Queer Bodies and Queer Materials in Post-WWII American Texts

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ABSTRACT

Although the primary subject of this dissertation is contemporary American literature and popular culture—individual chapters are devoted to careful studies of Octavia Butler’s short story “Bloodchild,” Cormack McCarthy’s gothic novel *Child of God*, Chuck Palahniuk’s epistolary novel *Pygmy*, and the track “It’s Good” by hip-hop artist Lil Wayne featuring Drake and Jadakiss—I develop a reading of these contemporary texts that places them within much older and richer intellectual, spiritual, psychological, and even biological traditions. My primary focus is the human body, both literal and figurative, as the site of dynamic exchanges, movements, blockages, and productive potentialities. I argue that at times the contemporary novels in this dissertation treat the body as a figure for social formations, at other times they treat inanimate objects as figures for the human body, and at still other times they examine material bodies in a manner that is beyond the figurative. In all of these modes, their engagement with the human body must, I argue, be understood within a much broader intellectual tradition—one that stretches from antiquity to the present, one that includes mythical and spiritual traditions as well as scientific ones, one that reckons evolutionary biology with the metaphysical and the aesthetic, just to name a few. Methodologically I have found it necessary to bring together otherwise desperate discourses: Marxist humanism and science fiction; mythology, Freudian psychoanalysis, and scientific-medical accounts of neurology; Lacanian psychoanalysis, sacred texts, and the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; and media studies, evolutionary psychology, and queer theory. When addressing literature that simultaneously provides instructions for tapping into the body’s productive potential, does cost-benefit analysis of
bodily expenses and profits, narrativizes journeys into the body’s coffers of possibility, and literature that takes the body as an aesthetic site of formal artistic expression as well as an always already processing and digesting zone of impressions and expressions that acts as a linchpin between one’s exchanges within oneself and one’s exchanges with the exterior environment, it is necessary to have an interdisciplinary approach that adds up to be more than the sum of their parts.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... vi

Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1 “Bloodchild” and “Alienated Labor:” Examining Octavia Butler through Karl Marx ......................................................................................................................... 12

Chapter 2 Mapping The Queer Body in McCarthy’s Child of God ....................................................... 36

Chapter 3 Masochism, Material, and The Child in Palahniuk’s Pygmy ................................................. 67

Chapter 4 Wounded Healers, Queer Becomings, and The Hood: A Close Reading of Lil Wayne’s “It’s Good,” Featuring Drake and Jadakiss .................................................................................. 111

Bibliography ..................................................................................................................................... 135
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More often than not language fails to approximate the experiences and feelings I intend for it to account for. Here, in this space allowed for me to give thanks to those to who I am empowered by, this is most true. At a loss for words and in no particular order, I’ll simply say thank you to my mother Cynthia and father Michael, to my wife Sarah and our children Iris and Jacob, my friends—(too many to name) Norma, Chris, Gary, Andy, Brad, Dan, Brian, Liz, and so on and so on—the community, and the earth. Thank you to my committee: Bret Benjamin, Tom Cohen, and Edward Schwarzschild. Thank you to Branka Arsic, Charles Shepherdson, Richard Barney, Eric Keenaghan, and Marjorie Pryce.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation constructs an argument around a primary trope recurrent in texts throughout the history of human ideas and particularly relevant to my study of contemporary American fiction: the figure of a single human as multiple, and its obverse form, a social formation figured as a single body. *Queer Bodies and Queer Materials in Post-WWII American Texts* explores how tapping into the human body’s productive potential can maximize a human’s capacity to live and die in harmony with their changing selves, to live and die in harmony in the social exchanges between self and other, and can maximize the forever-evolving human race’s capacity to live and die in harmony with the environment that it is both shaped by and that it in turn shapes. The literary, philosophical, scientific, and spiritual texts I explore allow me to address these dynamic exchanges. In each case I attempt to unfold a complex dialectic between the singular and the multiple.

This treating one as multiple has many permutations and variations, each of which comes with its own polysemic political implications and associations. Some texts make it the imperative to bring different multiplicities together into unity, while others stress an ongoing process of dividing and multiplying differences in order to produce more differences. Sometimes one multiplicity is treated as a static hierarchy, and sometimes it is treated as a shifting and evolving configuration. One multiplicity is often treated as the forever-generating, forever-(re)productive mommy-daddy-baby. One is treated as the forever-mourning mommy-daddy-baby. One is treated as the forever-quarreling twins or siblings—brother and sister, brother and brother, sister and sister. One is treated as the always-divorcing, always-reuniting husband and wife. One is treated as loving friends.
One is treated as jealous enemies. One is treated as the society within which one belongs and visa versa—the society is treated as an individual. One is treated as more than one earthly species. One is treated as more than one celestial species—one as God and man, one as angels and demons.

Although the primary subject of this dissertation is contemporary American literature and popular culture—individual chapters are devoted to careful studies of Octavia Butler, Cormack McCarthy, Chuck Palahniuk, and hip-hop artist Lil Wayne—I develop a reading of these contemporary texts that places them within much older and richer intellectual, spiritual, psychological, and even biological traditions. My primary focus is the human body, both literal and figurative, as the site of dynamic exchanges, movements, blockages, and productive potentialities. I argue that at times the contemporary novels in this dissertation treat the body as a figure for social formations, at other times they treat inanimate objects as figures for the human body, and at still other times they examine material bodies in a manner that is beyond the figurative. In all of these modes, their engagement with the human body must, I argue, be understood within a much broader intellectual tradition—one that stretches from antiquity to the present, one that includes mythical and spiritual traditions as well as scientific ones, one that reckons evolutionary biology with the metaphysical and the aesthetic, just to name a few. Methodologically I have found it necessary to bring together otherwise desperate discourses: Marxist humanism and science fiction; mythology, Freudian psychoanalysis, and scientific-medical accounts of neurology; Lacanian psychoanalysis, sacred texts, and the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; and media studies, evolutionary psychology, and queer theory. When addressing literature that, as I understand it,
simultaneously provides instructions for tapping into the body’s productive potential, 
does cost-benefit analysis of bodily expenses and profits, narrativizes journeys into the 
body’s coffers of possibility, and literature that takes the body as an aesthetic site of 
formal artistic expression as well as an always already processing and digesting zone of 
impressions and expressions that acts as a linchpin between one’s exchanges within 
one self and one’s exchanges with the exterior environment, it is necessary to have an 
interdisciplinary approach to both the texts being scrutinized and the bodies they address. 
It is necessary to treat the body as an organism/machine, to see it as situated within not 
only history but also socio-economical structures, to see the body as sexual both on the 
level of reproduction and eroticism, to see both the body and mind as evolutionary and 
historical, to treat it as a generator of ideas, and it is necessary to treat the body as the site 
of non-quantifiably measurable and often times unexplainable or esoteric experiences in 
order to ascertain a variety of angles that add up to be more than the sum of their parts. 

For example, I turn to ancient Egypt as a source of mythic assemblages that recur 
and resonate with the American literary tradition. There the incestuously intersexual sun 
god Ra-Atum births the “holy family” (or “unholy family” depending on one’s position) 
that is called the Ennead of Heliopolis by way of what is understood to be a sacred and 
esoteric manner of masturbation or parthenogenesis (The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid 
Texts, Utterance 527). The war saga between Ra-Atum’s most infamous children—the 
twin husband and wife Osiris and Isis and the other twin couple Set and Nephthys—is, in 
my analysis, both a struggle within the interior form of the intersexual Ra-Atum and is a 
struggle between two separate forms or entities who are themselves, like Ra-Atum, each 
treated as doubles; the sexual family drama culminating in the simultaneous death of
Osiris and the resurrection of Horus out of the body of his father, a rebirth that not only transforms the one but transforms the kingdom or community with implications of unending transformation.

In the American literary context, these stories that tell of the transformations of human bodies and social bodies are often popularly depicted not only as re-significations of Judeo-Christian narratives which can themselves be interpreted as re-significations of Egyptian transformation tales but are also depicted as material re-experiencings. For instance, when the Pilgrims come to America to escape religious persecution, when the southern slaves flee across the Mason-Dixon to the free states during the Civil War, or when America goes to war with Nazi Germany, the individuals in these groups not only understand themselves to be like the Jews who both confront and flee from the Egyptian pharaoh but they understand themselves to be materially re-experiencing and also materially re-configuring the Exodus revolution, a revolution that uses the energy of the pharaoh to move beyond the pharaoh—the pharaoh himself being the highest re-signification and re-experiencing culmination of the incestuously intersexual Ra-Atum: the narcissistic, masturbatory fantasy of a totalitarian closed circle (a body without an anus, a pure society of infinite growth progressing immortally) that implodes a queer democratic uprising of non-returning curves.

I chose to concentrate on post-WWII American texts—specifically texts occurring after the 1970s—because they mark a particular convergence of re-experiencing and re-signifying atop the materials of the past that is uniquely concerned with equitable economic disseminations within and across both individual and social bodies that are more explicitly coming to understand and express themselves as “queer” in the way the
term is now popularly understood. Here, I choose the term “queer” because of its
categorical ambiguity—ambiguity along the register of materially biological sexuality, of
gender conceptualization, and ambiguity within the zone of not only sensual affect but
also of the body’s material economy of neurological, reproductive, respiratory, digestive,
and other flows. What interests me about post-1970s American literature isn’t that it
explicitly understands and expresses itself as “queer” but that it begins to do so,
transitioning away from some of the nuclear-family-centric and bisexual-centric logics
affiliated with certain conservative facets of the “New Age” movement and beginning to
more explicitly take up alliances with the “Sexual Liberation” and “Gay Liberation”
movements while preserving a language of polysemic ambiguity that celebrates both
possibility and difference. Until the 1990s, the term “queer” is a pejorative term for
people who engage in sexual activities or entertain sexual thoughts that are deemed “non-
normative” or “non-heterosexual.” After the 1990s, activists and intellectuals
reappropriate the term and begin to use it to celebrate bodily difference in regards to
one’s relationship to themselves, one’s relationship to others, and one’s relationship to
the larger community of life forms with which one continually exchanges.

Post-1970s American literature is a decidedly unique zone for my research due to
the individual and social bodily convergences that exploded in the various experiments of
the 1960s, particularly the explicit emergence of what for lack of better terms I will call
the “New Age,” “Sexual Liberation,” and “Gay Liberation” movements. I stress that
there is nothing conceptually new here; before the 1960s Emerson and Thoreau were
already talking about the influence The Bhagavad Gita had on their thinking and their
friendship with the openly “gay” Whitman already suggests an implicit alliance between
Hindu mysticism, transcendentalism, and “sexually alternative” bodily arrangements. What changes is how the mass distribution of more or less formerly esoteric texts from sacred works like Gnosticism, Taoism, Yoruba, the Dogon religion, Kabbalah, and Tantric Kundalini Yoga and the mass dissemination of bodily experiments that come from engagements with these texts not only awaken re-experiencings and re-readings of more conventional sacred texts but how they blend with a political environment where debates about war and economic wealth distribution overlap with those centered on African American, women’s, and especially “gay” rights or rights for those either engaged in “sexually alternative” lifestyles or those “in possession” of bodies deemed to be “sexually alternative.”

As I’ve already stated, my research into literature that acts as instructions for accessing the human body’s productive potential, literature that warns of its dangers and sings praise of its benefits, and literature that narrativizes the operations individuals undergo on the road to gaining entry into these zones of possibility has taken me across the span of “human history,” suggesting to me that ever since there have been caves and catacombs with markings on the inside walls there has been some manner or other of queer business at hand. Post-1970s American literature, like Ancient Egypt, treats singles as forever-generating, forever-(re)productive mommy-daddy-baby triangles, treats singles as the always-divorcing and always-reuniting husband and wife, treats singles as societies, treats singles as more than one earthly species, and treats singles as more than one celestial species (always a way of addressing one’s relationship to the other without and the other within simultaneously). What is unique—in my mind greatly due to the “New Age,” “Sexual Liberation,” and “Gay Liberation” movements—is that these
assemblages are more explicitly figured as “queer” in a way that blurs the boundaries that allow for a solidified zone of identity coherence to form for those formerly understood to be “heterosexual” and those formerly understood to be “homosexual” alike. It becomes more explicit that “man-wife” configurations, to point to an easy example, have always been used to address queer exchanges within oneself as well as self-other exchanges between a man and a woman, between two men, between two women, between humans and society, between humans and nature, and between humans and the gods or God.

Post-1970s American literature deals with “queer potential.” It says “You are comprised of all this queer material, be a craftsman, and do with it what you will.” This is to say that although post-70s American literature becomes more explicit about the queer ambiguity of both the experiences and significations associated with tapping into the human body’s productive potential, it is ultimately committed to creating a democratic readership capable of making what it chooses out of the raw materials that are available.

The queer ambiguity of post-1970s American literature fundamentally throws the reader into a crisis of vulnerability that is simultaneously a zone of polysemic productive possibility.

Discussions involving humanism typically situate themselves around debates having to do with the question of human agency or debates juxtaposing rationality and science against myth and religion. In my first chapter “‘Bloodchild’ and ‘Alienated Labor:’ Examining Octavia Butler Through Karl Marx,” my analysis of Octavia Butler’s award-winning short story “Bloodchild” turns to Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and its account of the human in order to resituate the humanist
debate so that it centers on the question of the human body, a body that I understand both Marx and Butler to describe as being materially queer. Post-modern scholars such as Foucault and Agamben offer valuable critiques about the politics and ethics that come alongside the business of establishing a criteria that allows one to say who is and who isn’t human. However, I do not address these issues explicitly. My work is much simpler than that. It focuses on explaining how Marx defines the alienated laborer in opposition to one who is more or less alienated from alienation, the animal from the human, and the poor from the wealthy as these distinctions relate to bodies, implicitly situating Marx as a biopolitical thinker, a thinker of micropopulations within individual bodies and individual bodies as members of macropopulations. My work then uses Marx as a lens in order to address the body in Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild,” a body that in Marx’s terms is becoming human, although Butler depicts it as a body that is becoming alien, a seeming paradox that helps me makes sense of some of the contradictions in Marx: for example, it helps explain why what appears human to the alienated labor appears animal to the one who is more or less alienated from alienation and why what appears human to the one who is more or less alienated from alienation appears animal to the alienated laborer.

In my second chapter—“Mapping The Queer Body in McCarthy’s Child of God”—I take the conversation that situates McCarthy’s early work within theological and mythological contexts and relocate it within the realm of the body, namely a neurological body that I find useful to classify as queer. Using Elizabeth Wilson’s Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body, I enter into an analytical and critical dialog with Dianne Luce’s Gnostic and Platonic reading of McCarthy’s Child of
by closely engaging the third chapter of her work *Reading The World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Period* entitled “The Cave of Oblivion: Child of God.” Rather than interpreting the dead women, the various dwellings (like houses, barns, and caves), and the overall landscape in *Child of God* through mythic and religious lenses, I use Wilson in order to interpret McCarthy’s tropes as material signifiers that resonate in and around the human body, paying special attention to Wilson’s reading of Freud’s conversion hysteria (specifically in men) insofar as it involves a particular kind of excessive masturbation and/or a particular manner of coitus interruptus and her account of the enteric nervous system (the network of nerves and neurotransmitters between the anus and mouth). Moreover, playing on Wilson’s use of Oliver Sacks’ account of the human body that figures it both as having stored within it the evolutionary labor processes that preceded its production and as having in its store a living menagerie of cellular assemblages that express relational continuity with other life forms in the present, I am able to exact a reading of the figurative landscapes in *Child of God* that interpret them as both occurring within and without of the novel’s main character and thus not only question the consistency and individuality of the subject but also question the subject’s categorical humanity.

“Masochism, Material, and The Child in Palahniuk’s *Pygmy*” is the title of my third chapter, which engages Krister Friday’s analysis of masochism in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* insofar as it relates to narrative structure and identity by focusing on the relational body in Palahniuk’s *Pygmy* rather than chronological time. My third chapter argues that a productive way of thinking about the relational body in *Pygmy* is through a queer reading of gender and sexuality in and around Lacan’s account of “the
phallus” as it relates to his spatial account of childhood and adulthood in his “mirror stage.” Rethinking Lacan’s gendered depiction of the phallus in queer terms allows me to not only rethink relations between gendered subjects in Chuck Palahniuk’s Pygmy, but it also affords me the opportunity to rethink relations within gendered subjects. Moreover, in thinking about not only relations per se but about power distributions between relations, I am able to move beyond Friday’s trope of a masochistic narrative identity and address sadism and masochism on the sexual plane within and between subjects. My analysis tracks the question of sadism and masochism in Palahniuk’s Pygmy as it situates itself around one’s relationship to one’s own reproductive materials. The question of sexual tension as it relates to one’s reproductive materials is addressed in terms of sadism and masochism by Freud in a way that is markedly distinct from how it is addressed by Deleuze and Guattari, who turn to allusions to Tantrism and Taoism in order to challenge Freud’s position. Palahniuk’s Pygmy, as I understand it, is more interested in thinking through these debates in terms that are overtly Christian but can only be understood by recourse to Jewish mysticism, which itself is best grasped when understood as operating similarly to Tantrism, the crossroads that allows for these alliances to be made also being a focal point for my analysis in this chapter.

The fourth and final chapter—“Wounded Healers, Queer Becomings, and The Hood: A Close Reading of Lil Wayne’s ‘It’s Good,’ Featuring Drake and Jadakiss”—questions the consistency of the sexual subject and thereby questions the consistency of the, monogamous heterosexual couple by tracking Lil Wayne and his collaborators’ performances that mark themselves not only as centralizations of active agency but as wound-portals through which both sexual history and sexual otherness in the present
pass. Synthesizing media scholar John Hochheimer’s concept of a wounded healer with Bataille’s account of the wound of eroticism, I analyze Lil Wayne and his collaborators’ creative depiction of same-sex relations that I understand to parody and reappropriate Freud’s notion of inversion and then frame it within the context of Gates Jr.’s account of the dirty dozens, thereby suggesting that the dozens are fundamentally a queer art form, something Gates Jr. fails to emphasize. My final meditation in this chapter is on the relationship between hip hop’s “the hood” and “the queer closet” insofar as I work from a foundation established by Judith Butler to figure each not in passive but in active terms, not “the hood” or “the closet” one cowers behind but the hood and the closet one uses as a fortification affording one the opportunity to slide another magazine into one’s firearm.
When love beckons to you, follow him,
Though his ways are hard and steep.
And when his wings enfold you yield to him,
Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.—Kahlil Gibran

Chapter 1

“Bloodchild” and “Alienated Labor:”

Examining Octavia Butler through Karl Marx

To my knowledge, there are only three works of scholarship dedicated exclusively to Octavia Butler’s award-winning, short story “Bloodchild” (1984): 1.) “Would You Really Rather Die than Bear My Young?: The Construction of Gender, Race, and Species in Octavia E. Butler's 'Bloodchild’” by Elyce Rae Helford, 2.) “Loving Insects Can Be Dangerous: Assessing the Cost of Life in Octavia Estelle Butler's Novella 'Bloodchild' (1984)” by Brigitte Scheer-Schätzler, and 3.) “Alien Bodies and a Queer Future: Sexual Revision in Octavia Butler's 'Bloodchild' and James Tiptree, Jr.'s 'With Delicate Mad Hands’” by Amanda Thibodeau.

Helford is critical in pointing out that “Bloodchild” “explores” gender, race, and species in “outer space” as well as “inner space.” (260). Thimbodeau picks up on this figure of both inner and outer space exploration and furthers it by suggesting that
“Bloodchild” forces readers to imagine an alternative kind of colonization and imperialism that is decidedly queer:

[T]he desire to encounter aliens is almost always accompanied by a desire to demonstrate human strength, ingenuity, and ambition—three traits often appropriated by a masculine imperial ideology that penetrates unknown or virgin frontiers, but which many feminist and queer sf texts, classic and contemporary, subvert in order to queer heteronormative constructions of empire, exploration, and genre. (263)

Thimbodeau’s “Alien Bodies and a Queer Future” marks a register of “strength, ingenuity, and ambition” being espoused in Butler that is counterintuitive to these qualities as they are conventionally imagined in standard narratives involving imperial penetration into virginal territories.

Thimbodeau quotes renown Marxist Fredric Jameson in order to press toward a bit of qualification regarding the object(s) of desire for a queer conquest the caliber of the sort the reader encounters in Butler’s “Bloodchild:”

In *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), Fredric Jameson discusses the alien body as a representation of utopian ideals. He argues that “to imagine a new heaven and a new earth…offers representation its ultimate Utopian challenge” (120). The alien body crystallizes and answers this challenge: “for a new quality already begins to demand a new kind of perception, and that new perception in turn a new organ of perception, and thus ultimately a new kind of body” (120). (Thimbodeau, 263-4).
In Thimbodeau, the exploration of both outer and inner, virginal space that Helford tracks in “Bloodchild” becomes a queer conquest for what Jameson terms (and I don’t understand him to be speaking metaphorically here) “a new kind of perception, …a new organ of perception, and…a new kind of body.”

Thinking in terms of economic transaction, Scheer-Schätzler’s “Loving Insects Can Be Dangerous” suggests that, in “Bloodchild,” the young protagonist’s decision to be impregnated by what to him is the text’s alien other is a conquest for “life” that anyone can buy, “the price [being] a truly hard-won…opening up…[the] purpose [of which]…is not…the destruction but the continuation of life.” (318). Scheer-Schätzler argues that Butler understands this “transgression” to be “a parasitism but a parasitism performed and transformed by mutual consent.” (318-320). Scheer-Schätzler continues:

This willing acceptance of change, of undergoing metamorphosis, is posited by Butler as a condition for or ‘cost’ of the continuation of life. What is perceived as the ultimate ‘other’ need not remain an object of horror and total rejection. The encounter with it might also lead to a qualified acceptance based on ‘a broader interpretation of the designation human” (McCaffery 56). What Butler as writer of science fiction attempts to extrapolate is a future in which a “post-human body” (White 394) might be the only chance of survival. (319-20)

In my reading of Butler’s “Bloodchild,” I build on this tradition of thinking about a queer conquest of both outer and inner, virginal space that is simultaneously the appropriation of a new perception, new organ, and new body by turning to Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, using Marx’s work—especially his treatment of
“alienated labor,” “the human,” and “the species”—in order to expand on Butler’s text and visa versa, taking the time to closely explore how language works in each piece and between pieces in order to expand the reader’s horizons in regards to the kinds of metamorphoses that are possible for humans to undergo not only in the future but within our own lifetimes.

In her reading of “Bloodchild,” Scheer-Schätzler pulls from Larry McCaffery’s interview with Butler from *Across The Wounded Galaxies* in order to point to an “encounter with…[the other that] might also lead to a qualified acceptance based on ‘a broader interpretation of the designation human’ (McCaffery 56).” In Marx’s *Manuscripts*, I also find Marx addressing a “broader interpretation of the human” that is expressed simultaneously as a split between different kinds of humans and a split within the human, a cleave that I not only also understand “Bloodchild” to express but a cleave in “Bloodchild” that I find Marx extremely helpful in highlighting.

Marx’s posthumous *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* is one of Marx’s most unique works and therefore is the subject of much debate within Marxist circles—the Marxist humanists celebrate it, while so-called “antihumanist” Louis Althusser famously writes it off with distain. I do not wish to sidetrack myself and get tangled up in trying to classify either Marx’s *Manuscripts* or Butler’s “Bloodchild,” be they “humanist,” “antihumanist,” “trans,” “post,” or whatever. Nor do I wish to fall into the trap of arguing whether Marx’s *Manuscripts* express the same Marx that one can glean from *Capital* or whether Butler is the same Butler in “Bloodchild” as she is in *Fledging*. Rather, I put before myself the task of reading Marx’s *Manuscripts* within Marx’s own terms and thus treat it as a particular text, rich with potentiality, that, when used as a lens,
allows me to make a specific kind of sense out of “alien labor” and “the human” in “Bloodchild.”

There are more or less two groups or poles in Marx’s *Manuscripts*, more or less both because Marx uses a series of shifting signifiers to delineate each group and because the groups themselves shift and thus enact pressure on Marx’s signifiers, bending and twisting them this way and that along scales that vary in degrees of intensity—1.) there are the more or less estranged or alienated, and 2.) there are those who are more or less alienated from alienation. In essence, all of Marx’s *Manuscripts*, not only the chapter entitled “Estranged Labor,” is about the problem of “estranged” or “alienated labor,” Marx subtly unfurling his depiction of estranged labor as he moves through his text:

What...constitutes the alienation of labor? First, the fact that labor is *external* to the worker, i.e. does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself. ... The worker therefore only feels himself outside of his work, and in his work feels outside himself. ... His labor is...*forced labor*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfying needs external to it. ... External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates independently on the individual—that is, operates on him as an alien, divine or diabolical activity—
in the same way the worker’s activity is not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self. (74)

The first thing worth pointing out here is that Marx, like Octavia Butler in “Bloodchild,” is dealing with the occurrence of not only “man’s birthing” or “labor,” which can be undertaken by either one who is dominantly male or female, and here I’m following Marx in treating human sexual inheritance like Mendel treats plant sexual inheritance—having both dominant and residual traits. Marx is dealing with the occurrence of the male holding back part of himself—holding back his “life-activity, [or his] productive life…[that Marx defines both as] the life of the species…[and] life-engendering life” (76)—it is the occurrence of the male “sacrificing himself” and, ultimately, giving himself over to a labor process that excludes him. This is the timeframe wherein man “feels himself” apart, when man “feels himself” and, all over, finds that “the external character of labor…is not his own, but someone else’s.” (74).

Alienated labor is “begetting as emasculating,” implying that there is a pathway of “begetting” or “laboring” that is both masculine and maculating—“[S]ince for the socialist man the entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the begetting of man through human labor…he has the visible irrefutable proof of his birth through himself.” (92). Alienated labor is a refutation of a proof that is essentially visible. It is a sole externalization that lacks “essence” or intrinsic affirmation, a “self-sacrifice” and “mortification” wherein the worker literally “operates” (as in surgery) on himself in such a way that he both “loses himself,” doubles himself, or comes against himself as a seeming “alien, divine, or diabolical” energy, and, for Marx, it is important to keep in
mind that this is something humans go through (even if it is unfortunate or unnecessary
that they do)—it is a stage in the developmental process that leads toward communism.

The alienated laborer is thus unable to recognize the “irrefutable proof of his birth
through himself” and in denying himself produces out of himself a seeming “alien,
divine, or diabolical” double. Alienated labor in its extreme is therefore absolute poverty
and dispossession—pre-money, pre-industry—wherein man does not “affirm” himself
but “denies” himself. Put bluntly, alienated labor is “missed fortune,” “impotency,” and
the lack of that which Marx, like many others, calls “love,” implying that the alienation
of alienated labor is more or less the opposite:

If you love without evoking love in return—that is, if your loving as loving does
not produce reciprocal love; if through a living expression of yourself as a loving
person you do not make yourself a loved person, then your love is impotent—a
misfortune. (105)

Alienated labor is spending oneself solely on another’s behalf without also spending
oneself unto oneself. It is a halfhearted impotency wherein one fashions oneself into an
object of satisfaction for another without also turning oneself into an object of
satisfaction for oneself.

For Marx, the alienated laborer is a poor individual rather than a wealthy human
being: “Poverty is the passive bond which causes the human being to experience the need
of the greatest wealth—the other human being.” (91). A human being in the Manuscripts
is a species being who is first two—both man and woman—and then “social” or many:
In the approach to woman as the spoil and handmaid of communal lust is expressed in the infinite degradation in which man exists for himself, for the secret of this approach has its unambiguous, decisive, plain and undisguised expression in the relation of man to woman. In this natural relationship of the sexes man’s relation to nature is immediately his relation to man, just as his relation to man is immediately his relation to nature—his own natural function.

… [T]he relation of man to woman is the most natural relation of human being to human being. … In this relationship is revealed, too, the extent to which man’s need has become a human need; the extent to which, therefore, the other person as a person has become for him a need—the extent to which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being. … [C]ommunism already knows itself to be re-integration or return of man to himself. (83-4)

In the above quote, we see how Marx’s “communism” here is a “return of man to himself” (84) insofar as “the secret of this approach” toward potency and fortune that Marx earlier calls “love” but here calls “communal lust” involves a corollary between “approaching [the italicized] woman” as “spoil” (both treasure and waste) and in approaching or “being in relation to nature,” “man,” or to one’s own italicized “natural function.” It isn’t just any relation “between the sexes” but is specifically a “natural relation.” This is a coming face to face with the “infinite degradation in which man [meaning ‘the human’] exists for himself,” and I in no way understand there to be any negative value judgment surrounding Marx’s choice of words—“infinite degradation.” If this “infinite degradation” is degrading than it is merely a degradation from “superstructure” to “base” or from “idealism” to a “raw materiality” that is “infinite”—
the “living shape” and “social fabric” that, like a mycelium network, connects all of “life.” (86). When Marx points to the “infinite degradation in which man exists for himself,” he is providing terminological clarity: again, this is “human” for Marx. In the Manuscripts, “the relation of man to woman,” “man to man,” man to “the other person,” and then “human being to human being” expresses how, in a nut shell, “in his individual existence [a human] is at the same time a social being.”

In the Manuscripts, the individual is “animal” because he is blindsided by his own desire to propagate his specific species. The human being or species being in Marx does not reproduce like the animal, which only reproduces its particular species—the human being reproduces all species and thus doesn’t identify exclusively with his own species but with all species through the means of production that both flow into him and into which he flows. The human being (man) uses his nature or life-activity differently than the animal, which Marx says, “produces one-sidedly” and “produces only itself,” while man “produces universally” and “reproduces the whole of nature.” (76).

Marx tells us “Man,” meaning the human who is more or less alienated from alienated labor, “is a species being…[and] [n]ature is man’s inorganic body—nature, that is, in so far as it is not itself the human body. Man lives on nature—means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous intercourse if he is not to die.” (75) In his above depiction of the human who is more or less alienated from alienated labor (assumably the historical materialist who must first go backwards before he can live in the present moment), Marx invites readers to imagine man having fashioned himself another body, a sub-layer, non-human body comprised of “nature” that flows under his human, organ body. Marx invites readers to imagine a body minus the
organs, an inorganic body of pure flow and raw materials that knows no barrier between inside and outside—“The transcendence of private property is…the complete emancipation of all human senses” opposite the “one-sided” poverty of “private property.” (87) This is the “profoundly endowed” (89) body that man doesn’t just exist on, but, rather, (and here Marx uses italics to qualitatively distinguish “life” from “survival”) it is the body that man “lives on” by way of entering into “continuous intercourse” with it so as not to “die.” That which is here called “death,” Marx later explains, is the truly sublime gift that transitions the alienated laborer or individual into the human being or species being, and here “death” only need be encountered once—“Death” [is the] harsh victory of the species over the definite individual.” (86). It is “the absolute poverty” that results from “private property,” the mausoleum that “the human being has to be reduced to” in their, pre-human and animal state in order “that he might yield his inner wealth to the outer world,” which Marx calls “society” or “the consummated oneness in substance of man and nature—the true resurrection of nature—the naturalism of man and the humanism of nature both brought to fulfillment.” (87, 86).

Similar to my understanding of Marx’s Manuscripts, Butler claims that her award-winning, short story “Bloodchild” is her “pregnant man” story about different species coming together that she ultimately characterizes as a “love” story, and, here, like Marx, I understand Butler to use “love” in the most technical sense of the term:

IT AMAZES ME THAT some people have seen “Bloodchild” as a story of slavery. It isn’t. … [I]t’s a love story between two very different beings. … “Bloodchild” is [also] my pregnant man story. I’ve always wanted to explore what it might be like for a man to…chose to become pregnant not through some
sort of misplaced competitiveness to prove that a man could do anything a woman
could do, not because he was forced to…[but] as an act of love. (23-4).

“Bloodchild” is a “love” story that is told from the perspective of its young protagonist,
Gan. Gan is a boy who belongs to the species called Terran. The Terran are, in Marx’s
terms from the *Manuscripts*, “individuals” or individual humans who live on a planet that
is inhabited by the story’s other important species—the Tlic. The Tlic appear as animal-
like “alien beings” to the “individuals” or “alienated laborers” that are the Terran, the
position from which the narrator Gan tells the story, but, upon closer investigation, are
closer to what Marx terms “human.”

In “Bloodchild,” the Tlic are similar to Marx’s “nature,” “inorganic body,” or his
“the species,” placeholders for all that is materially other than the individual animal man,
that which the (part)icular or alienated animal aspect of humans must enter into a
becoming with in order to affirm their full “humanity” where being human means being
“universal” or “of everything” that is “nature”—being of, with, and for “the world” that
one is, being potentially primordial and individually animal simultaneously. Framed in
developmental terms, “Bloodchild” is Gan’s recounting his “last night of childhood,” as
Butler’s work tells the story of Gan, under difficult circumstances, deciding to become
implanted with Tlic offspring—simultaneously a pregnancy, death, and rebirth that, like
Marx’s affirmative category of “the human,” is a symbiotic assemblage the Terrans term
being “N’Tlic,” meaning “with Tlic” as in “with child” but, in this instance, is more like
being “with other.”
Understanding “Bloodchild” as a story that is told from the perspective of one of Marx’s “alienated laborers”—Gan—drastically alters the reader’s understanding of space and categorization in the text, as the “alienated laborer” is one who, according to Marx, has alienated himself from himself to the extent that his own otherness is turned against him in what appears as an “alien being…for whose benefit the produce of labour is provided” yet who “can only be man himself.” (78). By “man” here, Marx means “the other man,” who he also refers to as “woman,” “nature,” and “the inorganic body,” all characteristics which can be attributed to “Bloodchild’s” most important “alien being” whose name is “T’Gatoi,” Gan’s simultaneous “exploiter” and care provider, “the Tlic government official in charge of [Gan’s home, which is called] the Preserve.” (7).

T’Gatoi is described as being both form and formlessness—aquatic, terrestrial, and avian all at once:

She had bones—ribs, a long spine, a skull, four sets of limb bones per segment. But when she moved that way, twisting, hurling herself into controlled falls, landing running, she seemed not only boneless, but aquatic—something swimming through air as though it were water. (11).

Moreover, “her” gender is described as “female” yet due to what one might be inclined to perceive as her penis-like “tail” that both “whips” and administers a narcotic sting (9) as well as her capacity to insert her eggs into Gan with her, again seemingly penis-like, “probing ovipositor” (22), one can just as easily perceive “her” to be a “him” that Butler dubs “her” through her written speech acts. However, it isn’t as though penises are all that can whip and probe (never mind the question of kind regarding said “organ” or
others that are either similar to it or can be fashioned to be so). More than anything, Butler’s use of poetic language resists the reader’s impulse to stabilize and categorize T’Gatoi’s gender and maintains a language surrounding “her” descriptions that not only blurs gendered boarders within species but between species.

Regarding her liminal status in Butler’s text, T’Gatoi is also described as being able to enwrap Gan as well as his mother, brother, and sister, forming what the Terrans both perceive to be a “comforting” embrace and a “cage,” simultaneously marking T’Gatoi a territorial microcosm of the macrocosmic social space of the text called “the Preserve” as well as a territorial figuration for Gan’s own virginal zone of embodied private property at the same time that she is marked as the transgressor of those territories (9). When the reader couples T’Gatoi’s enwrapping capacity with her capacity to both penetrate and grow inside of Gan—making “Bloodchild’s” “N’Tlic,” which is similar to Marx’s “human,” possible—the reader is able to see T’Gatoi functioning like what Marx both calls “nature” and the human’s “inorganic body,” as “she” (who is also “he” as well as aquatic, terrestrial, and avian) lives both without and within of Gan. Moreover, she is the “life” upon which Gan and his family “lives”—“living” here being qualitatively distinct from “surviving”—not only insofar as she provides them with protection within “the Preserve” but also in the sense that she acts as the family’s pharmacy by giving them her “sterile eggs” to imbibe. In “Bloodchild,” these “eggs”—seemingly similar to “cosmic” or “world eggs” that are placeholders for all productive materials and for potentiality itself—act so as to “prolong life” and “vigor” as well as intoxicate the Terrans who suck the contents out of their “shrinkable, elastic shells” (8).
As Marx’s Manuscripts allow the reader to perceive all of capitalist society as the collective alienation of otherness and thereby the collective alienation of humanity enacted by the efforts (or lack thereof) of individuals, the entire world of Butler’s “Bloodchild” can be perceived to be the product of the Terran’s alienation of the Tlic, a whole social process of alienation production that in “Bloodchild” courses through Gan’s particular episode of alienation. This is to say that Marx’s Manuscripts allow the reader to see how Butler writes it as though Gan is the solipsistic source of all the alienation that is the text’s world—Gan being, in this register, not just a placeholder for all “individual” Terrans but a part that is not only produced by a whole society built upon alienation production but a part that is truly partially responsible for the alienation that is the text’s world in that, as an alienated-part-coming-face-to-face-with-his-own-alienated-otherness, Gan has an impact upon the manner in which the world is reconstituted because Gan has an impact upon himself. This is most evident in the way that all of the circuitry within and between forms in the scene where Gan assists T’Gatoi in delivering Tlic offspring from another man who is N’Tlic can be perceived as Gan’s refracted alienation of the other scene when Gan chooses to become N’Tlic by allowing himself to be impregnated by T’Gatoi, which, when using Marx’s Manuscripts to view T’Gatoi as Gan’s own alienated other, is another way of addressing Gan’s self-impregnation or self-birthing that is simultaneously his coming face to face with “himself,” his “humanity,” or his own “inorganic body”—it is the loss of his “individuality” that opens him up to “the other.” This isn’t to say that I am arguing that the way in which the scenes are temporally out of joint in Butler are representative of psychic displacement but is to say that the temporal
disjointedness of “Bloodchild’s” scenes refract the temporal disjointedness of the material world.

Gan’s inability to fully know himself and his kind as animal is related to his inability to fully know the other animal in the text called achtı as well as his inability to recognize T’Gatoi as a part of himself, his kind, and other animals alike. It is the key hinge that allows the reader to perceive the scene where Gan plays midwife and assists T’Gatoi in delivering Tlic grub from another man who is N’Tlic as an alienated refraction of the scene when Gan allows himself to become N’Tlic or impregnated by “the other.”

In the scene where Gan helps T’Gatoi extract the Tlic grubs from a man named Bram Lomas, the N’Tlic Lomas is “alienated labor” proper in that he is “in labor” without his impregnator—T’Khotgif Teh—and needs immediate assistance due to the fact that if the hatched grubs do not find another host body to eat from they will eat Bram Lomas. In response to this problem, T’Gatoi sends Gan to kill an animal—the achtı—so that she can use the achtı as a host for the Tlic grubs once they are extracted from Bram Lomas:

“I want no argument from you this time, Gan,” she said.

I straightened. “What shall I do?”

“Go out and slaughter an animal that is at least half your size.” …

My mother raised a few Terran animals for the table and several thousand local ones for their fur. T’Gatoi would probably prefer something local. An achtı, perhaps. … I had never killed one at all, had never slaughtered any animal. … I went out to the cages and shot the biggest achtı I could find. It was a handsome
breeding male… T’Gatoi seized the achtis. … [S]he extended claws from several
of her limbs and slit the achtis from throat to anus. (12-13)

In this scene, we see T’Gatoi operating similarly to Marx in the *Manuscripts* in that as
Marx says that the animal “produces one-sidedly” and “produces only itself” while man
“produces universally” and “reproduces the whole of nature,” T’Gatoi’s opening of “the
achtis from throat to anus” can be read as “her opening” the animal in Bram Lomas, this
precariously pregnant body who is later described as “stiffened” (14), so that his once
exclusively one-sided manner of production can open up to “the other” and can thus
reproduce “the whole of nature.”

In this scene, Gan is between passive witness and active agent, between the one
who is more or less an alienated laborer and the one who is more or less alienated from
alienation. Here, Gan seems to side with and identify with Bram Lomas. This is evident
when T’Gatoi learns Bran Lomas’s name by reading his Jewish-badge-like armband and
Gan “finger[s]…[his] own armband in sympathy.” (12). Yet Gan also sides with T’Gatoi
when acting as her midwife, and he is able to disassociate himself from Bram Lomas by
overlooking the connection between himself and the achtis he kills—the achtis being “a
breeding male” like Gan and Bram Lomas that is kept in a cage similar to the Terrans
being kept in “the Preserve.” Butler writes it so that it is as though during the time when
Gan kills the achtis, Gan acts in a manner similar to T’Gatoi, and during the time when
T’Gatoi extracts the grubs from Bram Lomas, Gan is acted upon in a manner similar to
both Bram Lomas and the achtis. However, with each identification or affiliation—Gan
with T’Gatoi and Gan with Bram Lomas—the traumatized Gan is unable to self-
reflexively recognize his shifting alliance.
The reader can gain an even clearer and more focused vantage of Gan’s shiftiness by turning to the parallel Butler establishes between the tinkering that Gan’s father does to the family’s waste water pipe (he rigs it so that it can conceal the rifle Gan uses to shoot the achti), “the tinkering” Gan’s does to the achti (i.e. the kill wound he “fashions” it with), and the surgery-like “tinkering” T’Gatoi performs upon the achti when she cuts it from throat to anus:

I went to the corner cabinet where my mother kept her large house and garden tools. At the back of the cabinet there was a pipe that carried off waste water from the kitchen—except that it didn’t anymore. My father had rerouted the waste water below before I was born. Now the pipe could be turned so that one half slid around the other and a rifle could be stored inside. This wasn’t our only gun, but it was our most easily assessable one. I would have to use it to shoot one of the biggest of the achti. (12).

Here, Gan’s father’s rerouting the waste water pipe and storing the gun inside very closely parallels T’Gatoi’s cutting the achti from throat to anus in order to use the achti corpse as a storehouse for the Tlic grubs, but it also parallels Gan taking the gun from the wastewater pipe and using it to kill the achti or his transferring the bullet from the gun to the body of the achti.

When Gan is alone extracting the gun—which he isn’t even supposed to have as it is illegal in “the Preserve” (12)—or killing the achti, Gan acts like an active agent who is not only able to alienate himself from his own animal side but is able to alienate himself from the other animal, yet, when he is with T’Gatoi and Bram Lomas, Gan enters into a
traumatized state of total detachment that brings him closer to Bram Lomas and the achtis but doesn’t allow Gan to recognize this closeness or identify with these other breeding male animals:

Lomas’s entire body stiffened under T’Gatoi’s claw, though she merely rested it against him as she wound the rear section of her body around his legs. … [Bram Lomas] wept helplessly as she used his pants to tie his hands, then pushed his hands above his head so that I could kneel on the cloth between them and pin them in place. She rolled up his shirt and gave it to him to bite down on. And she opened him. (14-15)

Here Butler shows Gan alienating his own active capacity. Traumatized and objectified by T’Gatoi’s actions, Gan is unable to seen the connection between him transferring the bullet from the gun into the body of the achtis and T’Gatoi transitioning the grubs from Bram Lomas into the achtis.

By placing T’Gatoi atop the “stiffened” body of Bram Lomas, who the text suggests is supine, while placing Gan up by Bram Lomas’s uplifted, bound arms and having Gan hold Bram Lomas down, Butler here throws Gan into a liminal position between active agent and passive witness. Because he helps hold Bram Lomas down, he is figured as active, yet because he is associated with Bram Lomas’s uplifted arms and is forced to watch T’Gatoi work on him, he is figured as passive—both Bram Lomas with his arms uplifted and Gan who is associated with the energy that holds the arms in place are evocative of the figure of religious witnessing associated with Pentecostal-like scenes where the Holy Spirit is understood to overwhelm one’s body and their capacity to act.
Up top, holding Bram Lomas’s arms, all Gan can do is look down and witness the violent transaction taking place below—T’Gatoi removing the grubs out of Bram Lomas’s body in order to place them into the cut opening inside of the acht. “Bloodchild” suggests that it is only from this position atop Bram Lomas’s body looking down that Gan is able to achieve a vantage of irresponsibility not only regarding the action that transpires below but the action that also transpires or will soon transpire within him once he becomes N’Tlic (here, I say “transpires” in the present tense because it is possible to understand this scene to show Gan—traumatized by the event of his own becoming N’Tlic—both materially and psychically alienating himself from both animal and human aspects of the body and taking up residency in the head). It is from this vantage up high that Gan is able to disconnect himself not only from the animal body but from the otherness body that plays the role of active agent here—T’Gatoi, the fluid “mail carrier” who opens the animal and moves the “grub packages” from one animal to the other, making it so that the animal who exclusively propagates its own species is able to propagate Tlic, which like T’Gatoi, I understand to be “inorganic bodies:” placeholders for all species or for “nature” as a “whole.”

In Gan’s implantation scene, instead of Gan shooting the animal acht—a shot that Butler suggests produces the very alienated, witness distance between self and other—Gan rather holds the rifle to his own head (20), prepared to shoot himself yet ultimately refusing to shoot, as though the gun-barrel-to-the-head pose that makes a pathway from groin to head opposite the cut T’Gatoi makes on the acht from throat to anus is a placeholder for the entire witness vantage that opened onto Bram Lomas’s former grub delivery scene (what Marx calls “socialist man[’s] irrefutable proof of his
birth through himself.”), as though Gan’s here choosing to lower the gun from his head and not shoot himself is simultaneously an erasure of his shooting the achtli in the former scene. In the latter scene, T’Gatoi makes it known that the shooting—the gun itself—also poses a threat to both her and “her species” (20), as though, in the previous scene, Bram Lomas’s whole precarious condition not only parallels the botched manner in which T’Gatoi is forced to open him and the achtli but also parallels the traumatic circumstances under which Gan is forced to sacrifice the animal in the first place, all instances of penetration that Butler sets in qualitative opposition to the latter scene when T’Gatoi puts her eggs inside of Gan, the critical instanced of border transgression that is missing in the former, horror scene, the critical act of love that differentiates the former scene from the latter:

She flowed around me and into my bedroom. I found her waiting on the couch we shared. … …I undressed and lay down beside her. I knew what to do, what to expect. I had been told all my life. I felt the familiar sting, narcotic, mildly pleasant. Then the blind probing of her ovipositor. The puncture was painless, easy. So easy going in. She undulated slowly against me, her muscles forcing the egg from her body into mine. I held on to a pair of her limbs until I remembered Lomas holding her that way. Then I let go, moved inadvertently, and hurt her. She gave a low cry of pain and I expected to be caged at once within her limbs. When I wasn’t, I held on to her again, feeling oddly ashamed. (22)

In this scene, the reader can see Gan and T’Gatoi no longer alienated from one another but rather literally connecting with one another—Gan’s becoming “N’Tlic,” which Marx calls “human,” the becoming of “animal” and “the species.” The reader can also see
penetration occurring without the violence associated with the former penetrations of the achti and Bram Lomas. Moreover, Butler uses this union as a counterexample of the assemblage of T’Gatoi and Bram Lomas—“I held on to a pair of her limbs until I remembered Lomas holding her that way. Then I let go…feeling oddly ashamed.” Here, it is as though Gan’s shame is linked to the event of Bram Lomas’s grub delivery, again, as though somehow the event itself were an alienated consequence of Gan’s horrific assumptions regarding Terran and Tlic union—a consequence of his ignorance of the complexities involved in such a union.

In this latter scene, it is his not using the gun on the achti, T’Gatoi, or himself yet at the same time his not relinquishing his freedom to keep it back that equalizes Gan and T’Gatoi’s power, an equalization where, again, Butler equates Gan’s not shooting himself in the head with T’Gatoi’s impregnating him, which itself is an event that acts as a counterexample to Gan’s shooting the achti and T’Gatoi cutting both the achti and Bram Lomas:

I lowered the gun from my throat and she leaned forward to take it.

“No,” I told her.

“It’s the law,” she said.

“Leave it for the family. One of them might use it to save my life someday.”

She grasped the rifle barrel, but I wouldn’t let go. I was pulled into a standing position over her.
“Leave it here!” I repeated. “If we’re not your animals, if these are adult things, accept the risk. There is risk, Gatoi, in dealing with a partner.” (21)

In the above quote, Gan not letting go of his right to bear arms is linked to his using T’Gatoi to pull himself “into a standing position over her,” T’Gatoi having “flowed off the table onto the floor” (21) after she “coiled herself into a small hill in the middle of the table.” (20). In the Manuscripts, Marx notes that it is always the “possession” of some such object (temporary possession it needs to be added) for the “means of life” that marks “a free man’s” “true political powers in life” and thus marks him as “a participant in the life of the community.” Marx says that “[i]n the middle ages…it is…the sword,” “[a]mongst nomadic peoples it is the horse,” while under capitalism it is “money,” and the reader sees that in the world of “Bloodchild,” Gan’s “true political powers in life” are marked by his simultaneously keeping “his gun” back but not using it to injure himself or another coupled with his being impregnated with T’Gatoi’s “eggs.” (100).

The positioning of Gan and T’Gatoi in the above quote—her low, him high—then isn’t reversed in the scene when she impregnates him but is still equalized due to his keeping yet choosing not to use his gun: “The small amount of fluid that came into me with her egg relaxed me as completely as a sterile egg would have, so that I could remember the rifle in my hands and my feelings of fear and revulsion, anger and despair. I could remember the feelings without reviving them.” (23) Here, Butler parallels the intoxication that comes from his “activity” of putting T’Gatoi’s sterile eggs into himself with the intoxication that comes from his “inactivity” of receiving the “small amount of fluid” that enters him “with her egg” and relationally juxtaposes these instances of pleasure to the horror of the Bram Lomas grub delivery scene when Gan was forced to
shoot the acht[i—“[I] relaxed me…so that I could remember the feelings without reviving them.”

Moreover, and this is critical, Gan’s consenting to be impregnated with T’Gatoi’s eggs—i.e. his not shooting himself in the head and thereby, since he is to be host to T’Gatoi’s offspring, not threatening the propagation of the Tlic species—is not only linked to his not shooting the animal but is also linked to his diverting T’Gatoi’s gestational flow away from his sister Xuan Hoa and into himself. Xuan Hoa is a strangely marginal yet also central character in “Bloodchild” who Butler describes as working alongside Gan so as to comprise “a unit”—“We had always been a unit, she and I” (9). It is both for and against Xuan Hoa that Gan chooses to be impregnated by T’Gatoi, as, in order to propagate her species, T’Gatoi is willing to use Xuan Hoa as a host rather than Gan:

I could make Xuan Hoa my shield. Would it be easier to know that red worms were growing in her flesh instead of mine? “Don’t do it to Hoa,” I repeated. …

“[Y]ou came to me…to save Hoa.”

“Yes.” I leaned my forehead against her. She was cool velvet, deceptively soft. “And to keep you for myself,” I said. It was so. I didn’t understand it, but it was so.” (21-3)

The paradox that is Gan’s joining with T’Gatoi both on behalf of Xuan Hoa and out of a selfish love of himself, his selfishly wanting T’Gatoi for himself, marks the more or less alienation of alienated labor that moves toward a communistic becoming that Marx
associates with “reciprocal love,” the “living expression” of oneself “as a loving person” that fashions oneself into “a loved person.”
“Just got home from Illinois, lock the front door, oh boy.
Got to sit down, take a rest on the porch.
Imagination sets in, pretty soon I'm singin',
Doo, doo, doo, Lookin' out my back door.
There's a giant doing cartwheels, a statue wearin' high heels.
Look at all the happy creatures dancing on the lawn.”

—CCR, “Lookin’ Out My Backdoor”

“I was alone, I took a ride
I didn't know what I would find there
Another road where maybe I could see another kind of mind there”—The Beatles, “Got To Get You Into My Life”

“The ass is connected to the brain stem
So I sing a simple song
So you can see the sucker in 'em”—Public Enemy, “How To Kill A Radio Consultant”

Chapter 2

Mapping The Queer Body in McCarthy’s *Child of God*

A fair amount of scholarship has been generated about Cormac McCarthy’s early work or what is also rightly referred to as his “Tennessee period,” which includes the American gothic work that is the focal point of this essay—*Child of God*, the story of Lester Ballard, a man who after his home is foreclosed on first becomes a social outcast living in the woods and caves of Tennessee and then becomes a necrophiliac and crossdressing serial killer before finally surrendering himself over to hospitalization, where, subsequently, Lester dies and his body is dissected and studied by medical students. Of the scholarship produced on *Child of God*—which traverses an expanse
across such noteworthy readings as K. Wesley Berry’s echo-Marxist “The Lay of the Land in Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachia” to Gary Ciuba’s psychoanalytical “McCarthy’s Enfant Terrible: Incarnating Sacred Violence in Child of God”—the most interesting interpretation, to my liking, can be found in Dianne C. Luce’s “The Cave of Oblivion: Child of God,” which is the third chapter of her work Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Period.

Luce’s “Cave of Oblivion” understands McCarthy’s work to engage in dialogs with both Gnosticism and Platonic philosophy:

As in many of his works, McCarthy’s strategy in Child of God is to employ mythic images and patterns to transcend the material body of the referential world, inviting allegorical readings and guiding the reader to ponder metaphysical issues. In Child of God, metaphysical concerns extend the gnostic implications of Outer Dark and cluster more consistently around analogues to Platonic myth than around the orthodox Christian mythology consonant with either Lester’s culture or McCarthy’s Roman Catholic heritage. (158)

Personally, I am not fond of the word “metaphysics,” and, even though I am more than a weathered reader of works engaging and critiquing the metaphysical tradition, I do not feel that I am prepared to fully engage those discussions here. What I can say confidently is that the term “metaphysics” itself is a troublesome term for me, even if it is practical in the sense that it functions both as a signpost to a tradition of thought and a signpost to what I would qualify as not that which marks a realm beyond the physics of the body but that which rather marks another layer of bodily physics. What I like about Luce’s “Cave
of Oblivion” is that it tries to point to what I understand to be themes regarding another kind of physics in *Child of God*. What bothers me about Luce, however, is that her Gnostic, Platonic, and metaphysical inflections threaten to drive the reader away from the body, and, for me, this is the exact opposite momentum that I find coming from McCarthy himself.

What is more, I greatly disagree with Luce’s understanding of Gnosticism and Platonism in the sense that she seems to understand them both to subscribe to a common “transcendental truth [.which she also refers to as “light or gnosis,”]…that [, drawing from Jonas’ work *Gnostic Religion*, Luce argues] materialism threatens to obscure. (159)” Again, insofar as “materialism” points to a scientist gathering data from the world without self-reflexive recourse to the goings on of his or her own body, I fully agree that “materialism” is a danger that threatens to obscure the so-called “transcendental truths” to which the Gnostics refer. However, if the word “materialism” working within the syntactical logic of the phrase “materialism threatens to obscure…light or gnosis” functions so as to push the reader away from the body and into a realm where they think thoughts that promise to transcend the body, then I am of the position that some basic Gnostic tenets are being violated. Anyone who knows anything about Gnosticism knows that the Gnostics or early Christians are mystics who claim to be aware of a knowledge that can be gleaned more from sensual experience than from research and that one of Gnosticism’s basic tenets is that the church as an institution is in no way needed in order for one to gain insight into what the Gnostics term “God.” Gnostics rather claim that the “divine spark” of “God”—not the demiurge but the material potentiality that precedes the demiurge—resides within everyone and that one can access “God” by way of turning
back into one’s own body. *The Gospel According To Thomas*, popularly classified as “Gnostic,” is famously quoted to highlight this tenet:

Jesus said, “If those who lead you (plur.) say to you, ‘See the kingdom is in heaven,’ then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. But the kingdom is inside of you. And is outside of you. “When you become acquainted with yourselves, then you will be recognized. And you will understand that it is you who are children of the living father. But if you do not become acquainted with yourselves, then you are in poverty, and it is you who are the poverty.” (*The Gnostic Scriptures*, 380)

In the above quote from *The Gospel According To Thomas* quote, it isn’t as though the birds and the fish aren’t “God” or that man isn’t “God.” Rather, *The Gospel According To Thomas* is saying that to know oneself on the inside is to know the outside and vice versa—it is to know the process of becoming. Moreover, because both the outside world and the inside of the body are not treated as objects but rather as subjects, *The Gospel According To Thomas* is saying that to know oneself both inside and out is to be known or to be seen by “God.” There is no “materialist” active-subject-engaging-a-passive-environment relationship here—there is rather a relationship where subjects exchange insides with one another, and, yes, these transactions are “transcendent” insofar as every time one’s insides become another’s each side is changed, but, to my knowledge (and no doubt this is debatable), the text does not speak to any manner of “transcendence” that is beyond “matter.”
In “Cave of Oblivion,” Luce has many opportunities to turn her analysis of McCarthy to the body, many good insights, yet, in the end, she sidesteps them all. A key example is when Luce marks the ironic parallel in *Child of God* between, on the one hand, Lester Ballard’s necrophilia and, on the other hand, the state medical student’s subsequent dissection of Lester Ballard’s corpse:

Missing among Lester’s peers is the gnostic’s compassion from humankind’s tragic position within the world, alienated from God and from his or her own spirit. The juxtaposition of the dissection of Lester’s body with the exhuming and bagging of his corpses as “Property of the State of Tennessee” (196) at novel’s end suggests a parallel between Lester’s descent into the materialism of necrophilia, a kind of inquiry into the human body (he inspects one victim’s “body carefully, as if he would see how she were made”; 91-92), and that of the socially and legally approved forensic, medical, and undertakers professions. But this is a commonality to which his community is blind. (168-9)

Luce locates a critical theme in McCarthy, yet, tragically, missing among her analysis is the understanding that McCarthy figures the entire text as a body.

Not only is *Child of God* a non-linear work, it is also a work where all of the characters function as though they enact transferences on one another in an endless circuit of intertextuality that moves between both characters and landscapes in such a way that the reader is sucked into the text’s ongoing exchanges between inside and outside. In *Child of God*, it isn’t that one scene, one landscape, or one character parallels another—all scenes, landscapes, and characters intersect and overlap one another like so
many interweaving Mobius strips. Luce is right then in that there is a kind of “parallel”—a screwed or tangled parallel—between Ballard’s examining a victim’s “body carefully, as if he would see how she were made” (91-2) and the medical students examining Ballard’s corpse at the novel’s end (194). However, there are two critical points that Luce fails to point out: 1) a reoccurring theme in *Child of God* associates Ballard’s female victims with the back of his own body, thus making it so that “his” examining “her” can be read as a “self-examination” and 2) McCarthy writes *Child of God* in such a way that not only are the instances of Ballard examining the corpse to see how she works and the medical students examining Ballard’s body to be read as explorations into the body, but the entire text, especially the landscape of the text, is to be treated as an open body through which Ballard moves as the reader’s tour guide at the same time that *Child of God* suggests that it is Ballard’s body through which the reader is moving; thus, again, the reader is left with the image of Ballard moving through his own body as someone viewing the results of an odd kind of self-administered MRI.

A reoccurring theme in *Child of God* associates Ballard’s “female victims” with the back of his own body. For example, when Ballard shoots a girl and her lover atop The Frog Mountain Turnaround after discovering them in a truck “fixin to screw,”—it is worth marking that Ballard shoots her in the “base of the skull,” and she slumps “into the mud” (151)—McCarthy describes Ballard placing the girl on his back:

She was lying as he had left her and she was cold and wooden with death. Ballard howled curses until he was choking and then he knelt and worked her around onto his shoulders and struggled up. Scuttling down the mountain with the thing on his
back he looked like a man beset by some ghast succubus, the dead girl riding him with legs bowed akimbo like a monstrous frog. (153)

Ballard encounters lovers smashed together in one manner or another atop The Frog Mountain turnaround—both dead and alive—in two other instances in the text, one of them is the space Luce quotes from, Ballard’s first encounter with a dead girl who he brings to his cabin in the woods after finding her and her dead lover frozen together mid coitus:

When he got home with the dead girl it was midmorning. He had carried her on his shoulder for a mile before he gave out altogether. … He came…shouldered her through the narrow doorway and went in and laid her on the mattress… He took off all of her clothes…inspecting her body carefully, as if he would see how she were made. (91-2)

In another scene in Child of God, Ballard waits for a friend, Ralph, in his home with the man’s wife and daughter, who Ballard later kills, and, here, McCarthy associates the soon-to-be-victim-of-a-girl with the outhouse: “He heard the back door shut. He saw her go along the muddied rut of a path to the outhouse.” (78). In a seemingly disconnected bit of dialog in Child of God’s flood scene, the sheriff talks with a man named Eustis and expresses sorrow regarding the looting that occurred to his store during the flood by saying, “I hate it about your being broken into.” (163). Even though the dialog literally says “broken into,” the theme of an inter-sexually split subject in Child of God invites readers to hear the sheriff say “sorry about your being broken in two.” A similar, seemingly disconnected bit of dialog emerges in the police station scene when
Ballard and the woman who is accusing him of rape get into a brawl and the deputy says, “Goddamn it Sheriff…get her or him one, will ye?” (52). Here, McCarthy has written it so that the reader can understand the “Sevier County” deputy (I mark that the reader can hear “sever” in “Sevier”) to refer to Ballard and the woman as two severed and warring halves of an individual body, as though the deputy tells the sheriff to get “her or him one” because he recognizes the individual to be a split subject that needs to connect, yet he doesn’t know whether to refer to this individual as a “her or him.”

The entire text, especially the landscape of Child of God, is to be treated as an open body through which Ballard moves as the reader’s tour guide at the same time that McCarthy suggests that it is Ballard’s body through which the reader is moving. The first chapter of Child of God, the scene where Ballard’s “home” is being auctioned off, supports my claim. While the auctioneers arrive at Ballard’s home, Ballard watches from “the barn door:”

To watch these things issuing from the otherwise mute pastoral morning is a man at the barn door. He is small, unclean, unshaven. … Wasps pass through the laddered light from the barnslats in a succession of strobic moments… The man stands straddlelegged, has made in the dark humus a darker pool wherein swirls a pale foam with bits of straw. Buttoning his jeans he moves along the barnwall, himself fiddlebacked with light. (4)

The language in the above quote is ambiguous so that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what McCarthy is up to. However, the bottom line is that in this scene McCarthy creates a twisted parallel or overlap involving scale. On one scale, Ballard stands in the barn
door, inside of a latter of light, and his pants are unzipped while he is about his business. On another scale, Ballard’s unzipped pants are the barn door, Ballard is about his business, and he is fiddlebacked with light. Thus, McCarthy writes it so that Ballard is inside of the barn and the barn is inside of Ballard simultaneously.

In the above quote, the “barn door” can be read colloquially as the “zipper on one’s jeans,” which themselves pictographically create the shape of a slit like an eye, the slip suggestive of not just the opening on a pair of pants but either the penis or vaginal openings, which is to say an opening that lends itself not just to “jeans” but also to “genes.” Another allusion to “genes” or DNA—signposted by the ladder-like double helix pattern to which the text alludes—can also be detected in McCarthy’s “laddered light” through which wasps pass and the remark that Ballard himself is “fiddlebacked with light,” which I read as a pictograph that overlaps the DNA double helix with the spine, if not also overlaps the anus with the penis or vagina, all of which, from varying angles, can be figured as “towering structures.” Further corroborating my associating “barn door” with “genitals,” I turn to the line “The man stands straddlelegged, has made in the dark humus a darker pool wherein swirls a pale foam with bits of straw.” This line sounds as though it is describing “a man” urinating—“man” meaning “human,” the intersexually fractured subject which, even biologically, I understand to point to a sexual assemblage having both dominant and residual sexual traits as well as dominant and residual gender traits where, in the case of the crossdressing Ballard who carries dead women on his back, the reader is led to believe that in exceptional instances these “dominant and residual traits” are not fixed but instead oscillate and organize and disorganize themselves into all sorts of assemblages. The above quote that seems to
describe a man urinating says that the man’s legs are spread, and he makes a dark pool; however, because the liquid is described as a “pale foam,” it is unclear whether this man is urinating and/or masturbating, and because the pool is “dark” and Ballard is abstractly about his business, it is unclear what sort of “dirt” he is urinating and/or masturbating into.

Later, in the same chapter, when Lester emerges from the barn with his rifle and demands that everyone leave what he claims to be his property, the auctioneer threatens Ballard: “Lester, you don’t get a grip on yourself they goin to put you in a rubber room.” (7). Never mind the plot—yes, of course, the auctioneer is telling Ballard that if he doesn’t put the gun down they will take him to the madhouse, clearly a real concern or option (even if only a temporary option) from someone in such a position—I want to highlight that McCarthy’s word choice here figures Ballard as a penis or a vagina that the auctioneer threatens to put “into” a “rubber room” or a condom at the same time it figures Ballard as semen or vaginal secretion that is being threatened to be placed within a similar contraceptive device. It should also be noted that the surname “Ballard” itself can be recognized both to mean “white ball” and “bald head” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ballard_(surname)). And, again, I understand the “whiteness” to be able to point to biological material, while the “bald head” can point to genitalia: a penis tip and a clitoris, if not also the seemingly “always-ready-to-crown,” closed labia themselves. More still, the figure of a “rubber room” can be interpreted to refer to “a room” within which something that “rubs”—a “rubber”—is housed. Notwithstanding, the real polysemic tension here is caught up in the phrase “get a grip on
"yourself" and the way it teeter-totters between one’s holding back their materials or one’s “gripping themselves” in masturbation in order to let them go.

Returning to the “barn door” scene, McCarthy’s spatial arrangement and mapping of Ballard’s traversal through that space is critical. As Ballard buttons his jeans, he moves from the barn door to the “the barn wall,” which is to say he moves from the zone associated with the genitals, where material flow can exit, back into the building structure itself. Then Ballard goes from the lower portion of the barn to the upper portion—the forebay, also called the overshoot, which would be located in the front of the barn, just above the barn door. It is from the forebay that he now watches the auction taking place at the family farm house below, which McCarthy suggests, like the barn itself, is both within and without of Ballard:

Standing in the forebay door he blinks. Behind him there is a rope hanging from the loft. His thinly bristled jaw knots and slacks as if he were chewing but he is not chewing. His eyes are almost shut against the sun and through the thin and blueveined lids you can see the eyeballs moving, watching. (4)

As with the scene where it is unclear whether Ballard is urinating or masturbating, it is also unclear what Ballard is doing here. McCarthy only tells us that he isn’t chewing, but something chewing-like must be occurring or McCarthy wouldn’t have to tell us that Ballard isn’t doing that. Notwithstanding, it is clear that McCarthy figures Ballard to be looking at “the family farm house,” which, on the level of basic plot, is implicitly located outside of the barn, and yet, at the same time, McCarthy figures Ballard to be looking inward, as though looking at the colors one sees through one’s eyelids when one closes
one’s eyes after staring at the sun—“His eyes are almost shut against the sun and through the thin and blueveined lids you can see the eyeballs moving, watching.” McCarthy figures it as though while Ballard is looking at his slightly opened eyelids he is able to see not only his own eyes moving under the veil of skin but is able to see onto the auctioning of his home, which the reader has to conclude is located both outside of and inside of his body. More still, no sooner than McCarthy describes Ballard in the third person he switches to the second person so that the reader shifts from being invited to imagine Ballard viewing this overlapping inner-outer body to the reader seeing this body through Ballard’s point of view, which, in certain genres, is called a POV for short.

When McCarthy’s auctioneer starts to speak, his language corroborates my argument that we are not only dealing with the auction of just any family farm house but that—as though it were something out of Plato’s Gorgias myth, so important for Luce, or as though it were out of the Egyptian or Tibetan Books of The Dead, if not also Adam and Eve’s fall in Genesis or Jesus’ crucifixion, descent into hell, and ascension into heaven from The New Testament—we are dealing with the auctioning of a body, crowds around a corpse, the sacrifice of the individual and the birth of the community, the loss of the center and the birth of decentered organs gone awry, a mad network where one doesn’t know whether to locate oneself in eye, hands, genitals, anus, ears, emotions, reason, senses, inside, outside, where one doesn’t know if emotions come from diet or from human interaction, whether sexual arousal comes from exterior encouragement or from internal chemistry.... The auctioneer says:

All right now. Jess and them is got the house open for them that wants to see inside. … [W]e want to get everybody registered fore we have the drawins. …
That’s right everybody, we will bid on the tracts and then we’ll have a chance to bid on the whole. They’s both sides of the road now. (5)

The transition from “the barn” to “the house”—“both sides of the road now”—appears to mark both the transition from one side of the body to the other, from the barn, associated with domesticated animals, to the family farm house, associated with domesticated humans, as though McCarthy is tracking a movement from a zone of genetic store to a zone of cultural store, as though the open corpse-of-a-house that is being auctioned off figures the community warring over the “assimilation” of the “animal infant” into “civilization.” By choosing the word “tracts” in the line “we will bid on the tracts and then we’ll have a chance to bid on the whole,” McCarthy figures it so that not only tracts of land are being addressed but also tracts of organs and tracts of nerves, thus addressing both the landscape and body simultaneously, as though each were discontinuous and continuous at the same time, as though here Ballard’s organ-body and his environment-body, which simultaneously houses his organ body and comprises it, are blurred.

Rather than turning to mysticism and philosophy, as Luce does (certainly a viable move), I opt to turn to the space where feminism meets hard science by looking to Elizabeth Wilson’s *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*. Wilson states her thesis:

It is my argument that biology—the muscular capacities of the body, the function of the internal organs, the biophysics of cellular metabolism, the microphysiology of circulation, respiration, digestion, and excretion—needs to become a more significant contributor to the feminist theories of the body. (16).
I agree with Wilson and suggest that not only do “feminist theories of body” need to look more to biology but that literary analysis does as well.

In *Psychosomatic*, Wilson looks at Freud’s early work on neurology and conversion hysteria—the conversion of anxiety into physical symptoms that Freud suggests derives from cultural repression not degeneracy—in order to emphasize that the body and the psyche are inextricably connected (11-12). Moving from looking at conversion hysteria in general to focusing on “neurasthenia” in particular—neurasthenia is a nervous weakness and sexual disorder that Freud argues is caused by civilization (24) as it manifests itself in the form of sexual repression turned into excessive “masturbation or the prolonged practice of coitus interruptus” (25) and Wilson clarifies is caused by excessive “[m]asturbation in the case of men, or cultural constraint on sexuality, in the case of women” (30), whatever such a statement might mean when intermingled with McCarthy’s *Child of God*, where the (anti)hero is figured as both man and woman—Wilson turns to a passage from Freud that I argue looks strikingly similar to the physical trajectory I understand McCarthy to map when tracking Ballard’s movement from the “barn door” to “the forebay” and beyond in *Child of God*:

Freud (1895b) offers an account of symptom formation in anxiety neurosis (one of the actual neuroses) in which these etiological notions are clearly articulated. In the sexually mature male, Freud suggests, somatic sexual excitation is produced almost constantly and eventually accumulates to a level where it impinges on the psyche. Specifically, it is “pressure on the walls of the seminal vesicles, which are lined with nerve endings,” that eventually breaks through the resistance to the cerebral cortex and “express[es] itself as a psychical stimulus”
This cathects, or libidinizes, a series of sexual ideas in the psyche, producing a libidinal tension that demands to be discharged. The adequate discharge of this libidinal tension is possible only through “a complicated spinal reflex act which brings about the unloading of the nerve endings, and in all the psychical preparations which have to be made in order to set off that reflex.” Freud calls this a specific or adequate action. That is, adequate discharge requires the synchronous release of somatic and psychic tension. Anything less than this will mean that accumulated somatic excitation will continue to breach the subcortical resistances and intrude into the psyche.

Wilson’s reading of Freud suggests that “[i]n the sexually mature male” sexual repression is regular—i.e. within any “non-bonobo,” “non-immediate-return-forager,” “non-orgy,” or “non-high-school” setting where people are, for the most part, coupled and are expected to fulfill needs for one another that in former times or other contexts would be explicitly filled by a community of participants (which isn’t to say that the community doesn’t either implicitly or, in moments of exception, explicitly fulfill these needs within “civilization”)—“somatic sexual excitation is produced almost constantly and eventually accumulates to a level where it impinges on the psyche.” This eventual impingement produces what Freud calls a “psychical stimulus” and what Wilson clarifies to be “a series of sexual ideas in the psyche” that “produces a libidinal tension that demands to be discharged.” According to Freud, discharging “this [particular] libidinal tension” requites some manner of specialized technique and much preparation involving the spine—Freud calls this act “a complicated spinal reflex act which brings about the unloading of the
nerve endings.” Beyond this point, apparently, if further repression ensues, sexual excitation will continue to back up into the psyche and produce negative results.

Wilson continues to read Freud’s further meditations on the subject of how extreme sexual repression can result not only in psychic melancholia but in physical trauma:

In a draft paper in the Fliess correspondence, Freud (1895a) extends his model of neurasthenia beyond the actual neuroses to take account of the psychoneurosis melancholia. He makes a case for “neurasthenic melancholia,” where excessive masturbation has chronically reduced somatic excitation. This weakening of the somatic system results in a libidinal impoverishment that is experienced psychically as melancholia. The strange etiology and itinerary of the symptoms of neurasthenic melancholia are documented in a diagram that maps the circulation of excitation from soma to the psyche and back.
The end-organ, spinal center, ego, and sexual object are linked via the movement of sexual tension and “voluptuous feelings” across the somatic-psychical boundary. This diagram...is a map of the psychosomatic structure that is disrupted in cases of neurasthenia...lead[ing] to a melancholic inhibition of the psyche, instinctual impoverishment, and pain. ... In this model not everything is cortical, cognitive, knowing. Second, the nervous system is thoroughly corporeal. Freud’s neurons are functioning more like flesh and blood than like cerebral units: “There may come about and in-drawing (as it were) in the psychical sphere, which produces an effect of suction upon the ajoining amounts of excitation. ... There sets in an impoverishment in excitation...an internal haemorrhage, as it were—which shows itself in the other instincts and functions. This in-drawing operates inhibitingly, like a wound, in a manner analogous to pain”. (26-9)

Wilson’s reading of Freud is an effective tool through which to track some of what happens to Ballard in *Child of God*—McCarthy’s figuration of Ballard as penis/vagina or semen/vaginal fluid, Ballard’s movement from “barn door” up above to the “forebay,” and his ultimately getting knocked unconscious with an “axe handle” and being thrown out of his “family farm house:” “He was layin flat on the ground lookin up at everybody with his eyes crossed and this aweful pumpknot on his head.” (9)

The figure of the “pumpknot”—not just in the colloquial sense where a “pumpknot” figures a bump on the head but in a more “abstract” or metonymy-like sense where “pumpknot” can be read to mark “a knotty water pump” on Ballard’s “head”—makes sense when put beside Ballard’s movement from “barn door” to “forebay” as well as Wilson’s diagram of Freud’s that depicts an “in-drawing...in the psychical sphere,
which produces an effect of suction upon the ajoining amounts of excitation…[leading to] an internal haemorrhage.” Dealing with Freud’s “psychical sphere,” it needs to be underscored here that Wilson declares “Freud’s neurons…[to] function[..] more like flesh and blood than like cerebral units” and points to Freud’s diagram in order to show a circuit that runs between soma and psyche, connecting “end-organ, spinal center, ego, and sexual object.”

McCarthy follows up *Child of God’s* opening, “barn door” scene by taking the reader to the cabin in the backwoods that Ballard squats in after being expelled from his “family farm house.” The first thing I want to mark regarding this scene’s setting is that it looks strikingly similar to the former setting. It has a barn and a house. The only difference is that the land is all grown up with weeds, and the second setting features an outhouse, which allows the reader to interpret Ballard’s expulsion from the family farm house as an expulsion enacted by the passing of time itself, as though the second setting is the first only later in time:

All that remained of the outhouse were a few soft shards of planking grown with a virid moss and lying collapsed in a shadow hole where weeds sprouted in outsized mutations. Ballard passed by and went behind the barn where he trod a clearing in the clumps of jimson and nightshade and squatted and shat. A bird sang among the hot and dusty bracken. Bird flew. He wiped himself with a stick and rose and pulled his trousers up from the ground. He buttoned his trousers and went back into the house. (13)
McCarthy depicts the above setting—with house and barn—in a such a way that the reader can interpret it as a twisted parallel of the setting encountered earlier, now vacated of both the auction crowd and many signs of domestication. Where in the earlier “barn door” scene, McCarthy paints a picture of what seems like Ballard either urinating or masturbating into a dark pool, here McCarthy shows Ballard defecating—the passing of time indeed.

Where in the first scene, Ballard is in the barn and looking at the family farm house, here, Ballard is behind the barn and looking at a home overgrown with nature. If this scene appears vulgar to the reader, then I suggest that it is because of the reader’s presuppositions and repressions involving defecation, if not also involving the earth and decomposition. McCarthy makes no such presuppositions and in fact paints a picture of defecation and life cycles that are more imbued with serenity than the prior, auction scene, where the hungry crowd hovers over the home being foreclosed on. Here, Ballard moves among “clumps of jimson and nightshade,” both hallucinogens, as though McCarthy were intentionally associating deification in this context not with a nihilistic or horrific death but with a death that is itself teeming with tracers of another kind of life. “[W]eeds sprout[…] in outsized mutations” from the outhouse that has clearly had some damage done to it since McCarthy describes it as existing in “remains.” “[F]lies clamber[…] over[…]Ballard’s] dark and lumpy stool.” Life thrives off waste in McCarthy’s *Child of God*. In “Cave of Oblivion,” Luce says:

[McCarthy] evokes the Platonic or gnostic conception of earthly life as a purgatorial experience or a netherworld. Rarely, however, does McCarthy
directly invoke optimistic notions of an afterlife, a cycle of reincarnation, or a transmundane reunification with the divine. (159)

No “netherworld.” No “cycle of reincarnation.” No “reunification with the divine.” I beg to differ. In *Child of God*, we see a cycle from the “netherworld” of the “barn door” to the upper zone of the “forebay,” out of the family farm house and back into a now altered “netherworld” of defecation associated with “divine” weeds. Geographical or spatial circuits similar to the one just described abound in *Child of God*, which has running through it a theme of jam-packed enclosure, which McCarthy associates with stored corpses (stores or any kind of preservation or form really), juxtaposed against nature flow that can even be detected on the sentence level in the above “defecation” scene where McCarthy places Ballard’s bowel movement beside a bird singing “among the hot and dusty bracken” followed by the bird’s flying away, as though to associate fecal matter closed inside the bowels with a singing bird and a bowel movement with bird flight, suggesting that along with the shedding of Ballard’s insides goes the shedding of caged sound, of music, of memory.

The pattern of jam-packed enclosure juxtaposed against nature flow can be detected in not only the transition from the scene where crowds of people invade the family farm house Ballard believed to be his property to the following scene where Ballard is shown among the “jimson and nightshade” but also in the action that follows the defecation scene, where the next blatantly significant thing to occur is that Ballard drags the corpse of a dead girl into the lower level of his cabin before tying her to a rope and hoisting her into the attic to keep until he wakes to a fire that destroys both the cabin and the girl. (93-105). Using Wilson’s *Psychosomatic* as a lens in order to read this
“necrophilia love scene” allows the reader to make sense of what kind of necrophilia McCarthy is interested in meditating on. Here, I re-quote a Wilson passage I used earlier regarding neurasthenia:

In the sexually mature male, Freud suggests, somatic sexual excitation is produced almost constantly and eventually accumulates to a level where it impinges on the psyche. Specifically, it is “pressure on the walls of the seminal vesicles, which are lined with nerve endings,” that eventually breaks through the resistance to the cerebral cortex and “express[es] itself as a psychical stimulus” (108) This cathects, or libidinizes, a series of sexual ideas in the psyche, producing a libidinal tension that demands to be discharged.

Thinking of the corpse in Ballard’s cabin in the woods as repressed sexual material “impinging on the psyche” to the point that it produces “a sexual idea” not only makes it impossible to imagine a world without “pornography”—stored sex footage—but also evokes a strange kind of empathy among the so-called “non-perverse” for the so-called “perverse,” the idea of “perversion” here really being mistaken for the repression of the “perverse” rather than the “perverse” itself. It at least makes one ask the question—well, if we all are “necrophiliacs,” on a certain level, than what drives one to externalize “necrophilia?” What kind of serious congestion must be taking place for one to no longer accept “necrophilia” as a current that runs parallel to “real sex” or as a substitute for “real sex” but rather seek it as an end in itself? What kind of serious congestion must be taking place where the desire for a solipsistic world of porn becomes an overextended end in itself?
Returning to this pattern of movements between low and high put alongside movements between dwellings in *Child of God*, I now point out that after Ballard is burnt out of his cabin in the woods in a twisted parallel of the former scene where he is expelled from his family farm house, he arrives at the mountain-side cave that becomes his next home, where, again, he stores the now multiple corpses from his serial killings in the lower caverns before he gets himself shot in the arm and hospitalized. Following Ballard’s hospitalization, a mob sneaks him out of his hospital room and takes Ballard back to his cave so that he might show them where he stored the bodies. There, Ballard eludes the mob in the lower regions of the cave and ascends up the cave’s top before bursting out of the earth (in another clear figure for rebirth that Luce misses). Later, like Ballard’s movement from the “barn door” to the “forebay” in the family farmhouse, the corpse’s movement from the lower level of the cabin in the woods to the attic, and Ballard’s movement from the lower level of the cave to the top, county officials eventually extract the cave corpses by pulling them out one by one using a rope from above. What I am most interested in here is that, similar to the scene where Ballard defecates beside the “jimson and nightshade,” the cave is associated with the gut.

In “Cave of Oblivion,” Luce compares Ballard’s squatting in the cave to Jonah’s being in the belly of the whale:

The cave system that Lester inhabits…is a spiritual underworld corresponding to Lester’s lost, blind, and constricted state of soul. It’s stalactites are “dripping limestone teeth” and it’s wet walls “with their softlooking convolutions, slavered over as they were with wet and bloodred mud, had an organic look to them, like
the innards of some great beast” (133, 135). Confined in his monstrous cave, Lester is like Jonah in the belly of Leviathan. (156-7)

Building on the theme of the barn and the farmhouse being both outside of Ballard and inside of Ballard simultaneously, I suggest that if McCarthy’s cave has teeth and is described as being “like the innards of some great beast,” one valid interpretive pathway that McCarthy lays before the reader is the one that allows the reader to associate the cave not only with the insides of Jonah’s whale but with Ballard’s insides. Luce omits several of what I understand to be critical lines from McCarthy’s “cave as innards” quote that I’ll now include:

[Inside the cave, Ballard] followed this course for perhaps a mile down all its turnings and through narrows that fetched him sideways advancing like a fence and through a tunnel that brought him to his belly… Here the walls…had an organic look to them, like the innards of some great beast. Here in the bowels of the mountain Ballard turned his light on ledges or pallets of stone where dead people lay like saints. (134-5)

Further supporting my claim, I suggest that Ballard’s “following the course” that “brings him to his belly” can not only be understood to mean that, in the cave, the character has to crawl on his belly but that the character is exploring his own belly. Ballard himself can be, and I argue should be, read as the “great beast” whose “innards” are being toured, as the mountain whose “bowels” are being traversed.
Again, I turn to Wilson’s *Psychosomatic* for context that both allows the reader to make sense of why McCarthy chooses to store Ballard’s corpses in a cave that he figures as “innards:”

The influence of psychological events on gastrointestinal disorders appears to be widely recognized, yet this influence is usually kept at a distance from the gut—sequestered in the brain or in the vaguest possible terms attributed to external, social factors such as stress. (42)

Seeking to explain how gastrointestinal issues affect the psyche, Wilson turns to look at the enteric nervous system:

The enteric nervous system (ENS) is a complex network of nerves that encases and innervates the digestive tract from the esophagus to the anus. The ENS is anatomically extensive: the small intestine in humans has as many neurons as the spinal chord; “add on the nerve cells of the esophagus, stomach, and large intestine and you find that we have more cells in our bowel than in our spine. We have more nerve cells in our gut than in the entire remainder of our peripheral nervous system.” (Gershon 1998, xiii) The ENS is anatomically and biochemically more similar to the central nervous system (CNS) than it is to any other part of the peripheral nervous system, the ENS may act independently of the CNS innervation. For these reasons the ENS has been variously named “the brain of the gut,” “the enteric minibrain,” and “the second brain.” … The ENS contains every class of neurotransmitter that is found in the CNS. Serotonin has been found to be a particularly important neurotransmitter in the ENS. The vast
majority of the body’s serotonin—Kim Camilleri (2000) suggests about 95 percent—is made, stored, and metabolized in the gut, and most of the serotonin in the blood is derived from the gut. … By 1999 at least thirty neurotransmitters had been identified in the brain and all of these are also found in the ENS. (34-6)

Thinking that “the ENS may act independently of the CNS innervation” as well as thinking of it as a “second brain” gives readers of *Child of God* something to think about in regards to McCarthy’s reoccurring theme that associates dead women either with Ballard’s back or associates dead women with the cave that is described as being like “innards” as well as having “teeth,” it seeming to be the case that, with the Ballard of *Child of God* who is a serial killer, McCarthy paints a picture of someone whose ENS is either being killed, is dead, or is perpetually resurrecting. In addition, marking the complexity of the ENS’s chemical inventory allows readers to engage new pathways of interpretation in regards to the “jimson and nightshade” that sprout up beside McCarthy’s dilapidated “outhouse” insofar as the weeds and outhouse are associated with the “other Ballard” who persistently asserts himself throughout *Child of God*, the Ballard who isn’t a serial killer, which is the case with the Ballard from the “outhouse” scene, where Ballard is described as not only defecating but is described as thoroughly cleaning his cabin, sweeping out the insects, burning old newspapers in the fireplace, and sitting “crosslegged” before a lit lamp in a manner that is rather Zen (15).

Wilson turns to Michael Gershon, chairman of anatomy and cell biology at Colombia University, for the “gnosis” regarding the connection between mouth and anus—the connection between outside and inside—in a way that helps us illuminate the teeth-bowels connection within Ballard’s “cave:”
Gershon (1998) likens the gut to the skin: both form boundaries between self and the world. In the case of the gut, this boundary allows the outside world to pass through us: “The space enclosed within the wall of the bowel, its lumen, is part of the outside world. The open tube that begins at the mouth ends at the anus. Paradoxical as it may seem, the gut is a tunnel that permits the exterior to run right through us. Whatever is in the lumen of the gut is thus actually outside of our bodies” (84). (Wilson, 53)

I want to continue to use both McCarthy and Wilson in order to ponder and elaborate on “Gerson’s paradox” or his statement that “[w]hatever is in the lumen of the gut is thus actually outside of our bodies,” as it isn’t only human corpses that surface inside of Ballard’s cave but other life forms as well.

McCarthy figures the cave in Child of God as Ballard’s insides and figures his insides as congealed not only with the corpses of “dead women” (whatever that polysemic figure might mean) but also both congealed with animal and insect fossils as well as with living fish, insects, and rodents that have managed to thrive inside of Ballard’s body:

For three days Ballard explored the cave he’d entered in an attempt to find another exit. … He knelt and drank from a dripping pool. He rested, drank again. He watched the bore of his flashbeam tiny translucent fish whose bones in shadow through their frail mica sheathing traversed the shallow stonefloored pool. … He scrabbled like a rat up a long slick mudslide and entered a long room filled with bones. Ballard circled this ancient ossuary kicking at the ruins. The brown
and pitted armatures of bison, elk. A jaguar’s skull whose one remaining eyetooth he pried out and secured in the bib pocket of his overalls. ... He heard mice scurry in the dark. Perhaps they’d nest in his skull, spawn their tiny bald and mewling whelps in the lobed caverns where his brains had been. His bones polished clean as eggshells, centipedes sleeping in their marrowed flutes, his ribs curling slender and whitely like a bone flower in the dark stone bowl. (189)

Again I turn to Wilson in order to not only make sense of McCarthy’s depiction of Ballard’s insides as encased with dead women, fossils, and living animal life, but I also use McCarthy here in order to suggest why in *Psychosomatic* Wilson moves from “Gerson’s paradox” stating that “[w]hatever is in the lumen of the gut is thus actually outside of our bodies” to Oliver Sacks work in Guam with the neurological disorder called “the lytico-bodig,” which allows Wilson to put forward an account of the human body that figures it both as having stored within it the evolutionary labor processes that preceded its production and as having in its store a living menagerie of cellular assemblages that express relational continuity with other life forms in the present.

Wilson turns to Oliver Sacks work in Guam, where Sacks looks at a neurological disorder called “the lytico-bodig” that in one subject produces what is described as a kind of atavism which Sacks understands as a manifestation of the man’s otherwise veiled reptilian qualities, about which Wilson says: “[Sacks] considers atavism to be the uncovering of an ancient link. If we still carry our fishy ancestors within us, it is not simply a vestigial freight—as inert, dead weight to which we are reduced in pathological or traumatic circumstances.” (93). Wilson junxtaposes Sacks model of evolution to
Darwinian and neo-Darwinian models and identifies Sachs as a possible ally for “feminists interested in neurobiological embodiments” (93):

In Darwinian and neo-Darwinian models of evolution, reptilian characteristics in humans are vestiges of past commonalities. What is reptilian in humans is a remnant of previous, now extant bodily form. … Sack’s ruminations [however] are consonant with the established notion of evolution as a branching system. Rather than formulating evolution as a ladder of progress in which organisms evolve in a direct and linear fashion out of each other (first fish, then reptiles, then birds), contemporary evolutionary theories depict the emergence of new forms as a branching development: from a common root all manner of different species diverge. … Without dismissing the branches of lineage laid down in conventional models, Sacks also keeps the bodily connection between long-separated lines active. That is, his reptilian-mammalion patient embodies evolutionary relations not simply along branch lines…but also across already differentiated lines in the present… This…relation, a bodily connection that traverses the branching system, makes evolution a networked array in which bodily form isn’t just influenced by the past, but is also generated by a biological commerce between classes and species in the present. (91)

Wilson’s notion of a “bodily form” that “isn’t just influenced by the past but is also generated by a biological commerce between classes and species in the present” not only gives the reader of Child of God a way of making sense of the fact that in Ballard’s cave there are both traces of animal remains and living animals, but it also allows readers to
see clearly McCarthy’s re-writing of the metamorphosis of Narcissus, which I suggest Luce misinterprets.

In Child of God, McCarthy shows us the nervous system and the psyche breaking down together, but Ballard’s crisis isn’t only a breakdown but is also a breakthrough, a process that takes him through the cave to the outside world in a manner of rebirth that only implies the need for more process, further breakdowns and breakthroughs, more lumen birthed by mouths, more lumen vibrating more skin from inside to outside, more lumen as outer-skin stretching inward until it births itchy mouths in the back of the head. The whole work is a non-returning feedback loop. Ballard’s turning himself into the “hospital” at the novel’s end (a place of sickness, health, death, birth, and madness all at once) before being taken back to the cave by the mob where he subsequently escapes is a twisted parallel that intertwines a trip down the birth canal with a trip through the ENS in a manner similar to the way in which the dissection of Ballard’s corpse at the end of the text is a twisted parallel of the foreclosure of his body—the bidding on the tracks and the whole—at the novel’s beginning.

Whether Ballard’s is a breakdown in relation to others or a breakthrough in relation to others isn’t the issue in Child of God. It isn’t an “and/or” question the text poses but is rather an “and/and” parallel of textual simultaneity. Luce compares Ballard to Narcissus in order to link the Narcissus myth up with Plato’s Gorgias myth, where “souls drink[...] forgetfulness from Lethe before incarnation:” “Lester’s voyeurism and necrophilia are repetitions of Narcissus’ fateful error—a mistaken application of vision and erotic attraction resulting in his drowning in materialism.” (166).” Luce’s seeing Narcissus in the masturbatory, “necrophiliae” Ballard is spot on, as, like Ballard, Ovid
depicts Narcissus rejecting sexuality and falling in love with his own reflection—however, Luce critically fails to see the connection between Narcissus’ “drowning in materialism” and his “reincarnation,” which is to say she fails to mark what Dali is all up inside—the “metamorphosis of Narcissus.” Like Ballard, the flaw of Narcissus isn’t that he falls in love with “himself” but is rather that he falls in love with his surface image. The breakdown/breakthrough for Narcissus is materialist, even Marxist, if you like, although excessively Marxist (Marx encountered neither in the library nor with a pamphlet or rifle in hand but rather encountered through the veins, Marx before Marx, Marx after Marx). It is when Narcissus’ fetishized, surface face dissolves to reveal the flower that is blooming inside of and bursting out of him that the material modes of production that make him possible and that he makes possible enter into a continuum of unveiling.

There are many moments in *Child of God* where Ballard stares into a window or a pool of water at his reflection. Possibly the most Narcissus-like one is the quote that links the word “rose” with his reflection: “Ballard leaned his face to the green water and drank and studied his dishing visage in the pool. He halfway put his hand to the water as if he would touch the face that watched there but then he rose and wiped his mouth and went on through the woods.” (127). Here—putting to the side the whole matter of wrestling with what “water” he is putting his hand into, what “face” he is touching, or what “mouth” he is “wiping” or how—it is possible to read the words “he rose” not only to mean that Ballard stood up but that, like Narcissus who turns into the pale flower that bears his name, Ballard becomes “rose.” More still, one of the most interesting ways to read this quote is to point out that the other that refracts here is not object but is
subject. As though having another mind, here the face watches, a “visage in the pool” that is described as being “dishing,” meaning not only that the “face” is “good looking” but also meaning that it dishes or (re)members, it being a marker for that simultaneously living and dead abyss of depth and surface that McCarthy shows Ballard engaging both chronologically and relationally in *Child of God*. 
She said Ye can we get married at the mall?
I said look you need to crawl ‘fore you ball
Come and meet me in the bathroom stall
And show me why you deserve to have it all

—Kanye West on “Niggas in Paris” off Watch The Throne

I am my own parasite
I don't need a host to live
We feed off of each other
We can share our endorphins…

I own my own pet virus
I get to pet and name her
Her milk is my shit
My shit it is her milk
Test meat!
Doll steak!

—Nirvana’s “Milk It” off In Utero

And he saith unto them unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men

—Matthew 4:19

Chapter 3

Masochism, Material, and The Child in Palahniuk’s Pygmy

Contemporary novelist Chuck Palahniuk’s epistolary novel Pygmy has yet to receive the scholarly attention it deserves, most scholars paying attention to Palahniuk’s
most popular work *Fight Club*—a novel wherein a passive, burned-out product recall specialist for a car company who suffers from insomnia meets his doppelganger on a nude beach and joins forces with him to form an underground boxing community that functions as radical therapy for the violently depressed subjects of late-capitalist America. The satirical, punk-mannered Chuck Palahniuk describes his tenth novel, *Pygmy* as follows:

> The lead character is a 13-year-old foreign exchange student sent to live with a suburban, white, middle-class family. Oh, and they're Christians. The visit is for six months, and he's one of a dozen similar kids, all shipped to America to live with typical families. The secret truth is that Pygmy is a terrorist, trained since infancy in martial arts, chemistry and radical hatred of the United States. He has six months to build a prize-winning project for the National Science Fair. If he succeeds, he and his project will go to Washington, D.C. for the finals competition—where the project will explode, killing millions.

([http://chuckpalahniuk.net/books/pygmy](http://chuckpalahniuk.net/books/pygmy))

Since there isn’t any scholarship that I know of written on *Pygmy* and since I do understand *Pygmy* to continue to develop themes the author establishes in *Fight Club*, I’ll be briefly turning to scholarship on *Fight Club* in order to frame my argument, namely Krister Friday’s "A Generation of Men Without History: *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom.” At the same time, due to the differences between *Fight Club* and *Pygmy*, I also aim to not get tangled up in *Fight Club* scholarship and thus intend to carve out a new space for thinking about *Pygmy* as a unique text that resituates the conversations around Palahniuk within the realms of not only queer interpretations of
Lacan’s account of the phallus but also within a broad territory that allows readers to think about the connections between Lacan’s phallus, the eastern philosophical tradition of Tantra Kundalini involving the chakra body, and the Jewish-mystical or Kabbalah depictions of the tree of life.

In “A Generation of Men Without History,” Friday engages the close-knit relationship between the dwindling power of the white masculine subject and the masochism said subject turns to as a kind of coping mechanism that allows him to compensate for his newfound meaninglessness:

In *Fight Club*, the "pleasure" of masochism is associated with the new masculine identity it seemingly affords Tyler and his followers (*You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive in Fight Club*). By extension, we can say that this masochism, the very support for Tyler's identity, is itself an empty form without content: it is an expectation of *an identity that is to come*. What *Fight Club* offers, in conflating identity as symptom, is a conception of identity in which abeyance and expectation become themselves the positive support for white male identity. ([http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.503/13.3friday.html](http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.503/13.3friday.html))

Friday’s analysis seeks to trouble white male identity by troubling narrative structure, thus allowing him to question origin as it resonates with a cause-and-effect logic that creates a schism between producer and product, between active and passive:

[A]s a biographical flashback of male decline and re-emergence, *Fight Club* is a narrative of identity, one that explains how the narrator came to be; how a certain identity ("Tyler") emerges and comes to recognize itself; how the narrator, with
the help of "Tyler," acquires his "revolutionary" consciousness; and how, ultimately, the narrator "now" finds himself with a gun in his mouth. This retrospective structure is foregrounded by the dramatic frame of *Fight Club*, raising the broader and much more important question of the constitutive relationship between identity and narrative history. … Told in retrospect, histories offer accounts of the past, and these accounts are inherently (but sometimes only implicitly) teleological, explaining, as they do, the present. That is why it is a commonplace to say that all (narrative) histories, including *Fight Club*, are primarily expressions of the present and for the present, and its condition, and its identity.

(https://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.503/13.3friday.html)

Here Friday expresses how narrative accounts of historical struggle seek to normalize and stabilize the present due to their being expressed without of the present—the narrator orders and forms the events of the past in such a way so that the conditions of the present are justified and stabilized: specifically, in regards to *Fight Club*, the narrator orders the past so as to justify the present conditions of a masochistic, white male identity or “identity with a gun in its mouth,” an identity marked by its own erasure, an identity that is because it has and continues to overcome its own erasure, even if its overcoming is inextricably interwoven with the erasure it uses as a prop in order to reestablish itself.

*Pygmy’s* narrative structure is similar to *Fight Club’s* insofar as it cuts back and forth between the present and the past, between agent number 67’s living inside of America with the secret imperative to enact Operation Havoc and agent number 67’s early childhood training as a military weapon in the unnamed dictatorship from which he
originates. What is unique about *Pygmy* that completely troubles the whole business of time is the way Palahniuk frames the novel within the space of the body. By replacing time with space, causality and origin are overlapped by networks of relational interdependence.

In his famous essay “The Mirror Stage,” I understand French psychoanalysis and philosopher Jacques Lacan to relocate Freud’s stages of sexual development—oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital—from the realm of causal time to that of relational space in a manner that is similar to Palahniuk’s in *Pygmy*. In Lacan, as in *Pygmy*, childhood is associated with the alienated position the followers of Derrida and deconstruction refer to as “phallogocentrism” more than it is associated with anything temporally developmental (Kamuf, 313):

[T]he human child, at an age when he is for a short while, but for a while nevertheless, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can already recognize his own image as such in a mirror. … This event…has often given me pause to reflect upon the striking spectacle of a nursling in front of a mirror who has not yet mastered walking, or even standing, but who—though held tightly by some prop, human or artificial (what, in France, we call a *trotte-bebe* [a sort of walker])—overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the constraints of his prop in order to adopt a slightly leaning-forward position and take in an instantaneous view of the image in order to fix it in his mind. (76)

In the above convoluted “poetry” of Lacan, there are at least two parallel planes being addressed. In the first, Lacan describes a literal nursling or breast-feeding child who, for
allegorical reasons, is left alone in his/her jumper in front of a mirror. This nursling, so the allegory goes, manages to pull himself so close to the mirror that the straps and supports of his jumper vanish from the nursling’s sight—the straps being metaphors for the “umbilical chords” of one’s organs, of nature flows, and of society that make one dependant on others—thus allowing the nursling to develop an egocentric image of him/herself as a coherent individual or Cartesian subject capable of frontal, top-down administration between his/her mind and body as well as between self and other.

At the same time Lacan addresses a literal “nursling’s” relationship to a literal “mirror,” he is also speaking about an either masturbating or sexually coupled “nursling’s” relationship to their genitals and whatever else they might be aligned with—there being this connection between the literal nursling’s mouth linked to the breast and the figurative “nursling’s” head atop the genitals during sexual arousal; breast milk overlapping with semen and vaginal secretion on the level of the imaginary due to 1) the idea that the genitals “milk” the head or pull materials from above and 2) the idea that the “head” milks the genitals or pulls materials from them as a result of the sensation of lightheadedness that is produced by deferred sexual pleasure. It is in this exchange that one’s head enters into a mirror economy with their genitals in such a way that not only is the “nursing” head able to adopt the function of the child who “overcomes the constraints of his prop” but the “aroused” or “nursing” genitals are also able to enter into a figurative configuration that makes similar the literal nursling’s relationship to the jumper and the genitals relationship to the whole body, as though the penis or vagina housed inside of the body is here more or less equivalent to the baby housed inside of the jumper. It is in addressing this same frontal, double currant—this privileging of the “male point of view”
or the line of sight from high to low and visa versa along the front half of the body—that
the Derridians will coin the term “phallogocentrism.” In Marxist terms, one can say that
in every instance (and there is always an instance as even the antithesis of “The Mirror
Stage” can be framed as just another “Mirror Stage”) a kind of “fetishism” is taking
place, not only the mistaking of a part of a productive network for the whole system but
an eclipsing of the process of production by the product itself.

In “The Signification of the Phallus,” Lacan further suggests that the same
problem of mistaking part for whole surrounds the tradition of addressing “the phallus.”
Where “The Mirror Stage” is about the fetishism of part over whole, “The Signification
of the Phallus” de-centers the phallus and thus fractures the centralized ego. Contrary to
popular understanding that the phallus is equivalent to the penis, Lacan argues that not
only is the phallus not just the penis: the phallus is “less…the organ—penis or clitoris—
that it symbolizes. … [T]he phallus is a signifier.” (579). Here, Lacan argues that not
only is the phallus more than the penis, but it is also more than the clitoris. Lacan’s
phallus enters into a mirror-like, refractory, or symbolic economy with the penis or
clitoris, as it materially signifies either insofar as it gives either shape. In this regard,
Lacan argues that the phallus has always been a “queer” or multi-sex, multi-gender
signifier that signifies both the penis as well as the clitoris. On this level, the
signification of the phallus, for Lacan, is primarily horizontal. However, Lacan doesn’t
solely remain on this level but transitions to address the signification of the phallus on the
vertical plane when he describes the phallus as a privileged signifier: “the phallus is the
privileged signifier of this mark in which the role [part] of Logos is wedded to the advent
of desire. … The phallus is the signifier of this very Aufhebung, which it inaugurates
(initiates) by its disappearance.” (581). Here, Lacan states that the phallus signifies from desire to Logos, from the signification of either penis or clitoris to speech, by way of an uplifting (Aufhebung) that is ushered in by its “disappearance,” which is closely associated with his notion of “masquerade” (hiding, veiling) and is thereby aligned with the “woman’s position” or “placeholder.”

Famously, “The Signification of the Phallus” is said to express how, for Lacan, the woman is the phallus and the man has the phallus:

Paradoxical as this formulation may seem, I am saying that it is in order to be the phallus—that is, the signifier of the Other’s desire—that a woman rejects an essential part of femininity, namely, all its attributes, in the masquerade. It is for what she is not that she expects to be desired as well as loved. (583).

I agree with queer theorist Judith Butler in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* when she says, ““Being” the Phallus and “having” the Phallus denote divergent sexual positions, or nonpositions (impossible positions, really), within language.” (59). The “being” and “having” are divergent and impossible positions within language because the language of the phallus is such that it treats every individual as having both masculine and feminine capacities or positions at the same time that it treats engagements between individuals as taking on masculine and feminine characteristics. In the above Lacan quote, the position of woman takes up a phallic apparatus of masquerade that affords “her” the opportunity to signify, and the “man’s” position is the signified of that signification (“the face” that is the product of a mask worn underneath the skin), which is why it is said that “man” “has”
the phallus. The “man’s” position “has” not as in “owns” but as in “houses,” is “spirited
by,” or “mirrors” the phallus.

In Palahniuk’s *Pygmy*, the protagonist who calls himself agent number 67
(everyone else in the text refers to him as Pygmy) occupies both the position of the
fetishized “nursling” and the de-centered phallus. He is both the masochism of the whole
that allows for the fetishized nursling to dominate front and center, and he is the
masochism of that masochistic position that disseminates power throughout the body.
When “agent number 67’s” “plane” lands and he is greeted by the airport’s “passport
man,” the “passport man” refers to him only twice, each time baptizing him with
language that casts “the passport man” in a paternal light and figures “agent number 67”
as a newborn child:

1.) “You’re a long ways from home, son.” and

2.) “How old are you, my boy?” (1).

This theme of figuring agent number 67 as a child continues when agent number 67’s
“host family” embraces him and his “host sister” gives him a welcoming gift:

Mother and father, host family name “Cedar.” Around operative me, make arms.
Grope hug. Host sister push bundle of paper so collide with abdomen of
operative me. … Printed on paper, in English gold letters say, “Happy Birthday.”
“It’s a T-shirt” say host brother. … Unfold fabric so reveal tunic, wrote across
front with “Property of Jesus”… Arms of operative me wrestle black fabric over
head, pull fabric down over shoulders, over waist until black hang to knees, past
knees. … Word “Jesus” flap over crotch. … Breathing cow father say, “You’ll grow into it.” (5-6)

By having the “demigod-like” passport man call “agent number 67” “son” and “my boy” and by having agent number 67’s host sister present him with a “Property of Jesus” shirt that says “Happy Birthday” on it, the reader is able to follow a line of interpretation that allows them to conclude that the airport in *Pygmy* is a figure for the beginning of “human existence” or even a figure for a hospital, while the airplane as well as the unnamed dictatorship agent number 67 hails from is a figure for life before “humanity.”

In choosing to describe the embrace agent number 67’s host parents give him as a “grope hug” rather than a “group hug,” Palahniuk associates the host parents with something akin to the male and female positions on the body along a similar line of logic found in Lacan’s “The Signification of The Phallus.” The “Property of Jesus” T-shirt that the host sister pushes into agent number 67’s abdomen is (similar to the “grope hug” that enwraps agent number 67 between the positions of the man and woman) a casing, as though the “grope hug” and T-shirt—certainly also the fact that the Cedar family is described as agent number 67’s “host”—are figures for the body itself, thus marking agent 67 as something dwelling within the body.

One of the most obvious sites in *Pygmy* where agent number 67 is marked as the phallus is after the smart-phone-like vibrator that his host sister invents for the school science fair breaks down, nearly killing onlookers, and she performs “an autopsy” on it:

Sister analyze possible why prized project rejected top award local science fair. Killer phallus autopsy. Host sister drip and draw in melted lead, breathing snake
tail of smoke. Say, “Well, Pygmy…” No look eye except upon postmortem phallus, say, “Maybe the whole world loves you, but I sure don’t.” (217).

Here, the host sister looks at the postmortem phallus and speaks to Pygmy or agent number 67, as though Palahniuk is informing the reader that they are one and the same. Thinking agent number 67 as a phallus that is D.O.A.—both the one whose birthday is being marked at the beginning of the text and the one who is simultaneously dead, dead even before the point in the text when the host sister performs the autopsy, as her science-fair-vibrator, like he who robotically refers to himself as “agent number 67,” is already marked as a machine—connects with Palahniuk’s theme of treating him, at moments, not only as the lodger within the body but as one occupying the spatial position of the “masochistic white male” in ways that Friday does not elaborate on due to both Friday’s focusing on time rather than spatial positions across and within the body but also do to Friday’s unwillingness to explore the relationship between sex and masochism in Palahniuk.

In addition to agent number 67 being depicted as lodged within a body wrap comprised of his American host family, agent number 67 is also described as part of a whole that is made up of his fellow, foreign exchange students/terrorists working on behalf of Operation Havoc:

Begins here tenth account of operative me, agent number 67, recall former practice offensive attack exercise. Battle gallery. Headquarters. … Depict here standard battle gallery, layered mirror to cover all one wall. No window. … Door of battle gallery swing so display best-accomplished attack
instructor. … Acclaimed instructor make small parade to penetrate gallery.

Respected instructor revolve head to cast eye, rest on all combat operative as individual. (65-68)

The spatial configuration of the battle gallery is one of not only enclosure but of enclosed reflections. The room is nothing but mirrors and there is no window. It’s a memory trap. When the adult instructor speaks to the children operatives, he revolves his head to do so, as though Palahniuk suggests that the instructor’s revolving head marks a head turning back on and into the body itself, an inward, Janus-faced gaze from high to low (adult to children) that treats the whole group as a single organism—“cast eye [which I read as a Panoptic “memory eye” or “mold eye”], rest on all combat operative as individual.”

Here, Palahniuk creates an overdetermined, collapsed parallel between the instructor gazing into the classroom and the “subjective mind” gazing into the “objective body” in such a way that the mutually constitutive objectivity of subjectivity is being highlighted (it being the case that the subject who looks into an echo chamber of reflections lacking a window is just as much produced by and objectified by the object of its gaze as its gaze fixes and reproduces the objectivity of its object).

In a similar yet unique scene with the instructor, the group, and an enclosed space—now a chemistry lab rather than a battle gallery—Palahniuk shows agent number 67 and his fellow operatives being coaxed by their instructor to identify with a white animal in a drain hole that the instructor ultimately terminates:

Depict here standard classroom laboratory occupy basement owning no window.

… Door of classroom laboratory…swing so display respected chemist
instructor… Unite wave of voice, all operative say, “Accept please, our gratitude for the wisdom you impart.” … Acclaimed leader make small parade to wire bin occupied white rodent. Hand of leader swing hatch door to access, pinch behind skin of rodent neck and remove out wire bin. Hand suspended wiggling rodent shoulder-high during face of instructor rotate to ensure all operative eyeing. Making small parade to edge of empty water bin sunk, flush, into laboratory work surface. In center floor of bin, drain hole. Perched top edge of water bin, spigot flanked metal switches to make gush hot or chilled water. … Revered instructor place white rodent on floor of empty water bin, near drain hole. … Much-brilliant instructor say…“Little animal curl tail tight to protect self. Shake. Shiver… Little animal merely desire to survive… Except animal vector disease… Little animal dirty, plus instinct plan reproduce…” Celebrated instructor say, “Vote.” Say, “Current now, with hand, vote: must we extinguish diseased parasite?” Hands of operative Ling and Chernok rise to say yes. Hands of Tibor and Mang. Hand of operative me remain low. Breath trapped lungs. Heart muscle scramble as rodent, battle indoors rib cage. Nose sniff, hard snort, so eye this agent no bleed water. Say inside head, say: Permit rodent survive. Say, Please. (37-42)

Here, as in the battle training scene I quoted before, the lab that I’m highlighting can be interpreted to be located within the body is described as an enclosed basement with no windows. In the quote I previously included, the adult instructor is depicted as just a head capable of rotating back into itself, but, here he now becomes an arm that reaches into this basement with no windows. This instructor takes “a white rodent” out of its
“cage” that is described as “curling” its “tail” and as having an “instinct plan to reproduce” (*Aufhebung*). This “white rodent” can be read in several ways, but, working with the theme of phallogocentrism in the text (which even here is already undergoing a defetishizing process as we are no longer on the surface of the body associated with Lacan’s “Mirror Stage” but are at least one layer removed) I want to bring out the ways the “white rodent” can be interpreted as sperm—“white male” indeed, but only up to a point, as even a little exploration will reveal the surface illusion that conflates “sperm” with “male” and with “white,” it being that sperm are as potentially male as they are female as they are black, white, yellow, etc., not to mention that a whole slew of non-human life forms depend on sperm for reproduction, etc..

The instructor holds the “white rodent” over the “drain hole” in the lab basement, threatening to send the “animal” from the confines of the interior space to something beyond, and then asks the children to vote as to whether they think he should terminate the animal. All of the children choose to see the adult’s power over the white animal as something they are able to access and identify with, except for agent number 67, who notices that the adult instructor’s power over the white animal mirrors the adult instructor’s power over him—“he” who later is addressed by his host sister as “phallus.”

There are several avenues that can be explored here, all pathways that I am currently interested in addressing having to do with the connection between death, ejaculation, and a specific field of so-called “masochism” related to sex (arguably the most important manner of masochism for Palahniuk, which Friday doesn’t address).

First off, there is an obvious connection between the “life” of the penis and activated-yet-non-ejaculated sperm. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud
marks this much and more, as for Freud not only is there a connection between “the store of semen” and penis arousal, but there is a connection between semen and the rest of the erogenous zones throughout and across the body:

If the store of semen is exhausted, not only is it impossible to carry out the sexual act, but the susceptibility of the erotogenic zones to stimulus ceases, and their appropriate excitation no longer gives any rise to pleasure. We thus learn incidentally that a certain degree of sexual tension is required even for the excitability of the erotogenic zones. (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 79).

Freud has much to say about sexual tension and pleasure. In fact, I suggest that there is a spectrum of difference regarding sexual tension and pleasure in Freud that always seems to sediment into binary extremes.

On one end of the spectrum is the “certain degree of sexual tension [that] is required even for the excitability of the erotogenetic zones” from the quote above. This tension and retention can apply not only to sperm but also to fecal matter in Freud when he discusses childhood sexuality, fecal matter retention coming before semen retention in Freud’s account. At this point, it is important to mark that, according to my understanding, the meaning of “child” in Freud is at a kind of odds with the meaning of “child” in Lacan’s “Mirror Stage,” as Lacan’s “child” fetishizes the front half of the body (the genital zone and the head associated with the face), which, no coincidence I’m sure, is the culmination of adulthood sexuality for Freud: in Lacan, I understand the culmination of adulthood sexuality to not be a single point or part but a perpetual
spiraling within and between the erogenous zones of self and other, both in regards to depth and surface:

Children who are making use of the susceptibility to erotogenic stimulation of the anal zone betray themselves by holding back their stool… In so doing it must no doubt cause not only painful but also highly pleasurable sensations. … The contents of the bowels, which act as a stimulating mass upon a sexually sensitive portion of mucous membrane, behave like forerunners of another organ, which is destined to come into action after the phase of childhood.” (Three Essays, 52).

The “other organ” that the simulating mass acts as forerunner to can be read as alluding to either the genitals or the phallus (which often times is classified both as a kind of extra organ and as a non-organ—for Lacan, it’s a “signifier”). Regardless, still lingering in a kind of gray zone between pleasure and pain, in the section of Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality titled “Sexual Tension,” Freud says, “I must insist that a feeling of tension necessarily involves unpleasure. … If, however, the tension of sexual excitement is counted as an un-pleasurable feeling, we are at once brought up against the fact that it is also unboubtedly felt as pleasurable.” (75). So a kind of tension is necessary, for Freud, but there is also, as the title of one of the sections of the Three Essays asserts, “dangers of fore-pleasure,” which, for Freud, involve a “preparatory act” replacing “the normal sexual aim.” (77). The particular “preparatory act” that interests me in regards to Pygmy is “masochism” as it relates to semen retention.

“Masochism,” for Freud, is the business of one turning oneself into an object of pleasure for another, and it is the antithesis of sadism, an extremity that Freud closely
associates with “rape.” Similar to Freud, for Palahniuk “masochism” is a “raping” of “oneself” (some of the complexities, there are so many, of which I will address momentarily):

The sexuality of most male human beings contains an element of aggressiveness—a desire to subjugate; the biological significance of it seems to lie in the need for overcoming the resistance of the sexual object by means other than the process of wooing. Thus sadism would correspond to an aggressive component of the sexual instinct which has become independent and exaggerated and, by displacement, has usurped the leading position. … Similarly, the term masochism comprises any passive attitude towards sexual life and the sexual object, the extreme instance of which appears to be that in which satisfaction is conditional upon suffering physical or mental pain at the hands of the sexual object. … It can often be shown that masochism is nothing more than an extension of sadism turned round upon the subject’s own self, which thus, to begin with, takes the place of the sexual object. (23-4).

I understand Freud to be addressing at least two levels of subjugation in regards to sadism: 1) the subjugation of the woman’s body and 2) the subjugation of the woman’s pleasure. Sadism is a total subject/object, active/passive relationship.

Masochism is the reverse. It is the objectification of oneself on behalf of the other and their pleasure: “any passive attitude toward sexual life and the sexual object,” a counterintuitive retention that Freud associates with cannibalism:
According to some authorities this aggressive element of the sexual instinct is in reality a relic of cannibalistic desires—that is, it is a contribution derived from the apparatus for obtaining mastery, which is concerned with the satisfaction of the other and, ontogenetically, the older of the great instinctual needs. (25)

In the above quote, it is important to mark that the “aggressive element of the sexual instinct” Freud associates with “cannibalism” is “derived from the apparatus for…mastery” that “is concerned with the satisfaction of the other,” meaning that this particular “aggressive element” stems from a masochistic root not a sadistic one, even if it ultimately winds up blurring the distinction between violence to self and violence to other. At this point, it is crucial to highlight that so-called “masochism” (a debatable term) is a highly contested topic in psychoanalytic and anti-psychoanalytic circles. What for Freud is a potential danger that can lead to a “preparatory act” replacing “the normal sexual aim”—if not also the assumably much larger concerns of “conversion hysteria” and “neurasthenia” (see Elizabeth Wilson’s work on Freud, coitus interrupts, and excessive masturbation in *Psychosomatic*)—is for Deleuze and Guattari a kind of death by overdose in an otherwise experimental program designed to produce what they term “the plane of immanence:”

The *masochist body*: it is poorly understood in terms of pain; it is fundamentally a question of the BwO (body without organs). It has its sadist or whore sew it up; the eyes, anus, urethra, breasts, and nose are sewn shut. It has itself strung up to stop the organs form working; flayed, as if the organs clung to the skin; sodomized, smothered, to make sure everything is sealed tight. … [T]he simple Thing, the Entity, the full Body, the stationary Voyage, Anorexia, cutaneous
Vision, Yoga, Krishna, Love, Experimentation. … A great Japanese compilation of Chinese Taoist treatises… We see it in the formation of a circuit of intensities between female and male energy, with the woman playing the role of the innate or instinctive force (Yin) stolen by or transmitted to the man in such a way that the transmitted force of the man (Yang) in turn becomes innate, all the more innate: an augmentation of powers. The condition for this circulation and multiplication is that the man not ejaculate. It is not a question of experiencing desire as an internal lack, nor of delaying pleasure in order to produce a kind of externalizable surplus value, but instead of constituting an intensive body without organs, Tao, a field of immanence in which desire lacks nothing and therefore cannot be linked to any external or transcendent criterion. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 150-1, 157)

Where Freud says that a little sexual tension is good and a lot of sexual tension is bad, Deleuze and Guattari think beyond the binary categories of good and bad and rather address potentiality, simultaneously saying that everything is permitted and that one should experiment with caution. What Freud says threatens to end in a “preparatory act” replacing a “normal sexual aim” or in “conversion hysteria,” Deleuze and Guattari claims has the potential to produce “Tao, a field of immanence in which desire lacks nothing and therefore cannot be linked to any external or transcendent criterion.”

It is necessary to understand the debate regarding sexual tension in “psychoanalysis,” including the Deleuze and Guattari strand (that can be interpreted as being part of the anti-psychiatry movement associated with radical forms of democracy and self-governance), in order to understand the debate or conflict occurring in both the mind of agent number 67 and in *Pygmy* as a text. Agent number 67’s identifying with the
seminal white rodent expresses much. On one level, it shows there to be a tangling of associations between orgasm and death, not only on the level of “sexual death” (wherein it is understood that if the sexual tension that creates a store of material substances ceases to be then both the vitality of the genitals as well as the rest of the erogenous zones also stop being) but also on the level Foucault observes in his account of attitudes toward ejaculation in Ancient Greece in The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure: “[Ancient Greek ejaculation] anxiety revolved around three focal points: the very form of the act, the cost it entailed, and the death to which it was linked.” (125). Here, I understand Foucault to note in Ancient Greek perception the observation that ejaculation effects “form” in so far as it effects the shape of the genitals, it effects “cost” in so far as ejaculate is associated with food intake and thus associated with nutrients, body chemicals, and energy more generally, and it effects or is associated with “death” insofar as Foucault observes traces in Ancient Greek texts linking ejaculation to a depletion of an individual body in the service of the species, an almost emptying out of one’s essence that is externalized into offspring: “For Aristotle and Plato alike, the sexual act was at the point of junction of an individual life that was bound to perish—and from which, moreover, it drew off a portion of its most precious resources—and an immortality that assumed the concrete form of a survival of the species.” (133-4) Here in Foucault the connection between the fetishizing ego and the fetishizing genitals—those two “nurslings” found in Lacan’s “Mirror Stage”—are linked by one’s own sense of life and death, which I argue is the same conflation of associations Palahniuk expresses in Pygmy with agent number 67 identifying with and holding to the “white rodent” as though the survival of the “white rodent” were tied up with his own survival, sexual tension here
operating as a counterintuitive mechanism of so-called masochistic self-objectification, a
turning away from the change and volatility of subjectivities that curls back into a desire
for a fantasy of objective life that Palahniuk suggests, taken up to a point, ironically
succeeds at breaking through its own phallogocentric, immortal world of solipsistic
monotony.

This idea that the desire for transcendence can transcend itself as it is expressed as
a sadistic impulse to subjugate the other become self-reflexively masochistic is best
shown in the scene from Pygmy when agent number 67rapes Trevor Stonefield only to
have the digestion of his actions destabilize his own phallogocentrism. While in
WalMart with his host brother (who he refers to as “pig dog”), agent number 67 witness
the high school bully Trevor Stonefield steal money from his brother. When approached
by Trevor Stonefield in the bathroom, Palahniuk shows agent number 67 assembled in a
power dynamic similar to the one from the scene with the chemistry instructor and the
white rodent I quoted above but now, rather than identifying with the white rodent,
Palahniuk shows agent number 67 identifying with and occupying the position of the
instructor:

Next then, feet parading around new corner, pig dog discover door printed
English letter word Men. Displayed there outline picture man, two arm, two leg.
Pig dog say, “This here’s called a spa.” Make finger straight at door, say, “You
go in here, and they got bowls of water set on the floor. The cleanest, freshest
water in these United States.” Say, “You only have to kneel down and you can
drink all you want.” … Next then, door of one small booth swing open fast…
Metal door boom open and voice say, “Hay, pygmy…” Male voice say, “Yo,

In this scene (where the details of the “rape” are further laid bare beyond what I have quoted above), even though Trevor Stonefiled, the assumably “sacrificial child” here, wears the shirt bearing the inscription “John 3:16”—“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (KJV)”—one can’t help but, due to the context within which the scene takes place, also think of “John 7:37-38”: “In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (KJV).” Not only can one not help but think of “John 7:37-38” in this scene, but one can’t help but mark the similarity between Trevor Stonefield’s “John 3:16” T-shirt and agent number 67’s “Property of Jesus” T-shirt that is so big the “[w]ord “Jesus” flap over crotch” (more on this momentarily).

Readers are invited to frame the above scene in terms of “masochism” due to Trevor Stonefield’s accusation that agent number 67 comes from a “dick mutilation place” followed by Trevor Stonefield’s asking agent number 67 to show him said “dick
mutilation,” to which agent number 67 responds with a “martial arts arrangement” that results in Trevor Stonefield down on his knees with his “mouth” in the “water” that the pig dog brother describes as “[t]he cleanest, freshest water in these United States” and agent number 67 standing above and behind him, looking down. Moreover, it is the way in which Trevor Stonefield can be read as not only an extension of agent number 67’s mutilated penis but as the mutilated penis itself that frames this binary assemblage between genitals and head as phallogocentric or as belonging to Lacan’s “Mirror Stage”—mutilation here signaling the fetishistic “male gaze” that severs part from whole.

However, it is in the Thanksgiving dinner scene from *Pygmy* that Palahniuk not only frames the violence done to Trevor Stonefield as a kind of “cannibalism” (like Freud says) but that Palahniuk shows said violence refusing to stay sequestered in a phallogocentric binarism:

Begins here twenty-fourth account operative me, agent number 67, seated surrounding meal table host family Cedar. American holiday food of Thanksgiving. Present: vast cow father, pig dog brother, chicken mother, cat sister host family all hands linked so create fence surrounding bounty food table. … For official record, intestines of operative me infinite sickened gorging diet typical United State household. … So infinite such array various flesh. Lunatic selection cheese, tissue, lactic secretions garnered of lesser sentient being. Bowels United States citizen harnessed heavy labor of process. Diet every spectrum culture across globe… All every citizen expected always dine… (165).
Whereas before in *Pygmy*, we saw Palahniuk marking the Cedar family as agent number 67’s host body within which he is lodged, and we saw the interiority of the body figured both as a boxing arena and a chemistry lab, here, similarly, the text can be read so that the linked hands of the Cedar family mark the boarders of the body, making the Thanksgiving table itself the body’s interior and thus making it so that the “eating” we are looking at, as the quote shows with all of its language dedicated to intestines and bowels, is “eating” on the level of a particular kind of digestion.

It becomes clear that Palahniuk frames The Thanksgiving dinner scene as “cannibalistic” once the connection between the mystery “meat” (here backwardly referred to as “dog”) that agent number 67 cooks and the discussion at dinner regarding the autopsy of Trevor Stonefield is closely read side by side. After being raped by agent number 67, Trevor Stonefield professes his love for agent number 67, only to have agent number 67 break his heart. Later in the novel, Trevor Stonefield pulls out a pistol and opens fire on a high school, model United Nations party where all of the delegates are engaged in what appears to be a pot smoking orgy (89). To stop the school shooter, agent number 67 jumps on Trevor Stonefield and uses his legs to sever his skull from his spine (108). True to form, Palahniuk writes this in such a way that the pot smoking orgy where the student’s minds get figuratively blown, Trevor Stonefield’s shooting people in the head, and Trevor Stonefield’s having his skull severed from his spine are all collapsed (multiple characters in the text receive injuries either to the spine or the head, see the outcome of operatives Pavel and Boban, where each of them are shot, in the combat training scene for one explicit example, pages 69-70).
In the Thanksgiving dinner scene, the autopsy of Trevor Stonefield is discussed at the same time that, implicitly, a kind of “autopsy” is performed on the intestines of the “American body” that is figured by the Cedar family. Other than Trevor Stonefield’s autopsy, the only other time the text mentions the word “autopsy” is when agent number 67’s host sister performs what is called an “autopsy” on her failed science fair phallus in the scene I quoted from before, where she looks at the vibrator and speaks to agent number 67 as though the two are one and the same. The following quote is from the Thanksgiving dinner scene:

Dawn of today, making most humble tone, voice of operative me request to prepare meal originating native homeland of this agent. … Hand lifted fork so close focus examine tines loaded beef, host mother poke own nose so inhale meat, say, “Did you hear?” Say, “They arrested Glen for abusing Trevor…” Tilt own torso vicinity host father, say whisper, “Sex abuse.” … Say, “I mean, Trevor was brutally sodomized.” Delectable consumables supplemented abundant portion sodium chloride. Palatable savory beefs, pleasing grains rice with churned polyps potato impregnated dairy fats, all containing excessive sodium chloride. Generating great appetite of water, catalyst hunger of liquid gobbling vast beverage. Pig dog swallowing, cat sister, cow father and chicken mother, all host family engaged feasting upon water. Ingredient sodium chloride spur suffer starvation of water. Nostril flared so deep sensate odor beef, mother peek into burden fork, say, “The autopsy, I guess it showed Trevor had scars.” Mother swivel skull so single nostril scenting morsel beef, say, “Inside his bottom.” … Cow father inhale odor emanating fork, say, “This ain’t half-bad, but it doesn’t
taste like any beef I’ve ever eaten.” … Pig brother fork seize, halt middle of
distance between plate and own mouth. Host brother eye ogle morsel meat, say,
“This is beef?” Pig dog cast eye to rest upon this agent. Say, “You cooked this?”

(166-7)

On the surface level of plot, the joke isn’t just the probably stunning realization that agent
number 67 can cook but that he cooks that which his host brother previously told him was
“beef” when pointing to a “dog” in a pet store inside of WalMart before the Trevor
Stonefield rape scene (14). This joke to the side—of course not totally aside, as I’m
marking the connection between 1), from the earlier scene, the pet store that the brother
calls a “fancy restaurant” and the bowls of water in the bathroom he describes as “[t]he
cleanest, freshest water in these United States” and 2), from the scene currently being
analyzed, the “salty beef” agent number 67 cooks and the thirst for “water” it produces—
the “dog” joke to the side, it is the overlap between “the Cedar family’s” peculiar
consumption of the so-called beef agent number 67 cooks, as well as the water they
drink, and the discussion of Trevor Stonefield’s autopsy that is key. Not only do we see
the binary, phallogocentric assemblage between Trevor Stonefield and agent number 67
fractured and disseminated between and among the host family or the rest of the body in
the Thanksgiving dinner scene, but we see said distribution framed simultaneously as
autopsy and digestion, a figuration that invites many things. Notably, it invites readers to
ponder the literal connection between digestion and voice, digestion and memory,
digestion and thought. In addition, it also makes readers redefine digestion in such a way
that it allows readers to view each erection as the product of all the other organs plus
nutritional intake (as here Palahniuk de-fetishizes the phallogocentrism of the Trevor
Stonefield rape scene by showing readers the “scars” or congealed labor behind the mutilated product, which in this case is the “standard American diet,” which comes from blocking the body’s organs either as a result of a front fetishism or in order to distribute power to the front). Moreover, in a gesture that is fundamentally anti-identitarian, it invites readers to view each “bowel movement” (starting at “the mouth”) as a passing corpse-of-a-self comprised of two overlapping corpses: the corpse of the genitals that derives from their Aufhebung and the corpse of a particular, contextual body belonging to a nutritional milieu (of which the corpse of the genitals becomes a part).

Similar to the instructor’s head from agent 67’s flashback training scenes, the mother’s head in the Thanksgiving dinner scene is depicted as being able to “swivel” while what the text describes as her one nostril scents the beef that her dialog associates with the scars on Trevor’s bottom, as though she is only one half of “the fork” she is described as “peak[ing] into.” The father says the beef “ain’t half bad,” thus associating him with the other half. This kind of gendered account of the body—which I feel demands to be framed as “queer”—can not only take us to Lacan’s “The Signification of The Phallus,” thus far my primary point of return on this kind of account of “man” and “woman,” but it can also take us (and I believe it is crucial that we go here in order to understand the tradition Palahniuk is engaging) to both Jewish mysticism or Kabbalah accounts of the body that are often figured by the Adam Kadmon tree of life, and to eastern, philosophical accounts of the chakra body associated with Tantric Kundalini yoga.

In Pinchas Giller’s Kabbalah: A Guide for the Perplexed, Giller explains some basic tenets of the sefirot:
The basic teachings of Kabbalah is that God emanates Godliness into the phenomenal world, from the realm of the Divine to the physical reality of everyday life. … This flow of Divine energy was portrayed in many ways by the kabbalists. The most popular and recognized system was that of...the sefirot...[which] first appear in the mysterious little work, *Sefer Yezirah*… As well as being a map of the workings of the Divine, and the structure of the Universe, the sefirot are mirrored in the human soul. Hence, human beings resemble the sefirot isomorphically, and each sefirah can be mapped onto the human body. For example, just as there is sexual energy in the individual...there is sexual energy in the Divine. In this way, the sefirotic system may be best compared to the system of chakras in Tantraism. … All of the sefirot were subject to symbolization, but no system of symbols was more widespread than associating the sefirot with different biblical paradigms. If certain figures from the Bible were associated with given sefirot, based on the way that the actions and life of each figure exemplified the power and qualities of their given sefirot. (42-49).

The image of agent number 67 lodged or wrapped up inside of his host family can be interpreted as a specific allusion to the image of the Adam Kadmon tree of life that is drawn by A.E. Waite:
In the Waite image, a first-time viewer is only going to perceive four faces embracing the Christ-looking body in the center of the tree (mostly associated with Jacob or Tiferet), but, as Giller states, every sefirot can have a face or personality (often times several) associated with it.

While the godhead (associated with nothingness) is above and the female face associated with the earth is below, on the upper right and left of the body in the tree is Abba (Hokhmah) and Imma (Binah), the Divine mother and father. Below Abba is the sefirot that is associated with the divine brother, Ze’ir Anpin (Hesed), across from whom is the divine sister, Nukva (Gevurah), below which, at the level of the genitals on the Christ-looking man inside the tree, are Adam and Eve, who are also associated with the front and back of the body (and who can be linked to both Netasa-and-Hod [testicles/ovaries/kidneys] as well as Yesod-and-Malkhut [genitals and anus]), Adam and Eve being the lovers who in prelapsarian Kabbalah are a single, “double-sided” or “intersexual” entity referred to as Adam Kadmon or The Primordial Adam (it is implied
that Abba-Imma as well as Ze’ir-Anpin-Nukva also retain this intersexual, generating function).

From high to low, this is the same order in which the family is introduced to agent number 67 before giving him a “grop[e] hug” in *Pygmy* (minus “Eve” who comes up later in *Pygmy* bearing the name “Magda(lene),” which I will address momentarily):

Mother and father, host family name “Cedar.” Around operative me, make arms. Grope hug. Next then, introduced two host sibling [as though they are the arms and, more importantly, the hands that the mother and father make]. Host sister push bundle of paper so collide with abdomen of operative me. … Printed on paper…”Happy Birthday.” “It’s a T-shirt,” say host brother… [W]rote across front with “Property of Jesus”… Word of “Jesus” flap over crotch. (4-6).

When overlapping the Thanksgiving dinner table that Palahniuk depicts as the Cedar family-body onto Kabbalah’s Adam Kadmon tree of life, the mother’s “swiveling” head that can smell the “beef” agent number 67 cooked at the same time that the mother is described as “peek[ing]” into the “fork” while she discusses the “scars” on Trevor Stonefiled’s “bottom” can be perceived as Imma (Binah) or the left side of the head both smelling and seeing backwards into the depths of the body where the meat and water are, in one way or the other, being digested.

In Joseph Campbell’s “Masks of Oriental Gods: Symbolism of Kundalini Yoga” (a chapter from Neil Lambert’s collection *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*), Campbell shows how the Tantric tradition of Kundalini yoga
depicts a similar body “fork,” connecting the right testicle (ovary) to the left nostril and visa versa:

The essential alphabet of all Tantric lore is to be learned from the doctrine of the seven “circles” (chakras) or “lotuses” (padmas) of the kundalini system of yoga. … The long terminal i added to the Sanskrit adjective kundalin, meaning “circular, spiral, coiling, winding,” makes a feminine noun signifying “snake,” the reference in the present context being to the figure of a coiled female serpent…which is to be thought of as residing in a torpid, slumbering state in a subtle center, the first of the seven, near the base of the spine [those digging for more nuanced specifics, will note that Campbell later says that the first chakra is not only at the base of the spine but is between the anus and genitals]: the aim of the yoga then being to rouse this serpent, lift her head, and bring her up a subtle nerve or channel of the spine to the…crown of the head. This axial stem or channel…is flanked and crossed by two others: a white, known as ida…winding upward from the left testicle to right nostril…and a red, called pingala…extending from the right testicle to left nostril… (115).

In Pygmy, similar to Lacan’s de-centering phallus, Palahniuk moves through and then beyond Kabbalah and Tantric models that map out a static body of gender distribution (also the impetus in Kabbalah and Kundalini)—woman here, man there, etc.—by having agent number 67 pass within and without each family member, while each of them are themselves physically passed out due to the drugs in the water agent number 67 gives each of them to drink (168).
What is uniquely distinct about the Thanksgiving dinner scene is that in this space that is not the site of the Trevor Stonefield rape scene but is rather the zone of the digestion of his autopsy, while the Cedar family is blacked out on the drugs agent number 67 puts in the water—the sister’s eyes are described as “fluttering” as her “face collapses sideways,” assumably causing her to look similar to Picasso’s “The Old Guitarist” or any street person who has just shot themselves full of a junk load and is on the nod—Palahniuk shows agent number 67 moving both between and inside of each member of the family-body, distributing energy from one source to another: namely, from the mother’s vibrator to the sister’s flashlight. While the sister is blacked out, agent number 67 removes a flashlight from her pocket. Because the flashlight lacks batteries, agent number 67 then goes into the passed out mother’s vagina, pulls out a vibrator, extracts the batteries, and puts them into the sister’s flashlight (168-9).

Following this power rearrangement that takes the batteries from the vibrator and moves them to the flashlight, agent number 67 extracts the father’s glass eye (the batteries, flashlight, and the glass eye all associated with stored memory or congealed labor of one sort or another). The flashlight and glass eye are the necessary pieces in the text’s puzzle that allows agent number 67 to break into the host father’s place of employment—the Radiological Institute of Medicine (another zone, like the chemistry lab, of elemental possibility)—so that agent number 67 can steal the deadly neurotoxin he needs in order to build the bomb he terms “Peace Machine” for Operation Havoc, the “Peace Machine” ostensibly promising to enact a radical form of “gene therapy” by attacking the “reptilian brain stem” that the “human genome” links to violence, thus “[r]esolv[ing]” global “political conflict[s],” but in “reality” is designed to “deliver…[a]
neurotoxin deep within [the] core [of the] United States capital…[in order to] murder countless American vermin (198)”. There are two other explicit traversals of the whole body that not only stick out in *Pygmy* but that associate the text with Lacan’s phallus, Kabbalah, and Tantra, the one being when agent number 67 recalls the sexual extortion dimension of his training and the other being the scene when agent number 67 scales the giant plaster body of Christ inside the church he and his host family attend.

During agent number 67’s early childhood training, the field martial informs the Operation Havoc operatives that American adults are repressed pedophiles and then trains them to be optimal objects of desire for sexual predators in order to extort them:

Begins here twenty-fifth account of operative me, agent number 67, recalling covert training… Explained secret espionage purpose of operative genitals… According famed field marshal, all entire member United State adults, all most savor sexual intercourse atop children. American citizen drooling pedophile famished for consume tender child genital. … According explain field marshal, former past history, all American citizen hidden homosexual. … Thus for top method gain access government, attain power over individual, must operative merely engage enjoined sodomy within American. Next then, subsequent threaten expose said citizen as surreptitious pervert. … Since modern era, explain renowned field marshal, depraved United State nation embraces such degenerates. America boasts frequent vast public parade for flaunting sodomy. Generating no shame, no afraid, historical threaten exposure no longer effective means extortion. … For succeed in America must operative become accomplished top sexual participant. In demon culture of despotic United States
must agents attain status of object exciting most desire. … This today, study location prostate. Next today, clitoris. Second next today, nipples. Study stimulation lips. Stimulation scrotum. Craft best effective service of pervert penis and vagina. In vengeance against American predators must total operative graduate expert in pleasing all pedophile for extortion. (173-7).

There is a clear way that the consumption of “tender child genital” can both drive the reader to revisit the Trevor Stonefiled rape scene and the Thanksgiving scene on several levels, yet, at the same time, one who is familiar with Pygmy can’t help but link the above sexual training scene with the scene when agent number 67’s extortion skills are realized, the scene when agent number 67 scales the huge plaster body of Christ in the church he and his host family attend and then threatens to expose Reverend Tony for having sex with operative Magda, who, like agent number 67, is only thirteen years old.

By now it should be obvious that both the portion of the above quote where agent number 67 is instructed to study the pleasure points of the body and the scene when he scales the huge, plaster body of Christ are strikingly similar to not only Lacan’s de-centering phallus but more specifically to Kabbalah accounts of ascending the tree of life and Tantric Kundalini accounts of ascending the chakras (leaving the descent to the side here). But what must be underscored in the above quote is that Palahniuk overlaps repressed same-sex desire and the repressed desire of adults for children. In the above quote, the field martial explains how outing closeted same sex desire was once a viable method of extortion but that in modern times when there are “public parade[s] for flaunting sodomy” the best method for blackmailing American “adults” is using their desire for “children” against them, yet, in Pygmy, with operative Magda, the desire for
sodomy and the desire for children is collapsed insofar as that desire is understood to emanate from without of Reverend Tony, who, as a “holy man” or rather as a figure for phallogocentrism, is implicitly a “someone” (possibly more of a stratum or stuck position than a fixed entity) who actively refuses to allow himself to sexually mature and thus is a grown man haunted by not only repressed sexual desires but by imprisoned sexual impressions from childhood that don’t stay back in the past but rather project themselves onto the foreground of the present.

This line of reasoning that shuffles between the debatably not-so-taboo desire for anal gratification and the debatably taboo desire of “adults” for “children” is also present in Palahniuk’s depiction of operative Magda in Pygmy. While in the corporate church the Cedar family attends in Pygmy, during the episode where Magda is baptized by Reverend Tony (who later has sex with her and is thought to have impregnated her), Palahniuk describes agent number 67’s host sister eyeing operative Magda in such a way that the host sister’s gazing can also be interpreted as one of the lines that interlink the sefirot (they are all connected) in the Kabbalah tree of life, namely Nukva and Eve (Malkhut, who is associated with Shekhinah and is without a doubt the greatly guarded center piece of The Zohar in particular and Kabbalah in general):

Cat sister eye rest below fake torture male. Eye of this operative discover that location, standing mouth tight as fist, eying back, operative Magda, agent 36. Electric bolt out Magda brown eye, to attack sister. Cat sister say, “You want to talk bitches…” Say, “That one looks like she could kill me.” … For official record, operative Magda sole state designate reproductive coagent operative me. Forever permanent. Extensive chromosome test establish best premium coagent,
assigned from birth, only Magda egg to fertilize. Agent 36 egg apportioned legal property solely operative me copulate. Atop vagina of that operative, noble best duty must lifetime fornicate. (25)

Above, the sister’s eye “rest below fake torture male,” which can be read as Palahniuk’s simultaneous allusion to the plastic crucified Christ in the corporate church from *Pygmy* and an allusion to the Christ-looking man who hangs in the center of Waite’s Kabbalah tree, under which, at arm-level, rests Nukva, the sefirot sister.

The train of thought that figures agent number 67 not as the de-centered phallus but as the phallogocentric phallus works out when reading the following line with the understanding that both agent number 67’s “eye” and his “mouth” can be tropes for the economy that comprises the so-called male gaze: “Eye of this operative discover that location, standing mouth tight as fist, eying back, operative Magda, agent 36.” Here, “standing with mouth tight as fist” can allude to, among several things, a firm and thus sealed “erection” (genital excitation) that produces a back surge of energy and thereby points, gazes, or seemingly flows back toward “Magda,” who Palahniuk figures simultaneously as an anus by associating her with a “brown eye” and as a little, virgin girl belonging to agent number 67’s past—at one point, the host brother describes her as looking like “a botched thirteen-year-old sex change.” (57). Again, herein lies the logic that, on the horizontal level of a model intersexual body, “the phallus” rests atop “the anus” that, in certain circles, is figured as “vagina” assumably under the constraints of 1) a patriarchal, homophobic social system, 2) a masturbatory yet mostly opposite-sex desiring imagination, and/or 3) an individuated body bearing “intersexual” traces (which makes sense even on the most conservative level insofar as it is common knowledge that
individuals are the products of both “mother” and “father”). This idea is corroborated in the following sentence: “[O]perative Magda sole state designate reproductive coagent operative me. Forever permanent. Extensive chromosome test establish best premium coagent, assigned from birth.” In this quote, “state” can refer to “the state of nature,” which is why the union is “forever permanent” (forever assumably within the span of a lifetime) and why it is “assigned from birth.” The chromosome test can be said to establish that these two are the best partners for one another because they are, like Kabbalah’s Adam and Eve, parts of a seeming “individual person” who, in fact (so Palahniuk suggests), is rather forever involved in the unending process of shedding him/herself into newness.

It is worth mentioning that not “the anus” but a particular kind of anus is not only often referred to as “a little girl” in pop culture—Van Morrison’s “Brown Eyed Girl” comes to mind—but, most pertinent here, is also treated similarly by Kabbalah (Eve’s mouth, Eve being “the child” of the “garden”) as well as Joseph Campbell in ways that have vast implications for how not only Pygmy but for how lots of literature can be read. Rich with mythological imagery, Campbell discusses the first chakra that he states is located at the base of the spine between the anus and genitals:

The lotus at the base of the sushumna, called the “Root Support” (Muladhara), is described as crimson in hue and having four petals… In the white center is a yellow square symbolic of the element earth, wherein a white elephant stands waving seven trunks. … The elephant, he continues, is symbolic of the strength, firmness, and solidity of earth; but it is also a cloud condemned to walk upon the earth, so that if it could be released from this condition it would rise. The
supervising deity made visible in this lowest center is the world creator Brahma, whose shakti, the goddess Savitri, is a personification of solar light. On the elephant’s back is a downward-pointing triangle symbolic of the womb (yoni) of the goddess mother of the universe, and within this “city of three sides,” this “figure of desire,” is seen the first or basal divine phallus (lingam) of the universal masculine principle, Shiva. The white serpent-goddess Kundalini, “fine as the fiber of a lotus-stalk,” is coiled three and a half times around this lingam, asleep, and covering with her head its Brahma door.[9]

Now to be exact, the precise locus of this center at the base of the human body is midway between the anus and the genitals, and the character of the spiritual energy at that point is of the lowest intensity. …

One may think of the Kundalini on this level as comparable to a dragon; for dragons, we are told by those who know, have a propensity to hoard and guard things; and their favorite things to hoard and guard are jewels and beautiful young girls. They are unable to make use of either, but just hang on, and so the values in their treasury are unrealized, lost to themselves and to the world. On this level, the serpent-queen Kundalini is held captive by her own dragon-lethargy. (Literature and Belief, 121).

At the beginning of his ascent up the chakra body, Campbell notes that—all between the anus and genitals—there is a sentry dragon who guards a virgin and a treasure (“money” certainly an important aspect of Pygmy that I unfortunately cannot deviate from my thesis here to analyze). The virgin and dragon block what Campbell describes as the “womb (yoni) of the goddess mother of the universe” inside of which is housed a “divine
phallus” (depicted in the pictures Campbell points to in *Mythos II* as black), around which is wrapped the feminine Kundalini serpent. Again, as with Freud, in Campbell we see a sadistic language that implies rape and conquest internalized or become masochistic, as assumably in order to get past this first chakra and access the “womb” that houses the “Kundalini phallus” the dragon must be slain and “the virgin” must be “spoiled” or, in the case of *Pygmy*, as well as least one other text both myself and most of America is very familiar with, the virgin must become pregnant.

The scene where agent number 67 ascends the huge plaster Christ inside of church not only points to Kabbalah ascensions up the tree of life and Tantric Kundalini ascensions up the chakra body, but it becomes the point when agent number 67’s training as a sexual extortionist is realized, as it is from atop the plaster Christ that he effectively places judgment on Reverend Tony for having sex with and impregnating Madga (it is only later that readers learn that the host brother is the one who impregnates her, the brother on the Kabbalah tree being associated with the right shoulder, arm, and hand):

> Shinny up same as climb main trunk, limb *Castanea dentata*. Crawling, scaling, gripping handhold, toehold wedged between musculature definition tortured statue, this agent climb legs, slink sliding along plaster groin, gain surmount loincloth. Hand operative me hook all fingers into vast cavity stature navel. Extend reach so able clasp handhold of huge plaster nipple. Statue feature cavern of fake wound, speak hacked deep into left side torso… For official record, this agent perched upon right-hand shoulder plaster male… Sudden sound mystery voice. Occur loud shout. Voice say, out cavern audience seating, male voice shout, “What the fuck are you up to?” Voice, devil Tony. … Next then, devil
Tony commence pace small parade, one direction, opposite direction, pacing as sentry far below statue. Pacing, say, “You’re not going to blackmail me.” Say, “It’s my fault, what happened… She told me she was eighteen.” Say, “She told me she was on the pill.” … Operative Magda gestating fetus fathered… devil Tony. State-designated reproductive partner this agent. (191-3)

As the text shows, there is a stark similarity between the previous sexual extortionist training scene, where agent number 67 is given the homework assignment to study the pleasure points of the body, and this scene when agent number 67 also traverses the body, the distinction seemingly being that in the previous scene agent number 67 studies his own body and in this scene he studies the plaster body of Christ. However, this distinction is blurred when one stops to ponder agent number 67’s “Property of Jesus” T-shirt (which is similar to Trevor Stonefiled’s “John 3:16” shirt) and when one recalls that, similar to the Cedar-family “grope hug,” the T-shirt that is associated with his “birthday” can be viewed as a body surface or wrap. This realization invites readers to evoke a text like Thomas a Kempis’ The Imitation of Christ, as well as the longer tradition of imitating Christ in Christian theology—the idea of marrying or imitating Christ both mentally and physically that for Kempis involves withdrawing from the world and engaging the life that is interior, an interior engagement that, like Christ’s, strives to both open a pathway connecting one’s body to Adam’s and Eve’s and to fracture the filial chain binding one to the determinates of the past, this being the business whereby coming before Adam and Eve not only allows one to move beyond Adam and Eve (a becoming “orphan,” being “born again,” or becoming “child of god”), but it also allows one to sever chronological time more generally and thus enters one into an engagement with a
multitude of human and non-human mothers and fathers in relational space. Furthermore, a body of Christ’s or a body that is the property of Jesus, interpreted a certain way, figures a body to which one cannot make full property claims, if you like a kind of eco-Marxist assemblage that signals the body not as a fetishized product but as a continuing flow of living labor processes.

In *Pygmy*, Palahniuk suggests that it is Madga that gives birth to Reverend (devil) Tony not the other way around—Reverend Tony being the sexually immature man-child who, in Palahniuk’s materialist account, is unable to mentally grow up because he is unable to physically grow up: “Operative Magda gestating fetus fathered…devil Tony. State-designated reproductive partner this agent.” Read a certain way, and this is the way I think it should be read, this line states that it is Madga’s gestating fetus—which I take to mark her ongoing preservation or her “stratum-like virginity” rather than the opposite—that fathers Reverend Tony. Moreover, because the line “State-designated reproductive partner this agent” follows the words “devil Tony,” as though describing “devil Tony,” this can (and again should) be interpreted to mean that here Palahniuk depicts Reverend Tony as agent number 67’s state-designated reproductive partner, which only makes sense if Madga and Reverend Tony are in some way exchangeable, as Palahniuk already states that Madga is agent number 67’s partner earlier. In this configuration, the violator of the virgin and the virgin are mutually constitutive to the point that if it is Madga’s virginity that gives birth to Reverend Tony than it is her pregnancy that dissolves him, he who in this scene is only described as a shadowy “mystery voice” that emerges from out of the sealed and empty inner sanctions of the church, a logos that can be trusted no more than the unreliable voice of agent number 67—the voice that tries to blackmail Reverend
Tony in this scene where the debatable crime that is really on trial is not Reverend Tony’s having sex with a girl who he was told was 18 but was really 13 but is the debatable crime of his wanting that kind of body in the first place.

In Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jetha’s seminal work *Sex At Dawn*, making some staggeringly radical claims that are backed up by a staggering amount of evidence that suggests fundamental flaws in the typically conservative discipline of evolutionary psychology in regards to its standard account of human monogamy, Ryan and Jetha discuss what they term, in very materialist language, the freedom of female “erotic flexibility” as it is specifically juxtaposed against the male “erotic rigidity” that they associate with adult desire for children:

> While many women are freed by their erotic flexibility, men can find themselves trapped by the rigidity of their sexual response... Once determined, male eroticism tends to retain its contours throughout life, like concrete that has set. ... Most researchers and therapists agree that these unusual sexual hungers are almost exclusively seen in males, appear to be related to early imprinting, and are difficult, if not impossible, to alter once boyhood impressions have hardened into adult yearnings. (281)

Ryan and Jetha’s notion of women’s erotic flexibility is further described:

> The human female’s sexual behavior is typically far more malleable than the male’s. Greater erotic plasticity leads more women to experience more variation in their sexuality than men typically do, and women’s sexual behavior is far more responsive to social pressure. This greater plasticity could manifest through
changes in whom a woman wants, in how much she wants him/her/them, and in how she expresses her desire. Young males pass through a brief period in which their sexuality is like hot wax waiting to be imprinted, but the wax soon cools and solidifies, leaving the imprint for life. For females, the wax appears to stay soft and malleable throughout their lives. (272)

When reading Ryan and Jetha in regards to women’s erotic flexibility opposite man’s erotic rigidity, for me, it is important to not only mark that the voice of Sex At Dawn, like its authors, is both male and female, but it is also important to turn to the authors’ allegorical reading of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, which for me helps establish the parameters regarding their account of men and women in Sex At Dawn:

It is no accident that what the BBC called “the most famous image in the history of art” is a study of the inscrutable feminine created by a homosexual male artist. For centuries, men have been wondering what Leonardo da Vinvi’s Mona Lisa was thinking. Is she smiling? Is she angry? Disappointed? Unwell? Nauseated? Sad? Shy? Turned on? None of the above? Probably closer to all of the above. Does she contradict herself? Very well, then. The Mona Lisa is large. Like all women, but more—like all that is feminine—she reflects every phase of the moon. She contains multitudes. (271)

The gender-pronoun-clustered contradiction here is, among other things, as queer as it is Lacanian because the encrypted lines “The Mona Lisa is large” and “[s]he contains multitudes” are references to the epigram at the chapter’s beginning from Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” where “he” states “I am large, I contain multitudes,”
suggesting that erotic rigidity is a problem involving phallogocentrism, it being well known that Whitman, like da Vinci, enjoyed the company of men.

Hopefully this analysis of _Pygmy_ opens up further research into these topics, helping to clarify, among many things, work like Lee Edelman’s controversial queer manifesto _No Future: Queer Theory and The Death Drive_, where Eldeman says things that might otherwise be misconstrued, notably things involving killing “the Child” and pedophilia:

> It is we who must bury the subject in the tomb-like hollow of the signifier, pronouncing at last the words for which we’re condemned should we speak them or not: that we are the advocates of abortion; that the Child as futurity’s emblem must die; that the future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past. (35)

_Pygmy_, as I have argued, allows readers to see the value of “aborting” such a “child,” as well as allowing them to connect these practices to Kabbalah and Tantric Kundalini traditions, if not also implicit, and sometimes explicit, Christian ones (we are defiantly in _The Gospel of Judas_ territory here). Here, an act of violence against childish impressions, which Eldeman, like Ryan and Jetha, is figured as a simultaneous attack against pedophilia, something Eldeman claims is a “fault, as ‘everyone’ knows, [that] defaults, faute de mieux, to a fear of grown woman. (99)”
Line up my adversaries, blast on sight, and fuck your boyfriend
Bitch, I want some ass tonight, you know my steelo
Alize and Cristal weed
I’m sure you've heard of all the freaky shit they say about me, huh

—Tupac from “No More Pain”

Chapter 4
Wounded Healers, Queer Becomings, and The Hood:
A Close Reading of Lil Wayne’s “It’s Good,” Featuring Drake and Jadakiss

In the essay “Voice from Rikers: Spirituality in Hip Hop Artist Lil’ Wayne’s Prison Blog” written by Sharon Lauricella and Matthew Alexander, Lauricella and Alexander use media scholar John Hochheimer’s concept of the Life Force in order to take account of the individual and communal growth processes that are fostered between New-Orleans-born, platinum hip-hop artist Lil Wayne and his fans via the open source medium of the blog-dialog during Lil Wayne’s incarceration in Rikers Island for the illegal possession of a pistol belonging to Lil Wayne’s manager (Shaheem). Describing Hochheimer’s notion of the Life Force, Lauricella and Alexander write:

According to this developing theory, the spiritual study of communication considers the energy that flows not only through but also among individuals… In the realm of empalogic communication, or the quest to understand, learn from, and attain peace, spiritual communication involves a “wounded healer” as a way of facilitating personal healing, being heard, and a way of treating others such that
they are deserving of love, suffering, recognition of struggle, spirituality, and mutual respect (17).

In addition to framing Lil Wayne’s prison-blog-persona within the context of Hochheimer’s “wounded healer,” I turn to the exemplary track “It’s Good” off of Lil Wayne’s *The Carter IV* in order to argue that Lil Wayne, as well as Drake and Jadakiss, who makes guest appearances on the track, embrace the persona of a “wounded healer” whose wounds are not only emotional but are also sexual.

In what I perceive to be a polemic moment in Georges Bataille’s *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, Bataille, similar to Hochheimer, evokes the image of a “wound,” which Bataille uses in order to juxtapose two of his critical terms—sexuality and eroticism. For Bataille, mankind is both animal and human. While sexuality marks the useful, animal aspect of human sex as it culminates in the propagation of the human species, eroticism is wasteful in a manner that Bataille celebrates because it is characteristic of the human aspect of mankind that takes sex far beyond the limits of simple biological reproduction. Bataille’s erotic wound is like a technological discovery that is put to the purpose of maximizing pleasure. It is pleasure as a means not only unto itself but as a means to more pleasure:

Our only real pleasure is to squander our resources to no purpose, just as if a wound were bleeding away inside us; we always want to be sure of the uselessness or the ruinousness of our extravagance. We want to feel as remote from the world where thrift is the rule as we can. … [W]e want a world turned upside down and inside out. The truth of eroticism is treason. (170-1)
For Bataille, eroticism is antithetical to capitalism in an odd manner because both
eroticism and capitalism are modes of accumulation. The distinction is that the capitalist
accumulates in order to reinvest his accumulation into the construction of a mechanism of
perpetual accumulation, while, similar to Hochheimer’s “wounded healer” who allows
the communal Life Force to culminate in and around him in order to become a medium
for therapeutic catharsis, the practitioner of eroticism accumulates in order to waste all
his savings in an orgiastic celebration that blurs the boundary between life and death.
The path of the erotic is treasonous not only to one’s abstract future self (the self one’s
inner-calculator plans funerals for, the self the nation state wages war in order to keep
safe, and so on). The path of the erotic is also treasons to the human species as a whole
because rather than investing what is often presupposed to be one’s own hereditary
materials in the reproduction of “one’s own line” (if such a thing even exists), the
practitioner of eroticism squanders and then throws off his or her resources so as to cast a
vote into existence that is both in favor of other people of the same species and in favor
of other life forms—thus, the erotic’s vote is a vote that is self-interested and
disinterested simultaneously.

In Bataille, the erotic’s wound is anal (among other things) to an extra-degree,
extra-anal in the sense that, for Bataille, all of the body can be perceived as a giant anus
or as a knot of many micro anuses, and this is especially the case with the genitals. On
this, Bataille elaborates on the “uselessness” and “ruinousness” of “erotic extravagance”
when he says the following: “The sexual channels are…the body’s sewers; we think of
them as shameful and connect the anal orifice with them. (57) [my italics].” Although
humans may find themselves thinking of the sexual channels as anal sewers and then find
themselves associating shame with the anus and with defecation, the “extravagance” of Bataille’s “eroticism” decadently embraces these ruins.

In the track “It’s Good” off of Lil Wayne’s *The Carter IV*, I argue that readers can not only detect Lil Wayne and his fellow rappers evoking the erotic’s ruinous wound, but they can also perceive how these rappers figure this wound as a sexual portal through which something akin to media scholar John Hochheimer’s Life Force accumulates within and passes through. One of the more rudimentarily enticing aspects of Lil Wayne’s “It’s Good” is that it explicitly deals with the issue of same-sex sodomy in a manner that is difficult to write off as just another instance of hypermasculine, homophobia in a hip-hop song.

The issue of same-sex sodomy in “It’s Good” is brought up by Canadian rapper Drake in response to Lil Wayne’s incarceration at Riker’s Island. Presumably speaking about Lil Wayne being on the same track as him, Drake, says, “Rikers Island on this flow/ 8 months for that pistol/But at least they had some bad bitches workin’ in that shit hole, Ahhh.” So if “Rikers Island” here refers to “Lil Wayne,” as though Lil Wayne represents Rikers Island because he just came from there, then Drake’s lyrics “But at least they had some bad bitches working in that shit hole” can be read in at least the following ways: 1) Lil Wayne had sex with female corrections officers while incarcerated in Rikers and 2) Lil Wayne engaged in same-sex sodomy while in prison. In the first reading, “bad bitches” refers to the naughty female corrections officers, while “shit hole” refers to Rikers Island. In the second reading, “bad bitches” refers to the naughty male inmates and “shit hole” refers to Lil Wayne’s anus.
The sense of ambiguity regarding whether Drake alludes to Lil Wayne’s same-sex encounters in prison or his opposite-sex encounters is cleared up with Lil Wayne’s verse in “It’s Good” when Lil Wayne responds only to Drake’s accusations that he engaged in same-sex relations while incarcerated. Seemingly in response to Drake, Lil Wayne says, “Stop playin, I ain't with that bullshit/ Niggas act like bitches. Shanaynay, oh my goodness.” The binary, hetero/homo way of reading Lil Wayne’s lyric is as follows: 1) Lil Wayne tells Drake to stop joking about him engaging in sodomy, an act that Lil Wayne deems a false way of life, and then Lil Wayne performs a parody of homosexuality that frames it within the context of Freudian inversion by alluding to male actor Martin Lawrence’s female character Shanaynay, who Lawrence dresses in drag to portray, from the 1990s sitcom Martin and 2) Lil Wayne evokes the exaggerated feminine hyperbole of the male snap queen in order to affirm Drake’s accusation that Lil Wayne engaged in same-sex relations while in Rikers. In the first reading, “stop playing” means “stop joking,” “bullshit” is the word Lil Wayne uses to place a negative value judgment on sodomy, and the line “Niggas act like bitches” refers to Lawrence playing Shanaynay. In the second reading, “Stop playing” again is Lil Wayne telling Drake to stop joking, but the line “I ain’t with that bullshit” can be heard so that it should be written “I ain’t with that? Bullshit,” where “bullshit” is Lil Wayne’s way of shutting down the possibility that “he ain’t with that” or that he didn’t engage in same-sex relations while in Rikers, and the line “Niggas act like bitches” is to be read as an imperative followed by Lil Wayne setting an example of how a man should act like a powerful woman by evoking Lawrence’s Shanaynay.
The issue of whether or not Lil Wayne did or does partake in same-sex sodomy is again explicitly evoked by Lil Wayne at the end of his verse on the track “It’s Good” when Lil Wayne says, “My nigga’s hungry, my bitch’s greedy/ Will I die a bloody murder?/ Dear Mr. Ouija/ Nigga, I’m straight, my girl a faggot/ Potato on the barrel/ Potato salad.” With these lyrics, if the reader chooses to read the line “My nigga’s hungry, my bitch is greedy” in conjunction with the line “Nigga, I’m straight, my girl a faggot,” the reader is able to conclude that Lil Wayne frames himself as an individual who is part man and part woman. In other words, Lil Wayne playfully re-appropriates Freud’s controversial notion of inversion in order to intentionally veil his proclivity for anal stimulation in a queer language that refuses to exclusively think in terms of same-sex-relations.

In his famous *Three Essays On The Theory of Sexuality*, German psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud explains his notion of inversion, which I suggest is more complex that what readers may at first deduce. Explaining the complexity of Freud’s idea requires that I not only quote Freud’s explicit account of inversion at length but that I also quote other ideas of Freud’s that I argue implicitly compliment his thoughts regarding inversion. Explicitly describing inversion, Freud writes the following:

The popular view of the sexual instinct is beautifully reflected in the poetic fable which tells how the original human beings were cut up into two halves—man and woman—and how these are always striving to unite again in love. It comes as a great surprise therefore to learn that there are men whose sexual object is a man and not a woman, and women whose sexual object is a woman and not a man.
People of this kind are described as having ‘contrary sexual feelings’, or better, as being ‘inverts’, and the fact is described as ‘inversion’. (2)

For Freud, the idea that original human beings were comprised of both male and female components takes on not only a mythic but also an anatomical component. On this, Freud writes:

[I]t appears that a certain degree of anatomical hermaphroditism occurs normally. In every normal male or female individual, traces are found of the apparatus of the opposite sex. … These long-familiar facts of anatomy lead us to suppose that an originally bisexual physical disposition has, in the course of evolution, become modified into a unisexual one, leaving behind only a few traces of the sex that has become atrophied. (7)

Later, in the same section of the text I’ve been quoting from entitled “Sexual Aberrations,” Freud goes on to describe how the senses perceive the erogenous zones exchanging place with one another in such a way that non-genital orifices appear to be mutating into genital orifices: “Certain regions of the body…seem…to be claiming that they should themselves be regarded and treated as genitals. (18-19).” For Freud, a mouth or anus demanding sexual attention needs to be framed along the lines of a mouth or anus becoming genital, as for Freud the pregenital stages of sexual development—oral, anal, phallic, and latent—are all stages associated with childhood, while the genital stage is associated with adulthood. Freud can only conceptualize oral and anal sex with adults as instances of atavistic regression rather than recognizing oral and anal sex as kinds of erotic pleasure unto themselves.
When one collapses these three quotes from Freud’s *Three Essays On The Theory of Sexuality* together—the first quote dealing with the mythic notion of an original human species comprised of both male and female anatomy that once severed strive to find one another and join in sexual union, the second quote arguing that there are traces of another sex found in one’s biological makeup, and the third quote expressing the idea that the so-called passive and active erogenous zones do not only communicate through themselves but that they also (mis)communicate through each other so that one can not only taste with one’s anus or deficate with one’s genitals but that one can also copulate with the entire body if not also with something that is more than the sum of one’s erogenous zones—one is able to conclude that, for Freud, one is always comprised of both male and female potentiality and that, in order to transition from childhood to adulthood, one should overcome the speed bump that is the Oedipus complex in order to conform to the standard norms of modern society and choose to identify with the appropriate gender/sex.

According to Freud’s logic, the invert is one who turns into themselves in order to identify with their own “hermaphroditic” other, and, then, from this position wherein one feels oneself from within rather than feels oneself without, the invert first desires oneself as sexual object and next desires those of the same sex or those who are similar to oneself. For Freud, the invert is a child in an adult’s body who refuses to resolve the Oedipal paradox. In opposition to Freud’s account of subjectivity where one must settle on identifying with one or the other gender or sexuality and where the category of the invert marks the aberrant individual who identifies with that which is within rather than that which is without, Lil Wayne, like Bataille who says he “want[s] a world turned upside down and inside out,” is a traitor to so-called normalcy who chooses to frame
himself not as a fixed invert but as a queer anomaly who is forever (re)inverting and is thereby forever displacing his own inside, as well as his own sexual identity. As I quoted before, Lil Wayne says, as though speaking about his male half and his female half, “My nigga’s hungry, my bitch’s greedy/… Nigga, I’m straight, my girl a faggot/ Potato on the barrel/ Potato salad.” The line “I’m straight, my girl a faggot” can certainly be read as a circuitous way for Lil Wayne to deny that he harbors any desire for anal gratification—the idea being that because his inner woman likes women he likes women and thereby isn’t inclined to partake in sodomy in prison or anywhere else. However, another position can also be taken up, which is that Lil Wayne identifies as a woman who desires other women, a position that is anything but heteronormal and hypermasculine and a position that listeners can also perceive Lil Wayne taking up in other songs.

For example, reminiscent of Osiris from Egyptian mythology who is often depicted as lodged between two sisters, Isis and Nephthys, as though wrapped up in a woman’s skin on the front and a woman’s skin on the back like a man trapped in a woman’s body (a woman who is, on a level, a self-contained, bipolar lesbian), on the track “Days and Days” off I Am Not A Human Being II, Lil Wayne says “Man, I’m on some other shit/ I want another bitch/ That want another bitch.” Taken one way, the listener can understand Lil Wayne to be saying that he wants a girl who is a lesbian so he can have two girls at once. Taken another way, the listener can understand Lil Wayne to say that he wants a woman who desires women because he himself identifies as a woman and thereby seeks a woman who will love him not as a man but as a woman. Along these lines, the lyric “Man, I’m on some other shit” can be understood so that the listener hears Lil Wayne disidentifying with “man” and identifying with the queer identity he simply
calls “some other shit.” Taken yet another way, the listener can understand Lil Wayne to say that, similar to Osiris who is effectively a dead man with priapism, he wants a woman who desires women because he conceptualizes himself as two women who “pass a dildo” or distribute sexual energy back and forth between one another.

Returning to the track “It’s Good” and Lil Wayne’s lyric “Nigga I’m straight, my girl a faggot” while keeping in mind Freud’s argument that the sensual invert’s senses operate in such a way that they shuffle the erogenous zones around so that specific orifices, if not all orifices, become extra-genital orifices, one can read Lil Wayne’s “girl” who is a “faggot” as a figure for his more or less “inner girl.” According to the linguistic logic of sensual inversion, Lil Wayne’s “inner girl” can be read (among many things) both as figure for his anus and as a figure for the base of his penis, making it so that if Lil Wayne is “straight” or “erect” it is because “his girl’s a faggot” or because the base of his penis that is figured as a vagina, an anus, or a girl is being stimulated by “another girl.” This “other girl” that stimulates the first girl can allude to Lil Wayne’s anal cavity figured as a vagina, thus explaining Lil Wayne’s predilection for the phrase “pussy ass nigga,” as in the track “Beat The Shit”. In addition, this second girl that Lil Wayne’s first girl desires can allude to another man’s penis inside of Lil Wayne’s anus (in this reading, the penis of the other man is figured as a girl just as Lil Wayne’s penis is previously figured as a girl, recalling that within the realm of sensual inversion, the base of the penis itself can be perceived as a woman or a vagina that a man enters from within himself as though identifying not with the product that is the erection itself but with the means of production behind the erection, the vital flow that births the erection as woman births child). In the midst of all of this excessive and boundless sexual energy that seems to pay
no mind to being politically correct whatsoever, as though the sexuality of no-mind, the subconscious, or the consciousness of the body (certainly a body submerged in a specific context of socio-political reproduction) is the level of expression the artist is after, Lil Wayne figuratively tips his hat to the gender-tuber-like reading possibilities surrounding the male/female anatomy with the line “potato on the barrel/ Potato salad,” depicting a formless play or mashed up salad streaming between the more-coherent, potato-like forms of penis, vagina, and anal cavity.

Recognizing the queer potentiality in Lil Wayne’s verse forces the reader to return to Drake’s lyric, which I quoted earlier, for a second reading: “Rikers Island on this flow/8 months for that pistol/But at least they had some bad bitches workin’ in that shit hole, Ahhh.” Earlier when reading Drake’s lyric, I had presupposed that the words “Rikers Island” were in reference to Lil Wayne and that “this flow” was in reference to the track “It’s Good.” However, when the reader chooses to interpret the words “this flow” so that they allude not to the track “It’s Good” as a whole but rather allude to Drake’s verse in particular, the reader is able to see something of a productive identity crisis occurring between Drake and Lil Wayne that figures Drake along the lines of Hochheimer’s wounded healer—the medium that acts as host to the surrounding community that is here represented by Lil Wayne.

When Drake says, “Rikers Island on this flow,” it can be interpreted as Drake saying that Lil Wayne is on Drake’s verse, as though Lil Wayne is working within and through Drake. This reading invites listeners to imagine Lil Wayne not only operating as a quasi-mouthpiece to Drake’s verse—here I’m reading “flow” as “spirit or cultural flow”—but this reading also invites readers to perceive Lil Wayne working as a semi-co-
pilot to Drake’s biological body, as the word “flow” in Drake’s verse can also refer to “material flow,” as in fecal matter, semen, blood, and so forth, which invites listeners to conjure up the image of Drake rapping while Lil Wayne is making love to him from behind.

Imagining Lil Wayne inside of Drake’s anus while Drake is rapping drastically alters how the reader interprets the content of Drake’s verse from “It’s Good.” “Rikers Island on this flow” can now refer to Lil Wayne inside of Drake’s anus, as though the former is blending his material flow with the latter and is thus entering into a kind of molecular symbiosis where it becomes unclear where the one body ends and the other begins. Interpreting the word “pistol” as a figure for Lil Wayne’s penis, Drake’s line “8 months for that pistol” can now be understood to refer to not only the time Lil Wayne spent in prison but the time Drake waited before being able to make love to Lil Wayne. More still, the lyric where Drake somehow seems to know that Lil Wayne had lovers in Rikers—the lyric “But at least they had some bad bitches workin’ in that shit hole, Ahhh”—signifies another instance where listeners are sucked into the M.C.-Escher-like virtual potentiality of sensual inversion if not also sucked into a logic that one might categorize as science fiction, as, on the one hand, while it is possible to imagine Lil Wayne making love to and ejaculating inside of Drake’s anus in such a way that Drake is able to utilize his anal senses in order to run a molecular inventory on Lil Wayne’s flow, thus detecting that Lil Wayne had many lovers while inside of Rikers, on the other hand, Drake’s line also invites listeners to imagine Drake making love to Lil Wayne from behind in such a way that Drake is able to utilize his penis in order to pick up on clues in Lil Wayne’s anus that lead Drake to the conclusion that Lil Wayne had lovers while
incarcerated. Drake’s artistic, science-fiction-like rendering of being able to detect the presence of others inside Lil Wayne’s anus is representative of not only an odd kind of archeology (the business of digging up old bones) but is also reminiscent of the biological process evolutionary psychologists term “semen displacement.”

Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jetha’s seminal text *Sex At Dawn* grounds modern human sexual promiscuity in our close cultural and biological ties to both pre-agriculture foraging societies as well as the bonobo chimps of north-central Congo, both of whom have a communal approach to sex as well as child rearing. Ryan and Jetha address the role semen displacement plays in sperm competition and the production of biological offspring. Sperm competition refers to the battle that is waged between men’s sperm within the reproductive tract of a single female animal. In the case of the human animal, whenever a woman has sexual intercourse with multiple partners within a five-to-seven day window, the men’s sperm compete with one another inside the vaginal tract to see who fertilizes the ovum. Addressing the workings of the human penis and its capacity for semen displacement, Ryan and Jentha write:

The unusual flared glans of the human penis forming the coronal ridge, combined with the repeated thrusting action characteristic of human intercourse…creates a vacuum in the female’s reproductive tract. This vacuum pulls any previously deposited semen away from the ovum, thus aiding the sperm about to be sent into action. (234-5)

Even though it isn’t explicitly addressed by Ryan and Jetha, one can assume that semen displacement also occurs in group sex among men, making it so that one can pull another man’s semen out of a third man’s anus, thus providing listeners with a context within
which they can follow the logic of my reading of “It’s Good” that suggests that Drake artistically represents something along the lines of “semen displacement” in his verse.

Thinking within the “semen displacement” zone of either real or imaginary possibilities certainly invites listeners to turn once again to Lil Wayne’s verse on “It’s Good,” where Lil Wayne says “I just throw the alley-oop to Drake Griffin.” Other lines like “I take you out/ That’s a date nigga” can also now be framed within a context involving the vacuum penis of “semen displacement,” not to mention lines off different tracks like Drake’s “Miss Me” from his album Thank Me Later, the title “Miss Me” itself also able to be interpreted within the logics of an anti-Freudian inversion (aurally “Mrs. Me”?), where Drake says, “[M]e and Lil Jazz ‘bout to spaz, can you keep up/? I’m just feeling sorry for whoever gotta sweep up.” Notwithstanding, the possibilities regarding how one reads “flow” in Lil Wayne’s “It’s Good” doesn’t end here, as once one begins to contextualize Drake’s verse within the realm of semen displacement, a whole other queer universe opens up that invites readers to imagine men conceptualizing themselves, either out of lust or horror, “having sex with other men” in so-called heterosexual as well as so-called homosexual contexts—some version or other of a fear of or desire for “sloppy-seconds” where a man conceptualizes either anal or vaginal intercourse in such a way that it is framed as his putting his penis into a vagina that has been molded to another’s shape. Once this manner of materiality that fundamentally resists property ownership over the genitals of another—as well as one’s self—is given freedom to run, it allows for all kinds of configurations to emerge, ultimately making it impossible to imagine there being such a thing as a virginal or even monogamous penis, vagina, or anus, it always being the case that the genitals are both literally and imaginatively not only bears of the impressions of
former lovers but are also more or less bearers of the impressions of communal excitation
from what otherwise would be classified as Platonic exchanges or engagements with
mere passers-by in the crowd in addition to the genitals’ more or less refracting yet also
bearing some manner of similarity to their multi-sexed, multi-gendered ancestral
counterparts. This line of reasoning, as it is proposed by Lil Wayne and Drake, provides
scholars with a new frame through which to both understand Freud’s account of inversion
and, opposite Freud, embrace and multiply it rather than pathologize it.

Judith Butler, one of the key thinkers of queer theory, celebrates French feminist
Monique Wittig’s reappropriation of Freudian inversion in her seminal work *Gender
Trouble:*

In *The Lesbian Body* and elsewhere…Wittig appears to take issue with genitally
organized sexuality *per se* and to call for an alternative economy to pleasures
which would both contest the construction of female subjectivity marked by
women’s supposedly distinctive reproductive function. Here the proliferation of
pleasures outside the reproductive economy suggests both a specifically feminine
form of erotic diffusion, understood as a counterstrategy to the reproductive
construction of genitality. In a sense, *The Lesbian Body* can be understood, for
Wittig, as an “inverted” reading of Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of
Sexuality*, in which he argues for the developmental superiority of genital
sexuality over and against the less restricted and more diffuse infantile sexuality.
Only the “invert,” the medical classification invoked by Freud for “the
homosexual,” fails to “achieve” the genital norm. (36-7)
Butler praises Wittig’s reappropriation of Freud’s inversion because, opposite Freud’s celebration of heterosexuality, the genitals, and reproduction, Wittig celebrates extra-genital eroticism. However, Butler is unclear as to whether the extra-genital “erotic diffusion” she celebrates in Wittig occurs on the outside of the body or on the inside of the body (no doubt it occurs in both zones). Due to Butler’s reading lesbian assemblages via Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body*, one can problematically assume Butler proposes that extra-genital stimulation can only occur on the surface of the body or in explicitly “lesbian” or even “homosexual” acts (meaning, I fear that one might take her to only address kissing along the surface of the skin above or below the genitals and not realize that she can also be addressing the chills up one’s spine or pleasure in the head or nipples that can happen on the inside of the body due oral stimulation applied to the genitals as well as other forms of eroticism that are not exclusively accessible to assemblages conventionally understood to be lesbian or homosexual). Reading not only “semen displacement” in Drake and Lil Wayne but also the displacement of any trace of third-party otherness during sex as well as thinking “semen displacement” as involving the displacement of sexual energy throughout the body as a result of erotic experimentation and artistry, scholars are reminded both that extra-genital, queer, erotic diffusion can occur not only across the surface of bodies but within bodies as well between bodies.

With “semen displacement” in mind—whatever the term might mean once we liberate it from a fixed regime of structuralist referentiality (think “dissemination” maybe)—listeners are now once again invited to reinterpret Drake’s lyric I quoted previously. Notwithstanding, whereas before I invited listeners to see how “Drake’s flow that features Rikers Island on it” can allude to Lil Wayne’s fluids either in Drake’s anus
or penis due to their same sex exchange, I now stress that Drake’s lyric also invites listeners to imagine Lil Wayne’s fluids inside of Drake due to their sharing sexual partners. This possibility invites a whole set of invisible third parties to emerge in the gap between Drake and Lil Wayne as they are understood to work off of one another on the track “It’s Good.”

Sex At Dawn authors Ryan and Jetha describe the kind of environments within which one may find a thriving group sex economy reminiscent of pre-agricultural foraging communities as well as the bonobo chimps:

For professional athletes, musicians, and their most enthusiastic female fans, as well as both male and female members of many foraging societies, overlapping, intersecting sexual relationships strengthen group cohesion and can offer a measure of security in an uncertain world. (93).

Ryan and Jetha also turn to Desmond Morris and his book The Soccer Tribe in order to map the group bonding that occurs both on and off the field of sexuality:

‘The first thing you notice when footballers talk among themselves…is the speed of their wit. Their humor is often cruel and is used to deflate any team-mate who shows the slightest signs of egotism. … If one of them scores (sexually), he is not possessive, but is only too happy to see his team-mates succeed with the same girl. … [This lack of jealousy is] simply a measure of the extent to which selfishness is suppressed between team-mates, both on the field and off it.’ (93)

This cruel, quick witted humor designed to deflate a group member’s ego in a social body built around shared sexual partners that Morris as well as Ryan and Jetha address is not only reminiscent of Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s account of “the Dirty Dozens” in his seminal
work on black vernacular—*The Signifying Monkey*—but it also makes us think about the Dirty Dozens in a way that Gates Jr.’s account doesn’t explicitly address:

Clarence Major’s *Dictionary of Afro-American Slang* says that “Signify” is the “same as the *Dirty Dozens*; to censure in 12 or fewer statements.” … The “Dirty Dozens” he defines as “a very elaborate game traditionally played by black boys, in which participants insult each other’s relatives, especially their mothers. The object of the game is to test emotional strength. The first person to give in to anger is the loser.” … For Major, then, to Signify is to be engaged in a highly motivated rhetorical act, aimed at figurative, ritual insult.” (68)

Rather than framing Drake and Lil Wayne’s dialog in “It’s Good” within the context of hypermasculine homophobia, I suggest that it be placed within a frame that blends the cruel, quick witted humor associated with the group sex environment described in Desmond Morris *The Soccer Tribe* and Gates Jr.’s “The Dozens.” Thereby, I suggest that the dialectic of seeming insult in “It’s Good” be understood as a ritualistic game designed to deflate one another’s ego, counter jealously, and promote group participation.

Moreover, Gates Jr. fails to explicitly mention this, but I also argue that “The Dirty Dozen’s” dialog in Lil Wayne’s “It’s Good,” if not in all contexts wherein the game is played, should be perceived as a form of ritual insult designed to get one to achieve a level of comfort with their own sexuality in spite of what another says, the idea being that the winner is the one who can hear themselves insulted a billion times and not be phased, while the looser is the one who lets the other opponent get “into their head,” as it were. Along these lines, “The Dirty Dozens” in Lil Wayne’s “It’s Good” can be perceived not only as a kind of training ground for self-governance but as a training ground for a
becoming that stretches beyond the territorial boundaries of the nation state and private property, a becoming that not only blurs the boundaries between both one and an other’s genitals, genitals and past lovers, genitals that are excited by and are thus molded by communal others without one touching another (insofar as touching is conventionally understood), and genitals that are more or less shaped by one’s ancestors but genitals that can enter into both literal and imaginative morphological allegiances with pre-agricultural foraging communities as well as allegiances with the bonobo chimps, societies where deflated egos and group identities were and are necessary for survival. Allusions to these allegiances can be found in numerous Lil Wayne tracks. For example, on the track “Watch My Shoes,” Lil Wayne says, “No ceilings R-I-P a man, motherfucking caveman.” Then in the song “God Bless Amerika,” Lil Wayne not only says “I am the missing link” but also says, “Granted we do it for vanity not for humanity/ But what’s appealing to me is under banana trees.”

As part of expressing alliances with groups of sexual others, be they one’s or the other’s past lovers, communal springboards of excitation, and one’s or the other’s both human and non-human family members, it is necessary to underscore that the “I” in Lil Wayne is excessively destabilized, so much so that one can argue that when Lil Wayne speaks he speaks from a radically dispossessed position, one where he refuses to identify with his own body (or a static idealization of his body) but instead identifies with an infinite becoming or with “God,” whatever that excessive word itself might mean or to whichever god or gods Lil Wayne’s “I” might refer. It is along this register that Lil Wayne and Drake’s exchange—conceptualized as both a queer overlapping of ideas and of material flows both between and within bodies—not only figures each as a wounded
healer through which the other traverses where each other is simultaneously
representative of any other or as the community, but it is along this register that Lil
Wayne’s queer exchange with Drake re-stages Lil Wayne’s queer exchange with a “God”
who moves through and exceeds him. In my mind, one of the key places to turn to in
order to track this political, poetic, and theological strand of logic involving the
schizophrenic nature of the “I” that comes before, passes through, and exceeds everyone
is the passage from the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament where Moses asks “God” what
name he should use to refer to “Him:” “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and
he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.
(Exodus 3: 14).” In the Exodus quote, both “God” and Moses carry the “I Am,” which
one can interpret to mean that “God” is the being “I” that is “pregnant” or “emergent”
within all life at the same time that all of life is “pregnant” or “emergent” within “God.”
The “I Am” in Exodus is both external to and internal to Moses and is also interpreted as
“I will be who I will be.” (The Zohar, 112). This, I argue, is the polysemic sense one can
linger on in Lil Wayne’s lyric “I am the missing link,” not to mention his often repeated
phrase (also the title of two of this albums) “I am not a human being,” in addition to
another one of his often repeated phrases “I am a Martian.” Also addressing a similar
idea within a queer framework, American spiritual teacher Ram Dass often depicts
individuated bodies as being “God in drag” (One-Liners, 13). By identifying with the
ever-emergent “I am” (a proliferation of “I”s rather than a single “I”) that persistently
wells up within him rather than identifying with any seemingly singular, objective body
surface that his vital insides manifest, “It’s Good” provides listeners with a new frame
through which to understand what it means to “be in the hood,” as the hip hop
colloquialism goes. “It’s Good” thereby allows listeners to track the connections between hip-hop’s “hood,” what Ram Dass calls “God in drag,” and the “homosexual closet,” even though, like Ram Dass’s ever-evolving “drag king” I argue, this is not a passive “closet” but an active one.

Eve Sedgwick’s famous work of queer theory Epistemology of the Closet, Sedwick explains how when one moves between milieus whose sexual repressiveness varies it becomes impossible for one to ever fully “come out of the closet,” the closet being the place where not only any desire that is perceived to be externally unacceptable gets internally redirected but specifically the space where externally rejected same-sex desire is internally policed or held back:

[T]he deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption means that…every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure (68).

Sedgwick leaves the reader with the impression that the queer closet is a space wherein one passively or preemptively hides in order to avoid policing or censure from the outside. Butler, however, again turns to Wittig in order to frame gender performance as an active antithesis to Sedgwick’s passive closet:

Wittig understands gender as the workings of “sex,” where “sex” is an obligatory injunction for the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize itself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this, not once or twice, but as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. The notion of a “project,”
however, suggests the originating force of a radical will, and because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term strategy better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs.

*(Gender Trouble, 190)*

With Butler’s reading of Wittig, the passive closet becomes a corporal sign, a project, and a strategic performance. In other words, gender becomes not a closet that one hides behind but rather a suit of armor behind which one plots.

In New York rapper Jadakiss’s verse off Lil Wayne’s “It’s Good,” listeners can detect this depiction of “the hood” (evocative of monks and priests as well as an impoverished region of the city, not to also mention that it is evocative of a casket) as a “strategic closet” in ways that overlap the figure of the strategically concealed “inner-queer” and the strategically concealed “inner-God”—it being possible to understand both “queer” and “God” to refer to that which cannot be classified or fully known. The link between class and sex/gender in the dual meaning of “the hood” (which can refer both to an impoverished slum and, like the closet, can refer to a fortress meant to hide one’s sex/gender from those who would seek to hurt one) is no mistake on the part of Jadakiss but is rather a deliberate link that stresses the danger and pain that comes with living under both of these blocked off zones wherein violence can easily erupt from either within or without. In his verse off “It’s Good,” Jadakiss says: “I am as real as they come, I follow the rules/ I am still in the hood but I probably should move/ Made enough money, I don’t fuck around/ I just felt they needed me, so I stuck around.” Following a class-driven interpretation of Jadakiss’s verse, listeners can understand Jadakiss to be saying that even though he has made money as a hip-hop artist he has chosen to remain a
resident of the impoverished community within which he grew up in order to help that community as best he can, even though doing so may put him in harm’s way. Along the lines of a queer analysis that understands “the hood” to figure something akin to either Sedwick’s or Butler’s “closet,” listeners can hear Jadakiss saying that even though he has already made enough money strategically using “the hood” so as to pass as heterosexual in order to reap the cultural capital (often times the door-opener to actual capital) that society bestows on “hetero-normalcy,” he still plans to “stay in the hood” as something of an undercover agent in order to help the others he encounters who have been forced into “the hood” or “the closet” out of fear. Finally from either a radically theological perspective or a perspective that poses a model of schizo-subjectivity in opposition to both the “fully-independent” free market individual and the “cog-in-the-machine” subject of the nation state, listeners can understand Jadakiss’s “I am” to function like Moses’s “I am.” In this sense, listeners can understand Jadakiss’s “I” that is “still in the hood but probably should move” to function as a temporary “subject position” or a temporary identity that one occupies for strategic purposes only in preparation to evacuate it. This art of being “in the hood” for strategic purposes only in order to plan to evacuate it resonates with spiritual practices of mourning, mourning not only the body that one sheds daily or even moment to moment as one grows and dyes into newness, but also ultimately mourning the body one will finally exceed at the end of one’s life. With this understanding, Jadakiss’s line “I just felt they needed me so I stuck around” can both position him as a kind of bodhisattva at the same time that it can be understood as his not marking himself as the one who stuck around but his identifying with the “I” inside of everything that sticks around, the “I” that makes cohesion possible at the same time that it
makes dissipation possible, which itself can be perceived as another kind of cohesion and so on.
Bibliography


http://chuckpalahniuk.net/books/pygmy


