Queer outings in imaginary spaces

Nicole Cosentino
University at Albany, State University of New York, nicole.cosentino@gmail.com

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Queer Outings in Imaginary Spaces

by

Nicole A. Cosentino

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Abstract

Picture this: Marcel Proust, Roland Barthes, and Djuna Barnes walk into a book. And stay there.

*Queer Outings in Imaginary Spaces* is interested in the way literature—in all its glorious forms—serves as a hideaway for queer subjects, and, more importantly, as a test space in which queer authors can introduce queer subjects and scenarios at relatively low stakes (depending, of course, on the language they employ in their work). Accordingly, each author studied in this project belongs to the queer literary canon, and each author was known for retreating into the worlds they fashioned for themselves to avoid the worlds that felt too much with them. Though my work has roots in queer theory, the project itself is interested in the imaginary queer spaces in literature that these authors created so that they could interact and “play” with the versions and translations of themselves that they were unable to present publicly.

Thus, in *Queer Outings in Imaginary Spaces* I argue that, over the course of their writing careers, Marcel Proust, Roland Barthes, and Djuna Barnes utilize various forms of literature—poetry, short stories, literary journalism, novels, and lecture series—to create safe spaces in which they evolve their peripheral thoughts, feelings, and subjects through language. In the case of Roland Barthes, the imaginary spaces carved out in his work are often presented in fragments. Over the course of time, though, we see Barthes move away from a Neutral practice of writing and toward a more personal, subjective style of writing. Thus, for Barthes, the imaginary queer spaces he constructs help him to feel safe in expressing his emotions, particularly after the death of his mother. Proust and Barnes construct their imaginary queer spaces a bit differently. They first create or examine a “test” subject or martyr and then evolve the narrative of that first iteration (or test subject) to create a queer subject whose experiences run parallel to the lives of the authors who created them. Proust first begins to navigate imaginary queer spaces in his
poetry, a space in which his dedications to specific people serve as his foundational grounds to discuss homosexuality, or inversion, in a coded way. From there, Proust creates his first test subject in the form of a young girl who acts as a martyr figure for sexual transgression, vice, and matricide. The young girl’s experiences from the short story are then translated, evolved, and sexually transposed into the experiences of Proust’s male Narrator in La Recherche. I also argue that the original martyr—the young girl—splits from the male Narrator to become Albertine, so that, by the second volume of the novel, Proust is either always chasing himself, interacting with himself, shaming himself, hiding himself, or killing part of himself. Albertine, of course, is the martyr who absorbs these actions. Finally, Barnes’s non-traditional upbringing informs the way she looks at Others. Instead of castigating them, she celebrates them—not as spectacles, but as humans. In examining the breadth of Barnes’s work, I argue that Barnes sought the uncanny in order to bring it to the public sphere. Though she was interested in freak show and circus culture, her focus was on teasing out the essence of each subject with whom she interacted—whether that subject was an exoticized Other from a freak show or a renowned actress—in an attempt to create some kind of balance between the heteronormative world and the world of the Other. This project demonstrates how Barnes uses her experiences as a journalist to create worlds within worlds (her short stories) as well as worlds beyond our world (Ladies Almanack) to accumulate the details necessary for her most notable cast of characters in Nightwood, which focuses on the queer spaces that main characters—particularly Dr. Matthew O’Connor and Robin Vote—inhabit.

Thus, Queer Outings in Imaginary Spaces argues that it is through acts of translation that test subjects and martyrs come into being and act on behalf of their creators. Proust creates translations of himself through proxies and authorial surrogates, Barthes enters into a translation
of the self by allowing himself emotional proximity to his struggles through the evolution of language, and Barnes translates herself onto the freak, or Other, as a study of humanity and the unspectacular spectacle of the aggrandizement of everyday life. It is only within the boundaries of the imaginary spaces each author creates that such translations and transpositions are possible.
Dedication

This project is dedicated to my professor, mentor, and lifelong friend Dr. John Lutz of Long Island University’s Post Campus, whose unwavering confidence in my academic abilities and unconditional motivation and support were instrumental in helping me to arrive at the precipice of my dream.
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through literature, worlds that I now get to share with my own students. Deborah, you have long been someone to whom I’ve looked and hoped to model myself after—your scholarship, teaching style, and celebration of the uncanny and queer showed me that the best way to explore the Other is to inhabit the space and mind of the Other. Thank you for “daring” me to read all of Proust, though I do believe the initial dare was for me to do it when I had some spare time—probably once I reached my 50s. Suffice it to say, I am glad I took you up on that dare, but even happier that I did it in one summer with your guidance. To my entire committee: your contributions to this project helped it to become something about which I will always be proud.

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Preface
Enter: The Contortionist

The work of researching the texts and their respective authors studied and analyzed in this project taught me that there is beauty in the malleability of a “plan” and opportunities to be teased out of several drafts of said plans gone awry. But, that is the business of academia—we think, we question, we research, we write. We hope to produce something memorable, but it is only once we reach the end of our project that we realize the most important legacy our work can make is the impression it leaves on us—the writer, the creator, the author.

For me, the doctoral dissertation project took on an-almost human form—it walked beside me each day, woke me up each morning, and kept me awake most nights. So, I suppose like Victor Frankenstein’s Creature, my creation was much like an infant once I breathed life into it. I found that, as the project gained clarity and momentum, the actual experience of writing it became an act of positioning, repositioning, stretching, and extending. This project is thus a contortionist, which means that, given the chance to stand “normally” among others of its “kind,” it might not fit the mold. It does not rely heavily on theory, but instead on intertextual connections and ideas that I found among these texts as well as the authors of study. Like the contortionist, this project shapes itself differently, but that is what is most comfortable for it.

Though the expected concepts and argumentative interventions needed for this caliber of writing are present—for a talented contortionist cannot be lithe without stretching—such interventions happen of their own accord; they move with the rhythm of the author of study, they bend only to reach farther into a concept, not to accommodate a normative expectation. That said, the project is by no means a rebel, nor is the contortionist. It is simply different. And just
because it is different, does not mean there is cause for celebration. The project shifts from one pose to the next to demonstrate its understanding that language is flexible; it can turn in on itself, it can live upside down and backward. But, it can be neatly rearranged and put back into “place,” should the need arise. What follows is a project that, like its author, has been patient enough to learn the importance of such flexibility. In shaping and reshaping itself, this contortionist project brings attention to the evolution of language, discourse, and the general positions each author takes on the thinking of their current “moment” in order to demonstrate that such an evolution happens individually, not globally.

Such is the case for me. My language, my discourse, and my voice have evolved over the past seven years. No longer do I toil with my ideas so that they look and sound and act like they “should,” nor do I squabble with myself about whether my ideas and analyses are “good enough.” I am not an imposter. What seems to hold true for all writers is that it is rather rare for any of us to write something that we deem to be “perfect.” Our hope—or my hope, anyway—is that one day readers might look into my writing with a keen eye and think, “How brilliant! How wonderfully unique,” but I know “that” day usually comes much later than the words go to print. It also occurred to me during my revision process that the work of critical literary analysis exists because, regardless of how straightforward an account might appear to be, we do not truly know what the author was thinking or feeling when they were writing their work. Even authors who enjoy recognition when their work is released often have difficulty defining the true essence of the work—and that is because that essence lives within the writer.

I’ve also learned that one can try to exhume another writer’s passion or essence from what is left behind in their work, but that writer will be disappointed to find only potential theories. The passion that drives forth an individual’s writing is deeply personal, and that is why
the best efforts we can put forth as academics, scholars, and critics is to use our intellect, reasoning, and knowledge of the historical and personal circumstances governing an author’s work as a means to better understand their worlds. Ultimately, though, the passion of any work exists within the author’s deepest interiority—where all passion lives and remains ever-inaccessible.

And so I present my work—my thoughts, my contortions—on Marcel Proust, Roland Barthes, and Djuna Barnes as an homage to all contorted thinkers who pursue their intellectual inclinations without abandon and howl into the night feverishly like an abject subject, split between two identities, giving each identity its proper space to roam.

This project is aware of herself and knows where her imperfections lay. For this, she is grateful, but unapologetic. For who among us is perfect? Not the contortionist, that is for sure. But, in the right pose, seen through the right eyes, the contortionist’s beauty and balance are unmatched. She is not perfect, and she loves that.

Enjoy.

—Nicole A. Cosentino, 2022
Introduction:
The Emergence of the “Homosexual,” Queer Fables, and The Spectacle of the Other

For all the brilliance that has emerged from the ever-burgeoning field of queer theory and gender studies, there still seems to be a lack of coherence when it comes to a universally agreed-upon term for a sexual Other. And there is good reason for that.

To have a universal term to label a sexual Other would be to minimize that community into a single identity, a mononuclear shell to catch all things “other.” When it comes to the complexities of sexual desire, though, it is rather problematic to be so concerned with labeling. Even if we were to socially agree (in a universe 60+ years behind us) that there were only two ways of “being”—“normal” and “homosexual”—within those sexual identities lay unbounded potential for other “types.” I say this to get the reader thinking as logically as possible about sexual labeling and the social need (and mandate) to identify oneself sexually. This project considers how nature, the Neutral, and the natural all intermingle to produce a canvas of sexual possibility in the landscape of the imaginary. As we will see, nature becomes a subject with just as much agency as core characters, and, as such, we see that what is deemed socially “natural” in terms of sex will be inverted. Nature thus provides the space for seemingly shameful acts of homosexual intimacy that result in some form of procreation to occur. In fact, at its core, we learn, nature needs little other than independence from social interference in order to survive—so too is this true of any human. In particular, this is especially true for the non-normative sexual Other.

I did not “come out” until I was 28 years old—mostly because I did not know how. Could I call myself a lesbian if I had slept with men? Should I call myself bisexual because of this instead? Was I pansexual because, like Dan Levy’s David Rose in Schitt’s Creek, I was more
“about” the wine than about the label? Or, was I queer because at some point all of the above were true? When the time came to shed the shroud of performance, the only words I could muster were: “I’m gay.” What followed this admission (confession?) was a voice in the back of my head yelling at myself: You are a woman! You can’t be gay! Gay is for men! That is not to say I held (or hold) any kind of belief in this anxiety-induced ignominy, but to highlight the fact that my knee-jerk response to my own self-realization had to do with the label I placed on it—and that has always resonated with me. Should it matter? Should there even be a word for it?

Well, of course there should be, dammit, because we live in the 21st century and if we do not label everything, how on earth will we understand ourselves? But, is this act of labeling—this seeming self-identification—meant for the subject’s benefit? Or, like a Scarlet Letter or an inmate number, does such labeling simply keep us organized so that the rest of society knows who we “are”? I am now 35, and I still ask these questions (and likely always will). Never having been one for tradition, I would have side-stepped the coming-out process entirely, but I am sure those closest to me would have eventually noticed a woman on my arm. Maybe it should have just been that way: show up as I am with the woman I love. “Everyone, this is my significant other.” Curtain closes. And scene.

Announcing oneself—to some degree—is the loss of oneself. Freedom is forfeited in the act of telling. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was aware of this when he wrote The History of Sexuality, Vol. I (1976), attending to the religious element of confession and the ramifications of such confessions for the subject. With all the reprimand that existed for the sexual other within the Catholic Church, there was also an insatiable interest—dare we say, desire—on the part of the religious order to hear the confessions to use as an institutional element of control over bodies and the freedom for those bodies to explore the bodies to which they were naturally
attracted. As Foucault states, “an institutional incitement to speak about [discourses concerning sex], and to do so more and more [demonstrated] a determination on the part of the agencies of power hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail” (Foucault 18). It thus became clear that the more socially reprehensible and marginalizing a subject’s sexual inclinations were advertised to be, the less likely that those who were considered sexual deviants would “practice” their pederasty in public. Society forces a label, and the fear of exclusion and the threat of destruction forces the non-normative sexual subject into submission. The work is done, and everyone is normal now, right? Wrong.

It turns out that the “monotonous nights of the Victorian bourgeoisie” along with the Catholic Church were responsible for the hyper-repression of sexuality (3). From the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, “Sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment . . . It was a time of direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgressions” (Foucault 3). However, once Victorian bourgeois sensibility became the desired (or enforced) norm, “Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law” (Foucault 3). With a model in place and tolerance exiled from humanity, the freedom that once existed in sexual play, desire, and copulation became strictly regulated, surveilled, reprimanded, and ostracized. As Foucault reflects on his ideology, he states: “By placing the advent of repression in the seventeenth century, after hundreds of years of open spaces and free expression, one adjusts it to coincide with the development of capitalism: it becomes an integral part of the bourgeois order” (Foucault 5). While I am less concerned with reading into sexuality from a capitalist lens, I include
Foucault’s position on this “coincidence” for a reason: social order is put in place by those in power so that a natural order establishes itself and becomes profitable. In this case, the fear that uranists would overtake the population and make procreation impossible induced a strong sense of anxiety, so the non-normative sexual subjects of the time were forced to announce themselves and then given the option to be normal or to get out. And then comes the anonymous rebel of My Secret Life (1966), which boldly states that a secret life should not be a secret, that shame should not inhibit sexual desire and that any kind of sex that is not heterosexual sex provides humans to learn that much more about human nature. While Foucault is more critical than complimentary about the style of the narrative, what is most important about My Secret Life, according to Foucault—despite the anonymous author’s naïve representation of a “plurisecular injunction”—was the fact that the “reticences of ‘Victorian puritanism’” that were exposed in the narrative created a “digression, a refinement, [and] a tactical diversion in the great process of transforming sex into discourse” (my emphasis; 22). With the nineteenth century’s demands for normative behavior, the homosexual interruption caused a ripple in discourse as well as in the natural order. After all, “the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault 43). At the time, however, the subjects who populated such a deviant species had no concrete means of identification within the larger social landscape. This changed during the mid-nineteenth century in Germany.

In a letter written to Karl Heimrich Ulrichs (1825-1895) on May 6, 1868, German-Hungarian writer Karolyn Maria Kertbeny invented the term “homosexual” (in German, homosexualitat). Shortly thereafter in 1869, the term appeared in print for the first time in

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1 Chapter 13 of The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature, edited by Byrne R.S. Fone, is dedicated to German Literature produced during the Uranian Renaissance (1820-1869). Fone writes, “Karl Ulrichs, theorist of homosexual law and advocate of social rights for homosexuals, developed the third-sex theory of homosexuality, the concept that a homosexual was a female
Kertbeny’s anonymously-published pamphlet *The Social Harm Caused by Paragraph 143 of the Prussian Legal Code*. Kertbeny’s core argument was that a subject’s sexual desires and actions should have no legal repercussions unless they somehow harmed another human. In the excerpt “Homosexuality” from *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature* edited by Byrne R.S. Fone, Kertbeny takes the position that to “maintain the medieval views concerning sexual excess” is “not only unjust, it is an unpardonable absurdity” (260). Kertbeny goes on to say that scientific studies regarding sexuality are not a stable enough basis upon which to reprimand, alienate, and “other” a subject:

[Science’s] conclusions are, in short, [that] besides the normal-sexual drives of all humanity and of animals, nature, in its sovereign frame of mind, appears to have given a homosexual drive to certain male and female individuals at birth, to have bestowed upon them a sexual constraint which has a physical and mental effect, [despite] the best intentions to have a normal-sexual erection. This presupposes a direct horror for the opposite sex; and it also makes those who are constrained by this passion incapable of withdrawing from the influence which particular individuals of the same sex have over them. (Kertbeny 261)

In total, Kertbeny numbers 18 points as to why homosexuals should be granted equal rights, though the central point remains: “The law has no place in the regulation of sex and

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soul trapped in the male body. Ulrichs expounded this theory and argued for the decriminalization of homosexuality in a series of booklets written between 1864 and 1879 under the pseudonym Numa Numantius. He collected them into a single volume where he coined the word *Urning*—in English *Uranian*—to denote homosexual and in an attempt to cancel the negative imputations associated with *sodomite*” (256). Based on Fone’s research, it seems that Ulrich should be credited with the concept and Kertbeny with the terminology, since the letters exchanged between the two overlap with the dates that each was writing and publishing.
homosexuality since homosexual desire is congenital, and that it is up to society, not the homosexual, to change” (261).\(^2\) This rationalization feels a bit contradictory. On the one hand, it seems that the homosexual’s desire cannot be touched by the law, and on the other hand, it is expected that society must intervene on homosexual desire in order to correct it—to make it “natural.” It is no wonder, then, why queer subjects retreated so deeply into their own worlds in an attempt to find safety in whatever spaces were available. I argue that this is an area where queer writers had a bit of an advantage, since they could use literary spaces to critique society,

\(^2\) Michael Lombardi-Nash’s translation of this work includes a selection of Kertbeny’s 18 points, among which are the following: “1. The modern constitutional state, which has only to protect rights (otherwise having no other secondary tasks, for that is what other organizations in society exist for and are called upon to perform), has no reason to become involved with the question of sex where the rights of others are not injured. 4 . . . because history has taught us that homosexualism is and always has been present alongside normal-sexualism among all races and in all climates, and thus cannot be suppressed even by the most brutal persecutions. 5. Furthermore, for this reason as well as for the essence of this drive (its inclinations as well as its antipathies), it is evident that it is rooted in a changeable riddle of nature; thus, it is not voluntary or simple refinement, but rather can only be an inborn drive and therefore cannot be suppressed. 6. This hypothesis is supported by the historical fact that so many important and noble characters of our history in general are either suspected of being or are known for sure to be of this partial drive, which, were it not an inborn one—and consequently one that could be suppressed—would not occur among such important men with their intellectual understanding and physical capabilities, nor among wealthy and powerful people, whose free choice of pleasure is unlimited. 7. In the face of this undeniable fact, we either have to call our ideas of culture into question (that we should consider these same historical people, whose intellect we esteem and honor to such a degree, as fit for imprisonment for their dishonorable acts) or we must find two kinds of law, one for the intellectual and socially powerful, and another for the rest of humanity” (261-262). Here, Kertbeny audaciously explains that those who are homosexual have likely tried to act and engage in “normal-sexualism,” but because they cannot suppress their desires, as they are inborn. Furthermore, the argument stands that there is a fine line between intellectualism and humanity, and that should the intellectual lot desire to persecute those who identify as homosexuals and engage in acts of homosexuality, then such intellectuals should have a separate set of laws meant only to govern themselves, since they clearly have both the means and the power to decide what is “right” within their own community, thus leaving the homosexual community outside their jurisdiction.
act out sexual desire, and engage in deviance from the safety of a proxy, authorial surrogate, test subject, or martyr.

Authors like Marcel Proust, Roland Barthes, and Djuna Barnes are part of the queer literary canon of writers who created such spaces which allowed the queer subject matter of their narratives to have visibility and validation. Though each author constructed these spaces differently, the imaginary spaces created by these queer authors yielded explorations of the self, deviations from normative culture, and the opportunities to be curious about their own sexuality and desire. Interestingly, each author studied herein utilizes either a test subject or martyr in order to deflect any potential shaming or social castigation onto a purely fictional subject.

The first chapter, “Proust’s Split Self: The Cultivation and Evolution of His Martyrs,” is interested in the work of Marcel Proust (1871-1922). Within the chapter, I argue that Proust’s imaginary worlds and the imaginary queer subjects who inhabit those worlds are first introduced with great prudence, as Proust was wary of André Gide’s boldness in Corydon. Feeling that the singular subjective was too expository when writing about taboo subjects like female sexual desire, transvestitism, and homosexuality/queerness, Proust, instead, creates a “test” subject, or Martyr figure (a suggestion provided in Corydon) as a way to explore what resides in his imagination—a world in which he can observe, critique, and engage in sexual deviance while remaining at a safe distance. The chapter first considers Proust’s reactions to Gide’s work, then examines a selection of Proust’s early poetry as a means of exploring metaphors that, within the parameters of Proustian Code, were confessions of homosexual desire. This leads my analysis to the evolution of Proust’s most significant imaginary spaces and subjects, all of which begin in a short story titled, “A Young Girl’s Confessions” (1896). I argue that this short story provides the first true test run of the scenarios and queer subjects yet to emerge onto the pages of Á La
Recherche du Temps Perdu (1913-1927). I track the evolution of the young girl as she emerges into both Proust-the-Narrator and Albertine in La Recherche as well as consider the ways in which these paralleled narratives reflect the author’s lived experiences. By transposing the sex of his main characters, Proust remains somewhat undetectable and creates an imaginary version (Balbec) of a real world, in which sexual deviance is surveilled, engaged, and, ultimately, chastised.

In Chapter 2, “Retrieving the Buried Barthes: The Art of Reading A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments, Mourning Diary, and Camera Lucida as a Collective, Personal Text,” I look into the evolution of Roland Barthes’s (1915-1980) language, style of writing, practice of (and eventual departure from) the Neutral as a means of understanding how Barthes came to create his imaginary space. For Barthes, the imaginary spaces in his work are essentially a collection of organized fragments that document the writer and philosopher’s ideas, truths, desires, frustrations, and a bevy of emotions the self-proclaimed maman’s boy was too apprehensive to directly address until after the death of his beloved mother, Henriette. Thus, Chapter 2 looks deeply into the phrases Barthes uses in his earliest fragments and the way the language of the fragments eventually becomes discourse, which ultimately leads to speech. Though the terms “language,” “discourse,” and “speech” seem quite synonymous on the surface, Barthes’s writing demonstrates that they are, in fact, quite different. Further, it is only once Barthes is forced to confront the truth of his mother’s imminent death that we see a clear shift in his thinking, and this is made tangible through his use of language. I will discuss how the Neutral language Barthes employs in early works like Writing Degree Zero (1953) evolves into active discourse in later texts like A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments (1977) and Mourning Diary (1977). Once Henriette dies, Barthes begins to engage with a subjective form of writing, and we see that most
clearly in the posthumously published *Camera Lucida* (1980). It is only within the imaginary space of emptiness left behind by *maman* that Barthes can confront his emotions.

The final chapter, “Come One, Come All: Djuna Barnes and a Freakish Humanity” considers how Djuna Barnes’s non-traditional upbringing in a polygamist family both inform her writing style and the way she views what society in general considers the “Other.” Barnes’s career as a journalist afforded her the opportunity to interview, observe, and spend time with the most “glamorous,” and the most abject, subjects of her time. What makes Barnes’s work incredibly unique is the fact that she treated all her subjects—whether real or fictional—the exact same way. For Barnes, there was no spectacle in the uncanny or in the side-show “freak” performer on the boardwalks of Coney Island. Instead, her writing indicates that the true spectacles of life are quite mundane; the spectacle is the everyday, the ordinary, the couple eating lunch al fresco on a chilly day. The circus and the “freaks” who comprised that world were people whose stories she was interested in telling. To better understand how Barnes came to create her imaginary spaces, I read the breadth of her work—interviews, short stories, poetry, and somewhat genre-less pieces like *Ladies Almanack* (1928)—and find that Barnes celebrated the ordinary human, the movie star, and the Other ubiquitously. Thus, Barnes’s imaginary spaces offer room for subjects to be who they truly are, and I see Barnes as being quite precocious in understanding that each sexual subject is not unique. In fact, Barnes’s work demonstrates that *every* subject—sexual or otherwise—is comprised of a variety of desires, personas, and needs. This simply makes subjects human, not spectacles. Barnes thus evolves a space like the circus and its sideshow acts—spaces that are purposefully constructed to invoke the imagination—as a way to create branches of this space in her literary work, both terrestrially and cosmically, in order to include and celebrate all.
Chapter 1: Marcel Proust

“You see,” the male subject says to the female subject, “this is where you must reside, for only a select few will ever see this space. It is mostly yours—because you will stay here unless I escort you elsewhere—but I must approve of the order in which this space is kept and the way you occupy it.”

Shrouded in a cloak of heavy fabric that weighs her delicate frame to the tufted chair, the female subject sits silently, almost obediently, and the male subject continues: “I have arranged for your comfort this parlour, filled with the most exquisite Fortuny dressing gowns, art, and flowers. Here, you will be safe. By remaining here, though, you agree not to disclose who I am. For, eventually, you will set out into the world in some form or another. You will become the martyr I use to gauge whether there is safety outside the space of these four walls. Do you understand?”

The female subject sits motionless, her head forced into an unnatural position to meet the eyes of her captor. She has no voice, but she speaks his truths. She knows that her visibility reveals his vice, so she stays and waits to emerge from the cocoon of the parlour.

She stares back at herself, now recognizing the monocle. “This is new; I have only ever seen it on the Baron Charlus,” she thinks to herself silently. “But, eventually, it will become part of me, too.”
(A Brief Foreword to the Chapter 1)
There is No “I” in Proust . . .

But there is an “I” in Gide. And, though this chapter is not directly concerned with the work of André Gide (1869-1951), it is important to foreground our discussion of Marcel Proust’s (1871-1922) work with Proust’s reservations about his literary contemporary’s willingness to be so forward in his use of singular subjective pronouns in discussions about homosexuality, vice, and deviance in general. Shortly before Proust’s death, Gide visited his ailing friend and brought to him a copy of Corydon, Gide’s most precious, delicate, and intimate work. Originally printed anonymously, Corydon is a defense of homosexuality produced in four Socratic dialogues, all of which rely on the first person singular to propel the narrative.³ After reading what Gide wrote in Corydon, both Proust and Oscar Wilde advised him against the use of such revealing and ostracizing language in a work so closely tethered to his own life, as they were still living in a world that was not yet progressive enough to understand that being a homosexual was not a medical or psychological condition, but, instead, an inescapable truth with which many lived and few publicly explored.⁴ Somewhat disappointed by Proust’s initial reaction, Gide responded to the criticisms of using the first person narrative rhetoric by defending the importance of truth telling and unapologetically proclaiming his lack of regard for his public reception with respect to his personal life and desires. Thus, in the preface to the third edition of Corydon, Gide

³ In “Albertine the Ambiguous: Notes on Proust’s Transposition of Sexes,” Justin O’Brien investigates the interaction between the two closeted gay authors, noting that Gide was warned against using subjective language in his writing without the protection of a literary surrogate or authorial proxy.

⁴ Justin O’Brien considers Proust’s reaction to Gide’s work, saying: “Even if Marcel Proust had not admitted the transposition of sexes to which he had recourse and André Gide had not preserved that confession, we could still find a thinly veiled warning to this effect” in Time Regained (943).
audaciously addresses this topic for his “friends” (arguably Proust and Wilde) as well as his audience, thereby stylistically and personally defending his choice to write freely:

My friends insist that this little book is of the kind which will do me the greatest harm. I do not believe it can rob me of anything I value; or rather: I do not believe I value greatly what it will rob me of: applause, decorations, honors, entrée into fashionable circles are not things I have ever sought out. I value only esteem of several rare minds who will understand, I hope, that I have never deserved it more than by writing this book and by daring to publish it today . . . I have never sought to please the public; but I value to excess the opinion of certain individuals . . . I wanted to be sure that what I was propounding in Corydon, and what seemed to me obvious, I would not soon have to retract . . . Certain friends to whom I had first shown this book criticized me for an excessive concern with questions of natural history . . . I am not writing to entertain, and I intend to disappoint from the start those seeking pleasure, art, wit, or anything but what will ultimately be the simplest expression of a very serious theme. (Gide xix-xxi)

Gide’s language indicates that he is unafraid of public backlash against his work; in fact, this short, but punchy preface almost welcomes criticism and backlash. To the willing reader, Gide poses a dare: I dare you not to pay attention to what you already know to be true, reader. I dare you to ignore my words, my desires, and the people they represent. The truth, the desire, and the people are all homosexuals—or, to use a timelier term, “uranians.”

The first of the four Socratic dialogues begins with a somewhat vague allusion to what is clearly a monumental date in the history of the fight for homosexual visibility and validation and the social castigation that accompanied such battles. Gide opens Corydon in the following terms:
In the year 190_, a scandalous trial raised once again the irritating question of uranism. For eight days, in the salons as in the cafés, nothing else was mentioned. Impatient with theories and exclamations offered on all sides by the ignorant, the bigoted, and the stupid, I wanted to know my own mind; realizing that reason rather than just temperament was alone qualified to condemn or condone. I decided to go and discuss the subject with Corydon. He, I had been told, made no objection to certain unnatural tendencies attributed to him; my conscience would not be clear until I had learned what he had to say in their behalf. (Gide 5)

Aside from Gide referring to those around him as bigoted idiots with regard to trials on uranism (later to make their way to America in the form of the Lavender Scare waged by Senator Joseph McCarthy), what is most important about this initial statement is the fact that Gide proclaims how, amid the ignorant theories, he wanted to go to a trusted source to “know [his] own mind” (5). Corydon thus becomes the source of all homosexual knowledge and wisdom from the book’s start, and Gide’s first-person endeavors with the known uranist peripherally label him as one, too. Additionally, the argument can be made that Gide’s narrator, as a proxy for Gide himself, goes to Corydon to know himself better because he is confronting his own truth by splitting an important dialogue between elements of his own mind: one that is heavily jaded by social opinion and order, and the other that is unapologetically genuine and proud of himself. Of course, this is not made explicit. However, the language here is irrefutable, for the “I” in this transcript wants to know his own mind, and the only way to do so is to seek the counsel of a public uranist. For Corydon, this is a means of resolution in order to dispel the rumors and misunderstandings of homosexuality. Corydon’s sexuality is confirmed when the narrator goes to his apartment in search of “signs of that effeminacy which experts managed to discover in
everything connected with inverts and by which they claim they are never deceived,” but no such effeminate things exist (Gide 6). Instead, Corydon’s living space is populated by artwork and literature—ligatures to the academy, but not to the effeminate. However, there is a twist: the artwork is Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Man* (c. 1512) and the literature and literary references are Léon Bazalgette’s translations of Walt Whitman’s work.

While the space itself is pregnant with possibilities of homosexual sites of investigation, my focus here is on the concept of the natural, into which the initial description of Corydon’s living space eventually segues. The narrator and Corydon discuss the idea of pederasty and Whitman. Corydon, eager to impart to the narrator the wit of Whitman utilizes Bazalgette’s assessment of homosexuality as the foundation for his argument. According to Corydon, the entirety of Bazalgette’s argument regarding Whitman proves nothing, as it relies heavily on a reversible syllogism: homosexuality is unnatural.5 However, Corydon explains, Whitman’s perfect health, coupled with the fact that he was “the best representative literature has ever provided of the natural man” turns the assumption of the unnatural in on itself. Since Whitman was considered entirely natural, and also gay, he reverses the incorrect assessment to say that homosexuality, or in this case “pederasty,” is natural.6 The trouble arises first in the attempt to prove this point to be true, and second to have the general public accept that truth.

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5 In “Les Monstres Sacrés” in *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature*, Byrne R.S. Fone takes note of the important opening dialogue in *Corydon* during which the narrator (Gide’s proxy) and Corydon (arguably the homosexual part of Gide) discuss the inherent masculinity and naturalness of Whitman as a way to counter popularly held beliefs about the total effeminacy of a gay man: “the topic that Gide uses to open the essays, a debate over Walt Whitman’s homosexuality, had brought to the fore the old stereotypes about the presumed unnaturalness and unmanliness of homosexuals” (411).

6 The conversation between Corydon and the narrator continues in the direction of a defense of homosexuality. The order to which people refer as *contra naturam*, or “against nature” is a central focus in Whitman’s writing because Whitman consistently refers to his male companions
As Corydon explains that he is preparing to write (but not to publish) a document titled a *Defense of Pederasty*, the narrator’s position becomes extremely critical, since the narrator is a direct surrogate for Gide. Pressuring Corydon about why he refuses to publish what he considers to be such a critical document in defense of what is natural, the narrator attacks Corydon, saying: “you swagger around in private and among yourselves, but out in the open and in front of the public your courage evaporates. In your heart of hearts you know perfectly well that the censure heaped on you is entirely deserved; you protest so eloquently in whispers, but when it comes to speaking up, you give in” (Gide 9). Here, we see how Gide-the-Author and Gide-the-Narrator symbolically and metaphorically operate as a bifurcated confrontation of

in overly affectionate manners, often utilizing words like pure, sweet, and affection toward these comrades in a shoddy attempt to veil his pederast desires. Corydon says that “whenever Whitman addresses his ‘comrade’ [in certain ways], the fact remains that all the fervent, tender, sensual, impassioned poems in the book are of the same order—the order that you call *contra naturam*” (Gide 7). To this, the narrator replies, “I don’t call it an order at all . . . But how do you reverse a syllogism?” Corydon quickly and aptly replies: “Like this: Whitman can be taken as the typical normal man. Yet Whitman was a pederast . . .” “Therefore pederasty is normal,” proclaims the narrator, “Now all you have to prove is that Whitman was a pederast” (Gide 7). This exchange is important because it focuses on the idea that the sexual truth of any given subject—real or fictional—resides within that subject; it is everything outside the subject that must be convinced of and accept that truth. Here, we see the beginning of the decoding process and start to gain an understanding as to why Gide was so uninterested in the terms he could use to avoid addressing himself. We might infer that Gide thought this avoidance to be something that only a coward would do. A person who is interested in truth of the self will not hide the self forever. The conversation with Corydon helps Gide’s narrator understand this idea by simply inverting the rationale of what is considered natural and how representatives of what is natural can simultaneously engage in what is termed the unnatural. What then? Where does that leave the arguments about the deviance of same sex intimacy?

Throughout this chapter, the terms “homosexual,” “pederast,” and “uranist” will be utilized (in some form) to describe a certain type of deviance. Any use of the term “homosexual,” or any derivative of that term, means attraction to/copulation with someone of the same sex as the subject being discussed. Any use of the term “pederast,” or any derivative of that term, means an adult male who engages in sexual activities with a male youth or adolescent. Finally, any use of the term “uranist,” or any derivative of that term, is referencing a historical term synonymous with the definition of homosexual; this is simply a term that was used more frequently during the period that Proust and Gide were alive.
battling interiorities. Acknowledging his own hypocrisy, Gide then goes on to write a series of conversations that undoubtedly point to Gide as a fellow uranist. It was in this series of thinly-veiled conversations that Gide outed himself, something that Proust actively avoided. And so, as the unpublished volumes of Proust’s work continued to make their way into the hands of eager readers, the “narrator-hero . . . [who] remained almost the only example of innocence in the world of the Guermantes . . . [whose family had become synonymous with the deviance of Sodom and Gomorrah], perspicacious reader after perspicacious reader had gradually sensed the true Proust under the barely fictitious ‘Marcel’ of the novel, posthumously outing Proust” (O’Brien 934). Proust was cautious to shroud his vice in a few more layers than his contemporary Gide. However, it was Gide’s interest in the reversal of stereotypes that opened the possibility for a new way of thinking to penetrate the literary scene with respect to how a non-heteronormative subject is read. As Byrne R.S. Fone writes, “The reversal of stereotypes was what interested Gide, and he argued that homosexuality is natural in human beings, and throughout the essay implies that homosexuals are not only a sexual but a political minority whose situation in society needed to be the subject of radical reevaluation” (“Les Monstres Sacrés” 411). To be considered a sexual and political minority others the non-normative sexual subject twice, and, by degrees, lessens that subject’s juridical agency. For this purpose, Gide “argued that homosexuality makes important contributions to society, and that definitions that depict homosexuals as effeminate, as invert, or as degenerate do not recognize the complexity of homosexuality” (“Les Monstres Sacrés” 411).
Such defenses of homosexuality are also scattered throughout the pages of Proust’s poems, short stories, and his most notable work, *À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*.\(^8\) Where Gide’s approach diverges from Proust’s, though, is in delivery. Proust’s authorial style is suggestive, not straightforward. It is for this reason that Proust—despite his reputation as a teenaged boy who often invited other boys to engage in sexual acts with him and who was forced to keep his hands tied down so that he could not continually masturbate—did not have to defend his sexual identity to any significant degree during his lifetime.\(^9\) Literature provided Proust the outlet by which he could explore the different potentials of the invert/uranist/pederast/homosexual. And, “Since Proust viewed most individuals as androgynous, he had no hesitation in distributing traits from the young men between his male and female characters,” and so we can trace how male traits become transposed onto female characters as acts of gendered translation.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) For the remainder of the chapter, the following abbreviations will be utilized to reference Proust’s novel as a whole as well as the individual volumes that comprise the novel: *La Recherche* for *À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*, *SW* for *Swann’s Way*, *WABG* for *Within a Budding Grove*, *SG* for *Sodom and Gomorrah*, and *TC* for *The Captive*. Unless a title is introducing a new concept or beginning a new sentence, the abbreviations will be utilized throughout.

\(^9\) The first chapter of William C. Carter’s *Proust in Love* (2006), titled “Promiscuous Proust” pays attention to Proust’s family life and the fears that both Proust’s parents had for their son, given the social climate of the late 19th century. Carter writes, “Proust’s parents agonized over the threat to his future success, a threat linked in their minds and in Dr. Proust’s scientific writings to neurasthenia and a lack of willpower: masturbation . . . Masturbation was also suspected of being a significant contributing factor in causing homosexuality” (8-9).

\(^10\) The chapter entitled, “Where Fair Strangers Abound” in Carter’s text talks about the summer vacations from 1908-1909 where he met Pierre Parent and Max Daireaux, who were both just over twenty. It is noted that Proust, “entered Parent’s name several times in his notebook, jotting down traits or dialogue eventually used for certain aspects of his fictional Saint-Loup and Albertine. “The young men” referenced in the excerpted quote are Parent and Daireux, and Carter argues that because the sexuality of Saint-Loup and Albertine are equally “ambiguous,” the traits that Proust borrowed from the real-life young men support the position that Proust transposed sexes in order to create a kind of sexual fluidity as he developed key characters (79).
characters gain a fuller description and become central characters in Proust’s defining, semi-autobiographical novel. Thus, we intervene in Proust’s works by inquiring about the translation of the self into different forms, finding the original prototype for the final “cut” of the character who we later come to know as Albertine Simonet. Select poems from *The Collected Poems* as well as specific short stories from *Pleasures and Regrets* are the sites of interrogation where we first meet the preliminary versions of Proust (and central figures in the author’s life) that will later expand to the pages of *À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*.

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Earlier in the work, Carter points out that “Proust used . . . transpositions for some of his principal characters . . . [which act as] the first clues of his latent homosexuality. The tomboyish Mlle. Vinteuil resembles her father; Charlus resembles his female relatives. These androgynous likenesses were intended in part to prepare for the profanation scenes . . .” (18).
“Now the memories of love are no exception to the general laws of memory, which in turn are governed by the still more general laws of Habit. And Habit weakens everything . . . That is why the better part of our memories exists outside us.”
—Marcel Proust

“But the true nature which we repress continues nevertheless to abide within us.”
—Marcel Proust

Mirroring, Modeling, and Making ‘Marcel’: Fragments of the Self Translated in Poetry

Much of Marcel Proust’s (1871-1922) literary repertoire is pregnant with allusions, observations, and criticisms of the desire to become enveloped in the bourgeois lifestyle in pre-and-post World War I France, with collections of poems, short stories like Pleasures and Regrets (1949) and his crowning achievement, Á La Recherche Du Temps Perdu (1913-1927) that demonstrate the polarized social and political tensions that existed within certain circles during the author’s lifetime. A master of transposition, Proust—much like his protégé Roland Barthes—actively avoided involving himself in his narratives, mostly to ensure a certain degree of anonymity and the continued seclusion of his personal life. According to Leo Bersani, “The literary treatment of the past is . . . a constant exploration of the narrator’s ability to re-create the self imaginatively . . . The story of a life whose meaning is fully realized only when that life is

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11 Passage excerpted from Volume II of La Recherche, Within a Budding Grove (300). The Narrator ruminates about this idea, questioning the space from which a subject can muster the ability to suffer and translate that ability into a performance for others. The discussion of Habit then takes form, an occurrence that the Narrator describes as one that is “bound by a diversity of laws,” meaning a subject’s social status and receipt determined the degree to which their Habits were deemed acceptable or abhorrent (II 301). There is freedom, it seems, in succumbing on the surface.
12 Excerpted from Volume V of La Recherche, The Captive (387).
transformed into literature necessarily illustrates a progress from what is given in life to what is imagined and invented in art” (5). This is especially true for Marcel Proust, since he relied on authorial surrogates to replace him in order to explore sexual desires that the typical post-Victorian sensibility chastised as distasteful and unnatural. Interestingly, though, it was believed that, “In Proust’s day . . . homosexuality determined by a nervous condition had its compensations in the enhancement of one’s overall awareness of the inner and exterior worlds, creating a sensitivity that is extremely useful to the artist” (Carter 20). We quickly learn that this rule of homosexuality is applied to the qualities of the Narrator, Charlus, and Albertine Proust’s crowning achievement À La Recherche du Temps Perdu; since the Narrator serves as Proust’s narrative transposition, though, the Narrator does not celebrate his own non-heteronormativity and actively reproaches his captive Albertine’s.

Performance thus becomes integral to both the author and his Narrator’s ability to “pass” as heteronormative, a concept that the Proustian Narrator makes clear early on in the novel: “But certain favorite roles are played by us so often before the public and rehearsed so carefully when we are alone that we find it easier to refer to their fictitious testimony than to that of a reality which we have almost entirely forgotten” (WABG 232). We are being ushered toward critique here, thinking through the potentials for the “roles” to which the Narrator alludes; it is all part of a more nuanced code that aims to discuss the truths behind the role-play, but only if the reader is capable of understanding such messages. For, in this case, being “in” on the codification reveals a certain vulnerability in the reader, too, since we live in worlds structured by our apprehension of the narratives constructed by and within those worlds. So, while Proustian code is very much a space for veiling, it is also a mediated, somewhat liminal space that allows writers like Proust to remain forward, yet closeted. Rather brilliant indeed.
Criticism has successfully “decoded” Proustian language as demonstrating a curiosity about same-sex copulation—particularly in Á La Recherche Du Temps Perdu. Though the decoding of Proustian language speaks to the author’s inclination to write and speak from a muted, third-person perspective as a way to examine his own urges and sexual exploits, there are more significant areas to the Proustian code than simply understanding how inversion functions in the novel. Instead, what we need to focus on when thinking about the importance of decoding Proust is the connection between critical scenes from the novel and those in the author’s actual life while also considering how the poems and short stories presaging Proust’s novel provide framework narratives and character sketches for the world he eventually creates for his Narrator, the Narrator’s family, the esteemed Swann family, the wealthy and powerful Guermantes clan, and, of course, the narrator’s prisoner, Albertine.

Proust utilizes his captive Albertine to create both literary opportunities for non-normative sexual expression as well personal exploration; this happens through acts of translation. In these acts of translation, Proust attempts to create a perfect test subject in Albertine, whose first iteration is an anonymous young girl from a short story published years earlier. To better contextualize this concept of Proust translating the self in order to express himself more freely in literature, it is critical that we consider a brief, but important, moment in Gide’ Corydon where Gide-the-Narrator and his friend Corydon are discussing Corydon’s forthcoming work, Defense of Pederasty. Corydon explains that in order for the book to work, he must find “martyrs to the cause” (Gide 10). Confused, Gide-the-Narrator asks for clarification, to which Corydon replies, “[The Martyr would be] Someone who would forestall any attack—who without bragging or showing off would bear the disapproval, the insults, or better still, who would be of such acknowledged merit—such integrity and uprightness—that disapproval would
hesitate from the start” (Gide 10-11). We can see how Proust translated this concept and applied it to the characterization of queer figures in his literature; in order to self-preserve, Proust-the-Author uses martyrs who take the fall for his sexual desires, when really those transgressions are simply expressions of his fantasies and lived experiences. Thus, in translating different versions of himself into his fictional, narratological spaces and assigning subjects to these roles, Proust successfully engages with the “deviant” areas of his sexual desires, social anxieties, and general discomforts under the guise of fiction.

Proust experimented with different iterations of metaphorically “coming out” in his poems and in his short stories as a way to remain closeted during his lifetime. Such works mark the beginning of the Proustian Code as well as the development of the split self, whereby the private half arguably exists in the imaginary, unknowable Albertine, whose first entrance onto the Proustian page comes in the form of an anonymous young girl, nearly two decades before we meet Ms. Simonet. Thus, in translating different versions of himself into his fictional, narratological spaces and assigning subjects to these roles, Proust successfully engages with the “deviant” areas of his sexual desires, social anxieties, and general discomforts under the guise of fiction—though critics would later argue that Proust was not nearly as subtle as he had hoped to be, the goal was to remain narratologically objective.13 Early poetry by Proust provides us with

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13 Adam Gopnik argues that there exists 6 distinctive versions of Proust, all of which become known to the reader, should the reader be willing to engage with the code-switching that compliments the gender-switching. Regardless of whichever “version” of Proust we find ourselves engages with, that iteration of Proust is yet another translation of the self, the nuances of whose personality find space to exhale and stretch in fictional literary landscapes. Gopnik says, “There are at least six Marcel Prousts to study . . . [who all] exist in separate, sometimes baffling strata. There’s the Period Proust, the Toulouse-Lautrec-like painter of the high life of the Bell Époque, who offers an unmatched picture both of riding in the Bois and visiting the brothels near the Opéra; and the Philosophical Proust, whose thoughts on the nature of time supposedly derived from the ideas of Henri Bergson and are argued to have paralleled those of Einstein.
areas to begin thinking about this idea of translation of oneself through an ever-evolving series of characters, all meant to be a veiled version of Proust-the-Author. Such poetry was typically written in the form of dedication and relied heavily on metaphor. What seems apparent from these shorter, lyrical pieces is that Proust was “taking a busman’s holiday from literature” in order to shake loose the other components of his great work-in-the-making. We will thus focus on three poems to foreground the translation and evolution of these concepts to understand how the subjects of his short stories emerged thereafter: “Pederasty, To Daniel Halévy” (circa 1888), “On a Maiden Who Tonight Played the Role of Queen Cleopatra, to the Great Anxiety and Future Damnation of a Young Man Who Was There. And on the Dual Metaphysical Essence of Said Maiden” (circa 1891), and “To the Guest” (n.d.). Within these poems, we see how Proust

There’s the Psychological Proust, whose analysis of human motives—above all, of love and jealousy—is the real living core of his book and the ‘Perverse Proust’ . . ., who was among the first French authors to write quote openly about homosexuality. Then there is the Political Proust, the Jewish writer who diagrammed the fault line that the Dreyfuss Affair first cracked in French society, and that the war pulled apart. Finally, there’s the Poetic Proust, the pathétique Proust . . .” (4). This further links Proust to Gide, as there are clearly at least 4 different Gides, considering the vastly different subject matters covered in his Socratic dialogues with Corydon (natural history, literature, the arts, history, sociology and morality) (Gide 27-28). To extend this concept further, one of Proust-the-Narrator’s first “love” interests—the child of M. Swann, for whom the Narrator has conflicting emotions that range from affinity and attraction to disgust and disdain, and Mme. Swann, whom we later learn to be a former courtesan and cross-dresser—Gilberte Swann is also described as having multiple dimensions. In Volume II, *Within a Budding Grove*, the Narrator describes Gilberte’s “sides” in the following terms: “It was true that Gilberte was an only child, but there were, at least, two Gilbertes. The two natures, her father’s and her mother’s, did more than just blend themselves in her; they disputed the possession of her—and even that would be not entirely accurate since it would give the impression that a third Gilberte was in the meantime suffering from being the prey of the two others . . . Gilberte was alternately one and then the other, and at any given moment only one of the two, that is to say incapable, when she was not being good, of suffering accordingly, the better Gilberte being unable at the time, on account of her momentary absence, to detect the other’s lapse from virtue. And so the less good of the two was free to enjoy the pleasures of an ignoble kind” (II 191). Like Gide and Proust, Swann’s daughter Gilberte is also split into different performative roles that exist only to please the audience in front of which she finds herself.
speaks through the experience of homosexuality while remaining at a distance from his own truth of being a pederast or uranian; furthermore, we see how the groundwork for future iterations of the self (and other core subjects-turned characters in his novel) is laid in a nuanced way.

**Proust’s Poetry—Confessions in Verses**

“Pederasty,” a poem written to Daniel Halévy, immediately makes it clear that with enough money and power, any sexual subject can free himself of the “vanity of politics and print,” leaving the space that oppresses him as quickly as possible so that he could live amid a “luminous and artificial green” (1.1-4; 2.5). A school mate of Proust’s, Halévy and his friends treated Proust in a beastly manner because they were uncomfortable with his less-than-masculine gestures. William C. Carter’s *Proust in Love* cites Halévy as saying, “He [Proust] figured among us as a sort of archangel, disturbed and disturbing . . . There was something about him we found unpleasant . . . His kindness his tender attention, his caresses . . . We were rough with him. The poor wretch!” (Carter 2). Proust was unmoved by his peers’ responses to his advances and did not let them impede his actions, and so he persisted in sending “his classmates poems and letters celebrating love between boys and offering himself as an eager partner for sexual initiations” (Carter 2). Proust’s feelings come into clearer view in the third stanza of “Pederasty” when the speaker actively defends him sexual desires and talks through a language of audacity rather than fear. Proust writes, “For what is *manly mockery* to me?/ Let Sodom’s apples burn, acre by acre,/ I’d savor still the sweat of those sweet limbs!” (3.9-12). Clearly, the reference to Sodom is an implication of sin as rooted in the Biblical story from *Genesis*. We see this trope emerge quite robustly in the fourth volume of *À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, which opens on a scene of deviant, homosexual intimacy whereby our ever-curious and “suspiciously”
hidden Narrator surveils the scene as it unfolds. In this poem, though, years before we meet the Baron de Charlus and Jupien (to be discussed later in this chapter), we are met with a defiance of the normative. Proust’s speaker vehemently rebuffs the ostracizing public gaze, taunting the status quo, and, similar to Gide, dares the recipient of the message to challenge his freedom of will and of sexuality (“For what is manly mockery to me?”). The fact that the terms “manly mockery” appear in italics is curious, since one might expect the speaker to emphasize the self here (“to me”) as opposed to the oppressor, those who mock. That the speaker is willing to suck the juices of the scorched earth of Sodom speaks to an attachment to a homosexual identity that is implied, yet not forthright.14

We then move into “On a Maiden Who Tonight Played the Role of Queen Cleopatra, to the Great Anxiety and Future Damnation of a Young Man Who Was There. And on the Dual Metaphysical Essence of Said Maiden” (circa 1891). Proust’s speaker first attends to the potential soullessness of Cleopatra, arguing, “Perhaps Cleopatra had so lovey a face/ But she had no soul” (1. 1-2). Women, or the image of a woman, is skewed by her ability to become three dimensional and take full shape. We can argue that this is a first iteration of Proust’s attempt to create a heteronormative sexual affair with the ever-capricious Albertine in La Recherche, since Albertine, like the one-dimensional Cleopatra is flat, without language, and more of a portrait to

14 Richard Howard (an avid Barthes translator) translates this work. In his analysis of the translation, Howard offers the following commentary: “Proust’s sexuality was a matter of public discussion even during his lifetime, but this poem and letters between Proust and Jacques Bizet and Daniel Halévy written at the same time certainly make his interest in homosexuality abundantly clear” (262). Howard goes on to note that one such letter written to Bizet from Proust acknowledges that Bizet “had refused Proust’s advances,” which corresponds to the journal entry of Halévy (as translated by Terrence Kilmartin) that notes Proust’s (sexual) weakness, proclaiming that he is most likely a pederast; though the Halévy journal entry does indicate that, despite Proust’s inability to read social cues, there was the hope that “flashes of hidden genius” would protrude from Proust’s lust/lovelorn personal life (Letters 263).
be gazed upon than a presence to be acknowledged. The stanza goes on to say that Cleopatra
remains the “unconscious guardian of immortal grace” in portrait, only then to declare that she is
“unaware that she embodies Beauty” (1. 2-4). Here, the idea that women are one-dimensional
and flat is further emphasized by the objectification of Cleopatra’s visage. An embodiment of
beauty who cannot escape the canvas—it seems as if we have come upon one of Elstir’s
subjects.¹⁵ The poem, translated by Harold Augenbraum, utilizes Cleopatra as a vehicle to
discuss Jeanne Pouquet, an actress who played Cleopatra and whom Proust admired and publicly
lusted after. At the time, Pouquet was engaged to Gaston Arman de Caillavet, and Augenbraum
argues that “because there was little chance of an actual attachment for himself, Proust paid court
to Pouquet,” likely as a way to present as straight, knowing that his advances would fall flat, as
Pouquet was already emotionally and sexually unavailable.¹⁶ Proust has a history of such
endeavors, according to Carter, who explains that the author flirted with girls, which was a
“practice he continued with attractive women, especially those who were the wives and
mistresses of his friends. As a result he could observe them very closely, but safely, from behind
the barrier of fidelity imposed by jealous possession on the part of the men and the respect and
duties of friendship on Proust’s part” (29-30). Thus, in creating this mirrored image of Cleopatra,
Proust demonstrates how the concept of personifying an emotion through an act of translation

¹⁵ The famed portraitist of the French elite in La Recherche. More importantly, Elstir, like the
Narrator, is a keen observer of the world around him and the people who populate it. Having the
gift of the artistic eye is what allows Elstir to paint without parameters, thereby capturing the
essence of people like Odette de Crécy in drag, sometime before she became the questionably-
faithful Mme. Swann. It is also through Elstir that other such metaphoric portraits are drawn for
the Narrator, particularly with regard to Albertine and what little history is known of the
tomboyish member of the “little clan” that captivates the attention of our young Narrator on the
beaches of Balbec.
¹⁶ See Translation of Poem 8 by Harold Augenbraum in The Collected Poems (269).
creates another form of the Martyr. What appears to be an uninvited gesture of sexual advance is merely a closeted homosexual saving face with a subject whose vulnerability as an actress leaves her more open to public access. And, though Richard Howard (the translator of “Pederasty”) notes that there was public discussion of Proust’s sexuality during his lifetime, Proust’s resourcefulness in matters such as the Pouquet-Cleopatra complex created an element of doubt. And that was—and arguably remains—enough to keep a potentially non-normative sexual subject free from the shackles of public disapproval.

A final example of fragmented translation in Proustian poetry is found in “To the Guest” (n.d.). “To the Guest,” as translated by Mark Polizzotti, considers Proust’s fascination and admiration of Madeleine Lemaire (1845-1928), who was “considered the greatest painter of flowers of a generation in which flowers were a significant theme” (Poems 326). Let us consider the poem in full:

Friend, seek the strawberry amid the violets,
See the flowers have covered the queen’s table then
And mix, bindweed, lilies, or else aigrettes,
Their sweet charm sweeter still of Madeleine.

Fear not, the wicked there won’t dare seek you
Our hostess is valiant as well as tender
She has sweetness to love you
But claws to be your defender.

Here, just like wine, the mind is delectable
Flowers that graced foreheads now gird the table
For the one she’d have painted you’d give your last mile
See, what joy! It’s Madeleine’s smile. (Poems 201)

As flowers act as a metaphoric tool throughout Á La Recherche Du Temps Perdu and are present around female subjects of prominence and importance (to the narrator, at least), so too do the flowers in the poem to Madeleine Lemaire stand out as significant, particularly because it has
been speculated that she is one of the models for Mme. Verdurin in the novel (Poems 327). Of particular interest is the salutatory gesture, “Friend” that begins the poem, thus implying that the speaker is talking to an entirely separate party, informing that anonymous subject that being amid the flowers, art, love, and protection of Madeleine Lemaire is a joy that cannot be experienced elsewhere or to this degree. However, when we consider a line like, “Fear not, the wicked there won’t dare seek you,” we see that the space in which the cohort of anonymous subjects gather is a safe space for the sexually non-normative. Further, it is a reassurance to the anonymous “Friend” that the “valiant” and “tender” hostess of this space is willing to bear her “claws to be . . . [the] defender.” Lines like this suggest two such possibilities. The first possibility: mirrored against the image of Madeleine Lemaire, Mme. Verdurin commands her guest’s actions and has the social authority to dismiss those whom she finds to be unsavory in her circle. The second: Proust is experimenting with talking to himself about a social gathering, knowing that others will speak about his sexuality, but also knowing that he has an ally in Lemaire. Taken this way, this line is one of the first times Proust utilizes an artistic medium to translate the dialogue of his interiority and direct it toward his outward, accessible self. Meetings with the self in literary mediums allow Proust to translate his many “selves,” but also to create new iterations and evolutions of the self in later prose, the first of which is a young, anonymous girl.

Confessing the Self Through Translation: The Evolution of Proust’s Young Girl

We begin a deeper examination into Proust’s translations of himself with the short story, “A Young Girl’s Confession” (“AYGC”; 1896), chiefly because the anonymous young girl is a first draft of the Narrator of La Recherche, whom the studied Proust reader knows to be an
authorial surrogate for Proust himself. So, where we once thought there existed only two versions of Proust—Proust the Narrator and Proust the Author—there is a third Proust, and she is the earliest version of Proust we meet in literature. It is this early version of Proust—the young girl—whose story explodes into a network of characters who later appear in Proust’s crowning achievement, La Recherche. It is important that we pay attention to what Justin O’Brien calls Proust’s “transposition of the sexes,” since “AYGC” immediately transposes the author’s sex so that he may engage a fictional voice to speak through the experience of a female subject trapped in vice; such a transposition is indicative of Proust’s desire to express himself in a more feminized way, so literary fiction became the only safe space where this could happen. Similar to Gide’s character Corydon, the young girl whom Proust creates is his test subject, a way for him to gauge public response to a heterosexual fall from grace, with some peripheral queer fringes.

“AYGC” is thus the first place where Proust starts to confess his own sexual transgressions, using the young girl as his Martyr figure. The story begins with the young girl’s tale of her failed suicide, her solution to inadvertently killing her mother from shock when the mother surveilled a lewd sexual act the young girl was performing. Since Proust was very much tethered to his mother and yearned for her undivided attention, he put “a thousand loving kisses” out into the world for his mother, (not so) silently proclaiming her the great love of his life; and we see this connection between the young girl—a proxy for Proust—and her feelings toward her mother (Letters 66-71). It is this early identity that creates the precedent for future Marcels yet to emerge. The mother-boy Marcel often sought a sense of security and love, finding that only his

\[17\] This is a phrase used throughout O’Brien’s piece.
mother could fill such a void. In this short story (just shy of 16 pages) that Proust utilizes an anonymous narrator who will eventually become split into the maternally-dependent Narrator and the vice-chasing Albertine in Á La Recherche Du Temps Perdu.¹⁸

“AYGC” establishes the strong themes of maternal yearning and the need for maternal acceptance as well as the fear of—and eventual acquiescence to—engaging in deviant sexual behaviors deemed shameful enough to end in matricide. The young girl is nameless like our Narrator in La Recherche. Though the short story does not begin with an epistle about the young girl’s early bedtime rituals, we are eventually led to that space and it becomes clear that the young girl yearns for her mother to be close at all times. Since the young girl is separated from her mother for months at a time, she wants to indulge and become enveloped in the maternal presence when it is available. In AYGC, Proust writes:

My mother would take me to Les Oublis¹⁹ toward the end of April, would leave again after two days, spend two more days there in the middle of May, then, in the last week of June would come to take me away. These visits, so short, were the sweetest and the most cruel thing to me. During these two days she would be lavish of her tenderness which habitually, in order to strengthen me and mitigate my excessive susceptibility, she would

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¹⁸ In fact, all characters in this short story are anonymous with the exception of the inciter/antagonizer of deviance: Jacques. As with “Pederasty,” written to Daniel Halévy, Jacques is yet another corollary to Proust’s real life, thus tying the anonymous girl that much closer to Proust’s narrators, for once Halévy had rebuffed the doting Proust, Proust sets his sights on Halévy’s cousin, Jacques Bizet, to whom he divulged the secrets of his life and the fact that his parents are displeased with him for his serial masturbation. Lonely and lustful, Proust “thrust a letter into Bizet’s hand, inviting him to have sex,” the next day between classes at school—a request that Jacques declined in a letter exchanged between the next set of classes. Even with the written refusal, Proust attempted one last time to lure Jacques, noting that engaging in such behavior “would prove harmless now, because they were young, innocent, and inexperienced” (Carter 3).

¹⁹ A surrogate for the fictional Balbec in La Recherche.
avariciously withhold. On the two evenings she spent at Les Oublis, she would come to kiss me goodnight after I was in bed, an old custom which she had abandoned because it caused me too much pleasure and too much pain, because due to my calling her back to say goodnight again and again I could never go to sleep, not daring finally to call her any more, but feeling more than ever the passionate need, always inventing new excuses, my burning pillow to be turned, my icy feet which her hands alone could warm. (AYGC 32).

Here, we see a filial sense of disconnection between the parent and the child, a theme that will gain greater depth in the relationship between the Narrator and his mother in La Recherche. In the case of “AYGC,” the young girl’s mother’s is emotionally withholding in order to strengthen her daughter, a test narrative that serves as the first iteration of a parallel plot yet to emerge regarding the Narrator of La Recherche’s anxieties about time robbed from him with his mother.

Let us return to a portion of Proust’s language from this passage: “In order to strengthen me and mitigate my excessive susceptibility, she would avariciously withhold [her affection]” (AYGC 32). It is the term “avariciously” that pierces the reader, since the implication of the mother’s greed indicates a kind of joy the mother might feel in knowing that her absence is causing her daughter to suffer. At least, this is the perspective of the young girl, who could only ever believe that the mother would be held back by something so shameful as greed when she is most needed by her daughter. Thus, the withholding parent trope is created here between mother and daughter, and this trope eventually evolves into a more sophisticated and emotionally-driven dynamic between mother and son on the earliest pages of La Recherche. While the discourse relative to the Narrator’s mother does not outwardly condemn her refusal to give her son the attention he wants from her, the presence of the father figure in La Recherche complicates the
Narrator’s ability to be with Mother, thus translating the greed of the mother and of the Narrator in “AYGC” onto the father in La Recherche.

Let us consider one of the earliest passages in Proust’s first volume of La Recherche, Swann’s Way (SW) to trace the development of the young girl’s bedtime narrative from the short story to see how it becomes the narrative of the young male Narrator. Proust writes:

My sole consolation when I went upstairs for the night was that Mamma would come in and kiss me after I was in bed. But this good night lasted for so short a time, she went down again so soon that the moment in which I heard her climb the stairs, and then caught the sound of her garden dress of blue muslin, from which hung little tassels of plaited straw, rustling along the double-doored corridor, was for me a moment of the utmost pain; for it heralded the moment which was to follow it, when she would have left me and gone downstairs again . . . I longed to call her back, to say to her ‘Kiss me just once more,’ but I knew that then she would at once look displeased, for the concession which she made to my wretchedness and agitation in coming up to give me this kiss of peace always annoyed my father, who thought such rituals absurd, and she would have liked to try to induce me to outgrow the need, the habit, of having her there at all, let alone get into the habit of asking her for an additional kiss when she was already crossing the threshold. (SW 15)\(^\text{20}\)

We can see a clear sexual transposition through acts of translation which have occurred between the creation of the young girl and the creation of La Recherche’s Narrator. Like the young girl, the Narrator also experiences anxiety about abandonment and disappointing the mother figure. In

\(^{20}\) With the exception of introductory or concluding ideas, Swann’s Way will appear as SW throughout.
both cases, the narrators’ rationales are parallel: too much affection from mother ultimately makes the child dependent, thus making proper emotional development nearly impossible. In reading these two passages alongside each other, I see the need for the mother’s kiss as both the root of pleasure and pain. In AYGC, the Narrator says of her mother, “she would come to kiss me good night after I was in bed, an old custom she had abandoned because it caused me too much pleasure and too much pain” because the young girl would constantly call her mother back to her room for more kisses (32). The young girl can call her mother back several times without fear of repercussions because there is no discernable father figure in this short story to punish such cries of weakness. Similar to the way Proust evolves the bedtime narrative from “AYGC” to La Recherche, Proust also evolves this key moment of mother-child intimacy from the short story to novel, translating the once-innocuous act in “AYGC” to a punishable offense in La Recherche. Let us return to a portion of Proust’s language from this passage once again to see how, despite the core narrative remaining mostly steady, the feelings of resentment are directed toward the father, not the mother: “My sole consolation when I went upstairs for the night was that Mamma would come in and kiss me after I was in bed . . . I longed to call her back [but didn’t because coming back] . . . to give me the kiss of peace always annoyed my father” (SW 15). In deepening the trope of maternal yearning in La Recherche as an extension of the experience in “AYGC”, Proust calls attention to the fact that a male presence—in “AYGC,” Jacques, and in SW, the father—complicates the Narrator’s ability to be close with the mother. It is important to note that the mother continues to return to her daughter’s room in “AYGC” for an elongated period of time, whereas in SW, it is understood that the Narrator is allowed one kiss, and he spends his entire day and night anxious about the little time he gets to spend with his beloved mother.
The other notable aspect of the interactions between the two scenes is the fear of disappointment and the removal of the character’s voice. “A Young Girl’s Confession” opens with the young girl’s failed suicide attempt because she “determined to kill [herself] the instant following her [the mother’s] death” (“AYGC” 35). Proust’s young girl is “young, innocent, and inexperienced,” so when she is deflowered at 16, she conceives of giving and receiving pleasure as a shameful act. However shameful the act might be, though, she enjoys her teenaged sexual liberation, and engages in her vice with Jacques and men like Jacques. Such acts are always followed by remorse and self-hatred which emerge as manifestations of disapproval from her mother’s all-knowing presence (the mother is talked about in terms of divinity throughout). And so, she attempts to cut herself off from the worlds of pleasure into which she has been initiated. Despite the young girl’s attempts to completely cease her involvement in her second, sexual life, she finds herself submissive to the call of the flesh. Even years later, at her own engagement party, the young girl—whose fiancé is absent—indulges in her vice. In this case, Jacques acts as the antagonist to heteronormative culture, the so-called “bad-seed” that sullies the otherwise picturesque world of bourgeoisie France. Like the narrator of the story, he is also a first iteration of a variety of characters yet to come: Mlle. Vinteuil, Albertine and her little clan, and even the tailor Jupien. In the world of Proust—whichever world that might be, novel or short story—there exists either a scapegoat or Martyr for the “fallen angel” archetype; in “AYGC,” Jacques is our scapegoat. Meaning, Jacques is the dark, unknowable figure whose goal is to temp the young girl toward vice and away from grace. When the young girl succumbs to Jacques’s temptations and decides the only way to mollify her misdeeds is to eliminate herself, she is forced to linger in a state akin to a type of purgatory, and it is in said state that she starts to yearn for the time spent with her mother at Les Oublis. This desire to be in a space “impregnated” with the essence of her
mother is so distinctly Proustian since this character wants to retrieve that which no longer exists. Similarly, the young girl is overwhelmed by a pressure to acquiesce to societal expectations, and pressure translated onto her by her mother:

> What grieved my mother was my lack of will. I did everything on the impulse of the moment. As long as the impulse came from my mind or heart my life, while not perfect, was not altogether bad. The realization of all my fine projects for work, for calm and reflection preoccupied my mother and myself above everything else, because we felt, she more clearly, I vaguely but intensely, that it would be nothing more than the image, projected into life, of that will created by myself within myself which my mother had conceived and nurtured. ("AYGC" 37)

Like the Narrator of *La Recherche*, the young girl also lacks a certain will, is impulsive, and acts in certain ways only to please her mother. To describe the creation of another self within the self signals a detachment of the self from the self. In this case, the young girl, a victim of sexual abuse at the hands of her own cousin—a crime her mother does nothing about after learning of the deviance—is a lost soul whose only wish is to please. She is no longer a pure poppy like the ones she picks for her mother or a majestic hawthorn like the ones that surround the Swann property and represent Gilberte—she is a plucked flower. No longer budding, she is now bare, open, and depraved.

The series of confessions that spring from “AYGC” are all rooted in a socio-sexual context. The first confession is the love for her mother; the second is her sexual encounter with her male cousin; the third is her desire to be with the deviant Jacques so badly that “Spending all the time [she] was not with him thinking about him, [she] finally sank so low as to resemble him as nearly as that was possible” (“AYGC” 38). This confession of cross-dressing presages the
transvestitism yet to come in *La Recherche*, exercised by characters like Charlus, Odette de Crécy (before she becomes Mme. Swann), and, of course, Albertine. That the moment of resembling the male for whom she thirsted is her lowest point speaks directly to Proust’s feelings about his own sexual desires and fears of publicly being labeled a pederast, since he was known to openly cross-dress in his youth. Yet another confession comes in the form of a fact: the young girl experiences “a period of nervous depression which affected [her] health” when she is 16, similar to the asthma and neurasthenia Proust endured during that period as well. At the same time the protagonist is suffering, she talks about the death of love and how it is replaced by habit, a trope to be expanded upon in Proust’s novel: “When love died, habit had taken its place, and there was no lack of immoral young men to exploit it. The accomplices of my sins, they made themselves apologists to my conscience as well” (“AYGC” 39).

The parallels between the life of Proust’s protagonist and his own (and later, the lives of the cast of *La Recherche*) are further elucidated in the focal point of the short story: the fact that stepping outside of the desires of mother can only end in matricide. A trauma victim, the young girl is already struggling with the issues of a sexual appetite over which she claims to have little power, noting that once she “lost her innocence” (because her cousin raped her) and “was the most worthless” she was esteemed the most (“AYGC” 40-41). The young girl’s sexual pleasure seeking and giving are what she considers the “worst crime against [her] mother . . . [and because] No one . . . ever suspected the secret crime that was [her] life,” she successfully lives two existences: virtue and vice (“AYGC” 41). When the young girl turns 20, she learns that her mother’s ailing health is further deteriorating and that her mother now has a mild case of heart disease and should be spared “all anxiety.” The young girl marries “to prove to . . . [her mother] how much . . . [she] loved her,” which forced her “to change . . . [her] way of living” (“AYGC” 41).
42). It is at the young girl’s engagement party that the ultimate betrayal occurs, since Jacques, the scapegoat, lures the intoxicated Narrator to separate quarters during the celebration. Once alone, and behind locked doors, Jacques and the young girl engage physically, and, despite the pleasure that the young girl experiences in this moment, her mind is elsewhere, with mother:

“Then, while more and more, pleasure took possession of me, I felt at the same time, stirring in the depth of my heart, an infinite sadness and desolation; it seemed to me that I was causing my mother’s soul, the soul of my guardian angel, the soul of God to weep” (“AYGC” 45). It is hard to ignore the young girl’s self-loathing here, as she is committing a mortal sin at the hands of the angels and God, all personified in her mother. The young girl’s sexual transgression becomes that much harder to ignore once the young girl examines herself in the mirror and realizes that “from [her] shining eyes to [her] blazing cheeks, [she] proclaimed a sensual, stupid brutal joy” (“AYGC” 46). The flames of the joy of turning her from docile daughter to sexual beast are quickly squelched upon the young girl’s second glance into the same mirror, now joined by the mouth and moustache of Jacques:

But soon in the mirror Jacques’ mouth, avid under his moustache, appeared against my cheek. Shaken to the depths of my being, I leaned my head closer to his, when I saw, yes, I tell it just as it happened, listen to me since I am able to tell you, on the balcony outside the window, I saw my mother looking at me aghast. I do not know whether she cried out. I heard nothing, but she fell backwards and lay there with her head caught between the

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21 “We drank to my coming marriage. I never drank anything but water because of the overstimulating effect wine had on my nerves. My uncle insisted on such an occasion as this I should make an exception . . . the champagne was so cool that I drank two more glasses. My head grew heavy, I felt the need to rest and, at the same tune, to expend my nervous energy. We rose from the table; Jacques came up to me and said, looking at me steadily, ‘Won’t you come with me; I want to show you some poems I’ve written’” (“AYGC” 45).
bars of the railing . . . I should rather my mother had seen me commit still other crimes, and even that one too, than that she should have seen that look of joy on my face in the mirror. (“AYGC” 46)

Once we arrive at the point of matricide in the story, the style of narration shifts to one that feels like the Narrator of Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” recounting the stealthy murder of the old man with the Vulture eye.22 The pace and frantic nature of the final confession packs with it so much nervous energy that it becomes difficult to discern whether these are the hallucinatory ruminations of a shock victim suffering from a mortal wound that is taking its precious time to finally kill the young girl—no doubt a kind of purgatory for her sins against God, the mother—or whether the young girl is somewhat of sound mind and confessing rampanty while someone will still listen to her panicked recollections. Suspicions exist about the balance between crime and

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22 While it may seem to be a bit of a leap to assume that Proust was influenced by Poe, the reality is that it is very likely that Proust read Poe. C.P. Cambiaire’s The Influence of Edgar Allan Poe in France (1927) documents the different literary movements in which Poe either had a hand or was the subject of criticism. Cambiaire offers the following insight on literary critic and Baudelaire enthusiast Barbey d’Aurevilly’s assessment of Proust’s work: “d’Aurevilly accuses Poe of using more artifice than real art, of not trying to convey a moral lesson, of being imbued with the fads of the day concerning mesmerism, somnambulism, metempsychosis and what he calls ‘les Chimères du siècle.’ He claims that in his ‘Gold Bug’ Poe spoiled his fantastic genius by a logical unraveling of the plot. The French critic failed to note that the discovery of the treasure is only an enticement to make us follow the thread of his wonderful deductions. He reproaches Poe with having almost no place in his writings for the human heart and human sentiments” (Cambiaire 46). Since d’Aurevilly wrote for Le Figaro, and we know that Proust himself also followed and eventually wrote for this periodical, there is a great chance that he happened upon the critique of Poe and explored it for himself. The stumbling and frantic final sentences of “A Young Girl’s Confession” are reminiscent of the “Tell-Tale Heart” Narrator practically beginning his listening audience to hear the story being told as it is being told, for that is the only possible truth. Perhaps Proust was intrigued by the idea of the confessional as forwarded in Poe’s short story and replicated the parts of it that best suited his own needs, particularly the seeming heartlessness of the young girl whose sexual deviance kills her mother and then the young girls stammering confession and revocation of that confession at the very end.
punishment in this moment, since the young girl “greatly resembling the young Proust” decides to take her own life because of this transgression—but did she actually kill her mother? (O’Brien 936). We might also speculate about the clarity of the moment for the young girl. We must first take into account that, “the content of the final conclusive vision is uncertain, the narrator is ‘blind’ as to what the mother has or has not seen . . . [and this leads] The reader [to duplicate] the narrator’s interrogation. Has the young girl really seen her mother dying in that spectacular way?” (Surprenant 120). Even in the end, despite knowing that the site of her sexual transgressions likely provided just enough anxiety to shock her mother to death, the young girl attempts to convince herself that what is real cannot be true, that her mother “had had a stroke of apoplexy” before seeing her and that the fallout is merely a coincidence (“AYGC” 47). A sweet dream indeed for a subject about to enter eternal rest herself.

I have chosen to analyze this short story purposely before engaging in my examination of Albertine to further concretize the focal point of this chapter’s argument—Proust is omnipresent in his subjects. The subjects of study thus far share a similar quality in that they all engage in, defend, or fall victim to deviance. Further, these seemingly independent subjects are not solitary characterizations for the sake of literary entertainment; instead, each persona, speaker, or developed character is a version of Proust that acts as an iteration of a self yet to come. The young girl here is a fuller version of the flat subject described as Cleopatra in Proust’s poem, as she is no longer one-dimensional and seen only as beauty. Instead, she is complex, jaded, and traumatized and looking for control and pleasure wherever she can find it. This young girl runs parallel to Proust’s lived realities as a young boy who was indelibly attached to his mother and whose sexual desires were forcibly repressed, much like we see in the young girl whom he creates as his surrogate here and later in La Recherche; however, the later iteration of the
anonymous Narrator as a translation of Proust is clearly more aware and suspicious of his surroundings and, therefore, situates himself in a position of the observer instead of the observed.

Proust’s preference for assuming the role of omniscient observer is described in William C. Carter’s *Proust in Love* (2006), in which Carter investigates Proust’s varying levels of sexual comfort as they relate to his life on and off the page. As Carter closes a chapter titled “Promiscuous Proust,” which preambles the second chapter, “Mighty Hermaphrodite,” we can sense that Proust felt caught between two identities, which created a sizable tension for the author that he passed onto his authorial surrogates and proxies. It is this very crossroads that is of interest to Carter’s work and that supports many of the claims made herein: “We see that young Proust remained trapped in the struggle between a boy’s desires to remain pure on the one hand and on the other to taste the forbidden fruit. Ever overflowing with tenderness, he sought an ethics and sanctioned the physical possession of his masculine ideal: intelligent beauty” (Carter 16). Thus, the liminal Proust further explored his sexuality by role-playing, morphing into a “boy-girl or whore sitting seductively in the laps of his male friends . . . [which] gave him an early understanding of what it is to be an androgynous being” (Carter 17). The delicateness described by Halévy along with Proust’s active pursuit of pleasure with himself and with others opened yet another portal of pleasure potential—the realization that there is a fluidity to gender and sexuality that can be celebrated and explored in the right spaces. This natural curiosity and inclination of Proust’s manifests throughout the pages of *La Recherche*, providing us one of the most forward scenes of boy-girl transposition and play: the depiction of the sexual relations and social positions of the Baron de Charlus and the ex-tailor Jupien.
A Defense of (Botanical, Pastoral, Contained) Homosexuality, a Natural Occurrence:

In a world of luxury and nobility there is also a world of deviance and defiance, and
Sodom and Gomorrah, the fourth volume of La Recherche is unapologetic about directly
confronting homosexual intimacy in its most “natural” state. Proust’s narrator, in the opening
scenes of SG, echoes the sentiments of Gide’s Corydon noting that nature has its own rules and
such rules should be untouchable by man. Using the backdrop of a controlled pastoral (a
greenhouse) and the flowers that are nurtured therein, Proust takes a moment to consider the
major arguments against homosexuality at the time, namely the concepts of procreation and
degeneracy/deviance. Ultimately, the beginning of this volume—and arguably its entirety—acts
as Proust’s version of Gide’s Defense of Pederasty, since Proust addresses homosexuality in a
natural space. Though he does not ever get as close to the subject as does Gide as to refer to it as
“natural” or through a singular subjective experience, Proust’s narrator’s desire to observe sexual
acts in nature between two men signals subjective desire, but also social prudence. So, in this
opening moment, as the Narrator astutely observes his environment, he notes the following:

The laws of the vegetable kingdom are themselves governed by increasingly higher laws.
If the visit of an insect, that is to say the transportation of the seed from another flower, is
generally necessary for the fertilisation of the flower, that is because self-fertilisation, the
insemination of a flower by itself, would lead, like a succession of intermarriages in the
same family, to degeneracy and sterility, whereas the crossing effected by insects gives to
the subsequent generations of the same species a vigour unknown to their forebears. This
invigoration may, however, prove excessive, and the species develop out of all
proportion; then, as an antitoxin protects us against disease, as the thyroid gland regulates
our adiposity, as defeat comes to punish pride, as fatigue follows indulgence, and as sleep
in turn brings rest from fatigue, so an exceptional act of self-fertilisation comes at the crucial moment to apply its turn of the screw, its pull on the curb, brings back within the norm the flower that has exaggeratedly overstepped it. (SG 4)

A clear attention to self-fertilisation presents itself in the Narrator’s ponderings as he awaits the arrival of the bee to the flower (all metaphor, of course). In this moment of interiority, Proust uses his narrator once again to tease out concepts relative to sexuality and the reasons why non-heteronormative sexuality and sexual encounters should be considered natural. Using nature as his main system of support is smart, since it is clear that there are species of nature that are either asexual, pansexual, or homosexual. However, Proust is attentive to the fears of his time, noting that the reason the flower requires the bee to fertilize it is because self-fertilization is akin to “intermarriages in the same family,” which leads to “degeneracy and sterility” (SG 4). This argument directly places society on trial, since there is a clear misconception that homosexual desire is synonymous with incest. The turn in the passage, however, happens when Proust examines these socially-constructed “truths” more carefully, using metaphors anchored in natural functions of regulation to ground his argument that self-fertilisation is not degenerate. Let us bring a closer attention to the final lines of this passage. Proust writes: “as an antitoxin protects us against disease, as the thyroid gland regulates our adiposity, as defeat comes to punish pride, as fatigue follows indulgence, and as sleep in turn brings rest from fatigue, so an exceptional act of self-fertilisation comes at the crucial moment to apply its turn of the screw, its pull on the curb, brings back within the norm the flower that has exaggeratedly overstepped it” (SG 4). To bring the self-fertilising flower “back to the norm” is Proust’s continued defense of homosexuality, since a claim like this counters the popularly-held belief that homosexual interactions yield degeneracy. Proust is signaling that the fears of heteronormative society are
misplaced—the fears of “sterility” as the result of “intermarriages in the same family” has to do with incest, not homosexuality. This is what allows the self-fertilising flower—metaphorically understood to be homosexual male encounters—to reestablish itself as a norm. The Narrator gathers these thoughts as he observes the interactions between the Baron and the ex-tailor.

Like a Foucaultian panopticon, the Narrator’s mode of surveillance is both intrusive and unseen. It is the hope of seeing “the miracle . . . the arrival . . . of the insect sent from so far away as ambassador to the virgin who had been waiting so long” that supposedly keeps the Narrator waiting like a proud, but hidden, soldier (SG 3). The Narrator is also curious about the social intimacies of the space in which he nestles himself among the verdure. And, upon seeing the Baron, the Narrator cannot help but quietly recount to himself the following sentiment: “I could not help thinking how angry M. de Charlus would have been could he have known he was being watched” (SG 5). Instinctively, the Narrator immediately considers the Baron’s social position and takes stock of the fact that while the Baron projects a virility about which he is extremely proud and in comparison to which “all other men seemed odiously effeminate,” the Baron, in this very moment, “assumed the features, the expression, the smile thereof, [of] a woman” (SG 5). 23 Similar to what Proust establishes in the plot of “AYGC,” here we have yet another translation from male to female form, since the Narrator is able to recognize how the Baron wishes to be received by society, but offers the correct assessment of how the Baron presents himself when society is not watching. Gendered confusion, coupled with Jupien’s invitation to the Baron to

23 This very sentiment is overtly expressed again in The Captive when a lovelorn and seemingly hopeless Narrator says, “The case of an affected old woman like M. de Charlus who, as a result of seeing in his mind’s eye only a handsome young man, thinks he himself has become a handsome young man, and betrays more and more effeminacy in his risible affectations of virility—such a case falls under a law which applies far more widely than to the Charluses alone . . .” (TC 464).
engage in sexual deviance with him, works to exact a scene in which the Baron loses his virility and social position in one, swift motion. Alongside the Narrator, we follow with great interest to witness this pollination.

The pollination proves to be both dominated by performative acts and power-dynamics, driven by social hierarchies. Here, we see high-low culture at play and how, in a manner similar to the way the Narrator perceives his station to be well above that of Albertine and her “little clan,” the subjects in positions of power are queer and, yes, have the ability to remain under the guise of heteronormativity. What Proust presents here is both a power dynamic and desire to maintain an appearance. Because the Baron is a member of France’s nobility, it is imperative that his outward persona mirror that of a heteronormative subject (though he becomes increasingly incapable of saving face in this way, especially once we arrive at the Hotel of Shamelessness in Volume VI). The safety of the greenhouse provides the Baron with the privacy he needs to engage the ex-tailor physically, despite the cat-and-mouse foreplay the two engage in prior to the Baron entering the carriage gate and succumbing to the sweet draw of the flower’s nectar.

Before the narrator describes the sexual exchange between the Baron and the ex-tailor, we are let in on an important rumination from the Narrator regarding M. de Charlus. Using botany and the man-made pastoral setting of the greenhouse, the Narrator remains faithful to his initial parallel of the bumble bee and the flower as a representation of the Baron to the ex-tailor. The Narrator says: “I did not know whether he [Charlus] was the insect that the orchid required, but I had no longer any doubt, in the case if a very rare insect and a captive flower, of the miraculous possibility of their conjunction when I considered that M. de Charlus [was likely a
homosexual)” (SG 9). Prior to the Narrator drawing this conclusion about Charlus, the Narrator likens the Baron to the “a great bumble-bee” flying into the courtyard; not long afterward, the Baron is awaiting entry to Jupien’s quarters, and, after coquettishly requesting a light, Jupien replies, ‘Come inside, you shall have everything you wish’” (SG 8-9). After the shop door closes behind the two men, the Narrator declares, “I had lost sight of the bumblebee,” a metaphor for Charlus (SG 9). We see how the metaphoric orchid/ bumble-bee trope works through code to evolve into a conversation about pleasure, pain, and cleanliness.

From images of nature, we are quickly drawn to another level of realism: the dynamics that exist in the space between pleasure and pain and what that means in terms of physical and emotional relationships with the self and with another subject. Let us first consider how the Narrator interprets and translates the sexual encounter:

For from what I heard at first in Jupien’s quarters, which was only a series of inarticulate sounds, I imagine that few words had been exchanged. It is true that these sounds were so violent that, if they had not always been taken up an octave higher by a parallel plaint, I might have thought that one person was slitting another’s throat within a few feet of me, and that subsequently the murdered and his resuscitated victim were taking a bath to wash away the traced of the crime. I concluded from this later on that there is another thing as noisy as pain, namely pleasure, especially when there is added to it—in the absence of the fear of pregnancy which could not be the case here, despite the hardly convincing example in the Golden Legend—an immediate concern about cleanliness.

Here, the Narrator’s reference to “a very rare insect and a captive flower” is an allusion to the next volume of the work, whereby the Narrator takes Albertine prisoner (“the captive flower”) in order to satiate his need to prove his heteronormativity to himself (“a very rare insect”).
Finally, after about half an hour (during which time I had stealthily hoisted myself up my ladder so as to peep through the fanlight which I did not open), the Baron emerged and a conversation began. Jupien refused with insistence the money that M. de Charlus was trying to press upon him. *(SG 12)*

Here we see balance attempted: pain and pleasure conceived to be concurrent waves of human emotion and experience that *any* subject can experience and provide. The Baron and the ex-tailor: our personified versions of Sodom (and Albertine, the latent Gomorrah), both outwardly proud and inwardly tortured. The interaction itself is meant to be performative; it is clear there is some fetishized sex play happening, given the “violent” noises sounded as if “one person was slitting another’s throat within a few feet of [the Narrator].” It is only after this moment that the Narrator articulates that the only other thing “as noisy as pain . . [is] namely pleasure,” which translates a moment of potential violence into one of sexual intrigue, experimentation, and kink. Extemporaneous, yet choreographed, the dance between the Baron and the ex-tailor is meant to exercise a clear power dynamic, as Charlus casually gathers himself after pollinating his flower and asking the man-turned-flower Jupien about other potential (and younger) partners he might contact. This, plus the Baron’s desire to pay Jupien for his *time* relay a clear message from the Baron to Jupien: *I put the coin in and enjoy the ride, then I choose my next adventure.*

Beyond Charlus’s feelings of superiority, we also see his internalized homophobia; it is clear that they must cleanse after they copulate.²⁵ But Charlus is unsuccessful in his furtive

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²⁵ The act of washing the body to cleanse the self is a popular trope in queer literature. The filth of homosexuality is something that the deviant subject must wash immediately, otherwise the deviant subject remains tainted, as does anything touched by the subject. We see a version of this thinking in James Baldwin’s 1956 novel *Giovanni’s Room.* Baldwin’s main character David is similar to Charlus regarding a need for cleanliness/fear of filth, an outwardly bourgeois demeanor, and a desire for lower-class men whom they dominate.
attempts to remain closeted. Eventually, the Baron stops caring and becomes sloppy, a characteristic that the Narrator finds irritating, given the pains he is taking to keep Albertine’s secret life—and by extension, his own—as undetectable as possible. Charlus’s failures are tied to a lack of concern for what others think (again, a nod to Gide’s Corydon): “But these moments of irritable retraction in which the Baron sought to conceal his true life lasted but a short time compared with the hours of continual progression in which he allowed it to betray itself, flaunted it with irritating complacency” (TC 404). Despite the Narrator’s observations and shrewd commentary on Charlus’s lack of discretion as the years elapse in the novel, the truth is “the portrait of male homosexuality is meant to be intricately humane. The idea of the man-woman is not a derogation of homosexuality, but an explanation of its normalcy; people, being people contain opposites within themselves” (Gopnik 9). Thus, the man-woman transition that we witness in the Narrator’s observations of Charlus have an artistic beauty to them, an almost cathartic remembrance of Proust’s own cross-dressing, prostitute-impersonating days. Why, then, does this same understanding not translate to Albertine?

Jupien recalls Jacques from “AYGC” in that each is a representative of the low culture that members of high culture actively seek. As it is the Baron who feels the need to wash almost immediately, we can sense that the filth and guilt felt by the anonymous female Proustian narrator in “AYGC” has been transposed onto the Baron. Since Jacques would be considered the “bad influence” in this scenario when measured against the subjects at the celebratory dinner, it remains unclear the extent to which Jacques is interwoven into this part of society. Though it is unclear whether Jacques is part of the high-low dynamic that is evidenced in the sexual relationship between the Baron and the tailor, what remains lucid to the attentive reader is that
Jacques does not “fit into” the social sphere of the young girl in this short story.\textsuperscript{26} For every higher-level member of society who is so bold as to engage with a person of a lower class, the lower-level, “bad” subject (in this case, Jacques) either becomes the scapegoat or the Martyr to protect the “willing” subject (in this case, the young girl), since the willing subject is typically in a position of power. In this case, the “sordid” influences are people like Jacques and Jupien—the people who have been engaged in vice long enough to know the codes, secret passageways, and contacts of the underworld of society’s upper crust. It is noted that “the many pages Proust devoted to various types of homosexuals and their determined efforts to find partners made it difficult for those who wish to avoid the taboo subject to deny the existence of a significant colony of homosexuals” (Carter 177). In moments like these, Proust’s ambition to provide a social commentary of bourgeoisie society’s hypocrisy is apparent: most people have secret desires, and more people than one would suspect have the desires of an invert. Proust uses this hypocrisy to create an imaginary world within an arguably imaginary person, Albertine Simonet. Albertine thus becomes the final version of the test subject Proust created in his young female narrator years earlier. What makes Albertine the ideal final iteration of the test subject-become-martyr is that, unlike the young girl, Albertine does not have any guilt in her inverted indulgences—this makes her untamable, and so she must be held captive.

**Finding (Training and Keeping) Albertine: The Author-Narrator’s Immersive Observational Therapy Sessions With/ Of the Self**

*Albertine is not a solid object.*

\textsuperscript{26} Though closer examination would be needed, a strong argument can be made that Jacques is, perhaps, the first iteration of Jupien.
She is unknowable.

—Anne Carson

About 50 pages beyond the Narrator’s retrieval of memory through the cathartic madeleine-tea experience, we see yet another clear emergence of Proust-the-Author. On the margins of life there exists yet another version of Proust’s desires, and she is delivered to us in the form of “arguably the most perplexing character that readers encounter” in the novel, Albertine Simonet (Harder 289). Albertine is crafted specifically for this novel; in fact, Carson notes that “Proust was still correcting a typescript of La Prisonnière [The Captive] on his deathbed . . . He was fine-tuning the character of Albertine” during his last days (19). Thus, in order to fully understand the way Albertine is crafted and characterized for the purpose of this novel, we must take Proust’s words into close and careful consideration, since he now has a martyr to absorb the repercussions of his deviant desires. Again, like Gide’s Corydon, Proust-the-Author has to carve out opportunities for Proust-the-Narrator to speak freely. Let us consider the following passage in which Proust-the-Author utilizes his surrogate Narrator to discern why certain relationships are manifestations that the (queer) subject has already established to be true; what reality presents is simply the evolution of the original idealization. The Narrator says:

We try to discover in things, which become precious to us on that account, the reflection of what our soul has projected on to them; we are disillusioned when we find that they

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27 Excerpted from The Albertine Workout. The full point reads as follows: “This pictorial multiplicity of Albertine evolves gradually into a plastic and moral multiplicity. Albertine is not a solid object. She is unknowable. When Marcel brings his face close to hers to kiss, she is ten different Albertines in succession” (Carson 14). Not only does this support the idea that, like the flat Cleopatra described in Proust’s early poem, Albertine is a character who can never have a full identity because she is not “a solid object,” it further bolsters the concept that, like Gopnik’s assessment there are several Prousts, there too exists several Albertines.
are in reality devoid of the charm which they owed, in our minds, to the association of certain ideas; sometimes we mobilise all our spiritual forces in a glittering array in order to bring our influence to bear on other human beings who, we very well know, are situated outside ourselves where we can never reach them. And so, if I always imagined the woman I loved in the setting I most longed at the time to visit, if I wished that it were she who showed it to me, who opened to me the gates of an unknown world, it was not by the mere hazard of a simple association of thoughts; no, it was because my dreams of travel and of love were only moments—which I isolate artificially today as though I were cutting sections at different heights in a jet of water, iridescent but seemingly without flow or motion—in a single, undeviating, irresistible outpouring of all the forces of my life. (SW 119-120)

The basic movement of the passage is that we conceive of love to be a person, but we often confuse that with our subjective associations about love and desire. In this case, the object of our love is always unattainable and the love we have manifested, in large part, is always subjective and self-centered, mediated and imaginary. The description of the Narrator’s “dream” woman who opens “the gates of an unknown world” will become Albertine, and thus the images of interest from Proust’s early poems to the anonymous protagonist in AYGC start to take a more concrete form in this important rumination in SW. That the Narrator concludes his thoughts on dreams as “only moments” that are meant to be artificially isolated undeniably sets the stage for Albertine, since her presence is largely artificial and the Narrator’s attempts to tame her and confine her are as exhausting and impossible as “cutting sections at different heights in a jet of water,” since the natural ebb and flow of water cannot be measured and, therefore, cannot be
isolated. Albertine is thus like the water, the space from which she emerges on the beaches of Balbec, and the space in the Narrator’s mind to which he returns to find comfort and answers.

It is in Balbec that we meet Albertine—albeit from afar. Prior to her arrival on scene with what the Narrator will call her “little band,” Albertine remains a dreamscape and the reality of the moment is that the adolescent Narrator spends most of his time with an equally homo-curious Robert Saint-Loup. With the change of setting comes a change of perception. Let us take a moment to consider the evolved perceptions of “love” on behalf of our Narrator at this point, thinking specifically about transitive properties and the expectations that the Narrator has of those outside himself:

When I succumbed to the attraction of a new face, when it was with the help of some other girl that I hoped to discover the Gothic cathedrals, the palaces and gardens of Italy, I said to myself sadly that this love of ours, in so far as it is a love for one particular creature, is not perhaps a very real thing, since, though associations of pleasant of painful musing can attach it for a time to a woman to the extent of making us believe that it has been inspired by her in a logically necessary way, if on the other hand we detach ourselves deliberately or unconsciously from those associations, this love, as though it were in fact spontaneous and sprang from ourselves alone, will revive in order to bestow itself on another woman. (WABG 299)

Here, the concept of “succumbing” is important, since it admits a certain level of defeat; more importantly, though, this act of vulnerability is a transitive act whereby women become exchangeable. The Narrator likens women to passing guests whose requests mirror “those

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28 I read the term “succumb” quite acutely here, since it is a very deliberate word that invokes vulnerability and suggests a victim. This term becomes more important when we consider that
made by tiresome women who are in love with us [non-heteronormative subjects], [and] we decline because we have pleasure of our own prospect” (WABG 257). Love there is none; sexual drive there is none; respect for the feminized subject there exists not; there is only the safety of the “tiresome women[‘s]” company to protect the Narrator from social castigation and rumors (since he does not want to be ranked among the Mlle. Vinteuil’s of the time and place). It is also important to consider how Proust’s understanding of love is translated onto his characters, since he does not think of love as a “very real thing”; it is transferrable, one face simply replaces another. Thus, the point here is that Proust uses subjective associations to create an artificial sense of loving someone because either the concept about love has nothing to do with the actual person about whom the Narrator is referring, or the subject does not exist at all. Proust makes this idea clear when he states, “if . . . we detach ourselves deliberately or unconsciously from those associations, this love . . . sprang from ourselves alone . . . [and will] bestow itself on another woman.” There is no clear interest in a specific woman; there is no discernable notion of

the first fragment of study in Roland Barthes’s A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments begins at the end of the tutorial on “how” the book is assembled and carries over into the title of the first element of the lover’s discourse: “So it is a lover who speaks and who says: “I am engulfed, I succumb . . . .” (the colon indicates the end of introduction and the title of the first fragment, respectively) (ALDF 10). An interpretation of Flemish mystic John von Ruysbroeck’s ideas regarding subjective engulfment clarify it as a type of vulnerability that Barthes describes as succumbing: “Engulfment is a moment of hypnosis. A suggestion functions, which commands me to swoon without killing myself. Whence perhaps, the gentleness of the abyss: I have no responsibility here, the act (of dying) is not up to me: I entrust myself, I transmit myself (to whom? to God, to Nature, to everything except the other) (ALDF 11). Considering the Narrator’s feelings about succumbing to a certain habit, we see a loss of the self—the very loss which Barthes writes about decades later in this fragment. The “gentleness of the abyss” to which Barthes alludes is the hope for acceptance in a place that exists beyond his vantage point (or, to put it more grimly, he is aware that he cannot exist in a way that feels natural without social alienation; this time happens well after he is gone. It is the “abyss”). Further, the end of this fragment’s point directs readers to questions regarding the subject, object, or entity onto which the speaker projects himself and his adjacent feelings of hypnotic, albeit anticlimactic, swooning.
romantic love. Instead, Proust provides a series of transpositions that he believes make a woman whole and acceptable. Even still, the Proust-the-Narrator pursues unattainable women to satisfy a social role the same way Proust-the-author only approaches unattainable and unavailable women: this act demonstrates heterosexual—therefore, heteronormative—sexual desire, but both the real Proust and his proxy know that nothing will come out of these interactions. These women are simply faces, easily replaceable and not especially captivating, though somehow collectable, for they reside in his memory and not in his heart. Like Swann, the Narrator collects people and arranges them like artwork to satiate his visceral appetite, suit his space(s), and provide the aesthetic draw needed to remain relevant in the Narrator’s life. Among the objects the Narrator collects is the illusive, unknowable Albertine.

The Narrator first sees Albertine and her little band of friends while sitting with Saint-Loup on the beach at Balbec. They are quite literally on the periphery of proper society: “they find themselves relegated to the edges of Balbec, on the line between its manicured grounds and its less cultivated surroundings. They are outsiders of unknown origin” who spark the interest of the Narrator and his equally queer companion Saint-Loup (Harder 292). The young men engage in some light “play” by calling to the girls—and what is more playful than some half-naked flirting on the beach? In the case of the Narrator, his version of flirting is more of an intense

29 In a scene that arguably shapes the setting, motif, and general groundwork for James Baldwin’s David in Giovanni’s Room, we are met with two adolescent boys who are fully aware of their homosexual urges, but actively repress those urges by engaging in heteronormative play. In James Baldwin’s seminal text Giovanni’s Room, we see similar complexities in David as we do in Proust’s narrator. I see a clear connection between the scene at the beach on Balbec in Proust when the Narrator first sees Albertine and her little clan and the scene at the beach on Coney Island in Baldwin’s novel. Each text provides us with two non-heteronormative adolescent boys at the peak of their hormonal urges attempting to flirt with their female counterparts unsuccessfully because they are not equipped or interested for that kind of intimacy with the opposite sex. Baldwin’s David recounts the memory in the following terms: “It was
observation, calculated and overly-introspective.\textsuperscript{30} Proust puts us into the body of the Narrator, possibly in the hopes that we will see through his eyes and enter his world. The band of girls is described to us at varying intervals of clarity. Much like the portraits of Elstir, the farther the images are from the Narrator’s vantage point, the less he (and we) can distinguish one body from the next, though we are aware of the little band’s confidence, since they are described as “advancing straight ahead, without hesitation or stiffness, performing exactly the movements that they wished to perform” \textit{(WABG 504}). Though the Narrator cannot quite discern one figure from the others at first, it is apparent that these girls are in sync with one another and, as they advance closer, it becomes increasingly clear that they “had decided that the surrounding crowd was composed of beings of another race . . . [and] they appeared not to see them, forced those who had stopped to talk to step aside, as though from the path of a machine . . . and if some terrified

summer, there was no school. [Joey’s] parents had gone someplace for the weekend and I was spending the weekend at his house, which was near Coney Island, in Brooklyn. We lived in Brooklyn too, in those days, but in a better neighborhood than Joey’s. I think we had been lying around the beach, swimming a little and watching the near-naked girls pass, whistling at them and laughing. I am sure that if any of the girls we whistled at that day had shown any signs of responding, the ocean would not have been deep enough to drown our shame and terror. But the girls, no doubt, had some intimation of this, possibly from the way we whistled, and they ignored us” (Baldwin 6). Based on the way each scene plays out, I have little reservation that Baldwin read Proust and used the model of Balbec, Saint-Loup, and Albertine to fashion Coney Island, Joey, and the half-naked girls. Further, we are given the impression that gayness has a sound. Baldwin’s David is suspicious that the sound of their whistles—and perhaps the manner in which they attempted the gesture—clued their female peers in on the boys’ disinterest in them. It is thus argued without argumentation that homosexuality can be read through every gesture, even the seemingly most innocuous. I still wonder what a gay whistle sounds like.

\textsuperscript{30} Closer to the end of \textit{Within a Budding Grove}, the Narrator frustratingly offers a bit more insight as to the mental anguish observing others takes on the observer: “How many observations, patient but not at all serene, must one accumulate of the movements, to all appearance irregular, of these unknown worlds before being able to be sure that one has not allowed oneself to be led astray by mere coincidence, that one’s forecasts will not be proved wrong, before deducing the incontrovertible laws, acquired at the cost of so much painful experience, of that passionate astronomy!” (561).
or furious old gentleman whose existence they did not even acknowledge and whose contact they spurned took precipitate and ludicrous flight, they merely looked at one another and laughed” (WABG 506). Unlike most “proper” adolescent girls the Narrator expects to see at the beach of Balbec, this little band breaks the rules—they are loud and overstated; they wear clothing that sets them apart; they have little to no regard for others, and they are unapologetic about how they present. In fact, based on the way we see this little band advance toward us—just as the narrowing scope of a camera lens zeroes in on adversaries as they gain prowess over their prey—we see that they are proud of their outward differences and do not intend to explain themselves or apologize to anyone. As we later learn, the little band is comprised mostly of lesbian adolescents, and their “loud and proud” displays on the beach are signifiers of Proust-the-Author’s interest in how non-normative subjects present themselves to already-established worlds where rule-abiding citizens carry forth in spite of their own desires. Here, this little band challenges popularly-held beliefs and practices, creating a ripple in the arguably calm seas of Balbec.

Though we do not yet know her name, Albertine is eventually the only subject who stands out among the little band, captivating the Narrator’s intrigue. She is described in the following terms: “a girl with brilliant, laughing eyes and plump, matte cheeks, a black polo-cap crammed on her head, who was pushing a bicycle with such an uninhibited swing of the hips, and using slang terms so typical of the gutter and shouting so loudly when I passed her” (WABG 509). What is interesting about Albertine is that she is immediately presented to us as having voice—and a loud, somewhat brash one at that—yet, she remains the most muted character in the novel. Almost no dialogue comes from this boisterous creature whose “tiresome phrase ‘living one’s own life’” becomes yet another point of intrigue for the Narrator (WABG 509). As
the little band draws closer to the Narrator, and the subjects come into clearer view, the Narrator’s observant gaze becomes immediately critical. Though this little band has “an invisible but harmonious bond, like a single warm shadow, a single atmosphere,” they are distinguishable enough for the Narrator to select from among them the woman to whom he alluded in *Swann’s Way*—the future woman who would show him new worlds. Despite not having a world or history to call her own, Albertine Simonet breaks away from the collective identity of her group to become an intoxicating entity whose mystique is irresistible to the Narrator. Enter: Albertine:

> For an instant, as I passed the dark one with the plump cheeks who was wheeling a bicycle, I caught her smiling, sidelong glance, aimed from the centre of that inhuman world which enclosed the life of this little band, an inaccessible, unknown world wherein the idea of what I was could certainly never penetrate or find a place. Wholly occupied with what her companions were saying, had she seen me—this young girl in the polo-cap pulled down very low over her forehead—at the moment in which the dark ray emanating from her eyes had fallen on me? If she had seen me, what could I have represented to her? From the depths of what universe did she discern me? It would have been as difficult for me to say as, when certain distinguishing features in a neighbouring planet are made visible thanks to the telescope, it is to conclude therefrom that human beings inhabit it, and that they can see us, and to guess what ideas the sight of us can have aroused in their minds. (*WABG* 510)

The “inaccessible, unknown world” mentioned here is an evolved iteration of the scene from *Swann’s Way*. In the chapter of *SW* titled, “Combray,” the Narrator talks about his infatuation with Mlle Swann, or Gilberte. Though he heard rumors that she was a “pretty little girl,” he was more interested in becoming acquainted with the famed writer and “golden guest,” Bergotte, who
was an intimate friend of the Swann family (SW 138). Though the Narrator talks about Gilberte in a seemingly romantic way, he is interested in opportunity: “Henceforth, more often than not when I thought of her, I would see her standing before the porch of a cathedral, explaining to me what each of the statues meant, and, with a smile which was my highest commendation, presenting me as her friend to Bergotte” (SW 138). For the Narrator, this world is inaccessible, save for the imagination of his mental telescope. He is cute off from these worlds, and they remain unknown. An evolution of this feeling and the questions the Narrator asks about himself in reference to his social and sexual worth become more prominent once Albertine becomes a central part of the narrative.

From the moment we meet Albertine, she—and any concurrent spaces she might occupy—are described either as inaccessible or unknown. What makes this moment especially important is the fact that the Narrator is continuing to assume the role of the dominated, rather than the one in command. He wants to be led toward worlds unknown, but is too afraid to endeavor to do so alone. In this moment of anxious introspection, the Narrator is actually gazing upon himself, thereby invoking the Proust-the-Author intervention into the safe space of the narrative. Within this contained, somewhat fictional world, Proust can ask these questions about himself through his Narrator, using Albertine as an object. Further, the Narrator is experiencing a

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31 We see a clear example of this when the Narrator continues to replay the image of Albertine in his head after first seeing her. The Narrator says, “Never, among actresses or peasants or convent girls, had I seen anything so beautiful, impregnated with so much that was unknown, so inestimably precious, so apparently inaccessible” (WABG 515). Use of the term “impregnated” is important here, since it presages the scene between Charlus and Jupien whereby the Narrator makes note of the benefits of homosexual intimacy, since pregnancy was not something about which the men had to worry. To first describe Albertine—tomboyish and inaccessible from the start—as being “impregnated with so much that was unknown” foreshadows a recurrent, underlying discussion of fertility, virility, and procreation throughout the rest of the work—especially in reference to Charlus.
kind of existential fear that this anonymous cyclist and her all-seeing telescope will be able to
discern the universe from which he hails, and then she will know his truth. Such a sense of
inward xenophobia speaks to Proust-the-Author’s anxieties about his sexuality being known, and
his Narrator betrays his apprehension through a series of rhetorical metaphors that bind the
Narrator to the eyes of the cyclist, thereby joining the two queer subjects narratologically in one
sense and realistically in another. Thus, though Albertine has long been seen as a proxy for
Alfred Agostinelli, Proust’s long-time driver-turned-lover, I see Albertine as a facsimile of
Proust himself.32 In fact, Carter notes that Albertine existed long before Alfred Agostinelli made
his appearance in Proust’s life. Carter writes,

While one can enumerate certain facts that Albertine owes to Agostinelli . . . it is
important to remember that her major function as a character was outlined in a note in
The Notebook of 1908, long before Proust fell in love with Agostinelli. Another and
perhaps the most irrefutable proof that a character like Albertine was to play a major role
in the plot is her ultimate link to the Mlle. Vinteuil episode, an episode that Proust
regarded as key to his story, and one written well before Agostinelli took up residence in
his apartment. (125)

The attempt to possess Albertine is the attempt to possess the parts of the self that are seemingly
untamable and socially invalid, and the circumstances of Proust’s familial life prevented him
from fully expressing his truth, thereby robbing him of his ability to possess himself.33 Thus,

32 According to Carson, “Albertine is believed by some critics, including André Gide, to be a
disguised version of Proust’s chauffer, Alfred Agostinelli. This is called the transposition theory”
(6).
33 In Proust in Love, Carter talks about how both Proust’s father and younger brother were sexual
clinicians who treated him like a medical subject. Carter writes, “His father, Dr. Adrien Proust,
and his younger brother, Dr. Robert Proust, studied human sexuality in a clinical sense in their
while Albertine’s character is extremely flexible in terms of metaphorical representation, the most important representation we should ascribe to this character is how she acts as a surrogate for the part of Proust that exists in an unknown universe, but one that can be seen with clarity when looked upon with the right telescope.

From the point of seeing and interacting with Albertine and her little band at Balbec, the Narrator becomes fixated on possessing knowledge about this unknown subject. It is by chance that he overhears a random beach-goer mention that Albertine is “that Simonet girl,” and it is Elstir who later confirms her identity as Albertine Simonet (as well as the names of the rest of the friends with whom she is seen). Taking this information in, the Narrator begins to imagine a dream world wherein the first words of the day are uttered not through the singular I, but instead through the collective us. Again, we see how Proust-the-Author uses the still-anonymous (at this point in the novel) Albertine as a sketch book where he imagines, in great detail, the joining of two entities. While the Narrator is established, has a history, and comes from a known and respected family, the yet-to-be-named Albertine seems without history, name, or place in society. The anonymity of this creature is intentional, since Proust is still trying to devise a way to interact with the other half of himself and his deviant desires, so properly sketching Albertine is important.

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treatment of patients who suffered from sexual disorders that were physiological or psychological in nature . . . Adrien Proust dealt with sexual anomalies as would a psychiatrist, treating both mind and body, in his firm conviction that, ‘the patient’s mental state . . . determines in large measure the dysfunction of the genital organs. This same belief in the importance of mind over matter led him to diagnose his son’s relentless asthma attacks as psychosomatic in origin, a conclusion that infuriated Proust and further alienated the two men. Proust adopted the same point of view in his novel, however, to explain Charlus’s evolution from a virile homosexual to a more flamboyant, effeminate type” (18). This could be why Proust’s Narrator holds a great deal of contempt for his father from the novel’s start.
This sentiment is confirmed when the Narrator explains his desire for a “perfect knowledge” and the barriers that stand in the way of achieving such privileged information:

For one cannot have a perfect knowledge, once cannot effect the complete absorption of a person who disdains one, so long as one has not overcome that disdain. And since, whenever the idea of women who are so different from us penetrates our minds, unless we are able to forget it or the competition of other ideas eliminates it, we know no rest until we have converted these aliens into something that is compatible with ourselves, the mind being in this respect endowed with the same kind of reaction and activity as our physical organism, which cannot abide the infusion of any foreign body into its veins without at once striving to digest and assimilate it. (WABG 521)

In what seems like a throwaway moment of narrative stream-of-consciousness, the plan to domesticate and tame this “alien” figure begins to take form in the mind of the Narrator.

Conversion is mentioned here, and it is not an accidental term. To convert the alien is to convert the self, so there is some hope for Proust-the-Author to trap the other half of himself—the deviant Albertine—and teach that subject how to behave properly by offering that subject rewards or rebuffs based on her behavior. Despite the impulsivity of the Narrator’s declaration of love for Albertine Simonet, she is nothing more than a hologram, easily replaceable by another figure: “my love kept for some time between itself and the image of Albertine a certain ‘play’ which enabled it . . . I might perhaps have been able to co-ordinate it with the image of another person. And this enabled me in a momentary flash to banish the reality altogether, not only external reality . . . but even the other reality, internal and purely subjective” (WABG 581). At nearly every turn, the Narrator brings his focus from Albertine back to his own internalized tensions and issues of selfhood. By separating “external reality” from “internal and purely
subjective” reality, the Narrator creates two worlds for his two selves, and Albertine is the fallout or any problems that arise between these incompatible factions.

These transpositions of Albertine’s character and subjectivity qualify her as a kind of literary chameleon, similar to her creator, whose visage, physiognomy, and entire being can shift based on the perception of the observer. In a later scene following a visit to Elstir’s studio, the Narrator sees Albertine and declares, “Albertine had not seemed to me that day to be the same Albertine as on previous days, and that each time I saw her she was to appear different . . .

certain modifications in the appearance, the importance, the stature of a person may also be due to the variability of certain states of consciousness interposed between that person and ourselves” (WABG 595). Albertine continues to shift based on the needs, anxieties, and suspicions of the Narrator—all of which are extensions of Proust’s own emotional and psychological apprehensions and misgivings. Interestingly, the Narrator declares how little he knows about Albertine, recognizing perhaps how little Proust truly knows about himself, since forcible repression led him to a somewhat secluded and lonely life. Using Albertine as his literary translation, the Narrator can secretly (yet publicly) question himself, using Albertine as his martyr figure yet again. Proust’s Narrator ponders the following concerning the illusive Albertine: “What did I know of Albertine? One or two glimpses of a profile against the sea, less beautiful, assuredly, than those of Veronese’s women whom I ought, had I been guided purely by aesthetic reasons, to have preferred to her” (WABG 597). Though Albertine is not the desired “type” for the Narrator—since the Narrator knows to whom he “ought” to be attracted—he “had thought about her endlessly . . . [carrying on with what he] called by her name an interminable

34 This is a trait that is not limited to Albertine, but is true of nearly every fully-developed character in the book.
inner dialogue in which I made her question and answer” (*WABG* 597). In the imaginary space where Albertine is already under the control of the Narrator, we get a clear sense that the “interminable dialogue” in which the two subjects are engaged has to do with Proust’s inner desires, those which are acted out by Albertine because Proust is too suspicious of public backlash to do the same. Within this suspicious space, the Narrator’s “various strategies become the causes of new feelings and new behavior . . . [and he] analyzes in great detail how both his need of Albertine and his slow detachment from her develop because of what he does to keep her with him” (Bersani 123). Albertine is both the question and the answer—she is the mirror into which Proust looks and engages in dialogue; such moments bring with them feelings of triumph, curiosity, and disgust.35

But the real question about Albertine has to do with her utility to the Narrator. The answer initially presents itself as sexual (for she invites him to her room, but then threatens to ring the bell when she realizes he is attempting to kiss her), but then shifts as there is something

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35 A concept that is again similar to what Baldwin does with his protagonist David. In the penultimate scene, David stares at himself in the mirror, knowing that Giovanni is going to be executed. As David reflects on himself, his life, and his desires with heavy emotion and metaphor, he says: “The body in the mirror forces me to turn and face it. And I look at my body, which is under sentence of death. It is lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of a mystery. And I do not know what moves this body, what this body is searching. It is trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries toward revelation . . . I long to make this prophecy come true. I long to crack that mirror and be free. I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed how I can save it from the knife. The journey to the grave is already begun, the journey to corruption is, always, already half-ver. Yet, the key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh” (Baldwin 168). Literal and metaphoric reflection happens to David with the mirror as it does with the Narrator through Albertine. Both David and the Narrator are stymied by themselves and their own anxieties of social castigation, thus they live in a liminal state of mendacity. What is perhaps most captivating about David’s reflection here is the focus on his “troubling sex” and how it can be “redeemed” and saved “from the knife.” The offense of pederasty was arguably more punishable when Baldwin was writing than it was when Proust was writing—this is thanks in large part to McCarthyism and the Lavender Scare.
about Albertine that the Narrator cannot help but take in, despite her “rebuff.” To the Narrator, Albertine is a non-human entity meant to be possessed, and either made abject through association with animals or made part of nature’s tapestry. Above all, though, engagement with Albertine is “entering into contact with the unknown, if not the impossible,” which is why this undertaking—the work of acquainting the self with Albertine, attaining Albertine for the self, and projecting/emitting the inner self on/through Albertine—is described as “an occupation as arduous as breaking in a horse, [and] as restful as keeping bees or growing roses” (WABG 630).

Despite world-expert on Proust Roger Shattuck’s 1974 study on the novel and his position that The Captive is “the one volume of the novel that a time-pressed reader may safely and entirely skip,” it seems unsafe to skip a volume that attempts to develop such a critical and unknowable character like Albertine (Carson 6). Made abject from the start of the volume, Albertine’s story is told for her through the perspective of the Narrator, so we can see the continuation of her silencing from earlier volumes. However, it is not until this volume that she willingly and unapologetically leaves at intervals, knowing that her secret deviance is safe with the Narrator the same way the Narrator’s secret, albeit unconfirmed, is safe with her. Once Albertine and her coffin-like parcels move into the Narrator’s space in TC, the true nature of the Narrator begins to emerge. While the Narrator and Albertine arguably complement each other in that they are both queer youths who have no genuine sexual interest in each other, they also bring out the proverbial worst in each other—the Narrator emerges as an extremely narcissistic, controlling subject and Albertine demonstrates a level of materialism and demand that she knows

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36 Yet again, Albertine’s existence and the suspicion and curiosity that create the unknowability of her character presage the opening scenes of Sodom and Gomorrah between Charlus and Jupien: the bee to the flower, the ultimate homosexual gesture set against an innocuous pastoral image of natural tranquility and order.
she can wage as a kind of allowance for being the Narrator’s pet, trophy, and secret keeper. There is no genuine love on the part of the Narrator, for he conceives of love as “no more perhaps than the diffusion of those eddies which, in the wake of an emotion, stir the soul” (TC 16-17).

Almost immediately, the Narrator acknowledges that his desire for Albertine is purely of a possessive nature: “Without feeling to the slightest degree in love with Albertine, without including in the list of my pleasures and moments that we spent together, I had nevertheless remained preoccupied with the way in which she disposed her time” (TC 18). For what other reason might Proust’s Narrator want to obsess over Albertine’s social engagements if it were not for the purpose of keeping her sexual proclivities a secret? In Albertine, the Narrator recognizes his own vice, and so in containing her and surveilling her, the Narrator, in turn, keeps himself in check. Albertine is situated in the Narrator’s room, “cramped between the bookcase and the pianola that she handles as much as at Balbec she did her bicycle . . . [she is] physically beautiful and alluring but at the same time untouchable” (Larkin 118). A suffocated space, the room itself becomes a prison for Albertine first and the Narrator second. There is a palpable moment of celebration for the Narrator when he realizes he has certain degrees of control over Albertine in such a space: “I had managed to separate Albertine from her accomplices, and, by so doing, to exorcise my hallucinations; if it was possible to make her forget people, to cut short her attachments, her taste for sensual pleasure was chronic too, and was perhaps only waiting for an opportunity to be given its head” (TC 18). To keep Albertine a prisoner is to keep his own secret. As Anne Carson notes, “Once Albertine is imprisoned by Marcel in his house, his feelings change. It was her freedom that first attracted him . . . This attraction is now replaced by a feeling of ennui . . . [and Albertine becomes] a ‘heavy slave’” for the Narrator (8). This
sentiment is echoed by Hollie Harder who says the “new, domesticated Albertine seems to lose her autonomy, her authority, and her self-determination, the very traits that the protagonist had found so appealing in her in Balbec” (298). But, once she is imprisoned, Albertine becomes mostly a pestilence for the Narrator and it “must be concluded . . . that in endowing Albertine with Lesbian impulses Proust was acting quite intentionally and logically . . in order for the travesti, or transposition of sexes, to be consistent, Albertine had to be bisexual” (O’Brien 945). Fear that Albertine might reinstate the otherwise “exorcised” hallucinations of the Narrator is enough to allow the Narrator revel in the defeat of Albertine’s privacy, yet his anxieties still lead him to worry that, if given the right set of circumstances and freedoms, Albertine’s sexual appetite will satiate itself in most undesirable ways, thus exposing him as a fraud harboring a fugitive.

It is clear that the Narrator’s own shame about his sexuality informs and motivates the behavior he imposes upon Albertine. Hallucinations of lesbian intimacies between Albertine and Andreé haunt the Narrator, and his obsessive mind disallows the crumbling of such images. This speaks to how Proust-the-Author warned Gide against using singular subjective pronouns in his defense of homosexuality in Corydon, since such language is incriminating; however, the manifestation of a fictional hallucination on the part of a character set in a third-person role is different. Albertine is “more than a woman . . . [she is] a continued fascination and jealousy . . . [who proves to be] the narrator’s projection of his own dialogic tensions between love and jealousy, past and present, representation and reality” (Kavaldo 277). Let us consider the anxiety that the Narrator harbors even after Albertine is under his surveillance: “In leaving Balbec, I had imagined that I was leaving Gomorrah, plucking Albertine from it; in reality, alas, Gomorrah was disseminating all over the world. And partly out of jealousy, partly out of ignorance of such
joys . . . I had arranged unawares this game of hide and seek in which Albertine would always elude me” (TC 20). The idea that removing a subject from a given setting does not recalibrate that subject’s desires and inclinations is something that the Narrator clearly understands but cannot accept. Instead, he participates in play with Albertine—or, the other half of his sexual consciousness—because he elects to remain ignorant for the sake of self-preservation. In turn, we see that there are “four ways Albertine is able to avoid becoming entirely possessable . . . by sleeping, by lying, by being a lesbian or by being dead” (Carson 19). Albertine is thus “split into separate personae with separate languages,” which strongly suggests that there is no real Albertine. Instead, Albertine is imaginary—a “Memory herself,” which motivates the “imperfect” Narrator to isolate her, thus preventing her from “enter[ing] the bodies of others” (Kavaldo 275; Mavor 291). Meanwhile, Albertine must pull herself in these directions to avoid confrontation and maintain some level of privacy, yet she still remains a personified bifurcation representing Pain and Joy, but it is only the Pain of Albertine that keeps the Narrator’s “wearisome attachment alive,” a self-pitying eulogy for a phallus without play (TC 27).

The only pleasure that the Narrator derives from Albertine is watching her sleep. This area of Albertine’s character development is among the key interests in Anne Carson’s The Albertine Workout. In one of the earliest scenes where the Narrator surveils the sleeping Albertine, he feels closer to her than ever, a moment he describes as the “first delicious moment of uncertainty,” which allowed her to “take[] possession of her more completely” (TC 90-91). Uncertainty peppers this scene, even as the sleeping Albertine awakens and, in a moment of hypnogogic sleep, reveals the connections of the many Albertines and the many Prousts. Proust writes,
Then [Albertine] would find her tongue and say: ‘My—’ or ‘My darling—’ followed by my Christian name, which, if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would be “My Marcel,” or “My darling Marcel.” After this I would never allow a member of my family, by calling my ‘darling,’ to rob of their precious uniqueness the delicious words that Albertine uttered to me. As she uttered them, she pursed her lips in a little pout which she spontaneously transformed into a kiss. As quickly as she had earlier fallen asleep, she had awoken. (TC 91)\(^{37}\)

Despite the otherwise unstable dialogism on the part of Albertine, she is the one who identifies the Narrator, thereby identifying the author. Typically, in such complicated and unstable dialogisms, “the author, deliberately, never fully reveals himself” so that the author might remain neutral (Kavadlo 272). In breaking the third wall, however, the audience is summoned as Proust gives Albertine the liberty of outing him, thereby allowing himself to be revealed. When we consider how artistically and quickly this happens, it is really quite magnificent. And, we are tethered along until the fifth volume of the novel before hearing this confirmation of identity.

Later, in notes sent to the Narrator from Albertine, his name is written not spoken, though, based on punctuation, we sense that the Narrator is reading the note aloud, therefore allowing Proust to insert him“self” in the margins of the work yet again. The note reads: “My darling dear Marcel, I return less quickly than this cyclist, whose bike I should like to borrow in order to be with you sooner. How could you imagine that I might be angry or that I could enjoy anything better than

\(^{37}\) Anne Carson’s study, *The Albertine Workout* (2014) documents the imbalanced number of times Albertine’s name is mentioned compared to the Narrator’s. The scene excerpted here is one of few moments in the entire novel where the Narrator is called by his name, Marcel. On the other hand, as Carson notes, “Albertine’s name occurs 2,363 times in Proust’s novel, more than any other character. Albertine herself is present or mentioned on 807 pages of Proust’s novel” (5).
being with you? . . . The ideas that get into your head! What a Marcel! What a Marcel! Always and ever your Albertine” (TC 202-203). Despite Albertine’s alien background and lack of cultural savvy, there is one area where Albertine matches the Narrator: in manipulation. The Narrator is just as much Albertine’s captive as she is his, and it is for this reason the Narrator plays Albertine’s games. To avoid ruptures is to endure the pain of remaining inside the “concealment of the secret hell that a life shared with [Albertine],” and the Narrator would apparently rather live in the hell scape that he fashioned than be alone or outed (TC 99). And again, it is imperative to remember that Albertine, as much as she can be a stand-in for Agostinelli, is also a version of Proust.

The evidence of Albertine’s transgressions are irrefutable, and it appears that she cares little about the social repercussions regarding her deviant proclivities and behaviors. At the same time, the Narrator consistently oscillates between feelings of hatred toward Albertine and feelings of love and contentment in her presence. In a classic yin-yang duality, Proust-the-Author grapples with the truths of what it means to be a homosexual of the time and uses his Narrator to exhaust himself with anxieties and suspicions about the implications that such a life creates for the subject living it. The Narrator is troubled that Albertine was raised by Mlle. Vinteuil’s friend (and, since we know Mlle. Vinteuil is a lesbian, it is assumed that every female with whom she interacts must also be a lesbian, since this psycho-sexual malady was considered transitive at the time), feels uneasy about her relationship with Andreé (especially after Cottard comments on the inappropriateness of the two women waltzing together, their breasts touching for all to see), and is intimidated by her relationship with Léa. In a moment of internalized panic, the Narrator thinks through Albertine’s behaviors and relations: “Albertine might deny specific betrayals; but by words that she let fall, more potent than her declarations to the contrary, by those looks alone,
she had confessed to what she would have wished to hide far more than any specific facts, to what she would have let herself be killed sooner than admit: her natural tendency. For there is no one who will willingly deliver up his soul” (TC 194). At no point does Albertine indicate that she would rather be killed than admit her “natural tendency”; this is an anxiety-ridden Proust speaking through his Narrator. The fact that this extremely pointed observation/accusation is followed by the idea of a subject giving up “his soul” is important, as we see the translation of Proust into Albertine quite clearly in this moment. Despite the Narrator’s best efforts to domesticate Albertine (which is also Proust’s attempt to keep that part of his sexuality tame), she escapes only to suffer an untimely death during a horse-riding accident. It is imperative that Albertine dies once too many people know her secret (her little band, Elstir, Mlle. Vinteuil, Cottard, and Françoise, to name a few), so she is removed in fragments, similar to the way that she is first gathered. Much like the sand on the beaches of Balbec, Albertine’s granular existence has beauty and validity only under the correct circumstances. When one vacations, one may live as Albertine lives; to take that identity back “home” is impossible, as is proven in The Captive and later concretized by Albertine’s death in The Fugitive.

The last images we “see” of Albertine are death images. As Carson assesses, Albertine is seen quite frequently in a sleep-like state, a state often likened to death. Once the Narrator and Albertine make the decision to end their tryst, the Narrator, describes the sleeping Albertine: “It was indeed a dead woman that I saw when, presently, I entered her room. . . her sheets, wrapped around her body like a shroud . . . the head alone was emerging from the tomb, awaiting in its sleep the Archangel’s trumpet” (TC 485). Not only does this moment foreground Albertine’s death, but it also provides the avenue by which Proust-the-Author contradicts the discourse of Proust-the-Narrator with regard to Albertine’s wish to be killed rather than to beouted, which
brings us back to the plight of the young girl’s failed suicide in Proust’s short story. Ruminating on the series of lies he has experienced and in which he has partaken, the Narrator has a rare moment of confession and self-reflection: “It was all a lie, but a lie for which I had not the courage to seek any solution other than my own death. And so I remained, in the fur-lined coat . . . beside that twisted body, that allegorical figure. Allegorising what? My death? My love?” (TC 485). The wish for death resides within the Narrator, not Albertine, for he cannot conceive of a life where his vice is so shamelessly on display. Thus, killing Albertine is an attempt on behalf of Proust-the-Author to kill that part of himself (through the Narrator) that he does not wish to be revealed. The receipt of Albertine’s letter from beyond the grave in The Fugitive firmly seals the coffins Albertine brings with her, thereby ridding the Narrator (and Proust) of the need to continue to repress and tame a spirit and desire that is so natural it can only be destroyed by nature itself.

Since love is an image we fashion in our minds, we are constantly left in a state of waiting. The love that the Narrator proffers to harbor for Albertine is self-serving and based on nothing more than a power-jealousy dynamic to which he yields and toward which Albertine remains peripherally subservient. In Proust, we can see how, everyday, we rely on our memory—and by extension, our imagination’s ability to have agency within our memory—to remodel the people we know out of habit. Ultimately, once mystery ceases to exist in a person, the desire to steal into that person’s life begins to subsist. And the dual representation of Albertine as being both a germinated flower and a multiple of herself means two things. The first: Albertine is growing, but not in the sense that she is a seedling that had no roots. To the contrary, the image of Albertine as a germinating flower in this circumstance has more to do with a flower that is able to regenerate itself and spread its roots once its season arrives. Of
course, the metaphor here has to do with the larger homosexual community that existed during this time and how, through secret channels and meeting places, uranists/ pederasts/ homosexuals could act out their deviance and return to the real world unscathed. Performing normativity is also the plight of the lower classes, since we see Charlus openly engage with men like Morel, dress in drag, and frequent brothels like The Hotel of Shamelessness.\textsuperscript{38} Though the Narrator prides himself on domesticating the beast that is Albertine (or, was supposedly Albertine), she has a strong sense of self and is keenly opportunistic. The second idea regarding Albertine as a multiple of herself is what has guided this chapter throughout: Albertine is, like Proust, a multifaceted queer subject whose desires must be kept private, otherwise she will experience social castigation and shame. Thus, Albertine is the part of Proust with which he can only meet up in a literary, narratological space so that he can confront his vice, attempt to contain and control it, and, upon realizing none are possible because Nature has its own agenda: he must kill her in order to preserve himself.

**Conclusion**

In *Proust in Love*, William C. Carter summarizes Proust’s authorial style quite well. Carter writes, “Proust always chose the complex over the simple, seeing many things in one, which led him to seek the harmony that unites them” (44). When considering the evolution of the

\textsuperscript{38} In a passage where homosexuality among the ancients like Plato and Virgil is being discussed, we are presented with the image of a cross-dressing, makeup-donning Baron de Charlus: “the Baron had devoutly lowered his mascara’ed eyelids which, contrasting with his powdered cheeks, gave him the appearance of a Grand Inquisitor painted by El Greco. But this priest was frightening and looked like an excommunicate, the various compromises to which he had been driven by the need to indulge his taste and to keep it secret having had the effect of bringing to the surface of his face precisely what the Baron sought to conceal, a debauched life betrayed by moral degeneration” (*TC* 272).
different iterations of the “self” that Proust provides to us in poems, short stories, and flat, yet complicated and capricious characters like Albertine Simonet, it is hard to disagree with this logic. For Proust, escaping into the written world provides a safe space shrouded in allusion, artistry, and metaphor. By no means is this an entirely condemnable space, but Proust is careful not to make the missteps of his contemporary, André Gide. Instead, Proust creates an ideal setting in which he can tease out the events of his life and confront them as different version of his public self. That Proust was a cross-dresser who invited boys his age to have sex with him speaks to my argument that Proust utilizes his literary subjects as proxies to be used in the same way Gide creates fictional martyrs. Thus, the speakers from his early poems lay the groundwork for his adolescent sexual history—“A Young Girl’s Confession” transposes Proust’s gender and imagines his worst fear: matricide at the hands of homosexuality, and we have the evolution of these effeminate voices in both the Narrator and Albertine in La Recherche. It is only in these spaces that Proust-the-Author can meet up with Proust-the-Narrator to extort and attempt to tame the part of the self that should not exist: Albertine, the manifestation of the boy-girl who presents as feminine and engages in lewd and unspeakable homosexual acts. For Proust, there is great beauty in “the coexistence of masculine and feminine traits within an individual” because such traits constitute a “positive, enhancing condition” (Carter 189). Of course, this is only true when the subject remains at arm’s length and Proust-the-Author can remain within the space of his cork-lined room, safe from watchful eye of society.
Chapter 2: Roland Barthes

I keep a collection of dead roses in a built-in shelf adjacent to my desk. From their best angle, they preside over a framed photo of Edgar Allan Poe, famed British dancer Margot Fonteyn (1919-1991), a collection of shriveled, lifeless sunflower petals that continue to accumulate in a glass jar gifted to me by a cherished soul, a somewhat androgynous headless wire mannequin (though I believe the bust has, over the years, and over its many moves, become somewhat deflated so as to hinder itself from decidedly binary labeling), and a 19th century lesbian couple whose history and names I do not know. Just out of frame, a copy of the hybrid collective Guise and Dolls (2015), which documents the work of Andy Warhol and Robert Mapplethorpe, sits nearby, atop a book of Gustave Klimt illustrations. The space is a mortuary for queerness, queer love, and queer death. The roses serve as a reminder that in death, there is beauty. That even once life stops, there is evidence that it once existed. People confuse the desire to preserve an essence with morbidity. This is not the case. I simply see death and life as existing next to each other, just at different stages. Without one, there cannot exist the other.

When I look at this photograph, I see lives lived in secrecy and others lived out loud. I see a passage of time, though all is static on this shelf. This shelf is a living photograph (therefore, it is dead) that serves as my Muse. I go backward in order to move forward; I keep death close in order to give it life. And, like Roland Barthes, I rely on the photo to birth literature.

Pictured: Vase of Death/ Life in Many Colors, assembled by Cosentino
Retrieving the Buried Barthes:
The Art of Reading *A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments, Mourning Diary*, and *Camera Lucida* as a Collective, Personal Text

“Each of us has his own rhythm of suffering.”
—*Mourning Diary*, Roland Barthes

“The power of language: with my language I can do everything:
even and especially *say nothing.*”
—*A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments*, Roland Barthes

**Method and Routine = Safety**

Toward the end of Roland Barthes’s (1915-1980) life, the once-devout structuralist, Marxist, and semiologist started to conceive of language and the discourse derived from language in a new way. For nearly the entirety of his writing career, Barthes focused on the technicalities of language, considering its usage and its receipt. He critiqued the circumstances under which discourse emerged while also considering audience-response and what the general writer might consider accessible, relatable, or readable. Barthes’s readings of authors like Balzac, Mallarmè, and Proust studied how language is formed, the manner in which it emerges, and the circumstances that dictate the degree to which language participates in a collective thought process / belief system or exists as a unique text that is decipherable only to the author of the work. What is missing from nearly all of Barthes early writing, though, is a personal connection to himself through language. For Barthes, writing about the self—the “I”—was an anxiety-inducing activity that, like being photographed, created a sizable discomfort. Barthes thus reserved for himself the position of observer for much of his writing career, knowing there was a safety in not revealing himself to his reader. From *Writing Degree Zero* (*WDZ*; 1953) to his
infamous essay, “The Death of the Author” (1967), we see little divergence in Barthes’s writing style (though, we do see a slight pivot start to occur in “The Death of the Author” with regard to the author’s willingness to forfeit some of the “power” associated with literary agency). For Barthes, remaining outside of discourse was a way to be in control of language, and thus allowed him to remain undetectable and comfortable (enough).

For Barthes, discomfort existed in the space between polarized tensions, whether it text, in language, or on the body. The first recognizable space where tension exists is in writing. In the fragment “Inexpressible Love” excerpted from A Lover’s Discourse Fragments (ALDF; 1977), Barthes defines the act of writing as a series of “enticements, arguments, and impasses generated by the desire to ‘express’ amorous feeling in a ‘creation’ (particularly of writing)” (97). Within this fragment, Barthes examines the impossible task of writing about the self,

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39 With the exception of introductory ideas or closing statements, Writing Degree Zero will appear as WDZ.

40 Barthes thinks of this split throughout the latter years of his work and lectures. In his lecture at the College de France on May 13, 1978, Barthes breaks down the contents of the unit titled, “Retreat,” in which he describes the concepts of public/private space, the idea of being in one/two places, and the theory of two entrances. Barthes writes, “the public/private myth, to be explained, by the way; it has been said: ideologically capitalist: but it’s the use of the “public” that is alienated in a market society (photos, interviews, gossip, etc.): the ‘private’ is a natural defense against commodification of the public → logical identification of the clandestine (or the anonymous) with the free. In any case the fantasy of split personality might be the more important one. I would infer from double-postulation that I witness in myself: (a) my resistance to having more than one place (city/country), my desire for one single permanent dwelling for both rest and productive work, the way I compulsively reproduce the same spatial structure, the same ‘proxemy’ everywhere . . . (b): my desire, sometimes, to have a second place, almost secret, familiar and unfamiliar, in a completely different neighborhood” (Lectures 141). It is important that we take note of Barthes’s consistent reference back to this fractured space, since it so volubly demonstrates why his earlier writing lacks a clear personal connection. He is unwilling to be commodified, but once his mother dies, he realizes that the only way for her to be forever etched in time (and for his half-brother Michel to have a source of income from Barthes’s writing royalties) is to step out of the private and into the public, thus commodifying himself.

41 With the exception of introductory ideas or closing statements, A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments will appear as ALDF throughout.
saying, “I cannot write myself. What, after all, is this ‘I’ who would write himself? Even as he would enter into the writing, the writing would take the wind out of his sails, would render him null and void—futile . . . what’s the use?” (ALDF 98). Barthes’s internal struggle with the idea of becoming the subject of his own writing is important because he cannot strictly write about himself without invoking images and representations of others, thus risking becoming “null and void [and] futile.” So, in asking what the “use” of personal writing is, he is really questioning how one can successfully write about the self while using the image or idea of another, separate “self” as a means of exploring one’s emotions.

Truly personal writing requires that the writing subject locate the “I” (himself), confront its truths, and expose his innermost desires, fears, and anxieties. For a close-lipped man like Barthes, such a concept was akin to a nightmare; thus, the “I” remained outside his writing for nearly his whole career. Though an apprehensive attempt to bring out the “I” is made in Roland Barthes (RB; 1975), Barthes immediately informs the reader that he is writing in character, so we do not fully experience the “I” of the writing—the “I” remains a character that might share certain qualities with his author, but is, nonetheless, imaginary. In fact, the “I” in Barthes does not begin to emerge until ALDF, a series of episodes that reveal Barthes’s feelings of bitterness, loneliness, and abandonment in love—sentiments that were likely triggered by his mother’s imminent death. Mourning Diary (MD; 1977), a journal-style text in which Barthes memorializes his late mother, Henriette, is written in late October, beginning the day after his mother’s death. Though these works were published at the same time, they were written by two different Barthes:

42 With the exception of introductory ideas or closing statements, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes will appear as RB throughout.
43 With the exception of introductory ideas or closing statements, Mourning Diary will appear as MD throughout.
the Barthes that lived for his mother Henriette Barthes (whom we come to know as maman, a French colloquial term used by younger children to address their mothers), and the Barthes that is forced to exist without her. Phrases and terms are carried over between the texts, creating an interplay of language that volleys between emotional extremes: love and mourning. Introduced amid this linguistic-discursive interplay is a series of lectures given at The College de France in which Barthes focuses on the Neutral (1977). Here, we see the lover’s language from ALDF and the language of loss from MD translated into a lecture series on Barthes’s interpretation and definition of the Neutral. There is a clear evolution of language in Barthes’s work of “showing” the self in RB, to revealing the discourse of love (amorous or otherwise) in ALDF, to then collapsing language inward in MD, and this evolution opens a space for Barthes to become a more intimate version of himself. What Barthes rhetorically poses in ALDF regarding the “use” of writing the “I” becomes a personal project in Barthes’s final work, Camera Lucida (CL; 1980), a text in search of the essence of maman—but he needed the language to find her, and that language could not be common or universal.

Barthes felt torn between two languages—the common language of the people (Doxa) and the personal discourse and speech of people with intimate connections. This chapter will consider how Barthes pulls himself away from the Doxa and becomes more engaged with his emotional turmoil through suffering, melancholy, and weariness. We will look to the work produced during the last decade of the semiologist’s life in order to show how later texts not only become more intimate through photography and the transfer of language to discourse, but also

44 It is only once Barthes’s scripts his lectures on the Neutral that we see Barthes’s style begin to take on sentimental notes, for the lectures consider the time during which Henriette was ill and the time after she passed.
through understanding how the condition of weariness informs his later work and propels a narrative of loneliness forward. Thus, to read *Mourning Diary, A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments,* and *Camera Lucida* with consideration of the Neutral works rather effectively for the Barthesian reader, since we witness the transformation of language to discourse and then discourse to speech (or conversation). Barthes does this through three distinct types of verbal communication: language, discourse, and speech. Language, in this specific context, is understood to be universally exchanged and common, the social element of its familiarity renders it impersonal to Barthes. Language belongs to the *Doxa.* Discourse occurs in intimate exchanges where common language rearranges itself to create meaningful verbal intercourse. Then, we have speech, or conversation as the final and most intimate form of communication in this tripartite Barthesian lexicon of interlocution. What is significant about Barthesian speech or conversation is that it either offered in fragments or entirely silent. Since intimacy is established in discourse, the speaker can exist as they are once they arrive at the final stop on Barthes’s semiotic train. As a collection, *MD, ALDF,* and *CL* each perform one of these functions. Barthes thinks first through language in *MD,* then through discourse in *ALDF,* and finally arrives at speech in *Camera Lucida.*

Of course, Barthes long understood and attended to the difference between language and discourse, and, as he argues, the opposition between language and discourse requires two spaces that stand in “dialectical relation to each other,” the first being a reservoir or a type of tabernacle where “the linguistic laws of a community are guarded,” and the second being “a moment of actualization” (Krauss and Hollier 41). We are therefore supposed to understand that first comes language, then comes discourse, and what is created in this amalgamation is the act of speech (Krauss and Hollier 41). Language is a set of laws, of syntax, that ultimately stifles and
constricts; language is “naturally assertive,” and is problematic because its use is not “to make oneself understood but to make oneself recognized” (Krauss and Hollier 42-43). On the other hand, discourse engages in the “rules of combination” whereby the speaker understands their “social, ideological, and neurotic limits,” and can speak freely based on that knowledge (Krauss and Hollier 42). We are left, then, with speech. *Camera Lucida* is the only text through which Barthes *speaks* to his readers from a space of weariness, suffering, melancholy, nostalgia, and the need to retrieve time lost.

I therefore argue that in order to access the most personal, genuine self of the extremely private, shy, and somewhat socially awkward Roland Barthes, the reader must understand the deep connection he shared with his mother, Henriette Binger Barthes. To do this, one must read Barthes’s later works in chronological succession, since no single text can fully translate Barthes’s discomfort, lonesomeness, weariness, anxiety, suffering, and mourning with relation to his connection to Henriette. It is only once we read *A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments, Mourning Diary,* and *Camera Lucida* as a collective body of work that we access Barthes’s most genuine self, and therefore understand the process of Barthes’s translation of language to discourse and discourse to speech during the last decade of his life.

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45 Resource material utilized herein is taken from *The Neutral, Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)* by Roland Barthes. These lectures are focused on the Neutral, a term which will appear as a proper noun throughout the project, since that is how Barthes treats it in his lectures. Barthes defines the Neutral as “that which outplays {déjoue} the paradigm . . . [or] everything that baffles the paradigm . . . The paradigm . . . [is] the opposition of two virtual terms from which, in speaking, I actualize one to produce meaning” (*Lectures* 6-7). The specific lectures referenced in this paragraph are taken from Barthes lectures on March 4, 1978.
The past 20 years has invigorated a renewed interest in Barthes’s later work, and such interest has encouraged scholars and critics in the academy to translate the style of Barthes’s work in ways that are not purely structuralist or post-structuralist, thus opening new avenues for interpretation of key texts that were produced toward the end of Barthes’s life. Sunhil Manghani writes,

Barthes’s late work marks an important refusal of oppositional frames in which contemporary issues are posed, and which, for Barthes, can only lead to forms of arrogance, violence, and narcissism. Thus, Barthes draws attention to the Neutral as a means not only to disrupt dominant frames, but also to refuse entry into them. Barthes’s ‘incidental’ accounts of the Neutral are an attempt to give form to a desire that offers release to the subject, rather than builds it. We come, then, to understand the Neutral less as a form of critique, more as an alternative means of living. (20)

As Barthes becomes more “post-structural,” he seems uncertain of all frames. The concept to which Manghani refers here—the Neutral as an “alternative means of living”—is important, since Barthes does not abandon his unique stylistic literary or social practices, but instead finds another way to utilize them so that he may remain non-confrontational in the event of unsolicited questions about his emotions.46 This supports Neil Badmington’s assertion that posthumous readings of Barthes afford the famed structuralist “new lives, other, plural lives” in which his feelings of entrapment in language are somewhat loosened by living neutrally (65). The desire

46 We see examples of this in texts like A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments, where Barthes refuses to engage with others as means to satisfy their need of “knowing” his personal relations, issues, and afflictions. Two such fragments are “Waiting” and “We Are Our Own Demons” (37, 80).
for the Neutral is to be understood as a desire for the “suspension of the conflictual basis of discourse” (Badmington 68). Barthes’s practice of writing through the Neutral is no longer read as solely as a system of avoidance, but instead as something that offers us the subject in a more honest and direct form.

It is only once *maman* is dead that Barthes can access himself in a new way, since he is now emotionally alone and without a routine involving his most beloved person. Barthes’s later writing is demonstrative of a new style whereby he, the artist, allows himself to speak freely about his desire to be both in and out of society, similar to the way he preferred to be in and out of discourse—a clear step outside the comfort of the quiet solitude provided to that point. In studying later works beginning with *RB*, we can watch how this sense of “elsewhere” develops into a clearer space of melancholy, then suffering, then mourning. We can thus use *RB* as a kind of crypto-text to prepare ourselves for readings of *ALDF*, *MD*, and *CL* to understand how the once-removed and almost entirely objective Barthes that we initially meet in *WDZ* becomes accessible to his readers in a new way; the non-corporeal space where subjective ideas, questions, fears, and anxieties form and reside have a more tenable agency and presence, which breaks down the neutral barrier Barthes worked so diligently to build. We see Barthes begin to “play” with literary subjectivity, creating opportunities for himself to express feelings about love, loss, death, and melancholy in ways that were not distant, though often fractured and/or hyper-focused on a specific moment, concept, or idea.\(^4\)\(^7\) As Barthes explores this new style more, his writing demonstrates an awareness that the perforation of discourse in literary work imbues texts

\(^{47}\) Barthes wrote about both Marcel Proust and Gustave Flaubert’s work, and Barthes’s earlier sense of these authors focused on how each explored facets of social and self-perceptions for narrative subjects meant to be their literary proxies.
with meaning, contra to Barthes’s long-held belief that personal narrative is a largely vacuous space. In fact, it is the very perforation of discourse that occurs in these works that establish them as “great works” of their time, and it is clear that Barthes wanted to become an undisputed member of that literary echelon, if only to memorialize the name of Henriette (Miller 8-9). Much like Proust, Barthes achieved such greatness in his later works in his exploration of personal melancholy, anguish, and suffering. We can see the exercise of this rhetorical style earlier in Barthes’s writing career.

The Barthesian Method: Fragmentation and Desire for the Neutral

Until the 1970s, Barthes’s writing repertoire was largely a collection of studies, essays, critiques, and theories, all of which thought through subjectivity but none of which immersed the reader in any personal account of the private, complicated life of the quietly homosexual Barthes. One of Barthes’s earliest works, Writing Degree Zero (WDZ; 1953), explores the dimensions of Literature, Style, Language, and Society and the way in which they either rely on each other or metaphorically destroy each other. Barthes contends that language exists on the “hither side of Literature,” whereas “Style is almost beyond it” because style provokes imagery, delivery, and vocabulary that “spring from the body and the past of the writer . . . [eventually becoming] the very reflexes of his art” (WDZ 10). For these reasons, Barthes declares “The Novel is a Death [because] it transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an orientated

48 The excerpt dated March 29, 1979 (the date after which Barthes begins to write Camera Lucida) in Mourning Diary supports this idea. The entry reads: “I live without any concern for posterity, no desire to be read later on . . ., complete acceptance of vanishing utterly, no desire for a ‘monument’—but I cannot endure that this should be the case for maman (perhaps because she has not written and her memory depends entirely on me” (MD 234).
and meaningful time . . . [only made possible] in full view of society” (WDZ 39). Writing is “always rooted in something beyond language,” since its Form can be viewed as a kind of rebellion in the sense that any “revolutionary mode of writing” can only be recognized as such when it is “defined not by its structure . . . but by its closed character and by its counterpart” (WDZ 21).

Since the source of writing is “beyond language,” Barthes contended that the act of writing language at length was almost certain to yield an excess of admissions. Barthes believed that “every man is a prisoner of his language,” and, further, that “language . . . creates for the writer a situation fraught with conflict” (WDZ 83), which is why he insulated his forms of articulation within methods and styles unique to his comfort (WDZ 81). This sentiment is expressed when Barthes contemplates the relationship between Literature, society, and Nature in WDZ, arguing that these connections create uniformity among entities that, arguably, should not speak the same language. Barthes says, “when the writer follows languages which are really spoken, no longer for the sake of picturesqueness, but as essential objects . . . writing takes as the locus of its reflexes the real speech of men” (80). As it is articulated, “the real speech of men” is meant to situate language as a “lucid act of giving information,” but this kind of act is always limited, Barthes argues, “since the universality of a language . . . is a fact concerning hearing, and not speaking” (WDZ 80-81). Angst about potential misinterpretations of the text informed his apprehension about writing anything fluid or too lengthy. Thus, fragments are key structural features of Barthes’s work. In place of linearity are systems of thought that correspond with each other intratextually, but also link up intertextually. We thus examine the evolution of terms like “pleasure” and “bliss” as defined by Barthes in relation to texts in The Pleasure of the Text
(Pleasure; 1973) to arrive at a more unified understanding of the interplay, or oscillation, language, later to be termed the Neutral.

This unified understanding is visible in The Pleasure of the Text, where we see a shift in Barthes’s writing and his desire to study “pleasure.” The study of “pleasure” ultimately provides insight about his perspectives on writing, the concepts of pleasure and bliss, and how language functions and is received. For Barthes, there are only two types of text that can pierce a reader: a text of pleasure and a text of bliss. Barthes defines the nuances of each: “[The] Text of Pleasure [is] the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it” (14). The text of bliss, on the other hand is, “the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts . . . [and] unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, [and] brings to a crisis his relation with language” (TP 14). “The pleasure of the text,” writes Barthes, “is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do” (Pleasure 17).

Barthes thus conceived of himself as fractured in the sense that he felt his body and his “actual” self were entirely separated entities; in this sense, Barthes takes on the qualities of a personified tmesis, or the separation of two parts of a whole. As a result, much of Barthes’s writing carries with it a palpable tension in language.

This tension is most visible in the oft-quoted opening to Roland Barthes. Prior to beginning what is meant to be an autobiographical text, Barthes informs (warns?) the reader about how the text should be read: “It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel” (RB 1). Here, we see Barthes embodying tmesis yet again—though the work is self-titled, there is an immediate separation of the self from the self. Even in this text’s most intimate moments, Barthes resists getting closer to himself because he is not yet ready; maman is still
alive, so he must adopt a character as proxy. There is something important about the process of producing Text for Barthes, even under these conditions, because it allows him to be free of his somewhat closeted homosexuality. Once the Text is written and produced, it becomes its own entity; as such, Barthes gives himself permission to be more personal, since, given the disclaimer, the speaking subject, our narrator, is simply a character. Let us consider the opening passage to *RB*:

> Once I produce, once I write, it is the Text itself which (fortunately) dispossesses me of my narrative continuity. The Text can recount nothing; it takes my body elsewhere, far from my imaginary person, toward a kind of meaningless speech which is already the speech of the People, of the non-subjective mass (or of the generalized subject), even if I am still separated from it by my way of writing. (*RB 4*)

Relief is the result of Barthes stepping away from a constructed identity whereby he is expected to roleplay normativity, calmness, and serenity. He writes and unpacks all the emotional energy which is stored in his subconscious, feelings that cannot escape in everyday discourse; his “narrative continuity” as a person is “fortunately” interrupted by the character who takes the place of Barthes. Certain pages of the Text are confessional and expository for Barthes, and because of this, he must separate himself from his body entirely—he must go *elsewhere* as a way to cope with such vulnerability. Once Barthes establishes himself in “character” as the arbiter of the Text, the role of the Text is to “recount nothing.” Barthes leaves his emotions in the character of the Text so that he does not have to confront those emotions in his daily life. The “imaginary person” Barthes constructs to satiate the *Doxa* remains only a vessel—the intellectual corpus in

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49 The Martyr-model analyzed in Gide’s *Corydon* in Chapter 1 also applies to Barthes’s need for a literary surrogate.
which his ideas are formed departs, leaving the vessel to deal with the language of the *Doxa*. But, since even in character Barthes cannot realistically separate himself from his thoughts, he continues to suffer from the “meaningless speech” of the “generalized subject.”

The formulae that allow writing to exist require that the author/speaker identify himself, but there is no use in doing so, since, according to Barthes, the reader has already decided how to receive the writer. Barthes writes,

You address yourself to me so that I may read you, but I am nothing to you except this address; in your eyes, I am the substitute for nothing, for no figure (hardly that of the mother); for you I am neither body nor even an object (and I couldn’t care less: I am not the one whose soul demands recognition), but merely a field, a vessel for expansion. It can be said that after all you have written this text quite apart from bliss; and this prattling text is then a frigid text, as any demand is frigid until desire, until neurosis forms in it. *(Pleasure 5)*

Barthes does not shy from directly stating that individuals create their own meaning from every type of interaction they experience. Therefore, Barthes argues that he, as a subject, is “merely a field, a vessel for expansion” for his peers, which is to say that Barthes’s corporeal presence is all that is needed to satisfy the speaker. And, despite the fact that Barthes concedes this point in “The Death of the Author” just five years earlier, it is clear that he is still trying to assert some authorial agency by stating that all texts are essentially flat, or “frigid” until desire, or “neurosis” comes to the fore.50 In order for this to happen, the reader must seek from the text what they are searching for within themselves and their personal lives; the same is true for Barthes.

50 While reflecting on a moment of gendered ambiguity in Balzac’s *Sarrasine* (1830), Barthes comes to an important moment of realization: any attempt to determine the “who” speaking in
As readers, we are subconsciously searching for pieces of ourselves in order to form fuller meanings of our own existence. The correlation between pleasure and bliss, according to Barthes, has to do with the reader’s response and reaction to the text; for what is pleasure for one reader may be bliss for another. Barthes’s most deductive reasoning with regard to the act of reading a text is simple: “pleasure can be expressed in words; bliss cannot” (*Pleasure* 21). The shift from pleasure to bliss, then, is an important one, since experiencing bliss indicates that a closer approach to self-disclosure is imminent—perhaps even welcomed. We can argue, then, that Barthes’s earlier texts like *Mythologies* and *RB*, for example, are texts of pleasure, since they do not break from their culture, but instead indulge it. However, once Barthes’s style begins to shift as the result of his mother’s illness, he begins to produce texts of bliss, namely in *ALDF*, *MD*, and *CL*. We see this happen through the Neutral, a concept first introduced in *RB*.

Barthes begins his definition of *Le neutre* by saying, “The Neutral is not an average of active and of passive; rather it is a back-and-forth, an amoral oscillation . . . the converse of an antimony” (*RB* 132). Referring to the Neutral as a converse of antimony saying that The Neutral

the work “will always be impossible to know” (“Death” 2). Barthes is struck by this revolutionary concept, and, in response to it, considers the issue of the author as a “modern figure” (“Death” 2). There is a great deal of narcissism in the act of writing, according to Barthes, as the “image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions” (“Death 2). There is a problem with any literary text being authorially-focused (unless, of course, it is an autobiography—a literary space in which Barthes continues to remain on the periphery as opposed to the center), so the author must enter[] his own death” in order for writing to truly begin (“Death 2). It is then up to the reader to determine the meaning of the text, and whatever “secrets” might reside within that text—whether covert or obvious—are left entirely to the interpretation of that reader. We might liken this concept to the Jamesian subject in “The Figure in the Carpet” (1896). The narrator comes upon such a secret, though it is not readily understood that Vereker’s “secret,” his “hidden treasure” is not a findable item or idea capable of being verbally articulated; instead, it is the feeling birthed in the audience in response of reading his work. The reader becomes part of the journey, so the reader—whether consciously or subconsciously—creates the reality of the secret or hidden treasure in order to make the story complete and enjoy closure.
does not medicate or beautify; there is no stasis, just a questionable series of ethics and morals, as dictated by language, that are in constant flux. Toward the final pages of this text, Barthes offers his overall perspective on the Neutral: “The Neutral is therefore not the third term—the zero degree—of an opposition which is both semantic and conflictual; it is, rather, at another link of the infinite chain of language, the second term of a new paradigm, of which violence (combat, victory, theatre, arrogance) is the primary term” (*RB* 132-133).\(^{51}\) Language, then, as a series of interconnected links that rely upon each other in order to maintain form and function, always has the potential to evolve and break, which creates a kind of dysfunction within function. We see this happen with Barthes’s application of the Neutral in his writing as well as his lectures.

As it is described in the lecture dated February 18, 1977, Barthes proposes the following conditions as desire for Neutral: a suspension of orders, laws, and the will-to-possess (among other things) as well as the suspension of narcissism and the voluntary practice of “dissolv[ing] one’s own image” (Krauss and Hollier 12-13). An additional “preliminary” to understanding the Neutral, according to Barthes, is accepting that violence is associated with the Neutral. However, within the Neutral, such violence is inexpressible because the passion that might have once resulted in recognizably violent behaviors (outside the Neutral) is no longer seeking to possess.\(^{52}\)

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\(^{51}\) In the May 6, 1978 lecture series on the Neutral, Barthes expands upon the idea of Oscillation, breaking it into categories of image and etymologies and vibratory time. In the section “Image and Etymologies,” we can see the evolution of the initial iteration take fuller form. After explaining three terms related to oscillation (“The grammatical Neutral: *to oudétéron,*” meaning “neither one nor the other,” “The political Neutral,” *mésos*, which “leans on no one side,” and *hétéroklitos*, which is both a noun (“he who leans on one side and the other”) as well as an irregular word, which means it is among other words “whose declension proceeds from different themes” (*Lectures* 130).

\(^{52}\) The phrase “the will-to-possess” will be studied later in the chapter.
Barthes contends that recognizing the will-to-possess is a desire that is “discontinuous, erratic” and never about wisdom (Krauss and Hollier 12-13). A final note to his students reminds them that, as a commodity, desire is marketable, and since desire exists within the Neutral, one might argue that the Neutral thus has the potential to become commodified. However, Barthes makes it clear that there is no marketability to the Neutral because the desire that exists within the Neutral is largely unattainable because of its singularity and uniqueness to the operator, writer, or speaker of said desire.

We thus understand that the Neutral exists as a non-confrontational space because it no longer seeks validation from the Doxa (RB 132). Though the lectures concretize the theories Barthes set in place for his practice of the Neutral, we have already noted that the initial theories regarding the Neutral (or, “le neutre”), wherein Barthes first describes the Neutral as being neither active nor passive, but instead an oscillation that he terms “the converse of antimony” before going on to say that the Neutral is “the vacancy of the person,” and an “absence of the imago” (RB 132).

The most critical element to take away from this statement is the idea that for the Neutral to exist the person must not. In this case, it is the absence of Henriette (or, at the point he was writing RB in 1974/75, it was the fear of losing Henriette) as the loved object that propels the ideology of the Neutral forward.

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53 In an entry dated November 28 (1977), Barthes directly refers to his lectures, the titular language of which connects directly to his original definition of the Neutral in 1975’s RB. Barthes writes, “Review my notes for The Neutral, Oscillation (The Neutral and the Present)” (MD 70). Though Barthes’s lectures are all focused on a facet of the Neutral, the subcategories under the sessions dedicated to Oscillation are “Image and Etymologies” and “Vibratory Time,” both of which were portions of the session dated May 6, 1978.

54 My argument here is supported by a diary entry dated May 25, 1978 in Mourning Diary. Barthes writes, “When maman was living (in other words, in my whole past life) I was neurotically in fear of losing her. Now (this is what mourning teaches me) such mourning is so to
theories often associated with psychoanalysis, the manner in which the term “imago” is being used here is distinctly psychoanalytic, since we are reading the later works of Barthes as a way to unearth his deepest truths, as they are connected to the love for his mother. So, in psychoanalytic terms, the imago, or “image” that Barthes wishes to suspend in time is that of his mother, which is rooted in an “unconscious, idealized concept of familiar love that an individual develops during childhood and which remains unchanged in adulthood” (“Imago” n.p.).

A significant disruption must occur, then, for Barthes to break the imago that he has constructed, and this can only happen once he accepts—once he affirmsthat language, as a system of codes, is limited to only representationally reconstructing a being—it cannot bring that being back into existence. In a lecture dated March 4, 1978, Barthes discusses this kind of Affirmation through the Neutral. In this lecture, Barthes address the Neutral’s inability to be officially codified:

the Neutral cannot be satisfied with the modes (modalities) that officially code the attenuation of the affirmative within language: negation, dubitation, the conditional, interrogation, wish, subjectivity, etc. Ideally, discourse in the Neutral shouldn’t even be a discourse in the subjunctive: for the modes are still a dimension of being. The (linguistic) problem would be to suspend all categories, to put what comes to language beyond mode, whether constative or subjunctive: or, better, to be more precise, to speak in implying, in making understood that every paradigm is badly put, which by itself would pervert the very structure of meaning: each word would become non-pertinent, im-pertinent. (Krauss and Hollier 45).

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speak the only thing in me which is not neurotic: as if maman, by at last gift, has taken neurosis, the worst part, away from me” (129).
We must take this portion of Barthes’s lecture into deep consideration, as he has just provided us his preferred “perspective” on how to read and interpret his works. Writing to satisfy language rules does not permit the Neutral to exist. However, works of discourse rely on the Neutral, since works of discourse are not seeking a firm “dimension of being,” but instead wish to invert the structure of language by exposing its paradigmic flaws. *ALDF* provides us with such discourse, as it looks specifically at love as a paradigm of the human experience and, phrase by phrase, scene by scene, panic attack by panic attack, demonstrates that each word of this discourse is an active disruption of life. The lack of structure here disrupts things, and only by disrupting the structural elements of language can a person truly come through. Understood this way, we see how Barthes disrupts his own structuralist ideas as he turns to a more personal style of writing in his later work.

Still, there remains a resistance in Barthes to fully confront his personal truths. D.A. Miller’s *Bringing out Barthes* (1992) is focused on this detail and is thus dedicated to “freeing” Barthes’s true essence. Early on, Miller reiterates what was already known about Barthes—he was very much a creature of the night. Barthes enjoyed traversing the night as a means of pleasure and as a means of studying others who were homosexual or queer like he was. What is not readily known—or, at least, what Barthes did not directly speak about with regard to his own life and proclivities—is that Barthes was a gay man who was seemingly too exhausted with the idea of being openly gay, and thus avoided any situations where his sexuality might come into question. Because of this, Miller is compelled to “out” Barthes, explaining that the mark of gay erotics exists in the Barthesian repertoire, despite its nuanced discretion. Thus, in “lift[ing] the repression” of Barthes’s sexual identity and by “notic[ing] and articulat[ing] this link for him” Miller outs both Barthes and himself in a single motion (6). In doing so, Miller contemplates
Barthes as a subject of study, arguing that Barthes’s can be read as a “pathetic picture” of the homosexual who was lacking “the headache” that should accompany an encumbrance like being closeted, despite desire (Miller 5). The “main possibilities” of the homosexual Barthesian lexicon, Miller asserts, are “maybe,” “impossible,” “tired,” and “I want to sleep” (5). There is a liminality to the lexicon that Miller theorizes here, since “maybe” is indicative of ambivalence, “impossible” is teeming with self-doubt, “tired” speaks to depression, and “I want to sleep” further concretizes the depressive mode. Why, then, the “headache”?

We can assume that the “headache” toward which Miller gestures mirrors the condition of “weariness” Barthes attempts to unravel in his lectures on the Neutral at the College de France. Here, Barthes argues that the personal experience of weariness is an intensity that remains unrecognizable (uncoded) because “society doesn’t recognize intensities” (Krauss and Hollier 18). Thus, the weary space thus becomes the domain of the “intellectual” artist, since the sentiment/ feeling of weariness is “unclassified, [and is] therefore unclassifiable”; as such, it remains isolated from language the same way the lonely queer artist remains isolated from his environment (Krauss and Hollier 17). In a lecture session dated February 18, 1978 at the College de France, Barthes further explicates the concept of weariness through the medium of the Neutral to his class. Barthes explains that since this condition of weariness is largely the subject’s demand for a position, the realization of such a demand would make it hard for the subject “to float, to shift places” (Krauss and Hollier 19). Such rationales directly correspond to Barthes’s response to the loss of Henriette, though he eventually allows language to free itself slowly, in text. So, we must ask ourselves: did Barthes want such recognition, such mobility in terms of his language? Or, was his language only for himself and a select few?
Elsewhere is Better than Somewhere—Studying in the Evolution of Love and Suicide

Roland Barthes believed that “language reconstructs itself elsewhere under the teeming flux of every kind of linguistic pleasure” (*Pleasure* 8). Thus, language is in constant flux because its reception is understood and internalized differently from person to person. It is a text that presents the reader with “particular problems that must . . . inform a gay writing position,” which is to say that this particular understanding of language is only achieved by a gay reader, which is why it remains largely inaccessible to the *Doxa* (Miller 7). It should be understood that the need to satiate the *Doxa* was far from the top of Barthes’s list of priorities as a (queer) writer. In fact, he was far more interested in remaining unknowable than in advocating for a queer agenda or, as Miller puts it, a “gay writing agenda” (Miller 14-15; 7). Thus, studying *ALDF* with this foundational theory helps us to understand the two schools of thought relative to Barthesian study. The classical reading of this work considers it to be a manuscript of the lover’s language—a scenography of the ways love interrupts life and, in doing so, disrupts the lover to the point of embarrassment which leads to the desire to retreat and to isolate. Miller’s reading of *ALDF* is among the classical readings, though Miller considered *ALDF* a “homosexual encounter” with Barthes that he was able to experience over and over again. The other school of thought, and the one toward which my intervention and analysis gesture, contends that *ALDF* is part of an interconnected series of texts that document the evolution of Barthes’s language from the prescriptive to the personal. In essence, *ALDF* is a transitional text since it builds upon language and style from *RB* and *Pleasure* in terms of fragmentation and attention to significant words and phrases.

It is important to note that writing in a fragmentary manner was what defined Barthes’s writing style. Barthes celebrated the fragmentary nature of his writing, and he directly addresses
its importance in *RB*, only to dedicate an entire text to fragments several years later in *ALDF*. What is interesting, though, about this explication is the way that Barthes steps in and out of direct and indirect discussion about these fragments and their development. Let us begin with Barthes’s first notes on the fragment in *RB*: “His first, or nearly his first text (1942) consists of fragments . . . Since then, as a matter of fact, he has never stopped writing in brief bursts: the brief scenes of *Mythologies*, the articles and prefaces of *Critical Essays*, the lexias of *S/Z*, the fragments of the second essay on Sade in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* and of *The Pleasure of the Text*” (*RB* 93). From the third person, “His first . . . text,” Barthes slips into the second person, speaking directly to his reader as if giving directions on how to properly assemble the codified language of the fragments: “Not only is the fragment cut off from its neighbors, but even within each fragment parataxis reigns. This is clear if you make an index of these little pieces for each of them, the assemblage of referents is heteroclite; it is like a parlor game” (*my emphasis; RB* 93). Even in direct speech, as indicated in the rhetorical use of the informal, second-person “you,” Barthes offers no satisfactory closure to the fragment. In acknowledging that the “assemblage of referents is heteroclite,” Barthes is saying that regardless of the manner in which “you” assemble the fragments, they will still feel abnormal. There is a specific reason for this, despite some seemingly contradictory elements at play. While the ideas in “The Death of the Author” invoke the birth of the reader as capable of interpretation and therefore liberated of the *Doxa*, the *Doxa* exists regardless of interpretation. So, turning language into discourse via fragments, as Barthes discusses in his *Lectures*, is ultimately what allows personal expression and interpretation to exist, therefore removing the once-impersonal nature of language. The case of the secondary “you” in this fragment is a frustrated critique of the *Doxa*, spoken by a subject
who believes all language shared with the general public becomes arranged as they see it, as a “parlor game.”

Further, we never receive closure in a fragment because, “Liking to find, to write beginnings, he [Barthes] tends to multiply this pleasure: that is why he writes fragments: so many fragments, so many beginnings, so many pleasures (but he doesn’t like the ends: the risk of rhetorical clausal is too great: the fear of not being able to resist the last word)” (RB 94). Barthes was enamored by the concept he said was perfected by Schumann, who referred to the fragment as an “intermezzo,” or interruption to what should be a linear, fluid piece. This prompts Barthes to ask (of his reader and of himself): “What is the meaning of a pure set of interruptions?” (RB 94). About the fragment, Barthes comes to the conclusion that, similar to the “intermezzo” perfected by Schumann and the “little phrase” performed by M. Vinteuil in Proust, the fragment is best understood as being situated as an ideal “high in condensation, not of thought, or of wisdom, or of truth . . . but of music” (RB 94). At this time, it is clear that Barthes is not thinking of how the pleasure he derives from scripting fragments will eventually lead him to a study of maman. Knowing and understanding the origin and importance of the fragment, though, is imperative for the Barthesian reader, since this style is unique to Barthes’s writing. The fragment is constructed of figures, order, and references to create a structural portrait of a discursive site where “someone is speaking within himself . . . confronting the other . . . who does not speak” (ALDF 3).

55 The first fragments in ALDF is titled “How this book is constructed,” and begins by informing the reader that “Everything [in the text] follows from this principle: that the lover is not to be reduced to a simple symptomal subject, but rather that we hear in his voice what is ‘unreal,’ i.e. ‘intractable’” (3). Barthes, like Proust, experiences anxiety when he thinks of the clinical repercussions of personal reflections and emotional confessions. So, he, like Proust, creates a
It is for this reason that we begin by looking at the fragment “I-Love-You” first from *RB* and then from *ALDF* in order to understand how the phrase operates in *Mourning Diary*. However, it is only once the phrase “I-Love-You” takes its journey through Barthes 1970s literary repertoire that we finally understand how the fragments come together in the examination of ‘WGP” in *CL*. We first come upon Barthes’s ideas concerning love in *RB*. Love is initially described as “*le folie,*” or “madness” (*RB* 91). Barthes is speaking, here, about love in a strictly romantic sense, noting that looking back at love through madness is akin to witnessing something as “cutting as rifle fire” because the “erotic explosion [of love] provokes bewilderment and fear: crisis, revulsion of the body, madness” (*RB* 91). Barthes argues that because there is no “modern word” to describe such a madman, he feels this sense of madness. Barthes believes that exploring love through the “Entanglement of language and the body,” is ultimately what allows a subject to see things more clearly and thus rediscover, “Book, *Doxa, Stupidity*” (*RB* 91).

As it is presented in *ALDF*, the phrase/term *I-love-you* has no meaning at face value. It is what Barthes refers to as a lexicographical “nolophrase,” since it is a “figure whose definition cannot transcend the heading” (*ALDF* 148). Elsewhere, however, this phrase is circular. The leading definition for this lexia in *ALDF* is as follows: “The figure refers not to the declaration of love, to the avowal, but to the repeated utterance of the lovecry” (*ALDF* 147). Without repetition, this phrase, presented as a hyphenated word in the lover’s discourse, has no agency. As it is language without meaning, but instead language that seeks meaning through repeated love acts and love cries, Barthes deems the term “socially irresponsible” because its main action works to fictional space for the *I* to exist, and this *I* can be as intractable or stubborn as he chooses, since he is not real.
suppress rather than to invite “adjustments, degrees, or samples” of what this term might potentially constitute (ALDF 148). This phrase exhausts Barthes because of its ridiculous nature, and Barthes therefore criticizes the term because, as an “exorbitant paradox of language,” it has no referent (ALDF 148).

The only “elsewhere” to which the phrase “I-love-you” may travel and find meaning is in song, thereby making it a “proffering” rather than language (ALDF 149). Hallucination thus becomes a critical part of the phase “I-love-you”, since the speaker of the word has already imagined that the amorous subject, the person toward whom the phrase is directed, feels the same way; this hallucination means that the amorous subject would have made their proffering at the same time (an impossibility, since this phrase has no measurability and therefore no predictability). Of course, according to Barthesian logic, this cannot happen because “Proffering cannot be double (doubled)” (ALDF 150). The term moves from symptom to action when the proffering is mirrored and owned. The elsewhere the lover hallucinated becomes a temporary reality when the empty language is mirrored and parroted back: “I-love-you, too” (ALDF 152). When the other responds, the phrase “I-love-you” becomes an action rooted in the intention of responding to the symptomatic term, hence each term is independent of the others. Barthes argues that as “omen,” “I-love-you” is at the “limit of language” because it does not collide with its system; the proffering of “I-love-you” similarly represents the “limit of syntax . . . welcomes tautology . . . [and] rejects the servility of the sentence” (ALDF 154). To become a subject of Expenditure requires the subject to seek the proffering of the word “I-love-you” and spend it, expecting to recover it elsewhere. Such an expenditure exposes this term’s representation of the limit of language since the word has no guarantee of receipt or syntactic/lexicographic support. It is a phrase that merely exists to be uttered, and only for a quick moment does this phrase exert
enough agency to return to the annals of nothingness in the space of a “somewhere” instead of a more definite “elsewhere” (ALDF 154). Barthes seems to believe this is true of all relationships, except the one between himself and his mother.

From MD: In an entry dated June 12, 1978, Barthes talks about the concept of I-love-you, which is a recognizable repetition from ALDF because of the way Barthes hyphenates the phrase into a single word. Here again we see how hallucination operates in the mind of the lonely queer figure, who, at this point, is deeply in stages of grief and mourning. The entry reads, “During the entire mourning period, of Grief (so intense that: I can’t go on, I’ll never get over this, etc.), continued to function, imperturbably (as if they were not properly brought up) habits of flirtations, attractions, a whole discourse of desire, of I-love-you—which more-over collapse very quickly—and begin again with someone else” (MD 140). Here, we do not necessarily read the sentiment of “I-love-you” as one that has meaning. In fact, meaning has been entirely deflated from this phrase now that maman is dead. For Barthes, though, we might argue that this phrase never held much depth or agency with regard to his discourse with maman because of how empty the phrase itself is. It is thus only through short, intermittent bouts of self-destructive behaviors (as we read them in Mourning Diary) that Barthes comes close to explaining the sentiment of love and how it operated between himself and maman. Love becomes a space that is essentially vacuous, and it is only once the possibility for the lovecry is removed that the term gains some level of meaning. This only happens, though, as the speaker, the mourner—Barthes—comes closer to the acceptance of death and the fact that he is essentially in control of death, to a certain degree. As readers, this concept is introduced to us as Suicide.

Before Barthes talks about suicide as part of the lover’s discourse, he first talks about it relative to the act of writing—or, more specifically, re-writing—the self in Roland Barthes by
Roland Barthes. In 1975, Barthes’s conception on revisiting his prior work is considered a “movement of abolition, not of truth,” so, he “shifts” from imitation to nomination (RB 56). In doing so, Barthes becomes his own story, a “freewheeling” subject in language for which there is no comparison; he presents himself as the pronoun of “the imaginary, ‘I,’ . . . [which is to be understood as becoming] im-pertinent” (RB 56). This imaginary “I,” the self which refuses the systems of language, thus develops agency in resistance to convention. It is only once a writer understands this, Barthes contends, that the seemingly “pretentious” idea in which one engages—an “essential danger for the life of the subject” who writes himself—is mollified by an even simpler solution: “the idea of suicide” (RB 56).

In keeping with the Barthesian method of writing beginnings without clear endings, this concept of suicide quite literally dies at the end of this thought. However, it is important that we consider where suicide enters Barthes’s language, since here he is clearly unwilling to reveal himself through the act of writing—it is the onus of the imaginary I to complete this task. The possibility for such distance might have something to do with the feelings of violence Barthes associates with language. For Barthes, the violence of language is more concerned with its effect on maman than its possibility to puncture anything or anyone else. This is true while Henriette is still alive, but it becomes that much more pronounced for Barthes once she dies. Undated notes in MD point to Barthes’s awareness of his ambivalence toward the idea of his own death, as he wonders how he would be aware of his suffering should he cease to exist and also

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56 The explanation of said “shift” is later detailed in more nuanced terms in A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments.
57 This is a concept that D.A. Miller takes up in Bringing Out Barthes.
considers how, should he simply disappear, Henriette would respond (it would cause her “unendurable pain”) (MD 247).

Whereas suicide in MD is understood to be a corporeal experience, “Suicide” in the lover’s discourse occurs in the mind. It is not a physical endeavor. Instead, it is a disconnect that works to save the lover because suicidal thoughts are words that can be spoken and are understood as words that have meaning all the time (my emphasis), unlike “I-love-you,” which only has meaning at the moment of utterance (ALDF 218). To speak the desire for suicide in the lover’s discourse serves two functions: it taints the loved subject’s life in the form of blackmail or it creates a vivid fantasy whereby language transfers to action and the lover and the amorous subject are unified eternally in death (ALDF 219). We see the evolution of this idea in an undated fragment in MD, under the heading “Suicide.” The undated fragments read: “How would I know I don’t suffer any more, if I’m dead?”; “In the imagination I might have of my death (which everyone has), I added to the anguish of disappearing soon the equal anguish of the unendurable pain I would cause her”; and, “On the infrequency—the insignificance of our verbalization, of our speech: yes, but never a platitude, a stupidity—a blunder . . .” (MD 247). The “her” to whom Barthes refers in the second undated fragment is Henriette. We see that the site of affirmation of suicide in the lover’s discourse carries over as a site of suffering in mourning. Here again, we see the anguish of the lonesome queer lover, who, even in tangential and fragmented suicidal ideations, is looking to return to the mother.

We might assume that the initial anxiety discussed in Roland Barthes speaks to what Miller analyzes in Bringing Out Roland Barthes in the sense that Barthes is withholding his true self. However, once we arrive at the point of ALDF, language has shifted to discourse and the circumstances of Barthes’s personal life have also shifted—drastically. The double discourse to
which Barthes now refers has less to do with the way he interacts with the world and more to do with the way he communicates with his true love, his mother, knowing well that she will not be with him forever. Though portions of the fragment can arguably be read as a lover speaking to or thinking about a loved subject, there is also strong discourse that indicates Barthes is thinking about his relationship with himself in relation to Henriette. Barthes writes, “I see the other with a double vision: sometimes as object, sometimes as subject; I hesitate between tyranny and oblation. Thus I doom myself to blackmail: if I love the other, I am forced to seek his happiness, but then I can only do myself harm: a trap; I am condemned to be a saint or a monster: unable to be the one, unwilling to be the other: hence, I tergiversate: I show my passion a little” (*ALDF* 42).

There is a strong Christian undertone to the polarized tensions here—Barthes is clearly struggling between succumbing to his desires (tyranny) and upholding a certain image in order to

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58 The concept of being torn in this way is later expanded upon in greater depth in the fragment titled “Dark Glasses” in *ALDF*, in which Barthes states the following: “I am caught up in a double discourse from which I cannot escape” (41). In *RB*, Barthes is not yet anxious about the impending death of Henriette, so his disassociation from writing in the form of an imaginary being works to reinforce D.A. Miller’s thesis in *Bringing Out Barthes* (1992) that directly addresses Barthes’s genuine fear of being outed.

59 Miller suggests the “Barthesian neuter can never exactly be ungendered or unsexed . . . it celebrates its relief from their double-binding exigency” (Miller 14-15). The “demand” implied by Miller’s use of the term “exigency” here is critical, since Barthes was fatigued by the pressure of being torn between languages, and, such an onset of fatigue is indicative of his personal feelings of being a tmetric specimen: should he declare himself, he could be the victim of violence; staying neutral, however, left room for interpretation—and the interpretive mode of language is both suggestive and brimming with doubt. That the neuter remains unsexed and ungendered is significant not only because of the idea that a space between sex and gender exists in peace with its surroundings, but, further, that the ambiguity—the non-codified lexicographical subject—can experience freedom from being bound by ill-fitting labels that demanded attention, repetitive practices, and social acceptance. With such potential freedom, though, comes the anxiety of exposure. Barthes seemed to live in a perpetual state of anxiety (a very Proustian condition), particularly when it came to his sexuality and private life. It is suggested in *Bringing Out Barthes* that the neuter as an ungendered and unsexed “space” was constructed by Barthes because he was “seeking to forestall homophobic attack” (Miller 15).
blend (oblation); in engaging with the latter, he ultimately sacrifices himself. So, it is significant that he uses the term tergiversate because it means to change one’s loyalties to be apostate, which we can read as a kind of religious renunciation of remaining passionless. He shows a little passion, albeit still masked in the guise of a character who continues to exist in the elsewhere Barthes created. He goes on to talk about the double-bind of hiding and passion, utilizing Balzac and Descartes to support the position that one cannot hide passion entirely because “passion is in essence made to be seen: I want you to know that I am hiding something from you, that is the active paradox I must resolve” (ALDF 42).

The “active paradox” that Barthes must resolve has to do with him finding and confronting his somewhat closeted homosexuality, despite the hurt it might cause maman, even in death. It is at this point that CL becomes extremely critical to our study of the evolutionary discourse in Barthes’s later writing. While ALDF acts as a strong representation of Miller’s argument regarding the importance of the neutered subject, CL gives that subject an identity, since Barthes no longer veils himself for the sake of the Doxa, or for the sake of maman. What I read in ALDF is a desire to establish relation and shared human experience more so than a desire to advocate for queer rights or visibility, as posited by Miller. Those who seek the text (pleasure) will read ALDF and think about the overall scene of the human experience being documented (“Waiting,” “Fade-Out,” “Adorable,” to name a few), but for those whom the text seeks (bliss), the importance of having a queer subject to represent the everyday life of a human is significant not because the subject is queer, but because the subject is experiencing loss in a way that is entirely unfamiliar, which makes that subject extremely vulnerable and inclined towards feelings of marginalization.
A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments thus achieves the balance and symmetry of the Neutral that Barthes first discusses in earlier works like Roland Barthes and later concretizes and gives name to in his lectures on the subject matter at the College de France as well as in the pages of Mourning Diary. It is in ALDF that we first encounter the weariness about which Barthes lectures, and it is in CL that the weariness culminates in the end of his search for his mother’s essence in the “WGP.” Throughout this journey, though, there is a tenable sense of Barthes’s grief and its effect on his psychological wellbeing, despite Barthes’s aversion to overly psychoanalytic jargon or applications.

A Change in Systems

By the late 1970s, it was evident that Barthes wanted to make a dedicated shift in his approach to language, discourse, and writing. As Barthes put it, “I want to change systems: no longer to unmask, no longer to interpret, but to make consciousness itself a drug, and thereby to accede to the perfect vision of reality, to the great bright dream, to prophetic love” (ALDF 60). To successfully agree to—or, “accede to”—the “bright dream” of attaining the “prophetic love” discussed here, Barthes had to surrender to his own consciousness and become addicted to it. In freeing himself of the duty of unmasking and interpreting systems of language, Barthes opened himself to what he feared most: confronting himself as an unprotected and vulnerable subject. Turning language and discourse inward afforded Barthes the opportunity to attempt a balance within the tensions of language by which he felt torn. Focusing on the works Barthes produced during the 1970s, we can see how this tension is somewhat relieved through a separate medium, the photograph. Though photographs are part of Barthes’s repertoire from his earlier work during that decade, it is not until after his mother Henriette Binger Barthes passes that he writes a text in
which his entire focus is photography, a project he privately called the “Photo-Maman Book,” but which was published under the title *Camera Lucida* (1980). Once his mother Henriette’s illness advanced and it became clear that his beloved maman would eventually succumb to her ailing condition, Barthes’s emotional vulnerability loosened his will-to-possess the control onto which he once held so tightly. So, through his grief, he reclaimed the parts of Henriette that he felt he could, and he did this through the study of discourse and photography, primarily as a means by which to preserve the memory of his mother, which depended “entirely” on Barthes (MD 234). Thus, in tasking himself with a project that created a new space of public-self-reflection for Barthes—the thinker and critic who so-adored every aspect of solitude—broke his silence to write stories of love and loss, as experienced by maman’s boy.

Barthes’s beloved maman, Henriette Binger Barthes, died on October 25, 1977. The day after her death, Barthes began to write notes—many of which were fragmentary—on random slips of paper in an effort to document his feelings and the emotions that ran parallel to his grief—a series of mementos to which he would return at intervals and expand upon so that he could remember maman as he remembered her, using his excess of emotion to continue to fuel his writing. Though Barthes wrote these notes for himself, he did intend to organize and publish them later on, since he felt it was his mission to ensure that Henriette was not forgotten. Shortly after Barthes’s own bizarre death (he was struck by a laundry truck on the streets of Paris, only to die 3 weeks later from complications) his long-time associate and translator Richard Howard gathered the fragmentary slips that Barthes wrote over the course of the two years following his mother’s death, translated them, and published them under the title *Mourning Diary* (as opposed to the Photo-Maman Book).
The relationship between Henriette Barthes and her son transcended the typical parent-child relationship; it was as if one was an extension of the other. Theirs was a language of possession, Barthes ever-referring to Henriette as *maman*—a term used by children, which roughly translates to “mommy” or “mum,” indicative of a childlike attachment, and, further, a desire to possess the mother fully, subconsciously believing her to be the acme of femininity—and Henriette always calling out to her son, “Mon Roland, Mon Roland” (*MD* 216). There was a possessiveness to the way they addressed one another, as if they could only ever belong to each other. Though there are still some vestiges of Barthes’s structuralist methods in *Mourning Diary*, there is also a clear attachment to his biographical history as his mother’s son. Classically, “When structuralist methods are employed, little attention is given to the narrators as holistic personas: their personality, biography, and narrating style,” but the pages of *Mourning Diary* mark an important and pivotal moment in Barthes’s writing style because the project provides a view of Barthes as a “holistic persona,” as his emotion becomes almost tangible—especially in moments when he has bouts of involuntary memory that arrest his being so mightily that all he can do is cry, isolate himself, or continue to write in pieces (Tohar et al. 59). Without question, Barthes’s adoration for Henriette was the purest and most complicated love he knew. It did not follow a “system” (something which he simultaneously craved and, later in his life, loathed), but instead was governed by raw emotion and anxiety. Additionally, this relationship worked to

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60 Barthes’s background in structuralism and semiology called for extremely structured systems of language that rely on codes. In *S/Z* (1973) Barthes argues every narrative is essentially a system of multiple, interwoven codes (Felluga 1). Each code serves a function in narrative. The hermeneutic code “exists as an enigma for the reader, raising questions that demand explication”; the proaetic code “applies to any action that implies a further narrative action”; the semantic code “points to any element in a text that suggests . . . an additional meaning by way of connotation”; the symbolic code is an extension of the semantic code that typically “organizes semantic meanings, usually by way of antithesis or by way of meditations”; finally, the cultural
shield Barthes from the criticisms of a world that could not understand him and appreciate him the way that maman did.

After Henriette’s death, Barthes becomes more aware of the world from which maman shielded him—the harsh world, the world of criticism. Too often, a mother’s intellect is ignored because her motherhood usurps any other facet of her character that might otherwise be pronounced. Barthes is aware of this—hyperaware. He documents a visit from the morning nurse on April 15, 1977 (a mere 6 months before her death), noting that the nurse speaks to his mother as though she were a child because of her ailing health. However, maman’s intelligence is something to be celebrated, despite the fact that “People never speak of a mother’s intelligence,” for fear that it would “diminish her affectivity [and] distance her as a mother” (MD 251). Is it not possible for one to be both intelligent and a mother? Of course. And Barthes knows this, too, since he makes it clear that “intelligence is everything that permits us to live superlatively with another person,” and that is the way he lived with maman (MD 251). However, what Barthes does not mention about this issue of the divide between motherhood and intelligence is how Henriette’s intelligence (I use this word in a covert operations-sense) ultimately cripples him to a certain degree. Not only does Barthes judge all other women (and likely all other people) in relation to his mother, but, further, he is incapable of receiving criticism because Henriette—knowing well that her son was not heteronormative or “normative” in any way—never spoke ill of him or criticized him.

code refer to our shared knowledge as humans and as readers of a text (Felluga 2). In ALDF, we see Barthes utilizing all five codes at different intervals. This indicates that, although Barthes was still deeply tied to a certain written aesthetic, he was also interested in the narrative integrity of writing, which, of course, applied to his own writing.
A series of repetitions in MD do more than just confirm this as fact, but further demonstrate the cyclical, anxious ramblings of a lonely queer subject who is no longer protected from the world by his mother.

Let us consider the fragmented notes from June 7, 1978, as excerpted from Mourning Diary:

To begin: “All the time I lived with her—all my life—my mother never made an observation about me.”

Maman never made an observation about me—Therefore I cannot endure them.

Maman: (all her life): space without aggression, without meanness—She never made an observation about me (my horror of that word and of the thing)

➔ And I think: Maman taught me you cannot make someone you love suffer. She never made anyone she loved suffer. That was her definition, her “innocence.”

The term “observation” appears in italics in every iteration of this thought for Barthes. This is telling both of his anxiety about his anxiety about self-exposure and also of his knowledge that Henriette knew he was a homosexual (though it is D.A. Miller who eventually does the “work” of outing Barthes). Continually drawing attention to the term “observation” indicates that Barthes is still too ashamed to speak his truth aloud, for fear that maman, in whatever elsewhere she occupies, might hear the confirmation and be ashamed of him. Even in death, maman’s

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61 This fragment is excerpted here is dated July 24, 1978, from an entry that precedes the others regarding Henriette’s preservation of Barthes’s ego and innocence. In this entry, he is grappling with finding meaning in the Winter Garden Photograph, and that level of mental stress triggers involuntary theorems regarding the photograph and the concept of innocence. Deductively: The photo is to literature’s birth as the state of innocence is to the state of being innocuous (MD 168).
agency is an omnipresent force about which Barthes remains aware and toward which he remains both faithful and respectful.

The second entry in MD, dated October 27, 1977 offers us a glimpse into the personal life of Barthes as a sexual being. An accusation from an unknown source outs Barthes: “You have never known a woman’s body” says the voice. To this, Barthes pointedly replies, “I have known the body of my mother, sick and then dying” (4). While the accusation is driven in the direction of heteronormative sexual desire and interaction, Barthes responds in the neutral, acknowledging that he has, in fact, known a woman’s body, the body of his mother. We need not interpret this through an Oedipal lens, since that is not our objective. Instead, we are looking at two important functions of Barthes language here. The first: his unwillingness to engage in the process of outing himself (the neutral); the second: assigning the body of a woman to the only woman whose body he ever cared for, his mother’s. Walter Benjamin identified Proust as an “aged child,” and, in a similar fashion, Carol Mavor considers Barthes a “boyish man, forever tied to his mother in both his writings and his day-to-day life” (130). For Barthes, existence was only possible with Henriette, even once she passed.62

Thus, in responding to the prompted accusation in MD, the “boyish man,” Barthes engages in conversation with himself about himself—the conscious and the subconscious meet, which makes these reflections deeply personal and admissible. We see a similar exchange

62 A deep sense of longing and nostalgia is felt here. When considering the direct Greek translation of nostalgia—“nostos,” meaning a return to home and “algos,” which means pain—Barthes’s desire to go back to maman and sites that remind him of maman further support Woodward’s argument that Barthes wanted to live with the suffering he endured once maman died because it kept maman alive in some way. We can see an iteration of this sentiment in a journal entry from August 18, 1978, in which Barthes writes, “Why is it that I no longer bear traveling? Why is it that I keep trying, like a lost child, to ‘get back home’—though maman is no longer there?” (MD 190).
between the selves in the fragment “I have an Other-ache,” where Barthes says: “My identification is imperfect: I am a Mother . . . but an insufficient mother . . . For at the same time that I “sincerely” identify myself with the other’s misery, what I read in this misery is that it occurs without me . . . [and] the other abandons me” (ALDF 57). Such intimate exchanges are demonstrative of a newer concept referred to as “Dolorology,” which is to be understood as an “organizing mechanism that governs the distribution of meanings between the compassionate recognition of subjects and the scientific objectification of bodies” (Strick 4-5). In short, we apply the term “dolorology” to Barthes’s suffering since his suffering attends to both the way his body responds to the pain of loss physically as well as the sentimentalism associated with it. In both cases, there is a clear awareness of how Barthes’s suffering turns inward, but also of how those internalized anxieties are also manifestations of the anxieties produced by the environment in which he lives. Thus, language becomes the site not only of affirmation, but of freedom, since it allows Barthes to disconnect from emotional exhaustion and escape to an elsewhere that exists only for himself, an imaginary space. We will now consider *Mourning Diary* and *Camera Lucida* to better understand Barthes’s transposition of style.

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63 Though Strick’s title infers that the study of dolorologies is unique to the American experience—particularly through the slave narrative—the conceptual foundations of dolorology are relevant to our study of Barthes’s pain and suffering, as these elements of Barthes’s life experience a tension between sentimentality and biopolitical surveillance. It is for this reason Strick’s work is briefly utilized in relation to Barthes’s work. However, it should be noted that Strick does cite Barthes in the chapter, “Picturing Racial Pain,” since Strick is thinking through the *punctum* of photography relative to Barthes’s explanations and theories of the idea.

64 Lawrence Kritzman also considers the imaginary in relation to Barthes’s writing. Kritzman says, “The writing of the text embodies the transgression of the forbidden satisfaction derived from the maternal. Yet it exercises an obsessional attraction for a self which, paradoxically, becomes a substitute object of nurturance that sustains the order of the imaginary. In order for the text to keep the fiction-making machine alive, its most fundamental law within Barthes’s critical fantasy must be to render the satisfaction of desire incomplete. The fictional must outwit the death drive of the pleasure principle. The enactment of narrative produces a discourse of
The Quest “Narrative” and Rediscovery of *Maman: Mourning Diary and Camera Lucida*

It is in the pages of *Mourning Diary* that we encounter a suffering Barthes, one who speaks from a place of loss and misery, beginning on the day following his mother’s death (October 26, 1977). Most argue, therefore, that *MD* is the most personal account in Barthes’s repertoire, since it is entirely subjective and written in a journal-style. The entries are often incomplete, short, or erratic, and it is from these excerpts that we can see the split beginning to happen between the two Barthes: there is the Barthes who reports factual information (dates, places, times, people), and then there is the Barthes in mourning, the part that may travel elsewhere and admit to feelings of emotivity, weariness, and melancholy. However, while there is an inarguable emotivity about *MD’s* style, this diary is not the most personal account in Barthes’s later repertoire—*CL* is. Because Barthes is documenting the act of mourning with an intention to publish it, *MD* takes on a performative style, despite its raw, genuine, and unfiltered content. And so, there is nothing entirely private about this literary work, since Barthes is willing to share it. An artifact that Barthes retrieves while penning *MD*, though, does credit this journal-style work with the beginnings of *CL*, the most intimate of Barthes’s writing. The “Winter Garden Photograph” of Henriette that Barthes discovers among *maman’s* belongings in *MD* informs the ultimate personal journey into the essence of his mother and himself in *CL*. Though *MD* allows Barthes to retrieve the elusive “WGP,” it is *CL* that provides him the space to explore desire which represents temporality as the deferral of meaning. The writing of the text transforms a reflection on desire into a kind of resonance of language that erases the object of its articulation” (Kritzman 855). In stepping away from the pleasures Barthes derives from Henriette, he assumes certain elements of her role/persona to “sustain the order of the imaginary.” Though, according to Kritzman, such action “erases the object of its articulation,” this is what Barthes needs to push forth: a *maman* of his own creation who does not object to being held in a captive liminality.
his emotions as he exhausts himself trying to “find” the essence of Henriette within the photo, using other photographs as a way to speak through the concept of *punctum*.\(^\text{65}\)

However much Barthes wants to “let go” of his authority in *Mourning Diary*, though, there is still tension between Barthes’s desire to remain isolated from emotion and to become steeped in it—and that tension is tenable in *CL*. The goal of *CL* is for Barthes to capture the essence of Henriette, but all the photographs featured in this text are of subjects that exist outside of Barthes’s personal world. Thus, Barthes engages in a project of social semiotics by using photographs of disconnected subjects as a way to connect to the personal family photographs studied in *MD*. There is also a tension between suffering and mourning that becomes apparent in *CL*. While these terms are closely related—and sometimes synonymous—in this Barthesian study, there is a clear distinction between the two. Woodward, for instance, examines Barthes’s attention to mourning by aligning it with Freud’s studies of melancholia and mourning, noting that, “Mourning is ‘necessary.’ It denotes a process which takes place over a long period of time. It is slow, infinitesimally so, as we simultaneously cling to what has been lost and ‘test’ reality only to discover that the person we loved is no longer there” (Woodward 94-95). Mourning, therefore, is part of a natural order of emotions that supposedly allows the mourner to come to

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\(^{65}\) In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes defines key terms that allow the reader to better understand the analysis of the photos of his study. Numbered among these terms are *studium*, which is defined as “the order of *liking*, not of *loving*; it mobilizes a half desire, a demi-volition; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds ‘all right’” and *punctum*, which derives from the Latin word meaning to pierce. The *punctum* is best understood as the element of the photo that has the ability to “sting, speck, cut, [make a] little hole” in the memory of the observer. Barthes further explains the *punctum* as the “accident” which both “pricks” and “bruises” him, since the photographs of study in this work—especially the “Winter Garden Photograph”—deeply resonate with his emotional connection to both his life as a secretly (or, at minimum, not outed) gay man and his life as Henriette’s son (*CL* 26-27).
terms with their new reality. Woodward’s reading of Freud’s analysis of mourning holds true for Barthes’s work. Suffering, though, is self-inflicted, according to Barthes, because the mourning subject evokes the memories of the departed loved one—either voluntarily or involuntarily—through a kind of alternate reality.

The fragment, “The World Thunderstruck” leads with Barthes’s definition of déréalité, or “disreality”: “Sentiments of absence and withdrawal of reality experience by the amorous subject, confronting the world” (ALDF 87). In other words, in the space of disreality—a space created by the amorous subject—the only thing that exists are different versions of suffering. A portion of the fragment places us in a restaurant with Barthes-the-Speaker who, alongside friends, declares, “I am suffering . . . This suffering comes to me from the crowd, from the noise, from the décor” (ALDF 87). In a more direct fragment, Barthes says, “I am caught in this contradiction: on the one hand, I believe I know the other better than anyone . . . and on the other hand, I am often struck by the obvious fact that the other is impenetrable, intractable, not to be found” (ALDF 134). There is a distinct difference between suffering and mourning, and Barthes’s willingness and desire to integrate his suffering into his writing is a kind of abandonment of the Neutral, since he is no longer in a state of weariness and his emotions can, in fact, be codified. Perhaps, though, the strongest definition of suffering is written by Barthes on September 1, 1979 in MD, “Suffering; impossibility of being comfortable anywhere; oppression, irritations and remorse one after the next” (242). In essence, a suffering subject is always at odds with himself, and, therefore, there is always tension with the battling halves of the self.

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66 Taken from “The Unknowable,” a fragment where “unknowable” means: “Efforts of the amorous subject to understand and define the loved being ‘in itself,’ by some standard of character type, psychological or neurotic personality, independent of the particular data of the amorous relation” (ALDF 134).
Though it is obvious that Barthes was actively switching systems of language to engage more closely with an intimate discourse in *MD*, we need to consider that Barthes was writing *ALDF* during the end of Henriette’s life. So, *ALDF*, which is most commonly read as a lover’s lament about engaging in unreciprocated acts of love, is more than that—it is a text of suffering and a text of reflection.67 Further, it is a text that provides to us facets of the mother-son connection Barthes shared with Henriette to demonstrate to his readers that the language spoken and understood by the Doxa would not read the same way the discourse of the work would to the weary, lonely, secluded reader in hiding and in mourning. Perhaps most importantly, though, the relationships established in *MD* and *ALDF* are solidified in *CL*, the lattermost text described as being “symmetrical to A Lover’s Discourse, in the realm of mourning.”68 It is only through reading, validating, understanding, and accepting weariness as a condition of suffering that we can access Barthes’s most genuine self, since weariness is a combination of emotions that plague both the body and the mind. Barthes says weariness is a combination of “three words in Latin: *Lassitudo, Labor, Fatigatio* (or *Defatigatio*) . . . At the crossroads of two images: *Labor* . . . [and] *Fatigo*” (*Lectures* 16). Among its many definitions and derivatives, Barthes ultimately decides labor is a “General image of sagging, of one’s being squashed,” an *Fatigo* means “to wear out . . . [it is] the endless process of ending” (*Lectures* 16). We thus use the term weariness as a vehicle for describing an endless cycle of being squashed. The question, of course, is—by what? For Barthes, weariness comes from remembering Henriette, though the emotional

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67 Some examples of this concept of unreciprocated love occur throughout Marcel Proust’s *A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu* as well as in André Gide’s *The Immoralist.*

68 This is taken from Geoff Dyer’s Foreword to *Camera Lucida.* The full excerpt discusses Barthes’s interest in photography and how the death of Henriette propelled Barthes’s interest with great force because he was “bound up with grief over her death” and as a way to come to terms with her death “searched” for her in *The Winter Garden* photograph (*CL* ix).
sensation is that much more intense when he realizes his true fear is potentially not remembering her—such weariness is most tenable in CL.

*Camera Lucida* is divided into two parts. Part I investigates photography in general and provides readers with critical definitions for terms to be used throughout his “reflections on photography.” Among these terms are *operator/spectator* and *studium/punctum*. Simply put, “The *Operator* is the Photographer. The *Spectator* is ourselves, all of us who glance through collections of photographs” (*CL* 9). There are several characteristics that define the concept of the *studium*, numbered among which are a general sense of human interest and an “order of liking” that “mobilizes a half-desire . . . [that is] vague, slippery, [and] irresponsible” (*CL* 26-27). However, the strongest possible definition of *studium* in relation to the bond that Barthes and Henriette shared has to do with the *studium’s* ability to teach. Barthes says, “The *studium* is a kind of education (knowledge and civility, “politeness”) which allows me to discover the *Operator*, to experience the intentions which establish and animate his practices, but to experience them ‘in reverse’” (*CL* 28). *Punctum*, according to Barthes, is the element of a photo which pierces the *Spectator*; it is what one “add[s] to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*” (*CL* xi). Among these terms, I find myself stopping at the lattermost definition of *studium*, since Barthes thinks of himself in relation to the studium as a *Spectator*, the whole scene of which creates a kind of spectacle (*CL* 9). Since Part I only considers photographs that do not necessarily puncture Barthes, but, instead, lay a foundation for how he will think through loss, melancholy, life, and as represented in and by the photograph, we look to Part II to find Henriette.

Part II of *Camera Lucida* is dedicated entirely to capturing the essence of *maman*. In an entry dated June 9, 1978, in *MD*, Barthes documents a morning walk through Saint-Sulpice,
delighting in its “simple architectural vault” (*MD* 136). As Barthes sits to rest, he “prays” to “finish the *Photo-Maman* book,” only to realize that he is “always asking for something, wanting something, always pulled ahead by childish Desire” (*MD* 136). This “childish Desire” to which Barthes refers is attended to in scholarship relating to Barthes’s seemingly unnatural attachment to his mother. The importance of the maternal presence that governs the pages of *ALDF* informs the way Barthes guides a reading audience through the process of “Philosophizing” an image, since the maternal imago of *maman* is inaccessible to us. As Kritzman puts it, “In the lover’s discourse, the maternal imago not only becomes the center of the subject’s identity, but remains an internalized principle of sensuality and corporeal experience whose absence constitutes a symbolic castration” (859). The desire for the return of the mother in *ALDF* results in a type of staging of a “catastrophic theatrical event characterized by the nostalgia for a lost maternal plentitude that is manifested in the projection of nothingness” (Kritzman 860). Such nostalgia leaves the lover torn “divided between the potential loss of what can never be recovered and the memory of what can never be forgotten” (Kritzman 860). We can sense this division in Barthes before *MD*, within the pages of *ALDF*. Thus, the way that Barthes “reads” the “WGP” of *maman* “exposes a specific kind of love that he only has for Henriette, which, ‘like a matrix (or a womb), beholds his body and replenishes it’” (Tsakiridou 280). This kind of attachment informs other, more psychoanalytic ways, of reading Barthes’s grief on the pages of these collected works, specifically *CL*.

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69 *Mourning Diary* attends to the idea that “Philosophizing” an image results in a separation of the mourner from his suffering. This makes talking about *maman* arguably easier for Barthes because he does not want to share her and, equally important, cannot access language suitable enough to capture her essence (121).
Camera Lucida is ripe for psychoanalytic interpretation because the deeply personal project actively protects Barthes’ beloved, blissful “Winter Garden Photograph” of maman. In fact, it is Barthes’ very approaches to grief and suffering in CL that demonstrate the clear emotional-psychic spaces between the Freudian concepts of mourning and melancholia. In Woodward’s analysis of CL, it is established that the psychoanalytic anchor unifying Barthes’s literary repertoire is a prime example that there is a space between mourning and melancholia and the accepted, overly-clinical assessment of these emotional stages leaves no room to carve out a space in between the two states. Freud’s work on mourning was more of a foil to understand the way that melancholia presents in the human psyche in order to establish the state of mourning as “normal.” Woodward argues that Freud’s analysis of these terms stymies the evolution around the conversation about mourning. The idea, act, and conditions of mourning are “paralyzed,” according to Woodward’s reading of Freud in relation to Barthes’s CL, since the term only concerns itself with the mourner’s need to free the self “from the emotional bonds which have tied us to the person we love” (94). Ultimately, Freud asserts that mourning is normal, but melancholia, in simplest terms, is failed mourning (Woodward 95). Woodward concludes that Barthes does not wish to be rid of the pain and suffering that the loss of maman caused him. Instead, Woodward asserts that by remembering his mother in a state in which he never knew her (The “WGP” referenced in CL), he allows himself to transfer grief to a kind of imaginary space where the passage of time does not negate the longing for the departed loved one. Rather, it reifies the love language assigned to that loved person. Examining Barthes’s experience of grief alongside the psychoanalytic understanding Freud forwards, we realize that

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70 A reference to Sigmund Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917).
time does not function as the mechanism that erases grief (Freud), but, instead, that time functions in a way where the erasure of emotive responses occurs (though, not indefinitely; anything that triggers involuntary memory reignites emotivity, and thus the grieving begins anew). This is why Barthes’s interest in photographs and desire to explore *maman* as he never knew her allows him to find some closure—an ending to all his beginnings.

In *Mourning Diary*, Barthes proclaims that the “Photo . . . [is] the birth of literature” (168). Barthes argues the photo can be “the object of 3 practices (or of three emotions, of or three intentions): to do, to undergo, to look. This idealization of the practices of the Photograph only become meaningful once he truly sits with the photo of *maman* in the Winter Garden. It is only once Barthes has this photograph in his possession that he can study it and begin a search for himself, through literature. *Camera Lucida* provides Barthes that space, since it is a text in search of itself; it is a text that, like the subject of its study (the photograph), “carries its referent within itself,” both “amorous [and] funereal” and vulnerable to complete destruction should either part attempt to separate from its adjoining “limb” (*CL* 5-6). It is when a photograph has *punctum*, or the ability to pierce, that it becomes meaningful to Barthes, and that is why the *Winter Garden Photograph* is something onto which he holds dearly. We must consider that “The punctum is a wound. Photography is the wound of our inescapable mimesis of death. To photograph is to perpetuate injuries; to refuse healing; to create a fictitious martyrdom” (Tsakiridou 276). It is almost as if *CL* wants the reader to help Barthes find Henriette, though Barthes knows such an undertaking could only ever be completed by himself.

Barthes says that “extreme love,” not indifference, erases the “weight of the image” (*CL* 12). How, then, do we apply this logic to his reaction to photographs of *maman* once she is passed? Going through her personal effects with brother Michel on June 11, 1978, Barthes
“Began the day by looking at [maman’s] photographs, noting that doing so invokes yet another bout of “cruel mourning,” a Sisyphusian pattern of emotional arousal with no rest” (MD 139). Two days later, Barthes “painfully” returns to the photographs, finding himself “overwhelmed by one in which maman, a gentle, discreet little girl,” stands alongside her father in the Winter Garden of Chennevières, France in 1898 (MD 143). As Barthes says in reflecting on the image of the photograph, “Her kindness was specifically out-of-play, it belonged to no system, or at least it was located at the limits of a morality (evangelical, for instance)” (CL 69). Here, the system’s morality that is being called into question, not Henriette’s. From Barthes’s biased perception, Henriette was above all systems of goodness because hers was more genuine than any other. The photograph of Henriette in the Winter Garden thus becomes the portal through which such goodness is measured as well as the object of the quest for the mourning Barthes. Eventually, this photograph brings Barthes to a point of confession; it becomes apparent that he is suffering from intense anxiety and guilt on this quest. Barthes writes, “I write my suffering less and less yet it grows all the stronger, shifting to the realm of the eternal, since I no longer write it” (MD 215). Barthes receives the reproduction of this photograph some months later on December 29, 1978, about which, he says,

Having received yesterday the photo I’ve had reproduced of maman as a little girl in the Winter Garden of Chennevières, I try to keep it in front of me, on my work table. But it’s too much—intolerable—too painful. This image enters into conflict with all the ignoble little combats of my life. The image is really a measure, a judge (I understand now how a photo can be sanctified, how it can guide it’s not the identity that is recalled, it’s within that identity, a rare expression, a ‘virtue’). (MD 220)
Barthes cannot bear to look at *maman*, knowing that she can never return. There is also a clear sense of intrigue and jealousy here, since Barthes is confronting the fact that *maman* had a life before he was born. He approaches this subject in *Camera Lucida* when he says, “As a living soul, I am the very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history,” and, in thinking about the “WGP” proclaims, “That is what the time when my mother was alive before me is—History (moreover, it is the period which interests me most, historically)” (65). Barthes is intrigued that he will never be able to know her as that version of *maman*, but investigates that History thoroughly as a way to determine whether he could actually recognize her, since the photograph could not “waken in [him] the rumpled softness of her crêpe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder” (*CL* 65). For Barthes, there is a peace in *maman’s* proximity, despite the two-dimensional nature of the photograph.

The series of photographs in *MD* that document Henriette Barthes at different stages of her life—some with Roland and Michel, others without—culminates with two photos of Barthes in his home in Paris and four separate replications of the hand-written fragments that are diary entries provided throughout the work. The last photograph of Barthes is the critic/artist pictured at his desk; he performs the task required by the Operator so that the photo might be taken with some success, but there is a weariness to him, even with the slight smirk he offers the lens. The description of the photo informs the reader that in the background, there are three photos on the wall, the center of which is the “WGP,” about which, he says, “*Maman’s* photo as a little girl, in the distance—in front of me on my desk. It was enough for me to look at it, to apprehend the *suchness* of her being (which I struggle to describe) in order to be reinvested by, immersed in, invaded, inundated by her goodness” (*MD* 226). Such distance from the photograph directly supports the sentiments that Barthes echoes in the afterword of the text while also supporting the
theses of scholars like Tsakiridou and Kritzman, who argue that Barthes’s attachment to *maman* was one that ultimately crippled him once he had to live in a world without her. Even in his attempts to keep *maman* close with his photo-study, he is still incapable of fully engaging with the reality that she is no longer there, though he realistically knows this to be true. The beloved photograph thus provides Barthes a translation of Henriette, since the photograph immortalizes her as she was at the time it was taken. Henriette’s image is a reminder to the mourning Barthes that she is accessible, but only superficially—his posthumous love for *maman* is a distortion of emotions.

*Camera Lucida* recognizes the tension that exists in the spaces of translation. Barthes writes, “I then realized there was a sort of link (or knot) between Photography, madness, and something whose name I did not know. I began by calling it: the pangs of love” (*CL* 116). Barthes is only able to recognize this connection because he spent his time studying the *punctum* of the “WGP” of *maman*. Such “pangs of love” are teased out in *ALDF*, and the study of the image in *CL* thus becomes the site of affirmation where Barthes can confront not only himself and *maman*, but the plasticity and malleability of language, emotion, and interpretation. In *CL*, contra to the study of images in *RB*, “The image is plastic and retractable and pleasure can find . . . multiple tasks and voices . . . this plasticity [can be viewed as] an impulse to shift the body into deliberate mutations, to make it theatrical” (Tsakiridou 284). It is for this reason that “Barthes’s nostalgia for ‘intractable realities’ can only sustain an autocratic and morbid photography . . . [in which] enlightenment can bring the body to the internment that Barthes ironically fears for himself” (Tsakiridou 284). Barthes confronts this fear, in part, noting that the only thing that separates Barthes from his mother is death, which is ultimately within the hands of time.
Conclusion

In 1967, the same year that Barthes penned “The Death of the Author,” he requested that Richard Howard escort Henriette about NYC until he was able to join them, as Barthes was in Baltimore to complete “academic duties” (MD 257). Howard documents the time he spent with Henriette in a way that is reminiscent of his talent for translation, as he not only gives the direct account of his experience, but also captures the essence of the experience. This act of translating the time Howard spent with Henriette further reinforces the closeness between Barthes and his Mother, as is evidenced in the later writing studied in this chapter. Without directly saying so, Howard hints that the bond between Barthes and Henriette was so strong that shared time during “ensuing family lunches” left Howard feeling a bit triangulated in the company of the mother-son dynamic, since theirs was a discourse that was not entirely verbal, but instead magnetic and seemingly only enlivened in the presence of the other (MD 258). However, the time that Howard spent with Henriette proved to be critical to Barthes’s goal of memorializing her, since Howard essentially corroborates the claims Barthes makes of his mother as “that perfected a being, life force and in death a paradigm, a phoenix” (MD 261).

It is not until we reach the Afterword of Mourning Diary that the argument made herein is confirmed. I say this with great confidence because our source is Richard Howard, a true friend and companion to both Roland Barthes and Henriette Barthes. Howard writes,

Having known Madame Barthes, even provisionally, clarified for me her son’s intentions neither to bury his mother nor to praise her, but to exalt her exceptional contribution to his own happiness and belief in the worthiness of life itself by the testimony of her own . . I here recognize the task in its most veracious form, though in this instance necessarily fragmentary, of what ancient Romans called filial piety, completed by the simultaneous
production of *A Lover’s Discourse* and of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* and all the other writings that succeed (in the true sense of that verb) his mother’s death. *Mourning Diary* can be correctly read only by a concomitant reading of these ultimate books *[Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments, and Camera Lucida]* and the hundreds of pages of Barthes’s final texts written at the same time (*à la fois*) he was producing these crucial and painful notations. *(MD 260-61).*

Howard’s account of his time spent with Madame Barthes reinstates the idea that, without the love of Henriette, Barthes would have been an entirely empty vessel. Without *maman*, life was worthless and the sense that Henriette was so dedicated to the happiness of “her” Roland made Barthes’s journey through life somewhat less painful. He thus dedicated his life to his mother the same way she dedicated her life to him. What Barthes releases in his later work is insight into a connection so intimate and private that only he and *maman* can access its language and nuances. However, as I have argued here, and as Howard has confirmed, we get a better sense of Barthes as a person through his representations and rediscoveries of *maman*, especially through photography.

My approach to dissecting both the language and the discourse of Barthes’s later work is the “correct” way to do so, for we cannot read and truly understand a text as seemingly upfront as *Camera Lucida* without first understanding the complexities of *Roland Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse, Fragments, and Mourning Diary*, all of which establish Barthes not only as a lonely queer subject, but, more importantly, as a mother’s boy whose entire life’s purpose was anchored in her presence while she was alive and in preserving her essence once she passed. As I argued in this chapter, Barthes’s motivation for writing was to ensure that Henriette would live on forever, and, according to Howard, he achieves this goal.
What we stand to gain from thinking of all three of these texts as Barthes’s most personal, voluntarily subjective writing is the understanding that they rely on each other to be complete. *Camera Lucida* is thus the culmination of the Barthes’s most intimate thoughts and ruminations about *maman*, the love they shared, the way she lived, and her essence as it is eternally captured in the *Winter Garden Photograph*. There is no pressing need to delve further into this photograph, since we cannot access it; it is protected, locked away, and preserved only in Text, not in print. For those of us who remain faithful to the importance of Barthes’s work and the evolution it underwent during the last decade of his life, simply *imagining* the photograph feels like enough. Regardless of how respectful we might be, the fact remains that, to Barthes, we, as his spectators—as his reading audience—are still the Doxa, and so we cannot speak the same language that he shared with *maman*. It is for this reason that Barthes knew he would remain “unwell” until he wrote something *having to do with her* (*Photo*, or something else) (*MD* 216). The “WGP” will remain forever locked in the trust of those closest to Barthes. Further, we can posit that, in death, Barthes does get his wish—to know Henriette as he never knew her before, to confirm the ruminations on the “WGP” of her essence as a child (for there is no truer form or version of ourselves than that of our childhood self), and to rest eternally knowing that he successfully switched systems in order to accede to his own need to confront his truths through discourse in order to rejoin *maman* eternally.
With an upbringing that was far from traditional, Djuna Barnes was always drawn toward uncanny subjects and the anomalies that populated equally marginalized demographics. Social, sexual, exoticized, and gendered others—the so-called “freaks” of nature that populated the ever-burgeoning and profitable world of the circus sideshow act—served as the true anchor to Barnes’s writing. She identified with their stories and aimed to tease out their regular-ness, interviewing sideshow freaks the same as she would notable celebrities and public figures. In doing so, Barnes extracted the essence of each of her subjects, locating their true story and not the socially-constructed narrative assigned to them. Barnes was a master of extraction in this way, as she was able to invoke what Roland Barthes would later term punctum (or that which “pricks”) with her wit, unapologetic frankness, and ability to position the freak alongside the “typical” human.

Like Georges Suerat’s Circus Sideshow (1888), Barnes’s work feels like a patchwork: odds and ends of different worlds coming together to create something new, out of the ordinary, or odd. The spectacular exists within the mind. Suerat and Barnes knew this well. At first, the subjects in Suerat’s painting do not feel like a mixed crowd, but they are. The opposite often presents as true in Barnes’s work, but she, like Seurat, allows her freaks to blend so seamlessly that we no longer focus on what “others” Barnes’s anomalies, but, instead what makes them whole, human, and valid.

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71 Excerpted from Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida, published posthumously in 1980, which is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2. The full quote reads: “And I, the Spectator, I recognize them with more or less pleasure : I invest them with my studium (which is never my delight or my pain) (28).
Come One, Come All: Djuna Barnes and a Freakish Humanity

She was bound by a peculiar Old Testament/Ten Commandment morality jumbled with a mixture of Victorian propriety and Anglican piety that often provided a unique or at least novel approach to contemporary problems.  
—From Life is Painful, Nasty and Short . . .  
In My Case It Has Only Been Painful and Nasty:  
Djuna Barnes 1978-1981  
By Hank O’Neal

Within the community of freaks, the heterosexual couple is not the dominant social configuration, but one of many varied expressions of desire and intimacy.  
—From Sideshow U.S.A  
By Rachel Adams

Sketching the lives and stories of subjects who were marginalized and invalidated by heteronormative social standards was a benchmark of Djuna Barnes’s literary career. For Barnes, those on the margin—those who represented the absolute limit of the Other—were subjects of interest that deserved recognition and visibility. Representation of this population was often manipulated by political and medical factions, which, in turn, affected the social standing and narrative of marginalized subjects—in particular, queer subjects who were deemed “freaks.” With this in mind, it is easy to notice the celebration of the Other evidenced throughout Barnes’s literary and journalistic repertoires. As Barnes was invested in the expository artistry of revealing the human side of humans (that is to say, the private persona detached from the objective worlds into which they were placed or for which they had to perform) in her nonfiction writing, the characterizations in her fiction boast a similar attention to humanity, since even the seemingly most depraved and marginalized subjects are here sketched with humanity. As we examine Barnes’s work with an attention to her ability to sketch her subjects, it is important to note that the fictional and non-fictional subjects of study referenced in this chapter all share three key
qualities: they are on the periphery, they either evoke a social/ sexual/ gendered “limit” or are a
direct representation of one, and they are considered “freaks,”

For the purpose of studying Barnes’s work, we will consider “the periphery” to be any
non-normative, non-binary, non-heterosexual subject; we will extend our understanding of the
periphery to those who were considered to be either social outcasts or low-class citizens in terms
of socio-economic status. Those who occupy the periphery are essential to Barnes’s image and
legacy as a writer because she was invested in telling their stories in a way that was
straightforward, unfiltered, and largely unapologetic. When we think of the concept of a “limit”
relative to Barnes’s work, we are thinking of any subject whose need to identify in a certain
way—or who refuses to identify at all—complicates typical social structures to such a degree
that they do not have enough tangible humanity to seem redeemable. Ontologically, this means
that there is a kind of “unredeemable humanity” that normative society shunned and that Barnes
actively challenged. Finally, as we consider the term “freak” in relation to Barnes’s work, we
should be thinking of subjects who are both on the periphery and represent a limit, but who also
publically and unapologetically display their Otherness without fear of social castigation. Such
subjects who refused conventionality were often the focus of much scrutiny and marginalization,
but for Barnes, subjects like these were ideal for her writing.

Much like her subjects of study, Barnes did not fit into any one socially constructed
category. The genre in which she wrote, her sexuality, her religious beliefs, and her refusal to
abide by any one way of thinking all actively resisted categorization and labeling. Such
resistance was built on Barnes’s experiences with trauma, a characteristic she shared with her
subjects of study. Thus, in Barnes’s unwavering dedication to pursuing, admiring, critiquing,
preserving, and creating art that similarly refused to conform to or abide by convention there is
the impression that Barnes was a living sketch of the worlds she created and the characters who populated them. A Western woman by birth and a woman of the West Bank by choice, Barnes was able to translate the interests and desires of a general population into fictionalized accounts that featured drama, romance, and, to a certain degree, fear and terror. Barnes’s exposure to the drastically different social landscapes of America and Europe provided her a firm perspective about the various beliefs people held about those who were considered anomalies and stood outside (or alongside) a social normativity, thus allowing her to study and understand the unspoken desires of a variety of audiences. In her writing, she thus provided the general public an intellectual space for collective participation in vice, or the literary equivalent of the freak show.

Attendant to the focus on freaks, anomalies, and others in Barnes’s work is the idea that gender, as a social function, is destructive and should, instead, be considered as a fluid, expressive element of personhood. With that in mind, I will consider Judith Butler’s position on the idea of binarisms relative to gender. As we will see in our examination of gender roles in Barnes’s work—especially in *Nightwood*—the specificity of gender relies on social receipt, but also, the way a subject *presents* socially in worlds outside their safe havens. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler says, “The masculine/ feminine binary constitutes not only the exclusive framework in which that specificity can be recognized, but in every other way the ‘specificity’ of the feminine is once again fully decontextualized and separated off analytically and politically from the constitution of class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations that both constitute ‘identity’ and make the singular notion of identity a misnomer” (7). So, for the female subjects in Barnes—be they “naturally” feminine or whether they merely identify as feminine—identity is at the mercy of their environment and the juridical structures that constitute that
environment. Similar to her literature, much of Barnes’s earlier journalism and short stories focus on the issues inherent in strict enforcement of gendered social norms. Thus, the assemblages of many of Barnes’s characters—be they fictional or non-fictional subjects—constitute a body of work that does not allow itself to conform to or be stabilized by normative gender roles or expectations.

Butler’s critique of the imbalanced social power structure that dictates the visibility and validity of its subjects is anchored in the polarized tension between representation and repression. Butler says, “representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women,” noting that “limitation, prohibition, regulation, control, and even ‘protection’ of individuals” are cited as guiding rationales for such imbalance (GT 3-4). Barnes seemed to be attuned to these hypocritical and, frankly, patriarchal ideas well before these words were printed and published. In fact, the female subjects (and subjects who identify as feminine) of the works considered herein either fall victim to representational politics and then flee from whatsoever was restraining them (Robin Vote) or they entirely refute representational politics and are considered the “other”; on the other hand, these subjects are ostracized by the greater public for it, but become objects of interest and attention (Nora Flood, Dr. Matthew O’Connor, Dame Musset). Since “juridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not ‘show’ once the juridical structure of politics has been established,” we experience these characters both as victims of representational politics and as victors against the restraints of representational politics (GT 5). So, it is important to understand that “the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical
structures as their foundation” (GT 5). Instead of juridical structures, I will look at the way said juridical structures ultimately objectify social anomalies and sexual Others in order to demonstrate how the incessant desire to label and classify subjects as a means of maintaining hierarchies is not always a successful venture for the normative subjects who oppress the Other. In fact, Barnes makes a mockery of social normativity and pays little attention to the way things “ought” to be for both her fictional and nonfictional subjects.

Barnes’s early career in journalism will demonstrate how such exposure to a variety of people from different walks of life helped to inform the development of her narrative voice and style with regard to female agency and their individual and collective power and mystique. Barnes’s work also expose key characters as freaks whose alienated, condemned, and marginalized subjectivity becomes the focus of celebration rather than scrutiny. Characters like Dame Musset, Dr. Matthew O’Connor, and Nora Flood, are sketched with the intention of highlighting the importance of non-normative social, sexual, and gendered identities and practices while characters like Robin Vote represent the absolute limit of the periphery that, arguably, cannot be redeemed by the act of speaking or by the flexibility and fluidity of the freak show.

The Freak Show: A Brief History

Freak shows originally gained popularity during the 19th century in Europe because the freak show represented a space where commoners could gather and participate in taboo culture as observers and tourists. That the onlookers—or, voyeurs—of the freak show were tangentially participating in the fictional world of each “freak” normalized the practice and allowed the freak to integrate into New York’s cultural and historical milieu. The freak show is thus a collective
representation of incomplete and broken beings, and, as such, it is attractive to people like Barnes who sketched characters that were equally incomplete and broken and served as reflections of her life experiences. Many of the freak show’s identifying qualities were borrowed by other industries in order to draw attention to their products. One such quality were the freak show speeches, or calls to the crowd. The call to the crowd was essentially a pitch to lure the audiences into the world of the other with promises of wild fantasies come to life and beings that personified the absolute limit not only of one’s imagination, but of science and reason. Since freaks were not considered prodigies or divine beings, their anomalous aesthetics required a level of intrigue made possible in the fictionalization of their lives. Such narratives were then projected onto crowds by enthusiastic circus employees as a way to bring more mystique to the already curious aura of the freaks that were yet to be revealed. Rachel Adams, author of *Sideshow, USA* writes, “by the nineteenth century, freaks had no inherent significance, although their anomalies seemed to cry out for an interpretation. As a result, they required narratives about exotic places, miraculous events, or horrifying accidents that might give coherence to bodies that otherwise suggested an intolerable fragmentation and dissolution of meaning” (5). As a way to establish ethos, the freak show leaned on ethnographic and medical “facts” in order to create the illusion of legitimacy. Realistically, what was occurring was the creation of believable, fictional, and entertaining backstories. These “backstories” were assigned to each freak as a way to sketch each subject into a character that the public would respond to with some form of emotion—the emotion itself was of no importance. These speeches were later adapted to the small screen with the debut of short films. According to Tom Gunning, “short films were introduced with speeches much like the spiel of a sideshow barker, who ‘builds an atmosphere of expectation, a pronounced curiosity leavened with anxiety as he stresses the novelty and astonishing properties
which the attraction about to be revealed will posses’” (Adams 66-67). Such speeches were assembled in such a way that was meant to extract amazement and draw on the grotesque and sensational (Adams 67).

How we conceptualize and use the term “freak” is important, since there are a variety of ways in which this term can be understood and utilized. *Freak Show* (1990) author Robert Bogdan understands the term “freak” to be an indication of a social role, leaning on the performative element to solidify the theatrical appeal of the freak. Judith Butler considers “freak” to be a social condition defined by a subject’s acquiescence and performance of a repetition of expected (and typically exploitative) acts. Adams argues the term is established on the foundational basis that within the nuanced balance of performance, staging, and costumes there emerges a new social subject: the freak. Barnes’s “freaks” hit all the proverbial prerequisites for anomalous intrigue, as her freaks can range from being freaks of gender (as we understand women in a radical and somewhat intangible work like *Ladies Almanack*) to being social freaks (like many of the characters featured in the short stories that appear in *Djuna Barnes’s New York*), to being sexual freaks (like Robin vote and Dr. Matthew O’Connor in *Nightwood*).

When it comes to Barnes’s freaks, we are best served by thinking through Butler’s assessment of the term because, for Butler, the term exists only as a condition of a response to social expectations that remain unmet by the subject. In refusing to perform natural social, sexual, and/or gendered roles, a subject becomes labeled as a “freak,” and we can see this clearly in Barnes’s fiction (and even some of her non-fiction). Barnes was writing during a time when avenues for collective participation in vice were readily available, which also meant that there existed a social avenue for performance. That is to say, Barnes’s New York was one that put freaks and anomalies on display—and Barnes was intoxicated by it.
Perhaps one of the most crucial elements to the success of the freak show and the proliferation of its culture and visibility was its marriage between science and spectacle. At the turn of the 20th century, freaks and freak culture represented an integral facet of New York’s historical moment, particularly in Coney Island. In 1932, Todd Browning’s career-ending film, *Freaks* debuted and was met with extreme criticism and distaste. While many consider this film the ruination of Browning’s directorial career, we can assume that Barnes was impressed with the work because of its daring cinematic, authorial, and narrative facets. Barnes saw in *Freaks* what others could not—its raw humanity. Browning created a film that took society’s most peripheral creatures and treated them *normally*, demonstrating that a “freak” could live a typical life. Essentially, Browning took a cast of “freaks” and created a love triangle ripe with lies, deceit, betrayal, machination, rebellion, drama, emotion, and resolution. The story of the film is invested in love and greed, which are common tropes and recognizable feelings for nearly any human, and that made the general public uncomfortable.\(^{72}\) Despite the normalization of the freak’s lives and interactions, the film did not seek to stabilize the freaks as normative persons in society. In fact, the film, “subverts the notion of normative standards” in general, and this is primarily achieved through the way the film represents the sexual fantasies and engagements of its characters.\(^{73}\)

Barnes does not shy away from the Browning method in the treatment of her subjects, as she was always focused on extracting the essence of those subjects. Regardless of whether the subjects are characters created by Barnes or recognizable public figures, Barnes’s writing provides the space for every subject to exercise their individuality. That the circus was able to

\(^{72}\) See Adams, 63.
\(^{73}\) See Adams, 72.
draw on the pathos of a crowd was what allowed the freak show to exist. Though Barnes was aware that the circus was meant to be a business whereby anomalies and other “freakish” subjects were regarded as nothing more than profitable objects, Barnes also knew that these social others had their own community. Thus, Barnes was invested in telling the true story of the freak, not the exoticized narratives fabricated to draw crowds. For Barnes, the freak was home and home was messy. Barnes did not hide hermesses, but, rather, reintroduced them under different guises of representation. As such, a great deal of Barnes’s journalism focused on the othered attractions of Coney Island, what she referred to as “human enigma[s]” (Adams 213). In fact, Nancy Levine credits Barnes’s early journalistic and tabloid career to her involvement and intoxication with bawdiness, the taboo, and a celebration of those on the periphery. Early in her journalistic career, we can see the development of Barnes’s fictional and nonfictional narrative structure begin to focus on the parallels that existed between the mundane and the extraordinary.

The Observers and the Observed: Short Stories and Interviews

As a reporter, Djuna Barnes often encountered human oddities that were not housed in freak shows or featured in the side shows of Coney Island; they were instead people on the periphery of the normally-functioning world, and she wanted to expose them for their magnificence and difference. Barnes had a talent for “mixing modes and forcing incongruous juxtapositions” in her work as a way to “confound her reader’s blunted expectations” of what writing ought to be (Levine 29-30).

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74 See Levine, 27.
At a time when many forms of dancing were banned and women were still fighting for the right to vote, one constant remained stable in New York City’s cultural landscape: the intrigue, mystique, and demand for the Other. “If Noise Were Forbidden at Coney Island, a Lot of People Would Lose Their Jobs” is one of many short stories in which Barnes considers the journey and the life of freakshow performers and other assorted circus and side show subjects. What is especially important about this story is the way that it invites a queering of normative subjects, since the thrill of vicariously experiencing oddity is deemed acceptable, perhaps even culturally informed. A message like this works to underscore a running theme in Barnes’s work in general, since “If Noise Were Forbidden” establishes the groundwork necessary to demonstrate that normative social subjects sought the other as a way to experience life in ways that felt slightly dangerous and wrong. This particular short story directly replicates sideshow culture not only as a means to draw in the reader (which thus queers the freak experience, since the reader is already involved in the story, and yet is being called to it as if it needs to demonstrate further ethos), but also to document the general public’s experience of engaging in freak culture as a means of collective exploration.

We are provided a description of the three major amusement complexes in Coney Island prior to the start of the narrative, and special attention is paid to Steeplechase Park. Those who endeavored to participate in the Steeplechase World were a species of their own kind, since such participation demonstrated a willingness to be publicly humiliated or made abject. In this way, the crowd—the observers—cross the boundary into the cage and become the observed. Barnes documents the experience of Steeplechase in the following terms:

The Steeplechase Pavilion of Fun, one of Coney Island’s most outrageous attractions, offered the paying customer a variety of opportunities to be made a fool of. In order to
exit the pavilion, one had to walk through a rolling barrel, crawl through a dog kennel, maintain composure when a blast of hot air lifted a skirt or carried off a hat, or receive a spanking from a clown—all within plain view of an audience of several hundred amused patrons who had just endured the same ordeals. (“If Noise Were” 142)

The combined experience of abjection and voyeurism at Steeplechase Pavilion of Fun is both absurd and sexually charged. In documenting the queer experiences of paying audiences who wanted to become part of the abjection of the sideshow, Barnes exposed the idea that humiliation, degradation, and abjection are all quite sexy to a normative social subject. To have the privilege to engage in abject practices “within plain view of an audience of several hundred amused patrons who had just endured the same ordeals” confirms there was no fear of social castigation, since this was a collective act. For the average person, there was a thrill in being on display for an audience, and Barnes wanted to keep a record of these social happenings as a way to validate the experiences of those on the periphery while also forcibly suggesting that the general public hold a mirror up to its own hypocrisies.

The preamble to the story also discusses Luna Park and it’s need to “ban the vulgarities associated with the tango and turkey trot in order not to alienate their family clientele” (“If Noise Were” 142). Such a rationale is reminiscent of earlier stories by Barnes like “You Can Tango—A Little—at Arcadia Dance Hall” (1913) and “No Turkey or Tango in Drag or Glide Dances” (1913) in which dance halls were heavily policed for fear that the public would begin to behave indecently as the result of dancing so freely. For dancing to be considered the potential culprit of tainting an otherwise family-friendly environment while attendance at freak shows and side show acts were acceptable family outings made little sense. There was a detachment from sensibility that Barnes was quite gifted at exposing and making artistic.
The story begins with a rather pathetic observation of a man whose good fortune afforded him a grand prize, and yet he is the saddest person Barnes claims ever to have seen at Coney Island. This sad man carried a “twenty-inch, red plush bear by the right foreleg about with him all of one day . . . and tried to forget that he had made a lucky throw” (“If Noise Were” 143). It is not accidental that the narrative begins with a lonely, queer figure whose outwardly good fortune does not affect his actual disposition. We might think of this figure as a kind of tramp clown—a wanderer or outsider, who can appear happy or sad, but is largely displaced. This figure exists amid a bustling world where industry, entertainment, and culture are booming. Yet, this figure is only recognized for thing that makes him alien to those around him, and he knows it. Barnes is careful, though, to think about what really makes Coney Island unique, and, as she suggests, it is not necessarily the “garish-colored Japanese lanterns and the sideshow with its fat lady and its human enigma,” but instead, the “dim, ivy-grown beer garden with its sedate squares of cheese set rigidly in the center of the little green table and the papa and mama eating a quiet lunch from an egg basket while the voice of another country speaks” (“If Noise Were” 145). What is propped up on the sideshow stage as other-worldly and exotic is a façade; it is the blending of cultures and the exploration of new cultural traditions that exist in Coney Island that make it such a place of wonder. The ordinary—a mama and papa eating a quiet lunch—is uninteresting to those wishing to be entertained because there is nothing spectacular about them. They are simply from another land. There is no backstory. They are immigrants eating lunch. The sideshow acts, however, are exoticized in a way that makes even the most mundane activity—chewing gum, for example—seem like a modern feat of daring accomplishment.

The point to “If Noise Were Forbidden” is to show the balance that existed in Coney Island. As Barnes documented it, Coney Island was a place where the ordinary and the
extraordinary coexisted with little complication or drama. In fact, the rhythm of Coney Island made it a central hub for commerce. And, normative social subjects and “freaks” alike understood this concept well enough to capitalize on the public’s need for entertainment and escapism. Coney Island offered the space for people to engage in. As Barnes notes, “Every place hasn’t a joyful reputation, and those that go to it find that they are welcome and that they might indeed have spent the day in worse fashion” (“If Noise Were” 149). As a destination for escape and a space for collective participation in the otherwise socially taboo and abject, Coney Island was critical part of the cultural backdrop of early 20th century American history. Barnes actively engaged in this social scene and drew on those experiences to create characters and worlds that turns our focus on the ostensibly normal in order to estrange it. What is normal is odd, and what is odd is more commonplace than one thinks—this was Barnes’s guiding message, and such a message was an extension of her own lived experiences since she, like the anomalies who so intoxicated her, was also a bit of a social contortionist.

About Djuna Barnes’s disposition, Mary-Lynn Broe notes that those closest to Barnes had pivotal relationships with her that seem borderline masochistic, given that a great many of her friends considered her to be both “tender” and “acerbic,” a person whose “refusal of self-analysis” read as a “deliberate sort of vanity” (6). Given Barnes’s non-traditional, polygamist, somewhat incestuous upbringing, her lack of desire to confront what others had observed in her as anomalous is not at all surprising. In fact, Barnes was quite fond of her somewhat alienating affect—so much so that she seemed unapologetic in her exercise of female masculinity and the unique power that accompanied it. We get a strong sense of this characterization of Barnes based on her interviewing style. As we will see, Barnes was not interested in extracting human interest
pieces so much as she was invested the human experience and the way her interviewees thought of themselves in relation to those around them.

Barnes conducted her interviews in a manner similar to the way she studied those who were socially deemed the Other, and we see an important example of this treatment in her interactions with Dinah, the Gorilla Woman. On October 18, 1914, *New York World Magazine* published Djuna Barnes’s interview with a sideshow act in the circus titled, “The Girl and the Gorilla.” The interview focuses on the balance between abjection and humanity, similar to what we observed in the style of “If Noise Were Forbidden.” At the time of the interview, Barnes was tasked with being the first female to come within “caressing or battling” proximity to the newly-arrived attraction, the bushgirl named Dinah. From the beginning of the article, Barnes focuses on the allure of sideshow culture and prompts the crowd to come and listen to the tale of the bushgirl. Intriguing, fictionalized anecdotal statements like, “A new species has come to town!” and “Such is the gorilla woman, the only living captive of her race” first establish this bushgirl as entirely uncivilized and abject. Such unfounded and glorified falsifications also indicate that this bushgirl is the only one of her kind and that those who are within proximity and fortunate enough to witness such a marvel should do so without hesitation. Though Barnes’s coverage of the story does not entirely dehumanize this bushgirl, the opening line is meant to draw a crowd similar to the way sideshow workers drew crowds to observe other oddities and anomalies. From this interview, Barnes had two main goals: to challenge conceptions of feminity and encourage people to rethink what it meant to be feminine, especially in other cultures, and to gain insight into what a “freak” like Dinah the bushgirl thought about the United States.

We are first introduced to Dinah as an abject subject, which perfectly aligns with the culture of the sideshow act that she was. About her initial impression and observations of Dinah,
Barnes writes: “She is neither very feminine nor very fragile, to look at. She has fashion’s wide-shoulder cape of hair, but this is as far as the semblance goes, as she stands before us leaning upon bowed forearms, taut as suspense, looking out of faraway eyes upon a life called civilized” (“The Girl” 40). We are given the impression of a subject who, similar to future characters that Barnes creates like Dame Musset in *Ladies’ Almanack*, comes up just short of qualifying as normative. Dinah is neither attractive nor delicate, which negates her ability to be considered feminine in a Western sense. However, she is also not “fragile” to look at, which insinuates that even though she is not beautiful by typical social standards, there is something alluring enough about her that, if only considered from the shoulders up, she might be deemed appropriately feminine and normative. She is accidently en vogue because her hair has “fashion’s wide shoulder-cape,” but that element is overshadowed by her stance and inability to stand fully erect, thus making Dinah an abject subject.

What Barnes’s interview with Dinah makes clear is that the abject aesthetic Dinah boasts does not equate to a decreased intellectual ability to understand social hierarchies and where she stands within (or, in her case, just outside of) such a structure. But, there is nothing demonstrable about Dinah’s qualities as sketched in the interview with Barnes that demonstrate any desire on Dinah’s part to be “normal.” We know that she looks “out of faraway eyes upon a life called civilized” and that she is a “bundle of unfathomable apprehensions” (“The Girl” 40). Dinah’s physical appearance and exotic roots thus render her incapable of civility or articulate thoughts because society controls how subjects like Dinah are viewed. That, however, is where Barnes’s writing challenges closely-kept falsehoods like this one. In fact, Barnes’s interview with Dinah works to demonstrate that even a socially abject and peripheral subject like Dinah has the
potential for deep intellectual capacity when given the time and space to exercise her thoughts without hundreds of eyes expecting a performance.

Despite Dinah’s singularity as the “only living captive of her race,” Barnes is able to draw from Dinah the humanity that exists within the freak façade that was cultivated for her and whose role she is required to perform in order to survive. Doing so demonstrates to the world that Dinah—and, by extension, other “freaks” like her—are both coherent and confident in their personal space and the worlds they have created for themselves. Barnes notes, “I found—for I had come to study her—that the largest and most splendidly satisfying thing in Dinah’s life is herself. She would rather stand well in her own estimation than upon a social footing” (“The Girl” 40). Based on this description, we know that Dinah was more than capable of intellectual depth, since she did not seek public acceptance so much as she knew that she relied on the public’s interest in her to earn a living. Dinah was aware that she was performing a role.

The performance extends through much of the interview. And, in following suit with her role as the uncivilized bushgirl, Dinah did not directly or immediately respond to Barnes’s question about her opinion of the United States. Instead, Dinah was quiet and timid—so much so that Barnes acknowledged Dinah’s efforts, proclaiming, “Her mind was a blank of well-arranged ignorance” (“The Girl” 41). Barnes knew well enough that Dinah was forcing Barnes to become part of her world, the world that existed behind the cage of the circus walls. To establish trust, Barnes engaged in “play” with Dinah inside the cage: “Having crawled after her for some twenty minutes, I sat up and argued. I said to myself: Now we will see of, after all, the advantages of civilization do not enable me to dominate this rather unique situation” (“The Girl” 41). At that point, perhaps not expecting too much from Dinah, Barnes asked Dinah once more about her reflections on the United States. Dinah responded with the following musings:
“Let me see”—she cupped her hand about her ear and dusted a piece of lint from her shoulders. (I freely interpret according to Professor Garner’s rules.) “The first thing that really attracted my attention was the meter upon the taxi that the professor hired to bring me here to the zoo. That thing climbed exactly three-and-a-fourth times faster than a chimpanzee, four times faster than an ordinary monkey, and six times faster than a gorilla. I hated to see anything get away from control so.” (“The Girl” 41)

Dinah’s fascination with the rapidity of taxi meter’s escalation might feel infantile on the surface, but the way that Dinah explains her curiosity about it is rather intellectual. She estimates the way the meter climbs to the way primates climb, since that is the identity to which she has been assigned. Furthermore, it displays a body of knowledge that she has that might be deemed irrelevant in normative society, though Dinah’s observations and understanding demonstrate that such knowledge was likely relevant in the world from which she has (supposedly) emerged for the entertainment of the masses. Thus knowing Barnes was there to interview her for a publication, Dinah had to be careful about the way she talked about the wonders of the United States because if she appeared to be outwardly intellectual, then she was no longer a modern marvel and singular example of a long-extinct species. Instead, she would just become a hairy woman with poor posture whose feelings about the prices of public transportation fall in line with those of the general public. While the average reader would likely not consider the way Dinah likens the high prices of transportation to the way monkeys climb trees as any proof of informed intellectual thought, Barnes understood the subtext of Dinah’s performative language to be an example of how something might be measured. Yet another description of New York provided by Dinah further concretizes her ability for intellectual depth: “‘I was quite grieved,’ she continued plaintively, ‘to observe that the sun has no chance in New York and that the moon
is only a past memory. I couldn’t make out whether it was daylight or electricity”” (“The Girl” 42). Yet again, Dinah’s discourse might initially be read as gibberish, but, in reality, Dinah is making a rather smart and complicated observation about how people are more dependent on what is manmade than what is natural—which can also be read as the way Dinah sees herself as an object of a social structure rather than a member of it. Why, then, if a subject like Dinah is so abject would Barnes be tasked with interviewing her? The hope, of course, was for the bushgirl to perform her role as if she were on stage, but Barnes removes the stage and enters Dinah’s world in order to better understand the subject of her writing. Barnes frees Dinah’s voice in this interview, which speaks to the example set forth by Zadel. In considering these examples, it becomes clear that an “uncivilized” bush girl like Dinah is likely more intellectually capable than those who sit in judgement of her.

Even with performing her role, though, there is something familiar about the bush girl, and Barnes extracts this likeness during the interview. We are told, “There is something terribly old about her, and yet nothing old at all. Her eyes alone will make you seem to remember something that has gone before” (“The Girl” 42). The eyes that first began as “faraway” now have some sense of resolution—the object of her glance is unattainable and will remain as such because whatever she seeks is out of place and out of time. Similarly, Dinah cannot reach her full capacity as a social subject because she is displaced and, therefore, detached. Even though there is a sense of isolation about Dinah, there is also a clear desire for human connection, as she willingly places her head upon Barnes’s lap and then spoils it by “gravely putting an orange peel upon her head” (“The Girl” 42). Dinah is the captive of both science and reason, and her abjection becomes most pronounced when she is on display: “She growled ominously when, lunging forward, [Engelholm, the Keeper] caught her by the scruff of the neck and paused in full
view of the crowd, wiping his forehead, holding her off like luggage from back home” (“The Girl” 42). Barnes’s documentation of the order of these events and the tone of the setting helps the reader to understand that most of Dinah’s response instincts are performative. Furthermore, Barnes’s journalistic style humanizes the once purely abject character by making her relatable to an “average” person. Despite this, Dinah remains a product of a brand that is meant to generate capital, and so she plays her role in order to survive.

“The Girl and the Gorilla” reinforces Barnes’s journalistic desire to study subjects whose existence was challenged or belittled because of their position, aesthetic, or status. Even though there is a clear sense of her curiosity in the interview, Barnes’s objective in meeting and spending time with Dinah was rather to gain an understanding of Dinah’s interpretation of the United States. Barnes was not interested in Dinah’s “backstory,” nor did she attempt to exoticize Dinah in any way. Instead, Barnes wanted to know how Dinah conceived of the world into which she was forced to be a commodity on display for the profit of her captors. The focus here is the construction of Dinah’s subjective world. In fact, Barnes was so invested in doing this that she went “down” to Dinah’s level, willingly entered her world, and spent time with her in order to establish a rapport and gain her trust. In doing this, Barnes makes Dinah’s subjective world the focus of study, even in the end where the abject and inhumane treatment of the poorly behaved Dinah leaves Engelholm, the Keeper at a loss for words.

Barnes was also interested in the positions socially recognized women held, both in profession and in politics. Among the interviews assembled in *Djuna Barnes Interviews*, we see an attention to including and exposing strong female presences whose perspectives were likely considered controversial in larger social circles. Interviews with American actress Lillian Russell (1861-1922) and American labor activist Mary Harris Jones, better known as “Mother Jones”
(1837-1930) are crucial to our reading of Barnes’s later fiction writing because they showcase Barnes’s ability to draw out the essence—even the agitation—of her interviewees. Such interviews provide us early impressions of the development of Barnes’s narrative style, since these interviews provided Barnes the space to actually sketch a profile of each subject. Women like Lillian Russell and Mother Jones were anomalies of their time because these were women who defined their environment, not women who were objects of their environment. As such, Barnes was sure to properly situate each woman in her respective space, not as a decoration of that space, but as the curator of her gallery.

On May 3, 1914, Barnes interviewed Lillian Russell, an American actress described by Barnes as “the American woman’s ideal and the American male’s sex symbol” (Interviews 48). Russell enjoyed fame as “the English Ballad Singer” and was best known for her performances in The Pirates of Penzance, The Pie Rats of Penn Yann, Patience, and The Sorcerer (Interviews 48). Though she was well-established in England, an attractive $20,000 salary brought her to New York, where she performed some of her greatest successes as an actress in The Princess Nicotine and The American Beauty. At the time of Russell’s interview with Barnes, Russell was making the transition from light opera to burlesque, though she was starting to show her age both in physical appearance and in the quality of her voice (Interviews 49). The daughter of Cynthia Leonard, the forward-thinking feminist and 1888 presidential candidate for the Equal Rights Party, Russell described herself as being “brought up on mother’s milk and suffrage” (Interviews 54). Russell was unique, the extension of a pillar for women’s rights, and a sucker for a good trinket.

Barnes’s approach to interviewing subjects avoids adding any kind of artificiality to what should be a natural conversation, thus Barnes never broke the silence of her setting. So, the
shared silence between Barnes and Russell prior to the interview gave Barnes the time to take in
the scene, describes the statuettes and trinkets about the apartment, and notice the distinctly
Eastern aesthetic Russell cultivated. Enamored by the mystique of Russell’s décor, Barnes aborts
her position on silence and begins the interview with a simple, yet critical question: “Do you
believe, Miss Russell, that surroundings affect us?” (Interviews 50). From this simple question
emerges a multi-faceted conversation that traverse a range of topics, not limited to the proper
preparation of sautéed mushroom and the actress’s feelings about the controversy at the Panama
Canal (Interviews 51-52). However, Barnes had an agenda; she wanted to know what the actress
believed was wrong with the world, what was “going to the dogs,” so to speak.

Having little to say about the current state of America at that time, Russell discloses that
she believed firmly in the power of women and their ability to stay focused and achieve
greatness. Despite Barnes’s probing, Russell’s position was direct and genuine: “with women in
the world how can things go to the dogs” (Interviews 55). Russell proclaims that a single fault
cannot be found in a woman because “they are splendid, they have such great ideals, even if they
are tied into knots by husbands; they have aspirations even if they have not as yet learned to walk
on the outer side of the street” (Interviews 55).75 It was likely surprising for readers to experience
such a human side of an actress, given her position on women’s rights and their agency. The
interview is entirely about Russell’s perspectives on the world and the space that women occupy
in it—and about odds and ends and dangling ideas here and there—, a space that truly allowed
Russell to be herself and voice her opinions on matters that were more important than her beauty

75 We can argue that this fresh perspective informed Barnes’s guiding principle in Ladies
Almanack regarding how a strong sisterhood among women can literally birth nearly any
possibility—even if it seems impossible.
regiment. In fact, Barnes notes at the end of the interview that Russell thanked her for “not 

having [asked] a single question about the way [she] preserve[d] [her] good looks” (Interviews 55). Russell, it seems, was grateful to be interviewed as a human and not as her artificial public persona.

To go from a movie star to a grassroots activist and treat each interviewee with the same 

regard further evidences Barnes’s dedication to paying homage to the socially marginalized/ 

underappreciated. When Barnes interviewed Mother Jones on February 7, 1915, she was 

working as a reporter for The Daily Eagle. Considered the nineteenth century’s most famous 

female labor activist, Mother Jones was labeled “the most dangerous woman in America” 

because of her “hell-raiser” personality and passion for laborer’s rights (Michaels n.p.). Known 

for her unfiltered wit, all-black attire, and audacity, Mother Jones lived a life of struggle and 

tragedy, having lost her husband and four sons to the yellow fever epidemic in 1867 and then 

losing her home and worldly possessions in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 (Michaels n.p.).76 As 

scholar Debra Michaels notes, “Jones focused on the rising number of working poor during 

industrialization, especially as wages shrunk, hours increased, and workers had no insurance for 

unemployment, healthcare or old age” (n.p.). Mother Jones was, without question, a subject 

toward whom Barnes was drawn because of the tragedy and struggle she had endured and the 

manner in which she created a name for herself in advocating for others. For Mother Jones, “rain 

never means green grass . . . it always means wet babies and pneumonia” (Interviews 101). An 

outspoken, fearless woman like Mother Jones certainly did not fit the profile for “proper”

76 Michaels writes, “Jones resumed sewing but lost everything she owned in the Great Chicago 

Fire of 1871. She found solace at Knights of Labor meetings, and in 1877, took up the cause of 

the working people” (n.p.).
ladylike mannerisms or behavior, and such a unique and powerful figure deserved her due recognition in Barnes’s eyes.

Barnes’s interview with Mother Jones, like her interviews with Lillian Russell and Dinah, begins with a clear description of the scene. We know that the interview took place at the Union Square Hotel in Manhattan. We know that the room was sparsely furnished and that the bed, the couch, and the few chairs that decorated the humble space were Mother Jones’s “social equipment” (*Interviews* 97). We also know that Mother Jones, at the time of the interview, was 82 years old, and that she wore her age in her movement and in her style. Barnes writes, “I asked her what had started her in this work that she had taken as her life task. It was an unfortunate remark” (*Interviews* 97). First, Barnes notes Mother Jones’s physical response: “She arose abruptly to her feet, she swept her arms wide in a passionate gesture. It was the universal gesture of the powerful person, it proclaimed disgust and contempt” (*Interviews* 97). Mother Jones’s initial response to the rather open-ended question was rooted in sarcasm and repulsion: “And you ask me that? . . . That is the question that forty million other fools before you have asked” (*Interviews* 97). As Mother Jones proceeds with talking in abstractions about the way lightning and thunder start and how the world starts as a somewhat sarcastic response to the question posed by Barnes, she eventually leads herself toward providing Barnes with meaningful, truthful, and raw explanations relative to why she was such a strong advocate for laborers.

What Mother Jones eventually gets to is the fact that any reporter can ask any person the why’-s and how’-s of the interviewee’s roots and motivation toward a cause. What those interviewers will never understand, though, according to Mother Jones, is that there is no good answer for these questions about motivation birthed in struggle, trauma, and marginalization. As Mother Jones put it to Barnes, “We can tell you and you can listen, but no tragedy was ever
comprehended that went from the mouth to the ear. It has to pass from the eye to the soul” (Interviews 98). Mother Jones describes her life’s journey as one that forced her to emerge from the “inside of the world . . . [from] the underside of the watch” (Interviews 98). Her low-status as an Irish immigrant in America coupled with her gendered status as a woman colored Mother Jones as a peripheral subject whose voice was not important enough to be heard. Rather than joining the suffragette movement, she was instead “trying to locate the left side of the world where the heart is supposed to be,” believing that wherever suffrage existed so too did corruption and hypocrisy (Interviews 99). Similar to Barnes, Mother Jones was also invested in uncovering and exposing humanity. In her interview, she says, “You have to associate with more than human beings to be a civilian. You have to go through your gutter and your cesspool” (Interviews 100). Residing in these gutters and cesspools were men who pretended to be good, Christian men that bled money from the working man and stood upon their dead bodies for a better view of the capitalist kingdoms they have created on the backs of laborers.

In many ways, Mother Jones was a threat to industrialist, capitalist America. Her unrelenting drive to expose crime and poor labor practices was always evident in her impulsivity—the “bog temperament” that did not inhibit Mother Jones from saying whatever came to her mind while she was feeling it (Interviews 104). She was a common woman, birthed from a common world, but she made her voice heard despite the obstacles that both her gender and her life’s circumstances had afforded her. Mother Jones had no prominence or prestige, but she died one of the most famous women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries regardless.

While there is nothing outright “freakish” about Lillian Russell or Mother Jones, each woman was an anomaly in her own right. Lillian Russell came from a feminist lineage that
instilled in her the belief that women were the fabric that held humanity together. Of course, this was not a popularly-held opinion in the early 20th century, so in this way Russell was an oddity. In the case of Mother Jones, we are also dealing with a subject who, when aligned with the sideshow acts of the circus, would not necessarily be considered a freak. However, Mother Jones’s dedication to labor equity and her fight for working families made her a force with which to be reckoned as hers was a presence that demanded attention, respect, and answers. This was not common for the typical early-20th century woman, so, yet again, we see that Barnes was focused on subjects who were atypical but whose voices needed to be heard. It was such voices that worked to enact change, and so they had to be showcased on the stage that Barnes built for them. On the other hand, we have a marginalized subject like Dinah who, despite her primitive practices and less-than-cosmopolitan aesthetic, is treated equally human as her counterparts Mother Jones and Lillian Russell. Common among these interviews is not only the fact that the interviewees are female subjects, but, more importantly, that their voices regarding the current state of the United States was being documented and heard. Each interview engaged the subject in a way that was unfamiliar to them because each interviewee was used to being asked about something less serious than her opinion about suffrage, war, and capitalism. So, while female subjects like Lillian Russell, Mother Jones, and Dinah the bushgirl might not outwardly share a common thread, their individual styles, beliefs, and performances unite them in making them some version of “the Other” upon whom society gazes. Furthermore, Barnes unites these women in matters of public interest, social justice, and governmental reform. For Barnes, every subject was a human subject, and every human subject deserved the opportunity to be heard and seen in their own subjective worlds—regardless of their preconceived social positions.
Two of Djuna Barnes’s works that offer deeper insight into the peripheral worlds of marginalized and othered subjects are *The Book of Repulsive Women* and *Ladies Almanack* (1928). Many of the poems featured in Djuna Barnes’s collection, *The Book of Repulsive Women and other poems* were first released as a chap book series by Guido Bruno in Greenwich Village in 1915. These poems concretized her literary image as an “oddity within modernism,” often attributed to the “old genres and styles” within her writing (Hardie 122). The collection itself features a series of poems and sketches of women of the time, in their domestic roles as mothers and wives or in more taboo roles as prostitutes and cabaret dancers. Interestingly, Barnes was not in favor of plans for it to be republished because she strongly believed that “nothing looks the same as it used to,” so republishing the text after nearly 3 decades felt like a misrepresentation of the history it was documenting (Hardie 119-120). When word of republication reached Barnes, she threatened Oscar Baron, the new publisher, saying, “I categorically forbid you to make such publication . . . [and] if you proceed with such publication it will be at your own risk and peril (Hardie 119). What is interesting about Barnes’s negative response to republication and Baron’s insistence to republish is the competing rationales of the two. Barnes was afraid that the themes of the text had not aged well or rationally over 30+ years, and Baron was insistent that this collection, though “‘dated’ by virtue of such an act, [is that] which precisely isolates and establishes the book’s status as an ‘object’ or ‘piece of writing’ to be circulated among fetishist-connoisseurs; in this case, such an identification is particularly marked given the text’s status as a *livre composé*” (Hardie 120). The republication of *The Book of Repulsive Women* later became part of Baron’s “collection of bibliophile curiosities” (Hardie 120).
The concept of repulsion as a subject of human interest writing can certainly be read as curious, and, upon first reading, the style and discourse feel rather brash and hard-hitting. Of course, that is the point. Barnes’s personal history and public displays were anything but typical, and so one must wonder what could possibly “repulse” someone so progressive and sage? It is, after all, a book of repulsive women, not men. So, the title itself leaves us with a bit of a puzzle before we even enter the discourse. A rather strong interpretation of how we should conceive of the term “repulsive” in relation to Barnes’s work is provided by Melissa Jane Hardie who says,

“Repulsion figures the trope as “turn” or repulsion, but also figures the “repulsive” women as corporeal representatives in the text of a troping that is also a repulsion or anti-troping. In this sense the effect of repulsive woman is in dialectical relationship to the function of the figure of tropism, as a form of inclination or attraction. They both participate in, and are differentiated from, a reading of the trope that relies upon the phallus as transcendental signified, the subject of inclination or desire. The “repulsive” women are turned, but also turn away, their bodies acting as both the ground of representation and as a apotropaic, a “turn off,” guarding against the very figurative strategies through which they are described. Repulsive women also figure the unpredictability of the rhyme, as it works to discern resemblance or attraction or similarity between words, proposing an attracting or resemblance between them, whilst instituting their semantic, if not phonetic difference.” (123)

So, our female subjects in *The Book of Repulsive Women* do not repulse so much as they resist. Though they are understood in relation to “the phallus as is transcendental signified,” they also refute that association by taking control of their own bodies and desires. A similar reclamation of the body is seen in *The Ladies Almanack*, as the main character, Dame Musset, navigates a
celestial world where she fails to deliver gender performance because she, in her repulsion, “turns off” and guards against the pressure to be what society expects.

_The Ladies Almanack_ (1928) is a satirical narrative that documents the different love interests, entanglements, disruptions, and anomalies of the lesbian expatriate community in Paris, using the months of the year as representational feminine subjects. The Almanack is written in “mock Elizabethan English” and was only sold to close friends at the time of publication (mostly those who are being mocked within the text), since its content was geared toward a very specific audience. While the Almanack was not necessarily considered one of Barnes’s stronger works at the time of publication, it has since become a cult classic in the queer literary canon (Loncraine “Introduction” x). Mary Lynn Broe credits Susan Lanser with the clearest reading of _Almanack_, as the text itself is a bit jarring at certain points. Broe contends that even such an “affirmative reading” as Lanser’s is dependent on that which is not named. The book itself takes on the structural elements of the _Farmer’s Almanac_ (originally published in 1818), but, instead of focusing on a compendium of information for a fruitful crop year, Barnes’s Almanack focuses on how the months of the calendar year—as chaperoned by the sun and the moon—provide a space for women to oversee their own destinies without the assistance of or need for men. _Almanack_

77 I use the phrase “representational feminine subjects” because _Ladies Almanack_ achieves what Judith Butler will later define as representational politics in her seminal text, _Gender Trouble_. Butler says, “the juridical formation of language and politics that represents women as ‘the subject’ of feminism is itself a discursive formation and effect of a given version of representational politics” Butler’s _Gender Trouble_ is invested in drawing a firm line between sex and gender in order to demonstrate that gender is nothing more than a social performance of expected and ascribed norms. Barnes achieves in 1928 what Butler discusses more than 60 years later—that, for society and culture to advance in any kind of significant or meaningful way, we must drastically alter our otherwise pedestrian understanding of what “should” constitute a gendered human identity, and, instead, culturally modify our society to be more inclusive and less focused on labeling people.
can thus be read contra-masculine necessity since the subjects who comprise the work are involved in an all-feminine birth and lesbian experience.

In fact, much of what we encounter in the pages of Ladies Almanack carries over to Barnes’s later work with regard to non-normative sexual subjects and the social and sexual positions and expectations of women. There is a critique of the expectations of the modern woman in the description provided for each month, and these critiques offer a destabilized female subject to counter the normative expectation of the then “modern woman” as it was imposed upon them by society. The cover art is important, too, as we see the objects attached to people who are considered essential, everyday people. Before the writing even begins, then, Barnes is already calling attention to the way that images of social subjects are manifestations of socially-inflicted norms that do not necessarily represent their essence. There are six figures on the cover of this work, all of which are accompanied by a slogan, so to speak: “The Cook Her Recipes,” “The Priest His Breviary,” “The Doctor His Physic,” “The Lion His Roar,” “The Bride Her Fears.” Of course, there is the most prominent figure on display to consider, and the only without a slogan or title to accompany her, but we can assumingly insert, “The Lady Her Almanack.” Beneath our central figure reads, “The Book All Ladies Should Carry,” as if to suggest that any female subject not in possession of this almanac—this guide to being a lady—is not entitled to be identified as a lady.

In this case, we are urged to judge the book by its cover—representation and the symbolism attendant to that representation set up the balance for the gendered figures presented to the reader. There are three male subjects and three female subjects. The male subjects are defined in relation to orders of nature (the lion), science (the doctor), and faith (the priest). Female subjects are relegated to entirely domesticated roles as cook, bride, and lady; thus, they
are not represented as having any power, strength, or influence outside their homes. Reduced to: cook, bride, lady. What is the cook without her recipes? They are her only tool, her only form of representation. Without her recipes, the cook has no direction and, therefore, cannot produce anything of substance. Similarly, we can also ask, what is a bride without her fears? Fears define the bride, indicating that a woman is both unable to make critical decisions and, possibly, cannot find peace without the solace of a man. A fearless bride, after all, would be confident and firm in her decisions and in anticipating her nuptials. Barnes’s reading of the female experience, though, leaves the bride firmly tethered to her fears because fears are what keep women in place and acquiescent to the desires of their male counterparts, thereby leaving men in a more concretized position of power. It is these same fears that make women vulnerable to the overpowering, masculine roar of the lion, the medical gaze of the doctor, and the judgement of the priest. The doctor and his physic (a nod to Chaucer’s Doctor of Physic) should be capable of allaying such anxieties for a fearful bride, but women of the time were likely to be considered hysterical if they expressed fear or apprehension about getting married, so confessing such feelings could potentially become a liability. The sheer presence of the priest and his breviary is a reminder that only men are able to hold the highest offices of power within the church, therefore leaving women subject to patriarchal structures even within faith. Standing at the center of these subjects is a single female figure who carries her Almanack with her dutifully, a satirical critique, no doubt, on the social expectations for proper women of the time.

*Ladies Almanack* is part of Barnes’s peripheral, unnatural world because it supports the idea that “All women should learn to love women,” therefore making it a female-centric work that marginalizes the male presence as one that is not only distracting, but, furthermore, troublesome and unnecessary. It further challenges the preconceived notion of what a lady
should be by directly talking about the conquest, pleasure, and pain of sex for women. Barnes refuted the social codes that dictated that “ladies” do not speak of or desire sex. Woman, as a sexual being, thirsts for sex and that insatiable thirst is only ever fully quenched by the companionship of a woman. The foreword to the Almanack mightily proclaims, “What a World it is for a Girl indeed, be she ever so well abridged and cool of Mind and preserved of Intention, the Instincts are, nevertheless, brought to such a yelping Pitch and so undo her, that she runs hither and tither seeking some Simple or Unguent which shall allay her Pain!” (LA 6). “Simple” and “Unguent” complement each other in so far as they are both antiquated terms that refer to medicinal intervention by either a gathering of herbs or the use of a greasy ointment for lubrication, respectively. Barnes is immediately attending to the fact that, regardless of what society teaches women in terms of being considered a prudent, chaste “lady,” those female subjects still have “Instincts” that cannot be quieted; instead, they rise to a “yelping Pitch” whose agency is strong enough to literally “undo her” to the point where she needs lubrication. As we will see, sex as a satiation of desire, sex as an act of power, sex as punishable, and sex as being at the mercy of gender are all concepts that present themselves in this work.

Barnes begins *Ladies Almanack* with a focus on the tale of Evangeline Musset, the girl who was supposed to be a boy, which immediately invokes a sideshow pitch, a kind of freakshow narrative of unique design, that urges readers to unravel this most unusual tale.78 Barnes presents readers with a unique problem in terms of Dame Musset. Though we know she is supposed to be a boy and is clearly better suited to that gender identity, the fact that she has been deemed a girl by medical professionals necessitates her participation in and performance of

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78 We might say Musset’s story feels as if it is the inversion of Matthew O’Connor’s story as she felt she was meant to be a boy and he felt more comfortable in the dressings of a woman.
that gender role. Since she does not abide by these socially-enforced norms, she becomes twice-
othered freak: a social freak and a freak of gender. Musset,

had been developed in the Womb of her most gentle Mother to be a Boy, when therefore,
she came forth an Inch or so less than this, she paid no Heed or Error, but donning a Vest
of superb Blister and Tooling, a Belcher for tippet and a pair of hip-boots with a scarlet
channel (for it was a most wet wading) she took her Whip in hand, calling her Pups about
her, and so set out upon the Road of Destiny, until such time as they should grow to be
Hounds of a Blood, and Pointers with a certainty in the Butt of their Tails; waiting
patiently beneath the Cypresses for this Purpose, and under the Boughs of the aloe tree,
composing, as she did so, Madrigals to all sweet and ramping things. (LA 7-8)

To “come forth an Inch or so less” than manhood leaves Evangeline at the mercy of medicine to
determine her fate. Once we enter March, Dame Musset discusses life’s circumstances and
where she currently finds herself in terms of sexual and gendered identity. With Masie Tuck-
and-Frill and Lady Buck-and-Balk as her audience, Dame Musset proclaims, “‘When I wish to
contemplate the highest Pitch to which I rony has climbed, and when I really desire to wallow in
impersonal Tragedy . . . I think of that day, forty years ago, when I, a Child of ten, was
deflowered by the Hand of a Surgeon!’” (LA 24). Barnes is addressing the social-sexual issue
with regard to intersex subjects and the people who get to determine which gender will be
assigned to the subject. As Butler notes, “gender is not always constituted coherently or
consistently . . . and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional
modalities of discursively constituted identities” any “person” can be “pregendered” according to
their “paraphernalia” (GT 6). In the case of Dame Musset, her “pregendered” subjectivity is the

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result of her “paraphernalia,” despite how overwhelmingly obvious it is that she identifies more clearly with a masculine subjectivity than a feminine one.

The dialogue documented between Dame Musset and her father is indicative of Butler’s theory regarding the issue of gender assumption and representational politics, since both people understand that Dame Musset is not suited to be a “lady.” The narrative implies that Musset’s father was aware that his “daughter” was not typical, as she did not abide by the codes that ladies should follow, but because she is biologically female and recognized as such, she is expected to perform that gender adequately and convincingly. As a subject in her family, Evangeline is a freak because she does not possess any of the desire to enter into a social landscape and be promoted as a debutante available for marriage. Instead, she sloppily engages with Duchess Clitoressa and is then ostracized and passively vilified by the attendees. We understand that Evangeline Musset neither saw herself as a woman nor was she seen as a lady by those around her. Her father feared, in fact, that Evangeline would be “one of those who is spoken to out of Generosity, which . . . would, by no Road, lead her to the altar” (LA 8). Evangeline’s father, here, represents not only the patriarchal power of the modern moment, but moreover, acts as the representative of normativity who enforces social expectations upon his daughter. After her failed attempt at social integration in high society, Evangeline’s father attempts to intervene:

‘Daughter, daughter, I perceive in you most fatherly Sentiments. What am I to do?’ And she answered him High enough, ‘Thou, good Governor, wast expecting a Son when you lay atop of your Choosing, why then be so mortal wounded when you perceive that you have your Wish? Am I not doing after your very Desire, and is it not the more commendable, seeing that I do it without the Tools for the Trade, and yet nothing complain?’ (LA 8)
Here, Evangeline responds to her father’s bewilderment about what to do in the case of her uncertain, atypical, non-normative subjectivity. Both father and child are aware that Evangeline is not “normal,” as Evangeline’s father bluntly tells her that he perceives “most fatherly Sentiments” in her, which is to say that he bonds with her in a way more suitable for a son than for a daughter. When he asks what he is to do about the predicament of knowing Evangeline is better suited as a boy, but has only ever been addressed, treated, and introduced as female in society, Evangeline’s response does not attempt to illicit pity or pathos, but instead states the facts—both her father and she knows that she was supposed to be a boy. The trouble that they are both having is that neither can celebrate Evangeline’s more masculine accomplishments and abilities because she does not have the correct “Tools for the Trade.” It all comes down to the tools with which one is associated, just as the cover art suggests. So, it is not surprising that Barnes chose the end the preface to the Almanack with the following:

Thus begins this Almanack, which all Ladies should carry about with them, as the Priest his Breviary, as the Cook his recipes, as the Doctor his Physic, as the Bride her Fears,

and as the Lion

his Roar! (LA 9).

This is interesting in the sense that the reader can interpret Dame Musset’s circumstances in from two perspectives. On the one hand, she should be able to present and to live as a man, should she choose. On the other hand, she should also be able to live as a non-normative female. The language afforded to us by Barnes is deliberately ambiguous because, like Dame Musset, we are uncertain of which way to go. As I see it, though, Musset can never be anything other than
female because of the “Tools” with which she is equipped; she thus does not possess the correct object to validate her as a masculine subject and, similarly, does not possess the proper qualities, abilities, or interests to be recognized as a female subject in society. This leaves Musset in a middle ground whereby she oscillates between the genders, as she can never be identified comfortably as either. She becomes a freak of her own nature in this way. Identity for Musset is thus constituted in a way that is meant to “accomplish whatever aims are in view,” since her “agreed-upon identity” is being utilized to dissolve the personhood with which she actually identifies ($GT$ 21-22).

In January, we are introduced to Patience Scalpel, whose perspective on procreation runs parallel to Dame Musset’s stance on performing a gender—it should be up to the individual subject whether one procreates and whether one chooses to act the role of woman. From Patience Scalpel, we learn that girls are complicated and not easily understood through standard measuring techniques. The narrator writes,

‘Thus her Voice was heard throughout the Year, as cutting in its Derision as a surgical Instrument, nor did she use it to come to other than a Day and yet another Day in which she said, ‘I have tried all means, Mathematical, Poetical, Statistical and Reasonable, to come to the Core of this Distemper, known as Girls! Girls! And can nowhere find where a Woman got the Account that makes her such a deft Worker at the Single Beatitude. Who gave her the Directions for it, the necessary Computation and Turpitude? Where, and in what dark Chamber was the Tree so cut of Life, that the Branch turned to the Branch, and made the Cuttings a Garden of Ecstasy?’ ($LA$ 12).

Here, we get the notion that Patience Scalpel applied every measure of learning to understand the condition of womanhood. Patience Scalpel comes to the sobering reality that women, in societal
terms, are sites of ecstasy and procreation. It is at this point that Patience Scalpel begins to think about the different “trouble” that arises from physical pleasure. If women “came to enough trouble by lying abed with the Father of their Children,” Patience Scalpel then wonders “What then in this good Year of our Lord has paired them like to like, with never a beard between them,” thus weighing out the possibilities for moral and social complications based on sexual desire (LA 12). After a quick, musing pause, Patience Scalpel boldly declares, “Sluts! . . . Are good Mothers to supply them with Luxuries in the next Generation; for they themselves will have no Shes, unless some Her puts them forth!” (LA 13). It is at this point of realization that Patience Scalpel declares that she will not be among the “Shes” to produce the “Hers” for the next generation, which is meant to invoke a kind of satirical fear—if women start to enter sexual and committed relationships with each other, then there can never be a “next generation”; instead, we would be left with a world of lesbian lovers, which, even under the most nontraditional circumstances, is purely implausible.

We might argue that is the genius of this rather dense work by Barnes. She is taking an irrational social fear—same sex love as preventing the possibility of a “next generation” to exist—and mocking it. In this case, the freaks and the Others are not the women who are involved in lesbian relationships. The freaks, instead, are those who represent the overwhelming social forces that dictate and demand heteronormativity. There is nothing more normal or natural about heterosexuality than there is about homosexuality. Barnes knew that nearly a century ago, and Ladies Almanack consistently focuses on this idea to elucidate the fact that women who loved women were not freaks and did not deserve to be socially ostracized or made to feel pressured into a life that was unfitting to them. By taking the image and story of the lesbian experience and carrying it through the months of the year, Barnes is making it clear that there is
no “right” season for love—that every season is a time for a celebration of love, regardless of who constitutes the couple.

March provides us with a strong exemplification of this ideology, since this is the month where Barnes begins to enter a more politically-driven discourse relative to the concept of equality for same-sex couples. Set amid the backdrop of what outwardly feels like Victorian sensibility and morals, we are surprised by the requests of the Dames Lady Buck-and-Balk and Tilly-Tweed-In-Blood to Dame Musset. As they sit down to tea, the Dames pose the following series of inquiries and rationales to Dame Musset:

‘Just because woman falls, in this Age, to Woman, does that mean that we are not to recognize Morals? What has England done to Legalize these Passions? Nothing! Should she not be brought to Task, that never once through her gloomy Weather have two dear Doves been seen approaching in their bridal Laces, to pace, in stately Splendor up the Altar Aisle, there to be United in Similarity, under mutual Vows of Loving, Honouring, and Obeying, while the One and the Other fumble in that nice Temerity, for the equal gold Bands shall make one a Wife, and the other a Bride?’ (LA 19)

These Dames ask Dame Musset the important question of lesbian visibility, validity, and rights. Through an authorial proxy like Dame Musset, Barnes becomes an authority on the subject matter as she becomes the very figure to whom others flock to ask questions and seek trusted counsel. March essentially argues that women who enter into valid relationships with each other should be protected by the powers of the law the same way any heterosexual couple would. Of course, in 1928, this was an extremely liberal and unconventional position to take, and Barnes was at the fore of such a movement. Thus, the female characters that color the pages of this Almanack are considered to be freaks in their own right, since they either actively refute the
social pressure to enter into binding heterosexual relationships or are extremely vocal about their 
support for women who want to freely express their love and partnership with other women. 
Such personages would never be represented—much less celebrated—in typical literature of the 
time, so looking at the ladies of Ladies Almanack as the freaks who began the trend of bringing 
attention to those on the periphery is crucial.

When the Zodiac enters the latter portion of March, we are informed that we are to be 
regaled with a tale about “the part about Heaven that has never been told,” which is preambled 
by Dame Musset’s explanation of how her gender was chosen for her—and incorrectly at that—
by the Hands of a Surgeon years earlier (LA 24). Those present for Dame Musset’s speech are 
appalled by her tale; one of them, named Tilly, offers to seek personal revenge on those who 
wronged Dame Musset by complicating her identity. Without qualm, Dame Musset replies that 
she is her own revenge, thus establishing that by representing the very embodiment of the other, 
she is subverting and refuting what was arranged as her truth years earlier at the hands of 
medicine. That the story of the choir of angels runs parallel to this tale is important. As it is 
narrated, the choir of angels produces a single egg. The Zodiac tells us all the angels banded 
together astrologically to create this child—first referred to as “one,” then quickly identified as 
“the first Woman to be born with a Difference” (LA 26). That Difference is that this woman was 
birthed from a sea of Shes, as Patience Scalpel would say, and, in their communal efforts 
produced the “Her” that seemed impossible to create without man. The angels now have the 
“Mother look” because they created a woman without the presence or biological assistance of 
man. The idea here is that man should not have the divine right to be dominant, nor should he 
decide who is male or female. So, following the story of Dame Musset’s violation, the angels 
gathered to produce a female child to honor Dame Musset’s struggle and to prove that women’s
love and women’s bodies are capable of so much more than any man or modern medicine could begin to discern. To take such a position clearly places Barnes outside the realm of “typical” literary tropes, as Barnes’s celebration of the other in Ladies Almanac gives voice to those women of the time who were not worthy of carrying this Almanack because they were not recognized as female or did not perform their ascribed gender role well enough to be considered part of the general population. Instead of attempting to conform, these ladies created their own journey, thus stepping outside the bounds even of the periphery and into freakdom. Once we get to May, the month of the Virgin Mother, we witness several important conversations between Dame Musset and the other women who make up her circle. Dame Musset is focused on the way lesbians conduct themselves in different part of the world and wants to expose those differences as a means of celebration.\footnote{Dame Musset proclaims, “I have learned on the Bodies of all Women, all Customs, and from their Minds have all Nations given up their Secrets. I know that the Orientals are cold to the Waist, and from there flame with a mighty and quick crackling Fire. I have learned that Anglo Saxons thaw slowly but that they thaw from Head to Hell, and so it is with their Minds. The Asiatic is warm and willing, and goes out like a Firecracker; the Northerner is cool and cautious, but burns and burns until . . . you see that Candle lit in you in youth, burning about your Bier in Death. It is time now that I find me a Night-Light, and just what Fusion of Bloods it be, I have not as yet determined, but—I think I have found it” (LA 35-36).}

**Limits and Liminality: Peripheral Subjects and Freaks in Nightwood**

From Long Island to Coney Island to celestial spaces that provide freedom for women to appreciate and love each other, Djuna Barnes had an affinity for spaces with potential for expansion. No niche was left without exploration, since within these crevices were usually the most interesting, ordinary people talking about and acting upon their desires. Yes, such literary spaces were spaces that Barnes craved, and, in “Lament for the Left Bank” (1941), in typical
Barnesian style, she sketches the scene of a typical Parisian setting: a café. The “cheap, badly pressed cotton napkin” with the “blood-red of yesterday’s burgundy” leaves its mark on Barnes’s best cloak the same way the sounds of “the sad, angry popping of taxi horns, [and] the gracious flowing of language chattered by clerks off for two hours of food and argument” leaves its mark on both her writing style and her general outlook on communication and public receipt (“Lament” 112). And there is something intoxicating about this because the ordinariness of sexual exploration and the noise of human interactions and emotions go largely unnoticed in public—that is the secret of French living: keep it all on the streets. Barnes writes,

And that is the real secret, the secret of the great and fallen country: the open hospitality of the street. Four walls make an argument, a tragedy; the street makes it only a momentary trouble. Here you can come and go. If you meet friends and disagree, you pay your bill and leave; if you “get on,” you go from there to harmony. At a café you can knit up the raveled sleeve of time, or be as bitter as you like and owe it only to yourself. No house can claim so much. The house holds bitterness, the street does not. (“Lament” 113)

It feels as if much of Barnes’s earlier writing was preparing itself for the arrival of *Nightwood* (1936), since the work that preceded it focused both on private and public perception of peripheral subjects and central figures in society. *Nightwood* provides a quick, insulated narrative to begin, but then explodes into a series of conversations that happen largely in the streets. In fact, the only conversations that happen within the space of “four walls” are confessional almost to the point of receiving absolution from sin.

Contained within the pages of *Nightwood* are the stories, sketches, and trials of subjects who operate on the fringe of normative society. We are provided subjects whose degrees of otherness are slowly revealed by other characters within the novel, even if they appear to
integrate well into heteronormative society and abide by its expectations. Thus, the novel itself operates as a kind of gradual outing whereby each subject interacts with another subject, and in doing so, reveals something about that subject that would not be apparent in the world of the “day.” Barnes’s focus on such subjects is correlative to much of the work that precedes this, as subjects in her short stories, interviews, and poems are often considered outsiders, pariahs, and freaks. We can thus see then how, “the motif of the sideshow freak emerged from [Barnes’s] early work and found its way into Nightwood” (Levine 27). The novel exposes the compulsory need to perform a normative role in order to survive, but pays closer attention to the freedom that one achieves apart from the performance of normativity. Perhaps most importantly, Nightwood makes clear that the “remarkable” or the “uncanny,” or even “taboo” is really rather unremarkable. There is nothing different about homosexuals, transvestites, or sideshow performers in relation to otherwise “normal” subjects in Nightwood—especially when it comes to relationships and emotional responses.

Nightwood celebrates the world of the circus and the anomalistic subjects exploited by the marketplace of the circus. In assembling a most complicated and intertwined network of freaks, others, and anomalies, Djuna Barnes creates an artistic space in Nightwood to which issues of personhood, sex, and gender from earlier works are reintroduced and find some form of explanation or resolution. We have already seen how Barnes’s journalism and short stories showcase the other, the freak, and the anomaly. By the time Barnes writes Nightwood, she is not only addressing niches of non-normative social subjects and behavior, but, more importantly, is resolving the problems from earlier work where such subjects were left without closure, still exposed, and without validation. Barnes achieves this through a nuanced attention to crafting each character’s backstory—or, lack thereof—so that we feel as if we have a full history of the
characters, even those without any history at all. All central characters are connected through the world of the circus, and the character sketches of Guido and Felix Volkbein, Dr. Matthew O’Connor, and Robin Vote help to illustrate the complexities of different social, sexual, and relational issues that traverse geography, anatomy, and family lineage.

From the start of the novel, Barnes’s character sketches of central and peripheral characters immediately establish a world in which identity is largely constructed for one self, and the construction of that identity is based on desire, the ability to deceive, and a subject’s willingness to perform multiple roles in order to remain visible. What unites the subjects in Nightwood is their self-awareness and their social awareness; they know who to be and when to be those versions of themselves. And when there is no concrete history for a character to build upon naturally, Barnes models how any person can simply create their own reality. Guido Volkbein, a Jew of Italian descent who is detached, isolated, and without a concrete history, is the subject whose story we first hear. Though we know he and his reluctant wife Hedvig conceive their son Felix before Guido dies, Guido still dies childless. An outcast, “Guido had lived as all Jews do, who, cut off from their people by accident or choice, find that they must inhabit a world whose constituents, being alien, force the mind to succumb to an imaginary populace” (NW 5). There was a gap in Guido’s life, and he attempted to fill that void with what is described by the narrator as the “saddest and most futile gesture of all . . . his pretense to a barony” (NW 5). Knowing that his title and beliefs were fraudulent, Guido assembles materials to help validate his position and blood, numbered among which were two canvasses of “intrepid and ancient actors” that bore a slim likeness to Guido. As we learn, Guido found these canvasses “in some forgotten and dusty corner and had purchased them when he had been sure that he would need an alibi for the blood” (NW 9-10). Thus, Guido and Hedvig’s son Felix enters the
world with little else but purchased family heirlooms and false Baronhood. Like his deceased
father, Felix is detached, isolated, and on the periphery of “normal” society, so he continues to
construct the identity for which Guido had laid the foundation. *Nightwood* opens with a story that
pretends to care about family history and lineage, only to jettison it to arrive at a present-tense
story about a handful of characters rambling around two cities, talking, numbered among whom
is Felix.

Felix Volkbein’s story then truly begins the discussion of what it means to create an
identity and, by holding true to self-constructed “facts,” is recognized as having a valid social
title, despite the fact that he is an imposter. We know that “Felix called himself Baron Volkbein,
as his father had done before him,” so the artificiality of the title carries over, unbeknownst to
Felix who inherits his father’s lie. While there is no record to corroborate the claim, there is also
no record to refute it. Therefore, the Volkbein blood is the blood of the Barons. Such
construction of a singular world is common in a modernist novel, since it allows the narrative to
form around specific spaces as opposed to objective, macrocosmic spaces. From Michael
Levenson’s *Modernism*, we learn that, “Modernity remains haunted both by a search for novelty
and by the recollection of precursors. This double sense creates an abiding instability, a sense of
modernity as inescapable but undecidable” (2). Thus, in sketching the Volkbein men, Barnes
achieves a distinctly modernist style since these characters rely on a past that is non-existent in
order to create a future based on novelty that is largely unstable because it is insupportable.
Levenson also talks about the way modernism is a type of rupture in the literary canon because it
“pierced the complacency of modern life” and worked to unite what was “separate, feeble and
active” (2). In the case of the Volkbein men, they are entirely separated from any form of
identity because of their lack of family history. Guido dies before Felix is born, and Hedvig dies
shortly thereafter, leaving Felix without a source to explain his lineage. Felix, and characters like Felix in the novel, are “Set against a society organized around comfort and respectability, appetite and nostalgia,” so it is only natural for outcasts to have some curiosity (even if it is not a true desire) to understand—and perhaps even sporadically adapt to—a normative, comfortable world (Levenson 3). Thus, *Nightwood* achieves the status of “true art [that] will violently recover something ancient that has been forgotten, even as it creates something new that has never been anticipated” (Levenson 3). In the case of Felix Volkbein, his involvement with circus culture is the “thing” that stands in opposition to the balance, organization, and comfort associated with a stable society. The ancient “thing” that is recovered and becomes something new is Felix’s marriage to and procreation with Robin Vote, as it is reminiscent of his father’s relationship with Hedvig, though Robin’s acerbic and sociopathic personality are a mutation of Hedvig’s that could not have been anticipated.

Since Felix lived such a detached existence, the appeal of that which was unattainable was attractive to him. So, as it is told, “Felix had insinuated himself into the pageantry of the circus and the theatre” early in his life (*NW* 13). These spaces “linked his emotions to the higher and unattainable pageantry of kings and queens,” which, of course, was attractive to him, given his belief that his was the blood of a Baron (*NW* 13). The performers who befriended Felix shared a similar trait to him: they created titles of their own to be appealing. In fact, these performers “took titles merely to dazzle boys about town to make their public life (and it was all they had) mysterious and perplexing, knowing well that skill is never so amazing as when it seems inappropriate. Felix clung to his title to dazzle his own estrangement. It brought them together” (*NW* 14). The sense of community formed under pretense in the circus culture is
significant, and it is the only space where Felix can freely flaunt his fraudulence since everyone there is a fraud.

Though the narrative insists that Felix thought of the people of the circus and theatre world as having, “desires utterly divergent from his own,” the fact that he sought their company and was able to “dazzle his own estrangement” in their company makes Felix somewhat unreliable. What Felix wants to avoid is being further alienated from normative life, and acknowledging his firm place in the circus world problematizes any chance he might have at normalcy. However, it is at the circus where Felix’s life changes because of the people with whom he becomes acquainted. One of these people is Dr. Matthew O’Connor, whose personage we are prepared for, in a manner of speaking, based on one of the performers in the circus: Principessa Stasera y Stasero. Directly translated, this title means Princess Tonight and Tonight. It is understandable how the English translation feels redundant. However, if we consider the way this title operates in Italian, we can see how a quick mention of this character both overtly and quietly introduces non-normative gendered subjects in this novel. “Principessa,” or princess, is clearly a feminine noun that requires accompanying female articles and conjugations with which to agree and to be considered grammatically correctly. Since the performer’s name is not simply “Principessa Stasera,” there is more to consider about what this title means. To have the modifiers “stasera” and “stasero” accentuate the title “princess,” a decidedly female title, problematizes the subject from the perspective of gender because the subject is both male and female. That these modifiers are coordinated with the collective conjunction, “y” or “and” as opposed to “o,” or “or,” means that this subject is always a princess, regardless of gender identification. Simply put, this princess is equal parts male and female, which in itself is a bold
statement in support of transgendered subjects, but, further, prepares the reader for a most unique subject, Dr. Matthew O’Connor.

It is important, though, that we consider the bridge between Felix and Dr. Matthew O’Connor, the trapeze artist, the Duchess of Broadback (also known as Frau Mann, yet another male/female title). It is Mann who introduces Felix to O’Connor, acknowledging that they had been “mixed up” for some time, which might imply the two had been sexually intertwined. Though there is nothing unique about one night stands or a dependable boudoir buddy, the fact that the trapeze artist, like Principessa Stasera y Stasero, is presented as gender fluid is significant to the development of the plot and the larger message of the novel. Though Mann is addressed with feminine pronouns, she is narratologically observed as being “unsexed” in a way that feels almost clinical, as is the case for Dame Musset in Ladies Almanack. We are given the following description of the trapeze artist whose “face was the tense expression of an organism surviving in an alien element”:

She seemed to have a skin that was the pattern of her costume: a bodice of lozenges, red and yellow, low in the back and ruffled over and under the arms, faded with the reek of her three-a-day control, red tights, laced boots—one somehow felt they ran through her as the design runs through hard holiday candies, and the bulge in the groin where she took the bar, one foot caught in the flex of the calf, was as solid, specialized and polished as oak. The stuff of the tights was no longer a covering, it was herself; the span of the tightly stitched crotch was so much her own flesh that she was as unsexed as a doll. The needle that had made one the property of the child made the other the property of no man. (NW 16)
This is the identity that Frau Mann allows people to see, and, since her skin has taken on the pattern of the attire in which she performs, we can assume that she relies heavily on this guise to navigate the social world.\textsuperscript{80} Beyond the attire is the attention to the “bulge in the groin where she took the bar,” which is further described, along with her calf, as being solid as oak. It is interesting that there is a peripheral attention paid to the phallus, yet a refusal to acknowledge the vagina. The crotch is “tightly stitched” so much so that Frau Mann is an “unsexed doll” whose gender is assumed based on aesthetics but seemingly cannot be confirmed. Like Dame Musset, Frau Mann exists in a state of sexual ambiguity.

Though we may not call him an “unsexed doll,” Dr. Matthew O’Connor is, by no means, a gender binary character. In fact, he is quite campy and represents an important development in Barnes’s character sketches, since he has been “driven . . . half around the world” to pursue his interest in gynaecology, which is more representative of his desire to understand how the female

\textsuperscript{80} In a description that feels reminiscent of Joseph Conrad’s Harlequin in \textit{Heart of Darkness} (1902), here we have Frau Mann costumed in a way where her flesh and her performance attire are melded together. In Joseph Conrad’s \textit{Heart of Darkness}, we are introduced to the harlequin who is dressed in a similarly bawdy and drag-like fashion. Marlow muses upon meeting this most unique subject, and, in his attempt to properly locate where in his image repertoire this image exists, he realizes that he looked like a harlequin. The following description is provided by Marlow: “His clothes had been made of some stuff that was brown holland probably, but it was covered with patches all over, with bright patches, blue, red, and yellow,—patches on the back, patches on the front, patches on the elbows, on the knees; coloured binding round his jacket, scarlet edging at the bottom of his trousers; and the sunshine made him look extremely far and wonderfully neat withal, because you could see how beautifully all this patching had been done. A beardless, boyish face, very fair, no features to speak of, nose peeling, little blue eyes, smiles and frowns chasing each other over that open countenance like sunshine and shadow on a wind-swept plain” (97). Though Frau Mann’s costume is not a subject of marvel as is the Harlequin’s for Marlow, the similarities in how each character is presented is important. In both instances, we are provided a clown-like presence whose skills are used to distract and amuse. Unlike other freaks about them—for Frau Mann, oddities of the side show, and for the Harlequin, the “savages” of the Belgian Congo—Frau Mann and the Harlequin are human enough to pass as members of normative society. They thus act as links between the world of the acceptable and the world of the depraved.
body “should” look, work, and function than of his desire to be in the intimate company of women every day (NW 17). While there is much to discuss regarding O’Connor’s character, the most significant elements of his character sketch to this study have to do with the way he conceives of gender and gender performance as attendant to love and the night.

Dr. Matthew O’Connor is a “great liar, but a valuable liar,” and those around him rely on his knowledge and ability to navigate different social circles in order to understand their own positions in life. What is most problematic about this is the fact that O’Connor, much like Felix and Nora—the two who seek his counsel most avidly—is unsure of his own identity, and therefore has to construct a false narrative publicly in order to live his truth privately. Perhaps the most climactic scene of this novel (and there are many) is when Nora, desperate and lonely, goes to see the doctor unannounced in the late hours of the night. Upon arrival, we see the squalor of “the doctor’s” boudoir:

A pile of medical books, and volumes of a miscellaneous order, reached almost to the ceiling, water-stained and covered with dust. Just above them was a very small barred window, the only ventilation. On a maple dresser, certainly not of European make, lay a rusty pair of forceps, a broken scalpel, half a dozen odd instruments that she could not place, a catheter, some twenty perfume bottles, almost empty, pomades, creams, rouges, powder boxes and puffs. From the half-open drawers of this chiffonier hung laces, ribands, stockings, ladies’ underclothing and an abominable brace, which gave the impression that the feminine finery had suffered venery. (NW 85)

The room itself is a testimony to O’Connor’s inability to achieve his goal of femininity, since it is described as a room into which a “woman has never set foot” (before Nora, that is) and, further, that the room itself is a collection in which “every object seems to be battling its own
compression” (NW 85). The room is a direct reflection of O’Connor, since there is a clear sense of suffocation and “compression” within the space. Further, that the room is described as never having a woman in it insinuates that, while O’Connor might conceive of himself as a woman and possibly identify as a trans woman, the narrative does not recognize him in that way because he cannot recognize himself in that way. In fact, Nora takes notice of the gendered tension of O’Connor’s room, noting: “the room was also muscular, a cross between a chamber à coucher and a boxer’s training camp” (NW 85). In a moment reminiscent of our introduction to Principessa Stasera y Stasero, our introduction to O’Connor’s room reminds us that the masculine and feminine can—and do—coexist in all spaces. And, for a subject like O’Connor, the problem does not arise from a societal pressure to conform so much as it is ingrained within; O’Connor is trapped between identities like Dame Musset, though, unlike Dame Musset, O’Connor experiences the world of the masculine and the feminine, depending on his environment.

And so, Nora’s first steps into O’Connor’s private life expose the truth of his private world. Not only is the doctor poor, but he is also clearly not a practicing physician, thus explaining the several volumes of unopened medical books. The fact that the medical books are the first item within the room that receive attention is important, since it suggests that the medical gaze upon non-normative sexual “freaks” like O’Connor is castigating and shame-inducing. The attention to the various medical instruments is especially interesting, given that Ladies Almanack’s Patience Scalpel is a central figure who functions as a subject that is meant to investigate non-normative sex and gender. Here we can see how an earlier work comes to the pages of Nightwood to resolve/ explain itself through an anomaly like O’Connor. Though O’Connor does not hold the titles or qualifications to which he pretends expertise and
knowledge, his pursuit of understanding himself can only be realized in noisy spaces such as the ones Barnes documents in “Lament of the Left Bank,” which make the “doctor” persona possible, or bound within four walls of his room where he can exercise his feminity. There is also the drawer filled with ladies’ intimate attire, articles of “feminine finery [that] had suffered venery,” which means O’Connor certainly donned these outfits for sexual partners. Such a room gives “even the most innocent a sensation of having been [an] accomplice” to some kind of degrading sexual exploit.

In this moment, Nora can either be critical of O’Connor or proceed forward with her concerns. The fact that she proceeds to his room, hoping for answers regarding her lover Robin’s inability to be faithful or stand still indicates that Nora understands (and participates in) a fraudulent existence. For Barnes, this narratological moment is critical because it exposes the truth about O’Connor (therefore exposing his lies), but O’Connor remains the authority; neither his dress nor his mess disqualify his expertise (for Nora, anyway). Thus, we see how the noise of O’Connor’s personal life are of little to no importance to Nora, since she has her own disequilibrium and agenda:

By temperament Nora was an early Christian; she believed the word. There is a gap in “world pain” through which the singular falls continually and forever; a body falling in observable space, deprived of the privacy of disappearance; as if privacy, moving relentlessly away, by the very sustaining power of its own withdrawal kept the body eternally moving downward, but in one place, and perpetually before the eye. Such a singular was Nora. There was some derangement in her equilibrium that kept her immune from her own descent . . . Nora robbed herself for everyone; incapable of giving herself warning, she was continually turning about to find herself diminished. (NW 56-57)
Nora is incapable of seeing her own demise—like many others who lie to themselves to maintain any semblance of equilibrium—and, more importantly, how she is in control of this version of her destiny.

It is in Dr. O’Connor’s boudoir that he and Nora have a discussion about the night and what it affords to drifters, those on the periphery, and the lost and lonely like himself and Robin. As Dr. O’Connor lays in his iron bed, outfitted in a woman’s nightgown, tucked into dirty sheets, awaiting a lover who never materializes, we are provided the following sketch:

The doctor’s head, with its over-large black eyes, its full gun-metal cheeks and chin, was framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendant curls that touched his shoulders, and falling back against the pillow, turned up the shadowy interior of their cylinders. He was heavily rouged and his lashes painted . . . [Nora thought]: “He dresses to lie beside himself, who is so constructed that love, for him, can be only something special; in a room that giving back evidence of his occupancy, is as mauled as the last agony.” (NW 85-86)

“Dr. Mighty O’Connor,” the man who has “been everywhere at the wrong time” and is now “anonymous” because of it is “undressed” and quietly outed by Nora, so to speak (NW 89). Though this is a rather quick exchange, no explanation is required from either subject; the two understand each other’s position well enough to carry forth. Within this conversation O’Connor educates Nora about the night and people of the night, saying, “The very constitution of twilight is a fabulous reconstruction of fear, fear bottom-out and wrong side up. Every day is thought upon and calculated, but the night is not premeditated. The Bible lies the one way, but the nightgown the other” (NW 86). Based on O’Connor’s assessment, then, “day” is constructed and controlled, but night is free and somewhat unpolicied. We also see an important distinction
between The Bible (the Priest and his Breviary) and the “night-gown,” or the other. Reflecting upon this, Nora muses that there is something transformative about the night, that people can take on a whole new identity, even while sleeping (NW 87). This interaction is likely the only truthful exchange O’Connor has with another human. There is nothing left to hide in this moment—there is no longer cause for façade. O’Connor feels as if he was placed in the wrong body and tries to compensate for his lack of true identity in the night—more specifically, the French night. And French nights, as we know, “are those which all nations seek the world over” because they are filthy, free, and freakish (NW 88).

Like Dame Musset in Ladies Almanack, O’Connor is between gender identities and performs one in order to satisfy the needs of the other. Looking to Barnes’s poem “Lullaby” (1923), we can see how the idea of non-heteronormative gender expression evolves from a somewhat reticent and obedient character like Dame Musset to a flamboyant, explosive personality like O’Connor. We see a progression in the poem’s three stanzas: childhood, emerging adulthood, and a regressive adulthood. Of the three stanzas in “Lullaby,” the first is most clearly associated with the persona who we have come to know as Dame Musset. From the first stanza of “Lullaby,” we can sense that the speaker occupies a rather liminal space, one where she is neither male nor female. She does not belong, therefore she is a social pariah. The same is true for characters like O’Connor and Dame Musset. In both instances, there is a clear need for each subject to feel like part of a community, but neither can achieve that because they are seemingly trapped in a space of confused and misunderstood identity. Let us consider the first stanza of “Lullaby” in relation to Dame Musset’s plight in Ladies Almanack:

When I was a young child I slept with a dog,
I lived without trouble and I thought no harm;
I ran with the boys and I played leap-frog;

Now it is a girl’s head that lies on my arm. (“Lullaby” 57)

Similar to Dame Musset, the speaker weaves in and out of a social-sexual identity. The earliest memories of the speaker’s identity are best understood as tomboyish; she resides somewhere between a masculine and feminine identity. The speaker feels comfortable in the company of boys (we can assume the speaker is female—or, at minimum, assigned female at birth), since she “lived without trouble . . . [and] thought no harm” as she “ran with the boys . . . [and] played leap-frog.” To sleep with a dog can either mean the child had a loved pet or that she was treated as one. The lines go on to indicate that she was more inclined to participate in activities more suited to a masculine audience. The “Now” of the poem is important, since it represents a pivot in the story of the poem. The speaker is unapologetically aware of her truth, publicly declaring that she sleeps with women. The poem goes on to say,

Then I grew a little, picked plantain in the yard;

Now I dwell in Greenwich, and the people do not call;

Then I planted pepper-seed and stamped on them hard.

Now I am very quiet and I hardly plan at all. (“Lullaby” 57)

As the speaker gets older, she becomes more aware of how her social image influences whether others will associate with her. Without much conflict, the speaker seems willing to commit whatever fire (the pepper-seed) exists in her life to the ground with an enthusiastic stomp. Such action is a declaration of selfhood that cannot be usurped by heteronormative social expectations. Without the noise of others, the speaker can enjoy peace and with peace comes the freedom to not be tethered to plans or agendas. It is just the subject, her solitude, and her quiet, that is until she is in pain and retreats to what is familiar:
Then I pricked my finger on a thorn, or a thistle,
Put the finger in my mouth, and ran to my mother.
Now I lie here, with my eyes on a pistol.
There will be a morrow, and another, and another.

The final stanza shifts to a mode of speech that resembles the speech patterns of *Nightwood’s* Dr. Matthew O’Connor, a subject who is a voluble representative and spokesperson for the night and understands how the night’s veiling and transformative powers can cause rupture in the world of the clean and non-freakish, like Nora.

“Lullaby” is constructed in a way where we can see a past, present, and a future, which foreshadows one of O’Connor’s most important verbal showcases as he lays in his bed talking to Nora. O’Connor, extending his conversation about the distinction between day and night and his experience with losing parts of himself for the sake of his “country,” says

am I not the girl to know of what I speak? We go to our Houses by our nature—and our nature, no matter how it is, we all have to stand—as for me, God has made me, my house is the pissing port. Am I to be blame if I’ve been summoned before and this my last and oddest call? In the old days I was possibly a girl in Marseilles thumping the dock with a sailor, and perhaps that memory haunts me. The wise men say that the remembrance of things past is all we have for a future, and am I to be blame if I’ve turned up this time as I shouldn’t have been, when it was a high soprano I wanted and deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as the king’s kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner? And what do I get but a face on me like an old child’s bottom—is that a happiness, do you think? *(NW* 97)
Here, we are taken through O’Connor’s rationale for why he feels he exists as he does—he is “haunted” by a past where he was assigned the correct gender, and that past has followed him into his present. As Barnes was an avid reader and admirer of Marcel Proust, we can assume the attention to “wise men” is a nod to the first English translation of Proust’s *À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu* (1913), *Remembrance of Things Past* (1934). It is Barnes’s focus on O’Connor’s hypothetical past that allows him to imagine a future where he can exist in his body in a way that feels comfortable and natural for him. For now, however, he is trapped and bitter. Like the speaker in “Lullaby,” O’Connor also wants to retreat back to the mother. In fact, he tells Nora in no uncertain terms “It’s my mother without argument I want!” (*NW* 159). It is only the mother who can quell the demons of the night when one is a child, but when one is an adult, he must confront the morrow each day that he rises. For people like O’Connor and Robin Vote, this makes life unbearable.

*Nightwood’s* Robin Vote is the limit of abjection, representing the extreme of non-normative sexual subjects who reside on the margins and periphery of otherwise normative life.81 Vote is the personification of a collective, nonsensical fear, with regard to the sexual other. Her character embodies a speechless, abject figure whose homosexual proclivities become “proof” that the “evils” of Sodom and Gomorrah can penetrate society, and when they do, everyone

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81 Interestingly, Robin Vote’s character is loosely constructed upon one of Barnes’s close friends, Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven (O’Neal 58). Early in 1979, Barnes feared that she was nearing the end of her life and tasked O’Neal with gathering the poetry and letters of the Baroness so that “something sensible” could be done with that work, as Barnes retained full literary rights to those documents (O’Neal 59). Having promised the Baroness that she would publish her poetry, Barnes tasked O’Neal with taking the Baroness’s manuscript to the McKeldin library for publication along with Barnes’s first draft of *Nightwood (Bow Down)*. As O’Neal documents it, he noted a “thinly fictionalized account of the Baroness’s life” in the pages of *Nightwood* (148).
around such a subject is also marked by vice. Like Proust’s Albertine, Vote is also unknowable because she rarely speaks, if ever. We are first introduced to Robin in a moment of distress; she is passed out in her hotel bed, and O’Connor receives the call that he must attend to her. Accompanied by Felix, the two go to the hotel—described as one that is so common it could move each night and never be out of place—promptly. Once again, it is crucial that we consider the initial sketch provided to us of Robin in her environment:

On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly over-sung by the notes of unseen birds, which, like cloaks on funeral urns, are cast over their cages at night by good housewives—half flung off the support of the cushions from which, in a moment of threatened consciousness she had turned her head, lay the young woman, heavy and disheveled. Her legs, in white flannel trousers, were spread as in a dance, the thick-lacquered pumps looking too lively for the arrested step. Her hands, long and beautiful, lay on either side of her face. (NW 37-38)

Though Robin is beautiful, she is immobilized and without the ability to speak, thus making her character sketch one that feels immediately mysterious and intangible. The language in the passage is significant, since she is enveloped by a “confusion” of things that are sloppily arranged about her. The narrator further describes Robin as having a kind of natural perfume that “captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odor of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea, making her seem as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire” (NW 38).

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82 Hereafter, Robin is observed in similar positions that render her speechless and nearly immobilized. Yet, she is still a subject toward whom Felix is drawn. Once Robin and Felix become a couple, she is described in this way yet again: “Looking up after an interminable flow of fact and fancy, he saw Robin sitting with her legs thrust out, her head thrown back against the embossed cushion of the chair, sleeping, one arm fallen over the chair’s side, the hand somehow older and wiser than her body . . .” (NW 48).
also learn that her flesh mimics plant life (yet another connection to Proust, since the illusive Albertine is likened to flowers throughout the novel), which creates a luminescence about her that indicates that hers is “the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds” (NW 38). Robin is presented as entirely abject, as she is not given any features that bespeak human qualities. Instead, she is of a dark, dank, moist earth; she is a sleepwalker who invades two worlds in order to satisfy her sub-human needs. In fact, once Robin does awake from her somnambulist state, her sketch is made more abject by Felix, who describes her eyes as being “mysterious and shocking blue . . . [with] the iris of wild beasts who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye” (NW 40-41). The narrative tells us that Robin is a “beast turning human,” and, as she does so, Felix succumbs to her mystique, feeling somewhat attached to her, since he senses in her a similarly insupportable and vague racial history.

Though Robin agrees to marry Felix, there is little chemistry between the two. Robin is described as existing elsewhere, that her attention “had already been taken by something not yet in history” (NW 48). Even with the bonds of marriage, Robin proves to be untamable. What Felix wants is a son, and Robin, through a power described as a “stubborn cataleptic calm” conceives of herself as pregnant, disappears for several days, and returns as an observer of the Catholic vow, though her intimate thoughts reside with women (NW 50-51). Throughout their entire courtship, Robin is speechless and without voice. It is only once she births their son that Robin speaks, and her speech patterns are indicative of a subject who feels trapped, uncomfortable, suffocated, and in the wrong place. In response to having a child, Robin’s refrains are nothing close to maternal. Rather, they are quite the antithesis. She says, “Oh, for Christ’s sake, for Christ’s sake,” “I didn’t want him,” and “I’ll get out” before leaving Felix and their son for America (NW 52-54).
While Robin presents as lacking certain psychological foundations, her fight or flight instinct ebbs more toward flight. Robin is a subject who is always looking to escape the reality of her present, and, in doing so, preserves her unknowability. We might say there is a touch of Simonet to the Vote blood, since both Albertine and Robin mute themselves to avoid entanglement and stray to circumvent social restraints. Though there are scant moments in the work where Robin offers a phrase here and there, she is largely a silent force of destruction devoid of any redemptive human qualities. In the chapter entitled “Go Down, Matthew,” O’Connor forces Nora to confront the truth about Robin. As O’Connor explains:

Robin was outside the human type—a wild thing caught in a woman’s skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain; like the paralyzed man in Coney Island (take away a man’s conformity and you take away his remedy) who had to lie on his back in a box, but the box was lined with velvet, his fingers jewelled with stones, and suspended over him where he could never take his eyes off, a sky-blue mounted mirror, for he wanted to enjoy his own ‘difference.’ Robin is not in your life, you are in her dream, you’ll never get out of it. And why does Robin feel innocent? Every bed she leaves, without caring, fills her heart with peace and happiness. She has made her ‘escape’ again. That’s why she can’t ‘put herself in another’s place,’ she herself is the only ‘position’; so she resents it when you reproach her with what she had done. She knows she is innocent because she can’t do anything in relation to anyone but herself. (NW 155)

Thus, Robin represents the absolute limit of the periphery and cannot be redeemed. Because there is no one to whom she can relate, there is no remorse that she can ever hold for her actions and wrongdoings against others. What qualifies her for the world of the freak is her abjection, but what disqualifies her from becoming part of that collective identity is her inability to relate to
anyone but herself. So, in the end, when Robin comes back to Nora, arguably in her most abject state, it is not surprising to see that she has fully transformed from human to beast, as the initial observation was made by Felix the first night that he met her. Standing before the altar of the weather-beaten white chapel, we see the Robin’s full transformation take shape; she is mimicking the demeanor of the dog, down on all fours, her knees dragging along the floor. And as Robin and the dog—locked in a bestial duel in a house of worship—instigate and attack one another, we are provided a final sketch of Robin barking, breaking out in fits of laughter, and crying herself into submission (NW 179-180). She, lying next to the dog, is trapped for eternity in an abject existence not to be understood by those who live in the world of the day.

**Conclusion**

Barnes was quite fond of *Nightwood*. In fact, she considered *Nightwood* the cornerstone of her literary career and she lived for the novel because it made her literary reputation. However, that reputation came with a price. Though Barnes was romantically involved with Thelma Wood for many years and loved her deeply, she did not consider herself a lesbian. As O’Neal puts it, “Her homophobia was real and intense. It was puzzling . . . [why she] was so firm in her conviction that she was not a lesbian. She loved Thelma Wood, but that didn’t make her a lesbian—it didn’t mean anything except she loved Thelma” (171). Further, Barnes would become especially hot-tempered when anyone “suggested in print” that she was a lesbian (O’Neal 169). So, the fact that *Nightwood* was so widely read by a lesbian audience and deemed a “lesbian novel” was unsettling to Barnes. According to O’Neal, Barnes would have never written *Nightwood* had she known that the legacy that would follow her would be one so closely
anchored to the lesbian existence (120). Beyond the issue with the reputation she gained as a “lesbian” writer, Nightwood also presented a problem for Barnes in terms of its ending.

Barnes was upset that general audiences and literary critics read the final scene of Nightwood as a scene of bestiality between Robin and the dog. Apparently, the final scene was a reinterpretation of actual events involving Barnes’s drunken friend Fitzie who, “drunk as a hoot,” started to crawl on all fours, confusing her dog, Buff (O’Neal 36). Barnes was interested in the way “animals become confused and excited when they see their masters in an ‘unusual state’” and utilized Robin’s abject state as an opportunity to create tension rather than confusion (O’Neal 36). By the end of the novel, Robin is devoid of nearly any human qualities, so for her to be able to come down to the dog’s level, figuratively and literally, opens a new space for interaction between species in a setting that feels uncomfortable. What initially feels like a decidedly deviant moment can also be read as a lesson in perspective. To the dog, Robin is a threat; to Robin, the escapism inherent in becoming a quadruped releases her from the binds and responsibilities associated with human existence. That she engaged in the play of the animal suggests a complete rupture in her connection to the human world. She must “Go Down” and stay down (O’Neal 36-37).

In a final study of the author, we consider her poem “Solitude” as it relates to her life as someone who did not conform to society, but instead lived in whatever way brought her happiness and contentment. The poem reads,

I seek no solitude but this—
This one within my little room—
Four candles set apart to watch
With wistful eyes the coming gloom.

And this, the shrouded mantelpiece
And sober gap of fireside-place;
And this, the darkened wonder of
A framed picture of a face.

This is my perfect solitude
Within my conquering abode,
The goal of haunting memories
That walk beside a chartless road (“Solitude” 6)

As with many of her most influential and atypical literary characters, Barnes felt the safest in the solitude of her “little room” where she could enjoy the fire and be entirely consumed by her loneliness. While a quick reading of this poem might indicate that Barnes was feeling lonesome—perhaps even melancholy—her language is so deliberate that we must attend to the fact that Barnes worshipped her solitude and protected it zealously. Looking to the last stanza of the poem confirms this idea, “This is my perfect solitude/Within my conquering abode,/The goal of haunting memories/That walk beside a chartless road” (6). When Barnes was alone in her small space, with nothing but the fire to offer enough light to “frame” her face, she felt most at ease—this was her “perfect solitude.” To enjoy solitude is important, notes Barnes, and the promise of her “conquering abode” offering her “haunting memories” in a space so inaccessible to others (“a chartless road,” so to speak) is what allows her to be truly content. To her, solitude is a celebration of closeness to the self; it is not something to be pitied, nor does it insinuate that the subject of solitude is at all lonely or alone.

The non-fiction and fiction personas we have considered in this chapter are strong representations of both solitude and a freak-show kind of individuality. When we consider characters like Dame Musset, the speaker of “Lullaby,” and Dr. Matthew O’Connor, we are met with issues of sexual identity that are easily ramified in the solitude of each respective character’s space, but are problematized when they step out into the social world. When we
consider other subjects like Felix and Robin, we are met with issues pertaining to social/ancestral identity that are allayed either with fabrications of a nonexistent lineage or a complete retreat into the dark crevices of the night. In either respect, the subjects of focus here rely on and thrive in spaces of solitude in order to enjoy wholeness and contentment. This is not something that can be offered by social interaction. For these reasons, subjects like the ones mentioned herein are considered anomalies, freaks, and the other. They reside on the periphery of humanity or represent the absolute limits of human existence, thus making them social pariahs who do not easily amalgamate to a normative social structure. Instead of banishing such seemingly undesirable subjects, Barnes elevates them to positions of visibility and validity. Doing this is a proclamation that simply acknowledging those who do not conform is the celebration, the secret of drawing out truth from the margins of humanity.
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