Misfitology: misfit narratives in ideology

Kennedy Lyn Coyne  
*University at Albany, State University of New York*, klcoyne@albany.edu

The University at Albany community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd

Part of the American Literature Commons, Creative Writing Commons, and the English Language and Literature Commons

**Recommended Citation**

https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd/2031

This Master's Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Legacy Theses & Dissertations (2009 - 2024) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. Please see Terms of Use. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.
Misfitology: Misfit Narratives in Ideology

by

Kennedy L. Coyne

A Thesis
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

College of Arts & Sciences
Department of English
2018
Abstract

This hybrid thesis, part critical and part fiction, examines experimental and nontraditional texts that showcase how misfits allow viewers and readers to glimpse ideological structures—particularly interpellation. It argues that the misfit is essential to the visibility of the ideological process because the misfit shows the disconnect between the inverted and the real world. The inverted world seems like the real world but it is masked by ideology. This thesis examines how a pair of films – David Lynch’s films *Blue Velvet* and *Mullholland Drive* – and a pair of novels – Eileen Myles’ *Chelsea Girls*, and Chris Kraus’ *I Love Dick* – expose the machinations of ideology, if only briefly. These ideological machinations become more visible when read through the theoretical lenses of Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” and Judith Butler’s “girling” in *Bodies That Matter*. In all these texts, although the misfits ultimately fail to overcome the ideological system, the readers and viewers get a glimpse of the system itself. The way worlds appear in these texts allow the reader to see misfits recognizing how they see how they do not fit traditional roles, which allows us to interrogate ideological roles and see how we are living in a construct.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Paul Stasi, my thesis advisor. His comments and advice changed the way I thought about critical writing. Without him, I would not have completed this project. I am grateful to Professor Ed Schwarzschild for encouraging me to keep writing fiction, despite my doubts.

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Eric Keenaghan, whose guidance with my undergraduate work informed and guided this project. His teachings helped me see the world differently. He taught me to think through ideas and problems both critically and creatively.

I would like to thank my parents, Jim and Dianne Coyne, for instilling in me the value of education and whose strength and perseverance kept me writing.

And finally, I would like to thank Allison, Chicken and Bean, my misfit family.
# Table of Contents

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

Chapter 1: Misfits and Interpellation: Perpetuating Ideological Roles in *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive* ........................................................................................................................................... 6  

Chapter 2: Women’s Resistance to ‘Girling’ in Eileen Myles’ *Chelsea Girls* and Chris Kraus’ *I Love Dick* .................................................................................................................................................. 29  

Chapter 3: Modern Love .......................................................................................................................... 49  

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................................. 86
Introduction

In Flannery O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (1953), the Wesley family plans to go on a vacation to Florida, but the grandmother wants to go to Tennessee. She lies and tells the family that a bandit called “The Misfit” is on the loose in Florida so that they will go to Tennessee instead. As the father drives, the grandmother’s cat, startled by the children, jumps into his lap. The car runs off the road and crashes, but nobody is seriously injured. When the family gets out of the car, the grandmother sees two men approaching. She immediately shrieks, “You’re the Misfit!” When “the Misfit” tells her it was not in her interest to “reckernize” him, she tries to manipulate him. She tells him that he is a really good man and would not do anything to harm them. He sees through her, though, and says, “I ain’t a good man.” He explains why they call him “The Misfit:”

I said long ago, you get you a signature and sign everything you do and keep a copy of it. Then you’ll know what you done and you can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match and in the end you’ll have something to prove you ain’t been treated right. I call myself The Misfit [because] I can’t make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through with punishment. (131)

“The Misfit” in this scenario claims his punishments are worse than his crimes. He also knows that whether or not he commits crimes in the future, he will be labeled as a criminal. Nobody will think of him as anything but “The Misfit.” He may be a bad person, but he is also a part of a system that would not integrate him back into society, and so he really has no other choice. There is no way for him to redeem himself. He is a product of culture. His continued criminal activity is in part because he knows he cannot escape.
I first read “A Good Man is Hard to Find” around the same time I read Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Misfit’s Manifesto*, which is composed of a compilation of personal non-fiction “misfit” stories. Yuknavitch, a self-proclaimed misfit, writes, “Some [misfits] have a point of view forged from both our experiences as well as our continued inability to enter culture, relationships, language, and social organization—the way we group ourselves in relationships, families, and communities—like other people” (3). I was struck by this idea that people exist in society who struggle to enter culture because of their differences. But a character like “The Misfit” in O’Connor’s story has no choice but to be separated from the rest of society.

We might see the problems misfits have more clearly when we consider them in relation to Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser writes that in society ideas are reproduced, just as people are, and made material by practices and rituals, however this social reproduction always produces a false reality. Although we live within it, ideology exists as a false consciousness, i.e. unless one is outside of ideology, one cannot see it. Althusser writes, “It is not their real condition of existence, their real world, that ‘men’ ‘represent to themselves’ in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there” (21). Everyone has some established role that people are expected to fit into. These roles depend on factors such as race, class, sexuality and gender. Some people fit their roles better than others—some are faced with harsher realities while others are designed to be more privileged. Although subjects of ideology are unconscious of the fact that they are inside a system, they can at least recognize how their realities, or conditions of existence, are different from others.

Scholars typically focus on how ideology is represented and represents itself to human subjects; less often do they focus on his theory of interpellation, or how ideology constructs
subjects. Interpellation determines a subject’s position in ideology and allows us to see how
different social relationships are formed. Althusser’s theory explains that an individual must be
called, or hailed, most often by another person, to be interpellated. How an individual responds
to this hail determines the relationship dynamic they have with their caller. Althusser writes,
“Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: ‘Hey, you there!’ One individual (nine
times out of ten it is the right one) turns around, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him,
i.e. recognizing that ‘it really is he’ who is meant by the hailing” (131). Once an individual is
hailed, and responds to that hailing, they become a subject of ideology. Althusser later calls these
subjects, actors, who have certain roles in ideology. He explains, when a friend knocks on your
door, you do not need to ask who it is because you already recognize him or her. When you see
your friend, you hail them as your friend, and in exchange they hail you. An unconscious power
dynamic, however, exists when someone with authority, such as a police officer calls out, “Hey,
you there!” Not only does interpellation determine social relationships, it identifies social roles
between subjects. But, if according to Althusser, only nine out of ten individuals respond to
hauling, there must be a small chance that some individuals do not become subjects, or perhaps
some individuals catch a glimpse of the system in which they are hailed and try to push against
that system. This could also suggest that the individual who does not respond to a hail (though
unlikely, but not impossible), might be able to see outside of ideology.

In this thesis, I examine how a pair of films – David Lynch’s films Blue Velvet and
Mullholland Drive – and a pair of novels – Eileen Myles Chelsea Girls, and Chris Kraus’ I Love
Dick – expose the machinations of ideology, if only briefly. These ideological machinations
become more visible when read through the theoretical lenses of Althusser’s “Ideology and
Ideological State Apparatuses” and Judith Butler’s “girling” in Bodies That Matter.
In Chapter One “Misfits and Interpellation: Perpetuating Ideological Roles in Blue Velvet and Mulholland Drive,” I argue that the misfit is essential to the visibility of the ideological process because the misfit shows the disconnect between the inverted and the real world. The inverted world seems like the real world but it is masked by ideology.

In Chapter Two “Women’s Resistance to ‘Girling’ in Eileen Myles’ Chelsea Girls and Chris Kraus’ I Love Dick,” I consider the ways Eileen Myles and Chris Kraus make their worlds visible even though they cannot escape ideology. Yuknavitch writes, “Most misfits struggle against the story that’s expected of them” (20). She writes that misfits struggle to follow cultural scripts—how to follow gender roles, how to be successful, how to fit into society. Kraus and Myles write themselves into stories they understand, into worlds they see themselves existing in. The worlds of these texts show how misfits are acutely aware of how they do not fit traditional gender roles. Misfits here are not the same as in the first chapter. These misfits allow us to see how we are living in a construct.

Chapter Three, “Modern Love,” is a collection of original short stories, modeled after concepts discussed in chapters one and two, that challenge traditional cohesive narratives. “Modern Love” resists homogenizing narratives so that the reader can create endings that make sense to them. These stories, similar to the texts I critically examine in chapters one and two, do not have redeeming endings. They are inspired by Blue Velvet, Mulholland Drive, Chelsea Girls, I Love Dick, and “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” These storylines are not meant to be relatable, or as Yuknavitch writes “match up with the traditional or mainstream storyline.” These stories are often strangely sexual and perverse, but they also have elements of their characters feeling misunderstood or alone. “Maude: A Drafty Review” is about a woman named Maude who likes purple things and suffers from bad poetry. “Indigo Boy” traces a day in the life of a lesbian
couple whose cat comes in between their relationship. Jane and Karen’s sibling rivalry erupts over dueling book reviews in “True Faith.” The eponymous “Modern Love” is about a couple whose relationship seems strangely tense. “Superhost” recounts a misfit love affair and follows Judith proposing to her fiancé Tony in Jeff’s studio apartment Airbnb. “Chelsea in Red” finishes off the collection and tells the story of a man named Gary who moves to Portland, Oregon to start a new life but finds himself unable to contribute to keeping Portland weird.
Misfits and Interpellation: Perpetuating Ideological Roles in *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive*

I don’t know if you’re a detective or a pervert.

~Sandy Williams, *Blue Velvet*

In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser writes, “It is not their real condition of existence, their real world, that ‘men’ ‘represent to themselves’ in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there” (21). How people see their relationships to their world is essential to ideology, and how they see those relationships is often different than how those relationships actually exist. The inverted world seems like the real world, but it is masked by ideology. In ideology, ideas are constantly reproducing themselves, and made material, through practices and rituals. This reproduction creates false consciousness and false realities that seem real but actually privilege the ruling ideology, which is often associated with the ruling class. These false realities contribute to a disconnect between the inverted and the real world.

In David Lynch’s films *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001), misfits’ roles expose to the viewer how ideology is perpetuated. In these films the misfits are women who are taken advantage of, manipulated and treated as objects. Their relationships to their worlds and to the other people in their worlds who actually fit emphasize the different realities misfits experience. Signifying structures within ideology, like the American Dream, the nuclear family ideal or Hollywood fame and glamour, expose how misfits do not fit the standard role of the subject. Although misfits do not quite fit into ideology they are nevertheless fixed in it and experience ideology differently than people who do fit. In other words, ideology keeps misfits as
misfits. Their differences can help us see the otherwise invisible ideological system at work. The misfit’s role is thus essential to the visibility of the ideological process because the misfit shows the disconnect between the inverted and the real world.

A productive way to look at misfit relationships is through Althusser’s theory of interpellation, or hailing. Theoretically, interpellation happens when someone calls out to an individual and that individual responds back. In practice, the call could be literal or figurative, from a person or a thing. If Althusser writes that we are always-already subjects in ideology, by responding, the “hailed,” without realizing it, confirm their position in ideology. By extension, confirming that position also confirms the relationship they have with their “hailer,” and vice versa. These relationships might or might not fit social expectations in the “real world” (i.e., the inverted world) but are accounted for by ideology. Signifying structures that seem like the real world (e.g., the white picket fence image produced by an idea of America) actually make up the “inverted world,” or an ideological image. When either the “hailed” or the “hailer” are misfits, these signifying structures are called into question. Ideology, in turn, makes a place for them as misfits to diminish their potential to expose the system for what it is: a structure that keeps people trapped within their roles at the expense of others.

Picture a straight line—America is that straight line, and the goal of ideology is to appear smooth. In Blue Velvet, when Jeffrey and Sandy, the town’s all-American couple get involved with the misfits Dorothy and Frank’s mystery, the straight line starts to bulge. The more they get involved, the more pressure is added to that line. But still, the bulge is not large enough to rupture the system. Ideology reinvents itself to seem the same, even though over time it changes and is different. As the “good” characters get involved with the “misfits,” they cannot see that they are adding to the problems, not making the problems better. This smoothing over of
difference is what prevents the most ideological subjects, who appear to fit seamlessly in their respected systems, from seeing that their actions have negative repercussions for those who are most marginalized in the system. In *Blue Velvet*, this is the All-American clean-shaven white heterosexual suburban male. In *Mulholland Drive* it’s the doe-eyed, naïve blond Hollywood actress and the buxom, exotic, brunette who Hollywood executives call “the girl.”

*Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive* work in cycles, in which the beginnings of the films overlap with the endings of the films. These cycles are both aesthetic and content-driven. Functioning from these non-redemptive plots, their subjects’ ideological roles are perpetuated. In these cyclical structures, the misfit characters that existed as a kind of bulge in a straight-line fold into ideology to recreate the image of what is actually the “inverted world.” Although a lot happens in these films, nothing seems to fundamentally change from beginning to end—in the most important ways (those ways being ideological) nothing changes. Bad guys are still in charge. Misfits remain misfits. The small changes that could be radical remain intact. This illusion is created in part by Lynch’s aesthetic. Lynch’s aesthetic which would usually suggest irony or parody, instead creates serious worlds that distinguish ideology from the films’ misfits. We do not usually expect good guys to do bad things, especially in worlds where everything seems idyllic. Typically, the characters who seem to stand out against their signifying structures seem like they are the problem. Yet, in Lynch’s films, it is the characters who seem to fit into ideological structures that keep the others as misfits. Without misfits whose personalities contrast the worlds they exist in (Dorothy Vallens in *Blue Velvet* and Betty Elms and Diane Selwyn in *Mulholland Drive*), we might overlook the ideologies that structure and perpetuate oppression.
Blue Velvet and Cyclical Structures

In Blue Velvet, social roles that seem to change, do not. Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle McLaughlin) and Sandy Williams (Laura Dern) seem like poster-children for the young all-American suburban couple who believe they live in an idyllic world. After Jeffrey finds a dismembered ear in a field, he befriends Sandy, the Lumberton detective’s daughter, to find out more information about what he perceives as a mystery. Together they find that the ear belongs to Dorothy Vallens’ (Isabella Rossellini) husband, who is held hostage by Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper). Jeffrey builds a relationship with Dorothy, just as he has with Sandy, to try to save her and her family from the town’s “bad guys.” While they think they are helping Dorothy, they cannot see how their own privilege plays a role in the ideology keeping Dorothy oppressed.

In Althusser’s scheme, subjects in ideology might be able to see what relationships they have with others and still desire them, even if this is to their detriment. For instance, because Dorothy is continuously abused and treated like an object, she knows how the system works, i.e. even seemingly good guys like Jeffrey will use her. In their relationship it seems like Jeffrey tries to help Dorothy, but he is unconsciously driven by sexual desire. Dorothy sees both sides, and despite this, she still hopes that Jeffrey will fulfill his role and prove that he really is good.

We can see ideology at work in the initial encounter between Dorothy and Jeffrey. Jeffrey and Sandy find where Dorothy performs and watch her sing “Blue Velvet.” After the performance Jeffrey decides to sneak into Dorothy’s apartment. Sandy tells Jeffrey, “I don’t know if you’re a detective or a pervert.” He tells her, “That’s for me to know and you to find out” (00:31:50). Although this interaction seems like it is in jest, his playful response suggests that perhaps part of him is aware that he is testing his good guy role. This is the first instance where he finds himself involved in a mystery. It is also the first time we see Jeffrey
unconsciously manipulating women, but this is not made entirely clear until he enters Dorothy’s world.

Alone in Dorothy’s apartment, he plans to leave before she comes home. When she unexpectedly returns, he hides in her living room closet. At first it seems like Jeffrey is hiding, but for a dramatized seven minutes, Jeffrey watches Dorothy walk around, undress, and even speak to her husband, who is captured by Frank, on the phone. When she finally hears a noise from the closet, she forces Jeffrey out with a knife and asks him, “What’s your name?” (00:39:00). She demands that he get undressed and then uses him sexually. Her actions, however, are not just that of a typical abuser—she uses him first, before what she knows to be inevitable: that he will use her. Dorothy is not conscious of ideology, but, especially because of her role as a misfit, she is conscious of how she has been treated as a sexual object in the past. Sandy jokes before Jeffrey enters the apartment that he is a pervert, which she does not entirely see either, but Dorothy intuits this—after all, he watches her from inside her closet. Because of her role in ideology, Dorothy is able to see Jeffrey in a way that he cannot see himself.

Privilege inhibits self-awareness, which in turn perpetuates ideology. Although Jeffrey tries to help Dorothy, because he is in a system that privileges him, he cannot see how other realities like Dorothy’s do not match his own. Jeffrey’s privileged lack of self-awareness even causes him to treat people in ways he does not want to. To some extent, his ignorance makes him a victim of ideology. He is not doomed to be an abuser, but there are structures in place that allow him to more easily be an abuser than an ally. At the same time, Jeffrey has agency to develop a more critical understanding of his privilege, but he does not because he ignores what he does not want to see. For example, during one of their sexual encounters, Dorothy tells Jeffrey to hit her. He does not do it, and as he leaves, Dorothy whispers out, “Help me” (00:51:45). The
next time they are together, Dorothy hails Jeffrey as a bad boy and asks, “Do you want to do bad things?” (01:08:45). He asks her what she means and seems discomforted by the question. She tells him she wants him to hurt her. Jeffrey tells her he does not want to hurt her. For a moment Jeffrey tries to affirm that he is not a “bad boy.” He tells her, “Frank has your husband and son, doesn’t he? You’ve gotta do something. Go to the police” (01:10:00). This is the first time Jeffrey admits to Dorothy what he knows about her situation. He does not tell her, however, that the police are in cahoots with Frank, though she is already aware of this. His lie, implicit as it may be, creates an illusion. He tells her to reach out to those in power to help her when he knows they cannot. The only thing this advice helps is his own ego; it helps him appear like the good social subject. In Profit and Pleasure, Rosemary Hennessy writes, “For Althusser, ideology consists of all material practices of meaning-making that produce know-how, including the production of individuals as proper, good social subjects who are willing to participate in their culture’s norms” (85). Jeffrey uses this moment to revert back to a “good social subject” even though he is using Dorothy for his sexual desire. He tells her what he thinks will make the situation right. Although it seems like Jeffrey actively tries to help Dorothy, he unconsciously manipulates her. By believing himself to be the what Hennessy writes as the “good social subject,” he continues to lie and hurt her because he deludes himself into thinking it is the right thing to do.

Although it seems that Dorothy dictates the terms of her relationship to Jeffrey, her actions are to her disadvantage and often to her detriment. In the scene where Jeffrey affirms himself as a good subject, Dorothy hails Jeffrey by her husband’s name, “Don, hit me.” This time Jeffrey accepts the hail, and when she tells him to hit her, he does. Althusser writes, when a person is hailed, “nine times out of ten it is the right one” (131). If nine times out of ten a hail is
successful, there must be a small chance that sometimes the hailed does not respond to hailing, and therefore does not confirm their position in ideology. This raises the question, if one is already-always a subject, why must they continue to be confirmed as one through social interactions? Jeffrey does not have to accept Dorothy’s hail as a bad boy, but he does. This scene confirms Jeffrey’s layered ideological role that allows him to maintain his good guy appearance while also doing bad things. The scene grows darker, music plays faster, followed by complete blackness. Images appear on the screen of Jeffrey’s hand, then Dorothy’s face. He strikes her twice and the sounds are loudly stylized. The camera zooms in to Jeffrey’s face, followed by a close up of Dorothy’s mouth which shows a chipped tooth. Jeffrey ultimately accepts Dorothy’s hail as a bad boy. By accepting the hail, Jeffrey confirms Dorothy’s position as well, as a misfit whose cultural norms include abuse and manipulation. As she continues to hail Jeffrey as a bad boy, Jeffrey hails Dorothy as his damsel in distress. Neither of these identities seem to align with the characters, and together they seem like an unlikely combination. Despite what seems like an unlikely combination, it matters because it suggests ideology interpellates subjects into relationships.

The film plays with the ways Jeffrey is and is not like Frank, ultimately showing that his ‘good guy’ exterior is not enough to distinguish him from necessarily playing the same role as Frank in relation to Dorothy. At first, Jeffrey’s ignorance allows the viewer to see how his version of the world compares to Dorothy’s reality. Jeffrey only catches a glimpse of himself doing anything wrong when he spends time with Frank. Until that point, Jeffrey thinks his actions are entirely driven towards helping Dorothy. When Jeffrey first meets Frank, he leaves Dorothy’s apartment as Frank enters, and Dorothy tells Frank that Jeffrey is “from the neighborhood.” Frank says, “You’re a neighbor. Well, what’s your name, neighbor?” In this
scene, Jeffrey and Frank look nearly identical, both dressed in black on either side of the camera. Dorothy stands out between them in a red robe. Dorothy tells Frank, “He’s a good kid” (01:11:30). In this moment we see Dorothy starting to believe in Jeffrey’s role as a good boy too, even though she did not trust it at first. Frank, however, does not trust that Jeffrey is what he seems. He sees them as the same, and in this moment, they are, at the very least, dressed the same. When Frank forces Jeffrey to take a joy ride with Dorothy and three of Frank’s friends, Franks seems especially intense. He stops the car to look back at Jeffrey, and tells him, “You’re like me” (01:22:55). After Frank says this, he touches Dorothy’s breasts. In what seems like an attempt to prove Frank wrong about him, Jeffrey tells Frank to leave her alone and punches Frank in the face. Dorothy exceedingly tries to protect Jeffrey from Frank, but she cannot. It seems as though she does not want Jeffrey to have to see his similarities to Frank. She does not want him to see that he is like everyone who steps out of the car—a misfit. If Jeffrey does not allow himself to see the connection, he does not have to fulfill any other role than being a good social subject. This way, Dorothy can maintain the illusion too.

The way Jeffrey sees himself contributes to the abuse perpetuated on Dorothy as a misfit. When Jeffrey enters a world that is foreign to him, made entirely of misfits, he begins to but cannot fully see how his actions are similar to Frank’s. These people do not fit the typical suburban look he is used to—one man wears a lavender jacket with a straw hat, a woman in pink with fish net stockings dances on top of the car out of sync to Roy Orbison’s “In Dreams.” The next morning, after being beaten by Frank, Jeffrey sits on his bed and cries as he pictures flashbacks of Dorothy telling him to hit her, him hitting her, looking at her son’s twirl hat, listening to Dorothy frantically speak to her son, and finally chipping her front tooth. In between each flashback, Jeffrey cries more and becomes more distressed. Although he feels badly, there
is nothing that suggests he will actually ever really help Dorothy. In part this is because he does not have the power or authority to. Even if she feels protected, it is all an illusion. Even as he walks downstairs to his family kitchen table and his mother and aunt wonder what has happened, he tells his aunt, “I love you, but you’re gonna get it” (01:29:40). Without realizing it, he is fulfilling Frank’s hail by becoming mean to someone he usually cares about. His ignorance allows us, once again, to see his version of the world against how it actually exists.

Even when Jeffrey enters a world filled with misfits, he still cannot see it as a real world because he has accepted hails in his life from cultural suburban America symbols. For instance, before Jeffrey first meets Frank, he finds out information about him and tells Sandy that he is very dangerous. With tears in his eyes, he asks Sandy, “Why are people like Frank? Why is there so much trouble in the world?” (00:55:50). Jeffrey, here, hails Frank as the “bad guy” and by not understanding Frank’s motives, he counter-hails himself as the “good guy.” Importantly, he is wholly unconscious that his actions are also contributing to the trouble that Dorothy faces. Even later when Frank tells them that they are the same, he has trouble seeing the connection. Even the scene where Jeffrey cries, which seems at first like an acknowledgement that he is a bad guy, is actually more proof to himself that he is a good guy: he cares about his violence.

In her article, “Subverting Eden: Ambiguity of Evil and the American Dream in Blue Velvet,” Irena Makarushka suggests that our introduction and conclusion to Lumberton is similar to our introduction to Jeffrey, who understands himself through “culturally inscribed symbols: the good son, helpful neighbor, boy-next-door, knight in shining armor. However, these images are not validated in his experience” (36). Hailing not only occurs through exchanges among people but can also occur through cultural symbols. Jeffrey is hailed by culturally inscribed symbols that are represented in the film in the introductory montage: tulips, red roses, a fireman
in his truck driving down a residential neighborhood, a crossing guard making sure children cross the street safely after school. Jeffrey interpellates himself through these culturally inscribed symbols, yet it is still difficult to discern where he falls on the spectrum of good versus evil. Because he seems good, when he does bad things they can more easily be overlooked because he is a product of the symbols that make up his reality. Makarushka writes that Jeffrey and Sandy believe good can conquer evil, but they never learn that this is really an illusion. This is especially true for Sandy who is continuously ignorant of Jeffrey’s actions and only sees his good side.

By being with Sandy, Jeffrey allows himself to be willfully ignorant of reality. If she cannot see his faults, why should he see them himself? Halfway through the film at the town’s diner, Jeffrey tells Sandy, “I’m seeing something that was always hidden. I’m involved in a mystery. I’m in the middle of a mystery” (01:05:44). Although he convinces her of this, he is not aware that this mystery is to his advantage and to Dorothy’s disadvantage. Jeffrey even convinces Sandy that he is above the law, represented by her father who is the town’s detective. This allows Sandy’s trust in the law to shift towards a trust in Jeffrey. He uses this moment to sit on her side of the booth and kiss her. By kissing her, he hails her as his romantic partner. While Jeffrey hails Sandy as his partner, he does not tell her he has also been sleeping with Dorothy. If he shares this with Sandy, he will have to admit to himself why he is actually sleeping with Dorothy—not for Dorothy’s gain, but for his own. Without either realizing it, this sets up a power dynamic between Jeffrey and Sandy that implicitly allows Jeffrey’s actions to continue because Sandy does not challenge them.

Sandy turns a blind eye to reality in part because her reality is so starkly different than Dorothy’s. Sandy and Jeffrey share this yearning to be part of an idyllic dream-world because
their lives set them up to believe this. Dorothy might share that dream, too, but her experiences make it harder for her to live in that dream-world than it is for Sandy. We can see this from the fact that all the scenes in the film with Sandy are starkly different than scenes with Dorothy. Sandy is the blonde-haired blue-eyed girl next door. She dresses in pastels, wears little makeup and her hair is always set in place. Dorothy does not necessarily look disheveled, but we often see her naked or wearing robes. She wears deep reds and blues and her hair is teased out. Despite their differences, however, both women are used by Jeffrey, but we only really see this in his relationship to Dorothy. For example, when naked Dorothy shows up on Jeffrey’s doorsteps, asking for help, it is clear to Sandy that their relationship has been more than platonic. And yet because she has also been used by Jeffrey, Sandy ignores this similarity by consciously keeping Dorothy in her role as oppressed. This, in turn, allows Jeffrey to continue to have a blind view of himself, which further shows us the ideological separation of the two women, even though they are in reality treated similarly.

Jeffrey and Sandy’s relationship more clearly show us the ideological separation they have to Dorothy, because their roles promise a nuclear family ideal. Their picturesque relationship seems convenient given the ways Lynch creates a nearly too-perfect world in the film. Earlier in the film Sandy shares a dream she had with Jeffrey,

In the dream there was our world and the world was dark because there weren’t any robins, and the robins represented love and for the longest time there was this darkness and all of a sudden thousands of robins were set free and they flew down and let out this blinding light of love. And it seemed like that love would be the only thing that made any difference. Then it did. So I guess it means there is trouble until the robins come.

(00:55:55)
Sandy holds on to this idea of the robin and love restoring equilibrium in the world so much so that when she does see a robin, she believes it must be a sign from her dreams. In Theory, (Post)Modernity, Opposition: An “Other” Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory, Mas’ud Zavarzadeh, writes “[…] ideology is a set of discourses, images, myths that establish an imaginary [imagined] relationship between the individual and the world” (99). For Sandy, this imagined relationship is made of her own disillusionment, confirmed by culturally inscribed symbols that interpellate her.

At the end of the film when everything seems resolved—Frank is killed, Dorothy is reunited with her son—a robin flies to Jeffrey’s family kitchen window. This is the first time that we see Jeffrey and Sandy as an established couple. The film seems to end with a love-conquers-all motif. Since justice seems to have been served, Jeffrey’s and Sandy’s lives can get back to normal. Sandy tells Jeffrey to look at the window, he tells her, “Maybe the robins are here” (01:57:50). The robin, however, seems exaggeratedly affected, with a large bug in its beak. It tilts its head, almost mechanically. The robin segues into a final montage of images that create an illusion of the all-American suburb, the same images that appear in the beginning of the film: tulips, red roses, a fireman in his truck driving down a residential neighborhood, a crossing guard making sure children cross the street safely after school. These images establish the imagined relationship Jeffrey and Sandy have to their world, a relationship that actually disguises the real trouble that exists for people who do not fit into these signifying structures.

The images at the beginning and end of Blue Velvet make Lumberton seem like an illusion and they also interpellate Jeffrey as a good social subject within American suburbia. The final montage is different, though, in a way that is important. It concludes with images of Dorothy, reunited with her son. This seems idealistic, after Jeffrey and Sandy have just literally
watched their dreams come true. For Dorothy this reunion might represent a victory, but it also might represent social reproduction. Her son wears a twirl hat; the same one Jeffrey finds in her apartment after they have slept together and he has chipped her tooth. Dorothy’s appearance is different now. She wears little makeup and brown clothing, which seems strange given her deep reds and blues throughout the film. When she smiles, we see her chipped tooth, and if we look closely, we can see she wears faded blue eyeshadow. But her look of happiness turns sullen and pained. She embraces her child almost sensually. The music that seems cheerful changes into a slower version of “Blue Velvet,” the first song Jeffrey and Sandy hear Dorothy sing: “and I still can see blue velvet through my tears” (01:58:50). The symbols we might identify Jeffrey with seem to represent an inaccessible world for Dorothy—one that she’s in but doesn’t quite fit. She can see it, but she is not able to fully experience it like Jeffrey or Sandy. Despite being reunited with her son, Dorothy remains a subject in a system that destroyed parts of her life, leaving her with a deceased husband and a history of physical, mental and emotional abuse. Because Lynch’s world creation seems nearly too perfect, but still slightly altered, the film’s affects allow Dorothy to stand out.

**Mulholland Drive and Structure Over Identity**

If in *Blue Velvet* the signifying system is America, in *Mulholland Drive* it is Hollywood. In *Blue Velvet* this signifying system, represented through culturally inscribed symbols, is contrasted to Dorothy’s much darker violent reality. Nevertheless, and ironically, her reality exists within Lumberton. *Mulholland Drive*, in contrast, is literally divided into two separate worlds that are seemingly similar with two different sets of main characters played by the same actors. In the first world, the characters do not have a sense of themselves, so they are not able to
be successfully interpellated in the second. Both worlds, however, exist in Hollywood, and though the characters’ personalities change, their relationships to each other remain the same. For instance, characters Betty Elms and Diane Selwyn, both played by Naomi Watts, maintain a sexual relationship with Rita and Camilla Rhodes, both played by Laura Elena Herring, in each world. The structural relationships in *Mulholland Drive* remain the same, though names change in different universes.

Although in *Mulholland Drive*, how characters identify themselves is not as clear as in *Blue Velvet*, some of Lynch’s aesthetic choices help to differentiate the misfits from their worlds. While in *Blue Velvet* Lynch recycles images, in *Mulholland Drive* Lynch recycles information, which suggests that as characters’ change, the structures that make them are maintained. In the first part of the film, Betty Elms comes to Los Angeles after winning a jitterbug contest. In the second half, when we enter a second world, Diane Selwyn, who is also played by Naomi Watts, has the same jitterbug story and come from Deep River, Ontario. They both share a relationship with a tall dark-haired woman who goes by Rita in the first world and Camilla Rhodes in the second. According to Zavarzadeh, “[…] the dominant ideology reproduces itself, constructs and maintains those subjectivities needed for the perpetuation of the status quo” (15). In *Mulholland Drive*, the status quo reproduces itself by reproducing the structural relationships between characters. Even though we are introduced to separate worlds, characters’ positions do not change. Betty and Diane are each devoted to Rita and Camilla figures, and that devotion eventually leads to a disconnect between them and Hollywood.

When Betty first arrives in Hollywood at the beginning of the film, accompanied by an older woman from the jitterbug contest named Irene, who will later appear at the end of the film to haunt Diane, she is immediately interpellated by this new world. She is hailed by Hollywood.
Her reaction is overemphatic. The camera zooms in on her while she stares wide-eyed and smiling at the “Welcome to Los Angeles” airport sign. As she steps onto the escalator she sighs and says, “Oh, I can’t believe it” (00:18:40). Betty is hailed by the sign in a similar way Jeffrey is hailed by the “Welcome to Lumberton” sign. To each character, these places represent precious worlds. When Betty steps outside of the airport, sporting her pink sweater embellished with rhinestones, she says, “Thanks, Irene, I was so excited and nervous. It was sure great to have you to talk to.” Her smile grows bigger, and Irene leans in to say, “Remember, I’ll be watching for you on the big screen.” At this point in the conversation, the sound quality reduces and sounds almost muffled. Betty responds almost too quickly, “Okay, Irene! Won’t that be the day!” (00:09:12). The scene seems so exaggerated that Naomi Watts looks like a bad actress.

Betty’s introduction to Hollywood is like the entry of the robin in *Blue Velvet*. Betty looks like she is trying to fit into the world so well, that she actually stands out against it. Even her clothing seems too precious, too calculated. The subtle differences between Betty and Hollywood make Watts, who plays Betty, seem like she is not connected to the character.

Rita is also hailed by Hollywood. More specifically she is hailed by a movie poster of Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* in Betty’s aunt’s bathroom and reacts positively to it. Rita is first introduced in the film after a limousine crash that leaves her with amnesia. She wakes up deserted and sneaks into Betty’s aunt’s apartment, where Betty stays while her aunt is away on vacation. When Betty arrives, she finds unfamiliar clothes on the floor, yet she does not react to them. She walks into the bathroom, looks in the mirror, giggles to herself, and smiles. When she turns around, she finds Rita, who she doesn’t know, in the shower. Rather than acting surprised or concerned, she apologizes to Rita for walking in on her. She assumes that Rita must know her aunt if she is staying there. Camilla tells her, “There was an accident. I came here.” As Betty
leaves the bathroom, she asks, “What’s your name?” (00:25:00). Rita looks confused, the camera zooms in on her face. She doesn’t respond. Betty leaves the room and puts her clothes away blissfully ignorant of the stranger in her new home. She is smiling and excited. The scene flashes back to Rita in the bathroom, looking at a poster of a blonde Rita Hayworth reflected in the mirror. When she steps out she tells Betty, “My name’s Rita” (00:25:50).

In *Ideology: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton questions interpellation. He asks, if we were already subjects, how could there be ‘a’ moment that we are interpellated? He writes, “How can the subject recognize its image in the mirror as itself, if it does not somehow recognize itself already?” (143). When Rita is hailed by the Hollywood poster, she is quite literally looking at herself, and the poster, in the mirror. She responds well to a Hollywood actress, which we later find she is becoming in the other world as Camilla Rhodes. Betty has a similar recognition when she looks in the mirror. She establishes that she is excited to be in Hollywood and make herself a great actress, but throughout the film, she rejects hails that would interpellate her as Diane.

Betty accepts Rita’s naming of herself almost too easily, which is characteristic of the inexplicable unflattering dedication she has to Rita throughout. The role in Betty’s relationship to Rita exists in both worlds and it involves an inexplicable unflattering dedication. For instance, when Betty is on the phone with her aunt and discovers that Rita does not actually know her—another assumption that Betty has made—her aunt wants to inform the police. Betty insists that there must be a reason why Rita is there. She is inexplicably always defending her. This could be because of her naivety. It might also be because in the alternate universe, Diane pines so intensely for Camilla’s love. In any case, here Betty even rejects her aunt’s attempt to call the police. Like Jeffrey, she feels she can solve this mystery on her own.
After this phone call, Betty questions Rita and the music grows dark. Rita holds her head crying, “I don’t know who I am” (00:43:20). Betty asks, wide-eyed and confused, “What do you mean? You’re Rita.” Rita insists, “No, I’m not. I don’t know who I am.” Because it is suggested throughout the film that Betty is interpellated as a naïve good-girl, we trust her. Yet, this moment challenges Betty’s credibility. Betty tries to force Rita’s constructed identity back on her.

According to Zavarzadeh, “To be constituted as a subject is to be given a consciousness by virtue of which one becomes a free agent and a unique irreplaceable person (because there is only one ‘you’ that can respond to the call of the Other)” (100). He writes that there must be some sort of a double recognition when hailed. The Caller must recognize the Called and vice versa. To recognize each other is also to unconsciously acknowledge the dynamic of the relationship between the Caller and Called. In some ways, it is as if the Caller and Called look into “the mirror of the Other” (100). The Called might recognize his or her role in a relationship or in society while also still unconscious that they are imbedded within ideology. Betty interpellates Rita as her aunt’s friend, and rather than deny the hail, Rita implicitly accepts it. When Betty tells her about her aunt working on a movie, she stops herself and says, blindly assuming, that of course she knows that. She falls into her Hollywood disillusions and tells Rita,

I’d rather be known as a great actress than a movie star. But you know some people end up being both. That is I guess you’d say, sorta why I came here. I’m sorry. I’m just so excited to be here. I just came here from Deep River, Ontario and now I’m in this dream place. You can imagine how I feel. (00:27:00)

Betty does two things here: she hails Rita here as knowing more than she actually does, and she explicitly identifies Hollywood as a dream-place. Like Jeffrey and Sandy, Betty believes in an illusion of the world, which makes her ignorant of what actually happens around her. Part of
what is at stake in Betty interpellating Rita is how it confirms her own interpellation—she brings them both into the dream place of Hollywood ideology.

Betty’s inability to see things is consistent in the film. If she cannot see pieces of herself existing in another world, she cannot be hailed by them. For instance, Betty looks through the newspaper to see if there’s anything about Rita’s accident. Rita asks, “There’s nothing?” Betty responds, “Not that I can see” (00:54:30). Later on, a waitress comes over to fill their coffees. She has hair similar to Diane’s, who we meet later in the film, and the shot zooms in to her nametag. Betty says, “Thanks” and then pauses to read her nametag: “Diane.” Rita precariously looks at the name, pauses, and the music is the same music we hear when Rita-Camilla are in the limousine before the crash. The scene changes, and the women enter Betty’s aunt’s apartment. Rita, who has no memory of anything, connects the name at the diner to another familiar name. She says, “Diane Selwyn. Maybe that’s my name!” The women look through the phone book to find Diane’s number. As they both pick up the phone, ears together, Betty says, “It’s strange to be calling yourself!” (00:55:55). While Betty thinks they are calling Rita, they are actually calling Betty’s other self in the alternate universe. Even as the answering machine plays, she does not recognize her own voice. This seems ironic given that Betty is certain of herself and who she wants to be (a great actress) in the first half of the film. She is even certain that Rita is who she said she was, even when Rita admits she does not know herself. None of these identities quite fit, yet Rita nevertheless continues to act out her role.

Even when Betty sees her own decomposed body, she refuses to be hailed by it. When Betty and Rita enter Diane’s apartment, it smells like death. This is the point of entry into an alternate universe inhabited by Diane, who in the entire preceding film has been Betty. Images inside the apartment grow dark. Rita and Betty close their mouths and noses, each with their
right hand. Their movements mimic each other’s (01:35:15). Betty walks in front of Rita and they slowly approach the bedroom. When they open the door, they see the decomposed body on the bed. The woman Betty and Rita find dead in the bedroom is the decomposed body of Diane-Betty.

After Betty and Rita have found Diane deceased in the apartment, they return to Betty’s aunt’s. Rita is visibly upset. She cries and cuts her hair over the sink. Betty wears a string of pearls, and the scene slowly changes, showing images of wigs and hair supplies. Betty tells her, “I know what you’re doing. I know what you have to do. Let me do it.” She touches her face. The camera moves to the wall, then the mirror, first showing Betty, and then panning to Rita, wearing a short blonde wig. Betty smiles, while Rita seems unfazed (01:38:00). Betty tells her, “You look like someone else.” The someone else Rita looks like is Betty.

In a matter of hours, the dynamic of Betty and Rita’s relationship shifts. That same night, Betty is in her aunt’s bed, and Rita plans to sleep on the couch. Betty offers the bed to Rita, who in the bathroom still wearing her wig. Betty suggests she take the wig off, and when she does, Rita comes into the bedroom fully naked. Nothing between Betty and Rita has suggested a sexual relationship until this moment. It is almost as if the nearly pornographic scenes are entirely aware that they are delivering a fantasy for the audience’s desires, especially because Betty and Rita’s relationship seems strictly platonic at first. There is no indication that they have any sexual relationship until Rita leaves the bathroom naked and Betty invites her to sleep in the same bed. Even after this scene, the next day, their relationship reverts back to being platonic. The only suggestion that their relationship is more than platonic is Betty’s unwavering dedication to Rita. Yet, this seems more like a character trait than an explicit dedication to Rita. Nothing suggests any more between them until the universe flip when Diane and Camilla are again involved with
each other on Camilla’s couch. Betty’s naivete might be a character trait, but her romantic involvement with Rita seems to be part of their structural relationship.

Betty’s dedication to Rita, in fact, seems to be largely to her own detriment. We can understand this better by looking at the moment in the film when Betty has an audition. In the scene, the director, Bob Booker (Wayne Grace), gives her final words. He tells her, “It’s not a contest. The two of them, themselves. So don’t play for real until it gets real” (01:15:45). There is a dramatic pause between “for real” and “until it gets real.” For the viewer, his words do not make much sense. At this point in the film, we have not yet been introduced to Diane or Camilla. It isn’t clear that Betty also has an identity, perhaps in another version of her reality, that is completely different from her identity as the good naïve girl. But as soon as Betty starts acting, she plays the role of both Betty and Diane. Her acting is serious and intense, a big departure from the character we see leaving the airport. She keeps her face close to her acting partner. She speaks slowly, quietly and dramatically. Her breathing is deep and her facial expressions match what we later see from Diane, who is torn and serious. This scene seems like the best acting in the film, as though the actual storyline is purposefully performative. The scene works so well it almost functions as the anomaly in the film—like its own misfit. This is also the only time we see Betty on her own. Without Rita, she proves she can fit into the illusion of Hollywood on her own—she can be a subject in Hollywood’s signifying system.

Later on, when she has the opportunity to audition for a big Hollywood film, which would make her a subject, or an actor, in Hollywood, she skips the audition because she remembers she promised to help Rita. Although it seems that Rita and Camilla are responsible for Betty and Diane’s downfall, even Rita and Camilla have little agency in the film. Throughout the film a group of male Hollywood executives decide who they want to become a star. Even the
director of the film has little say regarding who to cast in the lead of the role. He is even
trolled by the Hollywood men. The executives all want Camilla Rhodes—“She’s the girl.”
Their identities do not matter because they are all just controlled by the system.

We find that Diane has been pining after the actress Camilla Rhodes, also played by
Laura Elena Herring, who is Rita in the other universe. Diane is so distraught by Camilla
rejecting her love that she kills herself. When she does kill herself, it is as if she knows she has
no agency in her life inside Hollywood. By the end of the film, Camilla appears out of the
woods, the same woods she crawls through to get to Betty’s aunt’s apartment. This time she
takes Diane to a party. At the party, Diane is taunted by Camilla’s overbearing lack of love.
Camilla looks at Diane as she kisses another woman. Camilla even accepts an engagement to a
male film director. The scene changes and distraught Diane is in her apartment, alone at first,
haunted by laughter and someone knocking on her door. Her face is sweaty and the camera
zooms in on one of her eyes, which she can hardly keep open. The scene flashes back and forth
between her face and the older couple from the jitterbug contest, the same ones who brought
Betty to Los Angeles (02:20:48).

While Betty thinks Hollywood is an idyllic dream-world, her other self, Diane, proves it
is something else. In Ideology, David Hawkes writes “[w]hen the concrete individual comes
along ideology has ‘always already’ determined a specific set of roles a particular subjectivity
into which the individual will be slotted” (119). This would suggest that Betty’s character was
doomed to face Diane’s fate—a failed actress controlled by the Hollywood system. In one of the
final scenes the older couple from the jitterbug contest, an inch in size, crawl under the door
Diane’s the apartment. Diane runs into her bedroom screaming as the couple chases her, now
life-sized. The music is dark and loud, until Diane opens her bedside table drawer and shoots
herself in the mouth. Then silence. The film comes full circle here, back to the point of entry into the two worlds. Images of Betty, or maybe Diane, winning the jitterbug contest reappear, as do images of Rita and Betty together, with Rita in a blonde wig, mirroring Betty. The final image we see is of a man dressed in drag wearing a bright blue wig looking seriously at an empty stage. In some ways this image takes the focus away from Betty, Diane, Camilla and Rita, but it also reminds us of a line that reoccurs in the club, ‘Silencio’: “No hay banda! There is no band. It is all an illusion.” ‘Silencio’ is the point of entry where Betty and Rita spin into the universe of Diane and Camilla. The film ends in this place of transition, in which we are reminded that we still aren’t fully able to identify any of these characters who are too nuanced and whose identities always seem to be changing.

Despite our not being able to clearly identify them, it is clear that Betty-Diane are destroyed by the Hollywood signifying system. The night Diane kills herself, it seems like she finally realizes that her life is controlled by Hollywood, and Hollywood is controlled by men who make decisions. It is less Camilla that limits Diane than it is the idea of being a successful, beautiful actress; Camilla better fits in the system because she is better controlled by it.

**Conclusion**

*Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive* allow us to glimpse the boundaries of ideology through misfits’ experiences. Both films’ idyllic appearances conceal gendered oppressions that exists inside ideology but are hidden by the ways in which ideology produces false realities. The dynamic of the relationship misfits such as Dorothy and Diane have to their worlds expose ways in which others who fit more seamlessly in their signifying systems perpetuate ideology. Lynch’s aesthetic choices make the disconnect between misfits and their worlds obvious in some ways,
but also easy to ignore in other ways because the disconnects are not necessarily recognizable since misfits are trapped in competing narratives. In the following chapter “Women’s Resistance to ‘Girling’ in Eileen Myles’ *Chelsea Girls* and Chris Kraus’ *I Love Dick,*” I will consider how some ideologically prescribed gender roles are subverted and pushed back against through writing. Whereas Lynch applies his take on ideas like America and Hollywood to his world creation in film, Myles and Kraus adapt their personal experiences into fictionalized worlds as a way to write their lives into reality and transform how misfits function in society.
Women’s Resistance to Girling in Eileen Myles’ *Chelsea Girls* and Chris Kraus’ *I Love Dick*

Fear of not being understood is the greatest fear I thought lying on the bathroom floor at 11p.m.

Worse than not pleasing people, worse than anything else I can think of.

~ Eileen Myles, *Chelsea Girls*

I’ve fused my silence and repression with the entire female gender’s silence and repression.

~Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick*

In her 1993 book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Judith Butler asks, “Is there a way to link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender?” (1). She defines sex, or the materiality of the body, as an ideal construct forcibly materialized through time. Ideal norms are reinforced and reiterated to produce naturalized effects, or in other words, what seems natural is actually constructed. Performativity is the reiterative practice that materializes the body and as a result materializes and reinforces gender. Like ideology, gender performativity is established through ideas that are made material by practices and rituals. Butler argues that “it may be precisely through practices which underscore disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminist and queer politics are mobilized” (4, emphasis added). For Butler, gender is a performance for ideology. Looking at Butler’s work helps us see how she is showing that gender is a normative construct rather than something natural.

The publication of fictionalized memoirs like Eileen Myles’ *Chelsea Girls* and Chris Kraus’ *I Love Dick* challenges and materializes sexual difference Butler similarly deconstructs.
For Myles, this materializing takes the form of vignettes that account for their experiences as lesbian and poet, while Kraus’ *I Love Dick* takes the form of letters written from Kraus to Dick _______ ¹, who becomes her sexual obsession. Both Kraus and Myles defy traditional gender norms, partly through the ways they write about sexual desires. Their novels act as forms of double consciousness, making visible both the worlds they write about as well as the worlds they inhabit in real life, and in doing so disidentifying, to use Butler’s phrase, traditional gender roles.

One way we can understand the challenge these authors pose to traditional gender roles is through Butler’s notion of “girling.” “Girling” is arguably a lesser-known theoretical concept than performativity, and in fact appears only in brief part of the very last chapter of *Bodies That Matter*. In the chapter, “Critically Queer,” Butler extends Althusser’s theory of interpellation through the lens of gender performativity with what she calls “girling” (232). Butler coins “girling” to explain how women are interpellated into feminine subjects before birth, and how these gendered expectations are reinforced through a system of ideology. She identifies how the moment a pregnant female is told, “It’s a girl!” interpellates their child as a feminine subject. “Gender norms operate,” Butler argues, “by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond” (232). She writes that over the course of one’s life “It’s a girl!” leads to “I now pronounce you husband and wife!” The sole purpose of being a woman is to secure this “heterosexual bond” by becoming a man’s wife. “Girling” then is the first step in a problematic and exclusionary ideological concept of the heterosexual nuclear family.

In *Chelsea Girls* and *I Love Dick*, because misfits are keenly aware of not fitting the norms, the gendered nature of social norms becomes more obvious. At the time of their initial

---

¹ Chris Kraus does not disclose the last name of Dick in *I Love Dick*, though the character is speculated to be based on Dick Hebdige, a media theorist.
publications, in 1994 and 1997 respectively, these texts were not widely read but had their own cultural cult followings. Although they might not have flipped the girling paradigm in the late 1990s, their republications in 2014 and 2007, respectively, have appealed to younger audiences. As gender norms change over time, girling can be reimagined because of texts like that of Myles and Kraus. Readers, who might otherwise lack a sense of belonging in the real world, realize their experiences of Myles’ and Kraus’ fictional worlds—outside of the fiction, in the real world. Applying girling to *Chelsea Girls* and *I Love Dick* shows how queer misfit narratives help to expose gendered ideological structures, and in turn, we see how queer misfit narratives might actually reimagine how girling operates.

**Becoming a Female Monster in *I Love Dick***

Chris Kraus’ *I Love Dick* is composed mostly of letters, in no certain order, spanning December 3, 1994 to January 17, 1996, and interspersed with brief and seemingly random third person narration, also by Kraus. The novel begins with a third person account of Chris going out to dinner with her husband, Sylvère Lotringer and his acquaintance Dick. When Dick later invites the couple to spend the night, Chris suggests that Sylvère ride with Dick while Chris rides separately “to separate herself from her coupleness” (19). Although it is not entirely obvious at first, Chris attempts to separate herself from her husband so that she can be seen just as Chris Kraus, an experimental filmmaker. After a decade of marriage, Chris feels as though her identity is hidden behind Sylvère. She no longer feels like Chris-experimental-filmmaker, but like Chris-Sylvère’s-wife. She reclaims her agency, though, after this night at Dick’s, by stripping agency from him. Kraus “girls” Dick and uses him to write herself out of her marriage to Sylvère.
In the first few pages of *I Love Dick*, Kraus writes about herself as a stereotypical feminine subject, silent and passive. While Chris and Sylvère are at Dick’s, he shows them some of his video artwork, which Chris finds “hopelessly naïve” (21). Kraus explains “she is a lover of certain kind of bad art, art which offers a certain transparency into the hopes and desires of the person who made it” (21). “Bad art,” she proposes, “makes the viewer more active” (21). What is stereotypically feminine about her thoughts is not that she is a lover of “bad art” but that she does not voice them: “she keeps these thoughts to herself. Because she does not express herself in theoretical language, no one expects too much from her and she is used to tripping out on layers of complexity in total silence” (21). The “layers of complexity” she holds back in person are reserved for her letters to Dick, which she starts writing after this encounter. She does not explain why she does not engage in “theoretical language,” though it seems clear she associates mostly with her cultural theorist husband Sylvère and when around him has learned others do not want to hear from her. But that does not keep her from using theoretical language in her letters to Dick. In fact, it is almost as though she uses it to mock Sylvère’s status and wealth. By writing to Dick, she is not trying to be the feminine subject. Rather, she uses Dick, who she thinks of as a mediocre artist, and tries to interpellate him as *her* feminine subject, hence girling him.

The letters at first seem obsessive, but it is a contrived obsession. Chris knows that if she actually sleeps with Dick, the fantasy will be over (years later she does, and it is). At first Sylvère joins Chris writing letters to Dick because he thinks it will make their relationship more sexual. To Sylvère, writing to Dick is a game, but for Chris it is serious. Even if it is not entirely successful, she uses Dick as her device to escape being a feminine subject. One night while Sylvère and Chris wait for Dick to call, Sylvère tells Chris, “We’ve been treating Dick like a dumb cunt. Why should he like it? By not calling he’s playing right into his role” (59). He calls
Dick an explicit female insult when what he really means is that they have been treating Dick like a woman, inferior to what he is. Ironically, sexist as it is, Chris knows that Dick is playing into his role. After all, she sets it up. In “Part Two” when Chris leaves Sylvère, she actively writes past Dick as a person to Dick as an idea. Although she still writes “Dear Dick” or “DD,” she thinks of it as “Dear Diary.”

The “DD” letters become less sexual and more introspective as Kraus recognizes how gendered her life has been. At the end of “Part One: Scenes from a Marriage,” four days after she gives Dick 90 pages of love letters, Chris has a realization about her relationship to Sylvère. She screams, “Who’s Chris Kraus? […] She’s no one! Sylvère Lotringer’s wife! She’s his ‘Plus-One’!” (116). According to Kraus, “she remembered all the times they’d worked together when her name had been omitted, how equivocal Sylvère’d been, how reluctant to offend anyone who paid them. She remembered the abortions, all the holidays she’d been told to leave the house so Sylvère could be alone with his daughter. In ten years, she’d erased herself” (117). None of these significant details about her relationship to Sylvère have been mentioned previously, but with Sylvère gone, she begins to see things she had not seen. In a subsequent letter to Dick later in the text, Chris explains that when they first dated, Sylvère invited her to a birthday party where her name was not on the list—she was Sylvère Lotringer’s “Plus One” (179). She describes the party full of artists, most of them men, “except for female art dealers and us plus-ones” (179). Similar to her encounter with Dick, she expected to be “patronized and ignored” (179). Having become more aware of her role in her own erasure, the letters become a way to renounce the men who did not find her “feminine” enough and empower herself.

In “Part Two” she describes how men often broke up with her because they found someone else who was “more bovine or feminine” (54). She makes fun of the men who reject her
and the women they pursue, comparing them to cattle. She realizes that her husband is like these men. He does not understand her purpose in writing the letters to Dick, nor does he understand her. She writes that infatuation is “about wanting to know someone” (54). With women she has been infatuated with, she has wanted to be with them in ways that were not sexual. With men, she uses sex to realize who a person is “underneath the surface.” When she finally sleeps with Dick, she forces gender roles to reverse. She treats him like men treated her for prioritizing being an artist over being a sexualized woman.

A year after leaving Sylvère and two years after her first “Dear Dick” letter, Chris decides to end the fantasy and sleeps with Dick. Because “The Exegesis,” where Chris has her most revelatory reflections, comes after she sleeps with Dick, readers might not realize this act is an empowered and deliberate choice. The morning after, while they are still naked in bed, he tells her he has a “Friend (you [Dick] somehow femininized the word) arriving” (162). She is understandably deflated and the conversation takes a turn. They banter for a bit as Chris seems to try to hold onto the fantasy a little longer, even though they both know it is over. She tells him she “felt something for [him]. This strange connection,” to which he replies, “But you don’t even know me! [...] you project all this shit over me, you kidnap me, you stalk me, invade me with your games, and I don’t want it! I never asked for it! I think you’re evil and psychotic!” (163). It seems ironic that Dick feels so uncomfortable by Chris’ projections of him. When Chris projects her fantasies on to him he feels violated, but her actions are the norm for how men often treat women. But it is not ironic if it is Chris who is girling him, since Dick assumes the stereotypical feminine subject position. The difference is that for Dick it is just this one instance when for Chris it is most of the situations she finds herself in, including with her husband.
Sylvère tells Chris sleeping with Dick is a way of seeking rejection, but Chris recognizes it as a “bigger and more cultural” problem (171). She tells the story of when she was younger in Richard Schechner’s Aboriginal Dream Time Workshop. Chris describes herself then as a “Serious Young Woman, hunched and introspective” (173). Chris and Richard were the only two of the group to wake up before noon. They read the news together and talked about politics. She mentions him liking to talk about Althusser. “[L]ater on he turned the group against me for being too cerebral and acting like a boy. […] I hadn’t learned the trick of throwing sex into the mix” (173). When she starts writing letters to Dick, in contrast, she combines sex with art. “[E]xposed, alone, androgynous […] She wasn’t beautiful like the women: unlike the men, she had no authority” (178). Being a serious girl made her seem masculine and undesirable to men. She changed from a “Serious Young Woman” into a sexualized female, but this kept her from being fully herself. Only after she was able to be both serious and sexual, not one or the other, could she reclaim herself.

The journey to reclamation took Kraus recognizing how she had been complicit in a gendered ideological construct. She writes,

I’ve fused my silence and repression with the entire female gender’s silence and repression. I think the sheer fact of women talking, being, paradoxical, inexplicable, flip, self-destructive but above all else public is the most revolutionary thing in the world. I could be 20 years too late but epiphanies don’t always synchronize with style. (210)

Her personal epiphany might have come twenty years too late, but her work was published twenty years before its time. Publishing I Love Dick breaks the silence that counteracts the ideological structure. Towards the end of the book, she tells one of her friends that she aims to be a female monster: “Female monsters take things as personally as they really are. They study
facts. Even if rejection makes them feel like the girl who’s not invited to the party, they have to understand the reason why” (218). *I Love Dick* is ultimately about Kraus’ interrogating why she identified as Sylvère’s “Plus One” for a decade. Chris realizes that she has to “make [her] problems social” (196).

In the forward to the 2006 republication of *I Love Dick*, Eileen Myles writes,

I just knew in a quiet way I was ruined. If I agreed to be female. There was so much evidence on the screen and in books […] I just hated reading work by women or about women because it always added up the same. Loss of self, endless self-abnegation, even as the female was trying to be an artist, she wound up pregnant, desperate, waiting on some man. A Marxist guy, perhaps. (13)

Kraus reimagines what it means to be female in *I Love Dick*. She reclaims her agency by “girling” Dick. Although she does not escape the ideological structures that keep gender norms in place, she creates space for other women in the real world by challenging the norms. Kraus ends her novel establishing herself as an artist without being “desperate” or “waiting on some man.”

In 2016, twenty years after the novel’s publication, *I Love Dick* adapted to an Amazon Prime television series, directed by Jill Soloway, who is famous for having previously directed the award-winning series *Transparent*. In Jill Soloway’s adaptation, they (Soloway) incorporate some of Kraus’ film into the series as cameo footage—they make space for Kraus’ art. She continues to forge space for her gendered oppression in the real world—she becomes her own “female monster.”
**Chelsea Girls: Creating Spaces that Challenge Gender**

On the cover of the original 1994 fictional memoir *Chelsea Girls* is a Nicole Eisenman drawing that looks like dozens of nude women’s bodies obscurely intermingled in a pile in a pinkish red hue. Eisenman’s drawing suits the book’s content, a mélange of women having sex with other women, drinking, getting arrested, dismantling the patriarchy. The 2015 republication of *Chelsea Girls* replaces the plurality of girls with a photograph of the author, Eileen Myles, taken by Robert Mapplethorpe in 1980. Chelsea girls becomes Chelsea girl, but not exactly.

The photo is a black and white head shot of Myles, turned slightly sideways, back hunched, eyes looking almost but not quite directly into the camera. Myles wears a neutral expression, makeup-less and androgynous. Without the words “Chelsea Girls” below the photo, one might not immediately place Myles’ gender. In his *New York Times* book review “In ‘I Must Be Living Twice’ and ‘Chelsea Girls,’ Eileen Myles Ruminates,” Dwight Garner says Myles “resembles the young Mick Jagger as merged with Cat Power,” both long-haired cool hippie singer-songwriters (n.p.). Myles serves as both author and narrator of *Chelsea Girls*. In real life, Myles no longer identifies by feminine pronouns she and her and instead goes by they and them. But narrator Eileen of *Chelsea Girls* remains she and her.

It would be easy to look at this new cover and not know it is a Mapplethorpe, the Mapplethorpe, who is best-known for stirring controversy when his National Endowment for the Arts funded exhibit was hailed by some as pornography. In fact, in one of the *Chelsea Girls* vignettes, plainly named “Robert Mapplethorpe Picture,” Myles writes about how her own mother had no idea who he was and did not want to hang the photograph of her daughter by the famous artist. She does not even purchase a frame but rather begrudgingly slides it on top of another family photo. Myles as narrator is keenly aware of Mapplethorpe’s significance, despite
being an hour late to their meeting, and wanting to pretend as though she’s a “perverse and egoless writer” (225).

“Robert Mapplethorpe Picture” begins “The fear of not being understood is the greatest fear I thought lying on the bathroom floor at 11 p.m. Worse than not pleasing people, worse than anything else I can think of” (221). Throughout this vignette, Eileen is constantly being misunderstood—by her girlfriend, her mother, and Robert Mapplethorpe himself. When Myles shows a girl she dates, Ybette, the photograph, Ybette tells her that the way she looks in the photo is why she had a crush on her. “That’s who you looked like to me,” she says. “But you’re not like that” (224). It seems strange that the cover of the book is a photo of Eileen that seems like Eileen but isn’t actually the real Eileen. Ironically, knowing this, Myles still decides to make it the cover of the novel. In this case, not only does the content allow us to see how Myles perceives how she does not fit, but the photo does that too. She is and is not that girl on the cover. *Chelsea Girls* is about Myles struggling for identity and trying to figure out how to portray herself to the world.

Myles’ two identities in *Chelsea Girls*—lesbian and poet—get conflated. When Eileen first meets Mapplethorpe, she tells him she’s a poet. “You got a band he said. No. How come he asked. I just write poems. He didn’t get it. I felt like I was being lazy. It wasn’t true. I worked hard. You don’t know how hard it is to be a lesbian” (222). The misunderstanding from Mapplethorpe seems especially ironic given the ways in which his own work was misunderstood and even belittled for its often sexual content. From an outside perspective, it seems like he should understand her—they are both artists and they are both gay. Despite the struggles faced by gay men like Mapplethorpe in the twentieth century, Myles still felt outside of a culture that would seem connected. Society wanted to homogenize gay culture, but men and women had very
different experiences. Even to Mapplethorpe, Myles feels she has something to prove, though it is not clear what it is she is proving. His expectations of her as a poet are bigger than her reality as a poet—she “just write[s] poems.” This identity as poet comes from a place of living as a lesbian outside of gender norms.

Myles sees this double bind in “Bath, Maine.” In this vignette Myles and other lesbians get drinks in a gay bar. When they see the men taking their shirts off, they take theirs off too. In classic Myles style, they (meaning Myles) do not distinguish between people’s voices. Myles writes, “The men don’t have to put their shirts on. Just get out. You can’t be in this bar with your shirts off. Put your shirts on and get out. We did. But first we took our pants off and walked out” (2).

One way that Myles changes Butler’s girling, then, is by creating ideological subsets within already existing ideological structures.

Myles creates an ideological subset for themselves to exist as a lesbian in a world that dismisses homosexuality. They do this through writing, which may be part of why structure in *Chelsea Girls* is continually a struggle to decode, and why even writing about that structure often leads to confusion. Myles, both in the book and in real life, is trapped in the heterosexual matrix, and because they do not abide by heterosexual norms, Myles struggles to prove themselves a valid subject. According to Althusser, ideology is maintained by the reproduction of the submission of rules of an established order enforced through the governing bodies of repressive and ideological state apparatuses (104). The Repressive State Apparatus, or RSA, functions as the ideological superstructure, and are composed of things like the government, the army, police. Ideological State Apparatuses, or ISAs, are subsets within ideology that function privately and are things like religion, family, or culture (110). *Chelsea Girls* creates its own kind of ideological state apparatus, one in which Myles, the narrator and its central subject, recognizes that her
identity is not validated by other people. This misrecognition is reinforced when we get to
“Robert Mapplethorpe Picture,” when Myles is even misunderstood by another gay artist
because she is female. This is not lost on Myles. In a way she tries to hail herself as a lesbian and
a poet the way she wants to be seen. Through her unconventional writing style and content, she
hails her reader as well in order to confirm her role. Her written identity materializes sexual
difference and pushes back against cultural sects that try to reduce her.

Myles creates her own cultural state apparatus because of the ways sex, sexuality, and
femininity are ingrained in social norms. Elizabeth Wingrove explains how such a process works
in “Interpellating Sex.” Similar to Butler’s position on girling, Wingrove says that ideology is
made material through material practices and argues we should consider ‘sex’ as an effect rather
than an object in order to better understand other segments of ideology. She argues that
femininity is often ideologized into one group, “women.” She blames this overgeneralization on
the ways in which the idea of the female has been misrepresented in ideology. From one
perspective, “femininity exists because individuals assume the proper positions and practices of
‘women’ across multiple [ideological state apparatuses]” (883). This line of thinking, she says,
does not consider the ways in which different women have different lived relations to race, class,
culture, religion and the “issue is how these ideas (identities) find material form, how they
organize and are organized through social relations and political institutions” (885). Myles’
attempt to alter the existing ISAs through Chelsea Girls, allows us to see how she sees how she
does not fit ideologized femininity.

Myles begins Chelsea Girls with “Bath, Maine,” a narrative that, as we’ve seen,
plummets the reader into a world unusual for its time, in part because its storyteller is a lesbian
and lesbian culture takes a central focus. In the first sentences Myles speaks directly to the
reader, hailing them into their space. Myles writes, “I really had no damn business there. I mean, why am I living with my ex-girlfriend and new girlfriend, and her ex-girlfriend. How could that possibly be comfortable. I could be writing this from a jail cell. Funny, huh?” (1). Not only does their content defy tradition, but so does their language. They write questions as though they are statements. They do not use quotation marks to distinguish voices. *Chelsea Girls* is unconventional for how Myles challenges structure, stylistically and ideologically.

Even though misfits know they aren’t likely to win battles against established social structures, there is something important about trying anyways, which is precisely what Eileen does in “Bath, Maine.” In this vignette Eileen’s ex-girlfriend, Christine, is pulled over by the police for driving while intoxicated. Christine punches the police officer who has pulled her over, and Eileen jumps on his back in her defense. Myles writes,

> in my heart, I know the moment of my flight towards the blue shoulders of the law, I was flying for Chris, did love her, and was saving her from the professional mediocrity of white Datsuns, I was releasing her from bourgeoisie captivity, maybe bringing her home to the scrubby plains of my drunk art and love. (10)

It is somewhat ironic that *Chelsea Girls* begins with the same model as Althusser’s explanation of interpellation, literally having an encounter with a police officer, “the blue shoulders of the law,” similar to Althusser’s example about hailing in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” She even invokes Marxist terminology, “bourgeoisie captivity,” being imprisoned by the ruling class. Even though it is highly unlikely Myles was making a deliberate connection to Althusser—she probably was not—the parallel is striking. But Myles’ version takes a different turn than the original. Rather than accepting the hail of “hey you,” she attacks the police officer. She physically wrestles him when she has no real chance of success.
The actions Myles takes, from jumping on the first police officer’s back to insulting an officer at the station, only act, however, to reinforce social status. When police try to get her mug shot, she spits on the ground and makes faces to prevent them from taking the photograph. She looks at one of the female police officers and tells her, “you are a traitor to women, you’re a dyke, hey you big bulldyke, look at you” (10). Because Myles does not use quotation marks, upon a quick read, it seems as if the police officer is insulting Myles’ sexuality. Actually, though, Eileen is using the language the police might use to insult her, to insult them instead. But this does not work the way she hopes because, as Butler writes in “Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” even the language one might use to escape ideology, or the power of the ruling class, reinforces the structures that made it. Butler emphasizes how interpellation depends on history, specifically historicity. She writes that one “cannot extract itself from the historicity of that chain [of calls] or raise itself up and confront the chain as if it were an object opposed to me, which is not me, but only what others have made of me” (122). Eileen is, therefore, reinforcing their power even as she appropriates the language that has culturally been used against her.

Myles’ responses to the police officers’ hails might come from the guilt that is embedded in girling. Turning in response to a hail is an admission of guilt, according to Noela Davis’s discussion of Butler and Althusser. That admission of guilt binds the person who turns to the law (Davis 885). In “Subjected Subjects? On Judith Butler’s Paradox of Interpellation,” Davis questions how subjects have guilt if Althusser claims that they are always-already subjects, making the case that guilt comes from social dynamics embedded in culture. For Eileen, using the police officers’ language against them reinforces a guilt complex she probably does not recognize. And yet the guilt can be seen when she pushes against them despite knowing better.
Another way Eileen tries to undermine the power of the RSAs, like the police officers, who do not acknowledge her identity as legitimate by proclaiming herself a poet. Eileen goes as far to suggest that poetry has allowed her to become her own god. Myles thinks she legitimates her identity when she tells them,

I’m a poet, you fools, you asshole cops! Poet has always meant to me saint or hero, the dancing character on the stained-glass window of my soul, the hand lifting slowly through time, the whirr that records my material against strong light, gosh, why I live.

[…] I was a devout child, but my prayers were ritualistic insurance, and a real list of dead people—God, take care of grandma, grandpa—it became so long it was unfeasible […]

So I began to take up residence in my poems, saw my life as a loser’s, hence poetic. (10-11)

Myles recognizes the illusion of ideological structures and how belief in such structures are just “ritualistic insurance.” She tries to convince them that her poetic ideology has more power than they do. Of course, for the police, who are part of a sector of repressive state apparatuses, Myles has no power as a poet. In fact, they find her narrative laughable. They even tell her to recite a poem, which for them, reinforces the power they have over her. She recites a love poem, asserting her power through vulnerability, though for RSAs vulnerability has no power. Even though she cannot escape ideology, she creates space for her identity by proclaiming her vulnerability.

Myles was not always devoted to securing her identities. In fact, like the little girl that prayed for her dead relatives, she also tried to prescribe to gender norms as a teenager, and eventually found that they felt constructed and unnatural. We see Myles subscribing to the gender norms that reinforce “girling” in the vignette “1969.” In “1969,” Eileen is 19-years-old,
and living in Falmouth Heights, Massachusetts. The first line begins, “You can’t force a story that doesn’t want to be told” (101). She picks up a coffee and the *Boston Globe* every morning to make herself “be something” while the song “Good Morning Starshine” plays on “everyone’s radios” (101). She describes a vivid picturesque reiterative morning scene, and then contrasts it with her evenings in which she drinks too much alcohol and wants to have sex. She writes, “Everything I did was something to fix me. With all my heart I was trying to be dead” (101). At 19-years-old, Eileen is in the liminal stage between teenager and adult and discovering that she does not aspire to most people-around-her’s ideas of expected social norms. During the daytimes Eileen tries to fit in with what is expected from her, but at night, she separates herself from that reality and lives destructively. She would rather live destructively and try to be dead than live in a reiterative ideology that is prescribed to her through “girling.” Although “girling” isn’t natural, the reiteration of gender norms reinforces its naturalizing effect (Butler 8). If she can ritualize her behaviors, she can affirm their naturalizing effects. But in this vignette, we see Eileen struggle to believe in what she is doing.

Eileen innately knows that these “norms” are not natural, which is seen clearly in her interactions with her boyfriend Mike whom she doesn’t understand and who does not understand her—a common thread in the text. He tells her one day that he can see her living in a big house with kids—“a really cool mom” (103). He tries to interpellate her into the nuclear family ideal, but Eileen “never said anything which indicated in any way that [she] wanted to have a lot of kids and be a ‘cool mom’” (103). She thinks of that future as the real world. It seems like a natural thing to want, but she does not want or envision herself that way. She contrasts this

---

2 As a point of interest, comparatively, Chris Kraus was 39 when she gained awareness that led to her pushing against social norms. She even says that that awareness came “20 years too late” (210), which would have made her 19 if it were “on time,” the same age as Eileen Myles.
image with her current reality, living in a home with nine other young women, which she describes as office-secretary types who sleep with married men and get abortions (105). She does not identify with these women either. Instead she describes herself as “the resident college girl, or the intellectual hippy—whatever role I needed to fill” (106). She finds ways to change who she is in order to fit, yet she recognizes her differences compared to other women.

Eileen does not want to diminish her own identity and yet she consistently does so by playing whatever role seems to suit who she’s with. This is, in fact, why she stays with Mike so long. When Mike announces he has just started reading the *Lord of the Rings*, she thinks that if he has only started reading now, then he has so much of life to catch up on. She writes,

I couldn’t show any of these feelings. I had to act dumb. I had to keep losing so he wouldn’t know I wasn’t normal. It was like being in a bowling alley and listening to the pins drop incessantly as your score got lower and lower and men were beginning to smile at you. I’ll never forget that night. Watching his back go up the stairs as he returned to his dream, his house. (110)

Eileen knows she is supposed to want certain things, but she does not. She does not want male attention, especially if it means having to reduce herself to get it. And yet, she does it often. In the real world she is supposed to want to marry a man and have a family, even if it is not desirable to her. Despite this, she continues to try to fit into the “real world.” Towards the beginning of “1969,” Myles writes, “The attention of women was softer and more pleasing, but I didn’t know there was anything you could do with those feelings. The best solution I ever arrived at was to try and control myself and be dead” (102). She is aware that part of her misfitting is that she is not interested in being with men. This is a key part of living in her perceived real world because she is at the age where these ideas begin to turn concrete—women date men so
they will eventually get to the “I now pronounce you man and wife” stage in their lives.

Although the attention of women was “softer and more pleasing,” Eileen does not know that she can exist in the world where there is space for those feelings. Being inside of ideology keeps her from seeing it.

Until, that is, she meets someone who is like her and who, similarly, does not fit does; only then does she realize she can exist as a kind of misfit, but even here she doesn’t yet feel authorized to choose this life. When Myles finds out that Mike is cheating on her with a more “normal” girl, Myles dates Paul, another hippy “weirdo” who is starkly different than Mike.

They do things together that she does not do with Mike—dance, laugh, have adventures. Myles is particularly struck by how Paul does not make judgments on people—he engages with them. She writes that she always thought she could judge a person by how they dressed. She realizes this when they are at Woodstock, where the world seems different to her—where giant peace symbols are made by smoke in the sky. Eileen experiences a new world with Paul, yet does not think it is part of the real world. When they return to Massachusetts, Mike and Paul meet. Eileen stays with Mike, and Paul leaves. Mike tells her that she did not have to leave Paul. “I know,” she says. “I didn’t know it at all. Mike was like my job, my family. He was the real world where I belonged” (117). Although Paul’s world is more appealing to her, she does not see that there is any other world that actually exists than the one with Mike. To her, Paul’s existence is like Woodstock—it seems ideal but is so far out of reach because it does not meet the standards of what Myles’ perceives as the real world.

At the end of “1969,” Eileen attends Paul’s funeral. The only misfit she knows dies. The final lines of “1969” read, “Nobody would even say out loud that he did it to himself. I felt that. He probably already had his life. There was no place for Paul to go. He had that great laugh”
She recognizes that this other misfit had trouble finding a space for himself in the real world. He had just graduated, and his family had high expectations for him. But he was just a bartender. One night he drove his car into a stone wall. She also recognizes that no one has to think about why he passed, or that he “did it to himself,” if they do not talk about it. One cannot be hailed as something if it is not said out loud.

In May 2017, I asked Myles why they chose to publish *Chelsea Girls* in 1994. They said that’s when they could. Agents and editors “said these stories weren’t publishable. They didn’t have arc, they didn’t come to anything, they weren’t redemptive.” Myles said that a poet, Tom Clark, connected them to Black Sparrow, even though Myles was hoping to be published by something more mainstream. They said, “I think people who don’t like my work, they can’t abandon their own rules and just go with it.” Sometimes an editor will want Myles to move things around—“it’s just an assumption that there’s a better order or a more normalized, more readable experience. That’s not what I’m interested in giving anyone.” And Myles doesn’t. Neither Myles nor Kraus write “normal” narratives. Maybe they did not escape ideology, but their works have a larger cultural place now that did not exist when they were first published in the 1990s.

**Coda**

In an interview for the *Louisiana Channel*, Kraus said of her character Chris, “She’s writing her way out of her old life into another life.” In texts like *Chelsea Girls* and *I Love Dick*, misfits create other ideological worlds for other misfits. In a way this shows how culture has shifted since the original publication of *Chelsea Girls* and *I Love Dick*. In Jill Soloway’s adaptation of *I Love Dick*, Kraus’ story is set in Marfa, Texas. In the book, Kraus floats between
Los Angeles and New York, but never in Marfa. In a way she seems almost disembodied, which is strange for a first-person novel. She writes little about her present life and more about her desires and her past. In contrast, the television series grounds Kraus as a struggling artist who moves to Marfa with Sylvère and who doesn’t feel recognized because she is a woman. The choice to set the film in Texas is interesting given Soloway’s connections to Eileen Myles, who lives part-time in Marfa, a very small art town. Eileen Myles and Jill Soloway dated during the production of I Love Dick. This interesting network of misfits work together to make space for other misfits who are pushing back against the ideological structures put in place that enforce gender roles.

Neither Myles nor Kraus write “normal” narratives. One of the ways Kraus and Myles obscure ideological systems is by sharing their names with their protagonists. These works were all written around the same time, and they all mobilize feminist and queer politics, like Butler suggests. This mobilization just comes later than intended. Maybe these texts do not escape ideology, but their works have a larger cultural place now that did not exist when they were first published in the 1990s.
Maude: A Drafty Review

Maude likes purple things and poetry. She writes poetry, even though it’s not good, readable or relatable. She writes poetry so that when a stranger at a party asks her what her trade is, she can look him in the eyes, because it’s usually a him, and tell him that she’s a poet. Then she will take a sip of merlot. The redder her teeth get, the more she tells people she’s a poet. In the 1990s, Maude published *Chasing Men, Chasing Myself*. Some critics said her work was a vital text that represented third-wave feminism. In trying to write herself through identity politics, Maude’s poetry turned self-referential. All of her work referenced past work and had content like, “At the breakfast table/ I wonder/ Can I still eat doughnuts/ or has time passed.” Maude, whose work is about establishing identity, lies to her reader. Her name isn’t even Maude, it’s Clarice. She didn’t want any connection to Jodi Foster in her stellar performance of *Silence of the Lambs* besides the always-pleasing Anthony Hopkins.

When people asked Maude her age, she would lie and say she was 53. She was only 42, but this gave her the chance to blush when people said, “You look so good for your age!” Maude was a product of her poetry. Her hair was frizzy and blonde, and she admired an equally poor poet, Deborah Landau. She even created a group on Facebook for Deborah “Fandaus.” It only had one other member who posted videos of herself reciting Deb’s poetry and really embodying her pained expressions of being an upper-class white female whose privilege couldn’t save her from the scares of aging. The difference between Maude and Deb was that Deb had money and won an award that made her more money for already having money. Articles say it’s because she’s a good poet. Maude recounts jealousy in some of her works, “Why not me/when I look in the mirror/I know it could have/been/me/biting toes/off oppression/not her.”
Maude embodies her poetry. She chews her lip until it swells up to give herself that full-lip-look. Her motto: “big lips, bigger hips, but no babies!” Maude chews one half of the bottom at a time, so it looks like it’s been injected with cheap botox. The inside of her mouth she’s gnawed raw. Every bite stings. She goes days without eating. She struggles to brush her teeth because the insides of her mouth are chewed raw. She holds her chest and tries not to breathe. All of these efforts are forced. Maude struggles to struggle. It helps her write—to get into the middle-aged suburban woman who has sexual and impulsive needs that the general male public can’t see. She wants to be remembered like Sylvia Plath, but with no ovens involved. She writes about all of these details in Checking Myself: An Embodied Collection.

In her latest book of poetry, Body Moves, she recounts her time after her third divorce. She looks at shades of purple lipstick in a Sephora, and wonders whether one lipstick was worth $30 for a struggling artist who has just gotten divorced. Maude never discloses whether she purchased that lipstick, but the cover of her book, marked with a big purple lip smack against a cup of cruddy coffee, suggests she must have. In her next book of poetry coming out next year, she’ll undoubtedly reveal the details. But in Body Moves she uses language like “hobble,” “pockmarked,” and “copulate,” to describe her body and what aging has made of it. “In this world/ No one can see/ How I change/ utterly/ change.”

In conversation at a dinner party where only shrimp was served, Maude was heard saying, “My goal is to be accepted into the Best American Erotic Poems.” Perhaps in her next collection of poetry, if she can move out of middle age grievances with a wider vocabulary. Perhaps if she not only bites, but chews the toes off oppression.
Iris read online that first anniversary gifts were supposed to be paper-related. She thought maybe a card would suffice, but a good pop-up Hallmark card with some sort of glitter and hearts cost nearly $20 and she wasn’t sure Delilah would appreciate her gesture. Indigo boy’s litter situation was becoming a problem. They kept his box under Delilah’s desk, out of sight. Delilah needed a clean workspace because sometimes the litter got wedged under her toenails. Delilah hadn’t wanted to adopt the kitten, anyway. A vacuum would be practical and sweet.

They decided they would celebrate their first anniversary at the old-town movie theater. Iris got to the theater early, before Delilah. She bought herself a mint brownie. It would both freshen her breath and entice Delilah--chocolate was her favorite flavor. Iris saved Delilah a seat at the back of the theater. She chose the last of seven rows, so they could discreetly “do some kissin.’” There were only three seats in this row. Iris chose the middle and put her bag on the aisle seat. A man with a moustache sat next to Iris, on her purse, in the aisle seat. Once he already sat down, he asked if anyone was sitting “there” and pointed to his crotch. It was hard not to be distracted by what looked like a patch of shaved pubic hair glued to his upper lip. She paused and half-smiled with chocolate crumbles in between her front teeth. It was the kind of smile she would give someone sitting next to her on the bus, when every other seat was empty, while also avoiding eye contact and pretending to text someone on her phone, as if she weren’t trapped between a strange man and a maple-syrup-looking stained window. Her town’s buses were never clean. Iris told him no one was sitting there. “But let me actually just grab my purse.
You’re sitting on it.” She didn’t want to seem rude, so she smiled again. Despite her initial discomfort, he didn’t smell weird, which was typically how she gauged her feelings toward strangers.

The lights dimmed. In the first preview, a man chewed strawberries, red goo spilling down his chin, while he shoved a young girl against a brick wall. Moustache man shrieked with laughter, violently rocking his head back and forth. Iris stopped breathing for a minute. She hoped he would stop, but his rocking got faster. She excused herself to the lobby and took her puffer coat and purse with her.

Delilah was always late, which would otherwise have been fine, except when people like moustache man who wear leather jackets manically laugh at potential rape scenes. The indie film Iris and Delilah had tickets for was about an existentialist doctor whose true passion was for carving images of genitalia into avocados. It seemed strange, and Delilah hadn’t wanted to see it but Iris asked her, “Who would actually buy tickets to a movie like that other than us?”

Iris thought maybe Delilah wouldn’t show up, and that she’d sit with moustache man, not because she had to, but because then she wouldn’t feel like she was seeing a movie alone on their anniversary. Feeling alone was worse than sitting next to a weirdo. The night before, Delilah and Iris had a fight that seemed implicitly to be a fight, but hadn’t been explicitly identified as a fight, and if Delilah didn’t think of their fight as a fight, and Iris said something about them fighting, it could cause a fight. Usually Delilah would say that their arguments were always about who loved the other more. Lately, Iris thought their arguments were about Delilah loving Indigo, the cat she didn’t even want, more than her.
When Iris gave Delilah her gift, she used it immediately, cleaning every rug, corner and crevice of their one-bedroom apartment. Although it was bought with good intentions and Delilah seemed--at least to Iris--happy with it, Delilah was embarrassed to tell her family that, for their anniversary, Iris got her a vacuum. So, Iris gave Delilah a cat tree, too.

Whenever Iris came home from working at the fruity restaurant down the street, Delilah would move furniture around for Indigo’s convenience. Although she hadn’t wanted to adopt him, she bonded with him more than Iris did. She taught him to jump on her chest for treats. In the morning he would pat at her face when he was hungry. He would even sit at her desk while she was on the computer and wait there until she played videos of birds on YouTube. A few weeks earlier, Delilah left a portable heater topped with a fluorescent striped towel by the living room window so Indigo could safely and comfortably watch real birds fly by. But then he tried to attack the glass. Iris didn’t want him to get into those habits. She was afraid that when they actually needed the heater for chilly nights, Indigo would jump on it and burn his little paws. She also thought the heater looked tacky, so she ordered a brown cat tree. Amazon notified her that she could earn a one-dollar digital credit. If she waited a week rather than the Prime benefit of two days. She loved a bargain and was saving up her credits for a digital copy of *Harold and Maude*. They were such a fun couple.

One night, when Iris walked home in the snow from the restaurant, Delilah was taking pictures of Indigo on the towel. Iris asked, “What happens when we use the heater for its actual purpose, and he thinks it’s okay to sit on it?”
“Well, if he feels the heat coming out of it, why would he jump on it?” Delilah paused, and then got mad. “Stop trying to change the way I live.” She grabbed Indigo and went into the bedroom. Iris put the heater in the basement to show Delilah she was capable of being aggressive too.

The night before their anniversary, a package arrived at the door. When Iris ordered the tree, she sent it to Delilah, not herself. (Delilah had Amazon Prime and free shipping.) Since their last fight, they hadn’t talked about cat trees or portable heaters, and Iris had a habit of checking her email only once every three weeks. She forgot that a tree would be on its way. When Delilah opened the package, she called out, “You’re helping me assemble this.”

Iris was in a “mood” that night. She did not want to have anything to do with heaters, cats, or cat trees. She didn’t want to look at the pieces and scratching post and its little hammock and all of the screws in the cardboard box. She didn’t know how to assemble things, despite stereotypes.

“No.” Iris was also in the process of baking Delilah a vegan peanut-butter cake.

“So you won’t help a girl out?”

“I have frosting on my hands.”

“You can’t wash them?”

Iris begrudgingly washed her hands, while Delilah scissored the box open. When its contents were emptied, Indigo jumped in with his miniature kitten stuffed animal. Delilah stopped to take photos.

The relationship between Delilah and Indigo bothered Iris. She had wanted a kitten. Delilah didn’t. Iris even named him five months before she could convince Delilah to adopt him.
with her. Iris hadn’t understood why Delilah didn’t want a cat, but, then, she’d never had pussy before, either, and Delilah had. Anyways, Delilah bonded with Indigo almost immediately. They were both nocturnal, loved cuddles, and needed lots of head scratches. This, however, took a toll on Delilah and Iris’s relationship. Delilah hadn’t been as affectionate since they adopted little Indigo boy. How could they have sex when Delilah was always worried that Indigo might choke on his feather string toy? She would joke, “Don’t worry. We’ll be closer to fine.”

Looking at the tree parts, Iris said, “This seems pretty clear. I don’t think you need my help.” Delilah wanted Iris to hold the furry cardboard pieces while she screwed the posts in. After she did the first cat branch, the oven timer dinged. Iris huffed, “Cat tree or cake. Choose wisely.”

“Darlin’, this will only take a second. I just need you to hold it so I don’t screw these in crooked.” Iris hated manual labor. She was also annoyed with Indigo who kept nudging his head against the scratching post they were trying to keep steady.

“You need to move your cat out of the way.” Iris said it half-laughingly.

“Fine. Don’t help. Instead you should spend more time bringing in income by knitting beanies and selling them on Etsy.”

It was a hobby, not a career, and some of Iris’s beanies had hundreds of “favorites” from shoppers. Iris knew her hobby would take off on Cyber Monday when she listed her beanies as 33% off. There were some things Delilah didn’t understand.

That night they sat in silence for three hours watching *I Love Dick*, based on the book by Chris Kraus. It didn’t entertain Delilah. Something about Kevin Bacon reminded her of a high school English teacher who retold too many Seinfeld jokes. If she told Iris she didn’t want to
watch it, Iris would think there was something up between them. That could possibly cause another fight that would have just been a fight about nothing. Instead Delilah picked at her lip and watched as the characters tried to cheat on each other. This was the night before their first anniversary.

When Delilah decided she was going to hit the snoozer and fall asleep, Iris pouted. “I’m just going to cry on the couch.” Iris would say things like this occasionally. It was never clear whether she was actually feeling weepy because she “caught the melancholy,” or if she was annoyed with something that happened between her and Delilah. She would keep it to herself until one o’clock in the morning, when she would finally explode with something like, “I know you’re mad at me because you wouldn’t let me stick my pinky in your ear. And if the weird things I do are going to bother you, then maybe we shouldn’t be together.”

“Don’t do that. I won’t be able to sleep.”

If Delilah went to sleep annoyed, she would wake up that way. Iris had to put her own feelings aside to break the ice between them with something she knew Delilah would respond to, but how Delilah would respond, she wasn’t sure. Iris sat in bed next to her and tore an oozing piece of gauze from her big toe. She had been suffering from what seemed like an ingrown toenail situation for about a month. It was only getting worse and she was too embarrassed to go to the podiatrist. She tried to touch Delilah with it.

“Why are you toe-cha-in’ me?” Delilah’s whining sometimes sounded southern, but this seemed more of a drawl than usual.

“You mean torture?”

“No. I mean toe-cha.”
“Toe-cha.” Iris said it slowly. If she stopped talking now, they would likely end up lying in uncomfortable silence which could have been played as “I was quiet because I was tired,” but would likely be taken as “I was quiet because I was mad at you for making fun of my toe.” So, Iris rambled on. “You should write a story about toe-cha.” Delilah only wrote stories about bad relationships, usually about people she knew. “The main character would be in the bath with his girlfriend, and she would rub her toe on him and he would be like ‘Stop toe-cha-in’ me!”

“Why would the character be a ‘he’?”

“To make the story more digestible for the reader.”

“I’ll write the story and halfway through it say, ‘fuck you, reader, I was going to make it more digestible but fuck that.’”

“How would you even spell toe-cha?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” Delilah would never write that story.

The next day at the theater, the movie was five minutes in. Iris didn’t want to miss the main character carving avocados. Now that she had been waiting for 10 minutes outside of the theater, she was curious about the rocking moustache man. She wanted to see what he looked like when he cried, and if he were to cry during this film, which part would make his tears stream? In the lobby, Iris finished eating her second brownie with a fork. She waited. Although she was intrigued by moustache man, she didn’t actually want to sit next to him, or be in the same theater with him by herself. There was no cellular service in the theater to text Delilah, so she gave herself two more minutes before going inside.

Delilah showed up, sneaking a kiss on Iris’s cheek from behind. “Hey, baby, sorry I’m so late. Indigo puked on the carpet when I was getting ready.”
Iris had fed him a couple of pistachios the night before, even though Delilah told her not to do it.

“Oh no! Did you clean it up?”

“No, I left it there for you to clean after the movie.” Sometimes Delilah’s tone was dry. Then she said, “I won’t bring up the pistachios,” she paused. “But we can’t feed him pistachios. I actually did clean it up, though, and then he had all this energy. He climbed up my clothes in the closet and then hid behind shoeboxes on the top shelf. He’s a tough boy.”

“I don’t know. Maybe we should just go home.”

“He’s fine. Really. Let’s go see this movie I don’t really want to see.” Iris didn’t mention that Delilah picked the movie.

When they stepped inside the theater, moustache man was rocking his head back and forth, his hands clenched to the chairs’ arms. His lips were curled back, and his teeth were exposed. Iris waved to him.

Iris and Delilah sat on the opposite side, two rows ahead.

Iris smiled at Delilah. “What?”

“What?”

“What?”

“What.”

“I accidentally sucked Indigo’s tail in the vacuum earlier. He kind of loved it,” she whispered. The movie started.
Amy knows how I like my coffee—black with a little cream. When she wakes up, she
asks me if I want some. I tell her “and toast,” but she never remembers the toast. Then again, I
never remember to leave a note on the counter for her. By the time I wake up, my coffee is
lukewarm and Amy is gone. I think it’s because she drinks the kind of tea that makes you shit.

Like all day. That’s how I knew I loved her, because it didn’t gross me out enough not to.

Amy’s getting her Master’s degree in social work. She leaves in the morning for classes,
then she goes to her actual job. I never see her, I just hear the toilet flush in the mornings. I don’t
text her during the day, that’s okay because Amy lets me go out with my buddies when she has
work parties. We text sometimes during the day, but she doesn’t like it when I text too much. She says
she’s busy, but I know what her actual job is other than sometimes filing papers. But if Amy knows what
really know what her actual job is other than sometimes filing papers. But if Amy knows what

like all my friends most of the time. We were supposed to meet up with
he’d probably be a better guy. He has trouble holding on to a girl, but Amy won’t do anything to
them. I didn’t tell her Ryan was coming. She especially doesn’t like him. He’s hard to get to
know. You have to know him to like him. I feel bad too, because if he had a steady girl like me,
I’m distracting. When she’s in one of her moods she says I’m annoying. I work for the State, so I
don’t do much but think about seeing my girl when I get home since she won’t text me during
the day.

Amy’s getting her Master’s degree in social work. She leaves in the morning for classes,
then she goes to her actual job. I never see her, I just hear the toilet flush in the mornings. I don’t

Like all day. That’s how I knew I loved her, because it didn’t gross me out enough not to.

Amy’s getting her Master’s degree in social work. She leaves in the morning for classes,
then she goes to her actual job. I never see her, I just hear the toilet flush in the mornings. I don’t

like all my friends most of the time. We were supposed to meet up with
he’d probably be a better guy. He has trouble holding on to a girl, but Amy won’t do anything to
them. I didn’t tell her Ryan was coming. She especially doesn’t like him. He’s hard to get to
know. You have to know him to like him. I feel bad too, because if he had a steady girl like me,
photos. We were supposed to see my pals in an hour so I asked, “Hey, are you gonna get
dressed?”

She kind of grunted, like I offended her or something. Her clothes were okay. I think she
was wearing jeans and a sweater. I figured if she spends all this money all the time on her nails
and eyebrows, she’d get herself done up to see my buddies. I wouldn’t tell her that, though, so I
said, “I just want to show off my girl.”

I thought she would like that, but I don’t think she heard me.

I hadn’t seen Ryan and Manny in months. They were visiting their families for the
holidays. Ryan asked Amy what she had been up to lately. She told him about her classes, but he
wasn’t that interested. I can’t blame him, really. She’s stopped telling me about them too. When
he started paying attention to a girl behind Amy with the long hair and skinny, black shirt, I
thought I’d break the tension. That girl was starting to distract all of us.

“You know, back when I was in school I had to write a five-page paper. I only had, like,
three pages, and it was due over email. So I changed the font and added some stuff, copied some
lines out of the textbook and typed letters out until it reached the page count I needed. I put that
‘ish’ in Wingdings and said, ‘translate that.’”

Ryan almost howled. “He said, ‘Translate that!’” It was the perfect story. It definitely
was. But then Amy’s gotta get in there and start chatting.

“But you forgot to format it as a PDF file, so your professor obviously knew. If that
didn’t give it away, the images of seven peace signs in a row might have.” She always tries to
tell my stories as if they’re hers. That would be fine, but I don’t need people knowing my
business. People don’t need all of the details.
Amy left early because the sidecars went to her head. She gives me these looks as if I did something wrong. Sometimes I can’t deal with that. I put up with a lot because that’s my girl, but when I told her not to tell my stories for me, she said she was gonna go home. She told me she loved me. I said, “I only love my bed and my momma, I’m sorry.”

Amy didn’t think that was funny, but Manny did. She’ll be fine tomorrow, I thought.

Manny and I caught up. He was living alone, seeing a bunch of people, and meeting with most of them on Tinder. I told him, “You better make sure they’re legal, bro.” Ryan said as long as she didn’t get IDed it was fine. That’s what he thought. The guys made me think about how glad I was to be with Amy. I didn’t need to worry about getting carded at the bar. They needed to get themselves a girl.

Ryan said he met a girl on Tinder once and took her virginity. Then he stopped using it, because he didn’t believe a real 24-year-old woman hadn’t had sex before. I’ve heard of that happening before, but I didn’t want to question his story.

“Yo, I can’t even remember my first time,” Manny said. I knew that was true, because he changes his story every time I see him. Once it was his babysitter when he was thirteen. Another time it was his high school Algebra II teacher. Another time, a woman wrote him love letters until he finally slept with her.

I was feeling chatty, so I told them my story. “Bro, the first time I slept with a girl was in high school. I was pretty drunk at my buddy Squee’s party. His parents were out for the weekend to see a basketball game or something. The entire school was there and everyone else from like twenty miles away. That night was nutty. Bro, I can’t even remember what this girl looked like. I was either shitfaced, or I’m just getting really old.”
Ryan tugged on my tie and said, “I thought you were a virgin and Amy was your cover.” That would’ve pissed me off, but at least Manny was interested and listening to me.

“Nah, bro, I thought she was super wet, until I looked at my shirt. It was blood. She had her period. I put that shirt in the laundry the next morning, and my ma was, like, ‘the fuck did you do to this?’ I deadass told her someone tried to mug Squee and I stepped in. Said that the dude’s blood got all over the bottom of my shirt.”

“That’s savage. Do you still have the shirt?” Nev asked.

“For real it was gross. Nah, I threw that out. Ma believed me, though. I didn’t even have to really convince her.” I bet I have something written about that in my school calendar.

I checked the time and it was almost two in the morning. If I didn’t get home soon Amy would be getting up and ready for the day. I told my buddies I had to head out. Ryan tried to give me a hard time. That’s why he doesn’t have a girl.

Amy was asleep when I got home but when I woke up she wasn’t in bed. She had to get her hair done. She just had her nails done last week, and did something with her eyebrows the week before that. I don’t understand her priorities sometimes, only because she doesn’t really keep up with it. I was hungover when I woke up, hoping she hadn’t left yet. I called out to Amy, “Hey, are you up?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you bring me some aspirin and something to soak up whatever I drank last night?”

I waited in bed for at least ten minutes. I didn’t think she heard me, so I got up. She was looking at Twitter on her laptop in the living room. Politics, probably, reading the Mother Jones account. “We good?” I asked. I think she smiled. I took aspirin and ate a muffin. I don’t think
Amy was feeling good. I was gonna spit some Drake lyrics at her, but I didn’t think she’d appreciate them after last night.

“Hey, I’ll take you to get your hair done today. Maybe we can get lunch or something after,” I told Amy. She said okay to the hair appointment, but she didn’t want lunch. I tried.

People tell me I’m funny. And, I am. I know that. Amy and I go to the salon. Her hair looks bad, and she says she needs to get it done, but I could use that money for other things, like, making more money. But after last night I thought the right thing to do would be pay for her hair. Anyways, I’m sitting on this pleather sofa and she’s chatting with the hair stylist, the kind of gal who looks like one of those country bumpkin singers, and they talk about something, I’m only half listening. But this Dolly Parton-looking barber-girl goes, “you know those comedians that say ‘fuck’ every time they talk, and it’s like, okay we ‘fucking’ get it.” The whole shop roars. I’m sitting there thinking, you’re not fucking funny. I think I’ll use that in my act.

I tell Amy when we get in the car that I hate going to the salon.

“I didn’t ask you to come with me.”

She’s in a mood because it’s that time of the month. She’s always getting tight with me, like, it’s my fault. I still do whatever she wants, though, because I’m not tryna get my girl in the wrong mood. Amy makes me buy her Ultra sized tampons from Target. Now I don’t want to start a fight with her, but I don’t know why I should drive all the way to Target when she doesn’t pay for gas or her own tampons. She tells me she feels better about buying her plugs from a big box store that’s not too big-boxed. I don’t even know what that means, but I do it, because that’s the kind of guy I am. And her hair is looking nice.
Amy didn’t talk to me the rest of the day or the next morning. She left for work before I even woke up. I would’ve checked to see where she was but she won’t accept me on Find Friends, so I couldn’t locate her. When she got home it was like everything changed. She said, “Baby, want to go out later? I’m craving a good IPA.” I can’t pass down a drink, so we went out. For once it was Amy’s idea.

A bald-headed man was sitting next to us at the bar and almost immediately asked how we met. Amy said, the way she always does, “I was working at this restaurant, you know, the one down the street from Oliver’s on McCormack Road, and I had just cleaned the glass door. Well, Jeremy goes to leave and puts his hand on the clean glass to open the door. So he turns to say goodnight, and I look at him and ask, ‘Do you plan on cleaning that door now?’ I shouldn’t have said it, but it was getting late and I don’t fare well with drunks. Anyways he didn’t get it, being a white man who can’t see anything past himself, until I literally had to tell him that he just put his dirty fingers on the glass.”

That’s when I jump in and say, “I came in the next night to apologize, but she wasn’t there. Then I went back every night after for a week, but I never saw her. One night, about a month later, I came in with a few of my buddies, and there she was, looking sour, but beautiful, and I said, ‘I’m sorry about the glass.’ And she said, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Then I asked her on a date sometime, and a few weeks later, after she stood me up, I asked her out a second time, and she says, yes.”

Baldy asked, “Wow, so how long have you been courting this lady?”

“About two years,” I told him.
Well, Amy jumped right in to interrupt me and say, “Actually it’s been one year and ten months. It’s still early in the relationship.” Amy left to use the bathroom. I thought maybe she drank a lot of that tea because she was in there for a long time.

I offered to pay for the Uber ride home, because I thought it’d make her happy. Amy was kind of annoyed, again. I never know if she’s just being quiet, or she’s about to cut me. That’s kind of sexy, though. But she gets mad when I say that. When Uber-man whose name sounded like ‘quinoa’ dropped us home, Amy went straight to the bathroom again.

In the middle of the night she asks me if I ever imagined killing anyone. I mean, yeah, I think about busting people’s faces. One time when I was in high school, I was on the bus and some kid wanted to make fun of my Jordans because they were red, white and blue. Jordans used to be cool but Ma wouldn’t buy me the good-goods. She liked that Burlington Coat Factory discount. So anyways this kid asks me if I shopped at Burlington to get my kicks, and I did, but I didn’t want anyone knowing my business. So I felt like smashing his face in. I told Amy that story once though and she said, “Burlington only sells the knock offs, so you’re not telling the full story.” I didn’t want to get into that discussion again, so I didn’t tell it again.

“No, I’ve never thought about killing anyone.”

Turns out, when I was in the shower, Amy had an urge to knife my neck. That’s how she said it. I thought that was weird, but I went to sleep, anyways. I was tired.
True Faith

My sister Karen thinks that if she can read books she can write them too. She gets it from my father. He can count numbers, so he does our taxes every year. He says accounting is a scam. Karen and my father either take the easy way out or think that they can do what they can’t. My mom doesn’t care and neither do I, really. I don’t think she cares about anything, though. Like, I dated a woman once. My dad thought that was a phase, and he was right, even though he’s usually wrong. Now I date a guy who fucked me in high school. I wouldn’t say we slept together. He applied to FIT but didn’t get in. Now he works for a college pyramid scheme painting people’s houses. Sometimes he Snapchats me late at night. He choked me when we have sex, so I don’t do it often. Everyone thought he was gay. I thought it’d be cool if he were. That’s why I still talk about him—not because he traumatized me and completely messed me up. I’m getting over that.

If I didn’t feel so guilty cursing, I would probably be a stronger, more decisive woman. My sister embraces a lip quivering “Fuck You.” I couldn’t do that. I don’t wanna use the oppressor’s language, anyways. It always made me feel dirty. It still does. I think Catholic school does that to a girl. I was never spanked by a nun with a ruler. Well, maybe once, but that isn’t significant. Even if I had been, it wouldn’t have affected me. I’m still tortured by the kids who would compete over a 98.6 average versus a 99.2. I had a 99.7 in the eighth grade, but that doesn’t matter because I ended up at a state school studying Communications and online shopping for handmade mugs in most of my lectures.

Karen didn’t go to college. She writes book reviews for the Daily Crocodile, our town’s newspaper. Sure, my parents are proud of her, but what I do has more nuance. My communications degree taught me nothing, so I paved my own path. I review bad poetry. I don’t
disclose that until the third date, when I do go on dates, because I find many people don’t take as much interest in what I do as I do. That comes with any skill or trade, I find. I purchase my books from the dollar bins at local Barnes N Nobles. Or, I look for poetry the old-fashioned way, on Amazon, refined search to two or less stars. Most people read what society labels “best-selling” but ignores the “worse-than-mediocre.”

I want my work to be noticed. Mostly I would like anyone to see that I can do what Karen does. On one of those fogged window wind blowing nights after a few glasses of Ramona Singer’s Pinot Grigio, I texted “wanna come over and drink some *insert coffee emoji* tomorrow morning?” I don’t have an actual smartphone, so I insert the asterisks hoping technology will insert the little image for me. If anyone asks, I’ll tell them, “They haven’t fixed that glitch yet?” Then I’ll seamlessly change the subject and ask something like, “How many bookshelves are too many bookshelves in a home?” If they answer with a number, I’ll walk away. A person can never have too many books! It was a trick question!

When bad poetry is so cheap these days, it’s easy to accumulate hundreds of books over the years. My studio apartment is running out of space because I’ve covered my floors to ceilings with books. It has a romantic charm. I’d like Karen to see it, since her house is spotless. The last time mother came over to watch the Real Housewives of New York City and have a glass of Pinot, she told me I should be on a Hoarders show. I haven’t spoken to mother since. She was ruder to me that night than when Aviva threw her artificial leg across the dinner party table. Some things us women need to keep to ourselves, like our legs.

I never heard back from Karen. That was typical. She often says she’s too busy. Really, I think all of my fun antics keep her from her writing practice. It’s strange, really, when people talk about their writing practices. I wake up, have three cups of coffee, watch Fox News, and get
writing. I only watch the news for inspiration. It’s like bad poetry. It usually takes me two hours to compose a piece. My problem is really getting into the poetry. “Why are they so bad?” I ask myself. It’s easy to say the same thing in each review. Basically it comes down to: too rhymey, too dramatic, too much pining after the person the poet calls “the one” but never was the one, too many poems about aging. The list goes on. Good criticisms are hard to find. And keeping myself in a negative mindset is hard. I realized one day, going through a stack on top of my local poetry stacks, that some poets lived in my town. I never built a relationship with them. Maybe befriending them could add a spin to my work. And mother always said I could benefit from having more friends.

I used Facebook as my guide. I created a profile under a pseudonym, Greta Finklestein. I looked for Karen’s profile first, and friended her friends. I uploaded a photo of one of my ex’s dogs as my profile picture. Jackson, a miniature collie. How could someone resist a friend request from such a friendly face? I waited four hours, and when nine people accepted my requests, I went through my local poetry collection and searched for the poets. Real poets don’t have Facebook accounts. They have Instagrams, like Eileen Myles, with photos of sidewalks and trees and dirty mirrors. I friended Hillary Boonstood, Jared Leemond, and Harry Spicen, first. I noticed a trend, they all were a part of the town’s health food co-op Facebook group. I wondered if I joined the co-op, maybe I would be able to see what these local poets purchased. The old saying goes, you are what you eat. Your spiritual energy is probably built by how much kale you ingest. That was the missing ingredient to write better reviews than my sister.

Unfortunately, Karen was at the co-op while I was applying for a job. I tried to avoid her, but my wiry grey hair can be seen miles away. I ask for it to get colored that way, so my exes never forget me. My hair glistens in the streets in the middle of the night. At least that’s what my
exes have told me. Karen approached and started to question me. “Hey, sis, what are you doing here? I thought you didn’t like health food cooperatives.”

In that moment I knew she was onto me. “What do you mean? I come here all the time. And I finally figured it was time to bag groceries when I’m not here buying them!” I giggled. It was forced but she didn’t notice.

“Okay. Well I’ll see you around. I’m sorry I totally forgot to text you last week. And by the time I remembered I thought it was too late. I also don’t know if you get charged for every text you get, since you don’t have an iPhone. By the way, I sincerely respect that. I think that’s really great. I know I’m totally addicted to my phone.”

I stared at her. I could feel my smile turn straight.

She whispered in my ear, “I really didn’t want to bring this up here, but I think I know what’s going on with you. Although I think it’s weird, just know that I’m here, and I’d love for you to come over sometime soon. I’ll make us stew.”

The jig was up. I told her, “Look, Karen,” I emphasized her name with a forceful head tilt like Jack from my all-time favorite primetime television show, Will and Grace, and a hand on my hip, “I don’t want your stew. It’s usually flavorful and very tasty, but I cannot accept your gesture. Yeah, I made a fake Facebook profile, and yeah I added some of your friends, but you don’t understand how hard it is to do what I’m doing.” I admit it, I ran away. I couldn’t face Karen. Karen has a relationship with my parents. Karen has three kids. Karen’s seen Janelle Monáe in concert twice this year. All I have to show for myself is my car, the Electric Janey, who I bought used with 90,000 miles and named after Janelle Monáe’s totally-underrated-should-have-been-a-hit album Electric Lady. And she broke down last week.
I did what anyone would do. I left the co-op and took the bus to Kroger. In the fish aisle I put all of the tuna fish cans in my shopping cart. Once when I was younger, after a heavy-lifting gym day, I went to the supermarket for a can of tuna fish. A woman, wearing bootcut jeans and a “True Faith” t-shirt put three shelves of tuna fish in her cart. I couldn’t understand why she did it. I just wanted one can. But today, I knew that was what I needed to do, too. But unlike that woman, I took my cart over to the self-pay station and didn’t buy a single can. In that moment, I realized Facebook couldn’t be my guide, my creativity would have to be. In an era of fake news, I would create personas for my poets. It’s not the truthfulness of an article that interests readers, it’s how the writer can spin the story. I could spin a story or two. I’ve done it all the while.
Superhost

Judith’s teeth were yellow and candy-stained. They looked like genetically modified corn—too large in size and each a different shade of “buttery.” She thought if she ate apples, which were natural teeth cleaners, she wouldn’t need to brush the recommended twice daily. She also thought that teeth were just for chewing. Besides, her favorite food was mashed potatoes, so what was it to her? For someone as disengaged with her own hygiene, she was better equipped to share her opinion of what poor lifestyle choices other people made. She couldn’t understand why young girls these days wore loose shirts without bras. Her own breasts were small, but cone-shaped, and faced the ground. She could never get away with that. Late at night she would turn to her gender-neutral partner Toni, and ask, “why would anyone get a tattoo on anyplace but their ankles?” Toni wouldn’t engage in Judith’s criticisms of youth culture and let her keep on. “And if you—the general you, not you-you—were going to get an arm tattoo, why not just get an arm band? They look like bracelets for your muscles!” Toni figured sometimes Judith’s late-night rants were caused by all the barrettes she always covered her hair in that pressed on her head a little too hard throughout the day. Judith’s hair was covered in patterned hair clips, probably from 1994 when she was her spunkiest. If she forgot to put them in, it would be a long day for everyone involved. She just wouldn’t feel like herself. Since Toni and Judith started dating, Toni was prey to listening to all of Judith’s rants, rambles, and aggressions—but when she was sweet, she was the sweetest. Or that’s what Toni told their friends when they’d gently ask, “So…what do you feel you’re gaining from this relationship?”

Judith hated long car rides. Her candy corn teeth felt like they were growing fur, and Toni wouldn’t let her control the radio. Toni let her rearrange their whole apartment, get rid of their Keanu Reeves DVD collection, and even give their hamster, Lady, away because Judith said she
was allergic. Toni would not let Judith control the radio. The Buick only played Toni’s *Little Earthquakes* CD—on repeat. This occasionally started rifts between Judith and Toni. That and cherry coke.

They were on their way to Roanoke, West Virginia where Toni had a gig to play in a one-person Ani DiFranco cover band. After seven hours in the car, Judith found more than just cherry coke to argue about. She didn’t see how Toni could be in a cover band for a single folk artist. Toni’s main argument was, “If Prince cover bands exist, why can’t Ani DiFranco bands?” Judith was concerned with the validity of Toni’s logistics, “You should call yourself a cover-singer, not a cover-band. It’s deceiving and if I was your audience I would feel cheated by your deceit.” The air was clearly thick between them when, as Toni was driving, they pointed out a sign, and asked, “Wanna stay at the Butch motel?” It was a line that normally would have tickled Judith. She loved gay jokes. But she was very stern, “It said Dutch.” They sat in silence listening to Tori’s melodic voice.

Toni and Judith originally planned to stop in Allentown, Pennsylvania. They agreed it seemed like a novel town where they could sit on someone’s lawn at two in the morning and eat Vegan Treats vegan donuts. When they were getting close, Toni asked Judith if she was still up for stopping. Although Judith loved a sweet treat, she retorted, “I’d rather just get to Roanoke. If we stop now it’ll break flow.”

“What flow?”

“Accepting that you’re in a one-person cover band. I’m starting to accept that, but it’s taking time. Vegan donuts will just distract me from that. I’m sorry.”
Forty-five minutes later, Judith made Toni stop at Dunkin for a sugary treat. She hated long car rides.

Roanoke was its own town of old southerners whose lives began and ended there. Toni didn’t actually know this when they booked the gig, but they did notice that Airbnbs only cost $35 a night. Toni bought Jeff’s Airbnb for the night, because all of his reviews said that he knew Roanoke really well and made the best coffee. Plus, he was a superhost. Toni had rented out plenty of Airbnbs in the last several years. They liked to engage with people. Airbnbs were often cheaper, especially when they created a fake account each trip so each fake account could refer them for a discount. Typically Toni chose the cheapest rooms. Living the lifestyle of an Ani DiFranco band didn’t exactly cover the bills, but she was an artist! The only thing that mattered was the music. Judith, however, having never stayed with anyone other than family, was wary of this plan. She didn’t trust people, which she said stemmed from a long history of Facebook friend request rejections. Judith managed a sandwich shop, besides, and didn’t have much money herself. Toni picked Jeff, the superhost, to meet Judith in the middle. Judith asked Toni things like, “I just don’t get it. Does he stay with us? Will he get in between our mojo? What if he thinks we’re weed-os?” Judith thought it was cute to call each other weirdos, without the “r.” Toni hadn’t caught onto that yet. They said, “Look, superhosts are experienced, highly rated hosts who are committed to providing great stays for guests.” Judith figured Jeff must be the type then to put chocolates on her pillows. Judith loved chocolate. After their drive, when they finally made it to Jeff’s Airbnb, after passing more Confederate flags than Judith thought existed, (she thought they didn’t actually exist and were made up by the fake news, or the overly liberal Bill Maher), she looked at Toni dead in the eyes and said, “I need to potty.”
While spending some time in Jeff’s bathroom, waiting for the air freshener to kick in, Judith looked through his medicine cabinet. She expected more from the Airbnb, like Tom’s toothpaste, or a glass container filled with colored q-tips and makeup removing wipes. When she looked in the shower, she expected fancy body wash, not a bar of Dove soap. She mostly was appalled by the toothpaste spittle on the mirror. This is why she ate apples. As the bathroom’s stench wavered, she stepped out and said to Jeff, who was sitting on the living room couch talking with Toni about a podcast he had been listening to about sex cults, “This is a very interesting pad you got here. I’ve never stayed in a stranger’s house before, so I was just wondering, like, how often you might wash your towels and bedding?” Toni had already reassured her on the drive over, at least four times, that hosts customarily changed bedding and toiletries after each guest. “Everything is clean!” he told her with a southern grin and continued to talk about his newfound interest in podcasts. Judith thought podcasts were radio rip offs, but she didn’t tell him that.

Before Toni’s gig, while Judith was in the shower, Jeff asked Toni if they were married. Toni wore a large opal ring on her ring finger. Although it wasn’t a traditional ring, Jeff figured they were not a traditional couple. “I thought mayhaps that ring was a wedding ring. It really stands out.” Little did Jeff know, Toni stole it from the last Airbnb they stayed in by themselves.

Toni looked down at the ring. “Oh gosh, no this is so old. This is older than our relationship!” They paused. “We’ve only been together for two or three months, I think. And, I don’t know, I don’t really see myself as the marrying type. What about you? Are you married?” Toni knew that Jeff wasn’t married. The smell of urine in the bathroom suggested a woman didn’t live there. After seeing all of the Confederate flags on the drive over, they didn’t
figure he had a husband either. But they asked anyways. He told them, “You wouldn’t think it, but you and me must have somethin’ in common. No, I don’t like the whole marrying thing. I been done that when I was much younger, but it didn’t work out. My lady just never understood me the way I wanted her to. She met someone else, moved to one of them Carolinas, and I stayed here. It brought me closer to my religion.”

Toni didn’t believe in institutions, so they didn’t inquire more. “Well, I’m sorry things didn’t work out.”

“It’s fine. I’m happy doing my thing here, occasionally having an internet stayer come into my little home to keep me company.” Toni was a good conversationalist, but even they didn’t feel quite comfortable with Jeff. It wasn’t anything against him, but there was something weird about the way his body rocked back and forth while he spoke to her, the way he looked her directly in the eyes without blinking during their conversation. His leather jacket was four times his size and torn up all around the waist.

“Well, I need to get to my gig soon. I hope Judith is almost done in the bathroom.”

When Toni traded with Judith and got themselves into the shower, Jeff offered Judith some coffee and asked her, “So, what’s your story?” Judith was on chapter 32 of writing her memoir so she was used to thinking hard about herself. She told Jeff, “Well, to tell you the truth, Toni used to date my brother for about six years, but we always had a stronger connection. Now we’ve been dating for three months and twenty-three days, I believe.” Judith knew for sure how long they had been together. She measured her relationships by accounting for the date they had the best “lovin’.” The fifth and best time that they ever made “lovin’”, watching Jane the Virgin, was on March 24, 2016. So, Judith wanted to propose to her Toni after three months and twenty-
four days of dating. She loved secret meanings. I made her feel like a bad gal. She wouldn’t let Jeff in on that secret though. That was for the memoir.

When Toni got out of the shower, Judith grabbed their waist, highly caffeinated, and asked them, “We’ve known each other for years now. Why don’t we get married?” Judith had planned to ask Toni’s hand in marriage ever since March 24 when Jane finally decided between Michael and Rafael after two seasons of not knowing who she should be with. Judith would go into detail in her memoir about how her night was so romantic, she had to go back to see who Jane chose. She got on one knee and grabbed Toni’s foot. She gave Toni an anklet for the occasion. Toni didn’t have the heart to tell her the anklet would get caught in their favorite wool socks.

Toni was only performing seven blocks up the road. Although Judith didn’t want to walk, Toni knew that exercise would be good for her. And they left all their junk food snacks in the car: potato chips that tasted like macaroni and cheese; pretzels that tasted like pieces of cauliflower; raspberry chocolate that was spiked with marijuana. Toni couldn’t have Judith consuming those things before the show. She would get too hyper. Instead they prepared beforehand with a bottle of Vanderpump Rosé they found in Jeff’s liquor cabinet while he was at the movies. As they walked down the street, Judith made a confession to Toni. “You know, I’ve never actually listened to an Ani DiFranco song.”

When Toni dated Judith’s brother, Stephen, they listened to Ani every Wednesday night. It moved them through the hump day slump. One year, Toni and Stephen saw her three times and compared venues. “That can’t be possible. I can’t be in an Ani DiFranco cover band and you’ve never listened to Ani. That just doesn’t work.”
“I’m really only interested in feminist underground punk music. I consider myself a Riot Grrrl. You should know this about me. Besides, if you let me listen to anything other than Tori Amos in the car, then maybe I could have experienced Ani. And I can’t support you if you aren’t honest to your audience about being a one-person cover artist rather than a cover band.”

“I didn’t want to spoil my act when you already belittle my art. How would you feel if you were compared to your idol and criticized? How would you feel if the person you slept with breathed their buttery mouth in your face every night?”

The conversation turned hostile. Judith walked back towards Jeff’s. Toni left her. They realized Judith wasn’t her garden of simple. She didn’t even know the song.

Judith walked back to the car to eat her raspberry chocolate. While she was eating, she unlocked her phone. Toni had texted her earlier that day, “If it isn’t her, it isn’t here.” It seemed like a strange way of writing something sweet. But the skies opened up for Judith and she realized she needed to support her hot honey. But first she had to finish snacking. She didn’t want to walk seven blocks again though and was afraid to drive in residential areas that she wasn’t familiar with. Stop signs were more dangerous than highways, she always said. She went inside, and saw Jeff sitting on his couch listening to a podcast about a neurosurgeon that was maiming his patients. She said to him, “I’m not sure what the etiquette is for Airbnb hosts and roomers, but Toni’s already at the park, and I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind giving me a ride over to see her perform?”

Jeff only had five hours left of Dr. Death and was so immersed he didn’t want to stop listening, but his Airbnb status was determined by his renters, and he wanted to remain Roanoke’s most likeable, best coffee providing superhost. “Sure, I can swing you over.”
The drive only took five minutes. In the time it took, Judith sat in silence, realizing she hadn’t brushed her teeth or eaten any apples that day. When they arrived, she saw Toni sitting under a tree, an older couple wearing overalls nearby, and a toddler running around the tree trying to grab Toni’s guitar. Jeff broke the silence and told Judith, “I was thinking about seeing another movie, but this seems interesting.”

Toni performed for a crowd of twelve, including Jeff, Judith, a toddler, and two very interested pigeons. As a couple hours passed, Judith was interested in each blade of grass’s color in the ground. She wondered how someone could get a gig under a tree. She thought maybe this tree was a significant part of Roanoke. Little did she actually know, Toni just wanted to see Roanoke after watching the season of American Horror Story where Kathy Bates plays an actor who plays a murderer who takes on her role as a murderer in real life. Judith would only submit to that if it involved a lie.

Toni’s last song mimicked the text she’d sent Judith earlier, “If it isn’t her, it isn’t here.” Judith thought she heard that somewhere before. She nudged Jeff, “Toni is so clever!” Then she inched away because he wouldn’t release eye contact. When Toni finished her song, she pointed to the small audience, towards Judith. Judith blushed and stood up, though no signs suggested she should do that. Toni took their wool sock off, exposing their long toenails, tugged their anklet and said “Yes!” Judith didn’t understand the gesture but nodded as if it were the thing to do.

After the gig, Judith told Toni, “That was really good. The songs sounded really good. But I don’t really think I can stay with Jeff any longer because he’s kind of weirding me out. And he smells like bacon. Also, I think I want a vegan donut because I ate the raspberry chocolate that was in the car and now I have a super sweet tooth. Maybe we can sit on someone’s
lawn and just lay under the stars and think about our lives together one day? Or maybe I can just play you some Sleater Kinney.” Judith stared at Toni with her mouth open.

Toni said no. “But we don’t have to stay with Jeff tonight.” They found Jeff peeking in their car before they left. They also saw a gun in his bedroom earlier. Toni didn’t want to die in West Virginia. As Toni and Judith got in the car, Toni told Judith, “I always thought my obituary would say something like, ‘She died in Clearwater, Florida.’ Obviously because my mom would write the obituary she would get the pronoun wrong and it would all be laughable, but a West Virginia death is pushing it too far.”

“If our life was a story, I’d want it to end, ‘Then the car crashed, and they died listening to Pussy Riot.’” Toni turned down the radio and serenaded Judith with Ani. Toni wasn’t a riot grrrl.
Chelsea in Red

Gary, a liberal-conservative urban planning professor moved to Portland as a divorcée. In his spare time, he makes weed chocolate, since his ex-wife Lisa banned him from eating it after “tripping” and landing in the hospital decades ago. Lisa, a former student of Gary’s when he was just a young adjunct who wore wool blazers, left him for one of his urban planning proteges. Back when Gary and Lisa married, they were just six years apart. He taught an introductory urban planning course. Halfway through the semester he stopped teaching because he had a mental breakdown over the destruction of the ecosystem. (This was 20 years before Al Gore tried to take over the planet.) Too many homemade brownies got to Gary. In that semester, after his breakdown, he started dating Lisa. He only taught her for a few weeks, but she insisted later in life that their relationship started with an unhealthy power dynamic. This dynamic, she claimed, went on for years—through marriage, to the birth of their child, then through the rebirthing transition of their adult son-turned-daughter, until finally they were on their own again together and Lisa wanted out. To reclaim her power, she pursued Toby, 27 years younger with plans to map out California’s water system. Or be a sustainability consultant. He wasn’t sure. In the meantime he sold water-resistant flip-flops.

Gary wondered why Lisa left him. She would often chastise his habit of letting his nails grow too long. She didn’t like seeing the dirt deepen into his calcium-enriched nails. Gary liked planning trips to Utah to climb mountains. He especially liked the pain from digging his fingers into the earth’s surface. With Lisa gone, he could grow his nails as long as he liked without feeling the guilt of wearing all of those bloody band aids. He even wondered about painting them. His new home was, of course, Portland.
Gary sells topaz rings and sex dust. He rented a shop downtown around the corner from the “Keep Portland Weird” sign. When he researched Portland via Instagram posts and Twitter tweets, he noticed everything Portlandish was posted around that sign. When he rented the shop before he moved to Portland, from a Craigslist advertisement posted by a Gr0ov3y77, he hadn’t realized that homeless people heavily populated the area. Although he thought of himself as a forward thinker, he was wary of how the area might affect his business. Two doors down from Gary’s shop was a weed dispensary. He didn’t care for the smell, but he dabbled in the OG kush back in the day and knew that his topaz stones would appeal to local and traveling stoners. Their minds would make his products glisten. He didn’t need the money to survive; he just wanted appreciation for his work. He never got that back home.

He would tell his customers that his shop, Chelsea in Red, was dedicated to and named after his mother, who was in an assisted living facility in Rhode Island. She would always wear red lipstick before she took Gary to the beach when he was a child. Gary hated the beach because the sand got stuck deep inside his Speedo, but his mother enjoyed it. Gary laughs here when he tells the story. Ha. Ha. It was more marketable than admitting his shop was formerly a nail salon owned by a Chelsea Martin who disappeared in Forest Park’s witch’s castle and never came back.

Everyday Gary makes one move from each side of his porcelain chess set. The first day he set up shop, he moved a black pawn forward one space. Portland stores had Black Lives Matter signs in all their windows, and he tried to be socially conscious. Instead of abiding by
chess rules and moving the white piece first, he thought this could make an interesting conversation with someone someday.

Gary bought the chess set for his son when his son was just a boy. His son is now a daughter living in New Jersey, surfin’ on the waves. They played every night until one night, Chris wanted to play Scrabble. Out with tradition! Instead of using real words that were Merriam-Webster approved, they invented-words like “fissorp,” meaning the act of ripping one’s fingernails off. That was inspired by Lisa. Garry missed chess. And it fit his idea of the Portland aesthetic—strategic. He didn’t know what that meant exactly, but it felt right.

When Gary first opened the Portland shop, he would wait for browsers to play a game, or even just move a single piece. He stayed behind the counter with his thick round-rimmed glasses and eavesdropped on conversations. If he saw delicate looking girls, he would approach them and say, “You can play with the set if you like.” He thought they might treat it delicately. Usually the girls would smile and leave. When he was alone in the shop, he might play an opposing move and wait until the next day for another set of hands to challenge him. Over time, children of parents with purple hair and missing teeth would move pawns three spaces ahead, rooks diagonally and kings across the board. The lack of discipline agitated Gary. If no one was going to play right, he would rather play by himself, anyway. After a couple weeks, he grew tired of the blossoming youth culture, their eccentric haircuts and shoes made of thick cloth. In Portland, to fit is to not fit. Garry couldn’t even fit with the not-fitters.

The first month Gary lived in Portland, he lived in Airbnbs. He stayed in the Pearl district, Alberta arts district, Lloyd district. He couldn’t find his home in other people’s houses, though. Even the couple with different colored eyebrows silently judged him when he didn’t
recycle his sugar packets. Gary finally rented an apartment in Beaverton, which was less costly. At least he felt he was living the Portland experience, alone in an apartment within a strange named neighborhood. One night when Gary was still staying in an Airbnb, rented to him by a woman named Eleanor whose life centered around her dog Chew-Chew, he worked late in his shop, instead of taking the MAX to N Kerby. He wanted to get back while Chew-Chew was in his crate, and Eleanor asleep in her upstairs bedroom. There were few things that were particularly odd to Gary, but that couple, and he was convinced they might be a couple, Gary did not trust.

He stayed up, polishing his rings, then steam-cleaning his rugs. The Portland rain and the Portlandians’ mud shoes nearly ruined his carpet every day. He went to the back of the shop to wash off a sticky, purple substance that got on the khaki pants he recently purchased at one of the local independent clothing stores. He later found a hole in the ankle patched with scotch tape. When he left the store from the back, mumbling-fucking, he saw a woman with grey hair that looked dreaded but was just in knots, sitting at his chess board. She called herself Stanley. He recognized her because she came in every couple of days to say hello and admire the rings. Gary suspected she might steal one of the pawns off of the board. She would often rub them in the palms of her hands, give them a sniff, then put them down.

“I challenge you to a duel,” said the dreaded wonder.

Gary sat at the table without saying anything. It beat going home to Eleanor and Chew-Chew. Stanley, the dreaded wonder, left before either of them won. She stood up, “thank you, fine gentleman. We may meet again sometime.” And then she took a cape, did a sweeping motion, and said, “SWOOSH” violently, and disappeared. Gary was admittedly intrigued by Stanley.
When Gary officially moved into his apartment, he sold his computer for extra cash. Before he did this, online searches led him to sex dust. The herbal concoction had five-star ratings, and, when added to coffee, would enhance sex drive and boost creativity. It was popular among women-he-thought-but-couldn’t-be-sure-were-lesbians. One afternoon when it hadn’t rained, two women, practically thirty years apart, dressed in tan corduroy pants and black rain jackets, came in, giggling and stroking each other’s chins. This always put Gary in a sour mood, chin strokes. He couldn’t figure out their relationship, exactly, so he simply identified them as outsiders, probably from Idaho or some strange state like that where people mysteriously die from starch-inflicted potato injuries. The older woman carried an umbrella and the younger one a plastic water bottle—tourist markings. No one in Portland carries an umbrella or environmentally unfriendly water bottles.

The women talked mostly about Splenda and Diet Coke. “All I want is to find Splenda somewhere,” said the older blonde, reading the ingredients in the sex dust. Portland’s coffee shops mostly carried sugar-in-the-raw. “If I can’t have coffee I need a Diet Coke.” The older woman took out her phone. The younger, with a nasal-squeaky voice, kept looking over her shoulder. “What are you doing?” Gary had a fresh Diet Coke under his cashier station, but wasn’t willing to offer it to these ladies. “I’m searching ‘Diet Coke near me.’” Then they stared at each other for a full two minutes. Gary kept close track of time. He had nothing else to do. He suspected something was off, and didn’t understand the joke, if it was one.

“Ever hear about Splenda-man?” Gary, listening with a chisel tool in hand, raised an eyebrow so high it nearly reached his hairline. “He’s from Portland and comes into all of the New York coffee shops, knifing packets of Splenda.”
These were the conversations he listened to everyday, while he chiseled topaz.

After 20 minutes of looking at Gary’s ring display, the women bought one of Gary’s biggest stone rings and two packets of sex dust—they must have been a couple. The funky blonde told Gary she liked his shop music. It was exclusively Jimmy Buffet.

The pressure of Portland was getting to him. So were his handcrafted weed gummy bears. Sometimes Gary thought he was in a collection of short stories—a secondary character, not the lead. He wished his narrator would give him a better life.
Bibliography


Kraus, Chris. *I Love Dick.* Semiotext(e), 2006.


