illuminating discursive power structures, which is how Love describes Ngai’s reading of “weak” affects like irritation. A resistance to the cultural reliance upon historical, linear narrative trajectories as a condition of subjectivity informs all of these critiques.

Ngai reads ambivalent, enduring “ugly feelings,” including anxiety, envy, and paranoia, as “explicitly amoral and noncathartic” and indicative of a “noncathartic aesthetic: art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of suspended ‘action’) and does so as a kind of politics” (6, 9). Love, however, writes, “I do not think it would be right to read this [Ngai’s] interest in intentionally weak feelings or this refusal to directly link affect and action as a disinterest in action. Rather, I would venture that this persistent attention to ‘useless’ feelings is all about action:

about how and why it is blocked, and about how to locate motives for political action when none is visible" (13). While I agree that these feelings are "about action," Love's formulation still characterizes weak affects as inactive or passively receiving action (they are "blocked" by some external force)—a description that ignores the action these feelings accomplish that takes the form of duration, suspension, and delay. Ngai recognizes that these feelings can take the form of "suspended action," but does not consider the way "suspending" can itself be a political action. Thus, Barthes assigns a different political potential to "weak" or "ugly" feelings than Love and Ngai do. Love sees these feelings as emotions that can lead to other emotions that in turn can be politically efficacious and Ngai identifies a passive resistance at work, but Barthes ascribes explicitly ethical and political potential to Neutral affects.

Suspension, duration, and delay are temporal qualities. In *No Future*, Edelman describes the disruptiveness of queer sexuality to heteronormative "reproductive futurism," or the organization of society around the image of the future Child and the tyranny of cultural narratives based on it: "Historically constructed [. . .] to serve as the repository of variously sentimentalized cultural identifications, the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust" (10-11). Edelman locates the ethical importance of the antisocial queer as the figure that resists "the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure" in the Lacanian analysis that informs *No Future* (3). Barthes's Neutral performs similar temporally and socially disruptive work. For

Edelman, the queer, in his association with the death drive, constitutes the essential loss that structures the social. Likewise, the Neutral is the structuring absence that makes possible a system's existence as well as its destruction. Edelman writes:

[T]he impossible project of a queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition. This paradoxical formulation suggests a refusal—the appropriately perverse refusal that characterizes queer theory—of every substantialization of identity, which is always oppositionally defined, and, by extension, of history as a linear narrative (the poor man's teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—*as itself*—through time. (4)

Edelman's impossible project shares much in common with Barthes's desire for the Neutral in their Lacanian-influenced treatment of language and the Symbolic. In embracing the "self-constituting negation" of the Symbolic, Edelman embarks on a task always already destined for failure, that of searching for an "access to the *jouissance* that at once defines and negates us"—the same impossible escape from the Symbolic Barthes desires even in his recognition of the inevitable failure of attempts to outplay language and sidestep assertion (5).

Seeing something different in the figure of the child, Kathryn Bond Stockton makes the claim that "every child is queer" and examines, as I do, the problem of how "children's delay: their supposed gradual growth [. . .] has been relentlessly figured as vertical movement upward (hence, 'growing up') toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of

childishness" (*Queer Child* 3,4). Stockton sees delay as "central to defining childhood" and a concept that "call[s] us into notions of the horizontal—what spreads sideways—or sideways and backwards—more than a simple thrust toward height and forward time" (4). Similarly, my reading of adolescence in Nabokov, Wright, and McCullers examines the role of delay, as attached to neutral affects, as that which stalls both child development ("growing up") and the movement of the narrative to its conclusion.

Reading for the Neutral is a means of making visible an aesthetic of desire as a structuring force. Interruption and fragmentation as formal devices mirror certain Neutral affects—those emotions frequently described as ineffectual. Hysterical boredom, as an example of the type of non-progressive affect Barthes associates with the Neutral, serves as a means of thwarting the reproductive futurism Edelman describes by interrupting the cultural narratives that perpetuate it while underscoring its paradoxically generative properties. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, boredom is a function of discomfiting loss and an endless deferral of pleasure located in the constant presence of a *jouissance* we can no longer access, a loss revealed through an affect that gestures toward that which is no longer, paralyzing forward movement. The desire for the Neutral offers a mode of resistance to progress narratives of futurity and becomes a state of being and of "being present." It assigns an ethics to passive acts that resist reproduction. In reading Barthes's commitment to the legitimacy of affective response as critical discourse, an aesthetic of narrative delay, suspension, or interruption that characterizes neutral affects as having the potential to unravel cultural progress narratives

emerges.

The Neutral reinforces a state of perpetual desire and ensures the existence of the desiring subject. Barthes assigns an aesthetic of narrative suspension to the state of continuous desire that the Neutral reproduces within formal textual constraints at one point by comparing his penchant for fragmented prose to Schumann's use of intermezzo: "he increased the intermezzi within his works as he went on composing: everything he produced was ultimately *intercalated*: but between what and what? What is the meaning of a pure series of interruptions?" (RB 94). The relational impossibility of a pure series of interruptions captures the paradox of the Neutral—interruptions are not interruptions when they eliminate the paradigm they disrupted in the first place; the series becomes its own paradigm, which would then be subject to other interruptions in an endless circular fashion, constantly moving yet going nowhere.

The Neutral's formal manifestation as narrative interruption, disruption, or suspension allows us to see its temporal and relational aspects. Formal narrative interruptions exist in myriad other forms literary and critical—in the fragmented prose of Barthes's criticism and the annotated text, which Barthes describes as a quintessentially disrupted one. The "work of the commentary," he writes in *S/Z*, inheres "in *manhandling* the text, *interrupting* it. What is thereby denied is not the *quality* of the text [. . .] but its 'naturalness'" (15). Barthes here identifies literary criticism's ability to denaturalize the text through its interjections, which form a punctuated aesthetic. Such narrative disruptions also delay the linear movement of the text, which is what we see

in *Lolita*'s repetitive, allusive prose, as I discuss in chapter one. The character speech patterns in all three novels offer a stuttering repetition and return that stalls textual movement. They feature "non-progressive" narratives that refuse the normative logic of linearity. At the level of characterization, these novels evince those "affective gaps and illegibilities, dysphoric feelings, and other sites of emotional negativity," as well as the "ambivalent situations of suspended agency" that Ngai locates in Melville's *Bartleby*, the character who would, famously, "prefer not to," and paradoxically propel the narrative through their very resistance to it (1). The moments of "recessive action" Anne-Lise François identifies as a literary version of passive aggressiveness found in the willful refusal to act in *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (2008) similarly drive these narratives forward by moving backward. These denaturalizing interruptions serve as formal manifestations of the affective components of the narrative and constitute an aesthetic in *Lolita*, *Native Son*, and *The Member of the Wedding* that can be read in terms of the Neutral.

In the next three chapters, I read three novels in which queer temporality figures prominently in both the narrative and its structure through Barthes's concept of the Neutral, as well as the queer theory texts discussed above. All three novels share narrative properties that baffle linear temporal movement, and I will show how the feeling of being "out of time" in these novels resonates with Freeman's claim that the "sensation of asynchrony can be viewed as a queer phenomenon—something felt on, with, or as a body, something experienced as a mode of erotic difference or even as a means to

express or enact ways of being and connecting that have not yet arrived or never will" (159).

Many mid-twentieth century coming-of-age novels, such as *The Yearling* (Rawlings, 1938), *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (Smith, 1943), *A Separate Peace* (Knowles, 1959), and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), conform to the conventional narrative arc of the *bildungsroman*, a "novel of formation" in which a young protagonist matures from childhood to adulthood, often undergoing and surviving a spiritual (or existential) crisis. This narrative arc resolves itself when the character accepts her role in a larger society. In such works the development of the narrative parallels the development of the youth from unmoored misfit to her adoption of and absorption into the dominant social order. The novels' conclusions coincide with the protagonists' maturation. Something quite different, however, is happening in *Lolita* (1955), *Native Son* (1940), and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), which offer no such successful resolution for their adolescent characters. These works depict adolescents navigating the world, or, more accurately, show how the world acts upon these youthful figures rendered passive by circumstance. These novels are as much about a dominant social order as the characters who fall outside it. As such, adolescence in these works serves as less a model of natural progress and development than an obstacle that impedes it, setting them apart from conventional *bildungsromane*. Yet taken together the novels also resist other generic classifications. *Native Son* and *The Member of the Wedding* share some naturalist elements, but also contain modernist and gothic characteristics respectively. *Lolita* self-consciously toys

with various genres and has been considered both a modern and postmodern novel. What these seemingly diverse novels do share is a focus on adolescent characters who represent the transient or temporary nature of unsustainable desires. The adolescents at the heart of these novels do not mature or develop for reasons specific to their gender, race, and socio-economic class, but also overarchingly because of their nonheteronormative desires and queer behavior. These novels reject, criticize, or complicate the developmental, temporal narrative of maturity over time that the *bildungsroman* captures. They highlight stalled, delayed, or thwarted development in both the characters and the narrative movement of the text.

“Queer time” is the result of a disruption of heteronormative conceptions of (re)production, linearity, and futurity in my first chapter, “Going Nowhere Fast: Queer Temporality in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*.” In *Lolita*, narrator Humbert Humbert’s pedophilia functions as an anti-progress narrative, a subversion of heteronormative narratives of reproductive sexuality. He rejects and Lolita fails to achieve the possibility of a heteronormative futurity—a future characterized by a linear narrative of development progressing through normative desire, marriage, and reproduction—due to the way affect structures his narration. Humbert’s tale relies upon an indulgent relating of the emotions experienced, or believed to be experienced, by Lolita and himself. The feelings and non-normative sexualities of these characters create formal delays within the text. For example, Humbert describes in laborious purple prose Lolita’s frequent bouts of petulance—a passive emotion that Lolita wields as a means to temporarily

fend off or delay Humbert's ultimately unstoppable sexual advances. For Humbert, however, his description of her emotions becomes a device that slows the movement of the novel to its conclusion. Lolita's weak feelings stall Humbert's actions within the plot, while simultaneously stalling the movement of the text itself. Her boredom or indifference hinders the progression of Humbert's written narrative as it forces him to find ways to accommodate them within his story. Such delays and circular movements create a sense of queer temporality in the work.

Chapter Two, "Killing Time: Violence and Temporality in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," examines the depiction of protagonist Bigger Thomas as suffering from a case of arrested development as a twenty-year-old perpetual adolescent denied the socio-economic means of maturity by the systemic racism and oppression of American society. The novel portrays Bigger's developmental narrative as stalled. He cannot inhabit a normative "coming-of-age" narrative, and he does not desire one. Without access to such a progress narrative he has no future, a reality that queers his development. Bigger's queer, delayed maturation is reflected in the narrative delays in the text—the instances of time killing that punctuate the narrative. If Bigger exists when he *acts*—impulsively, violently, and motivated by rage or fear—as his lawyer Max argues at his trial, how then are we to read the large portions of the novel Bigger spends waiting to act; the stretches of narrative time marked by inaction that give way to violent outbursts? While contemporary scholarship often reads *Native Son* as a commentary on menacing black masculinity, or even misogyny, this chapter argues that Bigger's desires are

queer and characterized by “weak” gendered affects. Bigger kills time through a passive spectatorship of the world around him, a spectatorship characterized by weak or neutral affects that manifest in displays of idleness, apathy, and disaffection. Such passivity serves as a prelude to violence that delays the movement of the plot. This chapter focuses on one such site of queer stalling, the Regal Theatre where Bigger and his friend Jack masturbate together. This scene presents the theater as a homoerotic space. The act of time killing that occurs in that space is one that also queers the temporality of the narrative.

My final chapter, “Where the Day Takes You: Boredom and Belonging in Carson McCullers’s *The Member of the Wedding*,” examines the consequences of queer desire for two youthful characters in the novel, Frankie Addams and her cousin John Henry West. For Frankie, her assimilation into the dominant social order requires that she abandon her queer desires to maintain her tomboy identity and become the third party in her brother’s wedding and marriage. The alternative to embracing a heteronormative developmental model of progress is represented by John Henry who cross-dresses and believes that people should be “half boy and half girl.” His untimely death demonstrates the lack of narrative options available outside heteronormative linear progress models. The novel provides the structural inverse of the narratives of stalled progress found in *Native Son* and *Lolita*. The novel is primarily *about* the inaction of waiting and unfulfilled desires, an inaction characterized by Frankie’s constant weak feelings of boredom and anxiety. The action in the novel performs the work of interrupting the *inaction* that

characterizes much of the plot. Frankie's one strong, positive emotion—happiness—causes the novel to come to an abrupt end. Her joy interrupts the persistent “hush” of the kitchen, a location figured as a queer space within the novel and one that had facilitated a rich inner life based upon her failure to achieve a feeling of belonging. Frankie survives her adolescence, but survival comes at the cost of relinquishing an unintelligible subject position characterized by neutral affects for one more closely related to the narrative of futurity her brother's marriage represents, one aligned with strong, positive feelings.

CHAPTER 1

GOING NOWHERE FAST: QUEER TEMPORALITY IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S LOLITA

Humbert Humbert criss-crosses a postwar American landscape in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, aimlessly running from nothing in particular in an effort to stall or even halt the development and maturation of his "nymphet," Lolita: "We had been everywhere," he states, "We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country" (175-6). This instance of time killing leads to a wide range of defilements, scarring the landscape, Lolita, and the narrative structure of the text. The novel begins with narrator Humbert awaiting trial for murder. He recalls the events that led to his imprisonment, which nearly wholly concern the years spent sexually abusing his twelve-year-old stepdaughter, Lolita. Humbert's narration of these events is characterized by his strategic use of language to delay or prolong the duration of his narrative. Such delays are tied to Lolita's stalled development—a result of Humbert's desire to keep her a prepubescent "nymphet," in his parlance, both in "real life" and in his retelling of it—and accomplished through Humbert's descriptions of Lolita's weak or neutral affects, many of which correspond to those Roland Barthes aligns with the Neutral, as outlined in the Introduction. Lolita's ineffectual emotions become a source of textual duration. They are a stalling technique she uses to fend off Humbert's advances, and Humbert's description of them similarly stalls the narrative's conclusion. During the pair's first road trip, Lolita's neutral affects,

which stem from her desire to both put off Humbert's sexual advances and secure a sense of futurity for herself—even if it is only an immediate one, cause delays in Humbert's narrative. During the second road trip—this one Lolita's idea—she has already devised an escape plan different from waiting to “grow up” and away from Humbert's control and her dilatory affects paradoxically work to hasten this end.

Indifferent, indolent, petulant Lo is not allowed to “grow up” in the novel, moving from Humbert's abuses to Quilty's, and finally to her death in childbirth at age eighteen. Humbert's narrative is antithetical to heteronormative progress models that place a value on reproductive futurity—on protecting the world of hypothetical future children, as Lee Edelman describes it in *No Future*. In this sense, Humbert's narrative can be read as adhering to a queer temporality that eschews looking forward in favor of looking backward. Lolita herself is a queer child whose normative development is thwarted and who is denied access to a social order defined by heteronormative reproductive futurity. Heterosexual reproduction literally kills her.

Reading the novel's temporality as possessing a certain queerness opens up new possibilities for understanding the formal properties of the text. While a significant portion of the body of criticism surrounding *Lolita* addresses the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the novel, surprisingly little of it addresses the relationship between language and pleasure other than to note that Nabokov's use of language is stylistically impressive, or to assert that the novel is one big linguistic puzzle or riddle that

the reader must decipher in order to understand Nabokov's true meaning.

Many, if not most, critics approach *Lolita* as a riddle, puzzle, or game meant for the cunning reader to unravel, decipher, master, or solve. Michael Wood writes, "*Lolita*, like countless detective and horror stories, presents itself as a textual game," alluding to the influence of Poe's tales of ratiocination on Nabokov in order to link *Lolita* to a specific literary tradition rooted in enigma (103). Viewing the novel as a vexing mystery one must solve in order to uncover the truth, Ellen Pifer asserts:

As we strive to get to the bottom of things, however, we are likely to find that what seemed like firm ground becomes, in Nabokov's phrase, one more 'false bottom,' a trap door that springs open to reveal yet another quandary, a further conundrum. In this sense, all of the self-conscious devices in the author's cunningly wrought fiction, all the puns and parodies, allusions and alliterations that declare the novel's status as a work of art, faithfully reflect his vision of reality. (8-9)

This notion that the novel's status as "art" depends upon the "puns and parodies, allusions and alliterations," that construct the reader-as-detective is reflected in Alfred Appel's extensive annotated edition of *Lolita*, which dedicates itself to penetrating the dense, allusive thicket of *Lolita*'s dizzying prose in order to discover *the meaning, the secret* of the novel (in over nine hundred notes). Appel refers to *Lolita* as "Nabokov's puppet show," and claims, "Nabokov's passion for chess, language, and lepidoptery has inspired the most elaborately involuted patterning in his work. Like the games implemented by parody, the puns, anagrams, and spoonerisms all reveal the

controlling hand of the logomachist; thematically, they are appropriate to the prison of mirrors" (xxviii). Appel further asserts:

Lolita is a great novel to the same extent as Nabokov is able to have it both ways, involving the reader on the one hand in a deeply moving yet outrageously comic story, rich in verisimilitude, and on the other engaging him in a game made possible by the interlacings of verbal figurations which undermine the novel's realistic base and distance the reader from its dappled surface, which then assumes the aspect of a gameboard. (lvi-lvii)

Here the "game" becomes one of style or genre—*Lolita* is positioned as a would-be realist novel transformed into a post-modern chessboard by virtue of its reflexivity. Even Kathryn Bond Stockton's queer reading of the novel positions itself as explaining a "riddle" (119) by finding "cunning clues" (139) and claiming that "The answer to the detective mystery is the *mystery* of childhood sexuality [author's emphasis]" (144). Part of the allure of such approaches to the novel is, of course, Nabokov's own willingness to speak of *Lolita* in similar ways,²³ but such rhetoric ultimately has the effect of

²³ When asked in an interview to "explain the role of fate in your novels," Nabokov remarked: "I leave the solution of such riddles to my scholarly commentators, to the nightingale voices in the apple trees of knowledge. Impersonally speaking, I can't find any so-called main ideas, such as that of fate, in my novels, or at least none that would be expressed lucidly in less than the number of words I used for this or that book. Moreover, I'm not interested in games as such. Games mean the participation of other persons; I'm interested in the lone performance—chess problems, for example, which I compose in glacial solitude" (*Strong Opinions* 117). Similarly, when asked in a different interview why he wrote *Lolita*, Nabokov replied, "It was an interesting thing to do. Why did I write any of my books, after all? For the sake of the pleasure, for the sake of the difficulty. I have no social purpose, no

encouraging the disavowal of certain forms of pleasure associated with and produced by the text, and often leads to an over-reliance on biographical criticism.

Kevin Ohi succinctly sums up the majority of *Lolita* scholarship in this way:

Moralistic readings must cultivate an obliviousness to the novel's remarkable—and remarkably elusive, subtle, and canny—language and its transformation of confessed remorse into aesthetic rapture. The need to ignore the novel's language registers—albeit in negative form—one of the novel's central insights: the linguistic seduction and the erotic seduction are one, and critics' leaden readings of the text thus seek to contain the novel's erotic subversiveness. (160)

A queer reading of the novel's formal structure allows for a different understanding of the pleasure the text provides, the "erotic subversiveness" Ohi describes, in relationship to the temporality of the narrative. The pleasure found in the narrative's hesitations and delays, in the *duration* of Humbert's confession, has not been accounted for in criticism focused on puzzle-solving or moralistic readings. A queer reading of the narrative opens up new possibilities for understanding the relationship between Humbert's

moral message; I've no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions" (*Strong Opinions* 16). While such statements are often read by critics in the singular (*Lolita* is a riddle with a single solution), Nabokov's words here clearly point to a multiplicity of riddles and potential solutions within the text. If *Lolita* is a singular riddle (in both senses of the term), it is in fact one with no solution, a game with no opponent or end point. It is not surprising then that critics who attempt to solve the riddle and win the game become bound up in a system of infinite regress.

pleasurable confession, as Foucault would describe it, and textual duration—the foundation of the novel form.

From a narratological standpoint, delay is central to the existence of narrative. In his essay “Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Allan Poe” in *The Semiotic Challenge*, Barthes writes, “every narrative obviously has an interest in delaying the solution of the enigma it poses, since this solution will signal its own death as a narrative: we have seen that the narrator takes a whole paragraph to delay the exposition of the case, under the pretext of scientific precautions” (291). Barthes elaborates on this idea in *S/Z*: “In fact, the hermeneutic code has a function, the one we (with Jakobson) attribute to the poetic code: just as rhyme (notably) structures the poem according to the expectation and desire for recurrence, so the hermeneutic terms structure the enigma according to the expectation and desire for its solution” (75). He continues:

The dynamics of the text (since it implies a truth to be deciphered) is thus paradoxical: it is a static dynamics: the problem is to *maintain* the enigma in the initial void of its answer; whereas the sentences quicken the story’s ‘unfolding’ and cannot help but move the story along, the hermeneutic code performs an opposite action: it must set up *delays* (obstacles, stoppages, deviations) in the flow of the discourse; its structure is essentially reactive, since it opposes the ineluctable advance of language with an organized set of stoppages: between question and answer there is a whole dilatory area whose emblem might be named ‘reticence,’ the rhetorical figure which interrupts the sentence, suspends

it, turns it aside [author's emphasis]. (S/Z 75)

The centrality of structural delay to narrative returns in Barthes's formulations of the Neutral. As outlined in the Introduction, the Neutral, for Barthes, is the structural third term that "baffles" the oppositional binaries that produce meaning. This bafflement creates a pause or delay in the creation of meaning—it temporarily suspends it. While the Neutral takes many forms and figures in Barthes's work, here, as in the dissertation as a whole, I am interested in his linking of the Neutral to certain weak or neutral affects that appear ineffectual, but harbor great desires. Barthes embraces affects such as boredom, weariness, laziness, and anxiety as ignored or unthinkable discourses. They are characterized by a reticence to action or revelation. While an angry person makes her feelings known and acts upon them with violence in word or deed, the lazy or anxious person *does* little and reveals less about the conditions of such a state of being. When applied to narrative, these are the weak affects that can paradoxically constitute the narrative by delaying its linear progress when the text mimics their duration. This stalled narrative, in turn, mirrors Lolita's own stalled development.

In *The Queer Child: or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton takes up the question of "children's delay": "their supposed gradual growth, their suggested slow unfolding, which, unhelpfully, has been relentlessly figured as vertical movement upward (hence, 'growing up') toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness. Delay, as we will see, is tremendously tricky as a conception, as is growth. Both more appropriately call us into notions of the

horizontal—what spreads sideways—or sideways and backwards—more than a simple thrust toward height and forward time” (4). Asserting that “every child is queer,” Stockton writes, “despite our culture’s assuming every child’s straightness, the child can only be ‘not-yet-straight,’ since it too, is not allowed to be sexual. This child who ‘will be’ straight is merely approaching while crucially delaying [. . .] the official destination of straight sexuality, and therefore showing itself as estranged from what it would approach” (7). In *Lolita*, Humbert “suffers” from grand passions characterized by the affects of classical philosophy and rhetoric, while Lolita exhibits the passive, “neutral” affects Barthes examines, which paradoxically move the narrative along by delaying it.

Humbert aligns himself with these strong feelings—love, rage, jealousy, and sorrow—while he, as the narrator, allows Lolita access only to weak, ineffectual emotions associated with childishness: infatuation instead of love, frustration instead of rage, boredom and apathy instead of jealousy, sulky fits instead of sorrow. Immature Lolita is often incoherent, while educated Humbert is hyperarticulate and manipulative, controlling both Lolita and his prose. Barthes identifies images of the Neutral as being “depreciative,” including the adjectives “Thankless,” “Shirking,” “Muffled,” “Limp,” “Indifferent,” and “Vile”—all descriptors that Humbert either applies to Lolita or implies to be part of her character (TN 71-71). Humbert describes Lolita’s indifference in terms of neutrality: “‘Look,’ she said in that neutral voice that hurt me so” (141). In his possessiveness, Humbert writes, “Oh, I had to keep a very sharp eye on Lo, little limp Lo! Owing perhaps to constant amorous

exercise, she radiated, despite her very childish appearance, some special languorous glow which threw garage fellows, hotel pages, vacationists, goons in luxurious cars, maroon morons near blued pools, into fits of concupiscence” (159). Limpness here evokes both the wilting helplessness of Lolita and Humbert’s twisted characterization of the defiance of heavy limbs as seduction; it is credited with the power to incite action of the part of others. When associated with Humbert, however, limpness carries the opposite meaning:

I recall certain moments, let us call them icebergs in paradise, when after having had my fill of her—after fabulous, insane exertions that left me limp and azure-barred—I would gather her in my arms with, at last, a mute moan of human tenderness (her skin glistening in the neon light coming from the paved court through the slits in the blind, her soot-black lashes matted, her grave gray eyes more vacant than ever—for all the world a little patient still in the confusion of a drug after a major operation)—and the tenderness would deepen to shame and despair. (285)

Here Humbert’s limpness is the result of satiation and Lolita’s emotional state (vacant and confused) is relegated to a parenthetical while his strong feelings (shame and despair) are the intended focus of the recollection. Humbert’s narrative dallying centers on a series of memories that serve to highlight his own strong emotional states by contrasting them with Lolita’s weak ones under the guise of showing remorse for his deeds.

Lolita’s position within the plot as a kidnapped and abused stepchild

further circumscribes the range of affects available to her. Her temper tantrums are doomed to be ineffectual in such a situation and never rise to the level of action-producing rage. Humbert renders Lolita incoherent in his description of one such scene when an argument between them is interrupted by the police:

Lo treated me to one of those furious harangues of hers where entreaty and insult, self-assertion and double talk, vicious vulgarity and childish despair, were interwoven in an exasperating semblance of logic which prompted a semblance of explanation from me. Enmeshed in her wild words (swell chance . . . I'd be a sap if I took your opinion seriously . . . Stinker . . . You can't boss me . . . I despise you . . . and so forth) I drove through the slumbering town [. . .] when the kind officers pardoned us and servilely we crawled on, her eyelids closed and fluttered as she mimicked limp prostration. (171)

In this passage, Lolita's "wild words" are truncated by Humbert, who not only places them in parentheses, but also uses ellipses to omit so many of them that her speech becomes too punctuated to be legible. Her "despair," unlike Humbert's, is minimized as "childish" and unearned. Her body, however, is deliberately "limp" and "prostrate"—a strategy Lolita makes frequent use of in her attempts to thwart Humbert's desires.

Humbert frequently construes Lolita's resistance to his sexual pleasure as mere indifference: "There she would be, a typical kid picking her nose while engrossed in the lighter sections of a newspaper, as indifferent to my ecstasy as if it were something she had sat upon, a shoe, a doll, the handle of a tennis

racket, and was too indolent to remove" (165). Here, Humbert describes her as lazy for not being an enthusiastic participant in her violation. More telling still is his lengthy description of her reading material, which concludes with the observation that "she was curiously fascinated by the photographs of local brides, some in full wedding apparel, holding bouquets and wearing glasses" (165). Lolita fantasizes about the normative sexuality of heterosexual marriage while trapped in Humbert's warped, quasi-incestuous world. This fantasy recurs throughout the novel, perhaps most provocatively when Lolita briefly disappears in Wace and tells Humbert she had been looking at a store window with two mannequins: "One figure was stark naked, wigless, and armless. Its comparatively small stature and smirking pose suggested that when clothed it had represented, and would represent when clothed again, a girl-child of Lolita's size. But in its present state it was sexless. Next to it, stood a much taller veiled bride, quite perfect and *intacta* except for the lack of one arm" (226). The almost-whole bride mannequin represents the only future Lolita sees for herself—a comically warped version of heteronormative futurity where her normative development has been stunted as she plays child bride to Humbert during their extended road trips, which Elizabeth Freeman has described as a parody of the popular 1950s travel honeymoon (*Wedding* 173).

Within Humbert's carefully constructed narrative, he links his extreme emotional states that lead to acts of spectacular violence and misanthropy to his narrative devices. Early in the novel Humbert claims, "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style," thus associating violent acts with

florid prose (9). His “fancy prose” is a manipulation of language and narrative to suit his own ends. He uses it to hide and reveal his motives and desires simultaneously. Humbert provides elaborate justifications for his actions by offering deceptive theories of age, time, and history in an attempt to prevent the reader from rendering moral judgment. He frequently glosses over his violent acts—his kidnapping and rapes of Lolita and his murder of Quilty—in overwrought narration of his feelings and employs narrative delays as a mode of creating and prolonging pleasure in service of his affects. Early in his confession he writes, “Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as ‘nymphets’” (16). This relatively straightforward description of Humbert’s pedophilia and his rationalization of it—he’s sexually attracted to prepubescent girls and justifies his desires by casting the object of them as an inhuman other—becomes gradually hidden under layer upon layer of tortuous prose in the following pages. Turning to myth and metaphor and jumbling conceptions of space and time, he states:

It will be marked that I substitute time terms for spatial ones. In fact, I would have the reader see ‘nine’ and ‘fourteen’ as the boundaries—the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks—of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea. Between those age limits, are all girl-children nymphets? Of course not.

Otherwise, we who are in the know, we lone voyagers, we nympholepts,

would have long gone insane. (16-17)

Here “nymphets,” different from other nine to fourteen-year-old girls as he is quick to assert, move from “demoniac” creatures to ghost-like ones, becoming more inhuman and disembodied, and placed outside of recognizable reality. He continues, “Furthermore, since the idea of time plays such a magic part in the matter, the student should not be surprised to learn that there must be a gap of several years, never less than ten I should say, generally thirty or forty, and as many as ninety in a few known cases, between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under a nymphet’s spell” (17). Humbert’s relationship with time rests upon his desires to suspend it, to confine the objects of his pedophilic desire to an enchanted island where he grows older, but they stay the same age. Humbert has a pleasurable investment in delaying the maturation of both the nymphet at the center of his confession—Lolita—and of the narrative itself. Taking the form of a confession, Humbert’s tale is already structured by the pleasure of recounting his sins. Humbert’s narrative prolongs the retelling of his affair with Lolita and prolongs his pleasure in equal measure. Thus temporality in the novel is bound up with Humbert’s desires, which he simultaneously masks and unveils with his elaborate prose.

Humbert’s pleasure is that of a pedophile reliving his crimes for an imagined, captive audience. The longer his narrative time stretches, the longer the story time—where Lolita exists as a perpetual 12-year-old

nymphet—lasts.²⁴ The entirety of part I, chapter 26 reads as follows:

This daily headache in the opaque air of this tombal jail is disturbing, but I must persevere. Have written more than a hundred pages and not got anywhere yet. My calendar is getting confused. That must have been around August 15, 1947. Don't think I can go on. Heart, head—everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat till the page is full, printer. (109)

In this 66-word chapter, Humbert gestures toward three levels of narrative temporality: narrative time (the present—Humbert's period of writing the narrative in his "tombal jail" cell), story time (the story of Humbert's relationship with Lolita related in his narrative—here the events leading up to August 1947), and the invocation of futurity (the fate of the narrative after his death—here the imagined printer who will "complete" the story by endlessly delaying its resolution through the repetition of a single proper noun).²⁵

Humbert's narrative has "not got anywhere" because he is not interested in going somewhere. In this way, his narrative retelling mirrors the journeys he undertakes with Lolita. When he states, "We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing," he might just as easily be discussing his narrative—it shows us everything, but attempts to reveal nothing. Humbert does not care if we never reach the end of his story and uses his self-fashioned persona as a

²⁴ Here I follow Gérard Genette's terminology in distinguishing between these levels of narrative temporality.

²⁵ A fourth level—that of the time taken by the imaginary reader to read the narrative—is gestured toward at other points in the novel: "Gentlewomen of the jury! Bear with me! Allow me to take just a tiny bit of your precious time!" but falls outside of the scope of this analysis (123).

man of great feeling to structure a confession that forestalls a swift conclusion.

Stockton notes that delay “is seen as a friend to the child. Delay is said to be a feature of its growth: children grow by delaying their approach to the realms of sexuality, labor, and harm,” yet she also recognizes that “we know how sexual delaying sex can be. Sexual delay as an active arrest [. . .] is a way, we say, of ‘maturing’ sexually” (62, 63). Within the story time, Lolita’s passive affects stall Humbert’s pleasure. She attempts to delay his sexual gratification as a means to hasten her maturation by shortening the amount of time she remains until his control and, as a child, subject to the desires of a pedophile. Humbert is motivated by the present and the past while Lolita constantly plots to escape both. Humbert’s recollection of these emotions, however, pleasurably stalls the movement of his narrative to its conclusion; delay becomes a form of sexual pleasure within narrative time, one that is at odds with progress-oriented, future-driven temporality. Such an understanding of delay in the novel depends, in part, on a reading of Lolita’s character as possessing an identifiable subjectivity.

Critics, however, frequently read Lolita as a character deprived of any interiority and some have judged the novel ethically suspect because of this. In one of the most compelling of these accounts, Linda S. Kauffman interrogates Lolita’s lack of subjectivity and her erasure from the text in *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*. In her feminist critique, Kauffman writes, “*Lolita* is not about love but about incest, which is a betrayal of trust, a violation of love. How have critics managed so consistently to confuse love

with incest in the novel? My aim here is to show how—through a variety of narrative strategies—the inscription of the father’s body in the text obliterates the daughter’s” (57). Kauffman is one of many critics who cite “narrative strategies” as responsible for causing readers to sympathize with a pedophile at the expense of recognizing the pain suffered by his victim. James Phelan, in his in his narratological analysis of the ethics of the text, ultimately expresses a “distrust of his [Nabokov’s] ethics” and claims, “In writing this book, Nabokov, like Dolores, enters umber and black Humberland; but unlike her, he does not survey it with a shrug of amused distaste, but rather lives there with a kind of perverse relish. That, to my vision, is the inescapable ethical dark side of this book” (131). Such ethical objections to the text revolve around Lolita’s lack of subjectivity within the novel: “whatever else we might say about the complexities of Nabokov’s technique, he never moves in the direction of giving Dolores a significant voice in the narrative: it is Humbert the criminal and his response to his crimes as he writes about them that dominate the narrative first, last, and always” (Phelan 130). The scene most often used in support of these claims is one in which Humbert discreetly masturbates with Lolita on his lap on the family davenport. After this, his first sexual contact with Lolita, he claims to have “safely solipsized” her and attempts to render her entirely his creation: “What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own” (60, 62). Humbert’s dehumanization of Lolita is what allows him to commit his crimes

against her and is what these critics most strongly react against. In *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, Leland de la Durantaye rightly points out that this initial act of Humbert's changing Lolita from an "ethical subject" to an "aesthetic object" paves the way for his later abuse of her, writing that Humbert can only enjoy "his vicious circle of paradise if the real little girl he is so desperately mistreating does not too violently interpose herself—and so he decides to 'firmly ignore' her in favor of the 'phantasm' first formed on this fateful Sunday" (71, 73).

Ohi, however, argues that both Humbert and Lolita are essentially unknowable: "Consistency of tone or character is difficult to assess in a virtuosic prose that dazzles with sudden shifts of tone and voice: the real Humbert is no more accessible than the real Lolita" (184). Ohi claims that "to 'know' Lolita is thus to realize that one hasn't known her [. . .] So thoroughly disoriented is any notion of a 'real' Lolita whom Humbert was to have known that any moralizing effort to condemn Humbert's willful ignorance of her is destined to incoherence" (182). Since it does seem at first that the reader can only access Dolores Haze through Humbert's consciousness, if at all, it stands to reason that we only ever see Lolita—Humbert's fantasy version of Dolores. Yet the structure of the novel proves more complex than a reading predicated on a Humbert-as-subject, Lolita-as-other divide can account for. For what we learn of our narrator tells us that Humbert is never as fully in control of his text as he thinks he is, often blinded by narcissism, arrogance, and selfishness.

Not all critics, of course, view the novel in this way. Freeman's reading of the novel, for example, places Lolita in control of Humbert's narrative:

Lolita has refused to grant Humbert [. . .] a legible, complete identity. Her marks on the paper mimic the novel's unending movement not only across the United States but among narrative modes and the kinds of public personhood that she inflicts on Humbert [. . .] His travelogue, in turn, lurches uncontrollably between romance and courtroom testimony, and its narrator never stabilizes as either lover or pervert. [. . .] the fact that [. . .] Humbert seems condemned to imaginatively stagger across U.S. spaces and genres even from his jail cell, is Lolita's triumph. (175)

Stockton also argues for an evaluation of Lolita's subjectivity:

Since he [Humbert] self-confesses for the length of the book, it would seem as if Lolita can only appear inside his mouth, strapped to his motives [. . .] But fortunately Nabokov is not satisfied with this. He starts to hide Lolita—and her own competing motives—inside the legs that Humbert loves and the motions he describes but cannot comprehend. Legs and locomotions launch from Humbert's words that rhapsodize Lolita. A leg and a dog on his tongue make her seen—seen, that is, as a moving suspension, an interval of animal, inside his solipsism. (133)

Stockton further claims that the novel makes visible the motives of a sexual child—motives that remain invisible to Humbert throughout much of the story time: "*Lolita* has a sidetrack. A sexual girl grows alongside but strikingly apart from the arc of her (fake) father's future for her. For Humbert cannot see, until it is too late, the child's threat growing to the side of his own" (155). Only in retrospect does Humbert see how Lolita has plotted to leave him for Quilty, his *doppelgänger* pedophile.

Nabokov's authorial intrusions into his characters' narratives cast further doubt onto how much of Humbert's narrative belongs to him in a novel with postmodern characteristics. Appel notes Nabokov's use of the name "Vivian Darkbloom" in the text (an anagram for "Vladimir Nabokov") as an instance of an intrusive authorial presence in his notes to *The Annotated Lolita*: "As for H.H. and John Ray, unless characters in a novel can be said to have miraculously fashioned their creators, someone else must be responsible for an anagram of the author's name, and such phenomena undermine the narrative's realist base by pointing beyond the book to Nabokov," though he also notes the "utilitarian reason" for the anagram—Nabokov initially considered publishing the text anonymously (323). Gérard Genette refers to such intrusions as "the concurrence of theoretically incompatible focalizations, which shakes the whole logic of narrative representation" in *Narrative Discourse* (211). *Lolita's* self-reflexivity imparts information to the reader about the novel's status *as a novel* that only the author, Nabokov, and not the narrator, Humbert, would have in his possession. Furthermore, while both Humbert and John Ray claim to have obscured identifying details from the text, *Lolita* remains linguistically exposed as the only character that does not receive a protective pseudonym. John Ray notes, "While 'Haze' only rhymes with the heroine's real surname, her first name is too closely interwound with the inmost fiber of the book to allow one to alter it; nor (as the reader will perceive for himself) is there any practical necessity to do so" (4). Taken together, all of these factors call into question how "solipsized" *Lolita* ever really is for both the reader who sees the elements of *Lolita's* character

Humbert is blinded to and for Humbert himself. Humbert admits that not only did he “not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions,” but he also acknowledges that “there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one. Lolita girl, brave Dolly Schiller” (284). Here Humbert displays not only his current knowledge, as our jailed narrator (narrative time), that he harmed Lolita, but also the knowledge he attempted and failed to brush aside during the time he was her captor (story time)—that Dolores-the-ethical-subject and the phantasmatic Lolita-the-aesthetic-object were always one and the same. Thus the position that Humbert’s narrative provides us with his monolithic view of the other characters in the novels is a flawed one from the start.

If Lolita is Humbert’s creation, existing at the whim of Humbert’s unreliable narration, then how could we begin to imagine this character *does* anything, much less wrests narrative control from Humbert’s dominant voice? The answer is that Humbert is far less in control of his narrative than he believes and than readers tend to give him credit for. After all, for readers to recognize him *as* an unreliable narrator we must see that there is a difference between what he tells us and what “really happened” beyond simply assuming that he is untrustworthy or that a narrative framed as both confession and apologia meant, at least initially, to get him off the hook is not to be trusted. The moment in the novel when Humbert claims to safely

solipsize Lolita during the course of masturbating against her while she is perched on his lap is one such scene in which we see Humbert's narrative control flounder. In this, Humbert's first sexual contact with Lolita, he lays out the scene of his masturbation like a play for the reader ("I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay" [57]), yet when he reaches the part of the tale where he realizes he is assured of an orgasm, Humbert deliberately slows both his sexual climax and the pace of his narrative description of it: "With the deep hot sweetness thus established and well on its way to the ultimate convulsion, I felt I could slow down in order to prolong the glow. Lolita had been safely solipsized" (60). It is a scene motivated by lust both in the action of the story time and in the prolonged narrative retelling punctuated by a series of delays. Humbert's delayed orgasm leads to his use of narrative delay tactics—here comparisons and digressions:

I was a radiant and robust Turk, deliberately, in the full consciousness of his freedom, postponing the moment of actually enjoying the youngest and frailest of his slaves. Suspended on the brink of that voluptuous abyss (a nicety of physiological equipoise comparable to certain techniques in the arts) I kept repeating chance words after her—barmen, alarmin', my charmin', my Carmen, ahmen, ahahamen—as one talking and laughing in his sleep while my happy hand crept up her sunny leg as far as the shadow of decency allowed. (60)

Humbert consciously associates the pleasurable delay of sexual release with "certain techniques in the arts," and his use of language to delay the narrative

conclusion of the scene is meant to mirror the delayed sexual gratification his orgasm brings. The “equipoise” he strikes between coming and not coming is compared to the balance achieved in moments of narrative suspension. His recollection of the event tells the reader he filled this gap before orgasm with the mindless repetition of words after Lolita—the lyrics to a pop song. If Humbert, as he claims, “has only words to play with” in Lolita’s absence, then his words, the text of his confession, serve the sole purpose of filling the void of Lolita’s absence from the text. This occurs first in Humbert’s intended sense of her literal estrangement from him, then in her death that becomes the condition for the publication of the text, but also in the way his solipsism threatens to render her his invention (32).

This masturbation scene is a crucial one in which Humbert’s narrative control is seen to be less than absolute and one that allows the reader to see how Lolita and her weak emotions serve a larger narrative function than that of mere objects within Humbert’s hermetic narrative. Although he sets up the details precisely: “I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay [. . .] Main character: Humbert the Hummer. Time: Sunday morning in June. Place: sunlit living room. Props: old, candy-striped davenport, magazines, phonograph, Mexican knickknacks,” he is unable to create a convincing script (57). In this scene, when Humbert tries his hardest to erase Lolita’s subjectivity, hints of the “actual” event shine through. The reader can discern what the narrator cannot see; Humbert views Lolita as a sexualized object whose movements conform to his desires, but the reader sees Lolita as a squirming child. Humbert uses the pretext of noticing a bruise

on Lolita's thigh to fondle her: "there seemed to be nothing to prevent my muscular thumb from reaching the hot hollow of her groin—just as you might tickle and caress a giggling child—just that and: 'Oh it's nothing at all,' she cried with a sudden shrill note in her voice, and she wiggled, and squirmed, and threw her head back, and her teeth rested on her glistening underlip as she half-turned away" (61). Here we see the contrast between the actions of Lolita, who squirms away as he tickles, as a child might, and Humbert's willful interpretation of child-like behavior as flirtatious and seductive: she bites "her glistening underlip," and her attempt to gain the magazine Humbert has taken from her is related as "a sham effort to retrieve it, she was all over me" (58). After his orgasm, Lolita breaks free from his grasp to answer the telephone: "Immediately afterward (as if we had been struggling and now my grip had eased) she rolled off the sofa and jumped to her feet [. . .] There she stood and blinked, cheeks aflame, hair awry, her eyes passing over me as lightly as they did over the furniture [. . .] Blessed be the Lord, she had noticed nothing!" (61). Here Humbert's own prose betrays his desire to construe his actions as undetectable even as he acknowledges, "I was mortally afraid that some act of God might interrupt me, might remove the golden load in the sensation of which all my being seemed concentrated, and this anxiety forced me to work, for the first minute or so, more hastily than was consensual with deliberately modulated enjoyment" (59). Lolita's escape from the sofa "as if we had been struggling" must be read as *we had been struggling and now my grip had eased* in order for her actions to make sense as the telephone does not suddenly ring and provide an interruption. Rather Humbert notes it

“might have been ringing for ages as far as I was concerned” (61). This scene then, in which Humbert claims to negate or revoke Lolita’s personhood, does not lead the reader to adopt a similar stance; it reveals instead the slippages between what Humbert wills himself to believe about Lolita (she is a wanton seductress who paradoxically remains innocent of any knowledge of Humbert’s exertions) and what he inadvertently exposes about her (that the character is a “normal little girl,” and that “nymphets” exist only in the eye of the beholder). Humbert’s solipsizing move falls flat precisely because he is not aware enough of Lolita’s interiority to be able to effectively mask it. Though certainly muffled and obscured by his narrative, Humbert never fully succeeds in stripping Lolita of her subjectivity. Humbert’s further description of Lolita’s cool, indifferent demeanor at the end of the masturbation scene—she surveys Humbert as if he were a piece of furniture—gives an early indication of how Humbert will describe his Eve after her fall in this initial sexual encounter.²⁶ While he is aflame with passion, he describes her as detached and indifferent.

Humbert’s narration explains the banal with excruciating detail, but glosses over the intricacies of his pedophilia or obscures them with exceptionally purple prose. Humbert’s narration of his first night with Lolita in a hotel room, for example, consists primarily of lengthy descriptions of his agonized desire for her:

And less than six inches from me and my burning life, was nebulous

²⁶ Humbert explicitly refers to the biblical tale of Eve and the serpent throughout the passage: “[Lolita] was holding in her hallowed hands a

Lolita! After a long stirless vigil, my tentacles moved towards her again, and this time the creak of the mattress did not awake her. I managed to bring my ravenous bulk so close to her that I felt the aura of her bare shoulder like a warm breath upon my cheek [. . .] She freed herself from the shadow of my embrace—doing this not consciously, not violently, not with any personal distaste, but with the neutral plaintive murmur of a child demanding its natural rest. And again the situation remained the same: Lolita with her curved spine to Humbert, Humbert resting his head on his hand and burning with desire and dyspepsia. (130)

Yet after this long buildup Humbert pretends to dispense with the act in a single sentence: “by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers” (132). Humbert provides a narrative rationale for his descriptive strategy, stating “If I dwell at some length on the tremors and gropings of that distant night, it is because I insist upon proving that I am not, and never was, and never could have been, a brutal scoundrel” (131), while in a later act of paralipsis he declares:

I shall not bore my learned readers with a detailed account of Lolita’s presumption. Suffice it to say that not a trace of modesty did I perceive in this beautiful hardly formed young girl [. . .] My life was handled by little Lo in an energetic, matter-of-fact manner as if it were an insensate gadget unconnected with me. While eager to impress me with the world of tough kids, she was not quite prepared for certain

beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple” (58).

discrepancies between a kid's life and mine [. . .] But really these are irrelevant matters; I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all.

Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets.

(133)

Here Humbert has moved from describing Lolita as a child desiring "natural" child-like things, such as sleep, to a demoniac nymphet. Children "naturally" grow up whereas nymphets are suspended in time. Humbert's prose meticulously details his desires before turning away from them and claiming to do no such thing. Since part of Humbert's pleasure springs from the confessional structure of his narrative, which allows for the rehashing of all the gory details of his actions in a narcissistic, masturbatory fashion, the reader must always be wary of his claims of omission. As befitting the legal defense he hopes his story will provide, Humbert claims to supply the details that would exonerate him while omitting those most damning.

Unsurprisingly, the clear relish Humbert displays in recounting these anticipatory interludes offers the most convincing evidence of his guilt. He is the predator delighting in recounting the chase. While Humbert claims he is "trying to describe these things not to relive them in my present boundless misery, but to sort out the portion hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world—nymphet love" it becomes clear that his confession achieves the opposite and that Humbert protests too much (135). The narrative succeeds in exposing what it seeks to veil through its strategies of delay and (false) omission. Just as when Humbert claims, "I am not

concerned with so-called 'sex' at all," we know the opposite is true, when he tells us it was Lolita who seduced him we should know far better than to believe him (133, 132). For Humbert, a narrative composed of long sequences of waiting and time killing punctuated by terse descriptions of sexual encounters, or descriptions of sexual acts that follow his protestations against describing them, is pleasurable and serves the masturbatory purpose of allowing him to relive his exploits. De la Durantaye notes that as a pedophile and a voyeur, Humbert's primary mode of sexual satisfaction is masturbation; here his narrative account serves a similar purpose (67-75).

Humbert's strategy of self-conscious narrative delay occurs again near the novel's conclusion with his decision to murder Quilty. The parallels between Humbert's sexual gratification and his thirst for revenge are clear: "Let me dally a little, he is as good as destroyed," he writes before pages of recollections about his life with Lolita as he retraces places and spaces the pair had once occupied until he reaches Ramsdale (282). With a violent climax in sight, Humbert slows both his "fancy prose" and his narrative actions. The temporal aspects of Humbert's narration in this section of the novel begin to lose coherency. Beyond the shift from past tense to present—from "I was alone to enjoy the innocent night and my terrible thoughts" to "Let me dally a little, he is as good as destroyed"—we also see a change in narrative level. Humbert moves from the mode of recollection that characterizes his narration to a comment on his act of narrating. While his various asides and references to the text he is creating accomplish this narrative metalepsis throughout the novel, here he specifically associates his repetitive descriptions with delay.

Between “Let me dally” and the last sentence of the paragraph: “I was weeping again, drunk on the impossible past,” Humbert indulges in a long description of neon signage: “Some way further across the street, neon lights flickered twice slower than my heart: the outline of a restaurant sign, a large coffee-pot, kept bursting, every full second or so, into emerald life, and every time it went out, pink letters saying Fine Foods relayed it, but the pot could still be made out as a latent shadow teasing the eye before its next emerald resurrection. We made shadowgraphs. This furtive burg was not far from the Enchanted Hunters” (282). This digression is an example of the pleasurable equipoise Humbert associates with the delaying of the climactic outcome of his strong emotional states, either lust (in which the delayed climax is literally an orgasm) or jealousy and rage (where the delayed climax is murder).

The temporal levels of narration continue to fall apart the closer Humbert comes to his goal:

Now that everything had been put out of the way, I could dedicate myself freely to the main object of my visit to Ramsdale. In the methodical manner on which I have always prided myself, I had been keeping Clare Quilty’s face masked in my dark dungeon, where he was waiting for me to come with barber and priest: *‘Reveillez-vous, Laqueue, il est temps de mourir!’* I have no time right now to discuss the mnemonics of physiognomization—I am on my way to his uncle and walking fast—but let me jot down this: I had preserved in the alcohol of a clouded memory the toad of a face. (290)

Here the temporal relationship between story time and narrative time

collapses as Humbert loses control of his narration. He has “no time right now,” meaning, no narrative time for dallying with digressions or explanations. But the reason he gives for this lack of narrative time is an impossible one because it exists within the story time—he is “on [his] way to his uncle and walking fast.” Humbert claims to be methodical, yet here we see how his emotional state clouds his narration, even after the fact.

Upon locating Quilty inside his house, Humbert again first slows then quickens his actions and his corresponding narrative pace: “Then, still ignoring the raincoated phantasm that had stopped in midstairs, master walked into a cozy boudoir across the hall from the drawing room, through which—taking it easy, knowing he was safe—I now went away from him, and in a bar-adorned kitchen gingerly unwrapped dirty Chum” (295). In confronting Quilty, Humbert’s pleasurable fantasy of the murder simultaneously forestalls and hastens its actuality: “To have him trapped, after those years of repentance and rage . . . To look at the black hairs on the back of his pudgy hands . . . To wander with a hundred eyes over his purple silks and hirsute chest foreglimpsing the punctures, and mess, and music of pain . . . To know that this semi-animated, subhuman trickster who had sodomized my darling—oh, my darling, this was intolerable bliss!” (295). Here Humbert’s prose practically trips over itself as his use of ellipses hastens the movement from infinitive clause to infinitive clause, ending in an apostrophe—a rhetorical figure of either hopelessness or futility by definition as the addressee is usually dead or absent—here Lolita, in Humbert’s narrative time and his imagined futurity, is both. Humbert’s rage punctuates his narrative

just as he hopes his bullets will punctuate Quilty's body.

While Humbert entertains the passions of "high art"—love, tragedy, revenge—Lolita, even in her grief and despair, is allowed access only to the weak affects associated with her penchant for "low art," her consumerism, and her vulgarity. She is bored, irritated, and apathetic:

She had entered my world, umber and black Humberland, with rash curiosity; she surveyed it with a shrug of amused distaste; and it seemed to me now that she was ready to turn away from it with something akin to plain repulsion. Never did she vibrate under my touch, and a strident 'what d'you think you are doing?' was all I got for my pains. To the wonderland I had to offer, my fool preferred the corniest movies, the most cloying fudge. To think that between a Hamburger and Humburger, she would—invariably, with icy precision—plump for the former. There is nothing more atrociously cruel than an adored child. Did I mention the name of that milk bar I visited a moment ago? It was, of all things, The Frigid Queen. Smiling a little sadly, I dubbed her My Frigid Princess. She did not see the wistful joke. (166)

Even in this description of Lolita's dislike for him, Humbert attributes only weak affects to her. She shrugs with indifference and "amused distaste," while Humbert does not acknowledge her strong feeling of "plain repulsion"—the closest he permits is "something akin" to it. She is characterized as being "atrociously cruel" and "frigid" when she resists his advances through idleness and indifference. When she does submit to him

after extracting either a promise of an outing or activity, or, later in the novel, money, Humbert minimizes her despair as amusing and ineffectual. Her desires are “silly” while his are characterized as “passions”: “I remember the operation was over, all over, and she was weeping in my arms;—a salutary storm of sobs after one of the fits of moodiness that had become so frequent with her in the course of that otherwise admirable year! I had just retracted some silly promise she had forced me to make in a moment of blind impatient passion, and there she was sprawling and sobbing, and pinching my caressing hand, and I was laughing happily” (169). In this division of affects, Lolita cannot hope to have Humbert’s capacity for actions, especially violent ones. Interiority compromised, though not obliterated, by Humbert’s narrative, she appears helpless at most points in the novel. In one scene in particular, Humbert revokes a promise he had made her and he “happened to glimpse [. . .] a look on her face . . . that look I cannot exactly describe . . . an expression of helplessness so perfect that it seemed to grade into one of rather comfortable inanity just because this was the very limit of injustice and frustration—and every limit presupposes something beyond it—hence the neutral illumination” (283). Humbert follows his description of Lolita’s helpless and inane expression with another of his appeals for the reader’s understanding of *his* emotional state:

And when you bear in mind that these were the raised eyebrows and parted lips of a child, you may better appreciate what depths of calculated carnality, what reflected despair, restrained me from falling at her dear feet and dissolving in human tears, and sacrificing my

jealousy to whatever pleasure Lolita might hope to derive from mixing with dirty and dangerous children in an outside world that was real to her. (284)

While Lolita's emotional state is "neutral" and impotent, Humbert's is strong and "calculated." He feels despair, she feels so much she feels nothing.

At this point Humbert recalls:

I often noticed that living as we did, she and I, in a world of total evil, we would become strangely embarrassed whenever I tried to discuss something she and an older friend, she and a parent, she and a real healthy sweetheart, I and Annabel, Lolita and a sublime, purified, analyzed, deified Harold Haze, might have discussed—an abstract idea, a painting, stippled Hopkins or shorn Baudelaire, God or Shakespeare, anything of a genuine kind. Good Will! She would mail her vulnerability in trite brashness and boredom. (284)

Although he acknowledges that Lolita's affected boredom is a defense mechanism, he fails to see that she uses her access to weak affects as a means of stalling or thwarting Humbert's idealized romantic narrative and forcing a series of literal and figurative detours. When Lolita asks Humbert where her "murdered mummy" is buried, Humbert castigates her for her flippancy, "'Ray,' said Lo for hurray, and languidly left the room" (286). Humbert then discovers that she had been reading a book about a dying mother's love for her daughter and sees that languidness for Lo is a mask that covers mourning. Humbert "recall[s] that on this and similar occasions, it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita's states of mind while comforting my own base

self" (287).

Humbert wishes the reader to believe he is a man whose overwhelming passions place him at the mercy of fate, while Lolita is "A combination of naïveté and deception, of charm and vulgarity, of blue sulks and rosy mirth, Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat," leaving Humbert "not really quite prepared for her fits of disorganized boredom, intense and vehement griping, her sprawling, droopy, dopey-eyed style, and what is called goofing off—a kind of diffused clowning which she thought was tough in a boyish hoodlum way. Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl" (147-148). Try as he might to convince himself, Lolita is not the Annabel from his thwarted childhood love affair. Poe's tragic, gothic maiden has been replaced with a modern, petulant, postwar American teenager. This uncharitable description vilifies the paradoxically productive effects of Lolita's passive, weak affects. Lolita uses her boredom throughout the novel as a means of defending herself against Humbert's amorous advances:

Most often, in the slouching, bored way she cultivated, Lo would fall prostrate and abominably desirable into a red springchair or a green chaise lounge, or a steamer chair of striped canvas with footrest and canopy, or a sling chair, or any other lawn chair under a garden umbrella on the patio, and it would take hours of blandishments, threats and promises to make her lend me for a few seconds her brown limbs in the seclusion of the five-dollar room before undertaking anything she might prefer to my poor joy. (147)

Lolita's boredom here postpones Humbert's sexual gratification in a way that is unpleasurable to him and markedly dissimilar to his own delay of sexual possession elsewhere in the text, but it also has the effect of forcing Humbert's text to mimic the delay in his sexual gratification through the mindless repetition of the various chairs Lo sits in (the reader will remember that Humbert fills voids with the repetition of words and images). Humbert's desires repeatedly incite what he characterizes as boredom in Lolita during their travels:

I would park at a strategic point, with my vagrant schoolgirl beside me in the car, to watch the children leave school—always a pretty sight. This sort of thing soon began to bore my so easily bored Lolita, and, having a childish lack of sympathy for other people's whims, she would insult me and my desire to have her caress me while blue-eyed little brunettes in blue shorts, copperheads in green boleros, and blurred boyish blondes in faded slacks passed by in the sun. (161)

Here Humbert, as usual, shifts the focus from Lolita's weak affect—boredom—to his feelings, condemning her "lack of sympathy" for his sexual desires as "childish." The narration of this boredom, however, necessitates the lengthy description of his desires.

The first year the pair spend on the road is one long exercise in going nowhere fast:

Now, in perusing what follows, the reader should bear in mind not only the general circuit as adumbrated above, with its many sidetrips and tourist traps, secondary circles and skittish deviations, but also the

fact that far from being an indolent *partie de plaisir*, our tour was a hard, twisted, teleological growth, whose sole *raison d'être* (these French clichés are symptomatic) was to keep my companion in passable humor from kiss to kiss. (154)

Humbert claims that the trip was not one of lazy pleasure, but rather the outgrowth of Humbert's attempts to create a sense of limited futurity for Lolita at her behest. This passage also describes the movement of the narrative itself. Humbert's flourishes of rhetoric serve the same purpose as these "secondary circles and skittish deviations"—the prolongation of his time with a "nymphet," and his narrative delays pleasurably postpone the gratification of his desires. Lolita forces Humbert to create a sense of futurity for her in order to secure her compliance and end her passive delays: "Every morning during our yearlong travels I had to devise some expectation, some special point in space and time for her to look forward to, for her to survive until bedtime. Otherwise, deprived of a shaping and sustaining purpose, the skeleton of her day sagged and collapsed" (151). He continues, "By putting the geography of the United States into motion, I did my best for hours on end to give her the impression of 'going places,' of rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight" (152). The best Humbert can offer is the "*impression of going places,*" the deceptive practice of pretending to approach a conclusion when the act truly serves as a means of prolonging their journey without a destination. If Humbert possesses the emotional tools of a manipulative ruler, Lolita possesses the passive resistance of the disenfranchised, which she ultimately uses to escape her kidnapper. The

reader is led to believe that Humbert is in control of the narrative's formal structure into which he inserts self-conscious acts of narrative delay in his attempts to prolong the length of time Lolita spends as his 12-year-old victim in the story time. Lolita's narrative delays, however, work at the level of this narrated or story time. Her weak or neutral affects postpone Humbert's pleasure in the hopes of creating or hastening a futurity for herself. For Lolita, short of the physical escape she eventually manages, the only way out of Humbert's clutches is to age out of them—a task her delays work to hasten. Yet, Humbert narrates these delays. While unpleasurable to him when they occur during the story time of the plot, they ultimately further his goal of prolonging the narrative. The affective disparity between the two characters is most strikingly seen when a melodramatic, tearful Humbert visits a married, pregnant Lolita and finds her utterly unmoved by his elaborate appeals to her to run away with him answering merely, finally, and with pity, "No, honey, no" (279). The final description of Lolita we receive is that of insouciance: "I was surprised (this a rhetorical figure, I was not) that the sight of the old car in which she had ridden as a child and a nymphet, left her so very indifferent. All she remarked was it was getting sort of purplish about the gills" (280). Here Humbert uses affect, or the profession of it, as a rhetorical figure, relegating surprise, the "neutral" affect according to Silvan Tomkins²⁷, to a feeling in word or name only divorced from visceral experience. Humbert the narrator feigns surprise then admits that this is yet another example of his choosing "fancy prose" over accurate recounting.

²⁷ See Introduction.

In this, the last scene in which Lolita appears in the novel, she takes pleasure in delaying, thereby controlling, the revelation of Quilty's identity to Humbert in their final meeting:

She thought I had guessed long ago. It was (with a mischievous and melancholy smile) such a sensational name. I would never believe it. She could hardly believe it herself. His name, my fall nymph. It was so unimportant, she said. She suggested I skip it. Would I like a cigarette? No. His name. She shook her head with great resolution. She guessed it was too late to raise hell and I would never believe the unbelievably unbelievable—I said I had better go, regards, nice to have seen her. She said really it was useless, she would never tell, but on the other hand, after all—'Do you really want to know who it was? Well, it was—' And softly, confidentially, arching her thin eyebrows and puckering her parched lips, she emitted, a little mockingly, somewhat fastidiously, not untenderly, in a kind of muted whistle, the name that the astute reader has guessed long ago. (271-2)

Here, of course, Humbert's narrative seeks to outdo Lolita's hedging and the taunting of a secret yet-to-be revealed. He continues to delay the revelation of Quilty's identity for several pages.

What I term "queer time" in the novel then is linked to a baffling of heteronormative conceptions of temporality, (re)production, and linearity. Humbert's pedophilia functions as an anti-progress narrative, a subversion of heteronormative narratives of reproductive sexuality. Humbert claims that his desires are a result of thwarted romantic love, itself a familiar "boy meets

girl” narrative progressing sequentially through love, marriage, and children. He blames the derailing of his burgeoning sexuality, arrested at a young age with the death of his first adolescent lover, Annabel, for dooming him to attempt to recreate this site of desire over and over again with pre-pubescent girls. Humbert claims this unconsummated pubescent affair led to his fixation with Lolita. Though it reads as an attempt to justify his pedophilia, this interrupted sexual relationship mirrors the starts, stops, and stutters of his prose. He writes, “When I try to analyze my own cravings, motives, actions and so forth, I surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives and which causes each visualized route to fork and re-fork without end in the maddeningly complex prospect of my past” (13). The non-linear narrative of his endless hypothetical past imaginings resembles the recursive, compulsive re-reading of a book as he “leaf[s] again and again through these miserable memories” (13). He begins this portion of his narrative by “primly limit[ing]” his description of Annabel, thus equating long, lush description with the imprudent and the lewd, and ends by claiming, “I have reserved for the conclusion of my ‘Annabel’ phase the account of our unsuccessful first tryst” (14). He ends his story of Annabel by framing the beginning his story of Lolita through the lens of failed and thwarted sexuality.

In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman positions queerness as “outside and beyond its political symptoms, the place of the social order’s death drive” and asserts that “queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as

resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure” (3). In his Lacanian analysis, queerness names the structural position of the death drive and Edelman argues for a queer acceptance of this figuration as a means of “undoing the symbolic” that structures the politics of the social order (27). He writes:

[T]he Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust [...] the image of the Child, not be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children, serves to regulate political discourse [...] For the social order exists to preserve for this universalized subject, this fantasmatic Child, a notional freedom more highly valued than the actuality of freedom itself, which might, after all, put at risk the Child to whom such a freedom falls due. (11)

In the novel, John Ray, Jr., the fictional author of the novel’s parodic foreword, provides the moralizing viewpoint of a social order predicated on the reproductive futurity Edelman examines:

[S]till more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader; for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac—these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. ‘Lolita’ should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a

safer world. (5-6)

The novel wraps its tale of Humbert's renunciation of a social order predicated on reproductive futurity and the imaginary figure of the innocent child Edelman discusses within a parodic cloak. Nabokov himself lets us know unequivocally that he is "neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm" ("On a book" 314-315). The foreword seeks to preempt the search for a moral within the book by parodying those who might seek one, as well as any insistence on a moral didacticism that would position the future good of the imagined child above the pleasure, the "aesthetic bliss" of the moment. John Ray is the figure of the reader who cannot see beyond his own expectations and of the critic whose belief in his own theories of literature and human behavior threaten to obscure the text.

Humbert continually mocks and renounces a social order predicated on reproductive futurism. He delights in the play on "knowing" a person in the biblical sense when he refers to the book in which Charlotte had recorded Lolita's measurements and development ("*A Guide to Your Child's Development*") as the "Know-Your-Child" book, rendering this explicitly in his description of another volume: "I read and reread a book with the unintentionally biblical title *Know Your Own Daughter* (81, 107, 174). He points out various other puns and ironies during their travels: "I derived a not

exclusively economic kick form such roadside signs as Timber Hotel, *Children under 14 Free*” (147), to mention just one example. Humbert disavows his own reproductive capabilities by desiring pre-pubescents and he feigns ignorance of Lolita’s by describing her menarche as evidence of his sexual prowess. When Humbert acknowledges his own reproductive capability, he sees it as a tool either to remove Charlotte from the house so he may drug and rape Lolita or as a means of providing him with a supply of easily accessible nymphets to molest—the children and grandchildren he fantasizes having with Lolita:

I could switch in the course of the same day from one pole of insanity to the other—from the thought that around 1950 I would have to get rid somehow of a difficult adolescent whose magic nymphage had evaporated—to the thought that with patience and luck I might have her produce eventually a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a Lolita the Second, who would be eight or nine around 1960 [...] indeed, the telescoping of my mind, or un-mind, was strong enough to distinguish in the remoteness of time a [...] bizarre, tender, salivating Dr. Humbert, practicing on a supremely lovely Lolita the Third the art of being a granddad. (174)

Humbert figures reproductive futurity in a pleurably perverse fashion. The figure of the child who always exists in a fantasy of the future is, in this case, the figure of the child perpetually available for sexual possession. Humbert’s version of reproductive futurity does not involve adherence to current social and social political restrictions in order to preserve the innocent existence of future generations, but rather the flaunting of them in order to preserve the

fantasy of the victimization of future generations. While I do not necessarily read Humbert's queerness as related to an embracing or embodying of the death drive (the structural queerness Edelman discusses); I do read as queer the way he complicates the social order's relationship to the figure of the child by refiguring the implications of a constantly receding future predicated upon the linear temporality of reproduction.

Humbert has also been read by some critics as a queer figure for different reasons. Ohi, for example, views Humbert as queer by virtue of the way he "volubly celebrates a forbidden, illegal passion" and

[B]ecause his desire and his prose are energized by the world's disapproval, because he transforms everything he encounters into an aspect, sign, monument, or portent of his passion, because he is riven and obsessed, self-loathing and self-aggrandizing, proud and ashamed, mawkish and ironic, conflicted and absolutely arrogant in his refusal, his inability to stop talking about a love that disgusts the world. He seems to allow, to invite, my presumption in thinking that his predicament is a terribly familiar one. (188)

Ohi argues against moralizing readings of the novel that concern themselves with determining the level of sincerity present in Humbert's declarations of guilt in favor of "relinquish[ing] ourselves to the seduction of desire as a form of aestheticism or decadence (and of decadence as a mode or desire), of Humbert's love as founded on an impossibility or loss structural to writing" (188). Stockton's queer reading of the novel, in contrast, hinges on Lolita's position as a sexual child "queered by Freud" who "possesses sexual wishes

and aggressive urges, often in queer (mis-)alignment with fathers. [. . .] But Lolita is queer herself. Sexually schooled by 'little lesbians,' Dolly as the quintessential not-yet-straight child has her own movements with and against her two pedophiles through a set of dogs" (121). While Ohi convincingly reads the tropes of sentimentalism Humbert deploys as performing the queer work of destabilizing representation and Stockton reads Lolita's queerness through her actual and metaphorical relationship to dogs and modes of locomotion, I read Humbert's rhetoric and Lolita's (in)action as bound up with the structural processes of narrative delay. Given its pedophile narrator and sexualized child, whose normative development is arrested by her abuser, the novel's queerness is most clearly seen in its treatment of time.

The failure of Humbert's and Lolita's sexualities to fall within categories recognizable as heteronormative influences the narrative structure of the novel. While Humbert offers examples of what he would have the reader believe are narratives similar to his own—he repeatedly alludes to and compares himself with Edgar Allan Poe who married his 13-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm, and claims, "Marriage and cohabitation before the age of puberty are still not uncommon in certain East Indian provinces. Lepcha old men of eighty copulate with girls of eight, and nobody minds. After all, Dante fell madly in love with his Beatrice when she was nine" (19)—it is clear that his narrative of pedophilia falls outside the bounds of these historical anecdotes in his desire to halt the maturation of nymphets and deny both his and their potential for reproduction. After all, Poe took Virginia as his bride with the attendant normative expectations of marriage, not his prisoner or

concubine, and Dante was Beatrice's contemporary, not a much older lover. Lolita's own nascent sexuality is portrayed as being thrown off trajectory by Humbert's interference. Her initial introduction comes at camp as a form of child's play, which then becomes warped by the "parody of incest" she shares with Humbert (287). Later, Clare Quilty, who is revealed to be a child pornographer, refuses to fulfill her own romantic fantasies of monogamy. He asks her to perform "Crazy things, filthy things. I said no, I'm just not going to [she used, in all insouciance really, a disgusting slang term which, in a literal French translation, would be *souffler*] your beastly boys, because I want only you. Well, he kicked me out" (277). This is yet another example of Humbert's elaborate prose used in service of narrative delay—he removes the word "blow" from Lolita's mouth and inserts a 19-word interjection ironically condemning her vulgarity while celebrating the "old-world politeness" that he exploits as a means to elaborately detail that which he claims to be unable to discuss (38). Lolita's life ends with the product of her normative marriage—her daughter—killing her in childbirth. The nonheteronormative, queer trajectories of these characters become bound up in the formal properties of the text creating the novel's nested narration and engendering textual interruptions that mirror the fractured psyche of the characters, as well as their grief and desires, in recursive acts of delay. Thus, "queer time" in the novel is that which names the stalled maturation, development and progress of the characters that then becomes replicated in formal textual delays. These textual delays are in turn, as I have shown, related to the use of affect in the novel.

There is, of course, no future generation to be had in *Lolita*. Humbert's perverse plan to bear girl children with Lolita whom he could in turn molest is upset by the perversity of Lolita's actual demise: killed on Christmas day giving birth to a girl—a warped and ironic Virgin Mary. While John Ray, Jr. provides a utilitarian view of the worth of literature that aligns the goals of art with those of the reigning social order—that it should teach us things and pave the way for a better tomorrow, the text refuses him. John Ray looks toward the future and correlates meaning and value with a concern for children and the next generation, but Nabokov's "aesthetic bliss" belongs to the present.

CHAPTER 2

KILLING TIME: VIOLENCE AND QUEER TEMPORALITY IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

“Bigger, are there many Negro boys like you?’ ‘I reckon so. All of ‘em I know ain’t got nothing and ain’t going nowhere’” (357).

In his exploration of public sex and gay cruising in New York City in the late-twentieth century, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Samuel Delany describes various queer interactions within pornographic movie theaters, including the following encounter:

I glanced at the young guy, two rows below and a few seats to the side, when suddenly he put back his head, black hair glimmering in the screen’s light in rhythm with his fist. He blinked twice, closed his eyes, clamped his teeth, and, as his lips pulled apart, in two large gouts and a smaller, from his speeding grip his fluids arched into the black between his khaki knees, wide against two different seat backs. [. . .] After moments, breathing hard, he sat up to grin. ‘Hey . . . that was a . . . pretty good one, wasn’t it?’ [. . .] The young man looked up and—still grinning—saw me: ‘Not bad—hey, you’re watchin’ me too?’ I nodded. ‘I’m gettin’ off on her up there—’ he pointed at the screen—‘and you guys are all gettin’ off on *me* . . .? That’s funny, huh?’ [author’s emphasis]. (21-2)

Here Delany describes a man at a theater known as a gay cruising ground, which showed straight pornography, identified by gay patrons as a “straight kid” masturbating and inviting others to watch so long as they “sit at least a

seat away" (21). While the man in question might claim to be "getting off" on the porn actress on screen, he is also very clearly aroused by the queer voyeurism of the theater as a homoerotic space, by being watched by other men. I foreground Delany's work on the relationship between movie theaters and public sex in the latter half of the century in order to think backward through this moment of cruising to the homoerotic sex acts contained in movie theaters past, specifically the scene of masturbation that occurs in the Regal Theatre²⁸ in Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son*. Occurring at the point in the plot when protagonist Bigger Thomas and his friend Jack kill time before their thwarted attempt to rob Blum's store, the scene is a key instance of waiting or inaction characterized by queer behavior. Such moments in the text punctuate the narrative's linear movement and progress revealing the queer temporality that structures the novel. The scene depicts the theater as a homoerotic space where Bigger and Jack masturbate together and for each other. This chapter reads the Regal Theatre scene as one that highlights Bigger's position as a queer figure within the text. It depicts his homoerotic sexual behavior and shows the weak affects associated with his passive spectatorship to be both gendered and nonheteronormative.

Native Son depicts Bigger as suffering from a case of arrested development. He is a twenty-year-old perpetual adolescent who is denied the socio-economic means of maturity by the systemic racism and oppression of

²⁸ The address and description of the Regal Theatre given in *Native Son* corresponds with Chicago's Regal Theater, built in 1928 and shuttered in 1968. I use the former spelling when discussing the novel's fictionalized theater and

American society. As a heteronormative “coming-of-age” narrative is both inaccessible and undesirable to Bigger, the novel constitutes a story of stalled development. Without the possibility of occupying such a narrative he has no future, a reality that queers his development, much as it does *Lolita*’s, as discussed in the previous chapter. Bigger’s delayed maturation is reflected in the narrative delays in the text—the instances of time killing that interrupt and delay the novel’s progress. If Bigger exists when he *acts*—impulsively, violently, and motivated by rage or fear—as his lawyer Boris Max argues at his trial, how then are we to read the large portions of the novel Bigger spends waiting to act; the stretches of narrative time marked by inaction that give way to violent outbursts? I focus on the Regal Theatre scene as a specific depiction of one such instance of “killing time” that prefigures Bigger’s acts of violence—his “time to kill”—as a way to examine the interplay of queerness, affect and narrative structure within the text.

Bigger kills time through his passive spectatorship of the world around him, a spectatorship characterized by weak or neutral affects that manifest in displays of idleness, apathy, and disaffection. These moments of passivity and inaction form a stark contrast to those in which Bigger’s strong affects lead to violent action, yet have rarely been critically addressed. In *Native Son*, the strong affects that propel the major events of the plot—the fear and rage that enable Bigger’s murders and his flight from the law—are unsustainable. For the text to stretch from beginning to end, to develop linearly, these strong

the latter when referring to its physical referent. See Clovis E. Semmes, *The Regal Theater and Black Culture*, for a history of the Chicago venue.

affects must be interrupted, delayed by the weak, enduring ones. Bigger's indifference slows his rage; his anxiety causes a passivity that counters his quick, fear-based movements. Roland Barthes's formulation of the "Neutral" provides a useful lens through which to read the narrative function of weak affects. As explored in the Introduction, Barthes locates a subversive potential to disrupt or unsettle cultural and societal progress narratives in the dilatory affects he aligns with the Neutral, which include the idleness, anxiety, and hysteria that plague Bigger. These weak affects are all associated with inaction. They arrest the narrative development of the text, just as they characterize Bigger's own queer arrested development. Such a reading of the novel leads to a new understanding of *Native Son's* narrative as structured by a queer temporality that, in concert with racial difference and socio-economic inequality, disrupts heteronormative progress narratives predicated on maturity and reproduction. Such an understanding, in turn, complicates dominant readings of Bigger's sexuality and masculinity and the role of both in the plot.

Cruising the Movies

Bigger's visit to the Regal Theatre to watch the film *Trader Horn* as a way to kill time before his planned armed robbery reveals the passive inaction of waiting, as brought on by feelings of nervousness and anxiety, to be queer in nature. Throughout the novel, Bigger kills time through acts of passive spectatorship characterized by weak or "neutral" affects. The beginning of the novel establishes Bigger's physical day as one long exercise in time killing—from loitering on street corners to "loafing" with friends to watching a movie.

While any of these activities might be considered active pursuits under different circumstances, for Bigger they all serve as a prelude to the violence he hopes will happen. Bigger's world swings between action and idleness. In a particularly telling passage, the novel reveals the weak and strong emotional poles Bigger vacillates between:

All that morning he had lurked behind his curtain of indifference and looked at things, snapping and glaring at whatever had tried to make him come out into the open [. . .] Confidence could only come again now through action so violent that it would make him forget. These were the rhythms of his life: indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger—like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force. Being this way was a need of his as deep as eating. (28-9)

Yet Bigger's actions are often futile or impotent and dependent upon outside forces. Bigger "had been so conditioned in a cramped environment that hard words or kicks alone knocked him upright and made him capable of action—action that was futile because the world was too much for him. It was then that he closed his eyes and struck out blindly, hitting what or whom he could, not looking or caring what or who hit back" (240). Bigger seeks violence for its own sake. He finds pleasure in mindless acting out. The victims of his violence are physically weaker and usually women. Even as Bigger's violence hurts others, he frames his desire for such action as the certainty that something will happen *to him*. He fails to claim any agency and denies

accountability even within the structure of his own desires:

Because he was restless and had time on his hands, Bigger yawned again and hoisted his arms high above his head. 'Nothing ever happens,' he complained. 'What you want to happen?' 'Anything,' Bigger said with a wide sweep of his dingy palm, a sweep that included all the possible activities of the world [. . .] 'I reckon we the only things in this city that can't go where we want to go and do what we want to do.' [. . .] 'That's why you feeling like something awful's going to happen to you,' Gus said. 'You think too much.' 'What in hell can a man do?' Bigger asked, turning to Gus. 'Get drunk and sleep it off.' (20-21).

Bigger's certainty that something awful will happen to him becomes a shorthand for his perspective on his place in society as a member of a powerless underclass with no agency and no life options. His failure to acknowledge his role in his own actions and eventual fate speaks to his embrace of animalistic drives and impulses as a way of relieving his restlessness.

Bigger's early attempts to allay his anxious idleness merely prolong it: "Well, he could not stand here all day like this. What was he to do with himself? He tried to decide if he wanted to buy a ten-cent magazine, or go to a movie, or go to the poolroom and talk with the gang, or just loaf around. With his hands deep in his pockets, another cigarette slanting across his chin, he brooded and watched the men at work across the street" (12-13). Here Bigger offers up a false choice: stand there all day or "loaf around" somewhere else,

while he silently observes the obvious alternative across the street—men at work. Each of the activities Bigger considers are simply distractions—ways to kill time. He associates his lack of opportunities for action with his position in a racial underclass in his conversation with Gus after the pair has finished pantomiming various movie representations of whites in positions of power, what they call “playing white”: “‘Goddammit!’ ‘What’s the matter?’ ‘They don’t let us do *nothing*.’ ‘Who?’ ‘The *white* folks [. . .] They do things and we can’t’” [Wright’s emphasis] (19-20). The one thing Bigger knows whites will allow him to do, in terms of opportunity and acknowledgement, is become a criminal. It is this predetermined interpellation that leads Bigger to accidentally kill Mary Dalton. He knows the act of being a black man in a white woman’s bedroom will lead to accusations of rape, and his panicked attempts to avoid detection lead to murder. Bigger suffers from a fatal restlessness. He cannot live with the nervous anxiety that is the product of the limited narrative choices available to him and he cannot relieve these passive feelings without resorting to violence.

The novel frequently links Bigger’s passivity to his position as a spectator both of the mass media and of the strangers he watches. He often absorbs and internalizes the information he passively receives about himself. Newspapers, for example, are an external form of media that shape his internal desires and relationship to the world. Constituted by the images he is presented with, he is not an active or critical reader of mass culture. Bigger becomes the narrative he reads about himself. In a conspicuous example, the media’s construction of Bigger-as-rapist presages Bigger’s actual rape of

Bessie. His relationship to film viewing, however, is his most explicit act of spectatorship in the novel. Bigger views movies specifically as a distraction: “He needed more money; if he did not get more than he had now he would not know what to do with himself for the rest of the day. He wanted to see a movie; his senses hungered for it. In a movie he could dream without effort; all he had to do was lean back in a seat and keep his eyes open” (13-4). Bigger “dreams without effort” by letting the film do his dreaming for him, effectively circumscribing the narratives available to his consciousness. His willful rejection of agency encompasses even his potentially powerful spectator position. Indeed, Bigger is rarely an active spectator. In the movie theater, as on the street, or while observing Mary and Jan together, he is affected by the events he sees unfold while those events remain unaffected by him. Even when Bigger reimagines the imagery of *Trader Horn*, as I discuss shortly, he simply swaps one image of his powerlessness for another as he is unable to imagine a situation where society allows him to do *something* instead of nothing.

The Regal Theatre scene illustrates how Bigger’s passive and restless spectatorship becomes associated with queerness. In this scene, Bigger and Jack masturbate together in the theater, then change seats and watch a newsreel featuring the vacation exploits of Mary Dalton before viewing part of the film. Their public sex act is performed as much for each other as for any private release as they verbally narrate their pleasure to one another:

Bigger moved restlessly and his breath quickened; he looked round in the shadows to see if any attendant was near, then slouched far down

in his seat. He glanced at Jack and saw that Jack was watching him out of the corners of his eyes. They both laughed. 'You at it again?' Jack asked. 'I'm polishing my nightstick,' Bigger said. They giggled. 'I'll beat you,' Jack said. (30)

Their pleasure takes on the language of discipline and authority. Bigger's "nightstick" is a punishing instrument. Jack's brag that he'll finish first is a simultaneous offer of aid. The only other theatergoer mentioned is a woman who may have observed Bigger and Jack masturbating as she walked past them. This spectator is figured as both a willing and unwilling participant in the pair's sexual act and fantasies: "'I believe that woman who passed saw us.' 'So what?' 'If she comes back I'll throw it in her.' 'You a killer.' 'If she saw it she'd faint' 'Or grab it, maybe.' 'Yeah.'" (30). This dialogue appears after a break in their conversation, so it is not entirely clear which character is speaking which lines. Since Bigger turns out to actually be a rapist and "a killer," it is easy to assume that he is the one who threatens to "throw it in her" and brags that the sight of his member might cause her to faint, but the ambiguity here signals that the thought process of these juvenile delinquents is interchangeable. At this moment, Bigger is simply one of any number of boys, as would later be revealed at his trial when "the manager of the Regal Theatre told how Bigger and *boys like him* masturbated in the theatre, and of how he had been afraid to speak to them about it, for fear that they might start a fight and cut him [my emphasis]" (380). The manager confirms that the theater is a site where public sex acts were a known occurrence. Bigger and Jack's masturbation is not an aberrant bit of deviance, but part of a public sex

culture among un- or under-employed young men. Jack's comment to Bigger, "You at it again?" signals a pattern of behavior in which Bigger can be understood to not only habitually masturbate in this public space, but also to do so either with or observed by Jack. While the boys may claim to wish they had their respective girlfriends with them, the erotic nature of the scene depends on their public, homoerotic display of virility. The manager's testimony about boys like Bigger is immediately followed by "A man from the juvenile court [who] said that Bigger had served three months in a reform school for stealing auto tires," thus further associating public masturbation with a history of juvenile delinquency (380).

In his sociological study of twentieth-century African American literature, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Roderick Ferguson reads social formations, modernization, industrialization, and urbanization as forces that shaped a perception of African American communities during the 1920s and 30s as nonheteronormative. Ferguson makes this claim by citing sociologists' linking of ethnicity with variant familial constructions and argues that Bigger's juvenile delinquency in *Native Son* constitutes queer behavior due to the 1930s sociological association of such behavior with nonheteronormativity: "The [Regal Theatre] scene imagines juvenile delinquency as dangerously close to outright homosexuality, a closeness institutionalized through urban life. Though nonnormative heterosexual practices and homosexual practices were not commensurate in the 1930s, they were indeed adjacent" (48-9). The Regal scene, in its homoeroticism and the relative privacy of the darkened theater,

also gestures decidedly toward a gay cruising subculture. Gay male culture in 1930s Chicago was relatively open during the early years of the decade, but increasingly policed by the end, as David K. Johnson notes in his work on these historical subcultures. Johnson cites records from 1937 relating how “plainclothes police officers arrested men in theaters for fondling other men, and judges, under pressure from a frightened populace, gave maximum \$200 fines for the crime” (112). He also describes gay male culture in the 1930s as a type of youth subculture already focused on nonreproductive sexual practices:

[S]ince at least World War I, a peer-oriented, youth subculture has played a central role in shifting the center of social life from the home to the streets, theaters, and dance halls of urban America. Given the importance by 1930 of a youth culture organized around heterosexual dating, petting parties, and commercialized amusements—that is, around heterosexual desire unassociated with family or reproduction—the existence of a parallel world of homosexual desire seems almost unremarkable. (114)

In *Native Son*, Bigger and Jack’s public masturbation is portrayed as unequivocally deviant and nearly equal parts juvenile delinquency and homosexual behavior. Such nonheteronormative behavior has much in common with a 1930s gay cruising subculture.

George Chauncey writes of the adoption of various urban movie theaters as gay cruising grounds in the early twentieth century in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*:

Numerous movie and burlesque theaters, especially those in gay

cruising areas, also became a part of the gay circuit. [. . .] The theaters also developed an unsavory reputation in middle-class society at large, which the nascent movie industry overcame only by building huge, elegant theaters (appropriately known as movie palaces) in the 1910s and 1920s. Even some of the palaces became known as trysting spots for heterosexual couples, however, and a few, particularly in less reputable areas, became places where gay men (as well as straight men simply interested in a homosexual encounter) could meet one another. (194)

The Regal Theater was in fact one of the urban “picture palaces” Chauncey describes, though located in Chicago instead of New York. Chauncey further writes:

Since moviegoing was a perfectly legitimate way to spend the afternoon, theaters were places where young men could go to search out other gay men and begin to learn about the gay world. ‘I thought I was [the] only one like this until I reached High School,’ recalled one thirty-four-year-old black man in 1922. After learning a bit about the gay world from the other homosexuals he met in school, though, ‘I used to go to matinees, meet people like myself, get into conversation and [I] learned that this is a quite common thing. They put me wise.’ (194-5)

Chauncey’s descriptions of movie theaters as cruising grounds that facilitated nonreproductive sexual acts and homosexual encounters recall the behavior of Bigger and Jack at the Regal. Their joint masturbation is an act made possible

by the relative privacy of the theater, yet it is still a public, illegal, nonheteronormative sexual practice. The act of cruising itself bears a specific relationship to temporality. It is defined by watchful waiting and repetitive movements that serve as a prelude to a sexual act or encounter, such as circling a theater: “I usually take a quick tour of the whole place, just to see how things are looking. Here, that’s down the aisle there and up that one over there. Then it’s once around the balcony,” Delany tells a friend he has brought to the Metropolitan, a popular cruising ground (26). “There *are* a lot of people in here walking around,” his friend observes [author’s emphasis] (27). Delany and Chauncey’s descriptions of movie theater cruising share this in common with Bigger’s experiences in the Regal—cruising involves a lot of time killing.

Although witnesses at his trial testify that Bigger and his friend Jack masturbate to the newsreel of Mary Dalton, attempting to demonstrate Bigger’s lust for white women and Mary in particular, this is not what actually happens in the theater. Bigger and Jack masturbate prior to the start of the film to the sound of the theater’s pipe organ and change seats afterward. Indeed, the erotics of the scene concern nearly everything *except* lust for a white woman, including the homoerotic proximity of the male characters and the exotic space of the Moorish-Revival theater²⁹ itself, as well as the cinema

²⁹ In his history of the venue, Clovis E. Semmes describes the ornateness of the Regal and explains how the lavish interior was designed to invoke a particular exoticism through its Moorish Revival-style architecture and interior design: “Promoters boasted of marble floors from the Carrara quarries of Italy, silks from the Orient, ornate crystal chandeliers from Belgium, and mottled Moroccan leather-covered seats” (3). He continues, “The ceiling—a semi-atmospheric, illuminated, domed structure—provided a soaring tent-like effect with a richly beautiful, multicolored, striped motif. Through apertures

spectacles it houses and represents, and, finally, the sense of arousal at plans for their impending violent act—armed robbery. The place of women in the theater might seem to subject both the larger-than-life Mary Dalton in the newsreel and the female movie theater patron to Bigger and Jack’s controlling gaze, yet this is an illusory power they fail to actively wield, as demonstrated by Bigger’s earlier comments about passive movie watching. Even the potentially violent actions of the pair in this scene are merely projected onto them. The theater manager assumes the two are violent because they engage in deviant behavior, yet the idea of them pulling a knife when interrupted while masturbating seems logistically improbable. Likewise, the woman who walks past them is only retroactively threatened—only after she has passed by without incident do they make sexual threats that read as empty bravado. Like the “straight kid” in Delany’s example who claims to be aroused solely by the porn actress on screen, but is clearly seeking same-sex interaction, Bigger and Jack’s public sex act is primarily performed for each other.

The masturbatory actions of Bigger and Jack take place before viewing the movie they had gone to see—the 1931 film, *Trader Horn*. The primitivism on display in *Trader Horn*, which Bigger only half-watches, blurs the roles of spectator and spectacle for Bigger whose position as a spectator is inextricably bound up with his position as spectacle both in the plot of the novel and in his identification with the black bodies on screen; in both cases he lacks or believes he lacks agency. While film scholars have theorized modes of active

in the tent-like structure you could see the delicate silhouette of Moorish castles under a blue night sky with twinkling stars” (26).

spectatorship that involve processes of identification, what *Native Son* provides is a scene of spectatorship that serves a larger narrative purpose. Within the novel, spectatorship in the Regal is coded as passive time killing; and time killing in the novel—whether on the streets, in the pool hall, or in the movie theater—is associated with male homosociality. Male homosociality, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, is part of a queer continuum that connects it with male homosexuality (*Between Men* 1-5).

Writing of Bigger's spectatorship in terms of Wright's Marxist cultural criticism, Vincent Pérez argues that Bigger's desire for societal inclusion can be temporarily met within the confines of his spectatorship:

Just as American consumers in the 1930s and 1940s were drawn to the utopian aspects of media culture, by "losing himself" among the crowd, or amid the dazzling representations in the movies, Bigger too momentarily "merges" with the mainstream world as an equal member. Yet, significantly, unlike members of mainstream society, Bigger [. . .] is not drawn to the glamour of media culture. Rather, media texts for him embody *inclusion* in a national community from which he and other Blacks have traditionally been excluded [author's emphasis]. (157-8)

Pérez sees Bigger as an active spectator whose consumption of mass culture is an equalizing force in a capitalist society. Jacqueline Stewart also sees Bigger as an active spectator, and discusses Bigger's black spectatorship in *Migrating to the Movies* as engaging in a "spectatorial fluidity" that allows him to read

across the various performances witnessed in the theater, such as multiple film programs and newsreels: “Wright’s scene suggests that the variability of theater programs would have also shaped early Black ‘moviegoing’ experiences in general, and readings of individual films in particular” (100). Addressing the unrestored version of the text, which omits the masturbation scene and includes a double feature consisting of *The Gay Woman* and *Trader Horn*, Stewart argues that due to Bigger’s lack of socioeconomic mobility his relationship to film is that of a “reconstructed spectatorship” at odds with both the “ideal” white spectator and the figure of the deliberately distracted flâneur:

[W]ithout the flâneur’s affected freedom of unchecked social/geographic mobility, Bigger’s gaze is always tethered. In his viewing behavior he bristles at these restrictions, seeking to construct and synthesize fragments of images and sensations into coherent, satisfying wholes, or goals—the opposite of the flâneur/surrealist’s deliberately aimless, partial, disintegrative viewing (107).

Yet Bigger’s distracted spectatorship still presents him with possibilities not available to him outside the theater where his problems stem from his inability to construct a “satisfying whole” out of his life experiences: “There was something he *knew* and something he *felt*; [. . .] something spread out in *front* of him and something spread out in *back*; and never in all his life, with this black skin of his, had the two worlds, thought and feeling, will and mind, aspiration and satisfaction, been together; never had he felt a sense of wholeness [author’s emphasis]” (240).

This “sense of wholeness” Bigger craves is an impossible desire—the unifying of the split subject made impossible by the unintelligible nature of his racial otherness:

It was when he read the newspapers or magazines, went to the movies, or walked along the streets with crowds, that he felt what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black. (240)

Bigger’s lack of feelings of societal inclusion and his mental rewriting of *Trader Horn*’s depictions of blackness are less a means of constructing a pleasurable narrative, however, than an underscoring of the privilege he does not possess. Bigger “looked at *Trader Horn* unfold and saw the pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances and heard drums beating and then gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking, and dancing. Those were smart people; they knew how to get hold of money, millions of it” (33). The elision of these two worlds: the primitivist fantasy of *Trader Horn* and Bigger’s imagining of a wealthy white world, merely replaces one racial caricature with another, exchanging the African jungle for a white urban one. Bigger “loses” himself by letting his passive acts of spectatorship—how he kills time—define and circumscribe his identity. The newspapers and movies may offer the illusion of “merging,” but ultimately they tell him who he can and cannot be, and which narratives he can and cannot occupy.

Stewart argues that Bigger's spectatorship shares "some important affinities between Black working-class modes of modern looking via the cinema and those of bourgeois white flâneurs" by virtue of his "disjunctive engagements with the cinema as show (physical and mental engagement and withdrawal)" (106). Bigger's primary engagement in the restored version of the scene, however, is with the physical space of the cinema itself—the theater that offers a place to wait and the opportunity for the homosociality that Bigger associates with idleness and time killing. His secondary engagement with the film and the newsreel surely gestures toward Bigger's fantasy life, but in doing so reveals his lack of opportunity. For Bigger's dream is not simply to be or to bed the rich, but is a fantasy about white narratives of upward mobility that are unavailable to him. The attainable progress narratives he is ultimately presented with, such as religious salvation, are unappealing to Bigger.

While Pérez and Stewart make forceful claims for Bigger's agency as an active film spectator rather than a passive recipient of mass culture, Bigger has far less agency than he might appear to possess. Since spectatorship is coded as passive time killing within the larger plot of the novel, the duration of the scene should be read in terms of its *inaction*, or a lack of forward progress characterized by queer behavior. Bigger's queerness within the movie theater corresponds with the temporality of that moment in the text, which functions as a delay in the movement of the plot toward its resolution. Like other moments of killing time in the novel, this one is followed by an eruption of violence, even though the intended crime never takes place. Bigger nervously

changes his mind about the robbery and becomes violent with his friends to escape participation—a violence that carries homosexual undertones. After being accused of being “too nervous” by his friends, he attacks one of them, knocking Gus to the floor at which point “Bigger laughed, softly at first, then harder, louder, hysterically” (37). Bigger then draws a knife and forces Gus to lick its phallic blade (39). Bigger’s feminine anxiety is the precursor to sexualized violence.

Bigger’s relationship to the available progress narratives the space of the Regal represents is perhaps best expressed by Max at his trial: “this Negro boy, Bigger Thomas, is a part of a furious blaze of liquid life-energy which once blazed and is still blazing in our land. He is a hot jet of life that spattered itself in futility against a cold wall” (399). Bigger’s “hot jet of life” proves as impotent as his nonreproductive masturbatory sex act, semen also spattering in futility on the theater floor: “‘I don’t know where to put my feet now,’ Bigger said, laughing. ‘Let’s take another seat’” (30). Bigger fails to secure a future within the novel, a fact the novel attributes to the state of race relations in the 1930s: “Well, to tell the truth, Mr. Max, it seems sort of natural-like, me being here facing that death chair. Now I come to think of it, it seems like something like this just had to be” (358). Yet Bigger’s inability to imagine a future for himself also stems from his queer associations. In a heteronormative society that defines maturity as the reproduction of the dominant social order through sexual reproduction, Bigger’s inability to gain the economic and sexual maturity that would allow him to “grow up” and claim a place in this ordered world costs him his life.

As Max argues during his trial, Bigger's primary sexual outlet is nonreproductive masturbation: "Was not Bigger Thomas' relationship to his girl a masturbatory one? Was not his relationship to the whole world on the same plane?" (402). Bigger takes pleasure without giving and his juvenile masturbation becomes synonymous with an immature worldview that proves incompatible with a society focused on what Lee Edelman has called "reproductive futurism," or "terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (2). Bigger embodies the queer threat to the future of the fantasmatic figure of the Child, which Edelman posits as the basis for regulatory regimes that privilege heteronormativity and reproduction, through both his refusal to engage in a reproductive relationship and the murderous tendencies that make him a threat to society.

Although included in the page proofs sent to publisher Harper and Brothers in 1939, Wright edited the Regal Theatre scene prior to publication in order to make the novel's acceptance as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection possible. In requesting the changes, Wright's publisher, Edward Aswell wrote:

[I]ncidentally the Book Club wants to know whether, if they do choose *Native Son*, you would be willing to make some changes in that scene early in the book where Bigger and his friends are sitting in the moving picture theatre. I think you will recognize the scene I mean and will

understand why the Book Club finds it objectionable. They are not a particularly squeamish crowd, but that scene, after all, is a bit on the raw side. I daresay you could revise it in a way to suggest what happens rather than to tell it explicitly.

(486)

As a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, the novel sold 215,000 copies in the first three weeks of its release (Radway 287). The “raw” movie theater scene had a clear monetary value attached to its expurgation. Yet of all the potentially objectionable scenes in the novel, such as its graphic depictions of rape and murder, it was not the sexual and sexualized violence that offended, but the scene with mutually pleasurable homosexual undercurrents, the scene in which juvenile delinquency becomes conflated with queer behavior. The omitted text discussed in this chapter was restored in the 1991 Library of America edition based on Wright’s 1939 manuscript and HarperCollins has published this restored text in all subsequent printings and editions.³⁰

In his book club revision, Wright omitted the masturbation entirely, as well as much of the newsreel and any mention of Mary Dalton. Instead, the scene focuses on a lengthy depiction of the apparently fictional film *The Gay Woman*. The description of how Bigger saw *Trader Horn*’s “pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances and heard drums beating” (33) was replaced with a description of Bigger viewing the movie’s poster: “Two

³⁰ See Arnold Rampersad’s “Too Honest for His Own Time” Rpt. in *The Critical Response to Richard Wright*. Ed. Robert J. Butler. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995. (163-166) for a description of the editorial decisions made in restoring the text for the Library of America volume.

features were advertised: one, *The Gay Woman*, was pictured on the posters in images of white men and white women lolling on beaches, swimming, and dancing in night clubs; the other, *Trader Horn*, was shown on the posters in terms of black men and black women dancing against a wild background of barbaric jungle” (490). The description of *The Gay Woman* seems to replace the images of Mary Dalton in the newsreel: “He saw images of smiling, dark-haired white girls lolling on the gleaming sands of a beach. The background was a stretch of sparkling water. Palm trees stood near and far” (31). This passage appears to replace the image of Mary Dalton as one of the “daughters of the rich taking sunbaths in the sands of Florida!” (31). The description of the *Trader Horn* poster, however, is curious. The novel highlights the primitivist poster depiction of Africans, yet many of the extant movie posters for the 1931 film actually focused on the spectacle of the scantily clothed white female star of the film Edwina Booth, who portrays white “savage” Nina Trent, the lost daughter of missionaries who has “gone native” and become a tribal goddess. When looking at representative *Trader Horn* 1931 movie posters (figures 1-2), it becomes clear that MGM’s marketing strategy in the U.S. revolved around the sexualized figure of the white savage goddess—the fair-haired white woman made sexually available through her connection to uncivilized black Africa. In contrast, a 1931 poster from Sweden (figure 3) takes different approach and shows the disembodied head of an African tribesman, invoking imagery of the “noble savage.”

Figure 1



1931 Movie Poster

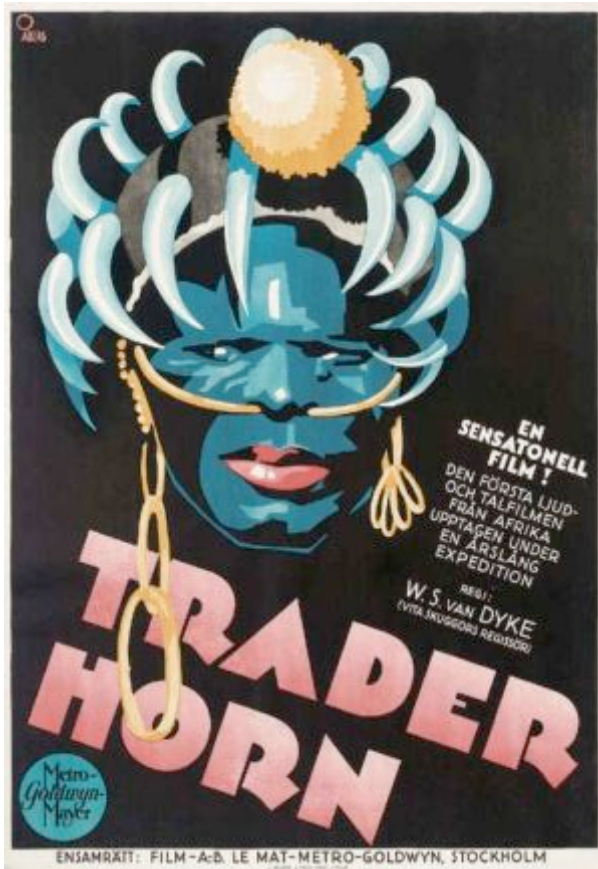
(Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Trader_Horn_\(1931_film\)_poster.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Trader_Horn_(1931_film)_poster.jpg))

Figure 2



(Source: http://www.movieposterdb.com/posters/09_12/1931/22495/1_22495_6cc8a0c6.jpg)

Figure 3



(Source: http://www.movieposterdb.com/posters/06_09/1931/0022495/1_131271_0022495_fedbeca9.jpg)

In both of the U.S. posters, Booth is a larger-than-life figure towering above not only black and white men, but also various jungle creatures, including elephants, hippos, and gorillas. As in von Sternberg's 1932 film, *Blonde Venus*, where an exoticized Marlene Dietrich emerges from a gorilla suit in her African safari-themed "Hot Voodoo" number to perform suggestively to "jungle beats," Booth wears a veneer of savage blackness that serves to sexualize the otherwise untouchable white woman underneath. Yet,

as the film and the posters makes clear, the white goddess is only really made sexually available to the white explorer, Horn. In one of the posters (fig. 2), it becomes clear that the only thing that can tame the “White goddess of the pagan tribes. The cruelest woman in all Africa!” is sexual conquest by the white male explorer. Horn’s conquest of the White Goddess is the domination and possession of Africa as well.

Mary becomes the stand-in for Booth (in both the published and restored versions) in her short appearance in the novel as the wild daughter of wealthy progressives who has a communist boyfriend and an interest in racial tourism. Jack goads Bigger with stories about how “them rich white women’ll go to bed with anybody, from a poodle on up. They even have their chauffeurs” (33), and inside the theater Bigger thinks:

Yes, his going to work for the Daltons was something big. Mr. Dalton was a millionaire. Maybe Mary Dalton was a hot kind of girl; maybe she spent lots of money; maybe she’d like to come to the South Side and see the sights sometimes. Or maybe she had a secret sweetheart and only he would know about it because he would have to drive her around; maybe she would give him money not to tell. (34)

Yet that very evening, when Bigger discovers that Mary is indeed a “hot kind of girl” with a secret sweetheart who wants to visit the South Side, his reaction is one of fear and confusion. Presented with his theater fantasy Bigger recoils: “some remote part of his mind considered in amazement how different the girl had seemed in the movie. On the screen she was not dangerous and his mind could do with her as it liked. But here in her home she walked over

everything, put herself in the way" (55). The momentary illusion of power he had over Mary-as-screen-spectacle dissolves once he enters her house and becomes her "project," which makes him feel "naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate" (67). Despite his advances, Mary is ultimately sexually available only to Jan, while Bigger is merely a passive spectator:

He was not driving; he was simply sitting and floating along smoothly through darkness. His hands rested lightly on the steering wheel and his body slouched lazily down in the seat. He looked at the mirror; Mary was lying flat on her back in the rear seat and Jan was bent over her. He saw a faint sweep of white thigh. They plastered, all right, he thought. He pulled the car softly round the curves, looking at the road before him one second and up at the mirror the next. (78)

Bigger slouches lazily in his seat just as he does in the movie theater, here enjoying a different type of show. As in the theater, his voyeurism leads to autoerotic arousal: "his muscles grew gradually taut. He sighed and sat up straight, fighting off the stiffening feeling in his loins" (78). This passive spectatorship, yet again, prefigures an outburst of violence when he smothers a drunken Mary to death with a pillow shortly after he drives her home.

The restoration of the masturbation scene by editor Arnold Rampersad was not without controversy, which largely hinged on questions of author intentionality. Rampersad argues that the restored text is closer to Wright's

authorial intention prior to the interference of the Book-of-the-Month Club, which he claims led Wright, “Poor all of his life and eager for a financial windfall,” to agree to make the revisions (164). Other critics argue that the expurgated passages belong in a note to the text. They see the publication of a manuscript instead of the published 1940 version whose changes Wright had completed as an undoing of the author’s final approval of the text.³¹

More interesting, however, is the content of the restored scene. The restoration of Bigger and Jack’s queer act of masturbation to the text complicates earlier readings of Bigger’s masculinity and sexuality. Critical discussions of how this scene adds nuance or dimension to Bigger’s sexuality often focus on Bigger’s desire for white women while ignoring the queerness of two boys masturbating together in the darkened theater. Such readings either assign the masturbatory act an aggressive heterosexuality or relate it to Bigger’s desire for white women, even though this scene, as I’ve discussed, is precisely *not* about Bigger’s desire for Mary. Rampersad claims:

[I]n making Bigger almost asexual and unresponsive where Mary Dalton is concerned, the Book-of-the-Month Club version made him less human, less alive and almost incomprehensible. And quite apart from its meaning in the novel itself, Bigger’s vibrant sexuality had historic significance. Never before in American literature, except in scurrilous attacks on black men as rapists or likely rapists, had black male sexuality been represented with such frankness. (165)

³¹ See James Tuttleton, “The Problematic Texts of Richard Wright” rpt. in *The Critical Response to Richard Wright*. (167-172).

While Bigger's sexuality is indeed represented frankly in the scene, it is not primarily heterosexual desire that is portrayed. Aimé J. Ellis similarly reads Bigger and Jack's actions in the theater as an example of "defiantly oppositional black male cultural practices" (185). In their act of public masturbation, Ellis sees a "collective unwillingness to abide by U.S. social decorum and order throughout the 1930s," arguing that as it is "Inextricably connected to a culture that appears to emasculate, maim, and desexualize, and in every conceivable way castrate black male subjectivity, masturbation can be interpreted not only as an oppositional gesture but also as a 'humanizing' practice" (189, 194). Yet this reading of the homoerotic scene as political protest views it through a heteronormative lens, a framework that is ultimately ill-suited for understanding the scene. Wright's widow and daughter, Ellen and Julia Wright, similarly supported the restoration of the Regal scene, arguing that it provides a fuller characterization of Bigger's sexuality, stating:

It is important to us that Bigger Thomas, who was 'castrated' because deprived of his sexual life in the edited 1940 text, is made whole again—and made human—by the reinstatement of this masturbation scene at the beginning of *Native Son* and of references to his guilt-ridden desire for rich, white Mary prior to the panic which leads him to smother her accidentally. (qtd. in Tuttleton 171)

What still remains unsaid in the debate over restoration, however, is an acknowledgement of the queerness of the scene. Bigger's sexuality is read as either denied (in the 1940 version) or aggressively, damningly heterosexual (in

the 1991 restoration), yet neither of these assessments can convincingly account for the actual act of masturbation that occurs or the physical site of this manifestation of desire—a movie theater. Readings that claim the inclusion of the scene restores Bigger’s sexuality or masculinity refer only to his inner thoughts about Mary as he wonders if she is “a hot kind of girl,” not his sexual behavior in the theater, which occurs before he first sees her on the newsreel (34). The restored text asks the reader to make sense of Bigger as a queer figure—a more complicated reading of his sexuality than as simply that of a violent rapist or emasculated boy, as it has largely been understood.

The Queer Temporality of Arrested Development

In *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton writes of the essential queerness of the figure of the child and discusses the relationship between the Freudian concept of “arrested development” and homosexuality. Within the framework of Freud’s stages of psychosexual development—oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital—homosexuality (what he called “inversion”) represents an “immature” sexuality that occurs when over- or under-indulgence of the child occurs during one stage and causes a fixation that prevents sexual maturation: “it is possible to point to external influences in their lives, whether of a favourable or inhibiting character, which have led sooner or later to a fixation of their inversion. (Such influences are exclusive relations with persons of their own sex, comradeship in war, detention in prison, the dangers of heterosexual intercourse, celibacy, sexual weakness, etc)” (Freud 6). For Freud, “masturbation is quite as frequently their [inverts’] exclusive [sexual] aim”

(11). Stockton notes that the “phrase [arrested development] has been the official-sounding diagnosis that has often appeared to describe the supposed sexual immaturity of homosexuals: their presumed status as dangerous children, who remain children in part by failing to have their own” (22). Bigger’s stalled developmental narrative resonates with such Freudian and cultural rhetoric that reads homosexuality as a case of “arrested development” and masturbation as an immature form of sexual release. Bigger’s sexuality throughout the novel is nonreproductive and more closely associated with death than life, from the masturbation associated with his queerness and juvenile delinquency to his rape of Bessie, which ends in her brutal murder. Throughout the novel, Bigger is referred to with racial condescension as a “boy” by white authority figures such as the police and Mr. Dalton, called one by his lawyer who attempts to use Bigger’s youth as a mitigating factor at trial, and by his mother as an expression of kinship. Infantilized by his economic dependence on his mother and his position in a racial underclass, Bigger, though twenty, is never a grown “man.” Writing about emasculation and nationalism in Wright’s work, Anthony Dawahare notes, “Wright shows how these feelings of emasculation can be intensified for black men, since they are extra-oppresed by racism and are symbolically emasculated as ‘boys’ in a racist discourse” (452). Dawahare further argues that the “Black men/‘boys’ are infantilized by white society, making American racism conterminous with sexism, since the infantilization of black men symbolically aligns them with ‘women,’ that other figure long associated with weakness and dependency in patriarchal society” (454-455). Bigger’s socially conditioned lack of

development is reflected in the delays in the narrative structure of the text, which take the form of long stretches of time killing in the novel.

The narrative structure of *Native Son* is generally thought of in terms of familiar plots and literary movements: it is a crime and punishment tale; a melodrama; a detective story; a confessional; a biblical narrative; a historical account; a black protest novel; and either a naturalistic narrative of environment and inevitability or a work of modernist fiction. As a rewriting of Theodore Dreiser's naturalist novel, *An American Tragedy* (1925), *Native Son* presents a narrative of crime and punishment and features an unsympathetic protagonist. Dreiser's long novel finds its narrative duration in the even, slow, and deliberate pacing of events relayed in excessively detailed exposition. The narration shifts between the omniscient, third-person point of view of the narcissistic, entitled, and social climbing protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, and a third-person subjective one that provides access to Clyde's thoughts and feelings. The narrative point of view does not remain within Clyde's consciousness, which allows for a slow and even third-person recounting of events as he schemes to obtain an upper-class lifestyle and methodically plots the murder he hopes will clear the way to it. The pacing of Wright's novel, in contrast, fluctuates wildly in third-person free indirect discourse, following the consciousness of Bigger—a socially created sociopath with violent mood swings. While both characters are represented as victims of their social environments, Bigger has no hope of accessing the wealth and privilege Clyde seeks. Bigger runs on animal instinct, killing out of impulse and opportunity, while Clyde attempts to cunningly navigate the society he is

presented with, eventually resorting to premeditated murder. For Dreiser, the “American tragedy” is the existence of social class strictures that turn Clyde, who might have otherwise been a well-adjusted boy, into a murderer. For Wright, Bigger’s existence can only take the form of a monster created by the inhuman social and economic conditions facing young, urban black males.³² While indebted to Dreiser’s naturalistic depictions of violence and socioeconomic class, Wright’s narrative differs in the motivations underlying each character’s actions, as well as the ways in which they carry out their crimes. Clyde’s planned crimes beget a measured narrative pace while Bigger’s erratic patterns of action and inaction are similarly mirrored in the delays and pauses in the text.

Gaining a better understanding of the novel’s narrative structure requires a closer study of Bigger’s seesawing pattern of passivity and action. Upon examination, it becomes clear that certain emotional states correspond to Bigger’s periods of passivity as opposed to those of violent action. Those moments in the text when Bigger passively kills time through spectatorship or surveillance are marked both by homosociality, as Part I explored, and the experience of “weak” emotions such as hysteria, anxiety, and boredom. Bigger’s passive stalling further reflects his “arrested development,” in which

³² Notably, in neither work is tragedy understood to include the murdered women killed by their current, former, or would-be lovers. The murder of a white woman in both novels serves as a plot device to illustrate the social forces at work on the male protagonists. The crimes committed against these women provide the impetus for the lengthy trial scenes and prison conclusions, but they are not the victims of either novel. Nor is Bigger’s black girlfriend Bessie, whose rape and murder at his hand ultimately goes unpunished.

he is prevented from becoming a “man” in a white class-bound society, and rejects the normative progress narratives made available to him. Bigger’s failure to “grow up” relegates him to a queer, futureless existence resulting in a narrative that can only be resolved by his death. The certainty of his execution provides closure to the novel.

In her 1993 essay on the novel, “The Re(a)d and the Black,” Barbara Johnson writes, “The unavailability of new plots is deadly” (154). Arguing that the signifying markers of Bigger’s blackness go “un-read” within the dominant narratives of the novel’s power structures, she asserts, “What Wright’s writing demonstrates again and again is the deadly effect both of overdetermination and of underdetermination in storytelling. It is because the ‘rape’ plot is so overdetermined that Bigger becomes a murderer” (154). Yet we should resist the urge to chalk the employment of familiar, knowable plots up to a failure of imagination on Wright’s part, for other narratives surely exist within the novel—they simply remain as “un-read” to the reader accustomed to them as Bigger’s blackness remains hidden in plain sight from the police.³³ These narratives are overshadowed by the larger plots that propel the narrative with their insistent forward motion. To Johnson’s focus on the racial power structures of the novel that determine the range of narratives available to Bigger’s character, I would add the heteronormative narrative of maturation or “growing up,” as predicated on entering a societal structure

³³ Wright has this to say about the plot of the novel in his essay, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born”: “Life had made the plot [the treatment of black boys by police and arrests on rape charges] over and over again, to the extent that I knew it by heart” (455).

organized by and to ensure continuation of reproductive futurity, as an additional stricture.

Bigger's queerness in the novel often goes unread. Those moments of time killing when Bigger is ruled by passive and homoerotic feelings disrupt the linear temporality of the narratives available to him. In Wright's essay on the writing of *Native Son* entitled, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," he attributes certain emotions to the various "Biggers" who served as models for the Bigger Thomas character in the novel: "All Bigger Thomases, white and black, felt tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless" (446). Wright attributes these feelings to the modern condition where people were "living in a world whose fundamental assumptions could no longer be taken for granted: a world ridden with national and class strife; [. . .] a highly geared world whose nature was conflict and action [. . .] a world that existed on a plane of animal sensation alone" (446). The novel's Bigger Thomas experiences all of these emotions to be sure, but I am primarily concerned with the narrative effects generated by these weak feelings of nervousness, anxiety, restlessness, and hysteria. Barthes's Neutral affects are considered such only insofar as they suspend conflict. Bigger's restlessness, as well as his anxiety and laziness, forestall his violent outbursts, but is as unsustainable as his violent actions: "the Neutral means suspension of violence [. . .] [it is] unsustainable" (TN 13). The paired weak and strong affects Bigger experiences—indifference and rage—create a seesaw effect not only in his life, but also in the narrative structure of the novel as its narrative pace fluctuates between lengthy exposition or scenes with little action and scenes with short bursts of action

and rapid plot advancement. The relatively brief police chase that ends with the dramatic water tower capture of Bigger, for example, is preceded by his long period of hiding out in abandoned buildings and is followed by a plodding trial with a foregone conclusion that comprises the last third of the novel (Book Three: Fate). Ample scholarship details the role of Bigger's racial consciousness in his violent actions, however the passive aspects of his character are less frequently acknowledged. Bigger's feelings of anxiety, restlessness, and hysteria might eventually lead to his violent acts of rape and murder, but these emotions are passive by nature and it is the quest to alleviate the discomfort of these weak feelings or the rejection of them that leads to spontaneous acts of violence, not the feelings themselves.

In the novel, Bigger's weak affects often occur within scenes of passive spectatorship—instances of time killing. Bigger spends a great deal of his time in the novel attempting to relieve his near constant feelings of nervous hysteria—feelings correlated with fear, inaction and paralysis. Early in the novel,

Bigger felt an urgent need to hide his growing and deepening feeling of hysteria; he had to get rid of it or else he would succumb to it. He longed for a stimulus powerful enough to focus his attention and drain off his energies. He wanted to run. Or listen to some swing music. Or laugh or joke. Or read a *Real Detective Story Magazine*. Or go to a movie. Or visit Bessie. (28)

Here Bigger identifies the actions that might save him from his fear, from his "hysteria": the active physical feats of running, laughing, and sex, and the

more passive spectatorship associated with art: listening to music, reading, and film watching. The stimulating effects of each lead to different conclusions: the direct physical exertion of running or intercourse or laughter leads to a physical tiredness, while the indirect mental stimulation of the detective story magazine, or swing music, or movie going seems to lead to a delayed hysteria by providing only a temporary distraction. Bigger's weak emotions prefigure explosive acts of violence. They are the disempowered feelings that turn discontentment into deadly momentum. His moments of passivity are often aligned with the failure of his emotions to correspond to his gender identity, which frequently leads to a failure of narrative recognition.

Bigger's hysteria throughout the novel, for example, is an explicitly gendered emotional state. The archetype of the "hysterical woman" is a well-documented one. In *Hysterical Men: The Hidden History of Male Nervous Illness*, Mark S. Micale notes that "the term *hysteria* traces etymologically to the Greek and Sanskrit words for uterus or womb, and that hysteria served for millennia of medical history as a male-authored commentary, often blatant in its misogyny, on women" (5). Galloping, misplaced wombs and nervous afflictions are often depicted as the sole province of women (the former for obvious reasons), yet as Micale notes, the cultural visibility of hysterical men (or descriptions of "men of feeling") tend to follow social trends in the understanding of gender categories:

Those times and cultures in which people felt threatened—regardless of whether the nature of the threat was military, economic, religious,

cultural, or sexual—experienced a greater need to rearticulate traditional gender identities, in contrast to the times perceived as ages of stability and security [. . .] Accordingly, a society’s capacity to accept the crossing of gender boundaries—and male hysteria is the quintessential gender-crossing diagnosis—waxes and wanes. (278)

Bigger’s “gender-crossing” hysteria is the product of his marginalized position as a member of a racial and socio-economic underclass during the Depression. His anxiety and nervousness are coded as feminine feelings, passive and ineffectual, and Bigger’s association with them marks him as a feminized subject in his moments of idleness. In order to realign himself with a masculine sensibility, Bigger commits increasingly brutal, sexually motivated acts of violence.

In Bigger’s world, the only way to “be a man” is to physically dominate, yet his feminine bouts of hysteria lead to fatal inaction. For example, after disposing of Mary’s body, Bigger attempts to remain calm as investigators explore the basement that contains the furnace in which he had burned her remains: “Bigger held his breath. But the man would not poke into that fire; nobody suspected him. He was just a black clown. He breathed again as the man closed the door. The muscles of Bigger’s face jerked violently, making him feel that he wanted to laugh. He turned his head aside and fought to control himself. *He was full of hysteria* [my emphasis]” (206). Bigger’s hysteria renders him incapable of action: “Bigger said nothing. He was limp all over; he was standing up here against this wall by some strength not his own. Hours past he had given up trying to exert himself any more; he

could no longer call up any energy. So he just forgot it and found himself coasting along" (210). This passivity and paralysis eventually leads to the discovery of Mary's body when he is physically unable to clear out the ashes in the furnace: "'I'm getting 'em [the ashes] out,' Bigger mumbled, not moving from where he stood [. . .] Bigger heard someone near him; then someone was tugging at the shovel in his hands. He held onto it desperately, not wanting to let it go, feeling that if he did so he was surrendering his secret, his life" (216). Bigger's hysterical inaction leads to the surrender of his life within the plot, for he knows he will be executed if Mary's body is discovered. While Bigger's powerful feelings of lust and fear and hatred allow him to kill first Mary, then his girlfriend Bessie, his weak feelings of anxiety and nervousness render him passive and nearly invisible. In fact, he is able to initially escape the Dalton house because the cops fail to recognize him as a subject capable of covering up a murder due to his passivity in their presence. His hysteria further leads to his desire for damning silence at his trial when he tells his lawyer fearfully that he doesn't want to speak in court: "Bigger's nerves gave way and he spoke hysterically: 'They going to *kill* me! You *know* they going to kill me'" (367). Bigger's hysteria is composed of ineffectual feelings that impede action on his part. Hysteria is figured as the cross-gendered, queer state that hinders forward narrative progress.

Ferguson reads Bigger as a figure of "anxiety about feminization and castration" (44), and argues that as "a feminized figure who does not conform to the heteropatriarchy or nationalism's regulated ideal, Bigger represents nonheteronormative dysfunction" (47). While Bigger's mother and sister are

positioned within the novel as castrating figures who chastise him and question his masculinity (“We wouldn’t have to lie in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you” his mother proclaims), Bigger is rendered powerless not only through economic and racial oppression, as Ferguson notes, but also through the weak or neutral affects that characterize much of his state of being in the novel—the ineffectual emotions, such as his indifference and anxiety, that are themselves products of his various marginalized positions (8). Bigger’s hysteria, which is the product of his powerlessness, in turn compounds and reproduces this powerlessness. As David L. Eng argues in his work on race and masculinity, hysteria afflicts those members of society who are the most powerless, asserting “hysteria [. . .] speaks to the production of a class of male subjects who are excluded by and large from symbolic privileges because of their class. In this expanded capacity, male hysteria also comes to mark off as well as create powerless bodies—both female and male—defined against the universal (white, middle-class, heterosexual) normative male subject” (179). In these gendered moments of inaction, Bigger becomes a queer figure and loses his cultural visibility.

Bigger’s nervous hysteria, the gender-crossing affect that that necessitates a trip to the Regal in the first place, results in further nonheteronormative behavior within the theater walls. While Bigger the violent male rapist, exists within the text as a juridical and social subject, the narrative contours of Bigger the anxious, feminized hysteric or queer cruising subject are hazy. Sentenced to die for the one crime he did not commit—the

crime no one committed—the rape of Mary Dalton, Bigger’s fate is predetermined not simply by the ready availability of the overdetermined plot of the black, male rapist, but also by the overdetermined plot of the tragic queer who is at odds with developmental models of progress and reproduction. In both cases, the only narrative ending available is death.

Bigger rejects all of the progress narratives he is presented with, mostly ideological (the salvation of religion, the political enlightenment of communism, and a discourse of racial uplift), embracing instead the constant vacillation between two poles: indifference and violence; brooding and desire; potential and kinetic energy (28-9). Max, the novel’s mouthpiece of communist ideology, forwards a social conditioning and internalized racism defense in his closing arguments and his visit to Bigger’s cell before his execution:

Bigger, you’re going to die. And if you die, die free. You’re trying to believe in yourself. And every time you try to find a way to live, your own mind stands in the way. You know why that is? It’s because others have said you were bad and they made you live in bad conditions. When a man hears that over and over and looks about him and sees that his life *is* bad, he begins to doubt his own mind. His feelings drag him forward and his mind, full of what others say about him, tells him to go back. The job in getting people to fight and have faith is in making them believe in what life has made them feel, making them feel that their feelings are as good as those of others (427-8).

Yet this passage reveals a different internal conflict in addition to the one Max intends. Max seeks to legitimate the positive, forward-thinking feelings of

self-improvement, if not exactly racial uplift, that he assumes are held in check by a mind filled with paralyzing internalized racism. In Max's narrative, Bigger wants to move forward, but is held back through societal influences. Bigger, however, frequently rejects these types of progress narratives. Those espoused by religion are particularly vulnerable to his scorn as a preposterous panacea. He sees the church as an institution that advocates acceptance in the face of injustice and a denial of reality. Recognizing Christian ideology as that which offers empty hope to people such as his mother, he violently rejects Reverend Hammond's attempts to proselytize. During his flight, the church's function within black society is explicitly rejected by Bigger:

Would it not have been better for him had he lived in that world the music sang of? It would have been easy to have lived in it, for it was his mother's world, humble, contrite, believing. It had a center, a core, an axis, a heart which he needed but could never have unless he laid his head upon a pillow of humility and gave up his hope of living in the world. And he would never do that. (254)

When Max later asks why Bigger stopped attending church he replies:

I didn't like it. There was nothing in it. Aw, all they did was sing and shout and pray all the time. And it didn't get 'em nothing. All the colored folks do that, but it don't get 'em nothing. The white folks got everything [. . .] I wanted to be happy in this world, not out of it. I didn't want that kind of happiness. The white folks like for us to be religious, then they can do what they want to with us. (355-6)

For Bigger, the linear progress narrative of salvation offered by religion is a

sham. With or without it, he is still going nowhere.

Bigger's eventual confession does not redeem him or bring pleasure—the recounting of his acts as spectacles renders him passive once more in his role as a detached spectator. Thus the crime and punishment melodrama that appears to structure the novel, much like the plots Bigger fancies in his detective magazines, provides the forward movement of the novel to its inevitable end. Execution seems the only plausible fate for Bigger once he is captured. This procedural structure frames the narrative's action in only one sense, however, for the *affective* movement of the novel is that of an adolescent stalled in the back and forth movement between the emotionally-driven registers of restless hysteria and violence. Bigger figures this in-between space as the “No Man's Land” between white and black that he occupies passively. Wright describes it in this way in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born”: “What made Bigger's social consciousness most complex was the fact that he was hovering unwanted between two worlds—between powerful America and his own stunted place in life—and I took upon myself the task of trying to make the reader feel this No Man's Land” (451). Bigger's failure to gain access to normative white America is marked as “stunted” growth. Wright's language of a life of thwarted development resonates with a narrative of queer arrested development.

Bigger's acts of violence are the only mode of expression available to him because he lacks the language to otherwise express his emotional states, and he lacks this language because he lacks a narrative precedent for his experiences. He cannot access a narrative with a future that will retroactively

make sense of his present. As an adolescent who will never grow up—both literally and figuratively—Bigger’s present is unintelligible without a narrative through which to understand it. Max draws upon this absence of available narratives in his legal defense of Bigger:

We know that happiness comes to men when they are caught up, absorbed in a meaningful task or duty to be done, a task or duty which in turn sheds justification and sanction back down upon their humble labors. We know that this may take many forms: in religion it is the story of the creation of man, of his fall, and of his redemption; compelling men to order their lives in certain ways [. . .] In art, science, industry, politics, and social action it may take other forms. But these twelve million Negroes have access to none of these highly crystallized modes of expression, save that of religion. (398-9)

Max discusses these expressive narratives as those belonging to civilized society and marks those who lack access to them as residing in the antisocial—set decidedly and permanently apart from mainstream society. Here a person who lacks access to conventional, linear, life-ordering narratives—those with the creation-fall-redemption arcs of religion (and, frequently, art), or the hypothesis-experiment-conclusion arcs of science, or the conflict-protest-resolution arcs of social action—is not living a life at all, but simply acting on animal impulse or reacting to external stimuli. In this worldview, organizing one’s life within or according to nonlinear narratives is an impossibility; chaos and unintelligibility are the only possible outcomes within an ontology that associates *being* with logical, linear order. Having attempted to join these

ordered worlds, Bigger fails and reverts to passivity: "Having been thrown by an accidental murder into a position where he had sensed a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him; having accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him feel free for the first time in his life [. . .] having done all this and failed, he chose not to struggle anymore" (274). A life with no future cannot orient itself in a coherent fashion within these existing narrative paradigms. This is why Bigger wakes with a knowledge of his own unintelligible racial otherness within a white world the morning after Bessie's murder: "Why should not this cold white world rise up as a beautiful dream in which he could walk and be at home, in which it would be easy to tell what to do and what not to do? If only someone had gone before and lived or suffered or died—made it so that it could be understood!" (241). The lack of narrative precedent renders Bigger's life unknowable: "He felt that there was something missing, some road which, if he had once found it, would have led him to a sure and quiet knowledge. But why think of that now? A chance for that had gone forever. He had committed murder twice and had created a new world for himself" (241). The illusory nature of this "new world" Bigger creates, however, becomes clear after his capture: "An organic wish to cease to be, to stop living, seized him. Either he was too weak, or the world was too strong; he did not know which. Over and over he had tried to create a world to live in, and over and over he had failed" (345). Max famously codes Bigger's acts of murder as acts of creation in an attempt to render Bigger an intelligible subject, and therefore one deserving of mercy, by translating the seemingly motiveless

random brutality, destruction, and death into a generative narrative of progression: "He was *living*, only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live. The actions that resulted in the death of those two women were as instinctive and inevitable as breathing or blinking one's eyes. It was an act of *creation*" (400). If Bigger's crime was an "inevitable" one, Max reasons, then its societal root causes can be traced backward through time and history as a long, linear narrative. If it was a generative act of creation, similarly, it can be logically followed forward according to a narrative of living, of progression. Max's pleas fail, of course, as a future for Bigger is always already an impossibility and his crimes defy understanding within such an ordered framework.

To end where we began then, in Delany's movie theater where the figure of heterosexual masculinity is queered by the homoerotic surroundings that make his pleasure possible. So it is with *Native Son*. As a novel, it is often read as a commentary on a type of menacing black masculinity, or even misogyny, yet its narrative of the consequences of oppressive racial and socio-economic power structures in America is very rarely seen as bearing the associated temporal markers of queerness. If Bigger's life is "stunted" by the first two social structures, then it is also queered by the way this stunting renders access to narratives of heteronormativity and reproductive futurity impossible. Examining the gendered and sexualized connotations of "weak" affects presents an opportunity to examine the way Bigger's Otherness is created and compounded by his nonheteronormative feelings. In *Native Son*, Bigger's intelligibility as a juridical and social subject becomes tied to the

intelligibility of his gendered affects and the cultural narratives associated with them. When his strong affects lead to action he is said to “exist,” when weak affects pause or suspend narrative action, his subjectivity becomes much less certain.

CHAPTER 3

WHERE THE DAY TAKES YOU: BOREDOM AND BELONGING IN CARSON MCCULLERS'S *THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING*

In *The Member of the Wedding*, Carson McCullers's 1946 novel about girlhood in the American South, the first words from twelve-year old protagonist Frankie Addams mouth are "It is so very queer [. . .] The way it all just happened" (461). This is an apt description of the novel itself, whose narrative structure can be understood, as with the other novels in this dissertation, to possess a queer temporality. "The [queer] way it all just happened" for Frankie describes her introduction to, and eventual exclusion from, the heteronormative framework of her brother's wedding—a union of which she desperately wishes to be a part. For the reader, however, the narrative—the way Frankie's story, related in third-person limited narration, "all just happened"—unfolds in its own queer way, characterized by long periods of waiting and inaction during which nothing much seems to happen, as well as by the way this anti-progress narrative reflects a queer model of temporal progress. Its foregrounding of queerness as related to events (the thing that happened), temporality (the thing that *just* happened), and narrative (*the way* it happened) is key to an understanding of the novel that does not rely on the author's biographical details or readings of McCullers as a regional writer. These common critical approaches prove unsatisfactory in their treatment of the text as either an extension of McCullers's personal life or in their comparison of her work to a canon of Southern authors such as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor—an approach that

often minimizes the complexity of her fiction in its own right.

McCullers uses the term “queer” repeatedly throughout the novel, frequently to refer not just to the odd or curious, but also to describe nonheteronormative desires and the feelings for which Frankie has no words. “Queer,” for McCullers, names both the deviant and the unknowable. In 1946, the novel’s publication date, the term “queer” was in public circulation as not simply meaning “odd” or “strange,” but also as (mostly pejorative) slang for homosexual—a use dating back to the early twentieth century (OED). Given McCullers’s familiarity with queer communities and her use of queer characters in her fiction, her choice of the word “queer” instead of “odd” in many cases merits scrutiny and can be seen as carrying nonheteronormative connotations. As Rachel Adams argues in her essay “‘A Mixture of Delicious and Freak’: The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers”:

What McCullers means by the queer is vague but suggestive. Her invocation of the term *queer* is frequently associated with her characters’ receptiveness to otherwise unthinkable permutations of sex and gender, which are defined in opposition to normative categories of identification and desire. Such a veiled deployment of the queer is unsurprising at a historical moment when it regularly functioned as a shaming mechanism to legitimate discrimination and physical violence against homosexuals [author’s emphasis]. (554)

McCullers’s use of the term is by no means straightforward in *The Member of the Wedding* as it most often springs from the mouth or mind of Frankie, a queer character in her own right. Frankie’s identification of those things that

are and are not queer mirror her position as an adolescent caught between worlds—between a dominant heteronormative social order and her own nonheteronormative, deviant desires. Thus when Frankie thinks of heterosexual intercourse or innuendo, for example, as “queer,” she does so from a position of social naïveté, or a rejection of social norms as is the case when she begins to feel ill at ease around the drunken soldier who would later attempt to assault her. “The hot, close smell in the hotel suddenly made her feel a little queer” because she is distinctly uncomfortable with the heterosexual expectations others have of her (525). To Frankie, it is strange that she wouldn’t be included in her brother’s marriage or that she should desire heterosexual sex. The perversion in her mind is the opposite of a dominant societal view that codes the monogamous heterosexual couple as normative and an incestuous triad as queer. Similarly, heterosexual intercourse strikes her as deviant while a shared honeymoon with her brother and his bride and sharing a bed with her father seems both normal and desirable. Frankie eventually learns, however, which things are “properly” queer and which fall within normative societal expectations through the guidance of the serially monogamous Berenice and the reality of her exclusion from her brother’s wedding, which forces her to confront heteronormative societal expectations. Throughout this chapter I highlight McCullers’s use of the word to demonstrate Frankie’s understanding of the concept of heteronormativity as she makes the change from queer tomboy to young Southern lady through a rejection of her nonnormative desires—a trajectory that proves inescapable for her. At stake is an understanding of the novel’s

queerness at the level of language and, as in the works discussed in previous chapters, narrative temporality. Understanding the shift in Frankie's mind between the things that are queer to her in the beginning versus the end of the novel also reveals a shift in the pace of the narrative. The unmoored, drifting girl who passes the time in the kitchen in a series of scenes that document little action gives way to the young woman whose life narrative gains purpose after she forsakes her youthful queer desires. Frankie the queer girl alternately trips and methodically lingers over her words in her attempts to have them received with the same gravity with which she feels them. Her language often thrashes about and her awkward limbs and emotions do the same as she attempts find purchase in an adolescence spent adrift and alone. Frances the teenager, however, is on a clear path to "growing up" which her confident (to the point of condescension), object-driven speech reflects as it also moves the novel to its swift conclusion. Her language mirrors her shifting emotional state, from bored and anxious to happy and content.

This chapter ultimately examines the consequences of queer desire for the two young characters in the novel, Frankie and her cousin John Henry West. For Frankie, her assimilation into the dominant social order requires that she abandon her queer desires to maintain her tomboy identity and become the third party in her brother's wedding and marriage. The alternative to embracing a heteronormative developmental model of progress is represented by John Henry, who cross-dresses and believes that people should be "half boy and half girl" (547). His untimely death demonstrates the lack of narrative options available outside heteronormative linear progress

models.

The Member of the Wedding is primarily about the inaction of waiting and unfulfilled desires, an inaction characterized by Frankie's constant weak feelings of boredom and anxiety. The novel provides the structural inverse of the narratives of stalled progress found in *Native Son* and *Lolita*. The action in the novel performs the work of interrupting the *inaction* that characterizes much of the plot. Lolita and Bigger are presented as adolescents whose normative development is stunted by exterior forces—pedophiles, racism, and socioeconomic inequality. Frankie, on the other hand, starts the novel “on the wrong track,” so to speak. Her adolescent development is re-routed and normativized, whereas Lolita and Bigger's is derailed. Instead of a child queered by external conditions, she is the innately queer child who must be straightened out.

In *Native Son*, Bigger's weak affects compound his racial otherness within the text by suspending narrative action with paradoxically violent acts of passivity. In *Lolita*, neutral affects serve a subversive function as the tool Lolita uses to impede the narrative of her captor and delay his sexual gratification in the hopes of providing herself with a future, thus creating a sense of queer temporality in the novel. In *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie's primary affects are restlessness, anxiety, and loneliness. The duration of these feelings that impede or limit action also create duration within the novel's plot. Frankie's restlessness keeps her in the kitchen, and the novel is stuck there as well. Her one strong, positive emotion—happiness—causes the novel to come to an abrupt end. The last sentence of the novel

reads, “I am simply mad about—’ But the sentence was left unfinished for the hush was shattered when, with an instant shock of happiness, she heard the ringing of the bell” (605). The arrival of Frankie’s girlfriend Mary—the normative replacement for her dead queer cousin, John Henry—causes a happiness that interrupts the persistent “hush” of the kitchen, a location figured as a queer space within the novel and one that had allowed her to articulate her deepest thoughts and feelings. The “special hush” she associates with John Henry and his lingering “solemn, hovering, and ghost-gray” presence is broken by Frankie’s content emotional state that no longer requires the lengthy kitchen conversations that the restlessness and anxiety caused by her queer desires do (605). Frankie’s casual happiness undoes her pensive boredom and anxiety. Her joy banishes John Henry’s ghostly queer presence and ends the novel, for the narrative has no duration without the delay of her weak feelings. Frankie survives her adolescence, but survival comes at the cost of relinquishing an unintelligible subject position characterized by neutral affects for one more closely related to the narrative of futurity her brother’s marriage comes to represent, one aligned with strong, positive feelings.

While all three novels, as I have argued in previous chapters, can be read as adhering to a narrative logic informed by the queer temporality that comes from a developmental model seen as delayed or thwarted when negatively compared to a normative model predicated on “growing up” straight, *The Member of the Wedding* is different in that it reveals a shift in narrative pace from the beginning of the novel to the end that is linked to

Frankie's adoption of this heteronormative notion of "growing up." As *Lolita* and *Native Son* constitute failed or thwarted coming-of-age narratives, the pauses and delays linked to their characters' weak or neutral affects and queer behaviors continue throughout those texts. *The Member of the Wedding*, in contrast, sees its narrative inaction give way to unimpeded forward progress as Frankie moves from having a queer relationship to futurity to a more readily imaginable heteronormative one. This enables her survival within the text while *Lolita* and *Bigger* are not so lucky. *The Member of the Wedding* demonstrates what is at stake in a conventional *bildungsroman* by showing how access to a cultural narrative of "growing up" requires queer sacrifice. Frankie undergoes a period of transition from her tomboy childhood to an embrace of womanhood after a spiritual crisis in which her queer desire to become the third party to her brother's wedding and marriage is thwarted (signified by her shift in self-naming from Frankie as a child, to F. Jasmine during her growing awareness of her sexuality and her maturation, to Frances, the thirteen-year-old "grown girl"). Frankie achieves the social recognition denied to *Bigger* and *Lolita* through her repudiation of queer desires that had threatened to consign her to a similar fate—othered and killed. Thus the queer temporality of the majority of the novel is similar to *Lolita* and *Native Son's* in that weak or neutral emotions associated with queer behavior create its duration through narrative delay *until* Frankie adopts a heteronormative social imperative. The novel highlights the consequences for queer adolescents while maintaining a form of queer narrative temporality, which makes it instructive to read alongside Nabokov and Wright's novels.

As in these novels, the moments of conflict or action in the plot of *MOW* are often downplayed or hidden in favor of lengthy descriptions of inaction. Indeed, inaction is a central theme of the novel, portrayed as the consequence of Frankie's boredom and near constant state of anxious anticipation or fearful expectation. McCullers's novel is about desire, the state that can only exist in the absence of its fulfillment—a constant waiting for something to happen. Roland Barthes describes waiting in *A Lover's Discourse* as the "Tumult of anxiety provoked by waiting for the loved being, subject to trivial delays (rendezvous, letters, telephone calls, returns)" (37). So it is with Frankie's anxiety as she waits for her loved object—the wedding. The weak or "neutral" affects Frankie experiences—chiefly anxiety and boredom—can be read through Barthes's examination of such feelings in both *A Lover's Discourse* (1977) and *The Neutral* (1978). Barthes's affirmation of the lover's discourse, "which offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, *amorously*, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak" resonates with Frankie's narrative as she silently confronts her loved object, which does not and cannot speak back (3). While Berenice, the Addams family's African American cook and mother figure to Frankie, initially describes Frankie's feelings toward her brother's nuptials as jealousy, she later realizes that she is wrong. Frankie isn't jealous of the wedding, she desires to join it: "Frankie got a crush! / Frankie got a crush! / Frankie got a crush! / On the *Wedd-ing!*" Berenice sings (491). Frankie's crush on the wedding itself as well as her longing to become a third party to her brother Jarvis's marriage, is figured as a profoundly queer desire and the product of

her feelings of loneliness and alienation during “the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid” (461). Her desire for a queer triangulated marriage fails when Frankie cannot articulate her desires to her brother and his bride and does not become a member of their wedding, managing only to wail, “Take me! Take me!” in a “sizzling” dirt road in the wake of the newlywed’s departing car (587-588). The novel’s swift conclusion follows in which her six-year old cousin and compatriot John Henry dies suddenly of meningitis, Frankie finds a socially appropriate female friend, thus completing her “coming of age,” and Berenice decides to marry her beau and leave the employ of Frankie’s father due to the family’s impending move. To give such plot details, however, is to miss the (in)action of the novel, which is structured around the anticipatory emotions Frankie endures.

In a review of McCullers’s 1940 novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, whose adolescent female character Mick Kelley shares much in common with *MOW*’s Frankie Addams, Richard Wright writes:

The naturalistic incidents of which the book is compounded seem to be of no importance; one has the feeling that any string of typical actions would have served the author’s purpose as well, for the value of such writing lies not so much in what is said as in the angle of vision from which life is seen. There are times when Miss McCullers deliberately suppresses the naturally dramatic in order to linger over and accentuate the more obscure, oblique and elusive emotions. (18)

The same can be said of *The Member of the Wedding*, a novel that seems to gloss over major dramatic events in favor of a focus on the portrayal of weak or “neutral” emotions that occur during the series of non-events that characterize four days spent waiting for a wedding. The novel does not explore Frankie’s grief; it examines her boredom. It cannot flesh out her joy at the conclusion, because its concern is with her anxiety, her nervousness, her frustration, her unease, and her restlessness.

This focus has led some critics to describe the novel as lacking a plot. In a review of the dramatized stage version of *The Member of the Wedding*³⁴ John Mason Brown describes McCullers’s “choosing to dispense with plotting” as a virtue, but decries her narrative pace: “the pity is that Mrs. McCullers’s play lacks inward progression. It is more static than it needs or ought to be. Its virtue is its lack of contrivance, but its shortcoming is its lack of planning. Salty and sensitive as is the delineation of its major characters, they do not develop; they stand still” (46, 47). George Dangerfield’s review of the novel claims that “what makes this story so unusual is the fact that most of it takes place through the medium of desultory conversations between three really weird people sitting in an even weirder kitchen. Nothing or almost nothing occurs here, and yet every page is filled with a sense of something having happened, happening, and about to happen” (32). More recently, Elizabeth Freeman has argued, “rather than plot, the novel consists of a series

³⁴ The stage dramatization of the novel by McCullers interestingly compresses the narrative time of the novel—the wedding, Frankie’s running away, and John Henry’s illness all occur on the same day. The effect of this compression of events is actually a quicker narrative pace than the novel.

of linked performances: fantasies, soliloquies, hallucinations, recounted tales” (*Wedding Complex* 59). These descriptions, however, are inadequate. The novel does, of course, have a plot, it can even be said to have a traditional three-part narrative arc consisting of rising action (preparing for the wedding/Frankie’s immature state), the climax (the wedding/F. Jasmine’s spiritual crisis), and falling action (aftermath of the wedding/Frances’s conformity into and acceptance by a heteronormative social order) that mirrors the conventional plot of a *bildungsroman*. We might further describe this plot as a moralized love story in Barthes’s terminology:

Every amorous episode can be, of course, endowed with a meaning: it is generated, develops and dies; it follows a path which it is always possible to interpret according to a causality or a finality—even, if need be, which can be moralized (*‘I was out of my mind, I’m over it now’ ‘Love is a trap which must be avoided from now on’* etc): this is the *love story*, subjugated to the great narrative Other, to that general opinion which disparages any excessive force and wants the subject himself to reduce the great imaginary current, the orderless, endless stream which is passing through him, to a painful, morbid crisis of which he must be cured, which he must ‘get over’ [. . .]: the love story [. . .] is the tribute the lover must pay to the world in order to be reconciled with it [Barthes’s emphasis]. (*LD* 7)

In this sense, Frankie’s coming of age is very much a love story. She falls in love with the wedding and the idea of a triadic marriage, realizes the impossibility of her queer desire within the heteronormative social order she

is expected to join, and disavows her queer desires—gets over them, so to speak—in favor of a more proper love object choice that will enable her to join the world. This though is not what critics mean when they accuse the work of plotlessness. What such criticism is really saying is that nothing much happens throughout the course of the novel and when significant events do happen—like the tragic death of a character—they seem minimized, dispensed with in a page or two. This untethered *affective* dimension of the plot is what Barthes describes as a type of corollary to the love story: “Very different is the discourse, the soliloquy, the *aside* which accompanies this story (and this history) *without ever knowing it*. It is the very principle of this discourse [. . .] that its figures cannot be *classified*: organized, hierarchized, arranged with a view to an end (a settlement) [Barthes’s emphasis]” (LD 7-8). Barthes’s alphabetical arrangement of figures—usually affects—which accompany the love story and have the ability to prolong narrative duration while confounding its resolution, but have no internal order, allow us to better understand the narrative movement of *The Member of the Wedding*. Frankie’s emotions, which stem from her queer love affair, dictate the narrative pace of the novel creating a sense of queer temporality, within which narrative delay is prominent when Frankie experiences her queer desires, only to give way to a rapid, forward movement characterized by her adoption of heteronormative norms. Frankie’s four-day queer love affair takes up the bulk of the novel, while her adoption of these norms allows two months to pass in the space of the last few pages. Queer affects delay and stall narrative development, just as they provide a sense of duration to Frankie’s adolescence.

Queers and Freaks

McCullers's work, as critics have widely noted, evinces a fascination with "freaks," a category frequently understood to include both people and things that are queer in both senses of the term. Her novels are filled with misfits, characters with disabilities, queer figures, and literal circus sideshow acts. Carnival freaks figure prominently in *The Member of the Wedding*, and Frankie's preoccupation with them is less morbid enjoyment of spectacle than fear-driven fascination as she worries about being or becoming a freak herself. Frankie's initial description reveals her tomboyish appearance, which she associates with being a freak:

This summer she was grown so tall that she was almost a big freak, and her shoulders were narrow, her legs too long. She wore a pair of blue track shorts, a B.V.D. undervest, and she was barefooted. Her hair had been cut like a boy's, but it had not been cut for a long time and was now not even parted. The reflection in the glass was warped and crooked, but Frankie knew well what she looked like. (462)

This warped reflection of an adolescent girl who looks like a boy with a "close crew-cut" is transformed at the end of the novel, when Frankie has turned thirteen and changed her boyish nickname to her given moniker, Frances—the feminine version of the masculine name "Francis," a switch that signals a resolution of her gender ambiguity (475). Before she makes this transition, however, Frankie displays a fascination with various "freaks" including sideshow freaks and prison inmates. Her fascination belies both a queer attraction and a fear of recognition. Her fears stem from a concern with being

physically freakish, and thus visually correlated with freaks, as well as being a misfit, thus occupying the social sphere of the freaks as outcasts. She also associates freaks with nonheteronormative desires, which parallel her own. These interrelated components of freakdom: physical, social, and sexual, are conscious concerns for Frankie as she warily evaluates herself. She calculates that, given her rate of growth, eventually “according to mathematics and unless she could somehow stop herself, she would grow to be over nine feet tall. And what would be a lady who is over nine feet high? She would be a Freak.” (475). She characterizes freaks as those who suffer from nonheteronormative desires and are subsequently barred from the sense of belonging she seeks: “‘I doubt if they ever get married or go to a wedding,’ she said. ‘Those Freaks’” (477).

The most popular freak at the fair is “the Half-Man Half-Woman, a morphidite and a miracle of science” (476-77). While the other freaks in the “Freak House” tent are studies in physical excess or disproportion—the Giant and the Fat Lady are too large; the Midget and the Pin Head are too small, the Wild Nigger and the Alligator Boy are too inhuman—the Half-Man Half-Woman is distinguished by costuming: “The Freak was divided completely in half—the left side was a man and the right side a woman. The costume on the left was a leopard skin and on the right side a brassiere and a spangled skirt. Half the face was dark-bearded and the other half bright glazed with paint. Both eyes were strange” (477). Whereas the Midget is a freak by virtue of dwarfism, the Half-Man Half-Woman is a freak by virtue of clothing and makeup and an unwillingness to choose an acceptable gender from a

male/female binary, enjoying instead a third gender that unites both. It is worth noting that “morphidite” or, more commonly, “morphodite” was not only a colloquialism for hermaphrodite, but also slang in the South at the time for a flamboyant homosexual or transvestite (OED). In this case, the “morphidite” is billed as a hermaphrodite—a “miracle of science,” but since costuming, not genitalia, is what others the Half-Man Half-Woman, transvestism is invoked as well. The queerness of the hermaphrodite mirrors Frankie’s position as a tomboy who is torn between masculine and feminine gender performances, as well as her desire to disrupt the binary of her brother and Janice’s marriage and create a triadic union between the three of them, so that they can become the “we of me” for her.

Barthes writes of the impossibility of drawing Plato’s hermaphrodite³⁵—the figure of total unity—spending “an afternoon trying to draw what Aristophanes’ hermaphrodite would look like: globular, with four hands, four legs, four ears, just one head, one neck. Are the halves back to back or face to face? [. . .] I persist, but get nowhere, being a poor draughtsman or an even poorer utopianist. The hermaphrodite, or the androgyne, figure of that ‘ancient unity of which the desire and the pursuit constitute what we call love,’ is beyond my figuration,” seeing instead “a monstrous, grotesque, improbable body,” which is how Frankie views the Half-Man Half Woman (*LD* 227). Frankie is a better utopianist, however, and her “Dream of total union with the loved being” instead takes the form of a union with the loved couple; a man and a woman with Frankie, who feels half-girl half-boy, to

connect them (*LD* 226).

Frankie's utopian dreams, however, still tend to reinscribe gender binaries, whereas John Henry, the novel's other queer child, embraces gender mutability. John Henry's interest in Berenice's list of "queer things" she recites for the children one night in the kitchen focuses on her story about a transsexual: "'How?' John Henry suddenly asked. 'How did that boy change into a girl?'" (533). John Henry spends a portion of the novel in drag, is also fascinated by carnival freaks, and imagines an alternate world in which "people ought to be half boy and half girl," a vision for which Frankie "threatened to take him to the Fair and sell him to the Freak Pavilion" a plan for which his answer was to "only close his eyes and smile" (547) for "his world was a mixture of delicious and freak" (546). Frankie's suggestions for improving the world, on the other hand, would allow people to "instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted" (547). Her vision preserves binary gender divisions while John Henry invents a third. Frankie fears becoming a "freak" while John Henry embraces it. When Frankie plans to run away, she decides that "if the train went to Chicago, she would go on to Hollywood and write shows or get a job as a movie starlet—or, if worse came to worse, even act in comedies. If the train went to New York, she would dress like a boy and give a false name and a false age and join the Marines" (593). Frankie frames her future choice as one between the idealized femininity of the movie starlet and the hypermasculinity of the marine, whereas John Henry refuses to choose. This

³⁵ Plato, *The Symposium*.

contrast determines the fate of these two queer kids. One understands that she has to choose and makes the socially acceptable choice. The other does not and fails to survive his childhood.

Barthes's treatment of the hermaphrodite/androgynous in *A Lover's Discourse* and *The Neutral* helps us understand the figure's destabilizing role. For Barthes, "the Neuter is not what cancels the genders but what combines them, keeps them both present in the subject, at the same time, after each other" (191). He continues, "The androgynous thus is the Neuter, but a Neuter conceived as the complex degree: a mixture, a dose, a dialectic, not of man and woman (genitality) but of masculine and feminine. Or better yet: the man in whom there is feminine, the woman in whom there is masculine" (193). The figure of the androgynous destabilizes binary categories of masculine/feminine by combining both; this is true, too, of Frankie's androgynous, occasionally disconcerting appearance: "You had all your hair shaved off like a convict, and now you tie a silver ribbon around this head without any hair. It just looks peculiar," remarks Berenice about Frankie's half-boy half-girl appearance (540). It is important to note that Frankie's androgynous, as a figure of the Neutral, is unsustainable. It simply delays the binary choice she has to make: masculinity or femininity? She cannot progress within a dominant heteronormative society without choosing. To refuse such a choice is to become the Half-Man Half-Woman of the freak tent. Barthes figures the hermaphrodite as a farcical version of the androgynous: "As always, things, when they are important [. . .] have a farcical version. The androgynous has its farcical version: the hermaphrodite → universally discredited. A monster: not

terrifying, but worse: uncanny [. . .] the hermaphrodite is linked to the theme of the dull, of the aborted, the decadent" (191). Whereas the hermaphrodite is a medical "monster" or oddity, the androgyne is a union of opposites, yet Barthes admits that his distinction is one of degree, "a value distinction" (192). As a metaphor, the hermaphrodite is the monster that emerges when the ambiguity of the androgyne becomes untenable. The other narrative option, of course, is the fate that befalls John Henry, who is content to inhabit an androgynous body and idealizes gender mutability. Such an unsustainable identity ultimately leaves John Henry without a living body at all.

John Henry dresses in Berenice's high heels and hat, tottering around the kitchen comically while Frankie and Berenice attempt a serious discussion about naming and identity. He "stood like a little old woman dwarf, wearing the pink hat with the plume, and the high-heel shoes" (476). John Henry is an imitation of a queer freak in this scene—mimicking the cross-dressing of a transvestite while resembling a dwarf, for the "Freak House" at the fair the children visit included "the squeezed Midget who minced around in little trick evening clothes" (476). This act of dress-up in the safe space of the kitchen, however, turns into an act of deviance when John Henry leaves the house later that evening to follow Frankie wearing "the jonquil dress, as F. Jasmine had given him all the costumes" (571).

John Henry courts recognition as a freak through his acts of mimicry. He performs an impression of the Pin Head in the kitchen, as he "held out an imaginary skirt and, touching his finger to the top of his big head, he skipped and danced like the Pin Head around the kitchen table. Then he said: 'She

was the cutest little girl I ever saw. I never saw anything so cute in my whole life'" (477). John Henry moves from miming the actions of a female freak, to cross-dressing, and it is his queer penchant for impersonation that contributes to his death:

A headache [Berenice] said she had, and John Henry West put his head down on the table and said he had a headache, also. But nobody paid any mind to him, thinking he copied Berenice. 'Run along,' she said, 'for I don't have the patience to fool with you.' Those were the last words spoken to him in the kitchen, and later Berenice recalled them as judgment on her from the Lord. John Henry had meningitis and after ten days he was dead. (603-4)

John Henry's painful death is described briefly, yet graphically. McCullers weaves the details of his illness with those describing Frankie's visit to the Fair with her new girlfriend, Mary Littlejohn. While "they rode on nearly everything, but did not enter the Freak Pavilion, as Mrs. Littlejohn said it was morbid to gaze at Freaks," John Henry lay dying (604). He "had been screaming for three days and his eyeballs were walled up in a corner, stuck and blind. He lay there finally with his head drawn back in a buckled way, and he had lost the strength to scream" (604). The close of the novel does not allow Frankie to gaze morbidly at freaks, but requires the reader to stare at John Henry's mangled, tortured body and see him as one of them. Frankie is not only barred from seeing the literal carnival freaks, but her cousin as well, for fear of contracting his illness, and his appearance in her dreams is that of embodied death: "like an escaped child dummy from the window of a

department store, the wax legs moving stiffly only at joints, and the wax face wizened and faintly pained, coming toward her until terror snatched her awake" (605). John Henry dies because that is what happens to freaks in McCullers's fiction.³⁶ The world cannot tolerate their existence, so they take their leave of it.

For her part, Frankie "was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you" (477). Haunted, Frankie asks Berenice, "Do I give you the creeps? [. . .] Do you think I will grow into a Freak?" (477). Berenice responds in the negative, but Frankie still worries. Frankie knows that freaks do not belong just as she believes her physical appearance, both her height and her masculine characteristics, her queer desires, and her "criminal" behavior exclude her from the society she wishes to belong to. Paused in front of the jail on the day before her brother's wedding while walking into town, Frankie recalls her feelings toward the freaks and fears both recognition of her queerness and a sense of connection because of it. The inmates "would be hanging to the bars; it seemed to her that their eyes, like the long eyes of the Freaks at the fair, had called to her as though to say: We know you" (571). Here Frankie's fear of recognition stems from her belief that she is a criminal, having shoplifted earlier in the summer; a person who shared an affinity with the freaks behind bars: "After she took the three-bladed knife from the Sears and Roebuck Store, the jail had drawn the old Frankie—and sometimes on

³⁶ For another example, see Antonapoulos and Singer, the queer mutes in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, who die from illness and suicide respectively,

those late spring afternoons she would come to the street across from the jail, a place known as Jail-Widow's Walk, and stare for a long time" (571). The "old Frankie" is, of course, Frankie-the-tomboy who begins the novel an "unjoined person" who "wanted to be a boy and go to the war as a Marine," while the Frankie who passes the jail on the eve of her brother's wedding has taken on the appellation "F. Jasmine" in anticipation of joining her brother and his bride in marriage (461, 480). Frankie muses to Berenice:

'J A,' said Frankie. 'Janice and Jarvis. Isn't that the strangest thing?' 'What?' 'J A,' she said. 'Both their names begin with J A' 'And? What about it?' Frankie walked round and round the kitchen table. 'If only my name was Jane,' she said. 'Jane or Jasmine.' 'I don't follow your frame of mind,' said Berenice. 'Jarvis and Janice and Jasmine. See? [. . .] 'I wonder if it is against the law to change your name. Or to add to it.' 'Naturally. It is against the law.' 'Well, I don't care,' she said. 'F. Jasmine Addams.' (474)

Here Berenice codes Frankie's desire to join Janice and Jarvis's marriage as expressed through her desire for the name change that she believes will enable such a union through naturalizing it—three 'J A's would naturally form a partnership—as both illegal and unnatural. Frankie shrugs off the specter of illegality, adding it to the series of "criminal" acts in which she believes she has already engaged.

Deemed too old to sleep in her father's bed, the unwillingly maturing Frankie "began to have a grudge against her father and they looked at each

precipitated by the heartbreak of one losing the other to death

other in a slant-eyed way," which drives Frankie to aimlessly venture away from the house during the summer until she finds herself "in so much secret trouble that she thought it was better to stay home" (481, 461). The "trouble" Frankie had gotten herself into that summer can be understood through her conflicted androgyny, which she attempts to hide. She steals phallic signifiers of heterosexual masculinity, the pocketknife from Sears as well as her father's pistol from his bureau: "She broke the law. And having once become a criminal, she broke the law again, and then again" (482). Yet Frankie also hides a sexual encounter that marks her as a heterosexual female, which she also considers to be part of her "criminal" behavior: "One Saturday afternoon in May she committed a secret and unknown sin. In the MacKeans' garage, with Barney MacKean, they committed a queer sin, and how bad it was she did not know. The sin made a shriveling sickness in her stomach, and she dreaded the eyes of everyone" (482). Frankie's shame over her heterosexual development, which she sees as unnatural, finds its remedy in her fantasies that involve Barney's murder at her hands through her illicit masculine weapons: "She hated Barney and wanted to kill him. Sometimes alone in the bed at night she planned to shoot him with the pistol or throw a knife between his eyes" (482). Frankie's uncomfortable outsider androgyny becomes an accepted part of F. Jasmine's desired role in the wedding. Thus Frankie's attitude toward the prisoners changes with her name, as it signals her belief that she is on the cusp of a union and state of belonging: "The jail did not frighten her this evening, for this time tomorrow she would be far away" (572). Frankie believes that the wedding will give her a sense of belonging

because she does not yet fully realize the queerness of the incestuous triad she envisions and desires. Her brother and his bride are, she decides, the “we of me,” a phrase that crystallizes her desire to herself, but makes little sense to others, as I discuss in the next section.

Berenice provides the reader with a laundry list of “many a queer thing” she has heard of including men in love with ugly women, strange weddings, a deformed burn victim, women who love evil men, “boys to [sic] take it into their heads to fall in love with other boys,” and a transsexual who “changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl” (531). The queerest thing of all, however, is Frankie’s crush on her brother’s upcoming nuptials: “I never before in all my days heard of anybody falling in love with a wedding. I have knew many peculiar things, but I never heard of that before” (533). Queerness here names nonnormative desires: men loving ugly women when they should prefer beauty, women loving evil men when they should prefer good and kind ones, gay men and transsexuals. Interestingly, the one queer thing in Berenice’s list that does not involve sexual desire, is her example of “a boy with his whole face burned off” (531). Berenice significantly includes “freaks” in the category of “queer,” displaying a definitional overlap between the two categories. Frankie’s love for the wedding queers both herself and that quintessentially heteronormative event and when her plan to become the third party to the wedding and marriage does not succeed it is the event that becomes the “failed wedding,” thwarted like the bridge games played with the adulterated card deck, the deck that can no longer serve its purpose because John Henry cut out the jacks and then the

queens to keep them company (itself an adulterous pairing—the kings are left alone). For Frankie, the wedding is a failure because it ends in the monogamous pairing of a heterosexual couple instead of the queer three-way union she sees as natural.

In her reading of McCullers's work through the lens of queer theory, Rachel Adams notes that her "fiction is populated by freaks, characters constrained by corporeal anomalies that defy the imposition of normative categories of identity" (552). Indeed, it is difficult not to read the various "freaks" in the novel as figures of queer embodiment by virtue of their nonnormative position as Others—the figures that allow the novel's characters claim their "normal" identities by positioning themselves in opposition to such outwardly grotesque bodies. Adams argues that "These freaks suffer an alienation from their bodies that parallels their experiences of estrangement within and isolation from the society of others," and claims that such characters "point to the untenability of normative concepts of gender and race at a moment when these categories were defined with particular rigidity" (552). In *The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in Modern American Culture*, Elizabeth Freeman reads *The Member of the Wedding* in terms of the contemporary gay marriage debate, arguing that "The novel's queerness lies in its perverse use of the wedding as an opportunity to redescribe how intimacy, connection, or 'membership' might be formalized and displayed" (52). Reading the novel's deployment of a wedding and marriage as queer in the way it offers alternate modes of relating or belonging to the heterosexual institution, Freeman claims

[I]n its redescription of desire itself as the desire to join— and in joining, transform—a mode of public, collective identification, *Member* departs from the terrain of both the object-focused “lesbian” and less-gender-specific “queer,” using the overfeminized form of the wedding to produce what might be called a female inflected queer rearrangement of social life in the 1940s and beyond. (52)

While Freeman’s argument that the novel showcases a “female inflected queer rearrangement of social life,” is compelling, I purposely rely on the “less-gender-specific” term “queer” because Frankie’s desire to rearrange social life is presented alongside, and should be read in relation to, John Henry’s antisocial practices.

Criticism of *The Member of the Wedding’s* narrative often falls into two schools: readings of the novel as a coming-of-age narrative that culminates in Frankie’s assimilation into a dominant social order and more optimistic readings that view the ending as subversive of social norms. The latter has become more popular since the 1990s, with a number of feminist and queer essays reading the novel’s ending as either implying a lesbian relationship between Frankie and Mary Littlejohn, or as at least maintaining the sexual and gender ambiguity present in the rest of the novel. As compelling as many of these accounts are, I remain unconvinced by them. I argue instead that the queerness of the novel is in fact made possible by its very instability. As oppositional desires are aligned with the Othered “freaks,” Frankie’s queer desires cannot coexist with the normative social order, for if they could they wouldn’t be queer at all. The instability or transitory nature of her desires is

what provides the narrative structure for the novel. The narrative endures only as long as her queer feelings do. While Adams discusses how queerness functions within the novel to open up the “potential of new and varied [nonheteronormative] possibilities” and claims that “the potential of the freak [is] to provide alternatives to the exclusionary norms that structure his culture,” the novel ultimately presents the normative social order it critiques as inescapable (575). By definition, freaks do not belong to the adult world Frankie longs to enter. Adams presents an optimistic reading of the novel as one that embraces queerness, resisting a reading of the novel’s ending and Frankie’s new friendship with Mary as “evidence of her ultimate normalization” (575). She argues that in the end the girls boycott the Freak tent at the fair because they realize “that the world is composed of freaks, that they no longer need to secure their own normality by exploiting a less fortunate Other” (515). Yet such a positive reading is wishful. The girls don’t have to look at the freaks because Frankie is no longer worried she might be or become one and because the freak that really matters to her—John Henry—is dying. Though Adams claims there are “lesbian implications” to their friendship, there is little evidence of this.

Freeman summarizes lesbian readings of Frankie’s character in this way, though she disagrees with them:

[L]ate-twentieth-century critics have read the novel as a classic ‘coming out story.’ As with Ann Bannon’s *Beebo Brinker* and other lesbian pulp novels that succeeded *Member*, Frankie’s boyish body predicts her trajectory toward her newfound relationship with Mary Littlejohn in

the last chapter, which represents the beginning of her recognition that she desires not weddings but other girls. A reading of *The Member of the Wedding* as a lesbian classic, perhaps even as a link between the lesbian relationships fostered by the all-female military and work environments of World War II along with the butch-femme bar cultures that succeeded them, would understand Frankie's obsession with the wedding of her brother Jarvis and his bride Janice as the misguided 'before' to a happily lesbian, partnered 'ever after'. (47)

Reading Frankie as a lesbian, however, is not an adequate way to address the triangulated (and incestuous) relationship she desires with her brother and his bride, nor does it account for her "crush" on the wedding itself, independent of the marriage it inaugurates³⁷. The relationship Frankie develops with Mary Littlejohn is perhaps the least queer aspect of the novel, as it is portrayed as normative feminine behavior best understood in relationship to Frankie's

³⁷ Critics often point to McCullers's own triangulated queer relationships as the blueprint for Frankie's desires, as she and her husband Reeves both pursued affairs and triadic relationships with other men and women. In her biography of McCullers, Virginia Spencer Carr details the difficulty of these relationships and writes, "The triangle that haunted her fictional characters now haunted her in reality, as well. A we of me relationship was good only as long as it suited Carson—and included her—but it was devastating if it left her out" (171). McCullers also referred to herself as an "invert" and "frequently preached to [Reeves] that it was perfectly all right for a person to love a member of the same sex. To her, nothing human in nature was alien or abnormal. A love relationship between two men or two women could also be a very spiritual union that should be above petty jealousies" (171). I mention this here as the majority of criticism that treats questions of gender and sexuality in McCullers's work either incorporates or fully relies upon such biographical details in readings of her fiction. I have avoided such biographical criticism in my own analysis of the novel, preferring to read the text on its own terms. The queerness of the text is apparent, regardless of

earlier exclusion from female cliques:

'Look,' John Henry said, and he was staring out of the window. 'I think those big girls are having a party in their clubhouse.' 'Hush!' Frankie screamed suddenly. 'Don't mention those crooks to me.' There was in the neighborhood a clubhouse, and Frankie was not a member. The members of the club were girls who were thirteen and fourteen and even fifteen years old. They had parties with boys on Saturday night. Frankie knew all of the club members, and until this summer she had been like a younger member of their crowd, but now they had this club and she was not a member. They had said she was too young and mean. On Saturday night she could hear the terrible music and see from far away their light. Sometimes she went around to the alley behind the clubhouse and stood near a honeysuckle fence. She stood in the alley and watched and listened. They were very long, those parties. (469)

Frankie's exclusion is painful. The image of her waiting and watching those parties from the outside is one of acute loneliness and rejection, which she hides with bravado: "'Maybe they will change their mind and invite you,' John Henry said. 'The son-of-a-bitches.' Frankie sniffled and wiped her nose in the crook of her arm" (469). Frankie has been excluded from the company of teenage girls and their "parties with boys" due to age, immaturity, and lack of sexual knowledge: "'The son-of-a-bitches,' she said again. 'And there was

McCullers's sexual history, preferences, or proclivities, as historically interesting or salacious as they may be.

something else. They were talking nasty lies about married people. When I think of Aunt Pet and Uncle Ustace. And my own father! The nasty lies! I don't know what kind of fool they take me for.'" (470). So for her finally to have a female bosom friend at the novel's conclusion is to participate in normative feminine heterosexual behavior. Although Adams maintains that the novel's "conclusion implies that she may be able to transform her experiences of gender confusion into more productive energies, rather than repressing them in favor of a socially acceptable heterosexual femininity," just the opposite is true (559). Frankie does wholly reject her queer desires, which are incompatible with the normative heterosexual femininity required of her in order to become a member of the dominant social order instead of a "freak." This is made clear when she contemplates suicide after the "failed" wedding: "She had said that she would shoot herself if the bride and her brother would not take her. She pointed the pistol at the side of her head and held it there a minute or two [. . .] When she lowered the pistol, she told herself that at the last minute she had changed her mind" (596). Frankie's queer desire to be a member of the wedding is foiled, but she still longs to experience feelings of belonging. Her choice is clear—persist in her queer desires, kill herself, and remain forever alone, "deadness was blackness, nothing but pure terrible blackness that went on and on and never ended until the end of all the world," or reject these desires in favor of going to find the soldier who had attacked her the previous day and who represents an aggressive masculine heterosexuality within the novel: "suddenly it seemed she might as well ask the soldier to marry with her, and then the two of them

could go away. Before he had gone crazy, he had been a little nice" (598). Frankie gives up on her queer desires in that dark alley, associating them with exclusion and death, and turns instead toward heteronormative expectations, which she further pursues in her friendship with Mary and their occupation with boys.

To deny a subversiveness to the novel's conclusion, however, is not to deny the complexity with which the work explores queer adolescence. While a subversive reading of the 1946 novel, such as the one Adams posits, in which the work valorizes queerness or allows it to go unpunished is a positive one, it denies the power of the negative ending. The novel ends with a dead child freak and a girl who rejects her adolescent queer desires in favor of membership in the heteronormative social order. Such an ending is not McCullers's referendum on queerness, however. It functions as a critique of a monolithic social order that posits assimilation, exclusion, or death as the only permissible states through which one can be understood as an intelligible subject. Frankie's survival comes at a cost. To ignore or deny that she paid dearly to escape her misfit status is to undermine the power of the novel's social critique.

Frequently grouped together with "Southern Gothic" writers, McCullers's use of grotesque bodies and minds is often understood by critics in terms of regionalism, as I've noted, though Sarah Gleeson-White reads McCullers's use of the grotesque through Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the carnivalesque in her book, *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers*. Gleeson-White reads McCullers's adolescent female

protagonists—Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding* and Mick in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*—as “revolutionary; they figure as sites of resistance since it is the adolescent, representing the new generation, the future as hope and possibility, in which society so greatly invests. The female adolescent body, as a grotesque site of becoming, challenges the very notion of discrete (feminine) identity [author’s emphasis]” (12). Gleeson-White writes that these figures are caught in a liminal state “between femininity and masculinity,” and therefore contain “grotesque possibilities of becoming” (12). Though it is tempting to see these likeable young characters as revolutionary, the fact remains that the world of *The Member of the Wedding*—trapped as it is within a very specific mid-century, white, Southern, heteronormative social order—truly offers Frankie only one real possibility of becoming. While Frankie is caught between feminine and masculine behavior to be sure, she does not realistically have the option of either remaining in the middle of such a binary or fully embracing masculinity and rejecting her femininity, for either of those options would preclude her from developing into an adult, an accomplishment that is only recognized through one’s assimilation into the dominant social order. Frankie’s options are clear—grow up and become a Southern lady or reject the tenets of socially appropriate femininity and become a freak, trapped in an immature stasis. She chooses the former. Gleeson-White recognizes the conflict between the gender expression of these characters and what their society demands of them and argues that “in opposing the ideal of woman, the tomboys are marked as freaks [. . .] The freak is thus a fruitful and appropriate trope for the expression of the adolescent experience of otherness

and perplexity, for it highlights the manner in which normative gender politics statically contain and mark out the young tomboys in oddness" (23). This is not entirely true, however. Being a "tomboy" is not synonymous with being a freak in the novel (or, I would argue, outside of it). To be a young girl with some masculine characteristics is presented as a relatively normal state of affairs because Frankie is understood as a child who *will grow out of this* developmental stage. Frankie is primarily afraid of *becoming* a freak who is nine feet tall and never gets married or goes to a wedding, while Berenice reassures her that she has the ability to clean up nicely (both literally and figuratively) and has a future ahead of her in which she will occupy a normative feminine space and marry a man. Freaks are not tomboys, freaks are adults who never made a socially accepted choice in their gender expression or sexual desires, as represented by the Half-Man Half-Woman. Frankie isn't a freak because of her gender expression, but rather because of her desire for gender fluidity and ambiguity: "She planned it [her version of a perfect world] so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, which ever way they felt like and wanted. But Berenice would argue with her about this, insisting that the law of human sex was exactly right just as it was and could in no way be improved," as well as her desire for a queer union with her brother and his bride (547). "Tomboy" is not a derogatory term, unlike "freak," because it does not name a fixed identity; it names behavior that is only possible during youth and is, by definition, temporary. There is no such thing as an adult tomboy, there are only girls who dress like boys and sometimes grow into lesbians (which is the narrative of coming out a

number of critics have read in the novel). The fear of recognition as a freak that Frankie harbors in her present is less about her tomboyishness than her feelings of exclusion, as one thing remains clear in the novel's portrayal and Frankie's understanding of freaks—they do not belong.

Boredom, Belonging, and Narrative Temporality

“Sometimes the anxiety is so powerful and so pressing (since that is the word's etymology)—an anxiety of waiting, for instance—that it becomes necessary to do something. This 'something' is naturally (ancestrally) a vow: if (you come back . . .), then (I will fulfill my vow)” (Barthes, *LD* 164).

“Because she could not break this tightness gathering within her, she would hurry to do something. She would go home and put the coal scuttle on her head, like a crazy person's hat, and walk around the kitchen table. She would do anything that suddenly occurred to her—but whatever she did was always wrong, and not at all what she had wanted. Then, having done these wrong and silly things, she would stand, sickened and empty, in the kitchen door and say: 'I just wish I could tear down this whole town'" (*MOW* 481).

The plot of *The Member of the Wedding* is primarily concerned with the inaction that accompanies Frankie's waiting to belong to something larger than herself and the bored and anxious feelings that accompany her desires. The majority of the novel takes place in the span of the few days between Jarvis and Janice's visit and their wedding, but these days are both the continuation and culmination of a long, hot, still summer of angst for Frankie. She has spent the spring and summer feeling excluded and acting out only to finally wait with nervous anticipation for her brother's wedding. The majority of the scenes in the novel take place in the kitchen of the Addams's house where Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry gather to kill time. As noted in the previous section, the novel's “plotlessness” hinges on the long stretches of

“kitchen time”—extended scenes in which nothing much happens apart from card playing, eating, and idle conversations: “The three of them sat at the kitchen table, saying the same things over and over, so that by August the words began to rhyme with each other and sound strange” (461). These scenes serve to delay the forward progress of the narrative and mirror Frankie’s own developmental delay, which is characterized by her inappropriate object of desire. They are also marked by Frankie’s feelings of restlessness and anxiety, “weak” or “neutral” affects that hinder progress. Frankie tries to relieve her anxious feelings by rushing to “do something,” anything: “She went around town and the things she saw and heard seemed to be left somehow unfinished, and there was the tightness in her that would not break. She would hurry to do something, but what she did was always wrong” (481). Her attempts to alleviate her feelings of nameless anxiety are always the “wrong thing and not what Frankie wanted” (481). Thus she finds herself ever returning to the liminal space of the kitchen in which the deviant desires of both Frankie and John Henry are safely voiced. The kitchen is also the primary site of queer inaction in the novel. It figures as a queer space for this strange triad who would form, in retrospect, their own kind of three-way marriage that offered its own sense of belonging to its members, a sense of belonging Frankie ultimately rejects.

Nothing much happens in the kitchen, but it serves as the site of lengthy narrative exposition as the three talk and eat and play cards all summer. Frankie’s language within the kitchen alternates between a slow and deliberate parceling of thoughts meant to impart the seriousness of her

feelings and wildly unmoored tantrums or hurried cascades of words that replicate her restlessness. An example of the former emerges at the beginning of the novel: “‘It is so very queer,’ she said. ‘The way it all just happened.’ ‘Happened? Happened?’ said Berenice. John Henry listened and watched them quietly. ‘I have never been so puzzled.’ ‘But puzzled about what?’ ‘The whole thing,’ Frankie said. And Berenice remarked: ‘I believe the sun has fried your brains.’ ‘Me too,’ John Henry whispered” (461). What Frankie lacks the language to express—why exactly her brother’s announcement was so “queer” and how it made her feel—she makes up for in the sheer duration of the conversation. Her cryptic statements require Berenice to prompt her for explanations she cannot give, which gives length to a conversation without substance. Such kitchen conversations, in turn, create duration in a novel that primarily records inaction. Frankie’s enigmatic speech is partially deliberate—she wants to be taken seriously by Berenice and John Henry—and partially the result of her confused emotional state—she doesn’t know how to make sense of the world around her. Her speech in these moments is often contrasted with Berenice’s matter-of-fact responses. When Frankie says, “‘They were the two prettiest people I ever saw. I just can’t understand how it happened,’” Berenice responds, “‘But what, Foolish? [. . .] Your brother come home with the girl he means to marry and took dinner today with you and your Daddy. They intend to marry at her home in Winter Hill this coming Sunday. You and your Daddy are going to the wedding. And that is the A and the Z of the matter. So whatever ails you? (462). Berenice, who wishes to guide Frankie on a normative, linear, developmental path, sees nothing

strange or ambiguous about a situation she can clearly articulate in a linearly-ordered developmental fashion—A to Z. Her speech is succinct while Frankie's lingers and repeats itself, creating duration within the text. Later in the conversation Frankie's words, though still spoken slowly, begin to tumble over each other as she attempts to give voice to the queer feeling she cannot name:

'I mean this,' said Frankie slowly. 'I saw them O.K. Janice had on a green dress and green high-heel dainty shoes. Her hair was done up in a knot. Dark hair and a little piece of it was loose. Jarvis sat by her on the sofa. He had on his brown uniform and he was sunburned and very clean. They were the two prettiest people I ever saw. Yet it was like I couldn't see all of them I wanted to see. My brains couldn't gather together quick enough and take it all in. And then they were gone. You see what I mean?' (486)

She sees the couple but does not see all of them because she views them through her desire for belonging—a desire that leads to her plot to become a member of their wedding. She lacks the words to express her nonnormative desire, however, and her language eventually devolves into a verbal and physical tantrum, which reflects her inner anxiety:

She could feel the beating of her heart, and when she spoke her voice was a whisper. 'What I need to know is this. Do you think I made a good impression?' [. . .] 'Why, you didn't do anything.' 'Nothing?' asked Frankie. 'No. You just watched the pair of them like they was ghosts. Then, when they talked about the wedding, them ears of yours

stiffened out the size of cabbage leaves—’ Frankie raised her hand to her left ear. ‘They didn’t,’ she said bitterly. Then after a while she added, ‘Some day you going to look down and find that big fat tongue of yours pulled out by the root and laying there before you on the table. Then how do you think you will feel?’ (490)

Frankie’s outburst is followed by her restless movement, akin to that of a caged animal:

Then she was walking round and around the room again. ‘I am so scared I didn’t make a good impression.’ ‘What of it?’ said Berenice. ‘I wish Honey and T. T. would come on. You make me nervous.’ Frankie drew up her left shoulder and bit her lower lip. Then suddenly she sat down and banged her forehead on the table. [. . .] Frankie sat stiff, her face in the crook of her elbow and her fists clenched tight. Her voice had a ragged and strangled sound. ‘They were so pretty,’ she was saying. ‘They must have such a good time. And they went away and left me [. . .] They went away and left me with this feeling.’ (490)

“This feeling,” Frankie’s queer desire to become a part of the couple, structures the narrative time spent in the kitchen as her attempts at expressing it fail over and over again. The last scene of the novel, which takes place in the kitchen as well, is also about anticipation as Frankie eagerly awaits Mary’s arrival, yet it occurs after Frankie has resolved the ambiguities surrounding her gender and sexuality. This scene of waiting lacks the restlessness of the earlier ones, as well as their duration. Frankie’s language has morphed from oblique and inadequate to direct and condescending as she moves to end

rather than encourage discussion with Berenice:

‘There’s no use our discussing a certain party. You could not possibly ever understand her. It’s just not in you.’ She had said that once before to Berenice, and from the sudden faded stillness in her eye she knew that the words had hurt. And now she repeated them, angered because of the tinged way Berenice had said the name, but once the words were spoken she was sorry. ‘Anyhow, I consider it the greatest honor of my existence that Mary has picked me out to be her one most intimate friend. Me! Of all people!’ (603).

Frankie shuts down conversation with Berenice because, having come of age and been assured of her newly normative feelings, she no longer needs it. Without the trio’s meandering kitchen conversations, the text ceases to meander as well, and swiftly concludes with Mary’s arrival shortly thereafter.

Although Berenice and John Henry share Frankie’s summer, they do not also share her angst or alienation. While Frankie is terrified of becoming a freak, her cousin John Henry embraces the idea. He is fully content in his world, that “mixture of delicious and freak” and is happy and comfortable in the kitchen (546). He reads as the confident outsider to Frankie’s anxious misfit. While criticism of the novel often paints Berenice as the third misfit outsider due her race, she should also be understood as an employee. As the cook, the kitchen is her workplace and her own home life is separate from the Addams’s house. Berenice visits Frankie’s queer world in which she is a mother figure for the girl, but she doesn’t live there. As such, her guidance always pushes Frankie toward normative behavior whereas John Henry

encourages freakery. Frankie is stuck between the two poles—heterosexuality as embodied by Berenice and her serial monogamous marriages or queerness as written on the cheerful cross-dressing genderqueer body of John Henry. In the end, of course, John Henry's path is unsustainable as evidenced by his death, while Berenice quits the family and the kitchen and decides to marry her beau T. T. Williams who "was very proper, and he liked to please everybody, and he always wanted to do the right thing" (493).

The many scenes of kitchen time killing underscore Frankie's feelings of alienation and unease: "They sat together in the kitchen, and the kitchen was a sad and ugly room. John Henry had covered the walls with queer, child drawings, as far up as his arm would reach. This gave the kitchen a crazy look, like that of a room in the crazy-house. And now the old kitchen made Frankie sick. The name for what had happened to her Frankie did not know, but she could feel her squeezed heart beating against the table edge" (463-4). Shaken by the news of the wedding, Frankie's anxiousness is palpable. Here queerness is associated with childhood and immaturity as well as a kind of freakery—the kitchen is a queer place for freaks, just like the confining walls of the "crazy-house," or, later, the town jail.

The kitchen space also exists out of time: "After the darkening yard the kitchen was hot and bright and queer. The walls of the kitchen bothered Frankie—the queer drawings of Christmas trees, airplanes, freak soldiers, flowers." (466). The queer interior of the kitchen exists in opposition to the normative outside world: the yard is cool and dark after sundown, but the kitchen remains "hot and bright." Though it is August outside, "queer

drawings of Christmas trees” adorn the interior walls. While groups of children play outdoors Frankie and John Henry remain sequestered:

‘Less play out.’ ‘I don’t want to,’ Frankie said. ‘There’s a big crowd going to play out tonight.’ ‘You got ears,’ Frankie said. ‘You heard me.’ [. . .] Along with the radio they could hear the voices of the children playing in the night. ‘But less go out, Frankie. They sound like they having a mighty good time.’ ‘No they’re not,’ she said. ‘Just a lot of ugly silly children. Running and hollering and running and hollering. Nothing to it. We’ll go upstairs and unpack your week-end bag.’ (468)

Frankie’s anxieties over her earlier actions of the summer, themselves a result of her attempts to “do something” to relieve her nameless anxiety, cause her to reject the outside world and games played by “ugly silly children.” Frankie does not feel a kinship with children anymore, yet is also not accepted by the clique of older, adolescent girls. She belongs nowhere but the kitchen.

Frankie kills time in the queer space of the kitchen much as Bigger kills time in the Regal Theater in *Native Son* by engaging in homosocial behavior. Both Frankie and Bigger feel oppressed by their anxiety-inducing idleness, but Frankie’s acting out and trouble causing includes attention-seeking antics, sexual experimentation, and petty larceny, whereas Bigger’s desires to *do something* lead to escalating incidences of violence, including rape and murder. Bigger’s feelings that “the white folks” “don’t let us do *nothing*” indicate his awareness of the lack of narrative options available to him as a member of a racial and socioeconomic underclass whereas Frankie’s restless anxiety stems from her desire to resist the progress narrative presented to her—finding a

nice “while boy beau” (NS 19-20; MOW 533). As chapter two explored, “growing up” is not a possibility for Bigger. Frankie’s narrative options are limited as well, but not to the same extent as Bigger’s. Frankie must choose between growing up, rejecting her queer desires, and accepting her place as a Southern lady in her dominant heteronormative society or embracing her queer desires, becoming a “freak,” and facing John Henry’s fate. Frankie well understands her options when she first asks Berenice if she thinks she “will grow into a Freak” and, upon Berenice’s negative reply, asks, “Well, do you think I will be pretty?” with prettiness serving as a marker of heterosexual attractiveness and freakiness signifying its opposite (477). Frankie’s choice is a privilege Bigger and Lolita do not have.

Freeman reads the temporality of the novel as a rejection of progress narratives, as do I, and she sees such a rejection as politically valuable: “This kind of thinking seems key to queering U.S. politics: to imagine social configurations and narrative forms that can refigure both the horizontal bonds between peers beyond couplehood and the vertical bonds between generations beyond parenthood. [. . .] [The novel] provides material for rethinking ‘queer’ beyond the nationalist (now global) frontier mentality and progress narrative” (65). While I share Freeman’s belief that the novel confounds progress narratives, creating what I argue is the novel’s queer temporality, I believe that this confounding effect relies on the portrayal of weak affects in the novel—the affects associated with Frankie’s queer desires.

Unlike Lolita’s self-sustaining and protective indifference and Bigger’s apathetic relationship with the world, Frankie’s boredom stems from her

sense that she does not belong. Whereas Bigger belongs to a specific underclass position in a socioeconomic hierarchy and Lolita essentially belongs to Humbert, the setting of Frankie's narrative is framed by her feelings of alienation: "This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid" (461). As such, the novel is often read as a commentary on loneliness. Frankie does feel very much alone, however her feelings of isolation can be attributed to the "extreme solitude" of what Barthes called the "lover's discourse" (*LD* 1). She is isolated by her desires.

The spring and summer of that year had been filled with a mixture of fear, giving way to anxiety and indifference for Frankie. Convinced that she must leave her town, Frankie continually packs and unpacks her suitcase having nowhere to go and no way to get there. Frankie's feelings are largely impotent and ineffectual, leaving her restless and unsatisfied: "This was the summer when Frankie was sick and tired of being Frankie. She hated herself, and had become a loafer and a big no-good who hung around the summer kitchen: dirty and greedy and mean and sad" (478). Frankie's fears stem in part from her adolescent loneliness. She has lost her best friend to a move, been banished from her father's bed at night, and has begun to form a sense of self that is separate and unconnected from the world around her:

She was afraid because in the war they would not include her, and because the world seemed somehow separate from herself [. . .] She was afraid of these things that made her suddenly wonder who she was,

and what she was going to be in the world, and why she was standing at that minute, seeing a light or listening, or staring up into the sky: alone. She was afraid, and there was a queer tightness in her chest. (480-481).

Frankie's sense of isolation corresponds with the monotony of that spring and summer: "For the last spring, that year, was lazy and too sweet. The long afternoons flowered and lasted and the green sweetness sickened her" (480). Disconnected from the world and a member of no club—a lack of belonging that Frankie fears contributes to her affiliation with freaks, time moves very slowly for her, a temporality reflected in the narrative.

By the end of the summer, Frankie's impotent angst is mirrored in the monotony of the kitchen: "And so each gloomy afternoon their voices sawed against each other, saying the same words, which finally reminded Frankie of a raggedy rhyme said by two crazies. She would end by telling Berenice: 'It looks to me like everything has just walked off and left me.' And she would put her head down on the table and feel afraid" (487). Frankie manages to suppress her feelings of fear at the adolescent changes she is experiencing, and her changing recognition of the world as something apart from herself and replace them with indifference and apathy:

So she stayed home and hung around the kitchen, and the summer did not end. By dog days she was five feet five and three-quarter inches tall, a great big greedy loafer who was too mean to live [. . .] She stuck close in the kitchen with John Henry and Berenice. She did not think about the war, the world. Nothing hurt her any longer; she did not care

[. . .] She would not let things make her sad and she would not care [. . .]
.] Each day was like the day before, except that it was longer, and
nothing hurt her any more. (482-483)

The summer of the kitchen has dragged on seemingly indefinitely, as suggested by the description of the radio constantly on in the background: “The radio had stayed on all the summer long, so finally it was a sound that as a rule they did not notice. Sometimes, when the noise became so loud that they could not hear their own ears, Frankie would turn it down a little. Otherwise, music and voices came and went and crossed and twisted with each other, and by August they did not listen any more” (468). The monotony of the kitchen is a reflection of Frankie’s seeming stasis. She is developmentally stuck between childhood and adulthood. Her perpetual restlessness drives her to do something, anything, but her actions are always “wrong” in that they do not relieve her anxiety.

Eventually, Frankie simply gives in to her boredom, idleness, and the stalled pace of her life. Frankie’s desire for the wedding begins the novel, which presents her anticipation of the event as a greater degree of the same unproductive emotions she has been feeling—anxiety and restlessness. Her desire to become a member of the wedding does not relieve her restlessness because it is not the *correct* desire that would help shepherd her into young adulthood the way a desire to have a “young white boy beau” like Barney would (533). The novel presents Frankie’s queer desire for the wedding as another example of how she is developmentally stalled in adolescence. Her inability to *do something* highlights the paralyzing anxiety that accompanies

her queer desires, which are seen as thwarting her forward, developmental progress. When Frankie cannot progress, neither can the narrative. Thus the narrative itself is a long exercise in delay, as the reader spends just as much monotonous time in the kitchen as Frankie does, and gives as much attention to the non-events, the inactivity of the characters, as to the few dramatic instances that strangely merit little description. While several hours in the kitchen constitute the bulk of the novel's narrative, the wedding itself is dispensed with in a page; the soldier's attack on Frankie, a paragraph; and John Henry's death, a sentence, for in the kitchen, "The clock ticked very slowly on the shelf above the stove, and it was only quarter to six. The glare outside the window shade beneath the arbor was black and solid. Nothing moved. From somewhere far away came the sound of whistling, and it was a grieving August song that did not end. The minutes were very long" (475).

The news of her brother's wedding gives Frankie "a feeling she could not name," yet she does name it when she says, "I just never saw an two people like them [Jarvis and Janice]. When they walked in the house today it was so queer" (462). There is, of course, nothing strange about her brother's announcement as he has been engaged for two years. What is queer in this scene is Frankie who has begun to imagine a place for herself within the wedding, picturing both her brother and his bride as "faceless" (462). "The spring of that year had been a long queer season" for Frankie and the queerness of her adolescent development coalesces around her brother's wedding: "Together [Janis and Jarvis] made in her this feeling that she could not name. But it was like the feelings of the spring, only more sudden and

more sharp. There was the same tightness and in the same queer way she was afraid" (479; 483). Frankie tries to make sense of her feelings by asking Berenice to narrate events she had been present for—her brother's visit: "'Tell me,' she said. 'Tell me exactly how it was.' 'You know!' said Berenice. 'You seen them.' 'But tell me,' Frankie said. 'I will discuss it for the last time,' said Berenice" (485). Frankie attempts to make sense of her lived experience by having Berenice tell her repeatedly what she has seen herself. Berenice gives a matter-of-fact description: the couple arrived, Frankie changed, the couple, Frankie, her father, and John Henry sat and had drinks, then dinner, then Janice and Jarvis left on the train, "The wedding will be this coming Sunday. And that is all. Now, is you satisfied?" (485). Frankie, of course, is not satisfied with Berenice's retelling because the events of the visit seem very ordinary when compared with the extraordinary feelings she experiences: "Tell me,' Frankie said again. 'Exactly what did they look like?' 'Look like?' Said Berenice. 'Why, they looked natural. Your brother is a good-looking blond white boy. And the girl is kind of brunette and small and pretty. They make a nice white couple. You seen them, Foolish'" (485). Berenice's description of the pair as "natural" is telling in her role as kitchen arbiter of the natural and unnatural. Natural for Berenice is a "good-looking blond white boy" marrying a "small and pretty" brunette. Frankie is not a small and pretty lady and she has no desire for a "natural" or appropriate romantic relationship. When Berenice tells her "'What you ought to begin thinking about is a beau [. . .] A nice little white boy beau,'" Frankie rejects the idea: "I don't want any beau. What would I do with one?" (533). Berenice's

instructions on femininity, ““You ought to fix yourself up nice in your dresses. And speak sweetly and act sly,” do not appeal to Frankie (533). Berenice is eventually the person who articulates Frankie’s desire for a queer union: “I see what you have in your mind. Don’t think I don’t. You see something unheard of at Winter Hill tomorrow, and you right in the center. You think you going to march down the center of the aisle right in between your brother and the bride. You think you going to break into that wedding, and then Jesus knows what else” (556). By calling Frankie’s plot “unheard of,” Berenice underscores the unnatural nature of Frankie’s desires. She further insinuates that part of Frankie’s unnatural desires are incestuous, as she wants to participate not just in the wedding itself, but in the “Jesus knows what else” that follows the ceremony—the wedding night and honeymoon that will consummate the marriage. Berenice warns Frankie away from indulging her queer desires lest they lead to an unnatural lifestyle: “If you start out falling in love with some unheard-of thing like that, why is going to happen to you? If you take a mania like this, it won’t be the last time and of that you can be sure. So what will become of you? Will you be trying to break into weddings the rest of your days? And what kind of life would that be?” (556). In this passage, Berenice’s undertones are clear—girls who try to break into weddings never become brides because those who fall in love with “unheard of” objects of desire, be it weddings, couples, or other women, are doomed to an unfulfilled life of disappointment. And as Frankie knows, the people who don’t get to go to weddings are freaks.

Frankie seeks the answer to her feelings of alienation in the queer union

she desires with Jarvis and Janis. She sees them as the “we of me”:

“Yesterday, and all the twelve years of her life, she had only been Frankie. She was an *I* person who had to walk around and do things by herself. All other people has a *we* to claim, all others except her [. . .] the old Frankie had had no *we* to claim, less it would be the terrible summer *we* of her and John Henry and Berenice—and that was the last *we* in the world she wanted” (497). Frankie turns away from the queer kitchen trio to the even queerer prospect of belonging to her brother’s marriage, of joining the *we* of Jarvis and Janis:

“There was her bother and the bride, and it was as though when first she saw them something she had known inside of her: *They are the we of me*. And that was why it made her feel so queer, for them to be away in Winter Hill while she was left all by herself; the hull of the old Frankie left there in the town alone” (497). Yet Frankie’s choice of a *we* is seen as an unnatural one compared to all the other “we’s” she lists: Berenice’s family, church, and lodge; her father’s store; members of various clubs; army soldiers; and criminals on a chain-gang (497). All of these institutions—work, family, church, community, and even prison—are sanctioned as normative collectives of individuals. Marriage, however, is a union for couples and couples only. As Barthes laments, “Thus—according to Nature, traditional wisdom, the myth—do not look for union (*amphimixis*) outside the division of roles, if not of the sexes: it is the couple’s *reason*.” (LD 227). Frankie’s desires are decidedly nonnormative and thus painted as unnatural and ultimately unsustainable. While Frankie’s vision of the future calls for gender mutability and world travel as part of her brother’s wedding, this vision is ultimately unrealizable.

While Frankie's queer desires do provide an in-between space that thwarts an oppositional choice, they do so by *stalling* rather than providing an obtainable third option outside and apart from dominant heteronormative society. Her queer desires and the feelings of anxiety that accompany them thus perform the work of Barthes's Neutral, which, as examined in previous chapters, *temporarily* destabilizes such oppositional binaries. Frankie the androgyne may destabilize masculine/feminine binaries, for example, but this is an ultimately untenable position. Likewise, her desire to infiltrate and expand the heterosexual couple is not an achievable goal. Barthes writes of the ethical component he assigns to the Neutral and its role in conflict avoidance, of resisting "injunctions addressed by the world to 'choose,' to produce meaning, to enter conflicts, to 'take responsibility'" (7). The Neutral suspends such choices, suspends meaning, and suspends progress. As such, Frankie's idle, androgynous adolescence is Neutral territory, refusing to choose between adulthood and childhood; masculine and feminine; queer and heteronormative. Her stalled development is bathed in anxiety and boredom, the Neutral affects that correspond to and paradoxically perpetuate inaction and stasis.

Despite Berenice's admonitions, Frankie has big plans for the wedding. While sitting across from a soldier she meets in the Blue Moon, a hotel bar she wanders into in her excitement to tell people about the wedding, "she suddenly saw the three of them—herself, her brother, and the bride—walking beneath a cold Alaskan sky, along the sea where green ice waves lay frozen and folded on the shore; they climbed a sunny glacier shot through with pale

cold colors and a rope tied the three of them together, and friends from another glacier called in Alaskan their J A names” (523). For Frankie, the future fantasy of her life in this three-way marriage seems more solid and appealing than the drunken soldier who buys her a beer and asks her out: “It was the actual present, in fact, that seemed to F. Jasmine a little bit unreal” (523). Frankie later that night dresses for her date with the soldier and “look[s] like a regular grown girl” in her “silver shoes! And silk stockings!” and “sweet dress” (578). Frankie puts on her approximation of normative femininity in anticipation of what she perceives to be grown-up heterosexual behavior—her date with the soldier, which does not go as planned: “although by the clock the time was not long, it seemed to F. Jasmine endless [. . .] their two conversations would not join together, and underneath there was a layer of queerness she could not place and understand” (580). Frankie feels unjoined from the soldier because she doesn’t understand his flirting and innuendo. She knows that a sexual undercurrent is at play in his “gay” and “sassy talk,” and it makes her uncomfortable and confused: “It was again as though the soldier talked a kind of double-talk that, try as she would, she could not follow—yet it was not so much the actual remarks as the tone underneath she failed to understand” (580-581). She feels “Like a nightmare pupil in a recital who has to play a duet to a piece she does not know, F. Jasmine did her best to catch the tune and follow” (581). When the soldier invites her up to his room, she equates it with the fair: “It was like going into a fair booth, or fair ride, that once having entered you cannot leave until the exhibition or the ride is finished” (581). Frankie compares the soldier’s

attempt to assault her to “a minute in the fair Crazy-House, or real Milledgeville” and Frankie escapes by knocking him unconscious and fleeing his room via the fire escape (583).

Frankie significantly compares escaping her would-be assailant to “[running] like a chased person fleeing from the crazy-house at Milledgeville,” thus associating the sailor’s aggressive masculine heterosexuality with the freaks in the institution and calling him a “crazy man” (584). She runs away from a heterosexuality that confuses her and toward her brother’s wedding, arriving home and proclaiming, “I wish we were going to the wedding right this minute [. . .] I think that would be the best thing to do” (585). Her encounter with the soldier who is, at best, a drunk and a creep and, at worst, a rapist and a pedophile, seems not to leave her traumatized. Her feelings simply echo those she has been experiencing all summer, those heightened by her plan for the wedding: “The waiting made her feel restless” (585).

Frankie fails to articulate her plans to her brother and his bride, however, never managing to explain how they are the “we of me” and causing a scene at the wedding by climbing into their car, clinging to the steering wheel, and sobbing for them to take her with them. Yet she describes this outcome as a failure on *the wedding’s* part and not her or her brother’s:

From the beginning the wedding had been queer like the card games in the kitchen the first week last June. In those bridge games they played and played for many days, but nobody ever drew a good hand, the cards were all sorry, and no high bids made—until finally Berenice suspicioned, saying: ‘Less us get busy and count these old cards.’ And

they got busy and counted the old cards, and it turned out the jacks and the queens were missing. John Henry at last admitted that he had cut out the jacks and then the queens to keep them company and, after hiding the clipped scraps in the stove, had secretly taken the pictures home. So the fault of the card game was discovered. But how could the failure of the wedding be explained? (589)

Here the card game between the odd trio is “queered” when John Henry removes and keeps the coupled queens and jacks, which represent a heterosexual (though illicit if the queen is running away with her servant) pairing that allows the world of the card game to function successfully. In Frankie’s mind, the wedding that would allow the odd trio of her fantasy—her, her brother, and his bride—was queered just like the card game, when the heterosexual couple is set apart from the group.

After her plan to join her brother’s wedding fails, Frankie runs away and has the thought that she will marry the soldier who she narrowly avoided being sexually assaulted by the night before, as she realizes “There was only knowing that she must find somebody, anybody, that she could join with to go away. For now she admitted she was too scared to go into the world alone” (598). As her queer union hopes have been dashed, Frankie has her heteronormative sexual awakening, piecing together the time she walked in on her father’s boarders having sex, the “nasty talk” of her friends, and her experiences with Barney and the soldier:

[S]he recalled the silence in the hotel room; and all at once a fit in a front room, the silence, the nasty talk behind the garage—these

separate recollections fell together in the darkness of her mind, as shafting searchlights meet in the night sky upon an aeroplane, so that in a flash there came in her an understanding. There was a feeling of cold surprise; she stopped a minute, then went on toward the Blue Moon. (598)

In this moment, Frankie understands heterosexuality and her place in it. The “cold surprise” she feels is unpleasant—she has lost her dream of the wedding and found only uncomfortable, misunderstood, and undesired moments. This realization precipitates her recognition that to occupy the position of a queer outcast as a tomboy who prefers the company of the cook and her queer cousin was to prevent her from belonging to a world structured by heterosexual norms. She pauses, but then continues into the hotel bar where she had met the soldier, thus accepting her heteronormative fate, which is sealed when a policeman approaches and identifies her, saying “I’ll phone in to headquarters to say you’re found” (599). Frankie has indeed been lost and found in the eyes of her father and the Law, but for Frankie she has not been found so much as lost for good.

Following this night of recognition and acceptance, “Frances was never once to speak about the wedding,” finding instead her feelings of anxiety and restlessness replaced by happiness and a feeling of belonging, not simply within her friendship with Mary, but also in her larger relationship to the world, from which she no longer feels set apart (601). Thus her lack of weak feelings also signals the end of both her developmental and narrative delays. Frankie rejects her tomboy character and is allowed entrance into an adult

world defined by the heteronormativity her brother's marriage represents. John Henry embraces his queer desires and remains a child forever—his death denying him the opportunity to grow up. The novel reaches its resolution when Frankie reaches hers. Having heeded the word's call to choose, Frankie's life progresses and the narrative documenting her stalled adolescence ends.

CONCLUSION

KIDS THESE DAYS

Ultimately, it is my hope to understand these novels through thinking about the cultural movement of these fictional figures—Lolita, Bigger, and Frankie—through time. In this conclusion then, I wish to briefly sketch the afterlife of these novels in our contemporary cultural imagination as a means of investigating the way time continues to work *on* these novels, and not simply within them. As this aspect of my project is still developing, these are the ideas I want to continue to think about and as such are more suggestive than demonstrative.

Two of the novels in this study have been canonized and one relegated to the category of “young adult fiction,” but significantly the only adolescent whose place in the popular imagination (in the U. S. and abroad) has continued to grow beyond the novel’s covers is the one we have the least access to within the text—Lolita. *Native Son* and *The Member of the Wedding* do not share Lolita’s cultural currency. Wright’s novel has entered the canon of American literature, to be sure, but Bigger Thomas is still seen as product of a specific historical moment. McCullers’s novel is less widely read and has met the fate common to novels about adolescence—they become novels *for* adolescents and thus somehow less serious and less universal than adult literature. Though lauded at the time of publication, *The Member of the Wedding* is now a book about a twelve year old, meant to be read by twelve year olds. The same can be said for any number of coming-of-age novels, perhaps most notably Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, which went from being

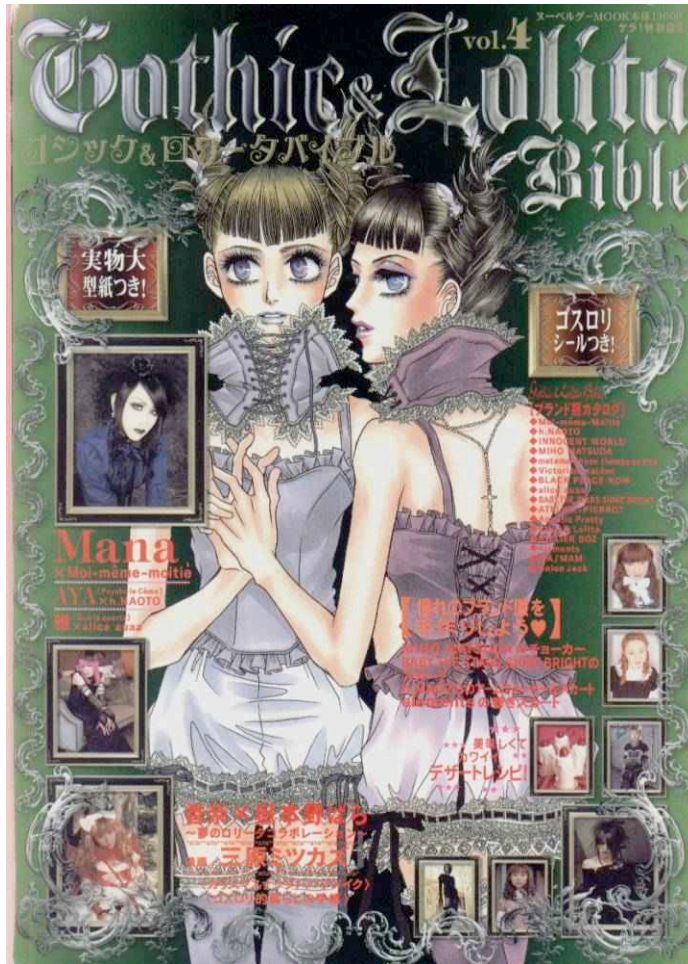
a novel that attracted a large amount of literary criticism in the 1950s and 60s to a novel for high school students—an immature work about an immature boy. I confess that I am not entirely sure what to make of this phenomenon except to note how the persistent devaluation or minimization of works about adolescents reflects a perpetually conflicted intergenerational relationship that ensures young people can only speak to and for each other while en route to a pre-determined futurity not of their making.

Lolita, on the other hand, now has a life nearly completely untethered from her textual depiction. Her name has become synonymous with sexual precociousness, underage temptresses, and various incarnations of “jailbait.” The news media is quick to label precocious teens “Lolitas” as demonstrated by the 1992 case of Amy Fisher, the 17 year old famously labeled the “Long Island Lolita” after she attempted to murder her 36-year-old lover’s wife. Fisher, now out of prison, has become a porn actress—a career Nabokov’s *Lolita* summarily rejected. It is striking the extent to which Humbert’s depiction of his “nymphet” has blotted out the reality of a victimized child in the popularization of “Lolita” as a descriptive term. We do not call kidnapped and sexually abused girls “Lolitas,” after all. Humbert’s view of girl children disturbingly mirrors our cultural one—they are simultaneously innocent and seductive, wholly sexual and sexualized.

Lolita is not just an American phenomenon. In Japan, a “Lolita” street fashion culture emerged in the 1980s or mid-1990s, depending on the source, and continues today. Wearing (or being, as the style is oft considered a state of mind) “Lolita” involves the donning of gothic Victorian frilly and child-like

clothing by adult women.³⁸

Figure 4



Gothic & Lolita Bible, Vol. 4 cover art.

³⁸ See figures 4 and 5 from the *Gothic & Lolita Bible*, a Japanese publication dedicated to Lolita fashion for examples of the style.

Figure 5



Gothic & Lolita Bible, Vol. 4 interior pictorial.

In contrast to precocious American “Lolitas,” the Japanese version attempts to reclaim a childhood innocence or modesty and its adherents assert that the look and the lifestyle it represents is about neither sexuality nor Nabokov’s novel: “Please put away all your preconceptions, this Lolita has nothing to do with Nabokov and his pedophilic Humbert, Humbert, nymphets, pornography, rorikon [“Lolita complex”] or Hentai [pornographic anime]. Lolita is a fashion from Japan” (“Avant Gauche”). “The pure, girl-like world

inside of me, that is what Lolita is all about,” says one self-professed “Lolita” (Talmadge). These fashionistas argue that “Our Lolita is an elegant young girl inspired by Victorian or Rococo times. They aspire to create a sense of nobility” (Jimenez CY4). The fact remains, however, that women wearing infantilizing clothing often serves to sexualize both the women and childhood, a practice well evidenced by the popularity of the “rorikon” or “lolicon” (short for “Lolita complex”) Japanese pornographic industry, which includes anime or manga that caters to middle-aged men with a sexual preference for young girls, or, at least, animated versions of them.³⁹

Back in the U. S., in October of 2009 Los Angeles architect John Bertram, citing his dismay with current and historical versions, held an online contest to redesign Lolita’s book cover: “I am disappointed, as *interesting* as the various depictions of Lolita are, by how very few correspond thematically to the novel” (“Venus”). He received 155 submissions from 105 different people in 34 countries (Bertram 3). All of the entries are posted online⁴⁰, allowing for a fascinating glimpse at what *Lolita* the novel represents within a contemporary public imagination. The entries included a perhaps predictable number of nods to Kubrick’s 1962 film version of the novel, featuring sunglasses and lollypops (Figures 6 and 7). Many depicted Lolita as a fully developed

³⁹ See Sparrow, William. “Japan’s Lolita merchants feel the heat,” *Asia Times*. 23 Feb 2008. Online:

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Front_Page/JB23Aa02.html, for a description of the lolicon industry and recent Japanese pornography laws.

⁴⁰ Online gallery available at this address:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/johnzarow/sets/72157622389801039/>. All images reprinted here are from John Bertram’s Flickr set located at the above address with the artist or designer noted in their respective captions.

woman instead of a twelve-year-old girl, and a number featured unintentionally humorous depictions of panty dropping, which displayed an ignorance of the plot of the novel (Figure 8). A large number also contained disembodied body parts—Lolita’s legs, eyes, lips—just as a number of actual covers have done over the years. After all, the images seem to say, the novel doesn’t ever show us the “real” Lolita, so how can the cover? (Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 6



Lolita Book Cover Contest Submission, Janece Frick

Figure 7



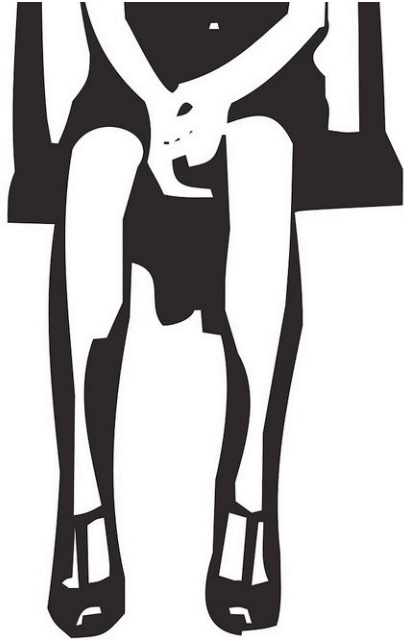
Lolita Book Cover Contest Submission, James Wesley Miller

Figure 8



Lolita Book Cover Contest Submission, Luis Pedro Barriga

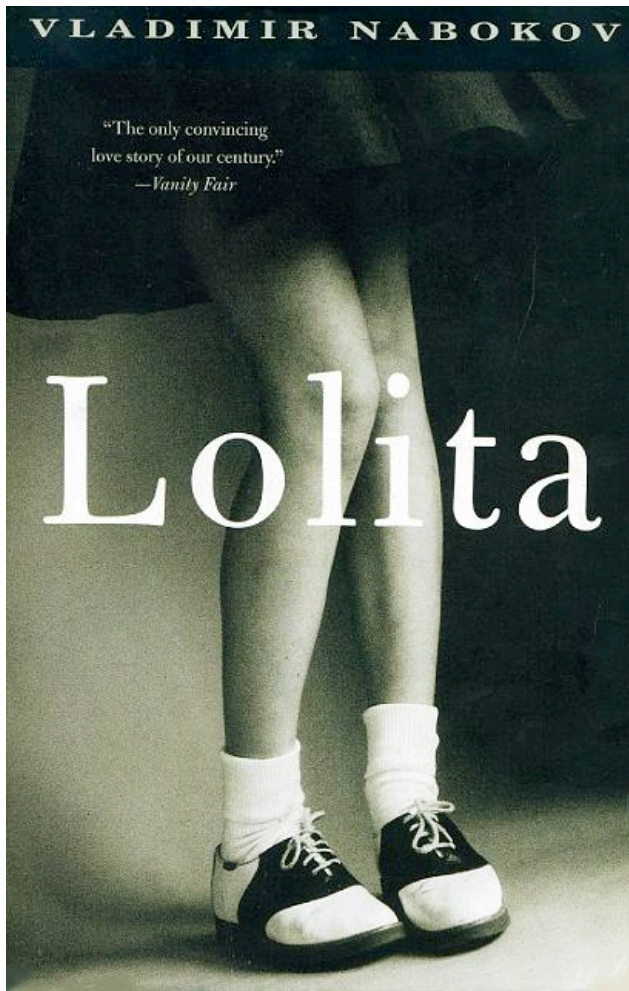
Figure 9



lolita | vladimir nabokov

Lolita Book Cover Contest Submission, Federico Diaz Mastellone

Figure 10



U. S. *Lolita* cover design by Megan Wilson for Random House, 1997.

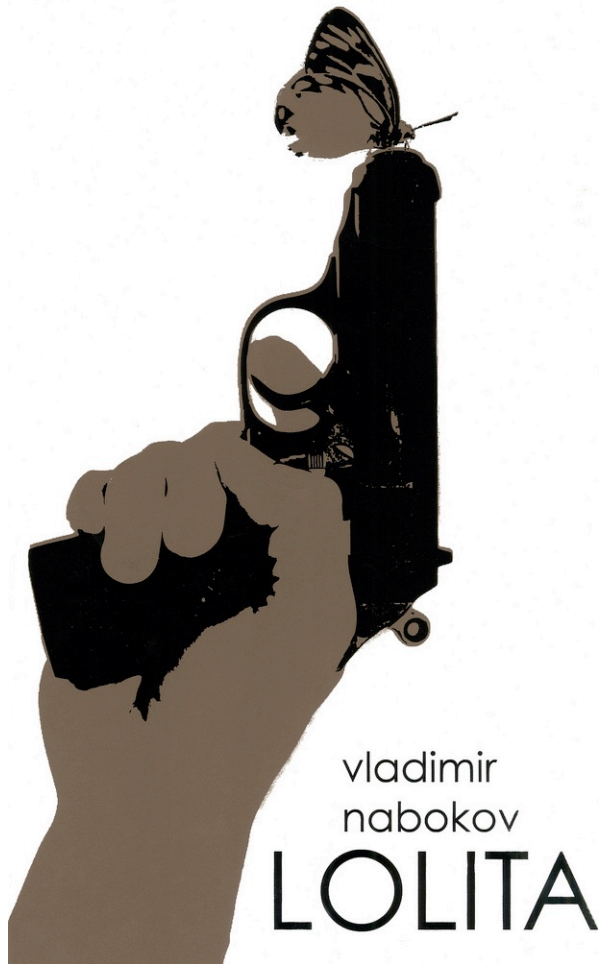
The better designs display a knowledge of the text, reminding us of the violence and control at the novel's core, like the cover by Natalia Olbinski, which features a young girl's ponytail held in a man's firm fist (Figure 11), or Derek McCalla's design, which shows one of Nabokov's butterflies startlingly resting on the barrel of a handgun (Figure 12).

Figure 11



Lolita Book Cover Contest Submission, Natalia Olbinski

Figure 12



Lolita Book Cover Contest Submission, Derek McCalla

The cover I find most evocative, however, isn't necessarily the best one from an artistic or graphic design perspective, but rather the one that combines archetypes of difficult children by casting Veruca Salt, the bratty little girl from the 1971 film version of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, as Lolita (Figure 13).

Figure 13

Lolita

Vladimir Nabokov



Lolita Book Cover Contest Submission, Zhuldyzay Dauletalina

Figure 14



Still from the 1971 film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* showing Veruca Salt mid-tantrum.

This cover image reminds me of the cultural currency of petulant little girls and the grown men who control them. It forces me to ask what it might mean to understand Nabokov's *Lolita* through or in relationship to *Willy Wonka*—both the film and Gene Wilder's creepy portrayal of Wonka as a man both childish and cunning who lures children into his hands with candy and evokes the specter of the pedophile. Was *Lolita* also a “bad egg” or were, as the Oompa Loompas moralize, her parents to blame? This reimagining of *Lolita* as Veruca manages to place the blame for the girls' behavior—Veruca is spoiled and *Lolita* possesses a precocious sexuality—on poor parenting by the adults in their lives, but it also retains the peculiar lack of sympathy accorded to the girls themselves. The audience isn't unhappy when insufferable Veruca

plunges down the egg chute, even as the film's dark undercurrent lets us know that she's headed for the furnace, just as *Lolita's* readers become so taken in by Humbert's narrative perspective that they often have trouble seeing her as a victim even as she "sobs in the night—every night, every night" (176). It is this dynamic, I think, that feeds the evolution of Lolita from fictional character to cultural signifier. Lolitas (and Verucas) are responsible for their own fates, even though they are society's creations. They allow a public fascination with the details of victimization without requiring anyone to empathize with the victims just as *Dateline NBC's* wildly popular "To Catch a Predator" series allowed spectators to become privy to the desires of "predators" without victims (in the television show men were lured—some might say entrapped—into a house rigged with hidden cameras by adults pretending to be underage children and teenagers online, and summarily shamed by the host and arrested by waiting police officers). As a culture, we seem to like girl children the best when we invent them. This is, of course, partially James Kincaid's argument about child sexuality as well: "erotic children are manufactured—in the sense that we produce them in our cultural factories, the ones that make meanings for us. They tell us what 'the child' is, and also what 'the erotic' is [author's emphasis]" (9). If the cultural understanding of childhood is innocence, then the cultural understanding of Lolita is not that of corrupted innocence—a reading that might be justified by the text—but that of the girl who was "asking for it." Thus the erotic child in this case is the one imagined to be willing.

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