Savage embraces: James Purdy, melodrama, and the narration of identity

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INTRODUCTION

James Purdy's Melodramas of Identity

There is a popular anecdote that readers of James Purdy lovingly circulate amongst themselves. It is a story about Purdy's age that most new readers will undoubtedly hear when they first chance upon his work, and few scholars and commentators fail to mention in their more recent discussions of Purdy's work.[1] Since debuting in 1956, and possibly even before that, Purdy's publishers, interviewers and friends believed that he was born in 1923. Since he still looked young and handsome at the time – contemporary pictures taken by Carl van Vechten attest to this – no one thought to doubt his date of birth. It was only after he passed away in 2009 that readers and friends, even those closest to him, learned that he was actually born in 1914. For his entire career, Purdy had presented himself as nine years younger than his actual age.

The reason behind this piece of biographical misinformation remains unknown. As Michael Snyder remarks, Purdy was reticent when giving out biographical details ("Becoming James Purdy" 111). The information he relayed in interviews was sparse and often riddled with inconsistencies and fictive accounts of his own life. Although never proven, some suggest that Purdy purposefully changed his birth date because he felt he was too old to be a debuting author. When he published his first collection of stories at age of forty two, he actually belonged to the pre-World War II generation; at this time critical acclaim was extended to the generation of new and exciting authors with whom he would rather be compared. If this was indeed Purdy's strategy, it most definitely succeeded. Early in his career Ihab Hassan compared his work to that of Truman Capote, John Updike, and Flannery O'Connor, among others (7), while Robert Hipkiss later (1976) drew parallels between Purdy, Jack Kerouac, and John Knowles. Jean E. Kennard (1975) read Purdy alongside Joseph Keller, John Barth, and Kurt Vonnegut. Although he was much older than these authors, Purdy ensured he was considered their contemporary by lying about his age.

Even if this bit of speculation touches only lightly on Purdy's motives for presenting himself as younger than he really was, this anecdote nevertheless tells us is that, if anything, Purdy was well aware of how he would be perceived by his audience

1 See, for example, this selection of articles, reviews, and obituaries that mention this particular anecdote about Purdy's age: Healey; "James Purdy"; Miller 421; Snyder, "Becoming James Purdy" 111; and Swaim.

and critics. By manipulating his biographical information – either by withholding or giving out false information – he managed to orchestrate the narration of his public persona: his identity as James Purdy, the author. This brings us to the crux of this dissertation. Throughout my dissertation I argue that the central concern of Purdy's work is his interrogation of the narratives through which we produce our own and other's identities. Writing at a time in which the American political stage turned increasingly to identitarian rhetorical strategies, Purdy seemed wary of narratives that reduce sexual, racial, and national experiences to the limiting confines of totalizing identity categories. In his writing, I argue, Purdy sought to undermine the narrative construction of identity and expose the oppressive structures embedded in society's investment in stable identity categories. Purdy considered these forms of oppression to be not only concomitant to the marginalization of non-normative identifications by a heteronormative, patriarchal, and white society, but part and parcel to any form of identitarian rhetoric. Ultimately, it is the restrictive nature of identity categories in and of itself that Purdy sought to criticize in his novels, short stories, and plays.

Discussing sexuality in a letter (dated October 14, 1957) to British poet John Cowper Powys, Purdy writes, "how really thrilling is your discussion of those words homo and hetero. I really am very queer, I suppose, in that I have NEVER believed in any of those terms" ("Purdy to Powys 10" 51, original emphasis). Purdy's early use of the term queer to denote neither gay nor straight, but something that defies categorization signals a career-long suspicion of the identitarian politics that started gaining purchase at the beginning of his literary career. Purdy's outright resistance against identity categories has, in turn, led to suspicion of his works and politics by identitarian political movements. According to Rainer Hanshe, Purdy "was neither palatable to the status quo nor celebratory enough of queer identity politics to be taken up by that community, and it is this which probably led to Purdy's hovering between acceptance and condemnation and his being largely invisible in America after a certain period" ("Choir Invisible" 18). Richard Canning corroborates Hanshe's assessment and even likens Purdy's distrust of identity categories to the work of the great modernist author Djuna Barnes: "like Barnes's *Nightwood*, Purdy's novelistic containment of the inalienably tragic status of the figure of the homosexual coincides with a personal incomprehension at the very idea of identity formations, identity politics or 'liberation'" (50). Purdy, in short, diametrically opposed the politics of a fledgling gay rights movement, but this opposition came at the cost of critical misrecognition. He was, as Hanshe puts it, "even marginalized within the gay community" ("Choir Invisible" 18).

The invisibility and marginalization that Hanshe mentions refers to the lack of mainstream and critical attention dedicated to Purdy's work since the 1970s. At the beginning of his career Purdy found his work being championed by established authors such as the aforementioned John Cowper Powys, Dame Edith Sitwell, Gore Vidal, Susan Sontag, and Angus Wilson, but the publication of his controversial novel *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967) saw him lose a large part of his readership. He also lost his publishing contract with Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, which up until that point had published all of Purdy's novels and short stories. Purdy could similarly count on significant academic interest in his work in the first decades of his career, and while he was able to sustain this attention slightly longer, this too began to wane in the early 1980s. Among his early academic admirers we find Ihab Hassan (1962), Warren French (1962), Joseph Skerrett (1969), Tony Tanner (1969), and Donald Pease (1970).[2] Purdy arguably experienced his height of critical attention in the late '60s and early '70s, when Bettina Schwarzschild (1968), Henry Chupack (1975), and Stephen Adams (1976) each dedicated a monograph to his work over a relatively short time period. Although Purdy continued publishing with great frequency until the mid-nineties, with the disappearance of a mainstream readership, critical attention followed suit. Christopher Lane speculates that this decrease in critical popularity was the result of his own rejection of "academic orthodoxy and identity politics, a position – he was the first to admit – that cost him many readers" (84). Whatever the cause of this critical decline, it resulted in Purdy's remaining "virtually absent from the literary canon and from the shelves of book stores in America" (Hanshe, "Choir Invisible" 18).

Despite his apparent absence from the American literary canon and his self-professed misrecognition by the literary establishment, recent years have seen a modest revival of interest in Purdy's writing. The foundation of the James Purdy Society in the first decade of the twentieth century and his death in 2009 returned his work to the purview of some readers and scholars. This modest revival led to the reprinting of some of his novels, as well as the publication of *The Complete Short Stories* (2013), which features a foreword by cult filmmaker John Waters. Scholarly output on Purdy has also increased in recent years, and my interrogation of the question of identity in his work responds in part to this recent upsurge in critical attention.

2 For a more extensive (albeit incomplete) overview of critical publications, see the bibliography that Hanshe compiled for the *Hyperion* special issue on James Purdy ("Bibliography" 222–226). The overview makes it obvious that the volume of critical and academic writing on Purdy's work decreased significantly in the second half of the 1980s.

Recently, scholars such as Don Adams (2008), Lane (2011), and Snyder (2011; 2017) have begun to theorize Purdy's complex relationship with identity.[3]

While most critics agree that Purdy resisted the restrictions of identity categories, few have moved beyond that assessment to recognize Purdy's attempts to produce a language in which he could create space for those who defied categorization. If Purdy called himself queer in the sense that he placed himself outside of identity categories, I want to take him to task and read his work not only as a reflection on the restrictive nature of identity, but also as a proposal to live differently: to find a language within which to exist without adhering to restrictive identity categories. Throughout this dissertation, I will bring Purdy's work in conversation with recent queer scholarship that has considered strategies by which queer and other non-normative subjects are enabled to survive within heteronormative and phobic societal structures. These conversations allow me to think through Purdy's work beyond the mere rejection of identity categories. Instead, I recognize that Purdy offers his characters tools with which they can act out their desires without submitting to normative societal structures. Before I expand on these queer tactics within Purdy's novels and short stories, I first elaborate on the ways in which other scholars have theorized the question of identity in Purdy's texts. Then, I introduce the theoretical framework within which I analyze both Purdy's undermining of, as well as his proposed alternatives to, restrictive identity categories. This theoretical framework – melodrama – exposes identity for its narrative and fictive construction, and allows Purdy to use that same narrative nature of identity as an escape route from its oppressive force.

Identity in the Critical Reception of Purdy

We find one of the earliest reflections on identity in Purdy's work in Thomas Lorch's 1965 article "Purdy's 'Malcolm': A Unique Vision of Radical Emptiness." In it, Lorch discusses how Malcolm, the protagonist of the eponymous novel, appears to be a "metaphysical blank waiting to receive identity" (210). Lorch sees identity not as a given, but as something that can be bestowed upon a person. Malcolm is an orphaned boy, and through a series of encounters with different people, in Lorch's reasoning, he should finally be able to receive his identity. Lorch also recognizes the novel's

3 Whenever deemed necessary, I will differentiate between Stephen Adams and Don Adams by using their initials.

satire, as the characters that Malcolm encounters come across as obvious caricatures: "Girard Girard of the business tycoon, Madame Girard of the neurotic society woman, Eloisa Brace of the pseudo-arty bohemian, and Melba of the entertainment star. Purdy satirizes them accordingly" (205). There is, then, an inherent tension in Malcolm's search for identity: the self that he is looking for will always be inauthentic. Ironically, this tension only exists because Lorch believes in the authenticity of identity in the first place, explaining that "As we look more closely, we find that the poses and behavior being caricatured are merely masks: there is little or no connection between them and the individual's true identity or his basic needs and desires" (205). Like masks, Purdy's caricatures are devices to cover up a hidden and innate identity; one more true than the social roles that these persons play. Because Malcolm only mirrors these particular roles, only puts on their masks as it were, he fails to obtain a "true" identity. Ultimately, Lorch even questions whether Malcolm truly exists: "the novel even contains suggestions that Malcolm has no human being at all" (210).

Skerrett (1979) continues to use the image of a mask to denote the constructedness of social identity. However, while Lorch implies that the social mask is inauthentic, Skerrett praises Purdy for his ability to convincingly wear different masks, and thus convincingly represent different voices in his writing. Skerrett zooms in on the host of black characters who inhabit Purdy's novels and short stories and suggests that Purdy speaks through what he calls a "black mask" ("James Purdy and the Black Mask of Humanity" 83). This black mask is just as constructed and fictional as the masks Lorch discusses – after all, Purdy remains a white American who occasionally presents African Americans as important characters in his fiction – but it nevertheless tries to approach a more authentic black experience. Of Purdy's short story "Eventide" (1956/2013), Skerrett writes that it is "not a story about white experience done up in blackface. It is fully imagined in terms of a black situation" (83). The image of a mask, which is not only a caricature of social identity but also a device that allows Purdy to represent a plurality of (racialized) perspectives, suggests that Skerrett sees the constructed nature of social identity less negatively than Lorch. Still, Skerrett imbues identity, or rather the lack thereof, with a similar destructive nature as Lorch. Whereas the latter suggested that the lack of identity invited the question of whether Malcolm actually exists, Skerrett, too, sees the loss of identity as a form of obliteration (86). The protagonist of the short story "On the Rebound" (1970/2013), for example, is a character whose fame and success has led to a loss of identity; Skerrett concludes that he "exists more as a symbol than as a personality" (86). For both Lorch and Skerrett, then, identity functions as an essential and immutable quality, without which a character simply ceases to exist.

Frank Baldanza offers another interpretation of the position of identity in Purdy's oeuvre. He argues that Purdy's characters are "troubled by a need for identity and for love in a sense that parallels much of what we call loosely 'existentialist' in recent writing" ("Corruption" 323). Baldanza also sees the notion of identity as a fundamental prerequisite of human existence. Purdy's characters are so overwhelmed by their desire for identity that the very nature of their being is at stake. However, Baldanza adds another element to this equation: the element of love. The need for love is juxtaposed with the need for identity in Baldanza's reading of Purdy, however, this need always comes at the cost of corruption. "A prominent feature in the microcosm of James Purdy," he writes, "is the relationship between a young innocent and the corrupt adult world in which he must make his way" (315). The moment in which Purdy's characters lose their innocence – become "corrupted" according to Baldanza – is when their search for love and identity is foregrounded. To be sure, Baldanza does not argue that Purdy moralizes or passes judgment on this loss of innocence. On the contrary: he argues, for example, that Jesse, the protagonist of "Everything under the Sun" (1961/2013), "is 'corrupted' to the degree that the reader thinks that smoking, drinking, whoring, swearing, and penny-arcade peep shows are evil, but Purdy is more interested, psychologically and morally, in Jesse's deepest need for love, before which the other, more traditional, moral questions are almost of ephemeral importance" (318). While Baldanza does not explicitly distinguish between a "true" self and a constructed social identity, he hints at a state prior to identity, prior to desire, in which the protagonist is still pure and free from corruption. As the second, or corrupted, state of being cannot be peeled away, unike Lorch's masks, there is arguably nothing more authentic beneath Baldanza's notion of corrupted identity. Still, he invokes a dichotomy between an identity that is true to the innocent origins of the protagonist and an identity that is produced by the interaction of the ingénue and their mentors, who are "former innocents themselves, reenacting a shadow play of their own initiation perhaps in a vain effort to communicate with their own lost innocence" (315).

Before I turn to more recent reflections on Purdy's writing, I want to draw attention to the extensive study of Purdy's work by S. Adams (1976). More so than his contemporaries, Adams reflected on Purdy's treatment of sexuality. More importantly, unlike the critics discussed so far, Adams understood Purdy's interrogation of identity in terms of narration. In the foreword of his monograph, Adams compares Purdy's work to that of William Faulkner, chiefly because of the "sheer quantity of narrators he employs" (10). However, Adams argues that Purdy moves beyond Faulkner, as in Purdy's work "the narrative act has turned in upon itself and instead of dramatizing

a search of meaning, it more frequently exemplifies the author's notion that real life has been reduced to the texture of fiction" (*James Purdy* 10). Adams rightfully suggests that Purdy's fiction does not necessarily care about *which* identities are narrated. Instead, Purdy's novels concern themselves with the question of *how* these identities are narrated. While other commenters have been troubled by what the lack of identity in characters such as Malcolm means, Adams seems more interested in the effect of such non-identity. This effect, he suggests, is that Purdy undermines the reader's expectations of character development: "in this version something goes wrong and the revelation of identity never takes place. Our expectations of a parable of the innocent's initiation into the adult world are ironically undermined" (*James Purdy* 26–27). Adams, then, draws attention to the connection between identity and its reader. Why else are other interpreters so troubled by Malcolm's lack of identity, if not for the fact that it is incongruous with how they are used to reading similar characters? Adams recognizes that Purdy challenges the narratives through which we construct identities by exposing the very fictiveness of these narratives, beneath which there is no true identity which can be revealed.

It is interesting that some years later S. Adams revisited Purdy's work and continued his inquiry into the way in which identities are narrated, rather than question what these identities might mean. In this reflection, Adams refers to the image of the mask as an insufficient metaphor for the complexities of narrating identities in an age after "gay liberation." As he explains:

> If the codified novel was once the only means of treating the homosexual theme and corresponded to the masks adopted in everyday life, so the image of a journey away from conventional society gives a characteristic form to novels that deal with the passage from self-concealment to self-expression. Nowadays this process is summed up in the gay liberation concept of 'coming out', but in the past 'going away' was the more likely point in the homosexual's assertion of his or her identity. (*Homosexual Hero* 56)

The narratives through which identities are asserted change over time, and likewise do the identities themselves. These identity-narratives are topoi that activate registers through which identities become recognizable as such. Purdy is aware of this narrative construction of identity, Adams claims, as "his work endlessly satirizes the compulsion to turn life into a fiction" (64). While it is true that in Purdy's work, life can only be discussed in terms of its production in narrative, I suggest an inversion

of the formula that Adams proposes, or rather, doubling it in its own mirror image. Purdy not only satirizes the compulsion to turn life into the fiction of identity, but also exposes as fictive the fantasy of a coherent and interior self.

More recently, critics have attempted to formulate a more nuanced analysis of Purdy's interrogation of identity.[4] Of these, D. Adams, Christopher Lane, and Kevin Arnold come closest to a fully realized analysis in which the dichotomy between a social, constructed identity and an individual, true identity is suspended in favor of a deeper consideration of how these identities are constructed. For these scholars, too, the mask continues to be a much-used metaphor in reading Purdy's interrogation of identity. However, D. Adams has sought to criticize the mask metaphor by analyzing Purdy's idiosyncratic use of epithets. "As if to emphasize the instability and artificiality of identity even further," he writes, "Purdy habitually refers to his characters, and they refer to one another, by descriptive or working titles" (10). Characters are often referred to by their occupation or social standing. Thus, in *63: Dream Palace*, we meet "the greatwoman," in *Garments the Living Wear*, the protagonist is referred to as "the thespian," and the antagonist of *Narrow Rooms* is continuously called "the renderer." According to Adams, "such designations emphasize the character's generic position in a social and/or archetypal setting and hierarchy, while calling into question his or her particular identity and individuality – seeming less a mask hiding an essential inner self than a heraldic device proclaiming one's spectral social and psychological presence" (10). The archetypal use of epithets cannot, then, be simply equated with the image of the mask. Behind these epithets, there are no identities that are more real or more true. Instead, these monikers activate archetypal narratives through which the categories of identity become legible, both to other characters and to the reader. Although "all fiction asks of us that we temporarily suspend our identity in order to invest ourselves imaginatively in the world of the text", Adams argues that Purdy's novelistic world moves beyond the mere suspension of identity and instead "[questions] the reality of our assumed identities by aggressively obscuring the line between fact and fiction" (20). Yet, while Adams acknowledges the fabricated nature of identity, he nevertheless hints at a truth or essence within human nature that is uncovered after the fiction of identity is stripped away: "by undermining the assumptions of individual identity and autonomy, Purdy insists that we consider ourselves both in relation to our shaping environments and to our innate and instinctive desire – life's great 'givens'" (21).

4 In addition to the scholars and essays that I discuss in greater detail in this section, we also find discussions of identity in Purdy's fiction in Pease "Storyteller" 78; O'Hara 80; Lee Smith; and Bawer.

Lane, on the other hand, suspends the notion of an interior, true identity altogether. Drawing on Purdy's 1975 novel *In a Shallow Grave*, Lane describes the identity formations of its characters as glyphs, containing "both too much and too little meaning" (81). Glyphs are by design typographical symbols that are immediately recognizable for what they signify, but at the same time divested of individuating features. Seeing identities as glyphs, then, "helps us notice what escapes his characters' identities, but also draws attention to the symbols our culture uses to sustain and normalize family life" (82). Lane continues:

> Purdy's fiction encourages readers to escape identity effects by exposing what is beneath them. That doesn't mean that he uncovers an essence capable of accessing a deeper truth – one that might reunite an ego-less humanity. Nor, one should add, was Purdy especially interested in trying to maintain the collective identity of marginalized groups. (85)

Lane recognizes that in Purdy's novelistic world, there is no deeper or hidden identity that must be discovered beneath the mask of social identity. If the mask of social identity is stripped away, it is only to uncover the constructedness of the identities that lie beneath it. There is no essence that prefigures the production of identity, and thus Lane argues that Purdy's treatment of sexuality should be read in conjunction with Freud's thesis on amorphous sexuality in the pre-Oedipal subject (90). The effect of this reading is that Purdy's fiction continuously undermines the reader's attempt at categorization. Lane observes that "just when we think, as readers, that we can predict his characters' behavior and desires, Purdy throws in a wrench in that fantasy, rendering 'sexual identity' a misnomer and even a contradiction in terms" (94). This last remark is essential to my reading of Purdy, as I argue that his characters are constantly looking for ways to act out their sexual desires without others reading these sex acts for their identity. Purdy resists the moment in which sex acts become placeholders for the narratives that constitute the fantasy of coherent and interiorized identities.

Kevin Arnold inverts Lane's reading of the relation between sex acts and the production of sexual identity. Concomitant to the argument that Purdy "challenges this idea of the sexual act as the truth of sexual identity", Arnold argues that Purdy also demonstrates "the absolute dependence and contingency of the *notion* of the sexual act upon a pre-existing signifying and desiring economy" (147, original emphasis). Sex acts and the production of sexual identity, then, fold onto one another.

Sexual identity is exposed as the effect of an incessant and compulsive reading of consecutive sex acts. These sex acts, in turn, can only be understood as such because the fiction of sexual identity structures these sex acts as referential of an interior and essential desire. This tension is foregrounded in Purdy's work, as he produces a "social discursive space [...] that seems utterly void of any stable social identities" (147). I am interested in Arnold's reference to the spatiality of Purdy's fiction. Throughout this dissertation I argue that a spatial reading of Purdy's fiction uncovers the operations within which identity is produced. Reading Purdy's novels and plays in terms of the spatial distribution of narration – or in other words, in terms of mise-en-scène – as I do later in my introduction to Purdy's short story "Mr. Evening" (1968), brings into view both the ways in which identities are produced through narration, and the strategies that Purdy employs to undermine the production of identity altogether.

Finally, Snyder touches upon an element of identity in Purdy's work that remains profoundly undertheorized in other analyses. Essays that think through the formation of identity in Purdy's fiction are predominantly limited to the discussion of sexual identity. Since same-sex desire is such a central theme in Purdy's oeuvre, and he so emphatically attempts to undo the foundations onto which we imagine our sexual identity, critics tend to overlook altogether other identity categories that Purdy tries to undermine. Skerrett, as we have seen, is an exception to the rule, as he is one of the first and only scholars to consider the position of race in Purdy's work. Snyder continues Skerrett's discussion of race, but while Skerrett is mainly interested in the representation of black American experiences, Snyder turns to the figure of the Native American. Through this figure he explores the implications of imagining national identity in Purdy's literature. Referring to S. Adams, who also broached this topic, Snyder argues that the appearance of Native American characters and themes serve "Purdy's obsessive investigation of American origins and identity, [and] 'his cumulative endeavor to chart the ancestry of the national psyche'" (Adams qtd. in Snyder, "Original Stock" 177). Purdy's portrayal of Native American characters, Snyder argues, is based on his belief in the transformative potential that these characters have on the rigid structures of American national identity: "This merger with the Indian is necessary to break away from dependence on a rigid Anglo model of identity rooted in Puritanism, to form a new national character, one that is inclusive, antiracist, and antihomophobic" (187). Thus, Snyder suggests that it is not just the exposure of sexual identity's constructedness at stake in Purdy's interrogation of identity, but also the structures of inclusion and exclusion that are organized by attachments to a national identity. In my dissertation, and especially in the final two chapters, I follow up on Snyder's dis-

cussion of national identity and analyze more fully the ways in which Purdy questions his character's attachment to national symbols as sites of identity production.

What's in a Name?

The mask metaphor that Lorch, Skerrett, and other scholars propose is appealing and hints at the constructed nature of the identities that Purdy forwards in his fiction. However, as we have seen in D. Adams's critique of the metaphor, it fails to address a fundamental question of identity which, I believe, is at the heart of Purdy's oeuvre. For Lorch, beneath the mask of social identity there is still a more genuine, more true identity that must be uncovered. Skerrett, while less negative in his appreciation of social identity's constructed nature, still sees identity at the core of a character's existence. It is my thesis that in Purdy's novelistic world, what is beneath that first mask is nothing other than yet another mask. Personal identity is just as constructed as social identity. To paraphrase Purdy in his letter to Powys: he never believed in any of those terms.

As we have seen, scholars such as Lane and Arnold have written more realized discussions on the question of identity in Purdy. They acknowledge that for Purdy, identity is always already a fiction. Throughout this dissertation I follow this analysis and argue that Purdy continuously challenges and undermines a conception of identity that relies on stable categories and an innate sense of the self. However, I push beyond the mere statement that Purdy undermines stable identity categories. I am not only interested in demonstrating that in Purdy's work identity is always a fiction, but also interested in uncovering how these identity-fictions are produced. Purdy, I suggest, presents the reader with a wide range of narrative devices that dramatize the formation of identity. In doing so, Purdy not only exposes these identities as fictions, but also provides his characters – and ultimately also his readers – with strategies to escape the machinations of restrictive identity production. Understanding the operations of identity production, I suggest, opens up a space in which we can begin to negotiate the ways in which we act out our desires outside of the confines of identity categories, and allows us to navigate what in Purdy's view is an inherently phobic social world.

To understand more fully how Purdy embraces a conception of identity as something that is always under negotiation rather than a fixed category, I turn to Lisa Duggan, who defines identity as "a narrative of a subject's location within social structure." She argues:

> As stories rather than as mere labels, identities traverse the space between the social world and subjective experience, constituting a central organizing principle connecting self and world. Individual identities, usually multiple and often contradictory, structure and give meaning to personal experience. Collective identities – of gender, race, class, or nation – forge connections among individuals and provide links between past and present, becoming the basis for cultural representation and political action. (793)

Whether individual or communal, identities always result by means of continued (re)negotiation of one's social location. Moreover, Duggan theorizes these identities as stories, as narratives that organize a person's understanding of their own and other's lives. As narratives, identities are always plural. There are multiple narratives that we can tell about ourselves. As narratives, identities are also always relational and context-bound. The stories we tell about ourselves change depending on to whom we are telling these stories and in which situation we find ourselves sharing about our lives. Finally, because they are multiple, relational, and context-bound, as narratives our identities can overlap and contradict one another at the same time.

Thinking through identity as narrative inevitably brings me to Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity (1990). Indeed, my analysis of Purdy's attempts to undermine stable identity categories is to a certain extent informed by Ricoeur's theoretical framework, for it allows me to utilize concepts from the discipline of narratology in my consideration of the question of identity in Purdy's work. If identities are not innate, but rather the result of narration, then surely we can assess the meanings and social effects that are produced by this narration through the employment of narratological concepts such as plot, character, and focalization.

However, thinking of identity as the effect of narration also gestures towards the readers of these identities. The stories that make up one's identity are not just narrated, they are also read. This reading occurs in Purdy's novelistic world between characters. Characters make assumptions about one another, or rather, they interpret one another's actions and gestures as a sign for their identity. Since these interpretations are often the result of misreading, they have devastating effects on the protagonists who resist classification into strict and immutable identity categories. This reading of narrative identity also happens between me and Purdy's novelistic world. As I seek to understand the ways in which Purdy destabilizes fixed identity categories, I employ strategies that demonstrate the effects of certain interpretative strategies, but which also privilege certain interpretations over others. As a reader of

Purdy's work, I am inevitably bound to read his undermining of identity in a certain way. However, as I hope to make clear in the chapters that follow, and in the fashion of Purdy's own attempts to undermine the idea of an innate and immutable identity, my own readings are far from conclusive. The narratives of identity can be read in many coexisting, but also incommensurable ways.

To further illustrate how identity is organized differently for different characters and in different contexts, I briefly discuss a short story and a chapter that each reflect on a similar question of identity in opposing ways. Both the short story "Don't Call Me by My Right Name" (1956/2013) and the chapter "Leave Me *Madame Girard*" from Purdy's 1959 novel *Malcolm* reflect on the function of the name for the constitution of one's identity. The chapter and the story, however, present wholly different views on what this function might actually entail for their respective protagonists.

In "Don't Call Me by My Right Name," the reader witnesses a terrible fight between Lois Klein and her husband Frank. The reason behind this fight is that, after six months of marriage, Lois, whose maiden name is McBane, still has not grown used to her new name. In fact, she loathes her husband's name, and in a public row she demands that he changes it for she "cannot go on being Mrs. Klein" (43). Lois so aggressively wants to change her name because her husband's name does not fit her, and most importantly, she has lost her own name, the name under which she is known socially and professionally. "There were hundreds of Kleins in the telephone directory," she laments, "but when people used to come to my name they recognized at once that I was the only woman going under my own special name" (46). With the loss of her name, Lois lost her identity. Her husband's name has overridden her own, and in the process somehow erased her recognizability. Her previous identity as Lois McBane has been subsumed by her husband's name, and where she used to be recognized as an individual, she now feels she has become one of many, part of an unidentifiable mass.

"Leave Me *Madame Girard*" presents us with a different version of the same story. When her husband, Girard Girard, threatens to leave her, Madame Girard suffers an identity crisis. If Girard Girard leaves her, he should at least allow her to continue using his name. She implores: "the whole world has always known me as she", and, "you could so much easier change *your* names than I mine" (*Malcolm* 136, original emphasis). Madame Girard has based her social identity solely on her husband's name. Now that he threatens to strip that name from her, she fears losing her identity as well. "A command from you cannot destroy my identity", she at first defiantly retorts, only to later realize the gravity of the situation: "you mean to destroy my identity, then?" (134–135). Yet, while she is afraid to lose her assumed identity, the situation also

makes her realize that she had already given it up at the exact moment she assumed Girard Girard's name: "her eyes fell on the intense gold letters of his identification, seeing perhaps then her own identity melting away into the letters of his name" (135). Thus, while Lois resists being identified by her husband's name, Madame Girard identifies so strongly with the name of her husband that she ceases to exist, if this name were ever taken away from her. To illustrate this point even further, the reader never knows her by any other name than Madame Girard, which the external narrator continues to use even after she and Girard Girard separate.

Bettina Schwarzschild already juxtaposes these two stories in her 1968 study of Purdy's work. She rightfully reads these two narratives as commentary on patriarchal structures that cast a woman as her husband's possession (18). As such, Schwarzschild suggests that Lois and Madame Girard do not differ as much from each other as their different responses seem to suggest. Both narratives can be read as cautionary tales to warn against the violence done to women in the patriarchal institution of marriage: when Lois angrily declares that she does not want to be known by her husband's name, he repeatedly hits her and throws her to the floor; in Madame Girard's desperation over losing her assumed identity, she threatens to take her own life.

Another trait these two women share is their concern with their social world. Both women express their reservations about how the outside world will recognize them under their new names, either after adopting or after losing their husbands' names. While both Lois and Madame Girard seem to imbue their husbands' names with significant power over their own sense of identity, they both recognize that their identities are effects of how these same names circulate in society. Lois and Madame Girard realize that their identities are produced by their social context, which is why both women respond so strongly to having their names changed. The effect of their names, be it their maiden names or their husbands' names, is that these names will be read and interpreted by others. A name functions as a signifier for one's identity, and when this signifier changes, identity changes with it. But a wrong name also invites misreading, which might be even more violent and oppressive; these potential misreadings force these characters into identity categories that limit their space for self-identification, or even non-identification. Above all, it is this violence of misreading that Purdy's protagonists attempt to resist.

In his annoyance at Madame Girard's attempt to claim his name for herself, Girard Girard sighs and says "it has been a week of melodrama, [...] a lifetime of melodrama" (137). Although clearly expressing his exasperation, Girard Girard's comment is right on target. This and other scenes from Purdy's oeuvre that undermine the fantasy of a stable identity can be read through the lens of melodrama. That

is, reading these scenes as melodramatic allows me to foreground the ways in which Purdy exposes identity as the product of narration, while also offering his protagonists means to resist the violence done by acts of reading. In doing so, I am indebted to Jonathan Goldberg, who argues that melodrama is the privileged place in which the contradictions of identity are foregrounded aesthetically (16). My use of melodrama here stems from a rich theoretical history that reflects on its theatrical and cinematic forms, and considers its aesthetic and rhetorical devices as analytical tools to foreground the operations with which narratives congeal into the fantasy of a fixed and stable identity. In what follows, I discuss three dominant views on melodrama, each of which highlights a different aspect of my understanding of the concept: melodrama as a historical theatrical genre, melodrama as an aesthetic operation, and melodrama as a affective conduit of political attachment.

Purdy and the Melodramatic Imagination

There is undoubtedly a solid connection between James Purdy's novelistic output and a theatrical, or melodramatic imagination. We find this connection in Purdy's biography, in the recurring themes of his novels, and in the ways in which these are narrated; each of these offer hints of a strong affinity with the theater and theatrical writing. Already in his childhood he wrote and staged plays for his younger brother (Uecker ix). Early in his career as a published author, Purdy revisited these first flirtations with the theater and started to write off-Broadway plays. In a letter to Powys dated February 23, 1958, Purdy expresses the anxiety he feels over trying his hand at playwriting ("Purdy to Powys 13" 60), yet this apprehension was soon culled, for his 1961 collection of short stories includes two of his early plays: the eponymous *Children Is All* and *Cracks*, the former of which was received with much acclaim; English poet Edith Sitwell even compared the play with the writing of Federico Garcia Lorca (Uecker ix). Although Purdy is much more remembered for his novels, he never stopped working as a playwright, publishing nine full-length and twenty one-act plays. Indeed, critic Douglas Turnbaugh reports that Purdy, in an interview with him, had confessed that he would like to be considered a playwright as much as a novelist (73).

Not only did Purdy continue to write for the stage throughout his life, but the stage also forms an important part of his prose. Although Purdy's biography is not the subject of my dissertation and will have only marginal influence, if at all, on my interpretation of his work, there are some interesting parallels between his biography and the characters he wrote into his novels. As certain scholars have mentioned,

in many novels we encounter characters that can clearly be traced back to real-life persons.[5] The eponymous subject of *I Am Elijah Thrush* (1972), for example, is based on real-life mime and friend of Purdy, Paul Swan (Varable). Elijah Thrush's occupation as mime provides us with the intertextual field of pantomime, which is a theatrical tradition that relies on gesticulation and mise-en-scène for the narration of its plot. Pantomime lies at the foundation of the development of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century melodrama (Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination* 62), which provides a strong enough intertextual theme and narrative device to employ as a lens through which I read Purdy's novels.

The thematic connection with melodrama is made in many of Purdy's novels, but features most evidently as intertext in *Garments the Living Wear* (1989).[6] On several occasions in the novel the external narrator mentions that its two protagonists, Jared Wakeman and Peg Sawbridge, "speak like [the] nineteenth-century melodramas" (70) they occasionally stage in their theater. The repetition of this statement produces the effect of mise-en-abyme: the novel itself becomes the theatrical stage and its protagonists are not merely actors in their own theatre, but also actors of the melodrama that is the novel itself. In the novel as well as in their own plays, they act an assigned role. In fact, without their assigned roles and without a stage on which they can act out these roles, the characters from *Garments the Living Wear* face existential crises. Their experience of identity seems wholly ingrained in their own theatricality, without which they seem to have nothing: "but the sudden realization Jared might go out of her life and leave her [Peg] without 'ideas' or 'roles', without footlights or applause or love [...] dried up her threats" (127).

Perhaps more than a thematic recurrence, melodrama also plays a significant role in Purdy's writing style. Each of his novels attests a dramatic sensibility at the heart of prose that treats its entire world as staged. One has only to look at Edward Albee's adaptation of *Malcolm* (1966) to recognize the theatrical quality of the original novel. Although the play did not meet much success – it folded a week after its Broadway premiere – it offers a good insight into the dialogic and theatrical style that can be seen as one of the most distinguished elements of Purdy's work. The theatricality of his writing, which is filled with excessive gesticulations, exclamations, and descriptions that read as stage directions, certainly opens up to an interpretational framework

5 *Cabot Wright Begins* (1964), in particular, features a host of characters who are thinly veiled caricatures of influential people in the New York publishing industry (Chupack 87–88).

6 For more examples, see the abovementioned *Malcolm* and *I Am Elijah Thrush*, and also *Out with the Stars* (1992).

concerned with the meaning-making of the specific narrative devices Purdy employs. However, if Purdy consciously invokes melodrama as an intertext, it is not just to place his work within a specific genre. He invites his readers to read his novels in a certain way; to regard them from a perspective that foregrounds certain stylistic choices. As I argue in this dissertation, the reader is invited to read Purdy's narratives as if perceived through a melodramatic lens.

The melodramatic mode can be seen as a reading strategy that is used to critically analyze Purdy's interrogation of identity. It is a lens that highlights the stylistic elements of Purdy's narration and, in doing so, allows me to ask multiple questions of these texts. I am not only interested in what kind of identities Purdy undermines, but also in the narrative structures that help him undermine the production of normative social identities. As I hope to show in this study, Purdy's use of narrative devices to expose the constructedness of identity offers a multiplicity of possible readings and meanings. Identity is, for Purdy, not only the result of narration, but the site where different narratives come together. These narratives can support or contradict one another, be incongruous or corroborate one another's stories. These narratives can narrate different events of a person's life, or nothing about this person's life at all. Still, the narratives that make up the production of one's identity coexist, regardless of whether they coincide or contradict. The production of identity, then, is the messy site onto which these different narrations converge and negotiate the relationship between the individual and social experiences of the person whose identity is narrated. Purdy does not subscribe to a totalizing reading of identity, simply because there are always different coexisting narratives in operation. Neither do I propose a totalizing reading of Purdy's oeuvre. Rather, by reading Purdy for the melodramatic, I look specifically for those moments in the text where totalizing readings and straightforward identifications are frustrated.

As mentioned above, there are different theoretical approaches to melodrama, varying from the consideration of its historical and generic roots in theater and cinema, to the discursive analysis of rhetorical strategies and political attachments. In the following section, I elaborate on these different theoretical approaches. First, I discuss melodrama as a historical genre. Theater historians such as David Grimsted, Frank Rahill, and James L. Smith had, in the '60s and '70s, begun to draw up the histories of French and American melodrama. As they foregrounded the genre's deep political ties, they managed to consider the importance of the genre for the waves of democratization from which it emerged. Later, Peter Brooks, in his seminal study *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*

(1976/85), would bring melodrama's political roots in meaningful interplay with its aesthetics, calling this principle the "mode of excess." Brooks also extrapolates his reading of melodrama as a mode to literature, making it a way of reading, rather than a set of generic qualities and requirements. Secondly, in considering melodrama as an aesthetic operation that exposes narrative devices, I turn to Thomas Elsaesser, Ernst van Alphen, and Goldberg who use the visual aesthetic of melodrama to theorize the ways in which its distribution of space, or mise-en-scène, can help us read texts beyond their plot. The ways in which a narrative is emplotted by narrative devices and stylistic choices, they argue, points towards tensions within the text and help us denaturalize the formation of identity. Finally, recent queer theorists such as Lauren Berlant and Elisabeth Anker have turned to melodrama to analyze the affective attachments of people to political narratives. They argue that the rhetoric of melodrama allows people to identify strongly with certain grand narratives, be they individual, social, communal, or national. In their analyses, too, looking closely at the melodramatic operations of affective attachments, denaturalizes these same narratives.

A Brief History of Melodrama

In the *Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, Carolyn Williams defines melodrama as "a combination of music and drama in which passages of music either alternate with passages of dramatic speech or subtend them almost continuously and in which speech and action are interrupted by moments of static pictorial composition, the tableaux" (193). By definition, then, melodrama is a genre that works across different media, combining dialogue, music, and stylized visual representation for its narration. The dramatic action that drives the narration of the play is continuously frustrated and suspended. Williams calls this narrative rhythm "suspenseful absorption pierced by intensified moments of shock, terror, or sentiment" (194). It is melodrama's interplay of different stylized forms of representation, and its tendency to employ different media in its representation and manifest itself across different media, that has led scholars to consider it a mode, rather than a genre. Arguably the best known example of this perspective is presented in Brooks's groundbreaking study in which he draws a line from melodrama's origin in pantomime theatre after the French Revolution, to the French naturalist author Honoré de Balzac and the American realist author Henry James. While Brooks admits that neither author is widely associated with the genre of melodrama, he nevertheless contends that they

both make use of stylistic devices that emanate the same excessive sensation as melodrama (20). Whenever the melodramatic qualities of these authors are acknowledged, Brooks suggests, it is to criticize their bodies of work for being vulgar:

> Balzac's use of hyperbolic figures, lurid and grandiose events, masked relationships and disguised identities, abductions, slow-acting, poisons, secret societies, mysterious parentage, and other elements from the melodramatic repertory has repeatedly been the object of critical attack, as have, still more, his forcing of narrative voice to the breathless pitch of melodrama, his insistence that life be seen always through highly colored lenses. (*Melodramatic Imagination* 3–4)

However, Brooks project is not to claim Balzac and James for the melodrama genre, but rather to show parallels between the mechanics of meaning-making in melodramatic theatre and in the nineteenth-century novel: "In considering melodrama, we are in a sense talking about a form of theatricality which will underlie novelistic efforts at representation – which will provide for the making of meaning in fictional dramatizations of existence. The nineteenth-century novel needs such a theatricality [...] to get its meanings across, to invest in its renderings of life a sense of memorability and significance" (13).

The meaning-making that Brooks identifies in both melodrama and the nineteenth-century novel occurs through the mode of excess which announces itself "over and over in clear language, [it rehearses its] conflicts and combats, it reenacts the menace of evil and the eventual triumph of morality made operative and evident" (15). The Manichean overtones of melodramatic representation stem from its roots in post-Revolutionary France (Brooks 14–15; Williams 194). As the first melodramas responded to the changed political landscape of France, its writers drew from a revolutionary rhetoric that imagined a just society in which the absolute rule of church and state were replaced with a bourgeois understanding of morals. Thus, Brooks argues that the melodramatic mode is "a central fact of the modern sensibility [...] in that modern art has typically felt itself to be constructed on, and over, the void, postulating meanings and symbolic systems which have no certain justification because they are backed by no theology and no universally accepted social code" (21). At the core of its representation, then, we find in melodrama narrative devices that foreground the ethical struggles of its protagonists to imagine a world in which the social codes must be continuously renegotiated. The ruptures that frustrate its narrative do not merely produce a sensational effect that allows its

audience into its narrative world – an effect of melodrama that, as we will see, undergirds recent theorization of melodrama as a political strategy – but also draws attention to the exact moment at which one moral code supersedes the other by temporarily suspending decision-making by means of stylized intrusions, such as tableaux vivants. This last insight is of great importance for theorists who consider melodrama an aesthetic operation that exposes the very narrative structures onto which its own world is built. Before elaborating on these two separate effects of melodrama, I want to first briefly address the history of American melodrama. The transposition of the genre, from post-Revolutionary France to the recently established nation of the United States of America, resulted in diverging practices on the melodramatic stage. Faced with an audience that had different expectations of its theatrical representations and, in effect, was being asked different questions regarding its audience's national identity, American melodrama developed in different ways than its European counterparts. These developments, however, resonate with the processes of meaning-making that Purdy employs in his interrogation of sexual and national identity.

The first melodramas performed on American soil were adaptations of successful European plays. William Dunlap, one of the first entrepreneurs of the melodramatic stage in the United States, imported a host of German and French plays at the turn of the nineteenth century. The popular plays by German dramatist August von Kotzebue, especially, formed the mainstay of Dunlap's repertoire, and by translating at least one per year since 1800, he provided a steady stream of European melodramas for American audiences (Grimsted 8–9). However, since these productions were primarily by European authors or followed European themes, melodrama remained a relatively marginal phenomenon in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was only after the memory of the American War of Independence against the British Empire had receded in the background that American playwrights turned to themes and narratives that were uniquely American, and thus allowed for a dramatic reflection on American national identity. Among the most successful of these national themes were patriotism and the frontier. Morality plays that addressed the differences between the countryside and the city were also popular (Rahil 228–229; 254–261). The war plays that reinforced the young nation's sense of patriotism still defined true American values in opposition to the villainous "craven, double-dealing Tories or heartless, overbearing Britishers" (229). The popular melodramatic themes of frontier and country-versus-city, however, looked for American values within the nation's own borders, and in doing so, exposed moral dilemmas that clouded the national imagination. Both plays that were set in the Wild West, which explored the meaning of the frontier to American

national identity, and domestic plays that opposed the vices of the city to the virtue of the countryside needed to address the racial differences that governed notions of citizenship.

Grimsted argues that because of American playwrights' desires to contribute to the production of a national literature, the prevailing sentiment of drama was the question of nationality (138). Nationality was predominantly dramatized in a "liberty-tyranny motif", but it also featured in plays that celebrated the liberty offered by the frontier (162–165). However, while the sense of nationality in war plays was easily established by juxtaposing Americans with British or Spanish forces – the former in relation to the War of 1812, and the latter with regards to unrest along the southern border persisting throughout the first half of the nineteenth century – the frontier plays could only imagine a sense of nationality by turning the indigenous inhabitants of the western territories into the nation's alien Other. "The convention of the bad Indian prevailed over that of the 'noble savage' in melodramas written around the ever receding frontier, becoming noticeable in the forties" (Rahil 232). While the spectacle of the Wild West drew large crowds, especially when the narratives were based on the adventures of Buffalo Bill, the narrative increasingly pushed into the direction of heroic frontier men who had to rescue homesteaders from the dangers of massacre at the hands of the "Indians" (Rahil 235–237). Domestic melodramas, on the other hand, turned to the juxtaposition of country and city to address American values. While, as Rahil explains, initially the villain of American melodrama would be played by British lords or hereditary landlords, Rahil explains that "for the intensely parochial and resentful rural nation that America had already become in the 1840s, the city smoothie filled the bill nicely." As Rahil describes:

> With his dandified attire, his cane and his moustache – that badge of the sissy in the eyes of all right-thinking patriots – this figure was a symbol of the hatred and mistrust with which the rustic viewed the growing wealth and power of the cities. Usually the slicker wears European clothes and affects European speech and manners, and his cynical principles and turpitudinous conduct are traceable to the influence of that decadent continent. (257–258)

However, while domestic melodrama turned to opposition between country and city to imagine the values that could be attributed to American national identity, playwrights also began to consider to the paradox of the rural American economy, which promoted the great American value of liberty, while being predominantly

based on the institution of slavery. By far the best known and most successful of American melodramas is George L. Aiken's adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which debuted in September 1852 (Rahil 248–249). The message of the play was already popularized by Stowe's widely read novel, yet it was amplified by its melodramatic staging, which allowed for a strong emotional identification between the audience and the protagonists. Grimsted suggests that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was indeed the first play to draw heavily upon mechanics of identification to communicate its political message (161). The play's tremendous success – it encored across the country and internationally for at least five decades – further solidified melodrama's structuring around absolute moral values. It exemplifies what James L. Smith identifies as an element of social protest at the heart of every melodrama. Indeed, he suggests that "patterns of social protest fit so snugly into melodrama that few nineteenth-century examples can resist a random fling at some *bête noire*" (73). Melodrama, then, was not only a vehicle that solidified the moral world of theater-going people, but was also a theatrical form "structured to expose a significant injustice" (73). However, the continued success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also sheds light on the impossibility of representation on the melodramatic stage. Melodrama never sought to achieve realism in its staging of sensational plays, but the popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* further highlights the genre's theatricality and its narrative constructedness. In order to ensure a continued flow of theatergoers, theater producers drew on increasingly sensationalist stage designs, effects, and characters, which led some companies to stage chase scenes with actual bloodhounds, or recast the play as a burlesque show (Rahil 252).

With the arrival of cinematic forms of entertainment around the turn of the twentieth century, staged melodramas quickly lost their popularity. This was, however, not the end of melodrama as such. Rather, the structural elements of melodramatic representation – its gestures, stylized staging, and moralistic stories – easily translated to the new medium of film. As melodrama as a genre already depended on visual representation rather than dialogue, many of the popular plays and actors of the melodramatic stage found their way to the silver screen (Rahil 297–298). This transition from stage to cinema, in which the same representational repertoire could adapt itself to a new medium, exemplifies its transmedial modality. At the same time, this transition also foregrounded what Mieke Bal has called aspects of storytelling such as space, rhythm and character (*Narratology* 78), which melodrama employs for its storytelling. It is the former of these narrative aspects that I want to consider by turning to a different theoretical framing of melodrama that takes its cue from the genres visual characteristics.

Melodrama as Mise-en-Scène

In his seminal essay "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama" (1972/91), Thomas Elsaesser describes Hollywood melodrama as "a particular form of dramatic mise-en-scène, characterized by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual or literary ones. Dramatic situations are given an orchestration which will allow for complex aesthetic patterns" (75). He continues, that "this type of cinema depends on the ways 'melos' is given to 'drama' by means of lightning, montage, visual rhythm, décor, style of acting, and music – that is, on the ways the mise-en-scène translates character into action" (78). With this definition Elsaesser draws attention to the original meaning of melodrama as dramatic theater accompanied by music to convey a specific meaning to the audience. The audience understands the emotions and the intensity of a particular scene by listening to the music that performs a running commentary. At the same time, he suggests that the visual organization of the film screen can be considered a similar form of orchestration. Moreover, filmic melodrama is not necessarily driven by plot. Similar to nineteenth-century stage melodrama, the plot of film melodrama is often punctured and frustrated by different narrative elements that at first glance do not necessarily contribute to the advancement of the plot. These elements, such as music, color, and objects in space, are organized in what Elsaesser calls mise-en-scène.

In response to Elsaesser, van Alphen writes that "when the melodramatic is given form through mise-en-scène instead of emplotment, it leads to very consciously elliptical narratives, or, in other words, to the feeling that there is always more to tell than can be said" ("Legible Affects" 27–28). This feeling that there is something in the narrative that cannot be represented in language, Elsaesser suggests, is located in cinema's already excessive mode of representation. The combination of dialogue, music, light, color, and time, which is integral to almost every Hollywood film production, overburdens the film with meaning in a way that, if emplotment were considered, would limit the interpretation of the text. Elsaesser argues:

> If it is true that *speech* in the American cinema loses some of its semantic importance in favour of its material aspects as sound, then conversely lighting, composition, décor increase their semantic and syntactic contribution to the aesthetic effect. They become functional and integral elements in the construction of meaning. This is the justification for giving critical importance to the mise-en-scène over intellectual content or story-value. (76)

Elsaesser's proposition to privilege mise-en-scène as an analytical approach to understanding processes of meaning-making in melodramatic films opens up a register of meanings and connotations that remain hidden should we look at these films exclusively on the level of emplotment. Films by Vincente Minnelli, Douglas Sirk, and Alfred Hitchcock begin to mean in multiple different ways when attention is given to the position of the characters in the frame, the distribution of objects across the cinematic space, or the lighting that adjusts the color palette of a specific scene. "The banality of the objects combined with the repressed anxieties and emotions," he writes about the Claudette Colbert vehicle *Since Your Went Away* (1944), "force a contrast that makes the scene almost epitomize the relation of décor to characters in melodrama: the more the setting fills with objects to which the plot gives symbolic significance, the more the characters are enclosed in seemingly ineluctable situations" (84). Thus, the placement of a bannister between a woman and her daughter can signify a rift in their familial relationship, as is the case in Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959), or when Minnelli's characters find themselves in an emotionally precarious situation, they are usually surrounded by precious and fragile objects as if to comment on the delicacy of their position (82).

Van Alphen elaborates on Elsaesser's use of mise-en-scène in his own reading of Andrew Wyeth's painting *Christina's World* (1958). He demonstrates that a certain configuration of visual elements can provoke a specific narrative framework outside of what is represented ("Legible Affects" 31). Understood as the way in which different visual elements are distributed onto the canvas (the position of the girl, the narrow framing of the house in the background, the low angle of the frame, etc.), van Alphen argues that the painting's mise-en-scène allows us to read the image within a narrative framework that is not necessarily suggested by the visual elements themselves. The constellation of these disparate visual elements makes the scene readable as a Hitchcockian thriller: we can imagine the still image as the suspenseful moment in which a chased girl has fallen down just before she has reached the safe haven of the houses in the background (31). Considering the mise-en-scène of the narration activates a wider array of narrative possibilities that are not always present on the level of plot. Van Alphen, then, uses melodrama as a reading strategy that "[focuses] on the articulation and punctuation of spatial and compositional elements. The resulting constellation could only be considered as 'constituted of meaningful signs' when considered as a melodramatic scene" (32). Melodrama, beyond a genre or a mode of representation, is then also an attitude of the reader towards the distribution of narrative elements of the text, which results in a more complex reading than just reading for the plot.

In van Alphen's reading of *Christina's World* he returns to Elsaesser's assessment that Hollywood melodramas expose contradictions of American civilization, and, in doing so, have turned "the American dream into its proverbial nightmare" (Elsaesser 89). Indeed, van Alphen considers the visual elements of the painting in relation to its title and suggest that what we are seeing is not just a woman who has fallen to the ground, but the suffocating affective relationship between the woman, Christina, and her world: small-town America ("Legible Affects" 30). Although she might be on the run from something outside of the painting's frame, the house to which she reaches will not liberate, but rather imprison her. Thus, van Alphen interprets the painting as a failure of self-fulfillment, as a frustration of the American Dream itself. The affective relationship between Christina and her "world," van Alphen argues, is not represented as narrative as such, but instead "evoked and reinforced stylistically by the mise-en-scène of an ambiguous emplotment" (31). Reading the painting in terms of a melodramatic mise-en-scène thus brings into view aspects of the story that are not explicitly represented by the narration itself, but which are suggested by narrative form.

In this dissertation, I argue that Elsaesser's and van Alphen's approaches can be effectively employed to understand the operation of mise-en-scène in non-visual narrative media as well. Although mise-en-scène as an analytical concept stems from narrative genres that have a decidedly visual component, its application in literary analysis allows me to consider an aspect of storytelling that is often undertheorized in narratology: space. In her seminal study to the theory of narrative, Bal already acknowledges that the concept of space is of often overlooked by narratologists, perhaps because it seems so self-evident (*Narratology* 132). More recently, Sheila Hones has also drawn attention to the disregard for narrative space in the field of narratology (687). In her study, Bal makes the distinction between place and space, in which place refers to "the topological positions in which the actors are situated and the events take place," while space indicates the way in which these places are perceived in the narrative (133). The point of perception could be a characters in the text, but it can also be located outside of these characters. For example, the observation of the narrative space originate from the external narrator as well. Space, then, concerns the focalization of place.

My understanding of mise-en-scène combines the perceptual representation of space in Bal, with Elsaesser's insight that different narrative elements are always situated in a spatial relation to one another and as such produce a meaning beyond the mere emplotment of the narrative. Other than Bal's discussion of space, mise-en-scène considers all narrative elements, and not just those characterizing an actual

space or the objects within it. However, Bal's focus on the perception of space, allows me to introduce the notion of focalization to Elsaesser's concept. Thus, in reading the mise-en-scène of Purdy's novels, I consider, among other things, the experience and appropriation of space by characters, the intensity of emotions and gestures, the layering of different focalizors, spatial connotations evoked by the use of topoi, the use of ellipses, the relationship between characters and objects, and, ultimately, the narrative location of identity.

Reading Purdy's narratives as melodramatic mise-en-scène enables me to foreground stylistic devices that are central to his narration, and by doing so I undertake Purdy's project to interrogate the narratives with which we construe the fiction of identity. To do this, I take my cue from the analytical perspective of melodrama employed by Goldberg in his recent inquiry into the genre. He adopts Elsaesser's approach to film melodrama and uses it to push on those moments in which narrative elements frustrate processes of emplotment, and which then give way to an analysis of the text from the perspective of mise-en-scène. Goldberg, too, defines melodrama as a transmedial modality; he identifies at its core "an aesthetics of the impossible situation, where 'of' means both 'derived from' and 'representing'" (155). An aesthetics, then, that emerges out of the same impossible situation which it represents. As such, it is an effect produced by the aesthetic expression of suspending an impossible plot situation's resolution. For Goldberg, this aesthetic expression is most vividly dramatized in the musical accompaniment that makes up the melos in melodrama. Thus he narrows his study of melodrama down to its interaction with music across different media – opera, film, literature, and television – in which musical themes are employed not only to draw attention to a certain irresolution in the plot, but also to underscore the impossibility of any such resolution and its promise of a happy ending.

Music accentuates plot and underscores the tension that must be resolved, or, indeed, refuses to be resolved; as Goldberg discusses, music dramatizes the suspension of a resolution. Thus, in Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, the section entitled "Melodram" – the only part in which music and spoken word are not strictly separated – leads not to the unmasking of Fidelio as Leonore, but on the contrary marks the final moment in which questions about Leonore/Fidelio's gender identity remain unresolved (9). This suspension of resolution prompts Goldberg to move away from Brooks's definition of the melodramatic moral world, which hinges on a moralistic struggle between Manichaean oppositions that are acted out onto the characters, towards a notion of melodrama that undermines these oppositions by interrupting the identification with either option. In Beethoven's "Melodram", Leonore/Fidelio is

both Florestan's wife as well as the betrothed of Rocco's daughter; this duality is reflected in the musical themes and movements that accompany the scene. In neither guise can Leonore/Fidelio rescue Florestan from his imprisonment: as Fidelio she is charged with the preparation of Florestan's grave, as Leonore she lacks the power to effect Florestan's release from prison. The "Melodram" ends at the moment of Leonore/Fidelio's unmasking, but at this point a resolution of the identity question cannot lead to a happy ending. Only the intervention of a *deus ex machina* – Florestan's pardon – can resolve the impossible plot situation (11).

Goldberg extends his reading of musical accompaniment in Beethoven's "Melodram" to analyze music found in various media. In doing so, his study transitions from music as a form of representation – in opera, in cinema – to music as a thematic plot element in literature. In the move across media, and the accompanying question of how music as form of representation can be transposed into a literary device, Goldberg follows Elsaesser's method of applying mise-en-scène to non-visual narrative media. The impossible plot situation, Goldberg argues, manifests itself in the mise-en-scène, which organizes the special distribution of narrative elements that dramatize irresoluble tensions in the plot. These tensions often pertain to questions of identity, as is the case with the "Melodram" in *Fidelio*, but also, Goldberg suggests, in the movies of Douglas Sirk, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Alfred Hitchcock. Identity-based tension, according to Goldberg, likewise features in the novels of Patricia Highsmith and Willa Cather. For Goldberg, in each of these texts the plot's drive is subsumed by musical and visual narrative devices, such as camera angles or the use of extra-diegetic music, at the exact moment that a crisis of sexual identity arises. These interventions in the plot dramatize the impossibility of representing sexuality.

Sexuality, I argue, is something one experiences or acts out, but which cannot be reduced to identity. The moment in which one is forced to announce their sexuality as identity – think of the confessional moment of "coming out of the closet" – brings about a crisis of legibility. Cultural and social conventions demand that the body is made legible by signifying a specific sexual identity. The ways in which people comport themselves, the way they gesture, or the way in which their voices inflect are socially and culturally coded as signifiers of their sexual identity. However, because they are so coded, cultural conventions of sexual identity often precede the experience of sexuality itself. The announcement of sexual identity is, then, the consolidation of these reading conventions, rather than a representation of the experience of sexuality. However, in the act of enunciation, the experience becomes subsumed by the fantasy of sexual identity. Experience, indeed, becomes secondary to the imagined fact of

identity. In this dissertation, I suggest that by reading narratives of sexuality for the melodramatic – e.g. by suspending the impossible plot situation of the "closet", or by pausing on the mise-en-scène of these narratives – we can resist the urge to reduce sexualities to the fantasy of sexual identity.

Melodrama as Political Rhetoric

The third approach to melodrama that informs my own analytical method sees it as a political strategy that introduces the Manichean worldview of nineteenth-century melodrama into contemporary political discourse. In using this approach, political and queer thinkers such as Anker and Berlant analyze how certain political discourses produce affective operations that drive people to attach to a collective, national identity. Echoing the modality of melodrama that Williams and Brooks already identified, Anker suggest that "melodrama is not merely a type of film or literary genre, but a pervasive cultural mode that structures the presentation of political discourse and national identity in contemporary America" ("Villains, Victims and Heroes" 23). Reflecting on discourse produced by media and in politics in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York City's World Trade Center, Anker considers this melodramatic mode conducive to the production of an American national identity: "it offers a morally legible national identity by positioning the U.S. as a victim engaged in a battle against evil" ("Villains, Victims and Heroes" 23). This national identity is produced by what Anker calls melodramatic political discourse, which "shapes the legitimation strategies of national politics, and the very operations of state power." She continues:

> *melodramatic political discourse* casts politics, policies, and practices of citizenship within a moral economy that identifies the nation state as a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action. It locates goodness in the suffering of the nation, evil in its antagonist, and heroism in sovereign acts of war and global control as expressions of virtue. (*Orgies of Feeling* 2, original emphasis)

Anker then points out an inherent tension within the political discourses that shape American national identity: it is at once "the feminized, virginal victim and the aggressive, masculinized hero in the story of freedom" (2–3). The American nation is cast in multiple, irreconcilable roles on the world stage that are legitimized by

rhetorical leaps and ruses of political discourse. This mode of melodrama harks back to Brooks's claim that melodrama is a proponent of the modern sensibility since it postulates "meanings and symbolic systems which have no certain justification because they are backed by no theology and no universally accepted social code" (*Melodramatic Imagination* 21). According to Anker, in the narrative of American national identity, this principle of melodrama translates into the promise of freedom as the nation's absolute virtue: "the moral legibility of melodramatic political discourse is in the service of an expectation that freedom is forthcoming for both injured citizens and the nation state" (*Orgies of Feeling* 8). Anker extensively analyzes political speeches and media representations of the September 11 attacks and the subsequent War on Terror from this perspective of melodrama to highlight the moments in these discourses that produce melodramatic affective attachments to the American ideal of freedom, which in turn the Bush administration used to mobilize nationwide support for its invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Although Anker convincingly identifies the workings of melodrama in political discourse, she remains decidedly negative in her assessment of melodramatic operations in contemporary American public life. In conclusion to her analysis of the melodramatic mode in media production after the September 11 attacks, she writes that "the most dangerous implication of the melodramatic national identity during September 11 was that it took power away from citizens by encouraging them to assume that state power was an unquestionable moral imperative in fighting the eternal battle between good and evil" ("Villains, Victims and Heroes" 36). Melodramatic political discourse, then, takes agency away from those who are addressed by it and who subsequently attach themselves to its symbolic imagery. Melodramatic political discourse, then, is a form of affective attachment that Berlant has called "cruel optimism", and which she succinctly defines as a relation that exists "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (*Cruel Optimism* 1). That is to say, these relations are not inherently cruel, but become so when someone's investment in a specific narrative obfuscates the ways in which he or she is oppressed by that very same narrative. For Anker this means that the American public's attachment to melodramatic political discourse that promises the ideal of liberty obscures the ways in which this same discourse legitimizes domestic policies of surveillance and oppression: "In its insistence on Manicheistic designations and the redemptive power of fighting evil, melodrama immediately foreclosed the asking of questions about responsibility, morality, and long-term implications of government action. Melodrama eliminated the space for complexity and ambiguity in which these questions could be posed" (36).

While I agree with Anker's assessment that melodramatic political discourse forges affective attachments that coerce its addressee to invest in political choices that are ultimately not conducive to their own wellbeing, I do not limit my understanding of melodrama to a rhetorical strategy that disables agency in a population. After all, as Berlant notes, "melodrama is associated historically with the breakdown of political regimes (of class, of government, of family)" (*Cruel Optimism* 157). Melodrama is not just a mode that divests its audience from agency, but also a mode in which its audience can shape and imagine alternative organizations of their public life. Asessing the production of national identity through the lens of melodrama, I argue, enables us to critically assess the operations of the cultural, social, and political narratives through which this identity is constituted. Melodrama, I suggest, is not merely a mode by which people are coerced to invest in an idealized image of their national identity. Rather, the use of melodrama in Purdy produces a space in which citizens negotiate the terms with which they organize their own sense of citizenship and attachments to the state.

For Berlant, affective operation of cruel optimism manifests itself in the impasse (*Cruel Optimism* 4). The figure of the impasse is reminiscent of Goldberg's impossible plot situation in which an irresoluble situation, of which all possible outcomes are detrimental to the protagonist's wellbeing, is suspended by aesthetic operations. Berlant defines the impasse as follows:

> [T]he impasse is a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event. (*Cruel Optimism* 4)

The impasse, then, is an irresoluble situation in which available epistemic frameworks fail to make sense of the world. Contrary to Goldberg's notion of the impossible plot situation, which hinges on a spatiotemporal relation between plot and mise-en-scène, Berlant sees the impasse as a predominantly temporal situation. In fact, she sees melodrama itself as "fundamentally a temporal mode, focusing on precarity but also on the urgent need to wrest the present both from the forms we know [...] and from the future-oriented ones to which the claims of the present are so often oppressively deferred" (*Cruel Optimism* 158). In her identification of melodrama within

the political realm, Berlant recognizes the agency with which citizens negotiate the organization of their present – which is inherently nostalgic – even if this negotiation takes the form of impasse.

The space in which these negotiations assume the shape of a national identity is what Berlant calls the National Symbolic, which consists of the institutions that make up "the *political* space of the nation, which is not merely juridical, territorial (*jus soli*), genetic (*jus sanguinis*), linguistic, or experiential, but some tangled cluster of these" (*Anatomy* 5). The National Symbolic, however, produces an affective relationship between the citizen and the state, which she calls national fantasy, or the operation by which "national culture becomes local – through the images, narratives, monuments, and the sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness" (*Anatomy* 5). It is in the production of national fantasy that the temporality of the melodramatic impasse is reconfigured spatiotemporally through the working of mise-en-scène. For example, commenting on Nathaniel Hawthorne's introduction to *The Scarlett Letter*, "The Custom-House", Berlant suggests that his writings constitute "the mental projections of the subject who has been politically socialized within the '*mise-en-scène* of desire' that constitutes the discourse of American national identity" (*Anatomy* 5, original emphasis). As such, the National Symbolic functions as a screen onto which national fantasies are projected in the shape of narratives and other cultural productions. This "cultural expression of national fantasy," Berlant writes, "is crucial for the political legitimacy of the nation: it is evidence of the nation's utopian promise to oversee a full and just integration of persons, 'the people,' and the state" (*Anatomy* 21). The National Symbolic shores up national identity by organizing national fantasy in its mise-en-scène. By framing national identity through the lens of melodrama, we can critically assess the way in which it is produced. I consider the mise-en-scène of the National Symbolic as a means to understand the ways in which it enjoins incongruent and opposing national fantasies into the narration of national identity. As such, the National Symbolic produces a fantasy of national identity that is burdened with the expectation of coherence and consistency, even if at the very site of its constitution, this fantasy is riddled with contradictions. Suspending the constitution of this national identity, then, returns us to Goldberg's definition of melodrama as the aesthetics of the impossible plot situation: in the moment of its suspension, we recognize that national identity is an impossibility in and of itself.

"Mr. Evening": Possessed by Mise-en-Scène

How, then, do I envision the reading of melodramatic mise-en-scène in Purdy's work? As should be clear, my understanding of melodramatic mise-en-scène goes beyond spatial representation in narrative. Besides a referential notion of mise-en-scène, I employ a notion of narrative mise-en-scène that considers the spatial distribution of narrative elements in the text. This makes possible a reading of the text that pushes beyond the plot and brings into view tensions that the narrative would otherwise occlude. This does not mean, however, that the thematic or referential representation of space in narrative cannot point us towards the workings of narrative mise-en-scène. In order to illuminate the interplay between referential mise-en-scène and narrative mise-èn-scene, I close this introduction with a brief analysis of Purdy's 1969 short story, "Mr. Evening." This story demonstrates the ways in which interpretative attention to narrative mise-en-scène contribute to a better understanding of the plot by dramatizing the inner life of its eponymous character through the spatial distribution of both referential space and narrative space.

There is a brief passage in "Mr. Evening" that stands out for its theatrical use of space and positioning of the two main characters in meaningful opposition to one another. These two characters are Mrs. Owens, a rich elderly woman who owns a collection of exquisite heirlooms that are worthy of "finding a home only in the Louvre" (289), and Mr. Evening, a young collector who agrees to visit her every Thursday in the hopes of acquiring a rare item from her collection. They move through this scene with no seeming purpose, or at least no purpose to advance the plot. Yet, while the plot is temporarily put to a halt, the narrator hints at how we should read their relationship through a description of their gestures and their position in relation to each other, which almost reads like stage directions in a pantomime:

> She now rose and stood for a moment, so that the imposition of her height over him, seated in his low easy chair, was emphasized, then walking over to a tiny beautiful peachwood table, looked at something on it. His own attention still occupied with her presence did not move for a moment to what she was bestowing a long calm glance on. She made no motion to touch the object on the table before her. Though his vision clouded a bit, he looked directly at it now, and saw what it was, and saw there could be no mistake about it. It was the pale rose shell-like 1910 hand-painted china cup. (279)

The narrative only returns to the plot in the last sentence of this fragment as the narrator mentions the china cup, an item from Mrs. Owens's inventory that Mr. Evening hopes to acquire. The movements and gestures that make up the rest of the segment do nothing to advance the plot. Instead, they guide the interpretation of space in this story. Mrs. Owens's towering over Mr. Evening and her directing his attention towards the coveted object emphasize the power play at the heart of the story. We find that the price of the hand-painted china cup and other antiquities that Mr. Evening wishes to purchase turns out to be Mrs. Owens's acquisition of Mr. Evening himself. That is to say, to possess the prized collection of Mrs. Owens, Mr. Evening must first become part of that collection. In fact, none of the priceless items in Mrs. Owens's possession are for Mr. Evening to acquire unless he becomes part of the surroundings in which Mrs. Owens secludes herself. When he inquires after a rare ingrain carpet, Mrs. Owens responds violently and exclaims that "no one who does not live here, you see, can see the carpet" (287). What appears to be a strange requirement for the purchase of antiquated objects turns out to be an elaborate scheme to make Mr. Evening a part of her collection instead. This plot is already alluded to earlier in the narrative when we are told that Mrs. Owens has "the tell-tale look of anticipation on [her] face which demonstrated that she 'wanted' Mr. Evening with almost the same inexplicable maniacal whim which she had once long ago demonstrated toward a certain impossible-to-find Spanish medieval chair" (278).

The power game that is played between Mrs. Owens and Mr. Evening is already commented upon by Baldanza ("Paradoxes of Patronage" 351–356). He identifies some paradoxes in "Mr. Evening", such as the fact that Mr. Evening "appears to be busy and idle at the same time", that Mrs. Owens invites Mr. Evening, an antique dealer, into her home although she is uninterested in selling or showing him "the slightest article from her collection" and that the animate Mr. Evening is to become the crown jewel of her inanimate collection of heirlooms (351). Baldanza reads these juxtapositions as the power play of a patron and protegé, in which Mrs. Owens fulfills the former role. Patronage is, according to Baldanza, so pervasive in the work of Purdy that he calls it an "ur-theme that underlies all the works" (348). Although this might be true of several of Purdy's novels, especially the earlier ones such as *Malcolm* and *63: Dream Palace*, I think that the power play in "Mr. Evening" should not necessarily be read as the dynamics of patronage, but rather as Mrs. Owens's wish to possess that which her own collection cannot offer her: the "unnegotiable human face" (285), or the beauty of youth that Mr. Evening possesses.

The theatrical description of movement and gestures prompts a further reading of the use of space in this short story. Such a reading shows, for example, how Mrs.

Owens's scheme to acquire the youthful beauty of Mr. Evening is dramatized through spatial descriptions that, as the plot thickens, increase in frequency. While in the beginning of the story the characters' position and movement in space are only sporadically described, from the moment that Mrs. Owens's scheme is set in motion, those spatial descriptions become increasingly frequent up until the point that action becomes almost completely immersed in spatial descriptions. And, as the movement of the plot is taken over by an increased attention to space, Mr. Evening, too, becomes increasingly confined to the space that is detailed.

"Mr. Evening" begins with a curious scene in which Mrs. Owens shows her sister Pearl a notice in the newspaper that was placed by Mr. Evening. In this notice, Mr. Evening enumerates certain invaluable antique objects that he wishes to acquire, and which Mrs. Owens recognizes as belonging to her collection. This leads her to conclude that this advertisement was meant solely for her, and she thus decides to invite him over. However, as soon as Mr. Evening enters her house, she reminds him that "nothing is for sale, and won't be even if we should die" (278). Instead she clarifies that she has asked him to visit her because of his quality of "wanting so deeply what [he wants]" (280), a quality that is to serve as an appreciation of her "lifelong success" as a collector. She requires him to visit her every Thursday for sessions of looking at and appreciating her heirlooms, which, as she obliquely suggests, will "pay off" (281) for Mr. Evening.

At this point in the story little attention is paid to the decor and surroundings in which the narrative takes place. The narrator briefly introduces Mrs. Owens's mansion, a secluded space that is described as "a huge pillared house" (277) and "protected from the street by massive wrought-iron bars" (273). This sense of seclusion is underscored as we learn that "Mrs. Owens never invited anybody from the outside" and her heirlooms are "kept from daylight as well as human eyes, locked away in the floors above her living room" (277). The sense of space that is invoked in these passages looms over the remainder of the narrative and could also be read into the relationship between Mrs. Owens and Mr. Evening. Space is already heavily saturated with a meaning that prefigures the resolution of the plot, and even though such spatial descriptions feature only sporadically in these first sections of the narrative, the theatrical style that is employed indicates a meaningful relation to the narration itself – much like the stylistic theatricality of the John Flaxman drawings that Mrs. Owens peruses during one of Mr. Evening's visits might be read as a mise-en-abyme for Mrs. Owens's design to entomb Mr. Evening into her own collection (283).

The emphatic allusion to Flaxman, an eighteenth-century draughtsman and sculptor of funerary monuments, points the reader towards the architectural orga-

nization – the mise-en-scène – that informs my interpretation of the story. Known for his minimalistic architectural use of space in both his etching of Dante's *Inferno* as well as the tombs he created, Flaxman draws attention to the meaning of spatial composition in the representation of allegorical figures and scenes (Symmons 511). Similarly, "Mr. Evening" consists of meaningful spatial compositions, not only in the form of descriptions of space, but also in the rhythm and frequency of spatial references throughout the narrative. I suggest that we read the narrative's mise-en-scène – that is, the narrative distribution of spatial references – as emblematic for Mrs. Owens's scheme of entrapping Mr. Evening as the living crown jewel of her collection of inanimate heirlooms. If this scheme is already prefigured in the symbolic meaning that can be attributed to the way in which space is represented as confining in the first part of the narrative, this is certainly also true for the way in which space functions on a wholly different level in the last part of the narrative.

It is only in the fourth section of the narrative that the descriptions of space become not only increasingly frequent, but also increasingly claustrophobic. After a snowstorm during one of his visits, Mr. Evening falls under a spell of paralysis and no longer seems able to move. Confined to his chair, he stays overnight and when he is brought to the restroom the next morning he urinates a stream of blood (287). These events prompt Mrs. Owens to keep Mr. Evening in her mansion. What follows is a series of tableaux in which the reader is limited to the perspective of Mr. Evening, who, from the confines of his chair, is frightfully aware of the commotion taking place in rooms adjacent to and above the room in which he is seated. This limitation to the focalization of Mr. Evening emphasizes his immobile state. While in the earlier part of the narrative, location and space were featured only marginally – albeit certainly meaningfully – the fourth and longest section consists, for the most part, of spatial indications. From the moment Mr. Evening becomes paralyzed, the narrative suspends the advancement of the plot in favor of spatial descriptions that tie Mr. Evening even further down to his arrested and isolated state: "The room in which he had sat these past days, however many, four, six, a fortnight perhaps, the room which had been Mrs. Owens's and her sister's on those first Thursday nights of his visits was now only his alone, and the two women had passed on to other quarters in a house whose chambers were, like its heirlooms, difficult, perhaps impossible to number" (290).

In addition to the confinement that Mr. Evening experiences physically, his isolation from other spaces in the house also reflect on an growing mental unease as he loses any sense of time and eventually becomes suspicious of every sound that he hears. Being closed off from other spaces in Mrs. Owens's mansion, Mr. Evening

begins to imagine how the noises and voices he hears in the adjoining room are the sounds of conspiracies that connive to do away with Mrs. Owens's collection (288). The sudden appearance of his personal effects and the carpentering he hears upstairs reinforces this suspicion. Upon asking one of Mrs. Owens's many servants, he learns that, indeed, preparations are being made for him to stay indefinitely; in fact, Mrs. Owens even has an antique bed refashioned to accommodate the unusual length of Mr. Evening (292).

As I have suggested, there is a certain theatricality that emanates from this use of space. If the allusion to the architectural drawings of Flaxman help us to see the use of space in "Mr. Evening" as orchestrated, and perhaps even allegorical, the increase of spatial descriptions that frustrates the plot's advancement should certainly be read through a similar lens. Earlier references to locations and features, such as rooms and buildings, and the wrought-iron bars that adorn the windows of Mrs. Owens's mansion, already impart an underlying sense of captivity. A schematic analysis of the frequency of spatial references in the narrative reinforces such a reading. Whereas the architecture of the earlier sections is loose fitting, in the fourth and last section it suddenly draws closer and ensnares Mr. Evening until Mrs. Owens literally "fixe[s] him with her gaze" (294). Indeed, at the conclusion of the story, we find Mr. Evening naked in an antique bed, sipping from the rare china cup which he so coveted and which he is now allowed to use since "all days are Thursday from now on" (295); Mr. Evening has become a permanent addition to Mrs. Owens's inventory of priceless objects.

In the above analysis I have responded to Baldanza's reading of the story as a narrative about the dynamics of patronage. His analysis of the narrative remains limited to a thematic discussion of paradoxical situations that, agreed, dramatize the dynamics between Mrs. Owens and Mr. Evening. However, in his reading he cannot account for the consequences that Mrs. Owens's power play have for Mr. Evening's identity. In Mrs. Owens's scheme of entrapment, she is less interested in being Mr. Evening's patron. Instead, she desires to possess him, but in order to do so, Mr. Evening must first transform into an object that she can collect; he must literally become one with his surroundings. The distribution of spatial references, then, works as a device to effect this transformation from subject into object. Whereas the first section of the narrative prefigures the entrapment of Mr. Evening in its gloomy description of Mrs. Owens mansion as a gothic prison, in the last section the narrative internalizes these prison-like qualities by making it seem as if the space literally closes in on Mr. Evening, until he is completely immersed into his surroundings. The paradoxes that Baldanza identifies in the narrative point to this transition from

active to passive, from desiring to being desired, from animate to inanimate. Yet, where his interpretation remains at the level of a thematic reading, I contend that a reading which considers the mise-en-scène of the narrative addresses something which is otherwise unrepresentable: the loss of self. "Mr. Evening" is then more than a story about the relationship between a patron and her protégé; it is a story about the dissolution of identity that this relationship brings about.

Overview of the Chapters

This dissertation is divided into five chapters, each of which scrutinize a different work from Purdy's oeuvre. Although Purdy's oeuvre spans five decades and includes numerous books, plays, short stories, and poems, I have chosen to focus on the first decade of his career, from the publication of his first volume of short stories, *Color of Darkness* (1956), to arguably one of his most controversial novels, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967). I do not, however, discuss these texts in chronological order. Instead, I have organized my case studies around the two identity fantasies that Purdy interrogates in his writing: sexual identity and national identity. The first three chapters consider the question of sexual identity in Purdy's writing, while the last two chapters focus on the question of national identity. Thus, I begin my dissertation with chronologically the last novel, and from there jump back and forth between publication dates.

In the first chapter I further set out the groundwork of my reading for the melodramatic. I am especially interested in the interpretative possibilities of melodrama when we consider the fantasy of identity as a mise-en-scène in which different identity narratives configure into a seemingly coherent whole. In the convergence of these narratives, the mise-en-scène functions to cover up inconsistencies and contradictions so that the fantasy of a coherent and true identity can be sustained. The mode in which this convergence solidifies into identity, I argue, is a confessional moment. The enunciation of sexual identity through, for example, the topos of "coming out of the closet", overrides the experience of sexuality and reduces it to the fantasy of identity. In this chapter, then, I close-read *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, a novel which demonstrates the operations of the confession for the production of sexual identity, and at the same time frustrates the possibility of a true confession. Using the mode of melodrama, Purdy renders suspect both identity and the confession of identity, and in doing so, gestures towards a queer strategy of resistance that I identify as what José Esteban Muñoz has called *disidentification* (1999).

My second chapter zooms in on the ways in which the fantasy of sexual identity is produced through the act of reading. The novel *63: Dream Palace* (1956) details several encounters in which the gestures and behavior of its protagonist, Fenton Riddleway, are obsessively read as signifiers for his sexual identity. I argue that this obsessive reading of someone's body and gestures for their sexual identity is tantamount to an act of violence. However, to stress my point, I do exactly what the novel resists: I read Fenton's sexuality in a specific way in order to demonstrate the impossibility of reducing someone's acts, gestures, and behavior to the fantasy of sexual identity. As will become clear from my analysis, the novel itself resists such a totalizing reading. The novel frustrates a reading of Fenton that would reduce his actions to his identity, and instead proposes that Fenton's identity consists of multiple, incommensurable readings that all operate at once. I propose to call this mode of resistance *epistemic promiscuity*. As is the case in the first chapter, this places Purdy's writing in dialogue with queer thinking that attempts to expose the fantasy of identity for being exactly that: a fantasy.

My third chapter closes the scrutiny of the question of sexual identity in Purdy's work that takes place in the first two chapters, but continues the inquiry into identity as the product of narration. The novel *Cabot Wright Begins* (1964) at once dramatizes the way in which narration produces the sense of a coherent and true self, and undermines this process of identity production by showing the constructedness of these narratives. In this chapter, the notion of mise-en-scène that I borrow from Elsaesser and Van Alphen allows me to approach the production of identity with a narratological framework. Drawing upon Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity, I employ analytical tools from the discipline of narratology to demonstrate how Purdy continuously undermines the stability of identity, right at the moment in which it seems to solidify itself. In doing so, I propose to bring queer theory into conversation with the discipline of narratology. Understanding that identity is always produced through narration, and dissecting the operations of this narration with the tools provided by narratology, I suggest, contributes to Purdy's queer project of destabilizing the fiction of stable identity categories.

The last two chapters of my dissertation address the question of national identity. As is the case with other forms of identity, national identity is also produced through narration. However, more so that sexual identity, national identity structures a plethora of identity narratives that together constitute the fantasy of a coherent whole. Moreover, in Purdy's work the question of national identity points towards a tension between collective and the individual identifications. The crisis of identity that many of his characters face comes about exactly at the moment when they must

conform to a collective identity that does not correspond to their own experiences. As I mentioned above, the screen onto which these fantasies of national identity are projected is called the National Symbolic, and I read this figure through the lens of melodrama. Considering the mise-en-scène of the National Symbolic helps us illuminate the narrative construction of both individual and collective identities. In the fourth chapter I analyze the 1961 play *Children Is All* to demonstrate how investment in the National Symbolic results in misreading. Edna, the play's protagonist, fails to recognize her long-lost son because she is unable to read him within the collective framework of the National Symbolic. However, in dramatizing this moment of misreading, Purdy once again tries to undermine the fiction of identity as a whole.

The last chapter further concentrates on the organizing effect that the National Symbolic has for the fantasy of national identity. *The Nephew* (1960), which forms the case study of this chapter, narrates the transformation of ideal citizenship in its protagonist Alma. I read the novel alongside two intertexts that can, each in its own way, be regarded as fundamental contributions to the American National Symbolic. The first intertext is Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), which like *The Nephew* narrates the transformation of its protagonist's relationship with the state through the changed meaning of the symbol that structures this relationship. The second intertext is the phenomenon of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. This figure functions as a screen onto which attachments to the fantasy of national identity are projected, regardless of ideological foundations. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, then, perfectly demonstrates the way in which the mise-en-scène of the national symbolic structures and fixates the fantasy of national identity. In *The Nephew*, as in *Children Is All*, the protagonist fails to identify a loved one; Alma too fails to recognize her own nephew as he does not fit in with her investment in the National Symbolic. Still, in this failure, Purdy envisions a possibility to renegotiate her own relationship to the state. This performative failure, I suggest further contributes to Purdy's queer project of dismantling the totalizing force of the fiction of identity.

CHAPTER 1

Savage Embraces: Melodramatic Tension and Disidentification

A recurring theme throughout Purdy's oeuvre is characters who simply refuse to adhere to social demands to fit in. His novels often house characters at the margins of society who, rather than conform to dominant social narratives, challenge the ways in which their identities are narrated by others. So too do the characters of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*. This *1967* novel introduces the reader to a cast of down-and-out characters in Depression-era Chicago who belong to the inner circle of the eponymous Eustace Chisholm. Among Eustace's "works", as he calls his self-appointed protégés, are Daniel and Amos, the principal characters of the novel's tragic narration. As is the case with many of Purdy's characters, Daniel and Amos refuse to comply with societal norms and fantasies about sexual identity. Often the identity that the social world of Purdy's novels wants such characters to conform to is a homosexual one. That is, in most of his novels, same-sex practices of the main characters are narrated as a sexual identity. As such, Purdy's novels often act out the tension between identity production and the sometimes violent effects it has on those whose identities are narrated. This violence comes about most clearly in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, in which both Daniel and Amos are eventually killed because they refuse to adhere to social demands that they proclaim themselves homosexual. The novel, then, dramatizes a violent tendency within discourses that demand homosexuals to publicly confess to their sexuality. Such a demand for exposure manifests itself often as the imperative to "come out of the closet", to make one's sexual identity public and fixed through a ritualized confession.

Although "coming out" is often cast as a moment of liberation in which one can finally show one's "true self", Purdy would contend that the exact opposite is the case. That is, throughout Purdy's novels and plays we find that he challenges the notion of a "true self" altogether. Moreover, he also seems highly suspicious of the rhetoric behind the presumably liberating speech act of the confession. Instead of liberating her- or himself from a suffocating and oppressing regime of the closet, the confessant remains within the confines of an equally oppressive regime of identity. Thus, categorization for many of Purdy's characters works against their wishes to act out or express their desires on their own terms. The claims of liberation through

confession hinge on certain assumptions about identity that are at stake in the politics of coming out. First, the narrative of liberation from sexual oppression assumes that there is such a thing as a true self which exists prior to social subject formation. Secondly, it assumes this true self to be a stable and fixed identity which can be covered or hidden from the social subject, nor is this true self affected by, or changed because of this concealment. Finally, this true self can make itself available to the subject on its own terms without having to be translated back into discursive frameworks that govern society's understanding of sexuality.

Underneath the surface of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*'s narrative we can discern a conviction that assumptions about one's sexuality merely displace one form of oppression for another. While the rhetoric of the closet – its demand to publicly feign heterosexuality – can be marked as homophobic, I argue that Purdy's novel demonstrates that the same is true for the imperative to confess to non-normative sexual identities. By confessing to what is considered an "open secret" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology 67*), a person makes him or herself legible to others, which subjects that person to yet another set of normative demands and prohibitions that organize the ways in which we can understand sexual identification. To understand the way in which Purdy's novel develops into a critique of the confessional mode in the social construction of identity, I propose to read it through the lens of melodrama. My aim in this chapter is to show that *Eustace Chisholm* is organized around a melodramatic emplotment that foregrounds its resistance to an understanding of sexuality as an identity that can be made legible and to which one should confess.

The melodramatic sensibility in Purdy's novel operates in at least two ways. On the one hand, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* offers ample stylistic and plot-motivated elements that allow for interpretation through a melodramatic lens. On the other hand, such a reading draws attention to the play with speech acts and mise-en-scène in a way that emphasizes unresolved tensions in the novel. Purdy's play with melodramatic conventions not only adds to the excitement of his writing – there is a certain lurid style in his prose that aligns his writing with melodrama – but can also be seen as a way of challenging the dominant notion of sexuality as an identity category. The fantasy of sexuality as identity, I suggest, is constituted by displacing speech acts and gestures, or the exteriority of a character, onto the fantasy of a coherent interiority. This displacement hinges not only on the repeated verbal confession to one's sexual identity, but also on the normalizing violence that the act of reading for someone's sexual identity entails.

Indeed, the act of reading for someone's identity, the novel shows, can be particularly violent. Daniel's tragic storyline reaches its apex when he succumbs to the

vicious assaults of his army superior, Captain Stadger. The latter has played a cat-and-mouse game with Daniel, trying to force a confession of homosexuality out of him. When the eventual confession does not match Stadger's expectations, he finds motive to punish and ultimately kill Daniel. Stadger's persecution of Daniel is preceded by similar demands of other characters for Daniel to confess to what they conceive of as his sexual identity. These attempts of casting Daniel's visceral desires as something legible to others in the shape of an identity form a recurrent motive throughout the novel. While Daniel does not seem to coherently act out his sexuality and thus refuses to be categorized, he is also vigorously and overtly read by others, so that his sexuality seems always overdetermined and prone to being misread. Daniel engages in sexual acts that can be described as both heterosexual and homosexual. Moreover, outside of the binarism of heterosexuality and homosexuality, he also engages in sadomasochistic and non-genital sexual acts. The multiple ways in which he acts out his visceral desires drives others to demand for confession and categorization. Daniel eventually submits to being forced out of the closet, even though what he confesses to is never the same sexual identity: he evades each attempt to categorize his sexual identity by variably complying or denying so that he never confesses to a single sexuality. Yet, by refusing one way of making his sexuality legible, he inadvertently makes himself legible in another way.

Underlying my analysis in this chapter is the assertion that the mode of confession produces what in Foucauldian terms is called a "regime of truth". These regimes of truth organize our understanding of sexuality to the extent that there is no *outside* of the discursive frameworks of these very same regimes that enables us to talk about sexuality in the first place; that is, these frameworks are all encompassing. In Michael Foucault's terms, the truth about our sexuality is a "truth" that "is linked by a circular relation to systems of power which produce it and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which redirect it" ("Political Function" 14). Once made legible within the epistemology of these regimes, the potentially infinite series of sexual acts is reduced to sexual identities. Sexual practices are evaluated and fermented into an identity through prohibitions and injunctions that evaluate sexual acts and object choices as either "good" or "bad" sex (Rubin, "Thinking Sex" 13). It should come as no surprise that I consider the works of Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, and Judith Butler to be cornerstones of my analysis, as their theorizing of discursive practices of these regimes of truth – among which the practice of confession remains one of the most dominant exponents in the structuring of sexual identity – underline my own melodramatic reading of the novel's challenge to the notion of sexuality identity.

In this chapter I read several instances that are framed by the mode of confession. At stake in these scenes are the ongoing attempts to make Daniel's sexuality legible to others, whether or not the confessions in question are performed by Daniel himself or are even about him. Among the many confessions in the novel, we find one that could be considered central to plot, but which at first glance has nothing to do with Daniel's sexuality. In this scene Eustace narrates the sexual history of Amos as a classic Oedipal scene. Read as the archetypical narration of psychoanalysis, the scene becomes emblematic for the relationship between psychoanalysis and the confession. The Oedipal fantasy not only construes sexual identity through an enactment of libidinal desires, but also depends heavily on the verbal witnessing of one's transgressions that produce sexual identity in the first place. The confessional logic that undergirds the psychoanalytic understanding of identity invariably criminalizes those who deviate from the norm by treating their sexual acts and object choices as pathological. Here we see that the confession works in conjunction with those regimes of truth that organize the conception of sexual identity through a psychoanalytic convention that assumes an interior truth of the subject that has to be made explicit, but which treats this interiority simultaneously as a terrible secret: a criminal act that permeates the subject's entire constitution as pathology.

Besides demonstrating the confessional logic at the heart of the Oedipal fantasy, this particular scene is rendered in such a style that it exposes the Oedipal plot as an archetypical melodramatic scene. Similar to the narration of "Mr. Evening", in which the highly stylized use of spatial descriptions takes over the narration of the plot, the Oedipal scene in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* can also be read as a demonstration of melodramatic mise-en-scène. This scene exemplifies the novel's use of melodramatic emplotment to demonstrate how a regime of truth that consolidates the fantasy of stable identity categories is produced by the mode of confession.

Many scholars of queer theory and gay and lesbian studies have made explicit the relationship between the confession of sexuality and the mechanics of inclusion and exclusion from society through state institutions such as citizenship, marriage, and the right to serve in the army. Purdy's work implies the same to be true for the rhetoric of what we in retrospect have come to call the "Gay Liberation Movement". The use of rhetorical strategies that stress visibility and the explicit disavowal of normative sexual identities – the injunction to come out of the closet – are tantamount to similar strategies of inclusion and exclusion that these rhetorical strategies contest. In the literary world of Purdy, the imperative to "come out" is just as oppressive as its prohibition.

Finally, the treatment of sexual identity in *Eustace Chisholm* not only offers a harsh criticism of and bleak outlook on the social imperative to "come out of the closet", it also gestures towards the possibility of opening up the understanding of sexuality in multiple ways. Toying with conventions of melodrama and confession, Purdy both exposes the oppressive nature of the modern understanding of sexuality and offers a means for repudiating that same oppressive regime of truth. For Purdy, melodrama is a means to render confession and identity suspect, and as such it encourages us to think of sexuality beyond the constraints of identity and confession. In the novel's final scene, Daniel gives in to melodramatic excess and leans into his own torture as a strategy to reclaim control over the ways in which he acts out his sexuality, while refuting the burden of identity. In conclusion, then, I make a case for the irony invoked by a melodramatic reading to bring about the potential for what José Esteban Muñoz calls *disidentification* as a strategy to reclaim one's self-determination within oppressive regimes of sexuality.

The Excess of the Unconscious

Despite other characters constantly coaxing Daniel into confessing his sexual identity, he refuses to see himself as a homosexual. When Eustace confronts him with the suggestion that he might harbor a sexual desire for Amos, Daniel resolutely exclaims that he "couldn't be in love with a man" because he has "never been, and [he] couldn't be now" (ECW 84).[1] The reason Eustace tries to persuade Daniel into a confession is that he sees himself as the narrator of the lives of those around him. Daniel and Amos, as well as Maureen O'Dell and Reuben Masterson, are regular visitors at Eustace's Chicago apartment where they seek advice. Eustace, who calls himself a narrative poet and works on a "long poem about 'original stock' in America" (5), takes his role as advisor very seriously; so seriously, in fact, that he drops his long narrative poem to devote his narration fully to the tragedy of Daniel and Amos. He provides the narrative with a running commentary by gossiping with others, by writing letters, and even in visions that he receives after a strange encounter with a fortune teller. Critic Bettina Schwarzschild identifies Eustace's role in the novel as that of a Greek chorus, and, indeed, much of the novel's melodramatic emplotment is driven by Eustace's narration (63). His narration produces, to a great extent, the sexual identity to which other characters expect Daniel to confess.

1 Where deemed necessary I use ECW to indicate that I refer to *Eucstace Chisholm and the Works*.

Eustace's confrontation with Daniel is the direct result of his urge to narrate or manipulate the lives of those around him. He has heard from Amos that Daniel has a history of sleepwalking and visits Amos's room every night in his sleep (82). During these sleepwalking spells, he tenderly holds and kisses Amos while the latter, apparently more at ease with his sexuality than Daniel, relishes in these moments.[2] Eustace interprets Amos's story as a confession of both his desire for Daniel and vice versa. Seeing himself as a matchmaker who should bring Daniel and Amos together, Eustace tries to provoke a similar confession from Daniel, even if it means that he needs to confront Daniel with his own sleepwalking. It is significant to point out that these expressions of desire for Amos only occur when Daniel sleeps – when he is without a sense of (self-)consciousness. In his discussion of Peter Brooks's work on melodrama, William Morse points out that despite his attempt to "redeem the melodrama by positing for it a disruption of consciousness, repression, and the reality principle", this emphatically does not reveal "the unconscious as understood by Freud, and certainly not Lacan's linguistic unconscious" (26). Instead, Morse argues that Brooks's treatment of the melodramatic dream world allows for an "unambiguous identification with the Manichaean moral structures of the mode" (25). As he accuses Brooks of subscribing to a transcendental identity, in which "virtue exists as virtue" (24), Morse reminds us that in psychoanalytic theory the unconscious should be understood as a process. "A process," he specifies citing Anthony Easthope, "of ongoing 'interaction multiply determined or overdetermined between different levels and mechanisms in the psyche'" (26). Melodrama does not present us with an identity that transcends desire, but rather one that interacts with desire in a way that can only find expression in the excessive mode of the unconscious.

By sleepwalking, Daniel acts out a desire that cannot consciously metabolize into the category of identity. It is here that melodrama's tendency to exteriorize tensions becomes manifest. Whenever Daniel has a spell of somnambulism, it coincides with a tension that arises within him. That is, whenever he is torn between admitting to and denying his libidinal desires, he is acting out these desires in his sleep. Daniel finds himself in what Jonathan Goldberg calls an "impossible plot situation" (11) that cannot be resolved and sustains itself by taking recourse to the aesthetics of

2 The fact that Amos relishes in Daniel's caresses does not demonstrate Amos's unambiguity about being identified as a homosexual by others. Just like Daniel, he responds negatively to the suggestion that his desires are aligned with the category of sexual identity. In fact, although Amos is aware of Daniel's actions and might even long for these caresses, he remains hesitant to make his desires known to Daniel.

melodrama. If resolution of a tension in the plot leads up to the disintegration of the character – that is, brings about a situation in which the character can no longer sustain her- or himself – melodramatic excess provides relief from this tension and forestalls the imperative to decide upon one or the other resolution. Yet, melodrama always violates the very thing it seems to be stabilizing. As melodrama manifests itself in excessive and uncontrollable exteriorization, it places the melodramatic character outside the norm of the coherent and classifiable subject. Melodrama, then, forgoes the either/or of categorization and keeps firmly in place the potential of a character to occupy a space between or outside of fixed identity categories.

The moment that Daniel finds out he has been sleepwalking brings about his first major crisis. The excessive exteriorized expression of his visceral desire makes way for the imperative to resolve the question of his sexuality by either affirming or rejecting the category of a homosexual identity. For him, the realization that he cannot control his visceral desires comes "as a final unhinging of the self" (82). Why this realization comes as such a shock that he feels as if "the scaffolding of his life was falling" (82) can be explained by looking at his previously held self-image and the way in which the unconsciously acting out of his desire makes this self-image unsustainable: "He once said of a newspaper scandal story about two men who had killed themselves over their love that he was opposed to physical relations between members of the male sex, and that they ought to electrocute faggots" (31). As he publicly declares his contempt for homosexuality, he now finds himself in a position in which his actions no longer correspond to what he believed to be true about himself. Although his actions stand in stark contrast with his opinion about homosexuality, he finds it impossible to repudiate these actions altogether. On the other hand, accepting these actions to be part of his sexual life runs completely counter to his previously held self-image, which he also refuses to repudiate. The impossibility of this situation results in the contradictory statements about his sexual identification. While at first he denies Eustace's suggestion that he is in love with Amos (84), a little later he says the exact opposite to his friend and former lover Maureen (106). Eventually, Daniel sees no way out of the impossible situation in which he finds himself. Unable to comply with the demand to make himself legible in terms of sexual identity, but also unable to give up his desire for Amos, Daniel decides to take drastic measures to escape the confession that is expected of him. After some soul searching, Daniel decides to turn to the one institution that, he thinks, can restore his previous self-image: the army.

In this novel, but also in other novels written in the same period that touch upon the topic of homosexuality, the army introduces a set of assumptions about sexual identity and the mechanics of inclusion and exclusion that is relevant in the light of

my discussion on Purdy's critique of sexual identity. Historians such as Allan Bérubé (1990/2010) and literary scholar Robert Caserio (1997) have shown how semi-liberal wartime attitudes and policies towards, and post-war repression of, homosexuality within the army not only ensured a proliferation of homophobic discourse, but also shaped the rhetorical strategies with which the Gay Liberation Movement would seek to push for the expansion of civil rights for homosexual men and women (Bérubé 128–148). Just as the forced silencing and punishing of homosexuals in the post-war McCarthy years hinged on oral admissions or denials of subversive charges, so too did the strategy of coming out of the closet, albeit with different political goals in mind. "Coming out" as a tactic to form a politically coherent constituency based on sexual identity falls back on similar mechanics of inclusion and exclusion that homophobic persecution employed about a decade earlier.

Despite enlisting, Daniel nevertheless cannot escape from the impossible situation that triggered his sleepwalking. Already on his first night at his posting, he has another spell of somnambulism and walks stark naked into the sleeping quarters of his superior, Captain Stadger. As long as the expression of his desire is borne out in the mode of sleepwalking, Daniel is able to forestall resolving any questions about his possible sexual identity. Yet, here too other characters attempt to read his sleepwalking as a sign of his sexual identity. Stager becomes fascinated by Daniel's peculiar demeanor, which makes him different from other privates. He interprets Daniel's sleepwalking as the expression of a homosexual identity which he cannot reconcile with his heterosexual and masculine presentation. The fascination for Daniel's behavior soon becomes an obsession. Abusing his position as superior officer, Stadger forces Daniel to engage in an increasingly violent carnal relationship in which he tries to subject Daniel fully to his own desires.

The impossible situation in which Daniel finds himself leads to his forcible attempts to present his own sexual identity to others as hyper-masculine and heterosexual. These attempts are constituted through the theatrical display of hyper-masculine behavior and thus Daniel becomes known among his fellow soldiers for his abundant and illicit visits to prostitutes and his brawls in segregated "negro sections of town" (209). The excess of these actions again points to the impossible situation that tries to sustain itself by suspending the moment at which the plot must come to a resolution. Daniel constantly redefines his sexuality in opposition to the sexual identity that others try to impose upon him. That these attempts are not enough to contain his desires becomes clear as his continued sleepwalking slowly turns into a cat-and-mouse game between Stadger and himself. Time and again Daniel tries to escape his army posting. Just as many times, however, Stadger makes sure Daniel returns to

him again. While Daniel continues to fail in his attempts to escape Stadger, the reader can never be sure whether these attempts fail because of Stadger's determination, or whether Daniel voluntarily returns to Stadger's suffocating embrace. As was the case with Daniel's sleepwalking, there is an excess in the way he acts out both his masculinity and his relationship with Stadger.

Throughout the novel, then, Daniel keeps returning to that impossible plot situation. Whether this situation is constituted by his sleepwalking or by his relationship with Stadger, each time Daniel tries to resolve it by presenting himself as heterosexual or masculine, he unconsciously returns to the situation that he tried to escape. Besides sustaining the impossible plot situation in which Daniel finds himself, these returns share another thing in common: these moments are always commented upon by the narration of Eustace, who maintains his role as Greek choir even after Daniel has left for the army. While Eustace does not talk to others about Daniel's situation, he corresponds with Daniel directly and provides a running commentary for his life. The continuation of Eustace's narration is key to the way in which the novel interrogates the confession as an identity-producing mode. To demonstrate the consequences of Eustace's narrative interventions for the way Daniel's sexual identity is produced, I turn to a brief scene in which Eustace's narration focuses on a different character: Amos.

Psychoanalysis and Mise-en-Scène

About two-thirds into the novel, the focus of the narration shifts to Amos, Daniel's object of desire and the other character who also resists being made legible as homosexual. After Daniel enlists in the army, we learn that Amos has begun a relationship with the millionaire playboy Reuben Masterson. Unhappy with this particular arrangement, Eustace seeks to warn Reuben to not get too deeply involved with Amos, as he is the bearer of a dark secret. In the scene that follows, Eustace discloses a story about Amos's youth that details an incestuous scene between Amos and his own mother, Cousin Ida.

Eustace's narration of the incestuous scene in which Amos was involved seems to follow the pattern of a traditional, albeit heavily condensed, Oedipus complex. Amos, who grew up without knowing his father, is suddenly confronted with him at age fifteen. As they go to an ice cream parlor, his father admonishes him not to eat ice cream "like a girl" (154). A brief struggle ensues in which Amos cuts his father with the shards of a broken glass: his father's clear attempt to castrate Amos is immediately

responded to with attempted patricide. Subsequently, Amos's transgression is both punished and rewarded: punished in the sense that he falls ill and is disturbed by a Ku Klux Klan march that passes his house which he thinks is led by his vengeful father; rewarded, because in an attempt to comfort her son, Amos's mother joins him under his bedcovers, which eventually results in their lovemaking. Amos's Oedipal desire for his mother seems to be *literally* acted out. That is to say, nowhere in the narrative is it affirmed that an incestuous act actually occurs. Only the suggestive exclamation uttered by Cousin Ida, "Amos, not your own Mother, for God's own sake!" (156) – a highly dramatized elision that urges us to read for the thing that is not uttered – indicates that a taboo has been broken. However, there is little doubt about what Eustace is suggesting: "It was right after that," Eustace continues, "that Amos came to Chicago and into our arms ..." (156). In Eustace's narration, Amos's incestuous transgression leads directly to his fraternizing with the group of sexual outcasts that surround Eustace, in turn becoming one of them.

The brief scene – it runs for a mere five pages – already runs over with lurid excitement when merely read for the plot. A half-orphan is suddenly confronted with his estranged father who verbally abuses him.[3] There is a violent struggle in which the son tries to harm his own father. Finally, the scene closes with that most sensational and transgressive act of all: incest. Taken at face value, the scene seems to relay conservative and reactionary accounts of the constitution of homosexuality in the child subject. Eustace's narration follows the rhetorical strategies of popularized psychoanalysis to account for Amos's homosexuality, while also distancing himself from that same homosexuality by framing this narrative as a cautionary tale. This is a strategy that Roel van den Oever identifies in the psychoanalytical explanations of homosexuality that were popularized in post-World War Two American culture. The phenomenon largely understood as momism sought to explain psychosocial disorders by looking at the relationship between mother and son. In this context of popular psychoanalysis, the Oedipus complex provided an explanation that placed the cause of homosexuality with the mother. However, of this American reframing of the Oedipus complex, van den Oever writes: "whereas Freud tried to refrain from condemning his patients and their disorders, his American followers exercised less restraint in this area" (21). Eustace's narration of Amos can be read in a similar vein. The narration follows a very crude Oedipal pattern, and through it Eustace seemingly wants to draw attention to the troubled and even pathological relationship Amos has with his

3 "Half-orphan" is Frank Baldanza's term for the many youthful characters in Purdy's novels who do not grow up in the traditional nuclear family ("James Purdy's Half-Orphans").

mother. Still, the heavily condensed narration of the Oedipal fantasy is riddled with stylistic devices that facilitate a reading for the melodramatic that undermines and contradicts the reactionary popularized psychoanalytical explanation of the scene. Looking more closely at the way in which the narrative is told, we find that the scene is less about Amos's sexual transgression than about the way in which Eustace uses his narration to cast Amos in social narratives that make his identity legible to others. Of interest, then, in this seemingly traditional Oedipal fantasy is how this fantasy flows over into actualization through stylistic and formal devices, such as speech acts and mise-en-scène, that in their particular use align with the aesthetics of melodrama. This passage from *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, as with most other of Purdy's writings, invokes a sense of melodrama that complicates a reading for the plot and demands that the reader interpret the scene otherwise.

Purdy uses stylistic means that are usually associated with melodramatic writing not only to lay bare American society's double standards regarding sexuality, but also to play with archetypical melodramatic characters – the ingénue, the orphan, the villain, the victim – in order to foreground social norms associated with the notion of sexual identity. These archetypes underscore the exteriority onto which identity is projected, while leaving blank the interiority of the novel's characters. What is at stake, then, is the conception of identity as an interiority. In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, sexual identity attaches itself to the exterior of a character, while leaving blank their psychological make-up, or their interiority. Yet, the narration presents its characters in such a stylized fashion that it draws attention not to the truthfulness of identity, but rather to the very construction of identity. The novel proposes to treat the formation of identity as mise-en-scène by raising the questions of where we should locate identity, and how its spatial conception congeals into the assumption of identity. The lens of melodrama, as a genre that hinges on its mise-en-scène as a signification device, allows us to scrutinize the spatiotemporal procedures of identity production, and the ways in which Purdy tries to undermine these in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*.[4]

Purdy's work, and *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* in particular, draws from the kind of American Hollywood melodrama that has prompted Thomas Elsaesser's theory of representation of internal struggles through the substitution of style and mise-en-scène for plot development (79–80). Ernst Van Alphen's repositioning of

4 The question of identity's location – whether identity is interior or exterior to a person, or whether there is a difference between interior and exterior identity at all – returns in the following chapters, as I identify it as one of the central concerns of Purdy's interrogation of identity as such.

Elsaesser's theories is a productive touchstone for this particular scene ("Legible Affects" 32). As is the case in Wyeth's painting *Christina's World*, in which the mise-en-scène produces a narrative that lies outside of what is directly represented, Eustace's narration depends on the spatial and temporal configuration of separate elements that together produce a familiar narrative of homosexual pathology. The Oedipal fantasy through which Eustace narrates Amos's sexual development serves as such a mise-en-scène, as it depends on a specific constellation of representational elements – characters (the son, the mother, the father) and actions (patricide, incest) – which in pre-scripted conjunction fix the protagonist's subject-formation onto a pathology, or sexual identity. Without making explicit claims about Amos's sexual identity – claims that he nevertheless makes elsewhere in the novel – Eustace's use of stylistic devices, such as formalized plots, speech acts, representation of character traits, and a frantic rhythm, provide an excessive quality to the narration. As the narration's style seems to overflow from the plot, Amos's subject formation also becomes exteriorized as it is reduced to a series of formal and aesthetic commonplaces. Nothing in Amos's perceived identity is assumed by himself, but instead results from a fantasy projected onto him by Eustace.

Mise-en-scène in melodrama can thus be understood in two ways. First, mise-en-scène can be considered a part of the excessive expression of that which is unrepresentable in the melodramatic narrative. Daniel's libidinal desire, as we have seen, can only find expression in his sleepwalking, in his unconscious state. The uncontrollable and excessive nature of his sleepwalking enables Daniel to enter into those spaces that he would not deign to acknowledge in a conscious state. The excess of sleepwalking literally opens up the space in which Daniel's desires can be acted out: a space that remains unavailable to him as long as he refuses to conform to the framework of a coherent and legible sexual identity. Mise-en-scène can then be understood as the literal space that is opened up, or traversed by, the excessive expression of libidinal desire. Alternatively, mise-en-scène can be understood as a configuration of previously known scenes, characters, actions, and spaces that together activate a narrative that goes beyond the represented elements. The whole of the narrative is greater than the sum of its parts. As we have seen in the Oedipal plot, mise-en-scène allows us to narrate that which falls outside the scope of representability. The alterity of someone else's libidinal desire is subsumed by shared preexisting assumptions that are activated at the moment the Oedipal plot is invoked. Shared knowledge of the Oedipal plot makes it possible to narrate the unrepresentability of sexuality and subsequently cast someone's actions and behavior as a coherent and stable identity.

Family Melodrama

In my discussion of the melodramatic excess of Daniel's sleepwalking, I alluded to it as a suspension of what Goldberg calls an impossible plot situation. The imperative to either acknowledge or disavow a homosexual identity puts Daniel in the impossible situation of having to conform to the constraints of identity regardless of his resistance against doing so. He either conforms to an openly homosexual identity by confessing his desires, or, by denying the suggestion of homosexuality, is framed by the open secret of the closet into which Eustace and others force him. That impossible yet decisive moment is postponed by his sleepwalking, which allows him to act out his libidinal desires without having to make a decision that is detrimental to his self-image. Goldberg too locates the impossible plot situation of melodrama with its excessive representation of mise-en-scène, as he extends his definition of melodrama from the musical accompaniment to theater (*melos* + drama) to "the impossible plot situation, and the music that accompanies it" (155). "Melodrama," he writes, "is an aesthetic of the impossible situation, where 'of' means both 'derived from' and 'representing'" (155). If we conceptualize melodrama as an aesthetic dramatization of the moment in which the impossible plot situation is suspended, we should first consider which tension is introduced by Daniel's sleepwalking.

We have seen how Daniel's crisis is provoked by the realization that his unconscious actions do not correspond to his consciously held beliefs. At the moment the imperative to confess to a specific sexual identity arises, what seems to be at stake is whether Daniel denies or confesses to a homosexual identity. However, while Daniel contradicts his own confessions, sometimes admitting to a homosexual identity while denying it in other instances, he continues to act out his sexual desires in the mode of sleepwalking. At issue is not the categorization of his desires as either homosexual or heterosexual, but rather this demand for categorization itself. Daniel is uncomfortable with identifying as either heterosexual or homosexual since both identity categories confine him to the same restrictive identity model. By presenting both homosexuality and heterosexuality as being part of the same oppressive identity categorization, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* decidedly breaks with the structure of popular melodramas in which the resolution of (sexual) identity crisis either results in condemning the given identity, as is the case with conservative melodramas, or celebrating the sexual identity, in the case of coming-out/coming of age melodramas (e.g. Nowell-Smith 272; Schatz 154; Leo 35–36; Padva 369).

The oppositional structure that *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* subverts from is perhaps best represented in the family melodrama, a subgenre that was popularized

by Hollywood in the postwar period. Melodramatic films by Douglas Sirk, Nicholas Ray, and Vincente Minnelli centered on the suburban nuclear family, which became the emblematic battleground onto which intergenerational and ideological struggles were fought. Similar to Eustace's use of popularized psychoanalysis, these family melodramas often drew on "the dominant intellectual fashions of the postwar era [...] Freudian psychology and existential philosophy" (Schatz 153). According to Thomas Schatz, family melodramas were drawn to these theories as "each stressed the alienation of the individual due to the inability of familial and societal institutions to fulfill his or her particular needs" (153).

The figure of the family in melodrama then occupies both the site of the American Dream of middle-class fantasies, as well as its undoing. It is within the ideal nuclear family situation that melodrama's tragic hero is confronted by the confines of normative social roles and expectations that construe his or her individual desires as deviant. In a more recent re-imagination of American melodrama, director Todd Haynes challenges the burden of normativity by framing the question of sexual identity in the film *Far From Heaven* (2002) through the framework of gendered and racialized social differences. One of the impossible plot situations revolves around Frank, a suburban father who desires men and lives in fear of becoming a social outcast if this secret is discovered. However, as Goldberg points out, in comparison with Cathy, his wife, and Raymond, her black lover, Frank is able to retain his position of white male privilege even after he is outed. "Haynes will not claim Frank for gay liberation," Goldberg writes, "will not simply celebrate Frank's coming out; he is still able to call the shots in a way that neither Raymond nor Cathy can" (70). Haynes's intersectional reconsideration of popular American melodrama illustrates how even in suburban family melodramas social norms affect people differently based on their social position. Not all families are struck equally hard by the tragedy that befalls the melodramatic subject. *Eustace Chisholm and the Works subverts* the genre of family melodrama in a similar fashion, not by focusing on the intersections of race and class identities as Haynes does, but by questioning the primacy of the suburban nuclear family as the cornerstone of American social life.

Indeed, if there is a place for any familial configuration in Purdy's vision of middle-class America, this can only be in the form of a perversion of the nuclear family. In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* none of the familial relationships adhere to normative patriarchal structures. Instead, Purdy seems to parody the primacy of the middle-class nuclear family by introducing a long series of deviations in which each character occupies a different perversion of the American family ideal. Eustace Chisholm is in an on-again-off again relationship with his wife Carla, and during a lull in their marriage

he finds a male lover, Clayton Harms; Reuben Masterson, who takes on Amos as a lover after Daniel has re-enlisted, is orphaned, but treats his grandmother as if she were his actual mother; Daniel, we learn, had lost his father in early childhood and has since had to assume the role of family patriarch by undertaking his father's job in the coal mine; Amos was raised by only his mother, and construes a family romance in which she figures as a non-immediate family member whom he consistently calls Cousin Ida, which might have enabled their incest; and finally, Maureen, who is impregnated by Daniel, has their child aborted in a gruesome scene that epitomizes Purdy's dystopian vision of middle-class American family values. What she gives birth to is what Purdy holds true for America at large: a "bleeding mucous of severed embryo" that signifies first and foremost as a "proof of manhood" (74–75).

Since the nuclear family is parodied in Purdy's imagination, homosexuality is no longer necessarily featured as a subversion of the normative family structure. Instead, it is because the normative family does not exist in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* that homosexuality is no longer pitted against heterosexuality as an opposing term in a Manichean scheme. Eustace and Reuben Masterson openly express their same-sex desires while still living out the familial fantasies that they have built for themselves. Eustace swaps his wife for a male lover, yet he just as easily takes his wife back. The gender of his sexual or romantic partner is clearly no issue in his promiscuous lifestyle. Neither does gender seem to matter for Reuben in living out his familial fantasies: when he brings Amos into his home, he introduces him to his grandmother as his new lover, expecting nothing less than her approval. Yet, while for Eustace and Reuben same-sex desire is not at issue, to Daniel it seems to pose a threat. The question is, however, whether this threat is provoked by homosexuality itself, or by the way this identity is criminalized by popularized psychoanalysis and the mode of the confession. The impossible plot situation that we encounter in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* resides in Daniel's refusal to adhere to the social demands of sexual identity, while simultaneously acting out the same-sex desires in a way that inadvertently feeds into the social fantasy of a sexual identity. There appears to be no satisfying resolution to the impossible situation in which Daniel finds himself since the choice for either plot resolution brings him back to the very thing he seeks to escape.

In this reading, Eustace might in the end become a less progressive character than he appeared at first glance, and which the novel misleadingly suggests by making him the eponymous character. Despite his own promiscuity, Eustace remains attached to stringent categories of sexual identity and seems to be the person who is most invested in claiming a homosexual identity for Daniel. I argue that Eustace's attempts

to illicit confessions from Daniel and Amos acknowledging their category of sexual identity signals a broader concern of the novel, and ultimately Purdy's whole oeuvre. *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, *63: Dream Palace*, and *Cabot Wright Begins* all dramatize the ways in which already existing narratives about sexuality are superimposed onto the fantasy of identity. Because of these preexisting narratives, characters in Purdy's novel seem not to have any choice but to acknowledge the assumption of a sexual identity, whether or not it is detrimental to their own integrity. To illustrate this, I will return to Eustace's Oedipal narration of Amos's sexuality. I have already suggested that the Oedipal plot can be read as a mise-en-scène that allows for the narration of what is at heart unrepresentable: the constitution of one's sexuality. By using the Oedipal plot, Eustace transforms the actions of Amos into confessional speech acts that can only be read from the perspective of that very same narrative.

A Closer Look at the Oedipal Plot

If we read Eustace's narration of Amos's sexuality as family melodrama, we cannot help but notice how it hinges on excessive speech acts and stylized gestures. We read, for example, how the characters in his narration cry out, whisper, and "flush beet red" upon speaking (154). Emotions, too, are exaggerated, as a Ku Klux Klan march "fill[s] both Amos and Ida with vague concern and uncertain terror" (155), Amos's father cries in "anguished surprise," and Amos threatens to kill his mother when she asks about the incident with his father (154). Rather than merely representing the plot, this use of language propels its events. It is through the speech acts and gestures narrated by Eustace that the implications of the Oedipal fantasy are evoked. Amos's father calling him a girl evokes the fear of castration, which is central to Freudian theory. Similarly, Amos's parallel attempt at patricide occurs when he stabs his father with a broken bottle. Finally, and perhaps most evocatively, the incestuous act is only suggested by Ida's whispering: "Amos, not your own Mother" (156). While never fully spelled out, the sequence of events obviously reads as an Oedipal scenario. Better still, the events suggest an Oedipal scenario in which Amos fails to sublimate his love for his mother, including its correspondent, albeit strangely contradictory, suggestion that this failure has led to his current sexual desire for men.

Eustace's melodramatic narration actualizes gestures and speech acts in such a way that these are inevitably read as signs of an Oedipal plot: the castrating father figure, the son's excessive attachment to his mother, the symbolic Law that prohibits incest. This dramatization gives a literal sense to what is happening. Amos's desire

does not remain on the level of fantasy, but becomes actuality when his mother voices the prohibition against incest. In doing so, Cousin Ida becomes an accomplice to the act which her words invoke. As the scene ends at the moment of her exclamation, the lack of closure in Eustace's narration implies that although Ida is well aware of the transgression about to take place, she still gives in to her son's sexual advances. Whereas in psychoanalysis the Oedipal fantasy is treated as phantasmatic – something that the child imagines but never acts out – that fantasy now transgresses into actuality. This transgression requires reconsideration of the function of the Oedipal scenario in social narratives about sexual identity formation: it is the narration of the Oedipal scenario itself, rather than the actions it describes, that produces sexual identity.

Such reframing has consequences for other narratives in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* that constitute sexual identity. At the beginning of the novel, we read about Amos's violent response to allegations of being queer (19), yet he continues to be drawn to Daniel. Even after he becomes involved with Reuben, Amos remains reluctant to acknowledge his homosexual desires, and their budding relationship is mostly framed in terms of prostitution: Amos is in dire need of money and hence becomes the lover of a homosexual millionaire (116), a narrative which, again, is enforced by Eustace. Amos's disavowal of categorization engenders his categorization by others. The lack of a self-confessed narrative framework in which to contextualize his behavior is again taken up by Eustace as an invitation to invent the narrative of Amos's sexual identity. What at first seems an attempt to understand Amos's sexual behavior soon turns into the enforcement of a sexual identity due to its incessant repetition.

As van den Oever demonstrates, the doting mother's relationship with her son was put forth by popularized psychoanalysis as a means to explain and disqualify the increased visibility of homosexuality in American culture (5–36).[5] Of course, such popularized accounts of psychoanalysis do no justice to the complexity of the psychosexual development that Freud described. Indeed, as Jane Gallop recounts, it is against this popularized American reduction of psychoanalytical theory that poststructuralists such as Jacques Lacan began to develop their own interpretation of Freudian theory (56). Nevertheless, it is exactly this popularized account in movies such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) and Otto Preminger's *Whirlpool* (1947) that captured the American popular imagination.[6] These popularized psychoanalytical

5 See Sedgwick for an account of how the mother-son relationship has taken root in fantasies of the closet (*Epistemology* 248–249).

6 Significantly, both Alfred Hitchcock and Otto Preminger are known for their melodramatic style,

narratives of sexual identity continued into the 1960s in the movies of Woody Allen and in novels such as Philip Roth's *Portnoy Complaint* (1969).[7] If we consider Purdy's novel to be a critique of the categorizing impulse with which society imposes an identity upon those who behave differently, this critique consists of the performative rather than the descriptive function of the narrative. At stake in this narration is not how a popularized Oedipus complex is used as a means to account for Amos's same-sex desire, but instead, Eustace's use of the narrative's performative purchase in American society to produce an identity for Amos. The prevalence of the Oedipal fantasy as a cornerstone of mainstream American psychoanalysis, argues van den Oever, has resulted in the production of a narrative framework that categorizes a perceived deviant sexual identity *a priori* (21–22). Eustace does not wish to understand the reasons behind Amos's behavior, but rather frames Amos in a manner that excludes any motivation for his behavior other than a pre-existing narrative of a pathologized and criminalized identity.

Looking more closely at the Oedipal fantasy as told by Eustace, we can distinguish a difference between an account of the Oedipal fantasy as thematized by mainstream psychoanalysis and the literalizing effect of his narration. By taking the symbolic Law literally – that is, by having Amos live through and act out the Oedipal fantasy – Eustace's narration also allows for the possible transgression's actualization. The Oedipal fantasy is taken literally to the extent that it is suggested that a sexual encounter between mother and son, members of the opposite sex, will inevitably result in homosexuality. This is why, as Eustace tells Reuben, Daniel "skiddooed" and fled from his relationship with Amos (151). However, the melodramatic mode in which Eustace narrates this history renders suspicious the consequences of this literal acting out of the Oedipal fantasy by confusing the phantasmatic with the actual, as popularized accounts of psychoanalysis are wont to do.

Eustace's penchant to represent the incestuous encounter of popular psychoanalysis in a literal fashion renders this narrative suspicious since it raises the question of how a heterosexual encounter can result in the constitution of a homosexual identity. This tension, which we find at the heart of many popularized accounts of the Oedipal scenario, warrants a return to the Freudian thesis that every human psyche is constituted by its bisexuality (Freud 141–142). If in the case of Amos his homosexuality

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even if their movies are usually regarded as *film noir* or thrillers (Elsaesser 81, 88; Affron 111).

7 See Van den Oever (147–179) for a detailed analysis of psychoanalysis and the Oedipus complex in Roth's novel.

is the result of a heterosexual encounter, then Eustace's narration suggests that there is a parallel between the transgression of the incest taboo and the transgression from heterosexuality into homosexuality.

Eustace's literal account then exposes a tension within the categorizing impulse of the Oedipal scenario. In her seminal study of the construction of male subjectivity, Kaja Silverman locates this tension in a doubling of the initial Oedipus complex. She argues that the male sexual subject goes through both a positive and a negative Oedipus complex to warrant a production of normative exogamous heterosexuality (361). The male subject's primary cathexis for the mother is deflected towards the father, which in turn should be deflected outward to prevent this new libidinal energy from turning into incestuous or homosexual desire. Butler understands this as "an infinite displacement of a heterosexualizing desire" (*Gender Trouble* 38). The incest taboo not only compels the male subject to direct his libidinal energy outwards, but also prohibits the homosexual desire that is produced by the displacement of the mother-as-object to the father-as object. Failure to adhere to this prohibition is, as Butler has pointed out, often construed as a criminal and punishable act (*Bodies* 100).

The threat of punishment construes the occurrence of non-normative sexuality as the subject's failure to adhere to the desirable outcome of the Oedipal scenario. However, the simultaneous occurrence of both the positive and negative Oedipal phases renders imaginable a homosexual desire within the production of the normative heterosexual subject (Silverman 360). If the subject's identification with either the mother or the father originates from a libidinal energy that, through a series of prohibitions, is ideally transformed into normative heterosexuality, it also always engenders a latent homosexual desire. The male subject who is denied the mother instead turns to an identification with the father. This new identification can, in the words of Silverman, "be read *either as* 'resolved' love for him [the father] or as a concomitant of love for the mother" (361). The process that should secure masculinity in the male subject results in a phantasmatic identification with the father: a displaced remnant of "an earlier desire for the mother" (361). The displacement of identification between the mother and the father is significant, especially if we follow Silverman's assertion that "desire cannot be scrupulously differentiated from identification" (317). The dividing line between identification and desire becomes particularly narrow in the infinite displacement of libidinal desire, and Eustace seems barely able to distinguish one from the other when he draws up a homosexual identity for Amos after the latter has had sex with his mother.

A crucial point of difference between Eustace's narration and Butler's and Silverman's accounts of the Oedipal fantasy, is that for the latter two the identification

with the mother and father is always phantasmatic. That is to say, insofar as the child desires his parents, this desire is always imaginary. It "cannot be sustained," as Laplanche and Pontalis explain, "when it is confronted with a correct apprehension of reality" (315). Eustace's narration does not treat incestuous desire as mere fantasy, but makes it literal by having Amos act out the full Oedipal fantasy. The act of lovemaking that occurs between him and Cousin Ida is the actualization of a libidinal desire that under normal circumstances should remain imaginary. However, at the moment of its actualization, the narration also makes apparent the constructed nature of this fantasy. While Cousin Ida's exclamation makes the transgression manifest, it also causes the reader to question the transgressive, or even criminal, nature of this scenario.

If we return to the lens of melodrama we recognize how Eustace's narration actualizes Amos's phantasmatic desire through the dramatization of speech acts and gestures. Moreover, the lens of melodrama produces the added effect of ironic distancing, which is both an intricate aspect of melodramatic aesthetics and sensibilities, and is also often used as a deprecating reading strategy that discredits melodrama as a serious genre (Klinger 15; Williams 324; Willemen 64). The genre's larger-than-life quality often frustrates the possibility of the reader's full identification with its characters. Instead, the reader will respond to the narrative with uncomfortable laughter and disavowal. That which is so excessively represented in melodrama quite easily becomes a thing of ridicule. Eustace's narration, too, can be read simultaneously as too strong an identification with, and a distancing from, the narrative's subject matter. Eustace, if anything, is portrayed in the novel as a character in the perpetual process of distancing: he distances himself from his wife; he distances himself from his own epic poem to keep up with the tragedy that befalls Daniel; and, as Stephen Guy-Bray observes, he even distances himself from the novel – in which he is the eponymous character – by forfeiting his role as protagonist in favor of Daniel's narrative (112). As such, the reader cannot be entirely sure whether his narration should be taken seriously; does Eustace display another instance of ironic distancing by narrating the scene in melodramatic fashion, or is he so wrapped up in the narrative that he cannot help but use excessive language to convey the gravitas of the scene? The tension between these two positions leads to reevaluation of the transgressive sexual act's function, since both positions imply different consequences for the production of Amos's sexual identity. This is certainly true when the narrative is regarded as Eustace's ironic distancing, since that position questions whether the criminalization of non-normative sexual behavior through the Oedipus complex is self-evident.

Questioning the seeming self-evidence with which non-normative behavior is construed as deviant is an important position for Purdy, who throughout his work

had sought to interrogate the oppression of identity. In classic psychoanalysis, the desiring subject is by no means in control of its own desires. Instead, the formation of subjectivity, originating in the Oedipus complex, is argued to be universal (Laplanche and Pontalis 283). This suggests that what is considered to be deviant sexual desire is produced under the same symbolic Law that organizes normative heterosexual desire. The invocation of "God's own sake" by Cousin Ida both establishes the taboo on incest and allows for its transgression. Butler understands this principle as the moment in which the Law that forbids incestuous desire inevitably makes this desire possible by its sheer prohibition (*Gender Trouble* 104). The Law's prohibition of the desire for an object inevitably eroticizes it, making it desirable (*Bodies* 61). In light of this argument it is telling that Cousin Ida's gesture in effect points towards the possibility of her own desire for Amos. Her half-hearted opposition, which enables this transgression in the first place, invokes only the Law of the symbolic order in the guise of "God's own sake." While her own desires remain unspoken, the mere fact of its possibility, enabled by her invocation of the symbolic Law, makes Amos desirable to her. If the Law needs the possibility of transgression to be effective as Law in the first place, Cousin Ida's desire, which is evoked by the prohibition, is as self-evident as the prohibition itself. The transgression of the Law is no longer necessarily just a criminal act, but also an act of reciprocation.

By dramatizing the interdependency of the prohibition and the transgressive act, Eustace's narration destabilizes the concept of a constant and criminalized homosexuality produced through this narrative. This not only happens in Eustace's narration of the Oedipus complex, but also in other instances in which characters in the novel repudiate the normative concept of same-sex desire as transgressive. Daniel, and to a certain extent Amos, tries to suspend the moment in which he must confess to a homosexual identity. The suspension of this confession is key to the way in which he resists the criminalizing purchase of the Oedipal fantasy. The melodramatic mode, and the ironic distancing that this occasions, bring into view the mechanics of confession. Just as Eustace tries to establish Amos's sexuality by narrating his sexual identity in a certain way, the confession that is part and parcel of the Oedipal fantasy is yet another strategy of those who attempt to construe the sexual behavior of others as an identity. The centrality of the confession and its criminalizing logic in Eustace's narration of the Oedipus complex bears strong resemblance to the closet as a metaphor for the recognition (or disavowal) of same-sex desires. While the phrase "coming out of the closet" has become the dominant metaphor framing the transition from non-recognition to openly admitting to non-normative desires or gender identifications, the public admission that is so central

to the closet metaphor operates as a pathologizing strategy similar to that of the confession. It transfixes sexual behavior to the fantasy of identity. In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, I recognize a strategy of writing against the closet as an epistemological marker for sexual categorization. The confession becomes a pivotal site in which Daniel suspends the necessity to occupy a sexual identity – even if it comes at the cost of his self-preservation.

Confessing "Out of the Closet"

One of the factors that caused a proliferation of sexual identities, Foucault famously argues, is the transformation of the confession from religious to secular and medical discourse. In the course of the nineteenth century sodomy was no longer understood as a sexual act between members of the same sex, but turned itself into an identity that tethered sexual desire to one's role in society. This was made possible by an explosion of discourse on sexuality. One had to repeatedly bear out her or his sexual object choice, and through these repetitious confessions sex acts increasingly coincided with conceptions of identity. Foucault indeed pinpoints the birth of homosexuality as identity to the precise date of 1870 in a widely cited, and often criticized, passage of his *History of Sexuality*: "Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43).[8]

For Foucault, sexual identity is the product of discourse and psychoanalysis has, in turn, played a significant part in the production of that discourse. It is important to consider the implications of this assertion for Eustace's melodramatic narration of the Oedipal scenario. As noted, this scenario plots out several stages of sexual development. However, popular psychoanalysis seems less interested in the cases in which this development follows the normative course, that is, the one producing exogamous heterosexuality in the subject. The cases that are most often narrated are those in which the Oedipal scenario is not resolved as it should be. Psychoanalytic studies focus exactly on those patients who failed to produce their sexuality in a normative way.

8 See Sedgwick for a critique of such pinpointing of a date, as it presents an oversimplification of experiences and practices that made up and continue to make up narratives of sexual identity (*Epistemology* 44–48).

Here we see a doubling effect within the production of discourse on sexuality: more discourse on non-normative sexual identities is produced *because* there is more discourse on non-normative sexual identities. For one, most accounts of psychoanalysis are concerned with the pathological construction of sexual deviation. Freud's most famous cases, such as Dora or the Wolf Man, recount the subject formation of those who failed to adhere to the social norm. Interestingly, in psychoanalytical discourse, what is considered to be the norm is defined negatively: the conception of normative sexuality needs deviant sexualities in order to establish itself as the norm. By the same token, psychoanalysis demands that the transgressions of patients are transferred into language, cementing their reality in literal terms. Psychoanalysis as the 'talking cure' not only produces medical discourse on sexual identity, but also ensures that its patients keep producing discourse by repeatedly talking about episodes in their past that might point towards the cause of their pathology. The compulsion towards discourse in psychoanalysis has often been likened to confession. Aptly described by Brooks, "[p]sychoanalysis, one of the most conspicuous inventions of the twentieth century, offers a secular version of religious confession: it insists on the work of patient and analyst – comparable to confessant and confessor – toward the discovery of the most hidden truths about selfhood" (*Troubling Confessions* 9). In its proliferation of discourse, psychoanalysis produces both a norm from which the patient is compelled to deviate and the imperative to constantly confess to this deviation.

In the next chapter I return to the performative power of the confession in the novel *63: Dream Palace*. In it, an "anal speech act" is misread as a confession to a passive sexual identity. The novel dramatizes how the demand for a confession produces a sexual identity even in the absence of sexual acts. In a similar way in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, Daniel and Amos are compelled to bear themselves out. In these and other of Purdy's works, characters can hardly ever contain themselves. Their speech overflows and keeps being projected into their world. Even if speech is made impossible, even if characters have no direct addressee, their urge to speak up still gets the better of them. Yet seldom do these characters confess to something that could constitute a coherent notion of the self. In one instance Daniel will acknowledge a certain desire for Amos, while at others he strongly disavows the slightest possibility that such desire could exist. Thus, during an argument with Eustace, Daniel exclaims "I couldn't be in love with a man [...] I've never been, and I can't be now" (84), while soon after he confides in Maureen: "I love him. I love Amos" (106).

The resulting confusion of these contradictory confessions is part of the reason why Daniel decides to break away from his life and start anew in the army. However, when Daniel re-enlists, he cannot help but to continue confessing: "some people

confess in the flesh, others on paper. Daniel, a mumbler or a mute in company, could pour himself out on a blank sheet of paper in a P.X. waiting-room to an invisible correspondent" (112). While Daniel returns to the army precisely to escape the demand to confess to his desire for Amos, he nevertheless returns to the confessional moment. The bodily metaphors that are used to describe Daniel's urge to confess are doubled as Daniel is hunted down by Captain Stadger. The latter continues Eustace's attempts to elicit a confession from Daniel, and in doing so literally inscribes what he takes for a confession onto Daniel's body with a medieval-looking torture device. I return to this scene in a moment, for it illustrates the performative power of the confession and the discursive violence that organizes the confessor-confessant relationship. For now, I want to focus on confession in terms of melodramatic mise-en-scène, as it opens up a spatiotemporal understanding of the speech act that dramatizes the social consolidation of identity.

As we have seen, melodramatic characters consist of archetypes, devoid of any semblance of individuality and psychological development, onto whom ideological struggles are acted out. Melodramatic characters are constituted through their exteriority. They are wholly made up of the language that describes them and projects archetypical character traits onto their personas. The Ingénue, the Villain, and the Hero are recognizable as such because they do not show any sign of interiority, but rather consist of the projection of topoi onto a seemingly coherent character. For these characters there is no inner truth to which they can confess in the first place. We see, instead, that what they confess to is the projection of external fantasies and ideologies onto them. Eustace's rejoinder to Daniel's denial is telling: "You've never been, and you *are*" (84, original emphasis). Just as Eustace narrates Amos's sexuality as an Oedipal fantasy in order to transfix it onto his identity, so too does he fix Daniel's same-sex desires in terms of identity. Both Amos and Daniel assume a homosexual identity because others project their own fantasies of sexuality upon them. Purdy's use of melodrama, then, problematizes the performative force of the confession by making his characters confess to an identity that is void of any interiority that could harbor truth claims. Confession seen through the lens of melodrama exposes identity as an empty canvas onto which the fantasies of others are projected.

The way in which sexual identity is projected onto a character's exterior is foregrounded by the specific language situation in which the confession is grounded. The performative nature of a confession construes the thing that is confessed to as what Sedgwick has called, in relation to the figure of the closet, an "open secret" (*Epistemology* 22). This open secret entails a reality that can only be produced by the speech act of the confession itself, but which is retroactively constituted as a previously

existing reality. While the speech act of the confession produces a new reality, this reality is immediately assumed to have existed before its utterance. This renders the confession as speech act highly suspect by definition, since the truth-claim that motivates the confession can only exist by the grace of that very same confession. The open secret of the closet, once again, figures as an example of how this unstable, and often untenable speech act self-implodes, as coming out of the closet makes it at once impossible to be in it (or ever having been in it) as well as being out of it. David Halperin explains this paradox from an epistemological perspective: "one effect of being in the closet is that you are precluded from knowing whether people are treating you as straight because you have managed to fool them and they do not suspect you of being gay," while at the same time "those who have once enjoyed the epistemological privilege constituted by their knowledge of your ignorance of their knowledge typically refuse to give up that privilege, and insist on constructing your sexuality as a secret to which they have special access, which always gives itself away to their superior and knowing gaze" (34–35). Halperin singles out the gaze of the other as the epistemological marker that makes it impossible to be either in or out of the closet.

Halperin frames the closet as a space that is impossible to occupy. In addition to this observation, I add that the state of being in the closet implies a temporal condition that is impossible to embody. In the logic of the confession, the temporal relation between the transgression and its confession becomes reversed. While the act that leads up to the confession historically precedes the moment of the confession, it can only be regarded as transgression after it is confessed to. The time of confession is, then, what Susannah Radstone describes as a "temporality that folds the future back onto the past" (201). For Brooks, this circular temporal logic is reflected in the transformation of the speech act itself. He argues that "confession may best be conceived as a speech-act that has a constative aspect (the sin or guilt confessed to) and a performative aspect (the performance of the act of confessing), and that the performative aspect can produce the constative, creating guilt in the act of confessing it" (*Troubling Confession* 52). Such a reversal is also implied when we consider the confession as a speech act that establishes the relationship between speaker and listener as the relationship between confessant and confessor. While the transgression can only be established retroactively after the utterance of the confession as a performative speech act, this speech act fails if the confessor does not recognize it as such. The confessor then plays an active part in the temporal reversal of transgression and confession, an effect that is further amplified in the psychoanalytical confession.

In *Troubling Confessions* (2000), Brooks describes how Freud in an essay written later in his life insists that the analyst constructs a truth for the analysand based on the latter's confessions. This "construction" is then fed back into the subject of analysis so that the analysand can incorporate it into his or her own narrative. "The analyst," writes Brooks, "constructs part of the story in order for the analysand to find more of the story – to produce a fuller confession" (53–54). In psychoanalysis, much more than in other instances of secular confession, the confessor is foregrounded as an active participant in its truth-production, for the confessor participates actively in the production of discourse on the transgression. Or, in Brooks's words, "the real test of truth in constructing the analysand's confessional story is simply the production of more story" (54).

What is ultimately at stake in this "production of more story" is the truth claim that lies at the heart of the confessional mode. In his seminal essay "Confession and Double Thought: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky", J.M. Coetzee interrogates the very notion of truth, and especially for whom this truth is produced. "The end of confession," he writes, "is to tell the truth to and for oneself" (230). The truth-claim of the confession is always compromised by the posture of the confessant. The confessant who is self-aware in the moment of confessing "raises intricate and [...] intractable problems regarding truthfulness, problems whose common factor seems to be a regression to infinity of self-awareness and self-doubt" (215). Although the confession presents itself as a mode of speech that aims to unburden the confessant of a sense of shame, this burden is only intensified by a self-awareness inherent to the confessional mode that immediately renders suspect the thing to which is confessed.

Considering Halperin's spatial understanding of the closet through the temporal reversal that is inherent in the complex confessional speech act, and considering the way in which the mode of confession always renders its own truth-claim suspect, I recognize strong implications for the social production of the confessant's identity through the act of confessing. While the act of coming out of the closet implies a movement from inside to outside, the temporal condition of the confession and the relationship between confessant and confessor reverse this movement. What is considered the innermost confessed truth indeed only becomes this innermost truth after it is spoken. The outwardly directed speech act constitutes both the confessant's and the confessor's understanding of what lies within the confessant. This is what Linda Anderson, in her analysis of Rousseau's *Confessions*, calls the "'radical internalization' of personal identity" (43).

Yet, this reversal also challenges the validity of the construction of the "inside" as one's "true identity". As I argue more thoroughly in my chapters on *63: Dream*

Palace and *Cabot Wright Begins*, Purdy's suspicion of identity production stems from the naturalization of an inner identity as the "true self", while this notion of inner identity is wholly the result of narration. If the mode of confession presents itself as a form of unmasking, this inevitably leads to an unlimited regression of unmasking. For, as I argue in my chapter on *Cabot Wright Begins*, if both inner and outer identity are constructed through narration, we can no longer speak of an epistemological difference between the two fictions. Inner and outer identity are then ultimately the same. Or, in Coetzee's words, we find "behind every motive another motive, behind every mask another mask" (220).

Confessing and Disidentification

We have already seen how the novel's impossible plot situation is dramatized by Daniel's sleepwalking. The impossible dilemma that the metaphor of "coming out" entails is further made explicit by the contradictory confessions that both he and Amos make. Their confessions oscillate between identification and disavowal, and these conflicting positions underline how the figure of the closet enforces the fiction of identity onto their behavior, regardless of the position that they confess to. But, perhaps even more importantly, their conflicting statements often suggest a coexistence of disavowal and identification. In a matter of a few pages, Daniel both repudiates and admits to harboring same-sex desire. Daniel continuously switches positions as if to confuse his interlocutors and leave them guessing which confession is the "true" one. Amos, on the other hand, turns his confessions into violent outbursts. Upon his introduction to the reader, the external narrator notes that "nobody could be sure on meeting Amos whether he was queer or not, because he was so fierce to approach and those who did so uninvited were injured" (19). The extreme aggression with which Amos at the beginning of the novel denies Eustace's suggestion that he could be homosexual invites confusion regarding his sexual self-identification, especially when later in the novel he seems to openly enjoy same-sex relationships.

Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz calls this playing-out of the tension between disavowal and acknowledgment "disidentification". He considers this a "descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). That is, to navigate a space hostile towards minoritarian identifications, the minoritarian subject will find ways to attach to the identification under scrutiny, while simultaneously

publicly performing its repudiation. In the space that opens up between these two positions, Muñoz recognizes the meaningful dramatization of the subject's refusal, or failure, to fully identify with a normative subject position by resting on the contradictory attachments that the subject embodies (*Disidentifications* 12). Disidentification as a practice of resistance, then, is closely tied with melodrama's dramatization of the impossible plot situation. Indeed, in the space opened up by melodramatic excess, Goldberg theorizes instances of frustrated identification, non-identification, cross-identification, destabilization of personal identity, and identifications that are too intense (34, 127–128, and 134–135). It is in the performance of disidentification that the fantasy of stable identity sees its own undoing. "The journey of self-transformation is one of undoing," Goldberg argues of this melodramatic space, "not a place of knowledge that can be claimed as one's own; not a place of identity, but of identification" (126).

The strategy of disidentification is easily recognized in Daniel's confessions, be they in the form of speech, gesture, or even voiced through the external narrator's use of free indirect discourse. The switching back-and-forth between identifications causes the fantasy of stable identity to give way as Daniel comes to embody both contradictory identifications at the same time. For example, in anticipation of his argument with Eustace, the external narrator reflects on Daniel's sexuality by reiterating Daniel's troubled feelings for Amos. As the external narrator does so, it evokes Daniel's sexual history.[9] The result is an ongoing oscillation between admission and disavowal, present and past. This narrative space is further troubled by the external narrator's tendency to switch in and out of free indirect discourse, which presents itself as inner "truth", a notion that is always rendered suspect in Purdy's novelistic worlds. For example:

> None of Daniel's tenants had interested him – indeed he hardly knew their names – until Amos. Unable to take his eyes off the boy's face, he could not admit that the feeling which seized him was love-he regarded it as some physical illness at first. Indeed, from the first beginning and hint of his manhood he had always had girls, had passed for girl-crazy in his family, and had continued his fornications like a good soldier until the present with habitual tireless regularity.

9 Throughout my dissertation I understand the external narrator as a function of the text instead of as a gendered character, which is why I have chosen to refer to the external narrator with the impersonal pronoun "it".

> He could not feel he wanted the body of Amos (who was a thin boy, though his buttocks had beautiful shape), but he could not deny to himself in his hours of blinding self-revelation that he needed Amos, that it was Amos who dictated everything he felt and represented all he needed. (81)

This fragment employs several disidentifying strategies that illustrate how Daniel attempts to negotiate the terms in which he can attach to his same-sex desire. The narration rehearses homophobic and heteronormative topoi that seek to establish Daniel as a proponent of the dominant heterosexual culture. As his same-sex desire is cast as an illness, his history of sexuality is portrayed in an exaggerated fashion as if to say, "someone with such a rampant history of heterosexuality couldn't possibly harbor same-sex desire". Yet, this same fragment attests to same-sex desire. He is said to be unable to take his eyes off of Amos and, in parenthesis, the external narrator remarks upon Amos's behind in a way that can only be taken as Daniel's opinion. However, here too Daniel's desire is framed by narratives that cast his sudden desire for Amos as a one-off incident. Indeed, Daniel does not seem to be in control of his emotions, as it is Amos who dictates "everything he felt". Even if Daniel admits to his desire for Amos – after all, he does have beautiful buttocks – he admits only to carnal desire while repudiating that this desire could be love. This, too, ties in with a homophobic rhetoric that allows for sexual intercourse between men, as long as this intercourse only serves the purpose of bodily satisfaction without the involvement of romantic emotions. In this brief moment, then, while Daniel's desire for Amos is expressed, the broad register of homophobic and heteronormative discourses allows Daniel's continued navigation of a cultural space that would otherwise cast him out because of his identification.

Besides showing the operations of Daniel's disidentification, the scene also contributes to the destablization of the confession's truth-claim and the juxtaposition of inner and outer identities. It does so by making the external narrator wholly complicit in its use of free indirect discourse, a narrative strategy that, because of its mediated nature, complicates the "truth" advanced by adopting Daniel's point of view. As the external narrator continuously slips in and out of Daniel's character-bound focalization, the narrative presents itself as Daniel's very own train of thought. The parentheses, asides, and ruminations on Daniel's past are presented as free indirect discourse: the external narrator, in the space of their own narration, not only gives way to Daniel's point of view, but also claims to share something to which the reader would otherwise have no access.

The use of free indirect discourse in this passage suggests a truth-claim that is motivated by the external narrator's brief adoption of Daniel's voice. After all, the mode of free indirect discourse requires the reader to assume that the external narrator has temporarily given way to character-bound focalization. However, while the genre of confession necessitates that the reader accepts its truth claim, this truth-claim is problematized by the free indirect discourse that the external narrator employs to represent Daniel's innermost feelings. Certainly, the external narrator of Purdy's fiction is already suspect as it often purposefully misrepresents or confuses events, actions, and emotions. The adoption of free indirect discourse in the above scene works to present Daniel's thoughts as if they were unmediated, while at the same time shows that the genre of the confession is wholly incompatible with free indirect discourse.

Although free indirect discourse might present itself as an unambiguous suspension of the external narrator's voice in order to make space for the seemingly unmediated transmission of character-bound focalization, the double focalization that is always presented in this narrative mode questions the validity of the truth that is spoken. While the mode of free indirect discourse implies that the external narrator has unmediated access to Daniel's thoughts, these thoughts become part of the external narrator's broader organization of the narrative. The disidentification strategy with which Daniel seeks to distance his same-sex desire from what he perceives to be an impossible identification is then doubled by the external narrator's use of free indirect discourse. As the narrator covertly intervenes in the representation of Daniel's speech, the "truth" of his confession is further destabilized. In doing so, the external narrator assists Daniel by opening up a melodramatic space in which the tension between two impossible plot resolutions are temporarily suspended, and in which Daniel can continue to navigate a hostile dominant culture through acts of disidentification.

Liberation through Disidentification

Daniel's flight to the army has an ambiguous status. Although Eustace believes that Daniel fled Chicago to escape his own same-sex desires, once at the army camp he continues sleepwalking and even begins to confess profusely in his letters to Eustace. Critics of the novel have always interpreted Daniel's escape as an expression of internalized homophobia (Adams, *Homosexual Hero* 66; Austen 357–358; Chupack 104; Schwartzschild 59; Snyder, "Original Stock" 182–183;). Of these critics, only Michael

Snyder regards Purdy's overt use of the "internalized homophobia" topos as a means to challenge homophobic responses to his earlier novels. He interprets Daniel's homophobic remarks throughout the novel as an ironic foreshadowing of his own death at the hands of Captain Stadger (168). I want to extend Snyder's assessment of Daniel's flight as more than the expression of internalized homophobia. Rather, I believe that this flight is both a continuation and an intensification of Daniel's disidentificatory practices. In the army, and especially in his relationship with Captain Stadger, Daniel is able to inhabit a space in which he can act out his same-sex desire, while attempting to survive in the homophobic dominant culture that he himself also embodies. That Daniel does not survive in the end does not diminish his attempts to navigate the hostile space in which he finds himself. Instead, I argue that his death can be seen as another act of disidentification. After all, as Muñoz reminds us, "disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects" (*Disidentifications* 5, original emphasis).

If anything, Daniel is vividly aware of his potential demise at the hands of Captain Stadger. There are moments at which he attempts to free himself from Stadger's bind or tries to resist his hold over him. Yet, at the same time, Daniel longs for the disciplinary measures that Stadger asserts over him, and acknowledges Stadger's authoritative power as a means to normalize his own sexuality. In a letter to Eustace, Daniel writes:

> I need it, and the army I can see sees I need it. I am under, I understand, a Captain Stadger, who is death in circles, and I hear from beforehand he will exercise all the authority he has over me, well, let him, let him put me on the wheel if he has to and twist until I recognize the authority of the army so good there will be nothing but it over me, over and above Amos and even all the pain – Give me news of him. (115)

Within the same frantically written sentence, Daniel expresses a complex desire to be punished, only to have that punishment testify to his wish to hear from Amos. Giving in to the army's authority, Daniel seems to believe, produces a space in which his desire for Amos is simultaneously repudiated and acknowledged. As he continues to correspond with Eustace, "Daniel Haws, who in 'life' (by which he meant civilian life) had been morose, taciturn, bitterly reserved and almost inarticulate, poured out everything. He did not even hesitate to touch on the master passion of his existence – Amos" (167). It is, perhaps ironically, the army that provides for him the framework in which he can more fully admit to his same-sex desires.

It is true that many midcentury gay-themed novels stage the army as a repressive and homophobic institution in which homosexual characters perish under the demands of heterosexual masculinity (Caserio 171, Austen 354–355). James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), Carson McCuller's *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), and Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948), arguably the best-known gay-themed midcentury novels, can only thematize same-sex desire at the expense of their homosexual protagonists, who inevitably perish in a hostile and homophobic environment. However, following Bérubé, Michael Bronski argues that with the disruption of traditional sex and gender roles in the United States army during the Second World War, authors of gay-themed pulp novels were also emboldened to situate their pornographic writing within army life (26). Purdy, too, sees a space for Daniel's same-sex desire in the army, exactly because of its heterosexist and masculinist organization. In the army Daniel can act out his same-sex desires by compensating for them with displays of excessive heterosexually coded behavior.

During his encounters with Stadger, the latter physically assaults Daniel with increasing intensity. His body becomes literally inscribed by Stadger's passion for him, resulting in a "crazy quilt of cuts, slashes and bruises" (208). Yet, his fellow soldiers interpret these inscriptions without exception as affirmations of his heterosexuality. They assume these are the marks of frequent visits to prostitutes in the nearby town, or even the results of brawls in which Daniel asserts his masculinity, as the following passage makes clear:

> The enlisted men who shared their tent with Haws had decided, when they had seen him return after Stadger's assault on him, that the soldier had again been beaten up by outsiders on one of his regular visits to the out-of-bounds Negro sections of town. They left him strictly alone, in grudging silence, perhaps admiration, and considered him probably too tough even for the regular army. (208–209)

Daniel is, then, able to act out his same-sex and masochistic desires, because in the space of the army, the traces of his encounters with Stadger are immediately interpreted as extensions of his masculinity. Daniel is even perceived as being too masculine, which suggests that within the framework of the army his behavior cannot be interpreted as anything other than signaling heterosexuality. The army offers Daniel a structure in which he can continue his disidentificatory practices as

it automatically creates a space in which he can at once give in to Stadger's "savage embraces" and distance himself from the very thing that made him run away from Chicago: a homosexual identity (214).

Eventually, Daniel's acts of disidentification, while allowing him to act out his desires on his own terms, do not ensure his survival. Because Daniel needs his bruised body to be interpreted as masculine in order to navigate the homophobic space of the army, he cannot ask for help from his fellow soldiers when his relationship with Stadger becomes too perilous. The very strategies that he needs for his survival become a liability as he is left on his own to defend himself against Stadger's ever-tightening clutches. Yet, even in the moment Daniel perishes at the hands of Stadger, we can recognize acts of disidentification that liberate Daniel from the demand to confess, to "come out of the closet", while still acting out his sexual desires.

When Stadger finds out about Daniel's history with Amos, he falls into a jealous rage and demands Daniel confess to his love for Amos. However, through his relationship with Stadger, this initial desire for Amos has changed into a masochistic desire for corporeal punishment. "Kill me", he demands of Stadger (232). In order to get what he desires – that is, in order to be punished by Stadger – Daniel needs to play off Stadger's jealousy and he does so again by subverting the genre of confession. This time Daniel does so by leaving out a confession altogether. In the face of Stadger's threats, Daniel remains silent:

> "How did you show Amos Ratcliffe your love?" Captain Stadger's voice came like the thunder behind them, with pitiless savagery he held open the mutilated man's eyelids.
>
> "I never gave him love," the soldier said, "I failed him as I failed myself."
>
> Pulling out of his pocket a photograph of the dead boy, Captain Stadger thrust it in front of the soldier.
>
> "Prefer me to him now, and you're free, Haws."
>
> When Daniel did not reply, he rained one blow after another upon his prisoner until the bark of the tree ran red.
>
> Leaving the soldier for a few moments then, he returned with the weapon he had shown him a short while before.
>
> A pink sheet of lightning illuminated the weapon's sharp edges and the captain without a word more began his work, pushing like flame with the instrument into Daniel's groin upward and over, and

> then when its work was nearing completion he put his face to Daniel's and pressing said something, in bloody accolade, that not even Daniel heard. (233)

It is the implied preference for Amos over Stadger which is read into Daniel's silence that turns the lack of speech into a powerful "truth"-producing speech act. The "truth" that Daniel denies, or forestalls by his silence, is established by Stadger. Purdy here perverts the relationship between confessor and confessant, as identified by Brooks, in having the confessor produce a "truth" out of the lack of confession. Stadger is so blinded by jealousy that his desire to hear a certain "truth" becomes more important than that to which Daniel would have confessed. Indeed, whatever confession Daniel might have volunteered, Stadger would have interpreted as Daniel's preference for Amos. The impossible situation in which Daniel finds himself is then ironically resolved by his rejection of confession. As such, this final scene illustrates the effect of melodramatic tension that Goldberg foregrounds in his discussion of *Fidelio*. *Melodrama*, he argues, "[calls] into question the assumption that action is tied to true identity". Moreover, it calls into question "the singularity of identity" (9). It is here that Purdy most emphatically foregrounds the violence that is inherent to the genre of confession, but also allows for its potential disidentification. The violence is undeniable: whether or not Stadger's interpretation of Daniel's silence is correct, as confessor he produces a "truth" that is lethal for Daniel. At the same time, through his subversion of the confession, Daniel himself leaves open the question of identity while still submitting to the punishments he so desires. As a final act of disidentification, Daniel liberates himself from the yoke of identity – the demand to "come out" and admit his love for Amos – while claiming the possibility of acting out his sexual desires in his own way. Finally, Daniel experiences "the most exquisite torment he could have ever imagined his body capable of" (214).

CHAPTER 2

Illegible Desire: The Epistemic Promiscuity of Sexual Identity

When Parkhearst Cratty meets the story's central character, Fenton Riddleway, we find both men in a park at night. Parkhearst is looking to meet people, presumably to listen to their stories and write a novel about them, but he is never really interested in what these people have to tell. Instead, he is mostly interested in looking at their physiques. When the two men meet, Fenton seems anxious and wants Parkhearst to take him to the place where he is staying; he is new in town and cannot find the address that was given to him. Parkhearst picks up on Fenton's anxiety and notices a bulge in his pocket. He cracks a joke about Fenton having a gun and making sure he does not shoot himself in the foot, but nevertheless decides to take him to the address that Fenton was unable to find.

Later in the novel, we find Fenton on one of his midnight wanderings through Chicago. He stops before an all-night movie theater and decides to go in. Once inside, Fenton notices the putrid smell of the men and boys who are usually out on the streets at night. Through the dark he sees men turning their heads to look at him, and from time to time a hand reaches out to touch his flesh. Fenton falls asleep in one of the chairs. After a while he awakes: it is already six o'clock in the morning and he decides to return home. On his way out he takes a look at a want ad he had picked up a little earlier, which says in large lettering "MEN MEN MEN".

These two scenes from *63: Dream Palace* (1956) could have easily been taken from Barry Reay's *New York Hustlers* (2010), Allan Bérubé's *Coming Out Under Fire* (1990) or Samuel Delany's *Time Square Red, Time Square Blue* (1999). The first two are historical studies, the latter a memoir, and all deal with promiscuous sex practices between men in the first decades after the Second World War. These studies demonstrate how, since the Second World War, parks, movie theaters and public restrooms in urban centers like New York, San Francisco and Chicago functioned as spaces in which men could find illicit sex with other men when homosexuality was still forbidden by law. Often, older men called "Johns" would hang around public parks after dark looking for younger men, nicknamed "trade", who would have sex with them in exchange for money, food or shelter. Similarly, all-night movie theaters (which would become porn theaters in the late '60s and early '70s) were ideal places to cruise for sex with other

men. The theaters were dark, patrons would pay admission only once and could stay the whole night. Often, "Johns" would find plenty of homeless "trade" who would use the theaters as a place to hustle for extra money.

Using only covert language to refer to this kind of promiscuous sex between men, readers of gay literature who were familiar with these practices would nevertheless recognize these scenes of hustling by their specific setting and their ambiguous references to objects and actions that suggested male genitals or sex acts between men. It would not be difficult for the reader-in-the-know to recognize in the two scenes from *63: Dream Palace* described above the sites of illicit hustling between two (or more) men. Parkhearst's looking for "material" for his book, even though he is only interested in outward appearances, obviously marks him as a "John" and the way he interacts with Fenton, including a covert reference to his genitals by way of suggesting he has a gun, seems to be a classic pick-up scene from gay pulp fiction of that era (Bronski 8). Similarly, Fenton's spending the night at an all-night theater while being looked over and touched by other patrons strongly suggests the cruising practices that Delany describes in his memoirs.

However, while the reader-in-the-know could read "between the lines" and construe from these two scenes the sites of male hustling, nothing in the two scenes explicitly refers to this actually being the case. Fenton's behavior and obliviousness to what is happening around him suggest that he is actually naive and blind to the potential for same-sex activities around him. Read literally, both scenes are nothing other than random situations in which Fenton happens to find himself while looking for his overnight address on 63rd Street. The suggestion of sex actually taken place or being solicited must be actively read into these scenes, a practice very common among readers of "gay" literature who look for textual evidence that homosexuality has always been a theme in art and literature, even in times when it was forbidden and the merest suggestion of same-sex intercourse would have been considered obscene and perverse.

Reading between the lines, or uncovering a "hidden" or "secret" gay identity from a historical text is a common practice of a gay and lesbian readership informed by, in the words of Gerard Koskovich, "the sense that LGBTQ people had been deprived of their heritage" (3). He argues that writing queer histories became an important cultural practice in the twentieth century, especially for the foundation of early homosexual organizations in the 1950s as "the search for a shared heritage began to shift from largely private and fragmentary pursuits to more public and structured ones" (11). The rhetoric in many of these studies often reverts to the topos of a history that must be uncovered, something that must come "out of the shadows", something

that has always been there but was yet to be recognized.[1] The metaphor of something being hidden, or something yet to be found, grants validation to the queer historian's work, as it retroactively establishes common vocabularies and cultural practices that tie marginalized communities together.

Beyond historiographic work, reading between the lines for suggestions of homosexual desire or same-sex practices has been the endeavor of many scholars in gay and lesbian studies, and has produced some powerful readings by Eve Sedgwick and Leo Bersani, among others.[2] However, reading for a covert homosexual desire where on the surface there seems none to be found also brings something else to the text. Reading between the lines not only attempts to uncover a hidden discourse on sexuality contemporaneous to the work, but also produces from the text new discourse contemporaneous to the reader. While it is relevant for historical purposes to reconstruct languages with which sexualities could be discussed, especially when there was no room for such sexualities in the public sphere, it is equally important to remain critical of the subject position and historical context that the reader brings to the text.

Reclaiming a text by showing how reading against the grain opens up a "gay" reading that would previously go unnoticed might, in fact, be at once both a liberating and a restrictive mode of reading; liberating in the sense that it indeed might be historically relevant, yet restrictive in the sense that it often silences other possible significations of the text. I want to consider this proliferation of discourse on sexuality in terms of what Gayatri Spivak calls epistemic violence (74). That is, the myriad ways in which a text signifies might be overwritten by such a strategy of reading for its hidden meaning. In such cases, the text is stripped of its potential to mean something different in different contexts and to different readers. If the interpreter of the text is hell-bent on it being about homosexuality, she or he often excludes the possibility of it signifying in different ways that might be contradictory to the interpreter's cause.

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1 For examples of works that use this metaphor, see Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr., eds. 1989; John D'Emilio 1982; and Molly McGarry and Fred Wasserman 1998. More recent works that include similar metaphoric language to reclaim a shared queer cultural past include Ann Cvetkovich 2003; Heather Love 2007; Cait McKinney 2018; and Christopher Nealon 2001. See also the *History UnErased* project for the adaptation of this rhetoric in contemporary pedagogic settings.

2 See for example Sedgwick's response to Bersani's famous "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1989) in which she proposes *fisting-as-écriture*, which undermines the "polarities that a phallic economy defines as active and passive" (*Tendencies* 101).

The potential of such violence in the shape of sacrificing other possible readings to serve the agenda or desires of the interpreter is a central concern in my reading of *63: Dream Palace*. The possibility of reading between the lines to uncover a homosexual desire or illicit same-sex practices that cater to the interpreter's desires is a recurring theme throughout the novel, and many characters read Fenton in a similar way, as I have suggested above. While Fenton is portrayed as naive in the scenes I have just described, in other scenes Fenton is aware of the passes that are made at him and he responds violently. Fenton does not necessarily recognize himself in the sexuality that is ascribed to him by others, and even finds such a suggestion insulting enough to become vicious. His outbursts introduce a tension in the novel that centers around the reading practices that occur in both the reader and the characters that read Fenton. In my reading of *63: Dream Palace*, I argue that the novel, together with Fenton, resists being read in one specific way. Instead, the novel continues to suspend the possibility of a conclusive interpretation and looks to keep Fenton's sexuality unresolved. In doing so, the novel responds to the epistemic violence done by reading a specific sexual identity into Fenton's character. By having him, and the novel as a whole, resist the possibility of an absolute truth-claim about his sexuality or identity, Purdy introduces a queer strategy that I will call 'epistemic promiscuity'. That is to say, both Fenton and the novel can always be read in a different way, and each reading of either Fenton or the novel will open up yet other different possible readings. Truth-claims about Fenton's sexual identity are not necessarily voided just because they are invalid, but more often because the truth about his sexuality can be many possible things at once without privileging one truth over the other. *63: Dream Palace* is, then, a novel that looks for a language in which we can be sexual beings without the constrictions of the identity categories in which sexuality is usually cast.

In *63: Dream Palace*, Purdy signals reading literally and figuratively as the primary modes we use to make sense of sexuality and sexual identity, making clear that neither can be employed unproblematically. Both literal and figurative readings inevitably feed back into fantasies about fixed sexual identities. I argue that the point of the novel is that different incongruent readings are always simultaneously possible, and that reading for a particular meaning in the text is to do violence to its multifaceted significations. However, I will demonstrate this by doing exactly what the novel attempts to resist: prioritize a specific reading over other possible readings. I do so to foreground the epistemic violence that is committed by the constant misreading of Fenton's acts, by characters in the novel and by its readers as well. Going against the grain of the novel allows me to highlight its operations of resistance, and to identify its queer strategy of epistemic promiscuity.

"Up we go then, motherfucker"

63: Dream Palace appears to follow the conventions of a classic detective novel, posing a mystery to be solved. At the beginning of the novel, the reader drops in on a conversation between Parkhearst Cratty and the "greatwoman" Grainger. While drinking a tall glass of Holland gin, Grainger asks: "Do you ever think about Fenton Riddleway?" (DP 85).[3] Fenton was a young man down on his luck whom Parkhearst had briefly taken on as a protégé. Fenton, it turns out, is also the central character in the novel's plot, for the reader soon realizes that a certain mystery surrounds him. Grainger's suggestion that Parkhearst "write down what Fenton did" (85) is the catalyst for the novel's main narrative, and shortly after Grainger's incentive Parkhearst starts to tell the story of "what Fenton did", which was kill his brother, Claire.

Apprehended within this framework of a classic detective novel, the story takes as its organizing principle a preoccupation with the narration of story and history. Tzvetan Todorov (1987) described the detective novel as a genre that dramatizes the ways in which both history and story are produced through its doubled mode of narration. At the very basis of the genre lies the question "whodunnit": the detective novel starts out with the premise of a crime and it is up to the detective to reconstruct the events that led up to the novel's beginning and figure out who was the perpetrator of the crime. According to Todorov, the reader is thus presented with two narratives folded into one: the first narrative is the history of the crime that is reconstructed by the detective, and the second narrative is that of the reconstruction itself (44). Ernst van Alphen calls this doubling of history in the detective novel a "dramatization of the paradox of narrativity. While the story of the novel is presented as a repetition of the history of the crime, it is simultaneously the task of the story to produce that very same history" ("Vertellingen" 100, my translation). Inherent to the genre of detective fiction, then, is the production of history by way of the detective's reading for clues that ensue from the crime, while the history of that very same crime can only exist as a result of this act of reading.

Reading runs through the detective novel as its central theme, but this reading can only be done retroactively. As the conclusion of the history of the crime (the murder; the stolen object) is already present at the outset of the story, the detective reconstructs what happened prior to the event in question, first by recognizing certain

3 Where deemed necessary I use DP to indicate that I refer to *63: Dream Palace*.

objects as clues, and then by interpreting these clues as signs for the actual facts of the crime. In *63: Dream Palace*, the reader repeats the work of the detective since he or she must participate in the reconstruction of "what Fenton did". As it is never made explicit that Fenton actually did kill his brother, the reader must look for clues and reconstruct the gaps in the story to solve the murder mystery. These clues are signaled by textual interventions – such as ellipses – and linguistic plays on names. The reader can make sense of these signs only retroactively; as the plot progresses, the reader starts to recognize how previous remarks or plot elements form a part of the answer to the question of what Fenton did.

To highlight the theme of reading as reconstructing a history in the detective genre even further – or rather, to problematize this theme – it is telling that in place of an actual detective, the crime of *63: Dream Palace* is reconstructed by Parkhearst Cratty, an unsuccessful writer of the type found throughout Purdy's oeuvre. His failure as a writer is magnified by his apparent failure as a reader. When Parkhearst first meets Fenton, the former is wandering around in a park "looking for 'material' for his book" (88). But instead of finding something to write about, he never seems to be truly interested in what he encounters: "many times he had run across people in the park who had told him their stories while he pretended to listen to their voices while usually watching their persons" (88). And again, when Parkhearst tells his wife Bella about his encounter with Fenton, "[she recalls that there had been] scores, even hundreds, of these people Parkhearst met in order to study for his writing, but the stories themselves were never put in final shape or were never written, and Parkhearst himself forgot the old models in his search for new ones" (92). Parkhearst's failure to write is here closely connected to his disinterest in stories or in the reconstruction of history; he either fails to listen to the stories of the people he encounters, or constantly forgets their stories in favor of either their outward appearance or someone entirely new.

Parkhearst's incapacity to write or read, and his utter disinterest in reconstructing histories make him an unlikely character to narrate the crime of *63: Dream Palace*. After all, as Todorov points out, the second-tier narrative of the classic detective novel – the reconstruction of the crime scene's history – is often explicitly narrated by a friend of the detective or a journalist who is writing a book or newspaper article about the whole affair (45). Parkhearst's disinterest in reading and writing undermines an unwritten assumption of the classic detective novel: the idea that there is a true crime scene that must be narrated in the first place. Todorov argues that even if traditional detective novels take as their premise a crime scene of which the true facts must be reconstructed by the detective's detailed close reading and interpretation of signs, the truth of these events can only exist through the doubling of their narration: that

of the history of the event and its subsequent reconstruction. The truth of the crime scene in the detective novel, then, can only be produced through its reconstruction, that is, the transformation of history into story. If the crime has no truth prior to its narration, the assumption that it has a truth at all, that there is a true history of the crime scene, might consequently be problematic in and of itself. This is exactly the problem that *63: Dream Palace* raises in its attempt to reconstruct "what Fenton did". The further the story unfolds, the more this initial question is pushed aside while the focus of the novel's narration keeps shifting around. As I argue later in this chapter, the focus of the narration moves from the question of "what Fenton did" to the question of "who Fenton was". This move from action to identity further problematizes the truth question, for here too, as we will see, the truth about Fenton's identity or actions can only be narrated retroactively. The truth cannot exist prior to its history being reconstructed as a story.

Despite the fact that the novel presents itself as a more or less traditional detective story with a murder mystery at its narrative heart, it plays with some of the premises of the detective genre and unsettles certain assumptions about whether it is possible to access the truth about a person or event through its retroactive narration. One of these premises is that classic detective novels in the tradition of the "whodunnit" are organized around the detective's endeavor to find out who committed the crime, while the crime itself is already present at the beginning of the narration. In *63: Dream Palace*, the opposite situation occurs: while the culprit is already present, the actual crime is only unveiled at the end of the story. Since the novel is organized around the discovery of the crime instead of the culprit, it already sidelines the possibility of there being a truth to this crime at all.

Although the novel upsets the basic premises of the detective novel, the reader is nevertheless invited to trace the work of the detective and piece together textual clues that might provide some answers to "what Fenton did". The solution to this mystery, however, is not at all straightforward and might perhaps move beyond the crime suggested at the end of the novel. That is, the murder of Fenton's brother Claire might not be the actual crime that Parkhearst and Grainger discuss. Since the detective and the reader of the detective novel can only reconstruct the history of the crime retroactively, I want to take this strategy to heart and read the novel in reverse to find clues for a different interpretation of the crime than what is offered at face value. The novel ends with an ambiguous statement by Fenton, which I propose can be taken as an unsettling of the narrated truth about "what Fenton did".

At the end of *63: Dream Palace*, Fenton picks up his brother Claire and carries him up the stairs of their house on 63rd Street. While carrying Claire, Fenton says: "up we

go then, motherfucker" (145). After this remark, the novel stops abruptly, leaving the reader to wonder who might be addressed by "we" and by "motherfucker". The abrupt ending and the lack of any narrative motivation for the statement pose a second, two-part mystery to be solved: Who is the motherfucker that Fenton speaks of, and why does the narrative end with this expletive?[4] As the text itself offers no solution to the question of the addressee, the options from which the reader can choose involve multiple possibilities: Fenton could be addressing himself, his brother, or both of them at the same time, or the motherfucker could be an apostrophe that addresses neither Fenton nor Claire.[5]

The ambiguity of this address is amplified by another ambiguity in the novel, which is made apparent when we consider the narrator of the story. The opening scene, in which Parkhearst and Grainger remember Fenton, frames the narrative which, in the tradition of the detective novel, is presented as a flashback that reconstructs the crime. Grainger coaxes Parkhearst into telling the story of what Fenton has done. Thus, the external narrator of the opening scene puts Parkhearst forward as the narrator of the central narrative: "Parkhearst would take another drink of the gin; then his voice would rise a bit, only to die away again as he told her everything he could remember" (88). However, while this sentence announces a shift in narration – which we assume jumps from an external, omniscient narrator to the character-bound narration of Parkhearst – the tense in which the story is narrated remains the same: "There was this park with a patriot's name near the lagoon. Parkhearst Cratty had been wandering there, not daring to go home to his wife, Bella" (88). Even though the flashback takes on Parkhearst as its focalizer, the narration continues in the third-person singular, treating Parkhearst merely as a character in the detective narrative that can be seen as his own story.

While the detective narrative that organizes the structure of the novel can be seen as Parkhearst's story, his own appearance as a character transgresses the conventions of the traditional detective story, in which the narrator is often someone other than the detective, usually a friend or uninvested bystander. Parkhearst's appearance as a character in his story frustrates a straightforward identification of the embedded narrator with Parkhearst as focalizer. The undefined identity of the narrator makes the addressee of the utterance "motherfucker" ambiguous. Even though the words are

4 Although it has been a common expletive since the 1970s, in 1956 "motherfucker" was a much more controversial word and not at all common in print. It has even been argued that this is the first instance in which the word *motherfucker* appeared in American printed press at all (Dawson 124).

5 Think of the colloquial use of "we" as first-person singular in sentences such as "here we go".

directly spoken by Fenton, they remain embedded within the ambiguous narration. As the external narrator maintains organizing control over the narrative that would otherwise be the domain of Parkhearst, the reader begins to suspect that there is more to the novel's mystery than Parkhearst's point of view can reveal. Looking more closely at the "motherfucker", then, raises a new set of questions that are not easily resolved: What is the meaning of this exclamation? Who is addressed? Why does the narration stop at this exact moment? The novel refuses to be read straightforwardly, and I argue that by uncovering these ambiguities in the novel we can begin to identify Purdy's concern with the way in which sex acts are read as straightforwardly legible signifiers of sexual identities.

Reading Fenton from Behind

Starting my own interpretation at the end of the novel, I take my cue from a reading strategy proposed by Jonathan A. Allan. In his book *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus* (2016), Allan reads several canonical texts that center around the configuration of sex and sexual orientation literally "from behind" (6). "Reading from behind" indicates reading from a backwards position; to scrutinize a text's assumptions and concerns by tracing problems posed at the end back to the beginning (18). From this perspective, trying to establish the signification of Fenton's utterance on the last page of *63: Dream Palace involves* looking at earlier parts of the novel for answers. However, this is not the only aspect of Allan's project. For him, reading from behind also opens up the potential to uncover organizing principles in a text that are rooted in anal desire instead of phallic desire, which for him is the primary signifying principle in Western literature. By focusing on the alternative organizing principles of texts that foreground the position of the posterior, such as the novels *Brokeback Mountain* (1997) and *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), Allan questions the conflation of anal desire with certain assumptions about sexual orientation and gender identification. Following Sedgwick's question, "what about male desire for a woman's anus – is that anal desire?" ("Anality" 155), Allan explores the sexual orientation that is assumed in representations of anal desire and of the anus as the site of sexuality. Anal desire, Allan argues, is not only consistently (mis)read as homosexual desire, but also seen to connote notions of passivity and femininity that fuel homophobic discourses and homosexual panic. Yet, although the texts that he reads often repeat and reinforce these assumptions about the anus, the anus is also always a signifier that cannot be contained. Any reference to, or act associated with

the anus, opens up to assumptions about sexuality and identity. As such, Allan argues, the anus has the potential to destabilize the phallus as the organizing principle of Western sexuality.

In reading *63: Dream Palace* "from behind", I take the detective novel's position of reading and reconstructing retroactively quite literally. I propose exploring Fenton's final exclamation as an invitation to the reader to return to the beginning of the novel and ask which question constitutes its central mystery. Reading back to the beginning of the novel, the question of "what Fenton did" begins to resonate in a different way. Moreover, since the text does not provide conclusive evidence as to who the addressee of "up we go then, motherfucker" is, both Fenton and his brother can be considered plausible options. In both cases, when read literally, the term "motherfucker" evokes the specter of incest. If we consider the possibility of Fenton apostrophizing himself by saying "up we go then, motherfucker", what Fenton did might not just be the killing of his own brother, a crime that has already been solved, but also the breaching of the incest taboo.

In the following, I prioritize one reading over other possible readings – namely reading "motherfucker" literally as referring to someone who has had intercourse with his mother – not because I believe it is the interpretation that makes most sense, but because it exemplifies how such prioritization uncovers the novel's own concern with the way in which certain readings are prioritized when interpreting acts as signifiers of sexual identity. My choice to prioritize a literal reading is motivated by Fenton's own inability to read for anything other than literal meaning.[6] Throughout the novel, we find instances in which Fenton is unable to read between the lines and instead interprets everything at face value. This becomes quite apparent from the title of the novel, which refers to an address, presumably the building in which Fenton and Claire live, on Chicago's 63rd Street. This address, however, is not written in the usual way, which would exclude punctuation and would run along the lines of "63rd Street Dream Palace".[7] This unconventionality would not necessarily draw attention to itself or be considered meaningful if it did not give rise to a disagreement between Fenton and Parkhearst, who, upon meeting each other for the first time,

6 The novel's placement within the context of Purdy's oeuvre provides an additional basis for this interpretation. Incestuous fantasies are a prevailing theme in Purdy's work, and while in most scenarios this remains just fantasy, the novels *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967) and *The House of the Solitary Maggot* (1974) both feature scenes of intercourse between mother and son.

7 See pe.usps.gov/text/pub28/28c2_001.htm for the officially preferred writing of US address lines.

debate whether the "63" should be pronounced "sixty-three" or "sixty-third" (90). Fenton insists that it is properly "sixty-three" and, according to Parkhearst, he never learns to say it correctly.

Fenton and Parkhearst adopt slightly different strategies with regard to the pronunciation of the address line. Although the address line does not appear in written form during this brief exchange, there is a considerable possibility that Fenton and Parkhearst's debate over it pertains to the way it is written in the title of the story: "63: Dream Palace". After all, the external narrator focalizes from Parkhearst's point of view, who in turn introduces Fenton to the reader by means of this anecdote. This anecdote immediately draws attention to the story's primary location of action. As a paratextual element to the story, the title is still part of the way in which the narrative is organized by the external narrator, and both the title and the short scene alert the reader to the curious spelling of the address line. While Fenton reads it literally in the way it is written – Sixty-Three Street – Parkhearst reads it for what it indicates: a building called Dream Palace on 63rd Street. These readings do not necessarily indicate a change in the meaning of the address line, nor are they mutually exclusive – both still refer to the same address – yet the resulting ways of referring to it do not fully correspond to each other either. To be fair, the difference does not completely correspond to the difference between figurative and literal readings as processes of meaning-making, but the scene does indicate Fenton's and Parkhearst's different attitudes towards reading. Throughout the novel, these divergent attitudes emphasize recurring tensions between incommensurable, but not mutually exclusive, readings that are central to the novel's strategy to resist the practice of reading the fantasy of sexual identity into Fenton's actions.

One of these tensions between literal and figurative readings can be identified when returning to the meaning of "motherfucker" at the end of the novel. Prioritizing a reading in which Fenton's exclamation is considered in its literal sense as referring to someone who has had sexual intercourse with his own mother almost inevitably invokes its figurative counterpart: Oedipus, or more precisely, the Oedipus complex.[8] Jim Dawson argues that the first use of "motherfucker" in American print coincided with the introduction of homosexual characters in the genre of juvenile delinquency novels and credits Purdy's *63: Dream Palace* as the first one to do so (124).[9] In a similar

8 Besides such overt play on names and the thematic connection with the Oedipus myth, Purdy's work shows an overall debt to the Greek classics. In her extensive study, Bettina Schwarzschild (1968) traces the many influences of Greek tragedy and philosophy on his oeuvre.

9 Perhaps unwittingly so, the novel's first edition also draws a connection between the expletive

vein, Roel van den Oever has demonstrated that because of the increased popularity of psychoanalysis in postwar America, many authors evoked the Oedipus complex as a strategy to address homosexuality while also disavowing charges of sympathy for homosexual characters.[10]

The play on the Oedipal fantasy is made more apparent if we take into account Purdy's peculiar and often meaningful naming of his characters. As in many of his novels, the characters of *63: Dream Palace* have outlandish monikers. The names Parkhearst Cratty, Grainger the "greatwoman", Claire as a male name, and Fenton Riddleway all stand out for being fairly unusual. As is often the case in Purdy's novels, these names have multiple meanings and functions, and they invite the reader to read them on different levels. Resonating with the detective genre that frames the novel, the name Riddleway literally signifies the "trajectory of the riddle". Fenton's association with the Oedipus myth is further reinforced if we think of the sphinx whose riddle Oedipus must solve. With the question "What did Fenton do?" already positioning Fenton as the novel's central subject, the association of his name with the idea of mystery also places him at the center of the second conundrum that needs unraveling: Is Fenton the motherfucker that he talks about/to? Although the question of "what Fenton did" can be taken as the organizing principle of both a "straight" reading and a "reading from behind", in the former reading the question points towards a possible crime, while the latter reading foregrounds a tension between literal and figurative interpretations of Fenton's last remark.

The shift from the literal "motherfucker" to its figural reading as the mythical Oedipus is further complicated if we examine other shifts from the figural to the literal, and vice versa, in the psychoanalytical appropriation of this mythical figure. The Oedipus character of the Greek myth and his Freudian counterpart gesture towards a constant tension between literal and figurative significations. While in the ancient myth, Oedipus was quite literally a "motherfucker", we must take into account that the narration itself belongs to the narrative tradition of mythology, which makes ample use of figurative language and which in modern times is often read as wholly figurative. Freud's adaptation of this myth in his writings about

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"motherfucker" and homosexuality. *63: Dream Palace* first appeared with the British publisher Victor Gollancz, who censored the novel's final line. Instead of "motherfucker", the last line in this edition reads: "Up we go then, bugger". Bugger, from the word *buggery*, is a British English word that indicates a man who has anal intercourse with either another male or female, but it is most often used to connote homosexuality.

10 See in particular the opening chapter "Momism and the Lavender Scare" (5–36) in his book *Momma's Boy: Momism and Homophobia in Postwar American Culture*.

the development of human sexuality, on the other hand, transforms the Oedipal narrative into an abstract schema. We no longer encounter an actual character, but are confronted with a series of psychosomatic developments that more or less follow a similar pattern. The character Oedipus merely becomes the figure on whose narrative this schema is based. Such a stylization renders figural the scenes of patricide and incest from the original narrative since Freud treats these patterns as purely phantasmatic (Laplance and Pontalis 315). That is, in the Freudian schema the subject is by no means expected to literally commit acts of incest or patricide. It is in the transition from the literal to the figurative use of Oedipus that homosexual desire becomes associated with the failure to sublimate the child's initial desire for the mother and thus develops an attachment to an object of the same sex.

There is another shift from the figurative to the literal at work in the Freudian adaptation of the Oedipus myth. Although the schema of cathectic attachments to the mother and father figures is a figurative rendering of the original myth's narration, in Freudian theory this schema nevertheless maps out actual psychosomatic processes that organize real desires. The phantasmatic cannot just be paralleled with figurative language, as the Oedipal schema affects the development of the subject's psyche quite literally. There is, then, already a tension between a literal and a figurative rendering of the Oedipus myth in the Freudian description of sexual development. If my reading of the Freudian adaptation of the Oedipus myth foregrounds how sexuality hinges on the tension between the literal and the figurative, the references to this myth through a literal reading of "motherfucker" also make clear how such a literal reading is inherently problematic. While my interpretation prioritizes a literal reading of the term "motherfucker", it immediately initiates a chain reaction of literal and figurative readings that complicate, or even undo the validity of this prioritization. To tease out this tension even further – or, in Jonathan Goldberg's treatment of melodrama, to suspend the resolution of the impossible plot situation – I want to linger a little bit longer on the Oedipal connotations of the "motherfucker" and the possible readings that this enables, not only of Fenton but also, as we will see, of his oddly named brother Claire.

Returning to the question that a reading from behind raises – Is Fenton the motherfucker that he talks about/to? – the literal reading of the "motherfucker" as someone who has had intercourse with his mother, and the subsequent figurative turn to the Freudian Oedipus complex, provokes further consideration of the fantasy of sexual identity. Reading back for clues to a possible resolution of this question, we find that the object of the question shifts around. "Who is the motherfucker?" turns into "Who is Fenton?" Parkhearst defends his reluctance to tell "what Fenton

did" by turning it into a question of identity: "I can't write down what Fenton did because I never found out who he was" (86). Through the constant repositioning of the questions that make up the detective story – What did Fenton do? Who is the motherfucker? Is Fenton the motherfucker? – a reading from behind that traces concerns exposed at the end of the novel back to clues provided at its beginning foregrounds the novel's central concern with the act of reading for sexual identity. Not only is this concern thematized in the plot, but this question also folds back onto the novel's reader who, after all, is positioned to prioritize any of the possible readings that are put forth in the narrative. My prioritizing the reading of "motherfucker" literally as the placeholder for Fenton's sexual identity is doubled by the way his sexuality is read as identity by others throughout the novel. As such, the novel provides a commentary on cultural assumptions about the connection between physical pleasure and sexual orientation, and as a consequence sexual identity. In the next section I reflect on two crucial scenes in the novel in which characters do exactly that: read Fenton's physical appearance and actions as signifiers for his identity.

Speak, So That I May Read You

We have already seen that the focalizer of the main narrative, Parkhearst Cratty, is unsuccessful as both writer and reader. In his non-commitment to reconstructing the histories of people he interviews he fails to distinguish story from history. Or, to put it more precisely, he mistakes story for history. His failure to read Fenton "properly" is doubled twice over in the novel. First, when Parkhearst introduces Fenton to Grainger, the latter shows hardly any interest in the boy. Instead, she and Parkhearst continue bickering about her drinking habit and other petty frustrations between the two of them. Eventually Parkhearst admits that he has brought Fenton to Grainger to seek her explicit approval and asks "Do you think you're going to like Fenton?" (113), but it is only after coaxing by Parkhearst that Grainger deigns to look at Fenton. It is not until this point that Grainger finally shows interest in Fenton. After giving him a good look-over she recognizes in him the features of her late husband Russell and without letting Fenton speak up for himself, she has decided who he is: "'He's Russell!' Grainger said finally" (116). Then, to reinforce her reading of Fenton as Russell, she makes him dress up in one of Russell's suits that she keeps upstairs.

In the second scene, Fenton is drawn to a theater where Shakespeare's *Othello is* performed. While at the theater, he makes the acquaintance of a man named Bruno Korsawski, who, in turn, introduces him to the play's leading actor, Hayden Banks.

However, much to Bruno's annoyance, Fenton remains silent in Hayden's presence, while Hayden is charmed by him and clearly expresses his interest. Bruno admonishes Fenton for not opening his mouth (137). After his introduction to Hayden, Bruno takes Fenton to see the play, but in the theater Fenton cannot help falling asleep, agitating Bruno even more. Even worse, Fenton cannot suppress the urge to pass gas. When after the performance Bruno and Fenton return to Hayden, Fenton again falls silent. Despite Bruno's clear anger at Fenton's behavior, Fenton seems oblivious to Bruno's response and even takes pleasure in his abrasiveness (138). In the evening that follows, Fenton becomes increasingly intoxicated after drinking copious amounts of bourbon and smoking a marijuana cigarette offered by Bruno. At that point, Bruno starts to kiss and undress Fenton, leading the reader to believe that Bruno and Hayden are trying to take advantage of his intoxicated state. After an ellipsis that follows the undressing, we find Fenton naked in the middle of the room; Bruno and Hayden appear to have been beaten up and Bruno forces Fenton at gunpoint to leave the house.

This short and violent scene, which is nevertheless presented in comic fashion, plays around with the misreading of the overactive anus as a signifier for a homosexual orientation, or, more specifically, a homosexual identity. Jeffrey R. Guss suggests that in Western fantasies of sexual orientation the anus is "the very ground zero for homosexuality" (39). The association of anal intercourse with homosexuality is so deeply entrenched that the anus itself has become an index for homosexual desire. A man who takes pleasure in the stimulation of his anus is almost invariably read as a (latent) homosexual, no matter what his self-identified orientation might be. Following this notion, it could be argued that Bruno and Hayden mistakenly read Fenton's incessant farting during the performance as a sign of the anality of his sexual orientation. That is to say, just as for Allan the anus is an excessive signifier that destabilizes "phallic" or straightforward readings, so too is Fenton's anus overflowing with meaning as he fails to control his sphincter. Indeed, the lack of control over his sphincter and the apparent delight he takes in it are interpreted as signs of homosexuality.

The two scenes can be read in conjunction with each other. Or at least, I propose to read the latter through the lens of the former. While the latter scene with Bruno and Hayden centers around the (quite literal) violence that is done by misreading someone's behavior for his or her sexual identity, the former draws attention to the way in which looking is claimed as evidence to justify this act of misreading someone else. Seen through each other's lens, these scenes seem to be complementary. In both scenes the characters look for signs that can replace Fenton's lack of speech, but they

do this in different ways in each scene. In the first, Grainger's superimposition of her late husband's image over Fenton's identity relies purely on her visual appreciation of Fenton's physical appearance. In this scene Grainger looks, but what she sees comes to stand in for Fenton's lack of speech. In the whole scene he says no more than half a sentence. In Bruno and Hayden's reading of Fenton, on the other hand, we have a scene in which all of Fenton's acts become a speech acts, again to fill in for his own lack of speech.

In the act of reading for identity, someone's physical appearance comes to replace his or her own speech. Appearances and acts become, for the reader, the signifiers that replace the object's own self-identification. When speech acts function as evidence for someone's interior truth, we can understand these as sites of meaning-making closely related to the genre of confession. This genre, when juxtaposed with the detective novel, highlights the way in which the production of identity is temporally reversed in these genres' narrative logic. Just as in the detective novel, in which the story of the crime can only be produced retroactively, so too does the confession retroactively produce the semblance of an already existing identity.

Fenton's own lack of speech leaves a hole in the narrative that his readers – respectively Grainger, and Bruno and Hayden – feel compelled to fill. In his treatment of the detective and mystery genres, Geoffrey Hartman argues that works in these genres are troubled by a lack at their center: "The center they scan is an absence; the darkness they illuminate has no heart". This observation leads him to quip that "instead of a whodunit, we get a whodonut, a story with a hole in it" (206). Barbara Johnson, in her brilliant reading of Derrida reading Lacan reading Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter", echoes Hartman's witticism when she theorizes the "lack" in Lacan:

> The theory seems to imply that at some point in human sexuality, a referential moment is unbypassable: the *observation that* the mother does not have a penis is *necessary*. And therefore it would seem that the "lack" *is* localizable as the substance of an absence or a hole. To borrow from Geoffrey Hartman's discussion of certain solutionless detective stories, if the purloined letter *is the* mother's phallus, "instead of a whodunit we get a whodonut, a story with a hole in it." (496, original emphasis)

Both theorists are concerned with the economy of signification in a genre that allegorizes the act of reading itself. Hartman sees the American detective novel's obsession with the act of reading as an act of self-cancellation. "Our eyes ache to read

more," he writes, "to know that the one just man (the detective) will succeed – yet when all is finished, nothing is rereadable" (218). In the moment the detective has solved the circulation of signifiers, once the so-called hole is closed, the reader can no longer return to it, for the reader would only be confronted by the genre's own artificiality (218).

Johnson, on the other hand, elaborates on the lack's construction in language to theorize how it circulates as a signifier: "Even on this referential level, is the object of observation really a lack? Is it not rather not an observation at all but already an *interpretation*" (496, original emphasis)? The absence of a sign, then, for Johnson is already a signifier in its own right. It is embedded in a language that always locates the absence of a sign in a symbolic structure, and thus makes the absence itself into a meaningful signifier. We have already seen in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* how the lack of speech becomes a meaningful sign in the genre of confession.[11] There, Captain Stadger takes Daniel's silence for admission, and thus the lack of speech becomes the absence which itself starts to signify. In the scenes described above Fenton's lack of speech also starts to circulate, however the absence of his voice is not just read as admittance. Instead, his silence invites Grainger, and Bruno and Hayden to look over his body for other meaningful signs. Fenton's silence displaces his speech from his voice to his physical appearance or to his overactive anus – both of which are then taken as confessional speech acts by his interlocutors.

The way Bruno admonishes Fenton for not speaking to Hayden and the way in which Parkhearst presents Fenton for Grainger to look at are both reminiscent of the famous Socratic adage that hones in on the genre of confession: "speak so that I can see you" (Erasmus 242). This commonplace notion, when considered in full, can be seen to address the orientation of Socratic desire, which privileges speech over appearance as the site for libidinal attachment. Found in Erasmus's translations of Petrarch's *Apophthegmata*, the entire aphorism reads as follows:

> When a wealthy man sent his young son to Socrates for him to assess his character, and the boy's attendant said, "His father has sent his son for you to look him over, Socrates," Socrates said to the boy, "Speak then, so I can see you," meaning that a man's character did not shine forth so clearly from his face as from his speech, since this is the surest and least deceitful mirror of the mind. (242–243)

11 For a more detailed discussion of the confession as a performative speech act in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, see Chapter 1.

Fenton's presentation to Grainger copies this Socratic scene almost exactly, up to the point where Grainger finally looks at Fenton and responds to his appearance in a manner opposite to Socrates. Instead of inviting him to speak so that she can get to know him, Grainger continues to ignore Fenton and finally makes a judgment about his person based purely on his looks. Bruno and Hayden, on the other hand, clearly express their annoyance with Fenton's lack of speech. In their desire to hear Fenton talk, they start interpreting his every action as a potential speech act, displacing the silence that comes from Fenton's mouth with the noises that his anus produces. Regarded within the framework of this Socratic adage, the two scenes complement each other: each foregrounds a different aspect of how the fantasy of identity hinges on the assumption that identity exists prior to its production through speech, and that the speech act of confession grants unmediated access to that identity.

In the aphorism cited above, Socrates is invited to attach his scopic desire to the boy by the father who asks him to "look him over". However, Socrates refuses to attach his desire to the boy's body, instead demanding that he speak. In this scene, speech is privileged as the object to which Socratic desire can be attached. The displacement of Socrates's scopic desire is motivated by his desire to get to the truth, or essence, of the boy. After all, speech "is the surest and least deceitful mirror of the mind". For Socrates to be able to appreciate the boy in front of him, he needs the boy to be a speaking subject. Socrates reads the boy's speech as a reflection of his innermost self – as an indicator of an absolute and essential state of his interiority, to which there is no access but through language. This way of reading is akin to how Paul De Man discusses the genre of confession as "an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood" (279). In his reading of Rousseau's *Confessions*, De Man shows how confessions are considered to occur "in the name of an absolute truth which is said to exist 'for itself' " (279). In other words, the language of confession does not correspond to the material world, but to the abstract idea of truth, to which we only have access through that very same language. Thus, confession produces a truth that exists in and of itself, but only if it is interpreted by its reader as a figurative use of language, in which case the interpretation congeals into the fantasy of the stable identity of the confessant.

If, as De Man suggests, confession operates as an epistemic use of language that produces a truth that exists only for itself, this truth-claim has no referential function since the interiority to which it confesses can only be made available verbally (280). De Man's interest in confession relies primarily on its performative rhetoric, which is "tied specifically to the absence of referential signification" and which "functions predominantly as if the matter had been settled positively" (291). Peter

Brooks subscribes to this understanding of confession as a performative speech act as he writes in his discussion of De Man's chapter that the confessional performance "opens the possibility that the performative aspect will produce the constative, create the sin or guilt that the act of confessing requires" (*Troubling Confessions* 21). The performative power of confession operates on the absence of an external referent to which a confession is made, while simultaneously rendering that referent present through the very language of confession. Just as for Johnson, the "lack" is already a signifier, for De Man, too, the mode of confession renders the absence of an external referent a meaningful sign. This is where the seemingly literal language of confession – seemingly, because of its self-referentiality – turns towards the figurative. At this turn, De Man recognizes the possibility for deconstruction, for it is the introduction of the figurative that both produces and disrupts the integrity of the truth that is confessed (292).

The narrative logic of confession, then, mimics that of the detective novel. Just as the supposed true facts of the crime in the detective novel can only be produced through the narrative reconstruction of the event, and thus by turning history into story, so too are the truths about acts or identities in confession only true when narrated. In both situations, however, there is an assumption that this narration offers unmediated access to the history of either the crime or identity, and its reconstruction takes on the semblance of truth by the suspension of the difference between history and story. Because of this belief that the truth of an event or identity can be narrated unproblematically, and the belief that the story is always a truthful representation of history, the genres of both the detective novel and confession operate on the assumption that there is an event or identity to narrate in the first place.

Fenton's silence in front of Grainger, Bruno, and Hayden mobilizes the confession's doubling of the assumption that a pre-existing identity or event is inherent in the detective novel. At the same time, his silence also problematizes the ease with which this assumption is made, and it questions the function of the reader/detective/confessor in the production of any truth claims about his identity. While his silence can be interpreted as Fenton being an empty canvas onto which others can project their fantasies about his identity, his violent response to Bruno and Hayden's advances surely suggests the opposite is true.

The context of the Socratic aphorism amplifies the tension between literal and figurative reading that is at the heart of Purdy's novel. Socrates reads language figuratively as confession, and so too do the characters surrounding Fenton. Parkhearst already introduces a position that privileges a figurative reading when he debates the pronunciation of the title's address line, and this position is extended by Bruno and

Hayden's reading of Fenton's overactive anus. Read from this perspective, Bruno's frustration with Fenton's overactive anus and silent mouth is not just an issue of politesse. Rather, Fenton's refusal to speak in front of Hayden also means that he refuses to confess to a certain sexual identity. Without such a confession, Bruno and Hayden can only venture a guess as to Fenton's sexual orientation by reading his actions figuratively as signs of his sexual identity. In a series of figurative displacements, the passing of gas comes to fill the lacuna produced by Fenton's refusal to speak. In other words, Fenton's verbal speech is substituted by a perceived "anal speech act". Being taken as a substitute for his verbal speech, Fenton's "anal speech" is then read figuratively as expressing an innermost truth about his sexuality: namely as signifying a submissive homosexual desire. The tension between literal and figurative readings that pervades *63: Dream Palace* is played out most extensively in the scenes at and after the theater performance. The sexual identity that Bruno and Hayden read into Fenton when they take his overactive anus as a confessional speech act can, in fact, only be produced by the figurative reading that fills in the gaps left behind by a literal one. In doing so, however, such a reading renders itself vulnerable to the destabilization of the very truth it tries to establish.

Epistemic Promiscuity

The destabilizing impulse of the novel's refusal to be read in a totalizing manner gestures towards an overarching theme of Purdy's novelistic world: a resistance against the normative and restrictive notion of sexual identity. In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, Daniel continuously switches between denial and admission in his confessions and makes it impossible to unambiguously align his sexual practices with what others consider to be his sexual identity. So too does Fenton refuse to provide certainty about what his gestures and speech acts might signify in terms of identification. In their attempts to destabilize how other characters can make meaning about their identities, I recognize a larger project that acts as a thread throughout Purdy's oeuvre, and which we will see return in the next chapters. This project is tied in with contemporary queer strategies that resist normative and hegemonic structures that organize our sexual and social lives. Daniel and Fenton's refusal to be read unambiguously is a strategy that I call *epistemic promiscuity*, with which I mean to indicate both Purdy's resistance to signification within a single structure of meaning-making, and his acknowledgment of the limitless potential of meanings with which signifiers circulate in American society.

The notion of epistemic promiscuity is informed by fundamental and ongoing discussions within queer activism and Queer Studies that posit promiscuous sexual practices as ethical alternatives to societal structures that privilege patriarchal and heteronormative monogamy. These debates arose in the wake of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, in which mainstream media and conservative pundits launched a concerted attack on promiscuous sexual practices between homosexual men as the primary cause of the rampant spreading of HIV, rather than the lack of adequate response from the government or otherwise homophobic and sex-negative policy implementations (Crimp 244; Harper 253; Watney 80–86). For Douglas Crimp, the amount of time conservative gay activists such as Larry Kramer and Randy Shilts spent on criticizing gay male promiscuity rather than advocating safer sex practices, amplified homophobic discourses that require gay men to abstain from sex in order to be non-threatening (242–251). Embracing promiscuity as an open, yet relational organizing principle for a sexual community was a means to renegotiate a gay communal identity: "Having learned to support and grieve for our lovers and friends; having joined the fight against fear, hatred, repression, and inaction; having adjusted our sex lives so as to protect ourselves and one another – we are now reclaiming our subjectivities, our communities, our culture … and our promiscuous love of sex" (270).

Contemporary queer thinkers have taken Crimp's early reflections of promiscuity to task by theorizing the ethics of promiscuous sex practices. "Promiscuity", Tim Dean writes in response to Crimp, "concerns more than new sex partners: it also concerns new ideas and new ways of doing things" (5). He positions promiscuity in opposition to purity, which he identifies as an anti-intellectual and anti-queer position. That is to say, within representations of queer sex, the notion of purity stigmatizes non-normative sex practices by sanitizing the public image of queer people. Dean identifies the ideal image of the unthreatening – because desexualized – homosexual as an act of oppressive and disenfranchising violence. Instead, he argues for a mode of cross-identification through sex practices that forego social stratifications based on class, race, and generation: "People closely associated with sex compromise the ideal image and mess things up; they menace our boundaries, auguring disruptions of integrity, by threatening to draw us out of ourselves into promiscuous contact and mixing" (20). In doing so, Dean echos Delany's assertion that promiscuous sex practices promote connections across identitarian categorization.[12] As such, these queer theorists argue that promiscuity opens up into an infinite number of possible

12 See Delany's *Times Square Red, Time Square Blue* (1999) for his impassioned argument for cross-class connectivity through promiscuous sex practices such as cruising and visiting porn cinemas.

identifications and thus a limitless potential for meaning-making. Or, as Bersani puts it, "tireless sexual promiscuity makes for a connectedness based on unlimited bodily intimacies" ("Shame on you" 95).

Crimp, Dean, and Delany are mostly concerned with the social interconnectedness of promiscuous sex practices. For instance, Dean's work on the gay male sexual subculture of barebacking presents itself as an ethnographical study that, in its findings, has certain implications for queer politics. Delany, too, is interested in social structures of promiscuous sex practices as he responds to neoliberal policy makers' attempts to ban gay sex from public spaces. Their celebration of promiscuity, however, also translates into queer practices of meaning-making. Or rather, promiscuity can be considered a queer strategy of resistance against homogenizing and totalizing ways of reading. To understand this, I draw attention to a warning against epistemic promiscuity that Cornel West voiced in a position paper on pragmatism: "epistemic pluralism degenerates into epistemic promiscuity that encourages epistemic policing by realists and foundationalists" (1748). The uncertainty of a shared frame of reference, a shared mode of meaning-making, instills in West the fear of repressive policing by foundationalist thinkers. However, this statement belies his investment in a caricature of postmodernism that equates pluralist thinking with political and philosophical non-commitment. Yet, queer theorists continuously show that the non-commitment of promiscuity should not be confused with non-attachment. Instead, just as Dean and Delany make a case for promiscuous attachment across race, class, and generation, other queer literary theorists argue for similar promiscuous attachments across modes of meaning-making and across fixed epistemic frameworks.

In his meditation on homosexuality in the work of Roland Barthes, D.A. Miller comments on the promiscuity of the signifier in the former's work, which he describes as "a proven ability to 'fall' into an infinity of not always untraceable contacts" (19). The signifier, for Barthes, is in constant circulation and refuses to attach itself to a fixed and absolute meaning. For Barthes, Miller argues, the moving signifier provides a strategy against "gay self-nomination", which Barthes considers to always stand in relation to processes of Othering and the submission to normative societal structures. "To proclaim yourself something", he writes, "is always to speak at the behest of the vengeful Other, to enter into his discourse, to argue with him, to seek from him a scrap of identity" (quoted in Miller 23). Promiscuity evacuates the sign of normative meaning and could, indeed, turn into an emancipated signifier: "Observe how 'the goddess Homosexuality' or 'Homo' gets enfolded into 'the goddess H.,' where H, as relatively emancipated signifier, can then unfold into a plurality of perversions, among which homosexuality, even 'in this case' has lost its priority" (22–

23). Seen through the lens of Barthes, then, the practice of promiscuity that Dean and Delany propose becomes not just an anti-identitarian strategy in which open erotic attachments circulate to produce multiple possible and co-existing meanings, but also a form of resistance against normative and perhaps even "monogamous" ways of reading. The promiscuous signifier resists the epistemic violence that reading for a homosexual identity, as I have detailed in the opening of this chapter, entails.

The scene described above already dramatizes the violence done by a totalizing reading. Bruno and Hayden's reading of Fenton turns out to be a severe misjudgment on their part, and neither they nor Fenton leave the scene unscathed. After Bruno and Hayden kiss and undress Fenton, an ellipsis is inserted to signal the passing of time, and which suggests that Bruno and Hayden have acted upon their misreading of Fenton's sexuality, much to the latter's displeasure. After the ellipsis, we find Fenton "standing naked in the middle of the room, boxing; he was boxing the chandelier and had knocked down all the lamps; he had split open Bruno's face and Bruno was weeping and held ice packs to his mouth" (141). Although Purdy makes ample use of ellipses in his dialogues and free indirect speech to mark brief pauses, the ellipsis featured at this point in the narrative is unmotivated. As such, it indicates an unspecified passage of time in which Fenton transforms from being passively undressed to an active aggressor.

When we combine the centrality of the speech act as truth-claim – which is pertinent to the confession – with the detective genre's assumption that there already exists an identity that can be uncovered, the central problem for Fenton becomes a question of how to resist being (mis)read by others. That is, is it possible for Fenton to behave sexually without his acts being interpreted as signs for a sexual identity? And by extension, can we attribute Fenton's resistance to being read in a certain totalizing way to the queer strategy of epistemic promiscuity? In attempting to answer these questions I return to the ambiguous expletive at the end of the novel, the "motherfucker".

Displacing the Lack

In the previous scene, we've seen that its violence hinges on the unmotivated ellipsis near its end. Since it is not presented as part of a speech act in any form, the ellipsis is wholly the domain of the narration. The ellipsis suggests that in the course of the scene, something so awful happens that even the narrator chooses not to tell it. As such, this ellipsis makes the reader complicit in how Bruno and Hayden (mis)read

Fenton's lack of speech as a displacement of signs that they interpret as signifiers of his sexual identity. The gap in the narration connects two different states, and the passing time indicated by the ellipsis leads the reader to fantasize about how the narration could go from one state to the other. What happens between Hayden's undressing of Fenton and Bruno being beaten up – by whom? – is entirely left to the reader's imagination. This ellipsis, just like Fenton's lack of speech or his involuntary farting, is an empty signifier that displaces the lack of signs that could be read meaningfully for the truth about an event.

This is, however, the only time such an unmotivated ellipsis appears in the novel. Now I will turn to another usage of the ellipsis in *63: Dream Palace* that we find much more frequently: ellipses that are part of direct or free indirect speech. These ellipses might be even more ambiguous than the one in the scene described above. Although it is tempting to interpret them as moments of silence, moments in which speech temporarily halts only to continue again, we should keep in mind that these speech acts are still embedded in the narrator's text. Just as the unmotivated ellipsis puts a part of the narrative under erasure, so too can we not exclude the possibility that these ellipses put speech or acts under erasure as well. An ellipsis that makes this point most saliently enters at the moment in which Fenton seemingly strangles his brother. This particular moment reads as follows:

> Then suddenly Fenton realized that he did not want Claire to come with him. He preferred him to stay in the old house. And at the same time he knew that if he stayed he would never have a moment's peace ...
>
> There was no way out that he could see. He could only stand there staring at Claire with impotence and rage.
>
> "All right for you," Fenton said at the end. "All I can say is watch out, watch out something don't happen now to you." (133)

This is where Fenton leaves the house, as in the next scene we see him waiting by the theater where *Othello* is performed. The next time we find him back at the house, he discovers Claire dead with clear signs of strangulation. During the scene leading up to this moment, Fenton and Claire argue about Fenton's intentions to move in with Grainger and perhaps even marry her. In the course of their argument Fenton grows increasingly agitated because Claire does not believe a marriage with Grainger will succeed. Fenton, on the other hand, regards Claire's skepticism as a sign of defeat and an attempt to sabotage his only shot at a better life.

Despite its brevity, this segment is nevertheless complex if we consider the various levels of narration involved. The first part is narrated in free indirect speech, while the last sentence reverts back to direct speech. The narrator takes on Fenton's focalization, and through this we are allowed a glimpse into his thought process. His thoughts, however, end abruptly once he realizes that there is no solution regarding Claire's dependence on him. After all, Claire is severely ill and Fenton's only options are to either bring him along to Grainger's house, or remain in the house on 63rd Street. The ellipsis here could indicate a brief pause in Fenton's thoughts just as much as it could point towards a thought or action erased by the external narrator, who had already taken on the perspective of Parkhearst as focalizer. Parkhearst's embedded focalization opens up into yet another set of possible interpretations. The ellipsis could be the result of either a lapse in Parkhearst's memory – he could consciously leave out details of the fight – but, perhaps most plausibly, he might have reached the limit in his fantasies about Fenton and Claire's argument. Even though Parkhearst remains embedded as focalizer because of the story's framing, he himself is not present at the scene. What is narrated – or omitted from this narration – could very well be seen as that which Parkhearst believes or fantasizes to be the true facts of the event. As such, the ellipsis in this scene is a signifier that, much like Fenton's lack of speech and flatulence, becomes promiscuous as it attaches itself to multiple possible readings that refuse to exclude one another. The only fact that the reader can be fairly certain of is that something must have happened in the space of this ellipsis.

After the ellipsis we find Fenton standing over Claire, enraged either by their previous argument, or by his inability to find a solution to this situation. At this point, the narrator returns to direct speech in which Fenton voices a threat to Claire. While Fenton seems to suggest that nothing has happened yet – he only warns Claire to be careful that nothing happens to him – the narrator mentions something must have happened anyway. The short phrase "at the end" is puzzling since no action or event, other than Fenton's standing and staring, has been narrated in this segment. At the end of what, we might ask, does Fenton voice this ominous threat? And when does this event or action occur? During his standing and staring, or is that also part of this "at the end" that the narrator mentions? Could it be that this action is exactly what is put under erasure by the sudden ellipsis in Fenton's train of thought? Whether the ellipsis represents a blackout on Fenton's part, the limits of Parkhearst's fantasy, or the external narrator's decision to purge the text of excessive violence, its pairing with the phrase "at the end" implies that it is exactly at this moment that the story takes a dramatic turn.

The next time we encounter Fenton in Claire's room, we find him staring at his younger brother again, and this time Fenton begins to grasp the reality of the situation. "He was back in the old house, in Claire's room, and though he was staring at Claire, he knew that his staring was to no avail, that he already knew what had happened and that the staring was to prevent him from telling himself what he saw" (141). Refusing to accept that Claire is dead, Fenton begins to go about his daily morning routine, talking to his brother and even trying to make him eat breakfast. When his attempts to force coffee and bread between Claire stiff lips fail, Fenton begins to see the marks of strangulation on his brother's broken neck. Looking down at his hands, Fenton connects the dots and draws the conclusion that he must have done this himself (143).

I have already discussed at length the "motherfucker" at the end of the novel, and the ways in which its meaning circulates throughout the story when we trace its ambiguity back to one of the opening questions that Parkhearst poses: "Who is Fenton?" Another reading of the "motherfucker", one that I have left mostly untouched so far, surfaces if we pair Fenton's discovery of Claire's death with the later scene in which he carries his dead body upstairs. As soon as Fenton realizes his brother has been strangled, he addresses him and says: "you're dead, you little motherfucker" (143). This is the only other instance in which we encounter the expletive "motherfucker" in the novel, and this time it is clearly addressed to Claire. The lack of ambiguity in this particular instance makes it probable that the addressee of the last exclamation is, in fact, Claire as well. Reading Claire, and not Fenton, as the motherfucker of this narrative has significant implications for questions I posed earlier in my analysis. Within this new context, the meaning of "motherfucker" no longer pertains to the question of Fenton's identity, but to that of Claire. Again we see that certain key signifiers in *63: Dream Palace* are promiscuous in their attachment to different possible meanings.

While considering Claire as the "motherfucker" would undoubtedly result in a valid interpretation, my aim here is not to exhaust all possible different readings of the novel, an endeavor that seems as impossible as it is unnecessary for me to make my point. Instead of offering a new interpretation of the novel based on the idea that Claire is the addressee of the final sentence, I believe that different readings are possible, and even plausible, at once. What interests me at this point is that both readings are made plausible by textual evidence, while the novel nowhere privileges one reading over the other. If this is true, then to what extent is reading Fenton as the "motherfucker" – which holds different meanings with regards to Fenton's sexuality – just the result of the reader's desire to read the lack of signs as a displacement of signifiers that could

tell the reader something about Fenton's sexual identity? Parkhearst's reluctance to talk about the events surrounding Fenton because he "never found out who Fenton was", immediately followed by the actual narration, creates the expectation in the reader that the story will in fact disclose more about Fenton's identity. The mere fact that the story can now be told must indicate that Parkhearst finally found out who Fenton was after all. The question that remains unanswered leaves a gap in the narration that, just like the scene with Bruno and Hayden, tempts the reader into reading for signs that displace the initial absence of a confessional speech act, but which also continuously refuses to attach itself to one specific narration.

Conclusion

Having read the novel "from behind", that is, having taken my cue from the issue of ambiguous identity raised at its bottom, I now return to the novel's very top: its title. "63: Dream Palace" features a typographic element that frames the novel's concern with misreading the anus and the notion of the motherfucker as signifiers of a certain sexual identity. We have already seen how the spelling of the title provokes a disagreement between Fenton and Parkhearst over how to pronounce it. This comic interaction and the peculiar way in which the address line is written draw attention to its possible meaning and function in relation to the novel's overall concerns with reading and writing (sexual) identity. That is, in the way it is written and in the confusion that results from this, the novel's title already signals a concern with the tension between literal and figurative readings. As we have seen with the figurative connotation of the Oedipal scenario that is introduced by reading the motherfucker literally, from the outset of the novel we recognize that any attempt to read its title literally is immediately frustrated by its figurative connotations. Just as the typographic ellipsis in the scene with Fenton, Bruno, and Hayden frustrates a literal reading, so does the typographic oddity in the title open up to fantasies about what the ":" in the title might signify. Taking Allan's provocation to "read from behind" to heart, it is not difficult to find the figure of the anus in the title: Purdy's preoccupation with textual and linguistic eccentricities invites the reader to read the typographic colon too literally, that is, to take it for its homophone: the anatomical colon.[13]

13 Michael Ballin and Charles Lock also note the typographic oddity in the novel's title which they deem a "weird [juxtaposition] of the naturalistic and the grotesque" (17). My analysis of the colon as a figure for the anus is inspired by my conversations with Charles Lock about the novel.

To extend Purdy's habitual play on words and punctuation, we could say in jest that the anus is also implied in the playful naming of Fenton Riddleway. If the name Riddleway points towards the sphinx of the Oedipus myth, then the novel's preoccupation with the readability of the anus as a sign for sexual orientation allows for the slippage of this riddle of the sphinx into a "riddle of the sphincter": what does Fenton's anus say about his sexual orientation?[14] While this question is on the minds of the characters Fenton encounters, the novel never offers a straightforward answer to it. Instead, it stresses the possibility that different incongruous readings coexist, rendering a univocal reading of sexual identity impossible. Any attempt to privilege one reading over others results in misinterpretation and does violence to the person being read. Both the anus and the motherfucker hover over the text as specters, as opaque signs that resist being read in one specific way. As such, Purdy recognizes something in desire that resists being read, or being made legible. Looking for a language with which we can address sexuality as something we *do* rather than as something we *are*, Purdy dramatizes the tension between these readings, neither of which provides access to Fenton's desires.

In conclusion, I cannot but admit that for the sake of this argument that I too have prioritized one specific reading of the novel by interpreting the "motherfucker" literally as referring to Fenton. Although there is textual and contextual evidence that motivates my reading, other possible readings of the motherfucker are not necessarily excluded by the text. The ambiguity of the address and of the narrative situation make other readings – e.g. of Claire as the addressee or of "motherfucker" as a colloquial term of endearment – plausible. Thus, while my reading argues against the violence committed by imposing a certain reading onto the text, this very same reading performs the violence it argues against. Privileging one reading, as I have done over the course of this chapter, at once confirms and undermines Purdy's project to destabilize generalizing narratives and readings that fix identity categories onto sexual behavior or body language. Taking this project to heart, however, the "riddle of the sphincter" might have a solution, yet this solution can only be posed in uncertain terms, for what Fenton's anus says about his sexual identity is always at once everything and nothing.

14 To also finally read Hartman's and Johnson's linguistic joke "from behind": it should by now be fairly obvious what would constitute the "hole" of this novel's "whodonut".

CHAPTER 3

Narrative Beginnings: Queer Theory and Narratology

Writing, as should be clear at this point, is a strong and recurring theme in Purdy's novels. Almost all texts discussed so far feature a writer who frames or interacts with the central plot of the novel. In other works, such as *I Am Elijah Thrush* (1972), *Gertrude of Stony Island Avenue* (1997), and multiple short stories, writers also take center stage, either to observe and frame the actions of the main characters, or to catalyze the plot by attempting to write, often about a missing or dead person. None of Purdy's novels, however, feature this theme so explicitly and intricately as *Cabot Wright Begins* (1964). The emphatic way in which writing takes center stage in this novel allows me to ask an important question that has lingered over the preceding chapters, but to which I can only attend at this point: the question of the narrative nature of identity itself. The different identities and identifications that I have already discussed within the context of Purdy's work should not be considered to be natural, ahistorical, or coherent. Rather, what I have so far suggested is that the notions of sexual identity and national identity are constructed through narratives that give us a sense of continuity and stability to which we can attach ourselves and others. In the preceding chapters I have focused on the ways in which Purdy demonstrates the narrative construction of these identities. In this chapter, I want to push this project a little further and show how Purdy, in his novel *Cabot Wright Begins* (1964), makes identity narratable to the fullest extent. I argue that by dramatizing the production of one person's identity through the narration of several others, Purdy challenges the false dichotomy between the notion of inner or "true" identity and outer identity.

In doing so, I will turn to Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity, which has been instrumental in thinking about the mechanisms that warrant the continuity of the selfsameness of identity. I argue that by thinking of identities as constructed through narrative processes, we always embed the concept of identity within constructions that shape our prejudices and biases towards those identities. The complex intersections of possibly infinite narratives that culminate in what we consider to be one's personal identity, cover up the many pre-existing narratives about race, class, gender, and sexuality that undergird our estimation of a person. In *Cabot Wright Begins*, Purdy explicitly resists the perceived coherence and continuity of identity by literally dramatizing identity formation through narration. Following the logic

of Purdy's critique of identity constructions, then, this chapter does not so much attempt to destabilize the subjects and mechanisms of the narratives with which we construct identity, as question the concept of identity itself.

Which Beginnings?

The plot of *Cabot Wright Begins* revolves mainly around three persons: two writers and the third person, the eponymous Cabot Wright, who is the subject of a novel within the novel. The latter's biography of stockbroker-turned-rapist fascinates a group of people who in succession attempt to turn his life into a bestselling novel. The first writer engaged with the biography is Bernie Gladhart. Bernie is urged by his wife Carrie, who is the first person to notice the story of Cabot Wright in the newspapers and who believes that this story can propel forward Bernie's failing career as a writer. The reason Bernie cannot succeed as an author lies in his own over-identification with the subject matter of his work. As an ex-convict, he writes novels about himself, which, as Carrie puts it, "never came out right" (CWB 35).[1] Writing about another ex-convict would distance Bernie enough from his autobiographical subject matter and bring out the "great book inside of him" that Carrie is convinced is there (8). Moving from his hometown of Chicago to Brooklyn, where Cabot Wright allegedly committed most of his rapes and where he presumably lives, Bernie finds himself unable to locate the subject of his novel. Yet, urged by his wife to write the novel anyway, he starts the manuscript on the basis on newspaper reports and police documents.

Cabot Wright is absent from his own narrative as Bernie begins to write his story without having located him. He is absent from his own story in other ways as well. Again urged by Carrie, another would-be author, Zoe Bickle, begins to interfere with Bernie's project. In the meantime, Bernie has located Cabot who, it turns out, happened to live right below his Brooklyn apartment – a coincidence "abundant in real life, but not tolerated by publishers" (48). Zoe, in turn, accepts an offer from Publisher Princeton Keith to edit Bernie's manuscript, which effectively means that she takes over his entire project and rewrites the manuscript herself. This time, however, Cabot himself is also in the picture. Zoe meets with him and proposes to read Bernie's manuscript to him so that he can help her find "the real truth about Cabot Wright's beginnings" (96). Despite his willingness to assist Zoe, Cabot admits that he has lost

1 Where deemed necessary I use CWB to indicate that I refer to *Cabot Wright Begins*.

his memory. He only remembers the events of his career as a rapist because of what he has read about himself and others have told him. Although he is the subject of the novel that Zoe is continuing, Cabot is again absent from the writing process, if not physically, then certainly as an active contributor to his own life story.

At first glance, *Cabot Wright Begins* seems to be a novel about Cabot's identity. Bernie and Zoe try to figure out who he is by writing a novel based on newspaper clippings and interviews with Cabot himself. After a closer consideration of the novel's title, which is echoed by way of Zoe asking herself what is true about "Cabot Wright's beginnings" (*96*), we find that it is not necessarily Cabot's *identity* that is the novel's narrated subject. Zoe's question, and with it the meaning of the novel's title, is just as ambiguous as its possible answers. For, what indeed are these beginnings? When does Cabot Wright begin? And ultimately, who or what are we exactly speaking of when we are considering Cabot Wright's beginnings?

A straightforward reading of the novel would suggest that the beginning of Cabot Wright is likewise the beginning of his life story; from the moment he starts to rape women and thus becomes interesting enough for Bernie and Zoe to write about him in the first place. This suggestion is underlined by the chapter entitled "Cabot Wright Begins", as this is the first chapter that deals with this specific history. It is in this particular chapter that the narrator describes how Cabot Wright suffers from fatigue and in his search for a treatment encounters Dr. Bigelow-Martin, who indeed treats him successfully. Unfortunately, the side effects of this treatment, it turns out, include such a tremendous increase in libido that Cabot Wright can no longer contain his sexual prowess. At the end of this same chapter, we find that Cabot Wright has already begun his career as a rapist. Read exclusively on the level of plot, this moment is indeed the first time we learn about Cabot Wright's history of rape in such great detail. Through Bernie's manuscript, the chapter offers some explanations for how and why he started raping women. The novel, then, seems to suggest that we should read his beginnings from exactly this particular perspective: Cabot Wright's identity is that of a rapist, and it only came into being at the point of his conversion from fatigued Wall Street stockbroker into relentless rapist after his therapy with Dr. Bigelow-Martin.

The significance of Cabot Wright's becoming a rapist only after seeing an analyst should not escape the reader. As I suggested in my chapter on *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, psychoanalysis, or the talking cure, produces deviant or pathological identities through the mode of confession. The fact that Cabot Wright starts to show pathological behavior only after seeing Dr. Bigelow-Martin suggests that there is more to Cabot Wright's identity than simply the question of where "true" identity begins,

and whether he actually committed the rapes he has been charged with. For the above is indeed not the whole story of Cabot Wright's beginnings; in fact, there are other things that find their beginnings in this chapter. The beginning of Cabot Wright's biography, or identity if you will, coincides with the act of narration itself. Although the manuscript about Cabot Wright's life had already been partially written by Bernie, in her attempt to continue the story Zoe begins to read the manuscript to Cabot. If we can provisionally argue that the identity of the Cabot Wright in question – that is, the character indicated by the novel's title and not necessarily the character to whom Zoe reads the manuscript – begins with the events narrated in the manuscript, then we should take the act of narrating literally as Cabot Wright's beginnings. Cabot Wright, the character in Bernie and Zoe's manuscript, finds his beginnings at a different moment than Cabot, the character to whom the manuscript is read. As such, the two characters should be considered separately when we ask whose identity is constructed by the novel, and how.[2]

As is often the case in Purdy's work, there is no conclusive answer to the question of what these beginnings entail, but a narratological analysis of the novel might help us sharpen the view of the novel's interrogation of identity production. Just as was the case in *63: Dream Palace*, in which the frame narrative in combination with an unreliable narrator enabled several contradictory interpretations to exist side-by-side, the narration of *Cabot Wright Begins* is marked by a frame narrative, an unreliable narrator, and a complex layering of different focalizations, each of which seems to privilege other interpretations and readings of Cabot Wright's life story. These formal qualities are often obscured by Purdy's narrative style, which privileges the illusion of continuity or coherence. Yet if we look closer at the formal narrative elements that disrupt the novel's apparent coherence, its central theme resonates differently. As the reader gets lost in what the "truth" about "Cabot Wright's beginnings" might entail,

2 The attentive reader might have already noticed that I seemingly use Cabot and Cabot Wright interchangeably. This, however, serves to disentangle the two manifestations of the character Cabot (Wright): one belonging to the frame narrative and the other to the embedded narrative. For analytical clarity, I have decided to designate the character in the manuscript (the novel within the novel) as Cabot Wright, while the character in the novel *Cabot Wright Begins* is designated simply Cabot. Throughout this chapter I have sometimes added or removed "Cabot" when citing the novel to signal which of the characters figures in the citation – a distinction the novel does not make as clearly as I do. Wherever the distinction between Cabot and Cabot Wright is difficult to make (as certain narrative devices encourage the reader to take these manifestations as one and the same person), I have written "Cabot (Wright)" to indicate that both manifestations of the character should be taken into account.

I propose that shifting our focus might offer a new and productive way of reading the novel. Rather than asking questions about Cabot (Wright)'s identity per se, a focus on the novel's narratological elements invites us to ask how this identity comes about in the first place.

If the novel's central theme no longer entails the question of who Cabot (Wright) really is, but rather, how his identity is produced, the tools with which we approach the novel's interpretation must also be adjusted accordingly. A significant part of the novel hinges on the narration from that of Cabot Wright, the character in the manuscript written by Berne and Zoe, to Cabot, the character in the novel. This specific situation introduces a layering of plot focalization that is crucial to the understanding of how identity is produced through narration. As will become clear from my close reading of the novel, the different levels of narration and focalization produce the effect that Cabot Wright and Cabot seem to coincide. Again taking my cue from Jonathan Goldberg's notion that melodrama revolves around the suspension of the impossible plot situation, I am interested in what happens when we suspend the coincidence of Cabot and Cabot Wright. Just as Goldberg identified an impossible plot situation in the coincidence in the characters of Fidelio and Leonore, so do I recognize a tension in the convergence of Cabot and Cabot Wright. Yet, while the *Melodram* in *Fidelio* ends when Leonore sheds her disguise and Fidelio ceases to exist, the narration of *Cabot Wright Begins* works to keep the characters Cabot and Cabot Wright completely entangled. By suspending the coincidence of Cabot and Cabot Wright, I ask which formal elements of the narration produce this converging effect. How does narration produce this idea of a "true" identity? Fundamental questions concerning identity production can be theorized by the framework of narrative identity, which allows me to draw on narratological interpretative tools while keeping in view the question of how Cabot's identity is produced through the narration of Cabot Wright's biography.

Discussing his concept of narrative identity, Ricoeur regards the novel as a laboratory in which we can imagine the intricacies of identity formation (*Oneself* 140). If anything, *Cabot Wright Begins* takes on the function as laboratory in which the problematics and potential of narrative identity are scrutinized, as the central action of the novel is exactly that, the narrating of someone's identity. In the next section of this chapter I give a brief overview of contemporary attempts to incorporate narrative theory into queer and feminist scholars' politicization of thinking about identity. While different fields, from social sciences to queer and feminist literary studies, think critically about narrative and identity politics, there remains a tension between the formal analysis of narratology and the current theorizing of narratives as identity-forming practices. My discussion of *Cabot Wright Begins* is in conversation

with different contemporary perspectives on narrative theory, and narrative identity in particular, as I hope to resolve some of this tension by teasing out the political potential of a narratological approach to identity formation.

The State of Narrative Theory

My motivation to consider *Cabot Wright Begins* as a demonstration of the mechanics of narrative identity stems from two separate phenomena in academic writing about identity and narrative. The first is what others have dubbed the "narrative turn" in social and historical sciences, which invokes narrative identity without addressing narrative theory, while the second phenomenon consists of the moving away from narrative theory (or narratology) by feminist and queer-inspired literary studies. Both of these phenomena seem to disregard the importance of narratology in the construction of narrative itself, and its ability to closely scrutinize the processes of meaning-making that these very same narrative processes try to obscure.

Over recent decades, Susan S. Lanser observes, the application of narrative theory, which was once so prevalent in literary criticism, has mostly disappeared from sight. Simultaneously, other disciplines in social sciences have increasingly picked up the notion of narrative, and especially narrative identity, to explain social, legal, and clinical practices among others ("Toward a Queerer Narratology" 33–34). The proliferation of thinking about narrative in these fields exemplifies the intersectional potential of narrative analysis. As Lanser stresses, "acknowledging not only that narrative is effectively intersectional but that intersectionality is effectively narrative may increase the value of narratological tools and methods across genres and disciplines by integrating formal patterns with social ones" (33). The methods and analytical tools of narratology, in this scenario, could contribute to interpretative practices in many academic fields and elucidate the ways in which disciplines make use of similar narrative procedures in their processes of meaning-making. However, despite the potential of narrative that Lanser identifies, she concludes that, although she speaks of a narrative turn in social sciences, this turn often focuses merely on the narrative itself, and hardly ever on narration, which undergirds the mechanics of meaning-making in narrative. For Lanser, "the 'narrative turn' in scholarship is hardly a turn to narrative theory as such" (33).

While Lanser bases her findings on a directory search across thousands of published papers in different academic databases, looking more closely at definitions of narrative identity in recently published papers supports her suspicion that although

the analysis of identity in terms of narrative seems to be widely popular among scholars, these analyses rarely include theoretical reflections on the constructions of these narratives as such. Instead, narratives are approached as templates or archetypes that organize the ways in which people can describe their own identity. In their attempt to define narrative identity Dan McAdams and Kate McLean, for example, seem more interested in the categorization of plots and their successful resolution than in the great variety with which these plots can be narrated. "Narrators", they claim, "should not go on so long and so obsessively as to slide into ruminations, for good stories need to have satisfactory endings" (235). Similarly, Phillip Hammack and Bertram Cohler are also exclusively concerned with the categorization of identity narratives, rather than the ways in which these identity narratives are constructed. In their comprehensive analysis of memoirs written by gay men over a five decade span, Hammack and Cohler reduce the complexity of storytelling to mere thematic categories that they identify for each decade in which the authors under discussion come of age. Thus, the thematic category that for them encapsulates the whole of gay male narrative identity in the 1950s would consist of the "struggle to resolve [an] internal sense of shame and stigma", while the dominant theme that governs narratives of the 1980s is summarized as the "need to reconcile [the] redemptive narrative of coming out with [the] contaminating narrative of AIDS and discourse of homosexuality as 'sin'", and the theme dominating literature of the 1990s could be identified as "resilience through coming out" (166).

In doing so, Hammack and Cohler fail to do justice to the immense diversity of narratives in the gay male community within and across locations, generations, and race. Indeed, they admit that their study is solely based on "white gay men in the USA" (165). Besides this narrow perspective, Hammack and Cohler's method also fails to account for the disparate narrative styles and formal features of the memoirs under scrutiny, not to mention the array of novels they do not discuss. (In fact, Hammack and Cohler discuss a mere two memoirs per decade – hardly a complete representation of the myriad memoirs written by and for the LGBT community.) If a memoir such as David Wodjnarowicz's *Close to the Knives* (1991) – not discussed by Hammack and Cohler – could be thematically linked to Mark Doty's *Heaven's Coast* (1997) or Tim Miller's *Shirts and Flesh* (1997) – both discussed by Hammack and Cohler – because of the fact that these three memoirs narrate the devastating impact of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, the ways in which these authors represent this history not only differ greatly, but their styles of narration are also hardly comparable with one another. Indeed, it could easily be argued that Wojnarowicz's anger over inadequate responses to the AIDS epidemic and the loss of his lover Peter Hujar is so

urgent because of his idiosyncratic narration, which often eschews conventions that would otherwise organize the narrative coherently around a plot. Reducing these novels to their thematic treatment of the AIDS epidemic disregards other processes of meaning-making that are involved in storytelling. In doing so, social scientists such as Hammack and Cohler, and McAdams and McLean, remain on the level of thematic representation. Their approach to narrative identity only allows them to ask what kind of identity is being narrated, instead of asking how this identity comes about. A turn to narratology, then, would allow this scholarship to ask more fundamental questions about the formation of narrative identity.

While the "narrative turn" in social sciences seems to preclude narrative theory entirely, many feminist and queer literary scholars have abandoned the project of narratology for wholly different reasons. In their introduction to *Narrative Theory Unbound*, an edited volume that attempts to reignite an interest in narrative theory among feminist and queer literary scholars, Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser trace the tension between "narratologists who assert that culturally invested and category-resistant approaches cannot properly be called narratology" on the one hand, and "scholars of gender and sexuality who remain suspicious of narratology's formalist priorities and binary frames" (2) on the other. They continue with the assertion that "narratology's roots in ahistorical structuralism seemed at first to preclude a feminist or queer approach. When analysis depends on 'either-or' categorizations, as it did in the narratology of the 1970s and 1980s, the rich multiplicity not just of genders and sexualities but also of narrative practices could indeed get reduced into essentialist and universalizing generalizations" (2). To be sure, Warhol and Lanser seem to caricaturize narrative theory by reducing it to its roots in Russian formalism and structuralist linguistics, but they do acknowledge important feminist contributions to the field of narratology by Elaine Showalter, Mieke Bal, and Nancy K. Miller, not to mention their own *Gendered Interventions* (Warhol 1989) and "Towards a Feminist Narratology" (Lanser 1986). Ultimately, however, they conclude that many feminist and queer literary scholars have generally abandoned the project of narratology and substituted it with other theoretical frameworks such as Judith Butler's notion of performativity (7).

Lanser suggests that this tension between narrative theory and feminist and queer literary scholarship originates in a heterosexist bias at the root of all narrative. "Gay narrative", Lanser quotes D.A. Miller, "is simply not feasible" ("Toward a Queerer Narratology" 31). Adding to Lanser's analysis of queer theory's distrust of narrative theory, Jesse Matz advances the claim that queer scholars find in narrative's progressive temporality the specter of "reproductive futurism" and "heterosexual

compulsion" (228). And indeed, scholars such as Lee Edelman, whose project consists of "shattering narrative temporality" (31), but also Elizabeth Freeman (2010) and Jack Halberstam (2005), have thoroughly theorized the relationship between narrative's demand for temporal progression and the ruses of reproductive heterosexuality and capitalism.

Such a strong suspicion of narratological analysis of identity constructions is, according to Peggy Phelan, rooted in Lacanian psychoanalysis. For queer theory, the psychic subject is also necessarily a social subject, and as such it theorizes identity in relational terms to the extent that "queer continually names and performs a relation to something other than itself" (78). In queer theory, then, identity is always social, is always redefined in a relational context and, in line with its feminist and antihomophobic politics, is always pitted against dominant social formations of a heteropatriarchal society. Such a relational conception of identity, however, also gives way to the dominant fiction of a "true" or internal identity. In its attempts to undermine dominant forms of socialization which compels the queer subject to adhere to repressive heteronormative structures – see for example Adrienne Rich's 1980 critique of compulsory heterosexuality or Rubin Gayle's 1975 analysis of the sex/gender system, two foundational theoretical frameworks for queer theory – queer theory cannot help but subscribe to a dichotomous conception of identity that consists of a socialized identity that is directed outward, and a core identity, which is something that resides within the subject.

The fiction of a "true" self is so prevalent that even Butler, whose concept of performativity would suggest otherwise, draws on it for her own resistance to narrative. In her seminal work *Giving an Account of Oneself*, she criticizes narrative form for its mechanics that give a sense of coherence to a story as "we may be preferring the seamlessness of the story to something we might tentatively call the truth of a person. A truth that", she continues, "might well become more clear in moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness – in enigmatic articulations that cannot easily be translated into narrative form" (*Giving an Account* 64). Butler posits the "truth" of a person opposite the seamlessness of a story or its narrative form, which she seems to equate completely with the tradition of the realist novel. In doing so, she glosses over the fact that these moments in which the "truth" of a person emerges – interruption, stoppage, open-endedness – are in and of themselves produced through narrative form. Indeed, as Maureen Whitebrook argues, such narrative gaps are heavily utilized in modernist novels in order to produce a sense of narrative identity (85). We privilege these moments in which narrative seems to fall apart as a form of truth-speaking, precisely because we can understand and interpret those moments

by making use of the analytical tools that narratology offers. Contrary to Butler, I maintain that the dichotomy between the "truth" of a person and narrative form is moot, since this "truth" is produced by the very same narrative form that Butler here resists.

Warhol too addresses this passage in Butler to theorize the reality effect in television shows such as *The Office*. This reality effect resides in the moments in which actors seem to break character, or acknowledge the presence of a camera crew, which for Warhol produces the same effects that Butler describes, and which "makes this fiction feel so much more 'true' than the reality shows do" ("Giving an Account of Themselves" 74). While Warhol fully acknowledges that this feeling is an effect of narrative procedures – she rightfully criticizes Butler for her too simplistic understanding of narrative theory – she nevertheless seems to subscribe to a similar conception of "true" identity. "To be sure", Warhol comments, "there is no 'truth of a person' that we could attribute to a purely fictional TV character" (74). Despite her negative formulation of the attribution of a "true" identity to fictional TV characters, her phrasing suggests that the attribution of a "true" identity is possible in the case of actual people.

I focus on this seemingly minor remark, not because I disagree with Warhol's feminist narratology, but rather because I would like to see it extended to the conception of identity as a whole, whether it is attributed to a fictional or non-fictional character. If there is such a thing as a "true" identity, this would mean that such an identity precedes the narratives and stories we tell about ourselves. But, as I have argued in previous chapters, different signs, attachments, and stories about a person always exist within larger networks of meaning-making. Phelan's description of queer theory's conception of identity as a social construct rings true to the extent that in the communication of identity there are always multiple parties involved. For example, such communication is always situated in a system of sender and receiver, which in Purdy's case finds its analogy in the "writer" and the "reader" of identity, in both a literal and a figurative sense. In my analyses of the encounters between these two positions, I argue that in each different encounter, different master narratives, modes of reading, memories, and symbolic narratives are activated by these different characters. In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, Amos's family history activates a Freudian Oedipal master narrative for Eustace, who interprets it as an explanation for Amos's homosexuality. In *63: Dream Palace*, different readings of the same phrase or body language produce wildly different conclusions about what Fenton's identity could entail. In *Children Is All*, Edna searches her own memory to match the identity of the person in front of her with that of her son, and as she fails to do so, his identity

changes with her misrecognition. Alma Mason of *The Nephew* activates narratives that are part of the National Symbolic to reach an understanding of her nephew's, and her own, position within her community.[3]

In each of these encounters between "writers" and "readers" of identity, preceding knowledge of narratives are activated to produce assumptions about the identity of one another. In the social situation of identity construction, there are always narratives involved that precede whatever we hold to be the "truth" of a person. However, in this chapter, I argue that this is also the case for that part of identity which we do not consider be social: the fiction of an internal identity that is deemed to reside at the core of a person, and which is considered to be the "truth" of a person regardless of how they express or present themselves socially. The premise of *Cabot Wright Begins*, in which two authors try to uncover the "truth" of a person who has forgotten his own identity, allows me to reflect on the way in which this so-called "truth" is constructed. We will see that, as Cabot learns more about himself via Zoe's narration, he is under the impression that he is rediscovering what he thinks is his "true" self. The way the novel stages this rediscovery of Cabot's "true" self via Zoe's narration of Cabot Wright, however, shows that the fiction of internal identity, just as is the case with social identity, is also already embedded in preexisting narratives and assumptions about who a person is supposed to be. Narratological analysis, finally, gives us tools with which we can expose the mechanisms that keep this fictive dichotomy between a "true" internal self and a constructed social self in place.

In our present political climate, in which narrative plays an increasing role in the formation of identitarian politics, we should be very apprehensive of doing away with narrative theory. The move away from narratology by both literary studies and social sciences (the latter of which, arguably, has yet to arrive at a point in which narrative theory embodies a fundamental part of its analysis of narrative identity), narrows the discussion of identity narratives down to the representational level, while disregarding the effects of formal qualities on the processes of meaning-making. Rather, the queer and feminist penchant for theories of affect, as Phelan suggests, has resulted in an unfortunate and false dichotomy between the systematic analysis of narrative structures and "the emphasis on collective identity, and its attendant conception of social-sexual identity as performance" (79). By privileging the theoretization of indisputably important contributions to critical theory by scholars such as Judith Butler (performativity), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (affect), and

3 See Chapter 4 for a more elaborate discussion of *Children Is All* and see Chapter 5 for a more elaborate discussion of *The Nephew*.

Joan W. Scott (experience), many feminist and queer scholars fail to recognize how these theories are firmly embedded in a narratological understanding of concepts such as time and repetition, actor and action, and space and place.

In an attempt to resolve this tension and reintroduce narrative theory into the discussion of identity construction and the politics involved in contemporary conceptions of narrative and identity, I return to one of the foundational theorists of narrative identity: Paul Ricoeur. His analysis of the temporal construction of identity through emplotment, character, and action has strong implications for contemporary discussions of identity.

Narrative Identity: Some Theoretical Considerations

Originally introduced in the third volume of his vast study *Time and Narrative* (1985/1990) as part of his larger contemplation of temporal aspects of narrativity (244–249), Ricoeur continued to theorize the concept of narrative identity more thoroughly in works such as *Oneself as Another* (1992). With this concept, Ricoeur proposes a radical shift in how we theorize the formation of identity as something that is produced over time, rather than an innate and constant quality of the self. If identity can only be produced in time, it is impossible to theorize identity outside of narrative "as there can be no thought about time without narrated time" (*Time and Narrative* III 241). Here lies, I believe, queer theory's main objection to Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity.[4] Although both Ricoeur and many queer theorists would argue for the impermanence and mutability of identity, for queer theorists this malleability of identity comes from social interaction, while Ricoeur's temporal model locates the changing nature of identity within its own self-constancy. That is, to recognize something as identity, Ricoeur observes, there must be a sense of permanence. This permanence is attained through the narrative category of character, or a "set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same" (*Oneself* 119). Characters are not only functions of narrative, according to Ricoeur, they are also plots in and of themselves. "The identity of the character", he argues, "is comprehensible through the transfer to the character of the operation of emplotment" (*Oneself* 143).

Ricoeur offers a thoughtful and complex theory of the ways in which the temporal dimensions of emplotment, action, and character produce a sense of constancy in

4 Indeed, of the twenty chapters collected in Warhol and Lanser's volume of queer and feminist narrative theory, only four briefly mention Ricoeur, and even then only in passing.

the narration of a person that congeals into a sense of identity. I want to zoom in on the category of character and think through its function within Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, for it is exactly through an analysis of character in *Cabot Wright Begins* that we can consider the novel as illustrative of the ways in which narrative identity can function as a queer critique of the category of identity itself. For Ricoeur, character "expresses the almost complete mutual overlapping of the problematic of *idem* and *ipse*" (*Oneself* 118), which are the two qualities that he identifies as "the two major uses of the concept of identity" (116). *Idem*, or sameness, is the identity-concept that allows us to see someone as one and the same over time, even if that person changes their physical appearance. *Ipse*, on the other hand, indicates selfhood, and Ricoeur emphatically stresses that it should not be confused with the concept of sameness. Instead, it implies a constancy of action and behavior, a constancy of the self. The overlap of these identities is where Ricoeur situates character as it "assures at once numerical identity, qualitative identity, uninterrupted continuity across change, and, finally, permanence in time" (122). However, when there is a discrepancy in the *idem* or *ipse* of someone's identity, we begin to wonder how fundamental or essentialist these characteristics of identity actually are. Character, Ricoeur suggests, is an organizing principle that allows us to gloss over such discrepancies, since it enables us to say that someone is acting out of character when we feel there is a disconnection between what we expect of someone's *ipse*-identity and the way he or she actually behaves.

To illustrate the operations of *ipse* and *idem* it might be fruitful to reconsider the final scene from *Children Is All*, which I discuss more extensively in the next chapter. In this play, the protagonist Edna's failure to recognize her own son Billy hinges on her belief that he would be unspoiled and unchanged by his time spent in prison. The temporal disjunction that is in effect due to the extended time Billy has spent in prison and Edna's refusal to visit him, however, obstructs her recognition of both the *idem* and the *ipse* of the character Billy, which effectively produces a new and wholly different character. On the level of *idem*, fifteen years in prison have changed the appearance of an adolescent Billy literally from boy to adult, a transition that keeps Alma from recognizing him as the same person: "no, no, you're not him. Billy was only a boy" (CIA 157).[5] On the level of *ipse*, we find the other obstruction for Edna's identification of her own son. The narrative of a man escaping from prison and getting shot in the process does not correspond to her own belief in Billy's innocence, which she keeps reiterating throughout the play.

5 Where deemed necessary I use CIA to indicate that I refer to *Children Is All*.

Something similar is happening in *Cabot Wright Begins*. Cabot's memory loss marks a fundamental break in the constancy of *ipse* in his character. The apparent constancy of character that is ascribed to Cabot Wright is indeed just that: ascribed to his narrated character. As I noted earlier, I distinguish between the character in the novel, Cabot, and the narrated character of the manuscript, Cabot Wright. This distinction allows us to bring the problem of *ipse* clearly into view. As the narrative organization of the novel is geared towards producing a sense of coherence between Cabot and Cabot Wright, a closer inspection of the ways in which these identities are narrated shows that the two characters are produced through vastly different narrative strategies. The confusion between Cabot and Cabot Wright, however, exposes how our sense of identity is composed of narratives over which we cannot always claim authorship, and in fact are produced by our constantly shifting position of reader and writer of our own and others' identities.

While the problem of *ipse* in *Cabot Wright Begins* seems to be clear-cut (however insoluble), the reader should not take the *idem* of Cabot straightforwardly either. In terms of sameness, the identities of Cabot and Cabot Wright sometimes overlap with conspicuous ease, while at other times, various physical descriptions of Cabot Wright differ both wildly from one another, as well as from physical descriptions of Cabot. For example, when Bernie first meets Cabot, he recognizes him because Cabot coincidentally matches the physical appearance of Cabot Wright as Bernie has imagined it. Later on, however, the external narrator paraphrases testimonials of women who were assaulted by Cabot Wright and describe his physical appearance, and especially his racial features, in different and mutually exclusive ways. Significantly, these racial descriptions differ completely from the redheaded man that Bernie has met. The constancy of sameness between Cabot and Cabot Wright, then, is anything but a given, which further problematizes the production of identity, or at least, the consistency that we ascribe to identity through the narratives we tell about it.

Lamented as one of the least theorized and analyzed aspects of narrative (see for example Wolloch 14; J. Phelan 1; Lanser "Toward a Queerer Narratology" 37–38; and Claggett 355–357), character nevertheless informs my consideration of narrative identity in *Cabot Wright Begins* to a great extent. Ricoeur, as noted already, defines character as a "set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same" (*Oneself* 119). Yet, Cabot Wright unsettles this notion since he lacks such distinctive marks – both for his victims, who all identify him according to different physical traits, and for Cabot himself, since he cannot remember his own life before imprisonment and produces new memories of his life that are mediated by the narrative about Cabot Wright. The question of memory plays an

important role in disentangling the narrative effect of overlap between Cabot and Cabot Wright, as I demonstrate later, as *Cabot Wright Begins* frustrates the connection between the perceived continuity of memory and the notion of identity. *Cabot Wright Begins* hinges on, and unsettles, the melodramatic effect that strips character of individuality. Yet while melodrama reduces its characters to archetypes which are immediately recognizable and serve as a function for the plot (Williams 203–204), Cabot Wright's lack of individuality endangers the social codes of the society he inhabits. In the last section of this chapter, I return to the question of character by reading Cabot Wright's racial ambiguity against the few black characters that appear in the novel. I read these black characters, and the way their melodramatic archetypes function for the plot, as the narrative organization of American culture within which the notion of identity takes shape, and within which non-normative sexual identity is widely associated with black and other people of color.

Before I return to *Cabot Wright Begins*, I want to draw attention to a rather remarkable disclaimer that Ricoeur places within his discussion of narrative identity. In it, he reflects on what he considers to be some strong limitations of the concept; limitations that, I would contend, instead hint at the most radical implications of narrative identity. Despite the concept's use to illustrate "the interplay of history and narrative", Ricoeur recognizes "an internal limitation that bears witness to the first inadequacy of the answer narration brings to the question posed by the aporetics of temporality". He continues:

> Narrative identity is not a stable and seamless identity. Just as it is possible to compose several plots on the subject of the same incidents (which, thus, should not really be called the same events), so it is always possible to weave different, even opposed, plots about our lives. In this regard, we might say that, in the exchange of roles between history and fiction, the historical component of a narrative about oneself draws this narrative toward the side of chronicle submitted to the same documentary verifications as any other historical narration, while the fictional component draws it towards those imaginative variations that destabilize narrative identity. (*Time and Narrative* III 248–249)

The concern that Ricoeur shows for the instability of narrative identity touches, I would argue, exactly on its most critical potential. The temporal continuity of the *idem* and *ipse* of character comes about through narration, but there is never only one possible way to narrate this continuity. Indeed, the story we tell about our lives might

be different in certain contexts or social situations, and while some of these different stories corroborate one another, others are in turn contradictory. It is the virtually unlimited ways to narrate identity that produces the queer potential of narrative identity. To illustrate how this concern for instability conveys the most radical implications for narrative identity, I turn to another fundamental narratological concept: focalization. This concept helps me to foreground those moments in which the instability of narration threatens a straightforward identification between Cabot and Cabot Wright and thus exposes how narrative at once produces and undoes our understanding of identity.

When Gerard Genette first introduced the concept of focalization in his seminal *Narrative Discourse* (1983), it was to disentangle the muddled notion of point of view and distinguish between voice (who utters the narration) and vision (who perceives the action). Focalization would come to designate the latter aspect of narration and Genette distinguished between three levels of focalization: zero, external, and internal. While external and internal focalization have become staples of the narratologist's vocabulary, the notion of zero focalization has sparked much debate among literary theorists (J. Phelan 111). Many narratologists, such as Bal (1985), have rejected the suggestion that a narrative text can have no focalization. For Bal, the analysis of focalization should not focus on the question of whether or not an object is seen, but rather on the identity of the focalizing subject (*Narratology* 171). James Phelan too, in his critique of Genette's theory, stresses how the concept helps to foreground the relation between speaking and perceiving, or focalizing subject (111). Focalization helps us to distinguish who is speaking from who is perceiving, but it also shows how the narration of the speaking subject is influenced or colored by the perception of someone else.

While often the speaking subject might coincide with the focalizing subject, this is certainly not always the case. The clearest example of this in the novel genre is free indirect discourse, in which the speaking subject adopts the focalization of someone else without making it apparent as such. But on a more fundamental level, there is often a complex interaction within a text between different focalizers, since the narrator of a story, be it internal or external, will often temporarily adopt the point of view of other characters in the novel. In these cases, as Bal points out, we are always dealing with a layered focalization, as the narrator still functions as the organizer of the narration; we cannot simply subtract its own focalization from the total equation once it temporarily adopts someone else's point of view (*Narratology* 157–158). As such, it becomes clear that the analysis of the narrative production of identity should also consider precisely who the focalizer of the narration is, or indeed,

who the focalizers are. Thus, while the effect of narration, that is, the organization of a text by a narrator, means that we read a text for its coherence, an analysis on the level of focalization shows that there are always different, competing, and incongruent versions of identity at play in the text.

Focalizing Cabot Wright

Within Purdy's oeuvre, *Cabot Wright Begins* plays around with the complex layering of focalization most pressingly. The narration of the novel within the novel is especially marked by different interlocking focalizations that raise several questions about Cabot Wright's identity and the association that the reader is drawn to make between Cabot and Cabot Wright. Before I turn to the question of focalization, I first want to briefly recapitulate the narrative that prefigures the introduction of the novel within the novel. Some of the themes and scenes that are presented in this narrative already point us towards some problematics of identity that Purdy sets out to expose with his narration of Cabot (Wright). A brief summary of the novel also highlights some of the recurring themes within Purdy's work – for example, the relation between reader and writer as is the case in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, *63: Dream Palace*, *The Nephew* – which allows us to read these alongside the different interpretative strategies that I have presented in previous chapters.

At the novel's beginning we learn that Chicago-based writer Bernie Gladhart has moved to Brooklyn to pursue a topic for a "great book". Bernie is sent by his wife Carrie, who has become fascinated by the case of Cabot Wright, a convicted rapist who allegedly raped over three hundred women. Her fascination with this case already at the outset signals the issues of identity that the novel problematizes: "Despite Cabot's being guilty of something, there remained in her mind a queer feminine doubt that he had been motivated to his deeds – more than 300 rapes in Brooklyn and Manhattan – by the overpowering lust attributed to him by the press" (9). Carrie suspects that Cabot's actions as a rapist are not intrinsic to himself, but rather the result of the narratives that are told about him. This suspicion – a queer and feminine one, we should not fail to notice – formulates one of the central questions of identity that the novel asks and reproduces in its own narration: which parts of one's identity are intrinsic to oneself and which parts of one's identity are attributed by others?

This question is asked and reproduced by the very writing of Bernie and the subsequent complex layers of focalization in which we find the narration of Cabot

Wright entangled. In Brooklyn, Bernie begins writing his novel by studying and fictionalizing Cabot Wright's case history. Carrie, however, insists that Bernie meets Cabot "before completing the script so that the story would be more 'authentic'" (17). While Bernie is writing a fictional narrative about the rapist, Carrie expresses the desire to have Cabot narrate his own story, since that would be closer to the truth. Identity, for her, is first and foremost the property of the person whose identity is narrated. The identity intrinsic to oneself, Carrie seems to suggest, can only be narrated by oneself.

Cabot Wright Begins can be considered a laboratory in Ricoeur's sense since it takes Carrie's position and problematizes it through several thought experiments over the course of its narration. The novel asks how identity is produced and formulates this question through the fact that Cabot is unable to remember his own identity and thus the narration of his identity is wholly dependent on external sources. Does Cabot's identity become a copy of Cabot Wright's fictionalized identity as narrated to him, or do Cabot and Cabot Wright remain wholly distinct characters? These questions are asked through a series of events that constantly prompt shifts in narrative perspective, which results in the reader questioning the narration's reliability. Where *63: Dream Palace* was structured by an embedded narrative that quite straightforwardly signaled the unreliability of the narration, *Cabot Wright Begins* too features an embedded narrative, but this time the narrative's embeddedness proves to be so complex that the novel fails to disentangle the different narrative perspectives even after the embedded narration has ended.

The embedded narration, which consists of the novel that Bernie is writing, operates on at least four identifiable levels of focalization that overlap and contradict one another. The first one is that of Bernie, who has written the manuscript. The second level of focalization is that of Zoe who reads the manuscript to Cabot. The third level of focalization is that of Cabot, listening to his own life story as narrated by Zoe. The fourth and least easily discernible level of focalization is that of the external narrator, which organizes the way in which Zoe's reading of Bernie's manuscript is presented to the reader, and who from time to time intrudes into the manuscript in a way that makes the reader doubt the reliability of what is presented. To get a better grip on how these four levels of narration are entangled, and how this entanglement problematizes a straightforward identification of Cabot Wright's narration with Cabot, let us take one step back and look at how the situation in which Zoe reads Bernie's manuscript to Cabot takes place. The events prefiguring this embedded narration, I argue, present some clues as to how to read the embedded narration in relation to the question of Cabot's identity.

Take the premise by which Bernie and Cabot meet: Cabot's physical appearance, on which Ricoeur's notion of *idem* identity hinges, refuses to coincide with the physical features ascribed to Cabot Wright, which should immediately alert the reader to the problematics of identity that the novel addresses. Bernie claims that he has already found Cabot and that he is living in the apartment right beneath him. He knows this, because when he accidentally looked through a hole in the flooring, he saw a person with the same red hair as Cabot has in his courtroom pictures (51) and because the name on the mailbox belonging to that apartment reads "C. Wright" (52). In these scenes, Cabot's identity is already fixed by Bernie's desire for the other tenant to match his image of Cabot Wright. The circumstantial evidence that Bernie produces is accompanied by his clearly expressed wish: "*I have seen somebody I don't know down there, and it can't be nobody; it's got to be him – Cabot*" (50, original emphasis). This wish is written down in his manuscript, which foreshadows the complex relationship between the embedded narration and Cabot's identity. Even though Bernie's suspicion turns out to be true – the other tenant is indeed Cabot – it is unclear whether this truth is purely coincidental, or whether the wish is quite literally father to the thought. After all, if the other tenant is supposed to be the same Cabot Wright as that of the manuscript, the novel subsequently queries the extent to which art – the manuscript – imitates life, or whether life imitates art instead.

This question becomes more evident when Zoe becomes a more prominent character in the novel and the second layer of the embedded narration's focalization is introduced. In conversation with Zoe, Carrie mentions that Bernie's books have always been too much about himself to be successful (35). She hints that art should not, or cannot, imitate life. Bernie attempts to convey his own identity on paper, which makes his novel unreadable. Zoe's publisher, Princeton, suggests the same when he remarks on the coincidence of Cabot living beneath Bernie: "coincidence which is so common, so abundant in real life [...] isn't tolerated by many publishing people" (48). Bernie's manuscript, then, is too close to actual life according to Zoe and Princeton, and they subsequently decide to remove him from the publishing process and let Zoe continue writing and editing the manuscript.

As soon as Zoe takes over the manuscript from Bernie, she also embarks on the quest to meet Cabot in person, which she finally does when she accidentally falls through a glass roof into his apartment. Upon meeting him, Zoe learns that Cabot has lost all memory of his own history. Indeed, the only memories that Cabot seems to have he gleaned from reports about his case, just like Bernie had done for his manuscript. "Only things I have to make me remember is some police tape-recordings", he says, and with a nod to journalists and writers who have previously

tried to interview him he adds: "that's why the 'hunters' soon tire of me. The tapes don't give them enough of what they want" (81). Again, the novel hints at a tension between fact and fiction with regards to the production of Cabot's narrative identity. The police reports and tapes, documents that are generally considered truth-adjacent, are insufficient for reporters and writers, who desire more than a mere reproduction of the facts. Stressing the desire for a narrative beyond the facts presented in the police reports, Zoe offers to read the manuscript to Cabot, in the hopes that listening to the narration of Cabot Wright might trigger his memory. The second layer of focalization of the embedded narrative emerges as Zoe reads to Cabot the manuscript that Bernie has written.

The third layer, Cabot's focalization, becomes apparent later in the embedded narrative by way of an intervention by the external narrator (which embodies a fourth layer of focalization). Zoe's reading of the manuscript adopts the voice of this external narrator, which makes it almost impossible for the reader to distinguish between the embedded and the frame narratives, a procedure which is important for the way in which narrative identity produces the effect of real identity. However, near the end of the embedded narrative, the external narrator makes a strange intervention that both disrupts the overlap between Zoe's and the external narrator's focalization, and introduces Cabot as another layer of focalization: "The reader, in this case the listener (Cabot [...] eavesdropping on his own story as novelized by Bernie Gladhart and revised by Zoe Bickle) had already met Dr. Bugleford, when he was Dr. Bigelow-Martin" (161). This aside remark disrupts the embedded narrative, which has so far used narrative conventions to make it seem like Cabot coincides exactly with Bernie's narrative about Cabot Wright. This intervention, which is not signaled by brackets as other interventions have been, casts yet another perspective on the entire embedded narrative. The external narrator interpellates the reader (or indeed the listener, Cabot) into the embedded narrative, and in doing so, recasts the entire embedded narrative through the focalization of Cabot. The interjection complicates the embedded narrative by raising doubt about the status of the narrative itself. The reader can no longer be sure whether the preceding part of the narrative is focalized by Cabot listening in on his story, Zoe reading the story, or Bernie having written the story, or all at once.

What ties these three levels of narration together is the organization of the external narrator. Notwithstanding how much overlap, contradiction, or corroboration exists between the three identifiable focalizations, there is still a sense of unity in the narrative effected by the external narrator, which structures Cabot Wright's story into a coherent whole. While the external narrator often operates in the background,

ensuring that the reader is not always aware of its presence, at times the external narrator cannot help but to interfere in the proceedings of the embedded narrative. Indeed, as soon as Zoe starts reading the manuscript, the external narrator makes itself present and adds another layer of focalization to the narration – a layer which further problematizes the question of Cabot's identity.

A Supposititious Child

Right when Zoe starts to read the manuscript, the external narrator makes itself known via a bracketed intervention: "The popularity of Cabot Wright as a criminal may have stemmed from two facts [she read]" (84, original brackets). This intervention signals that we should not consider the chapters that recount the embedded narrative as an unmediated representation of the manuscript. Rather, these chapters are organized by an external narrator, which does not shrink back from manipulating the narrative. One of these manipulative strategies is the way in which the external narrator uses Cabot and Cabot Wright indiscriminately to refer to either character. The prolonged confusion of both names and characters produces a similar effect in the reader, who at certain moments remains uncertain whether Cabot or Cabot Wright is meant by the narration.

Being aware of such manipulative strategies can alert the reader to the ways in which the narrative attempts to produce a coherent narrative identity for Cabot (Wright). Foregrounding these strategies by insisting on a clear distinction between Cabot and Cabot Wright, as I am doing here, frustrates a clear identification between Cabot and Cabot Wright. Another way to frustrate the confusion between Cabot and Cabot Wright is to be attentive to certain words that signal a convergence between the frame narrative and the embedded narrative. This convergence effects a sense of coherence between the narration of Cabot and Cabot Wright, but the suspension of this convergence uncovers the processes by which narrative identity operates. An example of this is the narrative's use of "supposititious", since recurring use of this word both produces and confuses the truth-claims of the embedded narrative.

Cabot, we learn, is an adopted son. The term to hint at his adopted status, "supposititious", which is used by press reports and in the manuscript, was unknown to Cabot himself "until [he] was out of prison and a magazine told [him] about it" (105). In the term "supposititious", we see how free indirect discourse runs throughout the novel and at once muddies and clarifies the distinction between the different layers of focalization. The term hints at the discrepancy between Cabot as he has

experienced his own life, and Cabot Wright as he is narrated by others. At the same time, his own usage of the term suggests that he narrates his own identity with the adopted phrases and styles of others who have also narrated his identity. Whenever the term "supposititious" occurs in the text, the reader's attention is drawn to the question of the narrated identity's status. By the same token, however, the reoccurrence of this specific word also draws attention to the mechanisms with which the embedded narration attempts to naturalize Cabot Wright's narrated identity. Drawing attention to the function of "supposititious" in the narration, for example, frustrates the operations of other manipulative strategies that would otherwise promote the confusion between Cabot and Cabot Wright.

Another of the manipulative strategies that the external narrator employs is the dimension of length. While the embedded narrative is clearly introduced as such, its length purposefully blurs the distinction between the frame narrative in which Zoe reads to Cabot, and the embedded narrative which Zoe is reading. The embedded narrative starts in chapter 7, and while chapter 8 returns to the frame narrative in which Zoe convinces Cabot to listen to her reading, the embedded narrative continues in chapter 9 and unequivocally continues until chapter 14. I say unequivocally, because after this point in the novel, the boundaries between frame and embedded narratives becomes even more troubled. While chapter 14 returns to the frame narrative, this switch is not signaled as such. Throughout the remainder of the novel, the external narrator keeps switching between the present of the frame narrative and flashbacks that might be part of the embedded narrative of the manuscript, and which are not clearly identifiable in terms of focalization. These flashbacks could originate from the external narrator as additional information for the reader; they could also originate from the point of view of characters as the external narrator assumes their focalization; or they could conversely originate in the unmarked return to the embedded narrative, as Zoe and Cabot are still working on their collaboration after chapter 14. The uncertain status of these flashbacks and the length of the embedded narrative have the effect that the reader subconsciously begins to identify the character Cabot Wright as narrated in the manuscript and subsequent flashbacks with the fantasy of Cabot's "true" identity – at least, if not for the occasional interventions by the external narrator that reaffirm the manuscript's fictional status.

In his life prior to becoming a rapist, the embedded narration tells us, Cabot Wright worked as a stockbroker at a Wall Street firm. His work is uneventful until one day he is informed by his boss Warburton of a catastrophe that altogether changes his life. Cabot Wright is summoned to Warburton's office, where his boss informs him that his foster parents have died in a bomb explosion while yachting on the

Caribbean. While Warburton speaks of Cabot Wright's parents, Cabot corrects him and mentions that they were his foster parents. In a somewhat aloof manner he adds: "you knew I was supposititious. Think we discussed it once" (136). Even though the remark seems offhand, the reader is reminded of Cabot's earlier statement that he hadn't heard of the word until after he left prison. The use of this word, then, signals the fictive status of this extended embedded narrative since according to his own account, he could not have used that word at that time. Or could he?

Cabot's focalization, we have already seen, is unreliable because of his loss of memory. When Zoe proposes she read the manuscript to Cabot, she expresses concern for the verisimilitude of what Bernie has written: "I don't suppose you can tell me if what you've read is authentic or not" (105). Zoe requires confirmation from Cabot on the events that Bernie has written down. His response questions the reliability of his own affirmations, as he tells her that he remembers:

> the separate details when once [sic] they're put together for me. You see, for nearly a year I read nothing but stories about myself. In newspapers, magazines, foreign and domestic – me, me, me. All the time I was in prison it was my story that was being told and retold. I read so many versions of what I did, I can safely affirm that I couldn't remember what I did and what I didn't. (105)

Cabot remembers everything that is narrated to him and this amounts to an absolute confusion about his own history: he can no longer distinguish between what he did and did not do, what is real and what is fiction. Just as he had never heard of the term "supposititious" before his release from prison, Cabot seems to suggest that he never knew anything about himself until after the details were narrated to him by others:

> Nor did I know my exact wrist measurements until a lady journalist, helped by a police captain who'd put the tape around me, said my body weight was ideal in line with the circumference of my wrist and height. My complexion was described with the exact artist's colour and shade, my excessive perspiration was counted in drops, together with a chemical description of odour and content, and there was of course my blood count and blood type. (105–106)

As Cabot admits that he only remembers things about himself that were told to him by others, we have no certainty of the status of the flashbacks that adopt his

own focalization. His comment that he had not heard the word "supposititious" until after he was released from prison, then, could have resulted from his memory loss – he might have known the term and forgot it upon losing his memory, only to refamiliarize himself with it after his release. The recurrence of the term flags those moments in the narrative when the reader must ask which perspective is presented. Yet the term's recurrence also ties together the embedded and frame narratives, since the answer to the question of which perspective is presented by this word gets lost in the layering of focalization. Reading for the elements of the narrative that at once produce the semblance of unity as well as allow us to unravel this semblance, brings us closer to answering the question of how identity is produced, rather than what identity is represented.

Identity, Memory, and Focalization

My focus on narrative devices, rather than on the thematic plots that are generally activated in discussions on narrative identity, does not necessarily show what is plotted, but rather how this emplotment operates. To conclude from my analysis that the narration's unreliability and the different intertwined or contradictory levels of focalization prevent the reader from insights into Cabot's identity, or even that identity in this novel is not experienced at all, would be a gross misunderstanding of what narrative in fact does. Asking how Cabot's identity is emplotted instead of asking what Cabot's identity is, brings us much closer to an understanding of identity as a constant negotiation between contesting – sometimes corroborating, sometimes mutually exclusive – narratives. Rather than disabling the production of identity by different levels of focalization, the narrative exposes the intricacy of different competing narratives that together produce what we read as Cabot's identity. In doing so, the narrative points us towards a false opposition that keeps returning in literature about narrative identity in general, and previous interpretations of *Cabot Wright Begins* in particular: the opposition between an inner, or "true", identity and outer identity.

Stephen Adams faults Purdy for the incoherence that characters seem to display. While discussing *Cabot Wright Begins*, Adams laments that "Carrie's abrupt transition from one extreme to another is typical of many characters in the novel: few show any coherence of outer and inner self" (80), and, "Mrs Bickle is the prime example of language's detachment from the inner self" (82). Bettina Schwarzschild also directs her attention to the notion of an inner identity in her discussion of the novel, and

in doing so, even projects this onto Purdy's entire oeuvre. She writes that "in James Purdy's stories, the need to be recognized and accepted for one's *inside* is so desperate that his characters cannot live without it" (50). While Adams criticizes the novel for presenting characters whom he interprets as having no coherence between inner and outer identity, Schwarzschild interprets this incoherence between inner and outer self as the central theme of Purdy's novelistic world. Despite their differences, both critics agree that the identities of Purdy's characters consist of an inner self and an outer self. They also both agree that the inner self is more authentic, "true", or real.

This opposition between inner and outer identity remains the dominant form of thinking about identity, regardless of how identity is narrated and by whom (Whitebrook 6–7). Memory plays a key element in this distinction between inner and outer identity, as the autobiographical voice or first-person narration associated with inner identity lends a sense of authority and authenticity to the memory. Because of this, Whitebrook identifies memory as a "problematic facet of narrative construction" (39). And indeed, while she mentions that memory might be an essential part of the narrative construction of identity, she also notes that memories are subjected to that very same process. The case of *Cabot Wright Begins* illustrates that, if we consider the function of memory as narrative, the distinction between inner and outer identity is a false dichotomy. Cabot's loss of memory allows for a consideration of inner identity as being constructed by the same narrative devices as outer identity. In this consideration, I claim that from a perspective of narrative identity there are no effective differences between inner and outer identity. In fact, in Cabot's case, the reader, the external narrator, and Zoe have just as much access to his inner identity as to his outer identity, since the difference between the two constructions of identity has completely disappeared with Cabot's memory loss.

Memory and narrative have long been closely associated in a wide array of scholarly fields, including trauma studies and memory studies (see, for example, Caruth (1996) and King (2000) for two influential analyses in these fields). Scholars from these fields have shown how an analysis of the narrative construction of memory helps us understand the workings of collective trauma and identities in ways that I cannot do justice by summarizing here. Instead, I turn to the two theorists of narratology who have informed my analysis of *Cabot Wright Begins* most extensively, Bal and Ricoeur, as they single out memory in their theories of focalization and narrative identity, respectively.

Bal argues that memory presents us with a special case of focalization. It is an act of seeing the past, but is still wholly situated in the present. More importantly, memories are acts of narration: "loose elements come to cohere in a story, so that they

can be remembered and eventually told" (*Narratology* 147). For this reason, Bal calls memories "rhetorically overworked". When represented or narrated, "the 'story' the person remembers is not identical to the one she experienced" (147). Elsewhere, she deepens this understanding of the narration of memory by theorizing what she calls "narrative memories", which she distinguishes from routine or habitual memories ("Introduction" viii). She regards memorizing as an act, and these acts of memory consist of past actions that are tied to the present through the very mode of narration. "Memory is active", Bal writes, "and it is situated in the present" (viii).

Ricoeur too fixes on memory in his studies of narrative identity, as the narration of memory points out the problematics of the perceived psychic continuity of *ipse*-identity (*Oneself* 133). At stake for Ricoeur is "the ascription of thought to a thinker". The narration of memories produces the suggestion of a causal relationship between past and present experiences in which the narrator of these memories is also believed to have experienced them exactly as narrated. To illustrate memory's impact on the notion of identity, Ricoeur discusses a thought experiment of John Locke in which he imagines the memory of a prince to be implanted into the body of a cobbler. Locke asks whether this person "become[s] the prince whom he remembers having been, or [remains] the cobbler whom other people continue to observe" (126). While Locke favors memories over physical continuity, Ricoeur concludes that this memory of one's own existence can only be described as a *quasi memory* (133), or the way in which the narration produces the effect of a coherent identity.

Whereas Cabot does not remember anything of his past and thus can only access his own narrative identity through the narration of others, characters such as Zoe and Princeton attempt to access Cabot's narrative identity by seeking his affirmation of the events they narrate. In either case, the construction of narrative identity is never wholly situated in just one person, focalization, or character, which, according to Whitebrook, is a result of the very nature of narrative. In her reading of E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, she argues that "the very act of narrating carries the risk that more can be read into the account of identity than was intended" (28). As we have seen in previous chapters of this study, and especially in my analysis of *63: Dream Palace*, Purdy's novels often dramatize the effects of reading the narrative construction of identities to the extent that, indeed, the narrated identity starts to signify in multiple, contradictory ways.

In the cases of *63: Dream Palace* and *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, these superfluous significations result from different frames of reference activated by the narration. Thus, for Eustace the classic Freudian narration of the Oedipus complex can only result in a homosexual identity. What we obtain access to is not so much Amos's inner

self, but the projection of a narrative onto Amos's behavior, which produces the fantasy of what his "true" identity is supposed to be. Similarly, Fenton's actions in *63: Dream Palace* are continuously cast in narratives about his identity. The narrative nature of identity, then, places it in a larger intertextual web of narratives and processes of meaning-making. This interconnectedness with other narratives situates the construction of narrative identity always between narrator and interpreter. Their mutual understanding of narrative identity comes about when narratives shared in common are activated through the narration. It is important to note that this effect occurs in multiple directions and regardless of whose narrative identity is constructed.

For Cabot, his narrative identity is constructed, either simultaneously or in succession, by the external narrator of the novel, by himself, by Zoe, and by Bernie. That these four actors contribute to the construction of Cabot's narrative identity, however, does not mean that at any one point any of these actors has full control over the narration, nor that they construct these narratives in similar ways, as is illustrated by the complex interlocking of their focalization. Rather, their attempt to narrate an "authentic" identity should be considered in terms of their looking for narratives that they share in common. If Cabot recognizes himself in what Bernie and Zoe have written about Cabot Wright, this is not because they have touched upon an inner self of some sort, but rather upon shared narratives that both parties assume to be true. In this sense, it is impossible to speak of an inner self at all, as this inner self is merely the projection of narratives that both parties hold to be "true" about a person. If we, following Bal, Ricoeur, and Whitebrook, extend the assessment of the narrative nature of memory in this exchange of narratives, we can put into question the privilege that memory has in dominant fantasies of a "true" and inner identity.

As Ricoeur explores the function of memory in the construction of narrative identity and Bal draws on memory in her elaboration of focalization, *Cabot Wright Begins* brings to the dilemma the absence of memory, and with it challenges memory's position within the fiction of "true" identity. This opens up the possibility to think of, and challenge, memory as a key element in the entrenchment of inner identity as pertaining to a "truth" about one's existence. The element of memory is simply non-existent in the novel. Or at least, memory as it is traditionally considered remains nowhere to be found. Cabot can only piece together the memory of his past via newspaper clippings and by listening to Zoe, and thus the question of memory ownership is brought into the discussion. To whom does a memory belong? What we witness in this scenario is the production of a narrative that comes to function as, or stand in for, Cabot's memory and consequently comes to constitute the narrative of his own identity; what Ricoeur would call a *quasi memory*. If the fiction of inner

identity imagines memories as belonging to the person who thinks them, then Cabot's memory loss allows us to think of these memories as the narrative products of scenes, stories, images, and feelings that have been instilled, and rhetorically worked, into a coherent narrative by him.

To complicate this picture a little further, the fragments of stories that Cabot works into his own memories are, in turn, snippets of stories that Zoe, Bernie, and Cabot have read in newspapers, police investigations, and court proceedings. Each of these, we assume, are also worked into coherent narratives (to make a case for Cabot's arrest warrant, to indict him) based on fragments that are considered evidence for his case. Cabot's memory-in-becoming, then, is a linking of narrative fragments that are themselves part of a larger chain of narratives that becomes so complex that the question of ownership becomes impossible to answer. After Cabot's release from prison and during his work on the novel with Zoe, his memory is at once his own and everybody else's. While he produces a coherent narrative with which he can imagine a memory of his own existence, the elements of which this narrative consists are all narrated by others, each with their own motives to narrate his life story in a certain way.

Crossing the Color Line

The social grounding of pre-existing narratives that come to constitute memory and identity brings me to a final point, not only for this novel, but for Purdy's oeuvre as a whole, that must be addressed: the question of race. Writing at the height of the civil rights movement, many of Purdy's novels, stories, and plays touch upon the issue of race in American society. Joseph Skerrett (1979) and Michael Snyder (2011) have drawn attention to the number, at that time remarkable, of African American and Native American characters in Purdy's work. Both Skerrett and Snyder read *Eustace Chisholm and the* Works, for example, as a novel that laments racism and homophobia in America, as it provides a commentary on the insistence of racial purity and segregation of value systems and cultural practices by America's dominant white culture (Snyder, "Original Stock" 187; Skerrett, "Black Mask" 80–81). Others have pointed out, however, that these representations often indulge in stereotypes and run the risk of appearing racist. Discussing the same novel, Stephen Guy-Bray writes that both Eustace and Maureen characterize an old-fashioned "fascination with non-white people" and he considers the use the term "blackamoor" in the novel to "have no function at all beyond promoting racism" (109).

The almost utopian wish that Snyder recognizes seems irreconcilable with the language that Guy-Bray critiques. However, if we condemn Purdy's work for stereotypical and racist representations, we run the risk of disregarding their function within his interrogation of identity production in American society. The appearance of black characters in *Cabot Wright Begins* foregrounds Purdy's turn to the melodramatic mode to interrogate how the dominant white culture in American society draws on stereotypes to both frame the identity of the Other and to establish its own identity as pure and superior. The different racial features that are ascribed to Cabot Wright tap into stereotypical fantasies about race and sexuality, and as such function as social narratives that construct the identity of Cabot Wright for him. Where Cabot's own memory fails, the narration of Cabot Wright fills in the gaps, and this narration leads us to consider the deep and complex relationship in American society regarding its own fantasies about citizenship, race, and sexuality.

My assessment of race in *Cabot Wright Begins* comes by way of queer theory and its emphasis on intersectional criticism. The story of *Cabot Wright Begins* is indeed a queer one as it addresses problematics of identity-constitution that are irreducible to mere questions of sexual or gender identification. The novel scrutinizes the ways in which these identities are produced through social narratives, which matches the agendas of many previously discussed queer scholars. However, rather than opposing narrative theory, I propose a combination of queer theory's intersectional interrogation of identity production with narratological tools. I maintain that *Cabot Wright Begins*'s queer potential comes to the fore exactly because of narrative theory's ability to read beyond the thematic representation of race that critics such as Guy-Bray find troubling.

Queering, as an analytical and political endeavor, has a twofold purpose. As Butler claims, it "might signal an inquiry into (a) the *formation* of homosexualities (a historical inquiry which cannot take the stability of the term for granted, despite the political pressure to do so) and (b) the *deformative* and *misappropriative* power that the term currently enjoys" (*Bodies* 229, original emphasis). Considering *Cabot Wright Begins* as queering identity allows me to look into the ways in which the novel at once produces and disrupts the narratives that imagine Cabot Wright's sexual identity. More importantly, this also allows me to consider how these narratives interact with, and respond to, other identity-constitutive narratives of race, gender, and class. "At stake in such a history", Butler continues, "will be the formation of homosexuality across racial boundaries, including the question of how racial and reproductive relations become articulated through one another" (229).

The project of queering texts, especially in the American context, inevitably leads to questions of how practices of racism and the narratives that these practices have produced are connected to the production of homosexual and other deviant identities.

Taking her cue from Butler, Siobhan Somerville continues the line of inquiry that the latter touches upon. In *Queering the Color Line* (2000), she traces narratives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that brought together formations of racial, gendered, and sexual identities. While she acknowledges the historicity of her project, she nevertheless concludes her study by arguing that "we might consider how current discourses of race and sexuality are shaped by residual effects of the earlier period and how they provide a context for making visible the very interconnections that I have explored" (166). Historical discourses that organize the divisions between "blackness" and "whiteness", masculine and feminine, and homo- and heterosexuality, often overlap and interact with one another, but also resonate through subsequent historical periods.

Foregrounding the instances in which race starts to interact with narratives of sexuality in *Cabot Wright Begins* shows how the novel employs certain narratives of sexual identities that are associated with non-white and non-normative sexuality, and which are tied to the topos of "crossing the color line". In *Cabot Wright Begins*, much like in many other novels by Purdy, race almost always occupies a position of melodramatic excess. A character's racial traits, when mentioned, are either too present, or not present enough. Excessive behavior of a character is often associated with racial categories, regardless of the racial traits of the character in question. Recall, for example, how in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, Daniel's excessive sexual prowess is confined to "the out-of-bounds Negro sections of town" by his fellow soldiers (ECW 209). Daniel's non-normative sexual behavior is both displaced to, and confined within, a fantasy about black sexuality which makes it less threatening for his peers. A similar combination of sexually excessive behavior and racial displacement can be found in *Cabot Wright Begins*. While Zoe asks whether or not Cabot could really be the perpetrator of those three-hundred-odd assaults, the embedded narrative offers several instances in which the stability of the identity of the narrated perpetrator, Cabot Wright, is drawn into question. One of these instances focuses on the reported racial identity of Cabot Wright. A closer reading of this scene foregrounds the position that race has within Purdy's interrogation of identity in American society. Invariably, the mentioning of race highlights the tension between discourses of sexual liberation and the position of African Americans, whose racial identity has historically been construed as sexually deviant.

After Zoe has stopped reading the manuscript to Cabot, the external narrator continues to reflect on Cabot Wright's past as a rapist. In one particular scene, the external narrator discusses the many racial identities that his victims attributed to Cabot Wright during the police hearings. In fact, it seems like no two victims identified him in an identical way:

> Cabot [Wright] himself might as well have worn a different disguise for each criminal attack, so various were the forms and faces attributed to him by those whom he attacked – a Black Muslim, a Puerto Rican degenerate, a longshoreman amuck on canned heat, an Atlantic Avenue dope addict, an escapee from numerous penitentiaries, and a noted Jewish night-club comic. (196)

These descriptions soon turn towards racial slurs as the external narrator continues to cite the many names given to Cabot Wright: "he was called the Anonymous Coon, the Kosher Jack, the Eternal Tar Baby, working with his weapon in the far hours of the night" (197). Finally, the sensationalist language of newspaper headings and radio advertisements is also called upon as seemingly random voices protrude through the narration in isolated exclamations such as, "RAPIST IS OUT! ANONYMOUS COON STRIKES AGAIN", and a jingle-like verse, "*They are waiting by the river,/They are waiting late tonight,/For his tool is hard as cobalt,/His dagger gleams like light*" (197, original emphasis).

This brief scene might be the most cinematic of Purdy's entire oeuvre, as its frantic pace and intrusive voices with no recognizable source resemble the filmic use of montage. In cinema, the different images and sounds spliced together produce meaning, not so much through narrative progression, but through the tension that is created when different images and sounds of an uncertain source are juxtaposed. Meaning, here, is produced through melodramatic mise-en-scène instead of plot. If we recall van Alphen's reading of Wyeth's painting *Christina's World*, the scene operates similar to the way in which cinematic melodrama produces excessive meaning through its use of mise-en-scène. Even though montage and mise-en-scène are not usually associated with one another – as David Bordwell mentions, "Bazinian 'mise en scene' is used as a foil to 'Eisensteinian' montage" (19) – both produce meaning beyond their primary narration. The sum is almost always larger than its parts when different images, sounds, or characters come together in montage or mise-en-scène.

I compare this particular literary montage scene to mise-en-scène since it exposes in a similar fashion some of the narratives that structure the production of identity in

American society. As we have seen in Purdy's use of the Oedipal plot, the configuration of certain plot elements activate meaning beyond its primary narration. In the case of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, the Oedipal configuration drew attention to the ways in which homosexual identities are produced by social narratives and prejudices. The montage of different voices that attribute various racial features to Cabot Wright, or evoke distinctive stereotypes about these races, indeed also touch upon social narratives and prejudices that are instrumental in the formation of identities in America. Yet, underneath this surface runs a counternarrative, an excessive meaning that is produced beyond the scene's primary narration.

The primary narration of the scene seems to want to confuse the reader. The many different accounts of Cabot Wright's racial identity, combined with the sensationalist media voices that the external narrator cites, have a discrediting effect. If all of the victims attribute a different identity to the assailant, how can we be sure that the assailant was indeed Cabot Wright? This doubt looms particularly large when these racialized attributions are portrayed by a sensationalist press which, throughout the novel, is portrayed as an unreliable exponent of consumer society. The juxtaposition of all these different voices, however, starts to resonate differently if we read it for its excessive meaning. Of all the descriptions we get of Cabot Wright, none is that of a white middle-class male. Cabot Wright is described as black, as a Muslim, or as Puerto Rican. He is described as an alcoholic sailor or as a drug addict. None of these descriptions associate transgressive sexual behavior with the dominant white middle-class American identity. Because of the many different anonymous voices represented in the montage, the scene hints at social narrative that exonerates the misdemeanors of white middle-class Americans, or even denies that they are capable of such transgressive behavior without the interference of a person of color or someone belonging to the working class.

The montage of racial slurs resonates meaningfully with three other scenes that also represent sexually transgressive behavior in conjunction with racialized identity. If the montage scene, read as a form of mise-en-scène, shows us how melodramatic excess produces meaning beyond its primary narration, then the following scenes demonstrate how the melodramatic use of archetypical characters produces a similar effect. The three scenes in question all revolve around the sexual intercourse of a white character with a black man. First there is Carrie who, after Bernie has moved to Brooklyn, takes on her black former lover Joel as her new tenant and eventually invites him up to her "wedding bower" (55–56). Then there is Gilda Warburton, who after being raped by Cabot Wright, begins an affair with her black servant (167–168). Finally there is Bernie: hurled into depression by the fact that his book has been hijacked

by Zoe and Princeton, and the knowledge that his wife has taken on a new lover, he roams the streets only to find a Congolese man with whom he spends a night of passionate and romantic love (213–214).

What these three scenes share in common, besides the configuration of a rounded white character who has sexual intercourse with a flat black character, is the function that this intercourse has. For all three characters, intercourse with a black man offers them something that they desire but cannot have in their white middle-class lives. Carrie seeks satisfaction of her unquenchable sexual desires, which Bernie, whom she calls "pedestrian in bed" (58), simply could not offer her. Gilda, hailing from Alabama, desires to live out her Southern heritage, which is impossible for her while she is living in New York with her Eastern-born husband. Her relationship to her black servants is one of possession, as she has named them as such (142), feels "like [she has] earned [her] Afro-American servants" (145), and finally possesses her male servant by having intercourse with him only to demand that he remains faithful to her (168). Bernie, finally, finds the love he did not receive from Carrie in the arms of the Congolese Winters Hart, whom he describes as an "Ideal Man" (213).

These scenes are presented as part of the sexual liberation of Carrie, Gilda, and Bernie. That is, through their intercourse with a black man, each of them act out their sexual desires outside the constraints of their white middle-class lives. However, the sexual liberation of Carrie, Gilda, and Bernie is taken at the expense of their black lovers who remain flat characters. After Carrie's sexual appetite is satiated, her black tenant is shown the door; Gilda's servant is literally possessed by her, meaning that her sexual liberation comes at the expense of his freedom; and the external narrator stages a scene in which Bernie's Congolese lover derides black Americans "with their immediate ambitious and small souls, and washed-out posture, their timid arrogance and hunger for the White" (213–214).

These scenes could be easily read only for their overt use of racist stereotypes. It is true that the power dynamic between the white and black characters is uneven. The black characters, for example, are subordinate to the white ones and, as noted, the black characters are flat while the white characters are rounded. Yet, there is more to these scenes if we read them against Cabot Wright's own racial ambiguity. Each of these scenes taps into the social narrative of sexual liberation, which, in turn, is tied to the racialization of sex in the United States. While Carrie, Gilda, and Bernie experience their sexual liberation, the reader is reminded that this only happens through intercourse with black men. The liberation that these characters experience is then effected by an old topos that associates race with transgressive sexualities. Indeed, the narrative of sexual liberation is an inversion of the older topos of black

sexuality as a threat to the racial purity of whites, which is fueled by white fear for the blurring of racial boundaries – the crossing of the color line, as Gilda calls it (177). In *Cabot Wright Begins*, this prohibition to cross the color line is flouted by the aforementioned three white characters. The topos of sexual liberation is activated by the presence of black bodies that enable the white protagonists to experience a sexuality that they could not express within the confines of their white middle-class lives. I want to pause on these archetypical character representations, for these add texture to my previous argument that the narration of Cabot Wright's racially ambiguous identity is a strategy by which dominant white middle-class culture attempts to maintain its own fantasies of integrity and purity.

Henry Chupack describes the function of these archetypical characters best when he suggests that in *Cabot Wright Begins* "a number of people appear to have been brought together to act out certain scenes and episodes in order to flesh out certain theses" (92). What is intended as criticism – Chupack considers one-dimensionality in Purdy's writing a flaw – is instead a crucial and intentional element in Purdy's fiction. Chupack, unwittingly, touches upon van Alphen's reevaluation of Elsaesser's use of the mise-en-scène of melodramatic movies ("Legible Affects" 26–29), discussed in greater detail in my introduction and in chapter 1. The configuration of narrative elements in an image (be it visual or verbal) activate certain collective memories and narratives that reside outside of the text. In melodrama, archetypical characters participate in this mise-en-scène and function as plot elements that activate certain fantasies about national and sexual identity.

The model of melodrama helps us understand how these archetypes continue to circulate within American society. It also helps us understand how these archetypes have come to constitute fantasies of identity, to the extent that even the slight suggestion of an archetypical character activates a set of assumptions and prejudices that together combine in a fantasy of identity. The nameless black characters in *Cabot Wright Begins*, for example, are only mentioned briefly, and their roles in the sexual liberation of the white characters is only mentioned in passing: the novel merely hints at the intercourse, but never fully describes it. Despite the rudimentary descriptions of these black characters, they are immediately recognizable as exponents of the all-too-familiar figure of black sexual transgression.

Rather than being fully rounded characters in the novel, these figures remain silent, much akin to the mute characters that Peter Brooks describes in his discussion of French melodrama (*Melodramatic Imagination* 62–80). The traits of these one-dimensional figures signal a specific plot development that someone familiar with the genre immediately recognizes. Furthermore, their muteness draws attention

to gestures that enact hidden desires. Melodrama, Brooks suggests, seeks to "break through repression and censorship in its unleashing of the language of desire", yet it is in these mute characters that the "expression of needs, desires, states, occulted below the level of consciousness" are made most apparent (80). The black characters in *Cabot Wright Begins* too gesture towards the novel's subconscious. Given the history and context of American racism, the black characters that Purdy introduces gesture towards a context in which the interplay of social fears and desires about race form the background against which Cabot Wright's identity is narrated. The clear distinction between Cabot and Cabot Wright points us to the many different ways each character is narrated. Of these differences, descriptions of their racial markers stand out strongest. The wildly varying descriptions of Cabot Wright's racial traits contrast starkly with those of Cabot: when the latter is described, there is no doubt about his whiteness, in terms of both race and class. He is described as having pale skin and flaming red hair, and as having grown up on Long Island with affluent foster parents who secure him a job at a Wall Street firm. Indeed, descriptions of Cabot connote a white upper-middle-class background, which is not widely associated with pathological rape and thus causes cognitive dissonance.

The black characters remind us that the ever changing racial traits attributed to Cabot Wright are the product of American society's deeply entrenched racist beliefs and communicate bourgeois fears of nonconformist sexual practices. Because the sexual assaults that Cabot has allegedly committed do not correspond to an image of whiteness, he is retroactively divested of his whiteness through the narration of Cabot Wright. As he loses his whiteness, Cabot Wright acts out the racist fantasy of the transgressive and hypersexual Other. Here I am reminded of Ricoeur's injunction that "there is no ethically neutral narrative" (115). In this case, the novel exposes how the production of narrative identity is not merely the result of narratives that circulate in society; narrative identity is also a device that perpetuates these stereotypical narratives. By thinking of these representations as melodramatic, I suggest that there is a complexity to these seemingly one-dimensional figures, as they activate certain registers that help us understand the how Cabot Wright's narrated identity is produced. Cabot Wright's sexual behavior does not match the narratives usually told about white middle-class Americans and thus the narrators of his identity begin to look for narratives that, for them, do correspond to his behavior. If Cabot's whiteness effects a cognitive dissonance in the narrators, then narrating Cabot Wright's racial features as ambiguous allows them to ignore their own discomfort and fears about transgressive sexual behavior. Yet as we have seen time and again, the novel exposes this construction of identity as fictitious.

Conclusion: A New Narrative Beginning?

In my chapter 2 analysis of *63: Dream Palace*, I introduced Geoffrey Hartman's figure of the "whodonut" as a model for thinking about the way Purdy's novels question the processes of identity production. For *Cabot Wright Begins*, however, the concept of narrative identity offers a much more radical model for thinking about the ramifications of identity production. The whodonut showed us how language can never be wholly sufficient in its attempt at representation. There is always something that escapes language, and in the attempt to wholly describe someone's identity, the model has us believe, we are confronted with an identity that consists of two parts: the outer ring, which is language, and an inner circle – the donut's hole – that can only be circumscribed, but never touched by language. While this model offers insights into the inadequacies of language in general, in terms of identity construction it nevertheless remains firmly rooted in the conventional idea that there are such things as an inner and an outer identity. The whodonut model also seems to suggest that this inner circle of identity must be more "true" to reality. After all, if language never succeeds in representing something truthfully, then surely that part of identity that cannot be represented in language must already be closer to what is real. If anything, Hartman's whodonut keeps intact the false opposition between inner and outer identity.

Cabot Wright Begins, on the other hand, shows how the concept of narrative identity does away with the opposition between inner and outer identity altogether. As I have shifted the question from what someone's identity is to how this identity is produced, narrative identity shows that these concepts are both sides of the same coin, minted in the exact same manner. Both of what we construe as outer and inner identity are produced through narration in which different narrative devices produce a sense of coherence among the often wildly different and contradictory character traits, gestures, and actions we observe in a person. In this situation, neither what we believe to be outer nor inner identity could be considered one's "true" identity. Rather, both are equally "true", since it is through these narrative devices that we interact with the world and experience our own and others' identities.

Cabot, finally, comes to acknowledge that his own self-image is entirely the result of narration. After the novel about Cabot Wright ceases to come to fruition and the protagonists have parted ways, Cabot writes one final letter to Zoe in which he bids her farewell. In this letter, Cabot seems to be distinctly aware of how his identity is ultimately the result of narration. He takes the narrating of his biography into his own hands and writes: "To think you – thank you – were the first person to listen

to me all the way through" (250). Cabot reverses the narrator/listener relationship between he and Zoe up until that point, and in doing so claims authorship of the life-writing that others had done for him. Turning to this reclaimed authorship, both in the reversal of his relationship with Zoe and in the letter he writes her, Cabot also reclaims the symbols and signifiers that constitute his narrative identity. "WHAT MAKES ME TICK?" he asks, and immediately continues, "I don't care about that now, Mrs. Bickle, but I do know, *hear* it any way you want, I am ticking as of this letter, anyhow, and I'll write the symbol for the way I feel now, which is HA!" (254, original capitalization and emphasis).

In his letter, Cabot takes control over the writing of his own biography by activating the literary theme of *Bildung*: self-cultivation or self-discovery. He does so by alluding to other novels of discovery – "Chicago seems a little lilliputian" (253) – or by referring to themes of travel and self-discovery, which critics have linked to *Huckleberry Finn* (Chupack 92) or with the work of Oscar Wilde (D. Adams 23–24). Although these three intertextual references differ greatly from one another, they collectively speak to a sense of liberty that is constituted by ongoing discovery and the continued questioning of truths. And Cabot keeps his own discovery ongoing: "[I] am on my way to extended flight, but this time with myself, and in search of same", he writes, suggesting that he is aware that the production of his identity will be a never-ending story (253–254).

With this last gesture, Cabot continues the move that I have made in earlier chapters. I have argued that the act of reading always produces different coexisting and incongruent fictions of identity. *Cabot Wright Begins* extends this conclusion to the act of writing and shows through the narration of Cabot Wright that telling stories about lives inevitably produces potentially unlimited different versions of an identity, which ultimately grants Cabot the freedom to tear away from the people that so forcibly try to narrate his identity. In Purdy's novels about the writing of others' lives, it is not just the act of reading, to paraphrase the words of Ricoeur, but also the act of writing that becomes a "provocation to be and to act differently" (1990, 249)

CHAPTER 4

As He Lies Dying: (Mis)recognition and the National Symbolic

As we have seen in the previous chapter about *Cabot Wright Begins*, the compulsive serial rape that Cabot Wright is accused of started when he began treatment with Dr. Bigelow-Martin to cure his chronic fatigue. What I did not discuss about this treatment is the curious diagnosis that Bigelow-Martin gives Cabot and which puts this illness in relation to the state of the United States itself. He says to Cabot Wright,

> Your case is not exceptional, Mr. Cabot Wright. Indeed it's not. Put it out of your mind that you are different. Your case is, in fact, my young man, the rule. Americans are tired. America is tired. (CWB 92–93)

In his assessment of Cabot, Bigelow-Martin presents us with two points criticizing the United States. First, he suggests that chronic fatigue is the American condition. Cabot's illness is not just something that affects him, but rather it affects the nation at large. Even worse, this condition seems to go unnoticed, as he explains that "most Americans [...] don't know they are dropping with fatigue" (90). Second, Bigelow-Martin levels critique at an important fantasy that structures the relationship between the state and its citizens: the fantasy of American exceptionalism. The American citizen is not exceptional if all citizens suffer from the same debilitating condition.

Elsewhere in the novel, Cabot reads letters written by his late Wall Street superior, Mr. Warburton. These letters, entitled "Sermons", are filled with scathing condemnations of American consumerism. One sermon reads: "the great thing about the American consumer is that it is filled before it is ever empty, glutted without knowing the feeling of either hunger or satiety, the organs of America so easily manipulated and ready for any surgical plastic, or other adjustment the Master Masturbator may believe ready" (CWB 190). Another sermon puts forward a similar accusation of American consumerism at an even more rapacious pace:

> [S]tick that product in every God-damned American's mouth and make him say I BOUGHT IT, GOD, I BOUGHT IT AND IT'S GREAT IT'S

> HOLLYWOOD IT'S MY ARSE GOING UP AND DOWN AGAIN IT'S USA, GOD, and if you can't get it in his mouth and make him SWEAR IT SWEAR IT USA, stick it in his anal sphincter (look it up in the dictionary, college graduates, on account of you didn't have the time to learn it in the College of Your Choice). (CWB 191, original emphasis)

While I mainly focused on the narrative production of Cabot's sexual identity in my analysis of *Cabot Wright Begins*, other critics have interpreted the novel as a biting commentary on the consumption culture of the United States. "*Cabot Wright Begins* is to a great degree a twentieth-century duplicate of *Gulliver's Travels*", Henry Chupack writes, "but our brand of follies and stupidities are even more despicable than those Swift lashed at in his day" (85–86). Indeed, Cabot's condition of chronic fatigue and the compulsive rape that is the result of his treatment can, and perhaps should, be read as a commentary on the relationship between consumption culture and sexual mores in American popular culture. The infinite availability of consumption goods at once desensitizes Cabot and compels him to consume: the scenes in which he rapes his victims are described, read as if Cabot were sampling a buffet.[1]

Besides this perhaps obvious observation of the relationship between Cabot's sexual behavior and the American consumer society during the Cold War, I am interested in the implication of that earlier moment in the novel in which Bigelow-Martin connects this relationship to the fantasy of American exceptionalism. More so than voicing criticism of American consumer culture, the novel can be read as a critique of the narratives that structure American social and public life, which, in turn, form the basis for the nation's obsession with consumption. Reading the novel as a critique of American exceptionalism also brings into view the ways in which Purdy interrogates the relationship between the American state and its citizens. Cabot, for instance, dramatizes the consequences of gluttonous consumption which is both promoted and discouraged by the state. When his consumption is spiraling out of control, the state intervenes by incarcerating him. This cycle is then repeated by Zoe Bickle and Bernie Gladhart who attempt to turn the story of Cabot's excessive consumption into yet another consumer product: the "great American novel". *Cabot*

1 Of particular interest is the scene in which Cabot rapes Mr. Warburton's wife, Gilda. Cabot was supposed to meet her for lunch, but instead of dining with her, he gives in to his urge to rape her. This rape is presented as the main course of a dinner, for after he has had his way with Gilda, her servant announces that dessert has been served (152).

Wright Begins thus dramatizes how narratives of sexual identity are always imbedded in narratives that organize the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The question of how the relationship between the state and its citizens structures the narration of sexual identity has so far been largely absent from my discussion of Purdy's work. Similarly to *Cabot Wright Begins*, other novels such as *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* and *63: Dream Palace* also evidence the state's presence as an organizing principle for the production of identity. Take, for instance, Daniel's enlistment in the army as an attempt to escape the narrative of homosexuality. The interference of the state in the guise of an institution that is widely associated with the exclusion of homosexuals, creates the expectation that Daniel should be read as someone who is in denial of his own sexual identity. Daniel's turn to the army casts him as someone who wants to participate actively in the public sphere in a way that removes all suspicion of homosexual desire from his person.[2] That he fails to do so points towards the tension between the compulsory heterosexuality dictated by the state and Daniel's resistance against identity in general. Daniel's crisis does not concern whether or not he identifies as homosexual in a society that demands its citizens be heterosexual, but rather originates in the fact that he refuses to identify at all based on his sexual behavior. This position poses a problem to the state: its subjects must announce themselves either as good, heterosexual citizens or as bad homosexuals who should be stripped of their citizenship. In the guise of his army superior, Captain Stadger, the state interrogates Daniel until it obtains what it considers to be a confession and can finally punish him for his transgressions against good citizenship. For both Cabot and Daniel, then, the state structures, to a great extent, the narratives through which their identities are produced by others.

Two works that address this relationship more urgently are Purdy's 1961 play *Children Is All* and his 1960 novel *The Nephew*, the latter of which I discuss in the next chapter. These two works explicitly dramatize the consequences of identity production against the background of narratives that situate its protagonists in relation to the American nation. Both are set, for example, against the background of a national holiday: Independence Day and Memorial Day, respectively. Both works also dramatize the consequences of misreading or mistaking identities. In the case of *Children Is All* this literally results in the death of the person who is being misread. The works draw attention to the ways in which fantasies of national identity

2 See Bérubé (1990/2010) and Caserio (1997) for more detailed discussions of the possibility for active homosexual citizenship within the institution of the army.

affect fantasies of familial and sexual identity by recasting the relationships of the protagonists, both mother figures, with their son and nephew through institutions and symbols that structure narratives of national identity.

Narratives of sexual identity are, in Purdy's work, often played out against familial attachments. Purdy's attempt to undermine psychoanalytical narratives that constitute the fantasy of sexual identity also questions the way in which sexual identity is considered to originate in the family. When Eustace considers Amos's lovemaking to his own mother a confession of his sexual identity, Purdy challenges the central position that the Freudian family romance has taken up in postwar fantasies of identity production. In the literal dramatization of the Oedipal scene, we recognize a suspicion of the social construction that Amos's homosexual desire originates in the initial desire for his mother. Other critics also recognize the way in which Purdy distorts familial attachments to expose the constructed nature of theories that use these to explain sexual identity. Bettina Schwarzschild draws parallels with ancient Greek and Latin literature to discuss the complex familial relationships in Purdy's work. According to her, the actions of Purdy's characters are motivated by the absence of a father figure on the one hand, and too strong an attachment to a mother figure on the other (1–6). However, for her the true tragedy of familial attachment is situated in the mother: "if the mother keeps her son she suffocates him and if she lets him go, heroically, she abandons him to the hounds" (3). Schwarzschild is, then, more interested in analyzing the ways in which mothers represent tragic heroines whose tragedy is to see their children suffer. Frank Baldanza also zooms in on the distortion of the familial situation in Purdy's work by addressing the many orphans and relationships between patron and protégé in Purdy's work. He too regards the absence of a father figure as the primary cause for the constitution of non-normative sexual behavior in Purdy's troubled characters: "Father-substitutes and fetishistic obsessions with father-associated objects are frequent", while mother figures further cripple their sons by overburdening them with love ("Half-Orphans" 255). "Feminine sexuality is blasted by all the paradoxes of creation", he argues, "because the immense sacrifices and devotion exacted by conceiving and nurturing offspring eventuate in a possessiveness which in turn distorts and cripples the masculinity of the son" (271).

Donald Pease places Purdy's familial dramas literally outside of the family's home by addressing his work as "unhomed imagination" ("Storyteller" 63). Purdy's protagonists are not just orphaned, but also often displaced.[3] The displacement that

3 Think for example of Malcolm of the eponymous novel, who loses his father in the, for him, strange city of Chicago.

Pease identifies functions as a narrative structure that folds in on itself. Similar to my use of mise-en-scène in this study, Pease recognizes a spatial element to Purdy's narration when he argues that "the experiences that Purdy's characters would disclaim and the structures through which they would disclaim them converge into a place of no return" ("Storyteller" 78). The resistance that Purdy's protagonists perform is doubled in the structure of the narration, but in this doubling they are both displaced from and imprisoned in the narrative space that they try to resist. "The characteristic setting for Purdy's novels is composed of two intersecting yet incompatible spaces", Pease observes, "the one from which his characters have become dislocated and the one from which they must escape" (78).

The spatial narrative structure that Pease here identifies, and which has thus far guided my own analysis of Purdy's work, organizes not only the way in which sexual identity is produced, but also the production of other fantasies of identity. In this chapter, I extend my previous considerations of Purdy's project of destabilizing sexual identity to include Purdy's attempts to undermine national identity as well. Following Lauren Berlant (1991), I call the narratives that produce affective attachments between the nation and its subjects "national fantasies". These fantasies are structured spatially by the National Symbolic, which I understand in terms of mise-en-scène. The National Symbolic structures the constellation of narratives through which the subject identifies him or herself with the nation. However, as I show in my analysis of *Children Is All*, the National Symbolic not only structures the fantasies of national identity, but also organizes narratives of familial and sexual identity. Akin to Pease's assessment of narrative space in Purdy's work, I suggest that the National Symbolic produces a spatial relationship between the nation and its subjects from which his characters have become dislocated, but from which they simultaneously are compelled to escape. That is, the National Symbolic structures the narratives of familial identity to the extent that sexuality and kinship can only be understood within the framework of the national fantasy. If these do not coincide, as is the case in *Children Is All*, a character cannot be "read properly", and thus runs the risk of being misrecognized. Purdy shows that narratives of familial and national identity are codependent on each other, yet at the same time mutually exclusive. Within the greater context of his oeuvre, *Children Is All* occupies a place in which the narration of familial identity converges with the narration of national identity. Within the context of my research, the analysis of *Children Is All* helps me to think through the ways in which Purdy's work imagines the violence that is inherent in totalizing identity-fantasies.

"Be sure to recognize me now when I come home today"

Children Is All presents as its protagonist Edna, a woman in small-town Ohio. She is anxiously awaiting the return of her son Billy, who had been imprisoned fifteen years earlier, only to fail to recognize him when he finally returns. As mentioned, the setting of the play is the Fourth of July festivities. Stage directions and dialogue constantly remind the reader of this fact by alluding to the firecrackers and the sounds of a military band that punctuate the rhythm of the play. Throughout the play Edna looks for solace in her friends Leona and Hilda, since she fears that once Billy arrives, she will not be able to recognize him. Although her friends try to convince her otherwise, Edna remains ridden with anxiety. When, much later than expected, Billy does come home in the dead of night, visibly wounded by gunshots, Edna indeed misrecognizes him. While she still holds him for a stranger, Billy dies in her arms.

Billy's homecoming and death on Independence Day, and the allusions to one of the most central narratives of the American national fantasy – the birth of the nation itself – suggests that we can read significance into the play's backdrop. In my reading of *Children Is All*, I claim that this misrecognition results from the demand for familial identity to coincide with national identity, as both identity-fantasies are incommensurable, even though they cannot be taken wholly apart either. If, as I argue, the play dramatizes the incommensurability of national and familial identity, how, then, is national identity made manifest in its narrative? The obvious answer to this question is the backdrop of Independence Day, which celebrates nationalist historical narratives, and which, indeed, directly affects Edna. However, the way in which the Fourth of July interferes with Edna's daily life is not necessarily in the form of celebration. Instead, it points towards Edna's attachment to the state that belies a distrust in the righteousness of the nation. At the very beginning of the play, Edna and Leona discuss their excitement over Billy's homecoming. Edna confesses that she experienced a restless night out of excitement, but she and Leona soon conclude that their sleeplessness could also very well be the result of the Independence Day celebration. "Then I laid awake listening to the courthouse clock strike every blessed hour", Edna recounts her spell of insomnia and immediately adds, "and your firecrackers, Leona" (CIA 112). It is not just the firecrackers that keep Edna awake but, strikingly, also the courthouse clock; precisely on the day Billy receives amnesty for his prison sentence.

Edna's insomnia illustrates her uncomfortable relationship with the state, which started with Billy's conviction. Overcome with an intense sense of shame, Edna cannot bear to witness the trial of her own son, even though he asked her to stay "so [she]

would know the story, so he wouldn't be all alone with just accusers" (CIA 117). Edna is convinced of Billy's innocence, yet she also admits that, when new information about the bank embezzlement for which Billy was sentenced to prison came to light, she refused to reopen the case. Shame also overcomes Edna when she tries to visit her son in prison, to the extent that she fails to visit him for the whole fifteen years of his imprisonment. She recounts how she had made several attempts, but each time she arrived at the prison gates, she was unable to walk through them. Finally, Edna worries obsessively over the reaction of her immediate community. Even her relationship with the town in which she lives is structured by a feeling of shame, as she fears that Billy's return would open old wounds and people would remind him of the fact that he has spent time in prison. "I'd die if I heard anybody say that about him", she exclaims (120). Edna is torn by different, incompatible affective attachments. On the one hand, she feels an unbearable shame because of her incarcerated son and is unable to interact with institutions that represent the state in the process of his criminalization. On the other hand though, she is convinced of his innocence and finds it just that Billy is finally pardoned. Indeed, she thinks that the amnesty he received is the only adequate measure that the state can take, even if this measure comes after fifteen years. "Pardoned of course", she says fiercely according to the stage directions, and she continues angrily, "he wouldn't be coming home otherwise" (115).

If Edna does not already suffer enough for having a son in prison, his return is yet another reason for her anxiety. Throughout the play Edna is heard worrying about her fear that she won't recognize her son Billy after his having been in jail for the past fifteen years. Her insecurity is prompted by Billy's ominous words, which she hears in a dream the night before his arrival: "Mom … Mother … Be sure to recognize me now when I come home today, hear? Make out you know me when I come home" (114). Although her friend Leona and the visiting reverend Stover try to assure her that she, his mother, could not possibly fail to recognize her own son, Edna remains fraught with worry. This is intensified by Billy's delayed arrival and her growing fear that he might not even show up at all. This anxiety manifests itself in doubt over her steadfast belief in his innocence. Although she is convinced that the state has falsely accused him and the amnesty he received is just, she also expresses her fear that her son might have indeed stolen from the bank and mentions rumors of his attempted escape (116). The guilt that is implied in her feelings of shame makes it impossible for her to unequivocally believe in Billy's innocence. The different, incompatible affective attachments to both the state and her own son, then, manifest themselves in a melodramatic impossible plot situation. The dilemma that she faces makes her choose between either fully investing in her son's innocence, which would mean that

the state has failed both him and her, or acknowledging the power of the state, which would mean that she must also accept the state's verdict that her son is a criminal. The impossibility of this choice, which is undergirded by her feelings of shame, results in her misrecognition of him. For when he returns home, he is no longer the boy that he used to be, but neither is he the man that she would now expect him to be.

The fear of being unable to recognize her own son and the anxiety induced by rumors and shame are not wholly unwarranted. When Billy finally shows up in the middle of the night, Edna indeed does not to recognize him as either the boy that was sent to prison fifteen years ago or as the man he has become. Moreover, the rumors about his earlier escape attempts are quietly affirmed when he confesses that he got shot escaping prison. Not only is he no longer physically the boy that Edna remembers, the guilt that is implied by his escape also means that he can no longer embody the innocence that Edna had invested in him. Despite Billy's efforts to convince Edna that he is truly her son, Edna only retorts with the words: "No, no, you're not him. Billy was only a boy" (157). And, while Leona and her neighbor Hilda do recognize Billy, Edna stubbornly maintains that the man who is dying in her arms cannot be her son simply on the basis that he does not look like the boy from fifteen years ago.

Schwarzschild suggests that this final scene pivots on the different meanings of the verb "to recognize" that Billy and Edna subscribe to: "Billy asks to be *known again* and accepted for what he has become after fifteen years in prison, but Edna talks about *knowing* her flesh and blood" (47, original emphasis). Edna, prompted by her own idealized version of Billy, takes the demand to recognize him literally and panics when she fails to do so. Prison has changed Billy's appearance to the extent that he no longer corresponds to her fantasized image of him. Billy, on the other hand, asks for a different kind of recognition. Billy looks for acknowledgment, or validation of his status as Edna's son. As he lies dying in her arms, he keeps insisting that Edna already "knows him" (157) and that he broke out of jail for her to be able to "recognize" him (157). Thus while Edna is looking for a visual semblance to the Billy of fifteen years ago, Billy asks her to acknowledge something more profound: his identity as her son. Edna's failure to comply to his demand suggests that it might be an impossible demand in the first place.

Berlant reflects on misrecognition as a survival strategy. That is, instead of understanding misrecognition as failure or as a mistake, she argues that the subject who misrecognizes produces a relationship of optimism between herself and the object she misrecognizes (*Cruel Optimism* 127). "To misrecognize is not to err", she claims, "but to project qualities onto something so that we can love, hate, and

manipulate it for having those qualities – which it might or might not have" (122). Misrecognition, then, produces or maintains positive attachments between subject and object, in the sense that the one who misrecognizes is confirmed in her understanding of the world around her. As such misrecognition is a strategy that allows the subject to project fantasies onto the misrecognized object in a way that the object's ambivalence is no longer a threat to the subject's imagined coherence. In Berlant's words, "fantasy parses ambivalence in a way that the subject is not defeated by it" (122). I am interested in Berlant's understanding of misrecognition as the subject's strategy for survival because *Children Is All* takes the fantasy of the coherent subject to task by having the strategy of misrecognition misfire. That is, at the moment Edna misrecognizes her son, she also loses her mind, which I argue, can be interpreted as her strategy to remain attached to her memory of Billy, as well as the play's insistence that the fantasy of a totalizing and coherent subject is akin to insanity.

The National Symbolic and Mise-en-Scène

That Edna misrecognizes her own son is, of course, partially due to the state's interference. Their separation of fifteen years and his life in prison have changed his appearance to the extent that Edna cannot acknowledge her own son in the stranger that visits her at night. So far, critics who have discussed *Children Is All* have failed to address the state's role in Edna's tragedy, even when the presence of national symbols and institutions constantly punctuate the rhythm of the play itself. Their appearances, even those as innocuous as the Fourth of July firecrackers that are sometimes alluded to, introduce the state as a narrative element to the play. If we consider these punctuations as part of the play's mise-en-scène, we can interpret them as part of the constellation organizing narrative elements, such as place, character, and focalization, into a narrative framework that expands beyond what is represented on the level of plot. I propose to read the melodramatic scene of misrecognition that concludes *Children Is All* as a reflection on the fantasy of national identity that is introduced by this constellation of narrative elements. Or rather, I believe that a critical reading of Edna's misrecognition in relation to the ways in which the state intervenes in the play, helps us understand more fully the involvement of the fantasy of national identity in Purdy's interrogation of the idea of identity itself. For, if identity is produced through narration, then surely the power imbalance that is inherent in the narratives that bind the subject to the state will affect the way in which the fantasy of identity is constituted.

These fantasies of national identity are structured by the National Symbolic, which comprises a spatial understanding of the relationship between the nation and its citizens. In her study *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (1991) Berlant defines the National Symbolic as follows:

> 'America' is an assumed relation, an explication of ongoing collective practices, and also an occasion for exploring what it means that national subjects already share not just a history, or a political allegiance, but a set of forms and the affect that makes these forms meaningful. [...] We are bound together because we inhabit the *political* space of the nation, which is not merely juridical, territorial (*jus soli*), genetic (*jus sanguinis*), linguistic or experiential, but some tangled cluster of these. I call this space the 'National Symbolic' (4–5, original emphasis).

A subject attaches to the fantasy of national identity through a complex constellation of narratives, institutions, and symbols that are rooted in different domains that together make up a coherent fantasy of the nation. Berlant's understanding of the National Symbolic as a political space helps her map out the way in which affective attachments to the fantasy of national identity are distributed across different, and often incommensurable, institutions, narratives, and symbols. As such, the National Symbolic can be understood in terms of melodrama's mise-en-scène. The separate elements can only produce the ideal image of the nation if we understand them in terms of a melodramatic scene in which the compositional distribution of these elements indicate a greater narrative. Similar to Ernst van Alphen's reading of Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*, the National Symbolic organizes the separate narrative elements into a constellation that activates narrative registers outside its own frame. The sum is greater than its parts.

The practices and narratives that are organized in the National Symbolic are always collective. The fantasy through which individual citizens attach to the National Symbolic is what Berlant calls national fantasy, which translates national culture into local practices and expressions. These national fantasies take many shapes and forms: they speak of different histories associated with the foundation of the nation, and project different futures that the nation moves towards. Some of these narratives are overtly expressed, while others are unspoken and merely assumed. Some of these narratives address the physical manifestation of national practices, while others speak to the symbolic relationship these practices have with the state. As Berlant puts it, "There is no one logic to a national form but, rather, many simultaneously

'literal' and 'metaphorical' meanings, stated and unstated" (5). The National Symbolic, then, organizes a vast array of incommensurable narratives. As such the National Symbolic is burdened by the expectation of coherence and consistency, even when at its very foundations it consists of contradictions and inconsistencies.

The National Symbolic can, then, be imagined as a screen onto which different narratives, identifications, and attachments between the state and its citizens are projected and congeal into a collective ideal image of what the nation should look like. Despite the paradoxical nature of the National Symbolic, its major aim is to "[translate] the reader to the time and space of national identity" (*Anatomy of National Fantasy* 168). This translation, however, comes at the cost of local attachments. As Berlant explains, the National Symbolic:

> requires each subject to shed her attachment to her other, local identities, and to enter a new synchronic political order, which has a mystical relation to everyday history. In contrast, through political parties, citizens are distributed along hierarchical lines in the political public sphere according to the value of their gender, class, ethnic, racial, and regional identities. The National Symbolic embraces everyone with a memory and a conscience. (*Anatomy of National Fantasy* 180)

The investment in a national identity frustrates attachments to local identities, be they sexual, geographical, or even familial. The National Symbolic demands that the attachment to national identity comes first. Edna, too, is burdened by this demand as she refuses to unequivocally relinquish her attachment to her son. She continues to believe in his innocence even after the state has sentenced him to imprisonment, and she experiences the institutions and symbols that represent the state as oppressive. Yet, her conviction of his innocence is by no means fallible. "He stole, Leona … He stole", she cries out, only to backtrack this outcry a little later by claiming that she "never knew all the charges against Billy, or what he did exactly" (116–117). Her identification with Billy also shows signs of faltering, as is clear from her constant wondering whether she will recognize him when he comes home and her eventual failure to do so. The play thus dramatizes the dilemma in which Edna finds herself, and which culminates in an impossible plot situation. At the moment Billy does come home, Edna is forced to choose between her familial or national identification – a choice which proves to be too burdensome. As Billy dies unrecognized in her arms, her mind appears to slip away from reality and into the memories that kept her attachment to the innocent Billy alive. "The knot that's held her together all these years is broken", Leona says

when she sees Edna cherish her dead son in her arms (162). Edna forsakes her familial identification with Billy as he dies in her arms. This does not mean, however, that Edna has attached herself fully to the National Symbolic. The play does not propose a straightforward resolution to the impossible plot situation. Edna might even have found her son right at the moment in which she renounces him.

Incommensurable Identities

According to Pease, the subject attaches to the National Symbolic through the projection of desire. Using a slightly different vocabulary than Berlant, his theory of the ways in which subjects identify through their attachment to an idealized image of the nation shows strong similarities. Where Berlant speaks of the National Symbolic and national fantasies, Pease uses the terms *National Thing* and *state fantasy*. He borrows the term state fantasy from Jacqueline Rose, and defines it as a "dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagined their national identity" (*New American Exceptionalism* 1). Pease's understanding of the production of national identity is deeply rooted in psychoanalysis. In his discussion of American exceptionalism as the dominant state fantasy since the end of the Cold War, he likens such national fantasies to the Freudian primal scene. Through national fantasies, citizens can imagine the nation as an "inaccessible place that could only be accessed retroactively" (*New American Exceptionalism* 17). The site that is imagined can be understood in terms of the Lacanian Thing, insofar that it is void of a signifier and produces in the subject the desire to attain it, without ever being able to do so. The National Thing, then, is "the placeholder for that which the national subject desires and at the same time that which causes the subject's desire" (17).

Pease's spatial understanding of the National Thing corroborates Berlant's reading of the National Symbolic as a screen onto which narratives about the state are projected. These narratives are often incongruent and contradictory, but can be activated, deactivated, and reactivated separately in order to justify the sense of belonging to the National Symbolic. In a similar vein, fantasies of familial identity also function as a screen onto which narratives are projected, but in this case the Thing produced is not the attachment to a phantasmatic object that is shared across a collective, but rather the attachment to a phantasmatic object that is the placeholder for the subject's persona. To make sense of the world and the people around us, we project narratives onto ourselves and others, and these narratives in turn congeal into that which is perceived as identity. This projection is always a form

of misrecognition according to Berlant, as such misrecognition is necessary to make the subject "intelligible to herself and to others throughout the career of desire's unruly attentiveness" (*Cruel Optimism* 122). In Edna's case this misrecognition is the result of different competing identity-fantasies that do not necessarily exclude one another, yet cannot fully coincide. Edna's familial identification with Billy hinges on her fantasy of his innocence. Rerouting that identification through her attachment to the National Symbolic seems impossible because it requires her to give up that very fantasy, and thus her identification with her son. Despite her strong attachment to her memory of Billy and her attempt to hold on to that fantasy through misrecognition, the National Symbolic continuously structures and organizes Edna's relationship with Billy. As the National Symbolic frustrates Edna's identification with Billy, she resorts to perhaps the most drastic measure imaginable: in losing her sanity she can continue to hold on to her misrecognition of Billy. I am not suggesting that Edna loses her mind on purpose. However, it can be construed as an act of desperation at the moment in which she realizes her image of Billy is no longer tenable. Before I address this in more detail, let me first discuss how, then, the National Symbolic frustrates Edna's attachment to the fantasy of Billy's innocence.

We have already seen how national fantasies intrude into the play's narrative in the guise of references to the Fourth of July and the American legal system. These two national fantasies tell completely different and incongruent stories, one of liberation and the other of incarceration. Still, these narratives coincide with Billy's homecoming. His return home on Independence Day can be read as a parallel to the narrative of the nation's birth. At the same time, as we learn that Billy has actually escaped from prison, we are reminded of his status as prisoner. The coincidence of these narratives allows us to reflect critically on the way in which national fantasies organize the relationship between the subject and the National Symbolic. Billy's escape from prison makes it attractive to read Billy allegorically. That is, Billy can be read as a stand-in for the newly emancipated American nation, the fantasy of which is continuously reinscribed as a staple of the American national identity on Independence Day. While this reading is not wholly unproblematic, it would corroborate Edna's belief in Billy's innocence. The United States, after all, sought liberation from unfair treatment by the British Empire, just as Billy has been treated unfairly by the state, according to Edna. The United States's emancipation is a cornerstone of national fantasies such as liberty, righteousness, and prosperity, because this emancipation functioned as a foundational moment for the production of its own national identity. As Lynette Spillman suggests, "for the United States, as we might expect, the founding moment of the revolutionary period was crucial, and the

Declaration of Independence carried special symbolic weight" (69). The foundational moment of the nation's emancipation serves as a structuring principle for most of its national fantasies. The imagining of an American national identity can hardly be imagined without a return to its own heroic emergence from the British Empire. Thus, Spillman describes the relationship between national identity and the narrative of independence as follows: "Claims about national identity almost always involve claims about liberty and its variants – independence, opportunity, political, civil, or religious freedoms, republicanism, self-government, or democratic institutions" (84).

While the coincidence between Billy's escape and the Fourth of July can be read as an allusion, this allegorical reading is, most likely, a cautionary tale. Although both Billy and the United States can be argued to have freed themselves from oppressive systems, the difference in magnitude – that is, Billy as an individual subject and the United States as a subjectivating collective – complicates this comparison. Edna's friend Leona seems acutely aware of the parallels between the current local events and the nation at large. She recalls what her mother used to say to her: "Leona, for a small place like this is, I never saw it fail, every rotten thing that happens in the country seems to happen right here first of all" (120–121). Leona inverts the comparison between Billy's homecoming and the emergence of the American nation. While chronologically the latter precedes the former, spatially the former precedes the latter. This spatial inversion suggests that Billy's escape might be read as a critical reflection on the narrative of Independence Day: Billy's escape is all but felicitous and his attempted emancipation results in his own death.

The difference in magnitude also signals a discrepancy in the comparison in that Billy is subjected to the American nation itself. After all, it is the juridical system of the United States that had incarcerated Billy in the first place. In *Children Is All*, the prison appears as a disciplinary and normalizing institution. Its function is to normalize narratives of the American nation by literally removing dissenters from the national space. In Edna's words: "He'll be like somebody come back from another world, another space!" (118). As a subject of its disciplinary system, Billy is now framed by a narrative of dissension from the nation's norm. This is particularly troublesome for Edna who, In dialogue with Leona, worries openly about whether Billy will ever again be accepted by their community upon his return. His being sent to prison constitutes him as a dissenter from the American National Symbolic. The dominance of the incarceration narrative complicates Edna's investment in Billy's innocence. She, too, has to admit that incarceration as a framing narrative device casts Billy as a potential criminal, which as an identity-fantasy is incommensurable to her fantasy of his innocence. That she nevertheless holds on to this image is an attempt

to maintain the imagined coherence of her own self. Her misrecognition, I argue, although unintentional, is certainly purposeful.

"My wanting Billy has passed so peacefully"

Edna's attachment to Billy can be understood as an obstacle to her own flourishing in the sense that she must give up her own sanity in order to continue her idealized image of him. Her attachment to Billy is also the result of a literal dramatization of identification. Elisabeth Anker explains the Freudian theory of identification as the substitution of a part of one's ego for a lost object of desire. She writes that in identification "part of the ego transforms into the lost object in order to compensate other parts of the psyche for the lost original tie with something desired" (*Orgies of Feeling* 184). Edna's lost object of desire – her familial relationship with Billy – continues to organize her subject formation to the extent that even when the object is restored to her, she refuses to let go of her fantasy of the original object. Anker considers the operations by which the subject identifies with a lost object the production of melodramatic subjectivity. In her reading of melodramatic political discourse after the September 11, 2001 attacks, she understands the production of melodramatic subjectivity as a key instrument in the legitimization of state power. "As with all identifications", she argues, "the melodramatic identification with state power arises out of an awareness of loss – a knowledge of the impossibility of having something one had loved – and functions as a mechanism in order to be similar to that which one cannot have" (184).

That Edna's identification with Billy is construed as a loss that can only be restored by the, for her, impossible gesture of giving up her idealized image of Billy, is exemplified by a scene in which the town preacher, Reverend Stover, visits Edna. As the local reverend, Stover represents the authoritative power that Edna has learned to distrust since the conviction of her son. During their conversation Stover mentions that Edna's house is situated outside of the town limits. The muddy opposition of being inside the town's social limits yet outside its governing limits is confirmed by Edna. However, she adds that she never had the intention to alienate herself from the town: "I didn't intend to be so much like a hermit when I moved out here, but the town began growing in the other direction, you see, and it's kept growing ever since" (135–136). Even though Edna believes that her displacement from the town's political space is not effected by herself, it is this very displacement that makes the backdrop of the Fourth of July festivities all the more palpable. "You pass the sign as

you drive out here", Edna says, "that's why they can shoot off the firecrackers" (135). The narrative space that is created here, just outside of the town limits, is akin to Pease's formulation of Purdy's unhomed imagination: a space from which Edna is already dissociated, yet from which she nevertheless needs to escape ("Storyteller" 78).

Inhabiting this impossible space, Edna can continue to hold on to the idea that the Billy who is coming home will be the Billy of her memories. Yet, the imagined coherence of this fantasy is disrupted by Stover's intrusion. Perhaps sensing Edna's anxiety over Billy's homecoming, he asks her outright, "Mrs. Cartwright, are you really happy Billy is coming home?" (142). Taken aback by this question, Edna seems to admit to the impossibility of her desire that Billy is still the same person from fifteen years ago. She exclaims, "I'm afraid for Billy to come home!" (142), because she is "not up to the demands he'll be sure to make" (143). Stover's unexpected question prompts the realization that Billy's demand that she recognize him will be impossible for her as long as she continues to hold on to her memory of her son. The rift in her belief makes her realize that the situation in which she finds herself is untenable, yet resolving this situation seems to be likewise wholly impossible. The possibility of eventually being confronted with her own son is just as impossible as the thought of him never returning home. Where earlier in the play Edna was mostly worried that he would indeed not show up at the promised time, instead she now fears not being strong enough to face him if he does make an appearance:

> I can't. I can't (*She sobs.*) You see how weak I am. I can't accept your thought. All I can think of is I will fail him. He will walk in, and I will say, or show my face: "*The ex-convict has come home. I've opened my house to shame and disgrace*". (144, original emphasis)

While Edna realizes that her idealized image is showing cracks, Stover implores her to accept the reality of this other image of Billy. She will find the strength when the moment arrives, he suggests, and at that same time will find herself (143). Stover never makes clear what this self should entail. Rather, his words ominously foreshadow the end of the play, where, instead of finding herself, she loses her mind when Billy finally shows up. The ending of this scene with Stover indeed seems to suggest that the inversion of Stover's words is the inevitable tragic outcome of Edna's loss of faith in her idealized image of Billy. After Edna's shattering realization, Stover coerces her to join him in prayer which ends with the phrase, "my love will be sufficient" (145). It is this last phrase which Edna finds unbearable to utter. Instead she falters on the very last word and begs Stover not to make her say it. She has realized that the

affective attachment that allowed her to hold onto her memory of Billy – her love for his memory – might not be sufficient after all. When Stover finally forces her to say the full sentence, she collapses in absolute despair: "Oh, Reverend, Reverend, Jesus, God, what shall I do? *(He holds her to prevent her from falling.)*" (147, original emphasis).

Immediately after Edna collapses, the curtain drops to indicate the end of the first scene. When the second, final scene of the play commences, we find Edna again in her parlor, still waiting for her son to come home. Between the two scenes some time has passed, because now the stage directions call for a "phosphorescent glow" indicating twilight (148). As the sun sets, firecrackers are still occasionally heard in the background, signalling that the Fourth of July is not yet over, and while Billy has not come home yet, there is still the chance that he might do so. The ellipsis created by the pause between the first and the final scenes produces the effect of temporal continuity. On a narrative level, the shattering of Edna's belief in Billy's innocence, and her subsequent paroxysmal collapse, is organized adjacent to the opening of the final scene. The spatial organization of these scenes, then, suggest that Edna's confrontation with Billy is brought into a meaningful relation with the previous scene. As I have indicated above, Edna loses her sanity as Billy finally appears in her living room and the attachment to her memory of him becomes untenable. The self that Stover suggested she would find when Billy returns, turns out not to be a coherent self, but a self that is shattered and undone. While this ending seems tragic – for indeed Billy dies in her arms – I suggest that in this moment of self-shattering, Edna finds a way to let the two conflicting images of Billy that have haunted her throughout the play congeal. Perhaps only by losing her mind does Edna find a strategy by which she can attach to her familial identification with Billy, who she believes is innocent, and restore her identification with the state, which has proclaimed Billy guilty.

That Edna's escape from the impossible plot situation comes at the cost of her own sanity points towards the relentless force with which the National Symbolic organizes fantasies of identification. The force of this identification is what Berlant has called *cruel optimism*, which she defines as the "condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (*Cruel Optimism* 24). Edna too remains attached to a problematic object in the sense that she continues her attachment to her memory of a Billy that no longer exists. This attachment leads to her inability to provide care for the adult Billy who visits her, as a result of which he dies. Still, the moment in which she seems to be losing her sanity might also allow a resolution of the impossible choice between her son and the state. After all, the choice for her was never between the state and the man who visits her, but between the state and the belief in her son's innocence. As long as she does not have to acknowledge the stranger as her son, that

fantasy remains intact. In fact, Edna superimposes the fantasy of Billy's innocence onto the stranger in her lap, so that she can remain attached to that idealized image. When she refuses to acknowledge the stranger who visits her at night as her son Billy, her mind returns to a memory she recounts at the beginning of the play. This is a memory of how Billy as a young boy came home with cuts and bruises. The blood flowed everywhere, and Edna would use a handkerchief and her own saliva to staunch his wounds (113–114). This memory returns to her as she caresses the dying stranger in her lap:

> You know what … I could almost say he reminds me of something from a long time ago … When Billy was a baby, he often fell and got hurt. He played too rough I always told him. When he come (*She draws the head of the stranger toward her lap.*) bruised and cut up, I used to take my pocket handkerchief (*She removes one slowly from her dress, like a somnambulist, and leans over the intruder.*) and I would moisten it with my … spit. (*She does so now.*) And I'd wipe away the dirt and blood. (*She cleans the stranger's forehead.*) I'd wipe away the dirt and blood when we wasn't near a place with water … That's a deep cut, there … You could lay your finger in it. (159)

The ellipses in the text mark temporal breaks. Edna is looking for words, trying to remember how she would take care of Billy when he came home wounded. The stage directions narrate her gestures. There is an automatism to the way she turns her attention to the stranger in her lap, as if she were sleepwalking. And as she recounts her memory, she reenacts her caretaking of young Billy. Yet as she seemingly absentmindedly reenacts her memory, the stranger in her lap becomes one with her projected image of Billy. She registers the stranger's wounds as if these were the wounds of her young son. And as the two Billys for a brief moment seem to collide, Edna finds her peace. "My wanting Billy has passed so peacefully", she tells Leona who has come rushing in after she realized that Billy had in fact come home that night, "I feel I almost welcomed him home and put him to sleep myself" (161).

What we have seen in *Children Is All*, then, is that the play operates on several narrative levels in which the fantasies of national and familial identity are at the core of the play's impossible plot situation. I have highlighted different possible readings in which the drama of misrecognition acts out several tensions within fantasies of both familial and national identities – Edna, the mother who doesn't recognize Billy, her own son; Edna, the mother who doesn't recognize Billy's self-image as her son;

Billy, allegorical figure for the American origin story who fails to be recognized as such; and Billy, subject to the American nation who is sacrificed to the totalizing fantasy of American national identity. Although Billy is ultimately sacrificed to the totalizing violence of the National Symbolic, Edna's attachment to her memory of the young Billy makes her oblivious to what she has just sacrificed. As he dies in her arms, Edna can finally reconcile her mistaken image of Billy – the stranger – with Billy – her son. She repeats to Leona: "my wanting Billy has passed, Leona … I feel so at ease with this perfect stranger who came in like from nowhere. For the first time in my life, Leona, I feel so close to my own son …" (162).

CHAPTER 5

The Unknown Nephew: Transforming the National Symbolic

In *Children Is All*, Purdy draws a scene in which familial and national identities are pitted against each other. The play demonstrates how an investment in the National Symbolic subsumes identification across familial ties, and eventually even erases the possibility for autonomous self-identification, as Edna starts to lose her mind at the end of the play. *The Nephew* (1960), published one year prior to *Children Is All*, explores a similar theme. In this novel, too, we find a mother figure who has been separated from a relative, or more precisely, her nephew. Like Edna in the play, the protagonist of *The Nephew*, Alma Mason, has to redefine her relationship with her nephew in the course of this separation. Despite their similarities, the play and the novel differ from each other on a crucial point. While Edna's relationship with Billy is established through the theme of (mis)reading, Alma's relationship with her nephew is made manifest in the theme of writing: when at the beginning of the novel Alma learns that her nephew has gone missing during the Korean War, she decides to memorialize him in writing.

While the works discussed in previous chapters already show a strong affinity with the theme of writing, embodied mainly by characters such as Eustace Chisholm, Parkhearst Cratty, and Bernie Gladhart, their relationship with identity is nevertheless expressed in the act of reading. Eustace is a struggling poet in Depression-era Chicago. Parkhearst is, similarly, an author who fails to finish any project because he cannot remain focused on his subjects. Still, it is in their guise as readers that the characters raise the questions of identity that Purdy is so interested in. Eustace reads a homosexual identity into Amos's placement in an Oedipal mise-en-scène, Fenton's body language is misread as passive anal desire, and finally Edna, too, misreads her son Billy because his time in prison has changed his appearance to such an extent that he has become unrecognizable for Edna's all too literal reading of him.

Like other characters, *The Nephew*'s Alma is also an "unsuccessful" writer. Unlike Eustace and Parkhearst, Alma is not portrayed as a professional author, but it is her attempt at writing that forms the central action of the novel. In considering Purdy's resistance to narratives of identity, the shift from the act of reading to the act of writing to establish characters' relations to identity production is, I believe,

significant. Writing suggests a different kind of agency than reading, and thus the identity production that is embedded in writing the lives of others is bound to a different dynamic than the identity production that follows the act of reading. Moving from reading to writing, then, allows me to think through Purdy's assessment of identity production from a different perspective, and foreground Purdy's general apprehension of the violence inherent to constructions of social identity. If the act of reading already proved to contain a violent force – either by negating a person's self-identification, as in *Eustace Chisholm*, eliciting violent reactions as we have seen in *63: Dream Palace*, or by letting someone perish because of the fundamental misreading that is part and parcel of every act of reading, just as we saw in *Children Is All* – the act of writing brings into view a different form of identity production. Pausing on the difference between reading and writing in relation to identity production will also help me draw a clearer picture of the ways in which Purdy's protagonists resist the constraints of identity. Edna's tragedy shows us that in Purdy's novels reading is associated with a passivity that violently forces its protagonists to assume a fundamentally misread and socialized identity. *The Nephew*, on the other hand, offers writing as an empowering alternative to reading. Whether the act of writing is successful or not, it nevertheless offers a means to reimagine identifications across familial ties and it helps the protagonists of Purdy's universe redefine their own relationships to the state.

Another significant difference between *Children Is All* and *The Nephew* is their treatment of the tension between individual and social identity: the latter does not enact a struggle of opposing subject positions. Instead, it stages the transformation of the single point-of-view of its main character. While in *Children Is All* national and familial identifications engage in direct confrontation, *The Nephew* leaves no space for any rebuttal against the position of the National Symbolic. If Billy can at least attempt to reclaim his familial identity in the face of Edna's misrecognition, the subject of *The Nephew*, Cliff Mason, is so completely erased from the equation that he does not even appear as a character in the novel. The erasure of his familial identity as Alma's nephew happens without the slightest interference on his part; from the outset of the novel he is already declared missing in action during the Korean War and, later on, is declared dead by US military officials. Still, it is exactly because of his failure to appear that the tension between the necessary erasure of his individual and familial identities and the assertion of the National Symbolic can be acted out.

Just as *Children Is All* is set against the backdrop of Independence Day, *The Nephew* is likewise framed by one of the central public holidays of the American national narrative. The fabula of the novel takes up the space of exactly one year, opening

and closing on Memorial Day. Opening and closing the narrative on the same public holiday, albeit a year apart, places its action between two parentheses. The action of the novel seems to be triggered and find closure by the same event. However, a close look at the different ways in which Memorial Day is described in the opening and closing scenes, and the different ways in which Alma engages with the observance of its rituals, alerts the reader to a fundamental change within the novel's protagonist that has occurred in the course of the novel. Alma's belief in the narratives that constitute the American nation, here represented by Memorial Day, is shaken by her recognition that the sacrifice of her nephew to the National Symbolic also means the erasure of any familial identification that had thus far given her life purpose. Eventually, her relationship with the state, as mediated by her relationship with her nephew, transforms from an identification that is organized by an investment in the National Symbolic based on Puritan values, to a democratic identification that includes the plurality of identifications found in her community.

The symbol that organizes the transformation we witness in Alma also changes its meaning. In my analysis of the novel, I argue that we can liken Alma's writing to the figure of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. A significant detail is that the Unknown Soldier of the Korean War was inaugurated at Arlington National Cemetery on Memorial Day in May 1958, shortly before Purdy started writing *The Nephew* (Powys "Powys to Purdy 41" 71). Drawing on the Unknown Soldier allows Purdy to address his complex relation to the National Symbolic and its myths of "good citizenship", which are represented by this very figure. Since the Unknown Soldier is presented as bereft of ideology, it can function as a screen onto which any identification with the state can be projected (Anderson 17–18; Wittman 9). Whereas *Children Is All* relied on the ideologically charged Independence Day as its background, *The Nephew*'s setting of Memorial Day and its thematization of the Unknown Soldier offer a version of the national narrative that is ideologically much more ambivalent.

Purdy offers us his own version of the National Symbolic by narrating the procedures through which Cliff's missing body takes on the properties of the Unknown Soldier memorial. This process is literally reproduced by Alma's inability to write her memorial to Cliff: the empty pages of which, I argue, result in the production of an entirely new meaning, rather than the failure that previous commentators Bettina Schwarzschild and Stephen Adams have read into it. Yet, besides the pages of Alma's memorial remaining empty, the narrative also gradually strips Cliff of any individuating qualities, which renders his image unidentifiable and universal enough to function as the Unknown Soldier. Not only does his body go literally missing, as "there wasn't enough left of him to ship home" (338), Cliff's biography, too, becomes

lost. Each time Alma discovers something about him that might jeopardize his representation of the ideal citizen, such as his suspected homosexuality or communist sympathies, she lets herself be convinced by her neighbors that these character flaws were not at all manifest in her nephew. As the narrative progresses, Cliff is both stripped of his physical body and of his individuating character traits. In the last section of this chapter, then, I take a closer look at the strategies that are used to transform Cliff into the figure of the Unknown Soldier. It is exactly through these strategies that the novel dramatizes the tension between narratives of individual identity and norms of social identity, which we have seen emerge in *Children Is All*.

Civic Myths and the Cold War

The Nephew is set in the fictional Midwestern town Rainbow Center at the beginning of the Cold War, or more precisely during the Korean War. Here we encounter Alma Mason, a retired out-of-state schoolteacher who learns that her nephew Cliff, who was placed in her custody when his parents died, has gone missing in action in Korea. At first she refuses to face the likelihood of his being killed in combat, but after some coaxing by her neighbors Alma decides to write a memorial in his honor. While trying to write about his life, Alma realizes she knows little to nothing about her nephew. She starts to interview her neighbors, friends, and other acquaintances who have played a part in Cliff's life, and to her consternation realizes that the image she has always had of her nephew is the total opposite of the person he was according to her interlocutors. Instead of being a quiet, family-loving small-town boy, Cliff hated living with his aunt, admired his communist teacher, and was closely associated with a homosexual couple. After learning these details about her nephew, Alma cannot write the memorial and finally abandons the project altogether.

Previous critics have construed Alma's failure to write a memorial to her nephew as establishing her status as a tragic heroine. According to Schwarzschild, Alma is marked by a profound sense of self-sacrifice, a tragic mother figure who continues to love her child despite the cruelty and hardship she must endure, and for whom there is no understanding in her society (41–42). Schwarzschild writes, "had Alma lived in a simpler society, where the old are not useless and unpopular, she would have had no trouble commemorating Cliff. In such a society it is the task of the aged to tell the myths and reveal the secrets of religion and culture to the young" (41). Alma's self-martyrdom prevents her from finishing the memorial, since in Cold War America, there is no patience for such sacrifice. Henry Chupack takes a different perspective

and interprets her actions not as being misunderstood by her community, but rather the result of her misunderstanding the community she lives in. He notes that Alma prioritizes condemning her neighbors and friends over writing Cliff's memorial. In her interviews Alma keeps moralizing about her neighbors' moral shortcomings. Yet, as the narrative develops, so does Alma's understanding of the people in her community. Chupack argues that Alma does not abandon the memorial because she realizes that she never knew Cliff, but rather because she finally begins to acknowledge and accept the flaws of her neighbors and friends without judging them (59). Stephen Adams, however, is a harsher critic of Alma: he accuses her of being strapped into a "puritan strait-jacket" in her "attempts to manipulate people according to some ideal version of them". This, for Adams, ultimately represents the hypocrisy of suburban American values that "can only hoard up empty *things* and caress surfaces beneath which the 'body' has fled" (62, original emphasis).

Similarly to Adams, Schwarzschild comments on the Puritan foundations on which Alma's moralizing is based, calling her "Alma Mason, the Puritan spinster", "Alma the Presbyterian", and "Alma the Protestant", while accusing her of "Calvinist pride" (35, 40–41). Recognizing Alma's moralizing as Puritan, as these critics do, places the novel in a literary tradition that reflects on early American lawmaking and nation-building through subscription to a strict religious moral code. Of course, New England Puritanism ended around 1700, thus Alma's moralizing cannot simply be equated with historical Puritanism (Gorski 57). Still, Adams and Schwarzschild draw attention to the continuation of certain Puritan cultural values that undergird the moral superiority of the American National Symbolic to which Alma seems to subscribe. These foundations translate into civic myths that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have sought to draw parallels between citizenship and the "founding ideals [that] persist in the United States" ranging from "founding fathers", the "virgin land", or "manifest destiny" (Thomas 5). As Brook Thomas posits, these civic myths incorporate the National Symbolic into narratives of historical continuity. Many of these civic myths envision the American nation as a utopian site that promises "liberty" and the "pursuit of happiness" as a continuation of the religious freedom sought by the Pilgrims when they migrated to the "new world", where they "found a more fertile soil for civic participation than in England" (28).[1]

Philip Gorski concurs with this reading of the American National Symbolic as rooted in myths and narratives of the nation's Puritan origins. "Still", he writes, "the

1 This notion of religious freedom that the Puritans sought, was, of course, limited to the freedom to practice their own Calvinist version of Protestantism.

greatest legacy of the Puritan founding is surely the Exodus narrative itself. This story of oppression, flight, and freedom has long had, and still has, an enduring resonance for an immigrant nation like the United States" (59). Similarly, Stacey Olster sees a continuation of Puritanism in later secular narratives onto which citizens can project their attachment to the National Symbolic:

> Earlier writers often directed their works to the propagation of millennial design and portrayed American history in accordance with whatever variant most suited their time – the Puritans with respect to a religious scheme that stretched from the Fall of Man to the establishment of New Heaven and Earth, the later Yankees with respect to a secularized Manifest Destiny that spread democracy from sea to shining sea. (2)

In her study *Reminiscence and Re-Creation in Contemporary American Fiction* (1989), Olster analyzes the relationships of American writers of the Cold War era to different accounts of time and history, including that of Puritan theology. The paranoia that structures works of novelists such as Thomas Pynchon, she suggests, "forms nothing less than the basis of Puritan historicism, a vision of continuity that encapsulated two forms of time – secular and sacred" (75). The political tensions between the United States and the USSR that governed cultural production during the Cold War extended a Puritan apocalyptic view of history to mid-twentieth-century America. Of Pynchon's work Olster writes, "his musings of apocalypse are only twentieth-century versions of those earlier exhortations with which his ancestors were quite familiar" (82).

The Nephew, too, is first and foremost a novel produced by and about Cold War paranoia. Since the action of the plot is catalyzed by Cliff's disappearance in the Korean War, the political tensions of the Cold War continuously haunt the novel's protagonists, as is often hinted at in passing: "Dreaming, Boyd saw a hydrogen bomb fall on Rainbow Center" (321). Purdy's novel can be read alongside other Cold War-era novels: Robert Hipkiss (1976) reads Purdy alongside Jack Kerouac, J.D. Salinger, and John Knowles; Jean E. Kennard (1975) reads him together with Joseph Heller, John Barth, and Kurt Vonnegut. Similar to many of these novelists, Purdy uses the political background of the Cold War to reflect on the American citizen's relation to the state, its politics, and her or his own sense of self.

The novel certainly seems to reflect critically on the civic myths that organize Alma's sense of "good citizenship", as her moralizing to her neighbors is consistently met with annoyance and irritation. In fact, she and her closest neighbor and moraliz-

ing ally, Mrs. Barrington, are at some point described by one of her interlocutors as "two de-sexed pillars of the American Revolution" (304). This passing reference to the Revolutionary War is telling of the civic myths that establish the National Symbolic against which Alma's ideas of citizenship transform. That is, the American Revolution itself has achieved the status of what Donald Pease calls "mythos", "a political fiction capable of organizing the lives of many Americans" (*Visionary Compacts* 8).[2] The Revolutionary mythos gave credence to the liberty fantasy as the absolute American value, extending the Pilgrim "Exodus" narrative to a post-Revolutionary United States in what Sam B. Girgus calls "a secularization of the Puritan religious impulse" (11).

By drawing upon Puritanism and the American Revolution in the context of a novel set during the Cold War, Purdy subsumes the United States' Puritan foundations into its Revolutionary mythos of progress. The description of Alma and Mrs. Barrington as "two de-sexed pillars of the American Revolution" introduces what Purdy sees as a Puritan sexual worldview into the myth of the American Revolution, suggesting a continuation of American attitudes towards sexuality, rather than a complete rupture effected by the Revolution itself. Yet, on closer inspection, Purdy offers a more complex account of the transformation of symbolic narratives that are "capable of organizing the lives of many Americans" (Pease 8), and which place *The Nephew* within the broader concern of postwar American literature: how to imagine America's Puritan inheritance within its modernist values of liberty and individualism.

Perhaps, then, it is as surprising as it is illuminating that I consider Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* an important intertext for my interpretation of *The Nephew*. In his most famous novel, Hawthorne proposes a temporal continuation of pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary America. His account of America's origins in Puritan moral laws can be read as a critique of the historical amnesia that the "culture of the Revolution" promoted: "when acknowledged as 'Revolutionary,' everyday events could be described as progressive rather than [...] merely successive" (Pease, *Visionary Compacts* 54). Unlike the radical break with which the Revolutionary mythos seems to distance America's Revolutionary genesis from its Puritan past,

2 This particular description of Alma and Mrs. Barrington carries a faint connotation of the Daughters of the American Revolution, a lineage-based women's organization founded in 1890 that is "dedicated to promoting historic preservation, education, patriotism and honoring the patriots of the Revolutionary War" (*Daughters of the American Revolution*). A later mention in the novel of their involvement in the Knights of Pythias, a likeminded fraternal organization, corroborates a reading in which Alma's moralizing is founded in the civic myths that cast the American Revolution as the continuation of the "Exodus" narrative that grants mythical status to the Pilgrims' search for religious freedom.

Purdy imagines a continuation of Puritan values that are transported with the reconfiguration of symbols that establish the relationship between the citizen and the state. Instead of elevating Cliff in her proposed biography to the symbolic status of mythical Revolutionary hero, the novel frustrates Alma's memory of him, which causes her to abandon her initial project and turn to her own relationship with the National Symbolic.

Paired with *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Nephew* can be read as a reimagination of the very symbol through which its protagonist defines her own relationship with the state. Of course, there are significant differences between the two novels. Whereas in Hawthorne's novel this symbol is the scarlet letter *A* embroidered on Hester Prynne's clothes, in *The Nephew* Alma turns to the figure of the Unknown Soldier to reflect on her changed relationship with the National Symbolic. More importantly, while Alma has the liberty to choose her own symbol through which she defines her relationship with the state, the scarlet letter is forced upon Hester by the very same state with which she is trying to negotiate her relationship – a difference that affects the ways in which Alma and Hester attach differently to their respective symbols.

Hawthorne's work has arguably been of tremendous influence on Purdy's own writing. Jon Michaud (2015), for example, recalls Purdy's claim that his affinity for authors such as Herman Melville and Hawthorne is based on what he considers their "Calvinist sensibilities", while Susan Sontag likens Purdy's work to the romance genre of Hawthorne, which "[has] often prospered in our [American] fiction at the expense of the novel" (5). There are some thematic parallels between *The Nephew* and *The Scarlet Letter* that could warrant a side-by-side reading of the two novels. Both novels present an object that symbolizes the political organization of the communities in which we find their protagonists; in both novels this symbol has a mediating effect between a mother figure (Hester and Alma) and a child figure (Pearl and Cliff); but most importantly, both novels dramatize the transformation of the protagonists' relationship with the state through the changing function of these symbols over the course of the narrative. Hester's embroidered letter changes meaning in the years after her reentry into the Boston community. Her relationship with that community changes, and because of that, the people of Boston begin to read the embroidered letter differently. Alma's memorial to Cliff, too, marks a changed relationship with the community of Rainbow Center. In her case, however, the memorial starts to change meaning for her before it changes meaning for the community altogether. Before I elaborate on this parallel, I will first briefly address the location of Rainbow Center and the narrative's framing between two consecutive Memorial Days, both of which incorporate in different ways the Puritan foundations of the American National Symbolic.

The community against which Alma measures her notions of "good citizenship" is the fictional Midwestern town of Rainbow Center, by some critics identified as Bowling Green, Ohio, where Purdy went to college in the 1930s (Miller 422; Snyder 115). While hardly the birthplace of the pre-Revolutionary American Colonies, such as the Puritan settlements of New England were, the Midwestern setting updates the nation's moral order for the Cold War era. Far removed from the progressive pockets of the East and West coasts, the Midwest is "often positioned as the 'norm,' the uncontested site of middle-class white American heteronormativity" (Manalansan et al., 1). According to Pease, the American heartland, as represented in popular and foundational narratives about the Midwest, has taken over the moral heritage of the colonies in the myth of "the frontier". The temporal rupture effected by the American Revolution could be translated into a spatial rupture by means of the vast unclaimed territories of the Midwest. If the Revolutionary mythos allowed American political life to imagine itself free from a pre-Revolutionary history, then the frontier effected something similar for its national space. "Both mythoi, that of the Revolution and that of the frontier, defined American freedom as the negation of any prior formation whatsoever" (Pease, *Visionary Compacts* 75).

The other benchmark for Alma's sense of "good citizenship" and her relationship with the state is the national holiday that frames the action of the novel. When Boyd comes home from a short trip to Kentucky and pulls the car into the driveway, he notices that the flag is flying over their house to commemorate Memorial Day, the national holiday that honors fallen American soldiers. Alma and Boyd are strict observers of Memorial Day rituals, for Boyd's initial reaction is one of guilt and disappointment, as he feels he has forsaken his duty to raise the flag himself (196). Memorial Day, or Decoration Day as it is sometimes called, originated in the mid-1860s, immediately after the Civil War, from several local initiatives to honor fallen soldiers (Kammen 102–103). Festivities and memorial services during this day had a "nationally desired note of reconciliation", incorporating both veterans of the Southern Confederacy and the Northern Union in order to bring the states together under a single national narrative (Kammen 102).

Three years after the war, in 1868, the United States government officially endorsed these memorial initiatives and it soon included not only the fallen soldiers of the Civil War, but also those of other wars, most notably the American Revolutionary War (162). This inclusion meant a separation between the public mourning and celebration of the events that were foundational to the narrative of the American nation. Michael Kammen points out that this separation could be considered an attempt to break from the nation's Puritan foundations in the imagining of its own

National Symbolic. He writes, "when May Day [Memorial Day] became the occasion of music, merrymaking, and popular entertainments, an editorial acknowledged that the Pilgrims and Puritans would have considered such activity as 'heathenish,' which was absolutely true" (255). As American citizenship transformed into a secular attachment to the nation state, its symbols also transformed into more secular forms of public mourning and celebration. Alma's emphatic observation of Memorial Day, however, changes the second time we encounter Memorial Day in the novel. This change, I argue, is symptomatic of her changed investment in citizenship and the National Symbolic.

Writing and Citizenship

It might be the coincidence of Memorial Day and the news that Cliff has gone missing that prompts Alma to begin her memorial to her nephew. The novel's opening draws a very strong connection between Alma's investment in this national holiday and her apprehensive feelings about Cliff's enlistment. Alma strongly identifies with Cliff and feels that his army service has already begun to change their relationship. Both she and Boyd question Cliff's decision to enlist; always having taken Cliff as "a young fellow [who] wanted to settle down", both are slightly amazed that "he enlisted before he had to" (197). And while they regularly receive letters from him, Alma bemoans the fact that Cliff "*doesn't* say much in his letters" (197, original emphasis) and faults the army for Cliff's lacking communication. Yet, Alma believes that this will nevertheless improve and implores Boyd to keep Cliff's letters so that they will "form a kind of diary of what he did" (198).

Alma's investment in the importance of writing is underlined by her comment to Boyd that "we must encourage him to write to us more often, and tell us more" (200). This opening scene, however, also subtly introduces the element that frustrates Alma's attempts to know her nephew. Because of Cliff's service to the American nation while in the army, he can provide her with only limited information. When they discuss Cliff's letters, Boyd suggests that "it's better to communicate too little than too much, since he's in service" (198). Early in the novel, then, Purdy establishes a strong connection between familial identification and the act of writing. Alma establishes her relationship with her nephew through his writing, yet the lack of information in his letters also immediately destabilizes their relationship. Juxtaposed to writing's association with familial identity is the state that frustrates this personal form of writing, and, by extension, also Alma's familial identification with Cliff. The

conflict between familial and national identity in the act of writing is a central theme in the novel. Alma's unsuccessful mission to memorialize her relationship with Cliff unwittingly leads to Cliff's undoing. In Alma's failed attempts at writing Cliff's life, his familial identity is also subsumed by the National Symbolic.

Shortly after Memorial Day, Alma receives a telegram from Washington, DC, stating that "Cliff [is] missing in action, after having been wounded a week earlier in Korea" (207). This ominous message is written in "casual and empty wording" and contains "several misspellings" (207). The empty wording of this official message echoes the lack of information in Cliff's earlier letters, just like the misspellings communicate a lack of care for both Cliff, who died in service of the state, and Alma, who has to suffer this loss. Similarly, any information that would affect Alma's relationship with Cliff fails to be communicated as it "did not convey to her the dreadfulness of the import" and "again, like Cliff's letters, the 'content' did not quite come through" (207). Indeed, Alma is left with the feeling that the message she received is incomplete and that more information should arrive soon.

Alma refuses to believe anything is wrong with Cliff; after all, missing does not necessarily mean that he is dead or would never return. Instead, she thinks that "the Government is duty-bound to write a long letter at regular intervals concerning Cliff, a communiqué sort of thing, complicated and detailed" (210), as if Cliff could be made present through such official writing. Like Edna in *Children Is All*, Alma displays a naive relation to the state. But whereas Edna's naive relation to the state is made manifest in the act of (mis)reading, Alma's ideals of citizenship are bound up in her ideas about writing. Alma's attitude towards citizenship is an active one; if the relationship between the citizen and the state is established through their mutual writing, then, a civic relationship based on reading betrays signs of passivity, as is the case in Edna's failure to perform her civic duties and her ultimate misrecognition of Billy. This sentiment is echoed by one of Alma's neighbors, Mrs. Laird, who places the act of reading as diametrically opposed to patriotism and active participation in civic duties: "come in here, dear, and salute the flag with me, and get your mind out of the gutter reading those books and papers" (272).

Despite her steadfast belief in an active and participatory relationship between citizen and the state, the latter does not respond to Alma's naive investment in the actualizing potential of writing. Apart from that one telegram informing her of Cliff's disappearance, the state remains frightfully silent. To make things even worse, soon after this news Cliff's letters cease arriving. It is perhaps because of this non-writing by both Cliff and the government that Alma decides to take up a writing project of her own. When Alma speaks to her neighbor Clara Himbaugh about Cliff's situation, the

latter draws upon her faith in Christian Science to console her. Although Alma seems to distrust Christian Science, one suggestion that Clara offers nevertheless sticks in her mind. Clara suggests that Alma writes down her memories of Cliff in a book, and although Alma initially refuses to take Clara's proposal seriously, the idea slowly germinates into her memorial-writing project. Alma's word choice is particularly telling here, for she is not writing a memoir or a biography of Cliff's life. Instead, she insists on calling it a "memorial", which connotes the act of commemorating a tragic event or someone who has perished. Indeed, even in its nonexistence, the memorial that Alma sets out to write provides a means to mourn the loss of her nephew before she can even be certain of his demise.

Renegotiating Failure

The three critics of Purdy's work discussed above – Adams, Chupack, and Schwarzschild – agree that the central action of the novel is Alma's failure to write Cliff's memorial. Chupack calls it a "nonperformance" (60); for Schwarzschild her failure is exactly what leads to her gaining self-knowledge (38); and Adams juxtaposes Alma's ineptitude with examples of successful writing to show that her failure is a symptom of the emptiness of the American suburban life in which she is so invested. As Adams writes,

> Alma's inability to write contrasts ironically with other examples of "writing" in the novel as apparently innocuous details reorganise themselves esoterically around the central axis to discharge their wry humour. Her mother, for instance, had blessed the world with a "memorial" to her culinary expertise which immortalises in "firm precise hand-writing" the recipes that had been second nature to her. Elsewhere, Mrs Barrington is seen to rule the neighbourhood from her spinet writing desk by the summonses and edicts that flow from her "model Spencerian hand." With such women for alter egos, it is no wonder that the "untidy" Cliff seems to escape all the categories into which Alma would place people. Yet as she suspends the determination to write *things* down, a new kind of perception unfolds. The puzzling welter of feelings that are unlocked constitute the first hesitant steps in a discovery of what was previously missing in her existence. (61, original emphasis)

I quote Adams at length because he touches upon several of the novel's elements that I consider to be running themes in Purdy's oeuvre. First, Alma is an unsuccessful author like those I have discussed in previous chapters. In contrast to her failure, the novel offers examples of successful writing, and compared with these, the consequences of her own failure are far-reaching. Although Alma imagines her life to meet the moral and bourgeois standards of American suburban life, the project of writing confronts her with a deficiency that she has previously been blind to. As she discovers that she cannot fit Cliff into the categories that she had once held dear, she also terminates her production of the written memorial, which, for Adams, inevitably results in her changed attitude towards her neighbors. Once she comes to terms with the fact that her idealized image of family life does not correspond to her lived reality, she no longer measures her community against her moral standards either. The absolute morals that fail to be codified within the context of Cold War American society give way to a more democratic political order in which moral standards are relative to the community itself.

The negative meaning that Adams assigns to failure is also present in Kennard's interpretation of Purdy's literature. In fact, she calls the running theme of failed authorship in Purdy's oeuvre his "fidelity to failure". She writes, "Purdy's own novels give us precisely that sense of attempted expression which fails, of art struggling against its own impossibility. Yet they exist, expressions of the paradox of their own existence. Like all novels of number they take the reader towards nothingness; each novel, like its reader, struggles but fails to make sense of the experience it records" (84). Her reading of *The Nephew* echoes this somewhat bleak and nihilistic view of Purdy's work, as she argues that Alma's failure to write a memorial to Cliff should be read as an extension of his disappearance. Not only does he disappear physically, but her failure to record his disappearance also causes him to recede even further away. "The action of the novel is a movement towards the void", Kennard argues, and eventually, according to her, the novel should be read as a commentary on "art's struggle with its own impossibility" (93–94).

Failure, however, is not just the lack of a successful speech act, a nonperformance, or the failure to produce something positive. Failure is in and of itself also an act that establishes new meanings, is open to interpretation, and produces new opportunities and situations that the failing subject can act upon. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam calls for a renewed appreciation of failure, or rather, for an understanding of failure as a practice which "recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities" (88). However

unintentional it might be, failure uncovers alternative possibilities and allows the failing subject to rethink and renegotiate his or her attachment to the failed object. For Alma too it is not so much she who changes, but rather her relation to the object she has produced. Unlike previous critics, I maintain that we should not consider Alma's project as a failure per se. In line with Halberstam's suggestion to rethink the meaning-making of failed projects (24), I propose to interpret Alma's project as a wholly different one.[3] After all, when Alma proclaims that she has stopped writing her memorial to Cliff, she does not claim to have abandoned it. Instead, she reframes the whole memorial as something entirely different:

> "I've decided not to write anything about Cliff after all, Boyd," she said in loud expressionless tones.
>
> He scowled.
>
> "After all the fuss and bother everybody's been to in town." His old temper flared – to her relief and yet to her inexpressible sadness.
>
> "The memorial is finished," she said, in words perhaps as surprising to herself as to him.
>
> "You've written it?" he cried, a strange pleasure and surprise on his face.
>
> "No," she replied. (337)

In a sudden moment of clarity Alma realizes that she does not have to write the memorial in order to finish it. On the contrary, the memorial is finished exactly because she has not written it. The title of the chapter in which this scene takes place affirms this reading, as it, too, is titled "The memorial is finished" (335). The memorial no longer functions as a biography of Cliff. It might no longer be about Cliff, her nephew, at all. Its new function is that of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier – the epitaph for those anonymous soldiers who have fallen in battles and fought for the safekeeping of the nation's integrity, and which serves as a screen onto which the National Symbolic can be projected. The figure of the Unknown Soldier allows Alma to replace her view on citizenship, within which she can no longer frame her

3 For another consideration of failure in American literature, see Gavin Jones's *Failure and the American Writer* (2014). In his study, Jones counterpoints the myth that American literature is mostly concerned with the narration of success. Instead, Jones suggests that recognizing the failure of canonical nineteenth-century authors contributes to a fuller understanding of their contribution to the constitution of the American national identity.

relationship with Cliff, with a democratic relation to the state that allows her to redefine her identification with Cliff and her community. In this, I follow Thomas's notion that with the end of Puritanism and the shift to a secular state during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the conceptualization of citizenship, apart from the idea of "participation in or membership of a community", obtained the additional notion of being "inextricably bound to the nation" (225). In the course of the novel, Alma, who represents the Puritan values of suburban America, is forced to redefine her relationship with the National Symbolic. Even if she first adheres to a moralizing involvement in her community, at the end of the novel her notions of "good citizenship" are rewired through the changed meaning and purpose of her memorial to Cliff.

The Unknown Soldier

If we consider Alma's failure to write her memorial not as the impossibility of meaning-making, but as the transformation of the object through which Alma negotiates her relationship with Cliff, and in extension her attachment to the state, we begin to recognize parallels between her memorial and that other national memorial to fallen and missing soldiers: the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. This kind of memorial, erected in nations across the globe, stands out for various reasons, two of which are closely related to the themes that I have identified in *The Nephew*. Firstly, the history of Unknown Soldier memorials shows that for many nations their erection was a pivotal moment for the redefinition of the relationship between the state and its citizens, especially during times in which this relationship underwent crisis engendered by war. Secondly, the remains that are immortalized by the Unknown Soldier memorial are, and must be by definition, anonymous. For such a memorial to function as a symbol for all citizens, the Unknown Soldier has to remain – or become, as is the case with Cliff – unidentifiable. Only then can the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier function as a placeholder for a cross-ideological identification with the National Symbolic.

Benedict Anderson opens his seminal study of the cultural roots of nineteenth-century nationalism with a brief observation about the curious phenomenon of the Unknown Soldier memorial. Most of these monuments were erected after the First World War, a period in which Western nations sought to redefine the narratives that constituted their national identities and needed new symbols to invest their citizens in this renewed national framework in the aftermath of devastating wars.

The Unknown Soldier is particularly interesting in this endeavor since it houses multiple contradictory meanings within its relatively simple outlook. Anderson writes, "void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings" (17, original emphasis). The National Symbolic haunts the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, not because the remains that it contains are invested with meaning and identity, but rather because the remains' *lack* of identity is invested with meaning. In relation to the Unknown Soldier, individual identity is erased in favor of a national one. Indeed, Anderson claims that the identity constituted by the Unknown Soldier cannot but be a national one. Historically, monuments to Unknown Soldiers have played an overwhelmingly nationalist role, eschewing other state ideologies and political movements. Thus, there are Italian, French, and British Unknown Soldiers, but there are no tombs to commemorate the unknown socialist, the unknown fascist, or the unknown pacifist (Anderson 17–18, Wittman 9). Rather, sovereign powers seem to inscribe and re-inscribe the National Symbolic represented by the Unknown Soldier easily across ideological beliefs. Thus, the Italian monument for the Unknown Soldier, interred next to the Vittoriano in Rome, was intended as a unifying and pacifying memorial after the First World War, but was endowed with new nationalist meaning as soon as the fascists came to power, only to later function as a national symbol for the democratic regime after the Second World War (Wittmann 6). Although the ideologies behind the investment in nationalism changed over the course of these three different regimes, the symbol that was employed to effect these feelings of nationalism remained the same.

Although Anderson does not go on to explore the figure of the Unknown Soldier in much detail, his observations do point towards an inherent conflict between individual and social identity that lies at the core of the National Symbolic. The Unknown Soldier can only function as a national symbol once every trace of the individual identity of the interred remains is erased or obscured. At the same time, these remains should be identifiable enough as a subject to the nation that the tomb represents. This is what Wittman calls "shared anonymity" (10), and makes the Unknown Soldier memorial so effective as a placeholder for the National Symbolic that attaches citizens to the nation across ideological affiliations.

Identification through and with the Unknown Soldier ties a community to the National Symbolic, as it offers a narrative on which the values of a nation can be founded. Questions of identifiability, such as the sex or race of the remains, are therefore often suppressed in favor of the memorial's symbolic value. Yet this suppression is precarious since it is continuously haunted by certain properties of the

Unknown Soldier's remains that are at once undeniable but which might become unwanted in certain political climates. Individualizing properties of sex, race, and class that fail to correspond with community values linger around the Unknown Soldier's bones as a reminder of the constructed nature of their unifying symbolism. The American practice of adding new remains of Unknown Soldiers to their complex of Tombs of the Unknowns – as was done after the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War – illustrates this precariousness as it problematizes the possibility of shared anonymity.

Returning to the practice of raising a memorial to the Unknown Soldier in different historical and political contexts – during the Cold War and the post-Cold War era – reintroduced debates about nationality and the identifiability of the interred bones within different, larger national debates of citizenship. At stake in these debates were the questions of who is represented in the National Symbolic, and which ethnicities, sexualities, or classes are excluded from this representation. While these debates were present during the erection of Unknown Soldier memorials in Europe after the First World War (Wittman 95), the reopening of these debates in the United States has touched upon a reevaluation of what the Unknown Soldier symbolizes in relation to American citizens, who are supposed to identify with the nation through this very symbol. If the first Unknown Soldier memorial organized American citizens around a single unifying symbol, debates surrounding the inaugurations of the Korean War and Vietnam War Unknown Soldiers challenged the universality of this symbolism by bringing into the equation questions of race and nationality (Wagner 646; Schwartz and Bayma 958).

Sarah Wagner offers a critical reading of such debates surrounding race and citizenship in relation to the Unknown Soldier during the transition from Cold War to post-Cold War America. She analyzes the debate in which the anonymity of the remains in the Vietnam crypt of the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery was the subject of vehement discussion. Developments in DNA analysis allowed forensic scientists to identify the unknown remains more precisely, which prompted the demand for disinterment of the already-buried remains. The call for excavation and further analysis of the now-identifiable remains, however, was not necessarily provoked by these scientific developments – after all, similar demands were not made of the Unknown Soldier memorials commemorating the First and Second World Wars or the Korean War. The reason the public began to question the legitimacy of the memorial itself was the initial selection procedure used to pick one set of unidentifiable remains among other possible "unknowns" (635). The remains of the Unknown Soldier can never be wholly unknown, since

certain aspects of his identity can or should be made plausible for him to fulfill its function as the Unknown Soldier. For example, forensic scientists can, based on the analysis of the remains alone, already identify the race, sex, height, and age (Wagner 636). Moreover, the remains should plausibly belong to a subject of the nation in question; it must be made plausible that this subject had served in the armed forces belonging to this nation; and it must be made plausible that the subject had fought and died during campaigns in the war that the memorial is commemorating (Wagner 637).

The combination of these attributes and basic criteria – those already-known and those that need to be made plausible – problematize the uncritical adoption of shared anonymity. If certain attributes of the remains are always already known, then these attributes will most certainly affect the decisions made when trying to decide the criteria for inclusion into the citizenship status that is so essential to the function of the Unknown Soldier memorial. The criteria that need to be made plausible are influenced by the already-known facts, effectively including or excluding certain remains of the Vietnam War from selection. To make plausible that the selected remains for the Unknown Soldier memorial of the Vietnam War belonged to an American citizen, in the episode Wagner describes, the decision was made to select only remains that were identifiable as Caucasian and to dismiss remains that were identified as South-East Asian. The selection committee argued that it could not guarantee that the South-East Asian remains belonged to a U.S. citizen, even though South-East Asian Americans had also fought in the Vietnam War (639). Certain demands made of the remains have the effect that, in a political landscape that becomes increasingly racialized and individualized, the promise of shared anonymity that once tied the Unknown Soldier to the National Symbolic can no longer tie all subjects of the nation to the National Symbolic in the same way. Responding to rumors about the possible identity of the Vietnam War Unknown Soldier, the Department of Defense ordered a DNA analysis of the interred remains. Following this analysis, a name was connected with the Unknown Soldier, who was, as a result, no longer unknown.

The fact that the Unknown Soldier memorial of the Vietnam War still holds its function as a national monument, despite its remains being no longer unknown – in fact, the tomb currently remains empty – attests to the changing nature of commemoration from the communal function of shared anonymity to more individualistic practices in the second half of the twentieth century (649). This move towards individualization during the Cold War is touched upon by Purdy's treatment of the Unknown Soldier in *The Nephew*. While predating the Unknown Soldier memorial

of the Vietnam War by several decades, its narrative nevertheless mirrors the latter discussion about the identifiability of the Unknown Soldier's remains. Yet, while in this discussion the increased knowability of the remains attests to a growing practice of individualized commemoration in the United States, *The Nephew* reverses this narrative. The more Alma seeks what she knows about Cliff, and the more she realizes she never knew him at all, the more she begins to identify with the community that previously could not live up to her own moral standards.

The novel offers a mode of commemoration that allows Alma to identify with the National Symbolic during the Cold War while acknowledging the increased individualization of American society. To see this in action, we need to draw attention to another important aspect of the Unknown Soldier memorial – its status as a publicly commissioned work. Even if Wagner's account of the Vietnam War Unknown Soldier memorial stresses the increased individualization of the political landscape after the Cold War, she also shows how the memorial is first and foremost a public work. The public demand for disinterment and subsequent analysis of the remains in fact highlights its function as a public memorial that promises a shared identification with the state for its citizens.

A closer look at *The Nephew* tells us that the inhabitants of Rainbow Center are, indeed, not the homogenous group usually associated with suburban America. Still, the memorial that Alma is writing becomes, like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, very much a public project. While Alma realizes that her work slowly stagnates, the neighbors around her become increasingly invested in the memorial's completion. Alma is fully aware of this public investment: "All her neighbors – Mrs. B., Faye Laird, Clara Himbaugh, Mrs. Van Tassel, not to mention Professor Mannheim and Boyd – *expected* her to write something, even if only a page, and Cliff's biography was, one might say, publicly commissioned" (310, original emphasis). Earlier, in conversation with Boyd, Mrs. Barrington had also expressed how important it was that Alma finish her memorial because "*then* and only then … can she forget it" (278, original emphasis). However, the communitarian work that is implied in Alma's writing frustrates the possibility of her identifying fully with its subject, Cliff. When she tells Boyd that she has decided to quit writing the memorial, she voices this sentiment clearly: "did it ever occur to you that you were all babying me, an old-maid schoolteacher with nothing to do, writing a book about a young nephew she didn't really know from Adam or probably understand?" (337). At the same time, this distancing from her idealized image of Cliff allows her to engage with the people in her community differently. In the remainder of this chapter, I look more closely at how the disappearance of Cliff, or rather, his transformation into the symbolic figure of the Unknown Soldier,

enables Alma's renewed identification with the other inhabitants of Rainbow Center. In order to do so, I want to draw a parallel with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, since reading these novels alongside each other allows us to understand how a changed identification with the same symbol might reflect a transformation in attitudes towards the National Symbolic.

A Pillar of the Community?

Both *The Nephew* and *The Scarlet Letter* dramatize the transformation from one civic order into another through the changed meaning attributed to the symbol that initiated the narrative in the first place. Thomas argues that in *The Scarlet Letter*, the notion of "good citizenship" changes when the embroidered letter on Hester Prynne's chest gains a different meaning in the eyes of her community (Thomas 44). At first the letter functioned as an imposed symbol of Hester's adultery. Yet, although society no longer demands that she wear the letter, she nevertheless continues to wear it voluntarily. Hester wears the letter as a sign of her transgression of moral and colonial law, and throughout the novel the letter serves as a reminder of her place within, or rather outside, the Puritan community and socio-political order. However, the symbol changes meaning over the years, mostly informed by Hester's good works: "many people refuse to interpret the scarlet *A* by its original signification. They said it meant Able" (Hawthorne 149). For Thomas, that Hester's actions alter the significance of the symbol for the community indicates that she transforms the terms of what "good citizenship" entails (44). The letter that Hester wore as a testament of her transgression of New England law through her good deeds comes to symbolize redemption rather than penance.

Although the letter's meaning changes over time, Hester continues to wear it to define her own relationship with her community. This might be best exemplified by the scene in the forest in which Hester casts off the symbol in an act of rebellion. At first, Hester feels liberated from the burden of shame. Soon after, however, she is troubled by the fact that, without the letter attached to her chest, her daughter Pearl refuses to approach her as if she no longer recognizes her own mother. Only after Hester reattaches the letter does Pearl return to her mother. Thus, the letter has not changed significance altogether. Through her daughter's attachment to it, the letter continues to organize Hester's position in the community; she is unidentifiable without the symbol that signifies her shame. This changes with the public revelation that Pearl is the illegitimate daughter of the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, which

is closely followed by his death. In doing so, Dimmesdale not only further absolves Hester in the eyes of the community, but also secures her return as one of them: "After exhausting life in his efforts for mankind's spiritual good, he had made the manner of his death a parable, in order to impress on his admirers the mighty and mournful lesson, that, in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike" (Hawthorne 241). Nonetheless, after Dimmesdale's death Hester disappears, only to return years later. When she does, she is wearing the Scarlet Letter, but it is no longer a mark of shame, but rather a symbol that should be "looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too" (245). As the letter *A* has lost all connotations of her earlier relation to her community, Hester dedicates herself to counseling women who, much like her, rebel against Puritan society. Of this ending, Thomas writes: "on her return Hester has a different relation to the Puritan community. On the one hand, she acknowledges the importance of civil order as she did not in her rebellious days. On the other, Hester is now accepted by the people who once spurned her" (43). Her redemption, then, is the result of a two-directional transformation. Not only does the Puritan community open up to Hester again, but Hester has transformed her own attitude towards the community as well. She can only return to the community when the significance of the scarlet letter has not only changed for the Puritans, but also for herself.

As Thomas notes of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne wrote his novel during a period marked by a "religious disestablishment that moved churches into the sphere of voluntary association" (47). Yet, partly because of Hawthorne's own contribution to the myth-making of the Puritan roots of the United States, the political organization that replaced these Puritan foundations has, Thomas argues, contributed "to the mistaken belief that the political system that developed in nineteenth-century America should be seen as a secularized version of a Puritan theocracy, with citizens having the same structural relation to the state as Puritan subjects had to the political representatives of God on Earth" (47). The narrative of the United States' Puritan foundations, then, has become a civic myth of its own. Thomas follows Sacvan Bercovitch, who claims that Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* in response to this secularization of American politics, in which the relation of the citizen to the state became based on the ideology of individualism, as opposed to the communitarian Puritan ethos (30–31). As such, we can consider Alma's investment in a moral community as the inheritance of the myth that the post-Revolutionary National Symbolic is modeled on pre-Revolutionary Puritan values. Her sense of community is based upon a moral system in which alternative individual attachments to, or disidentifications with, the state have no proper place.

Opposite to Alma's imagining of the National Symbolic stands the civic myth of individualism that characterized the United States as a capitalist society during the Cold War, and which tarnishes her ideals of patriotism, marriage, and procreation. Reminiscing about Cliff being decorated with the Purple Heart she also recalls her other nephews, all of whom have abandoned her by first serving in the army, then marrying, and finally moving farther West (226). Although Cliff actually disappears while serving in the army, for Alma these other family members are the ones actually "missing", since they stopped writing her letters while still alive. Her other nephews achieve success in life by abandoning their community, and thus their individualism taints the ideal image of "good citizenship" that their success otherwise could have embodied. The challenge that the novel presents to Alma now that "the letters from Cliff [have] stopped" (210), now that he has also gone missing, is to incorporate his disappearance into a transformed definition of citizenship, without suffering a moral crisis.

Thomas notes that a Puritan organization of citizenship can be read alongside Freud's thesis that civilization needs some degree of repression for it to "maintain a just civil order" (35). Contesting this idea, Herbert Marcuse sought to imagine a civilization based on a non-repressive foundation. Thomas traces Marcuse's response to Freud back to early-nineteenth-century debates on "good citizenship" and argues that Hawthorne's novel about the Puritan rule of law can be read as an inversion of Marcuse's utopian challenge of Freud. The civic myth of "virgin land" suggests a wilderness for the Pilgrims to conquer and tame under their moral law. As such, narratives that constitute the myth of Puritan lawmaking in the colonies establish a binary opposition between nature and law at the heart of American citizenship (Thomas 33). Or, as Jacqueline Rose puts it, it places the domain of citizenship under the auspices of the repressive superego which "Freud eventually theorized as the site of social law" and "draws on all the unconscious energies it is meant to tame" (9). Purdy, in turn, challenges such a Freudian account of the repressive Puritan foundations onto which the American nation is built. As we have already seen in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* and *63: Dream Palace*, Purdy is highly suspicious of popular psychoanalytic narratives that have structured Cold War American thinking about sexual identity.[4] In Alma's renegotiation of her relationship with the National Symbolic, Purdy shows himself equally suspicious of narratives that formulate the repressive nature of the citizen's relation to the state. However, with the task of preventing a moral crisis

4 See van den Oever 21–22, and Kimmel 261–290.

at hand, Purdy offers Alma a way to redeem her relationship with her community through the memorial that she has set out to write. In renegotiating the function of the memorial in her commemoration of Cliff, Alma is also able to renegotiate her relationship with her community, just as Hester does in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Thomas argues that even though the scene of Hester's redemption restores her to the existing civil order, this restoration prompts a reconsideration of citizenship which no longer agrees with its Puritan predecessor. Hawthorne's model of citizenship at the end of the novel is an interactive one: Hester's reintroduction to her community is formed by a sympathetic identification that produces "independent citizens capable of choosing where they can best develop their capacity" (45). Thomas recognizes this move as a transition from a Puritan formulation of citizenship, which is based on obedience to the law, into the foundations of liberal democracy in which consensual citizenship is governed by communal and historical ties:

> Hester's decision is freely chosen in the sense that no one forces her to make it, but it is certainly not a decision made without pressure from many complicated historical and psychological factors, just as one's decision as to where to maintain or seek citizenship is not simply a rational choice about possibilities for political or economic freedom but one conditioned by numerous factors that one cannot control. (45)

Ultimately, Thomas's claims that "the civil order to which she submits has also changed" – that is, that the Puritans no longer "try to control all aspects of life" – is evidenced by the way that the scarlet letter itself starts to circulate differently within the community: no longer as symbol of damnation, but as symbol of redemption (46).

If Alma's failure to write a memorial to Cliff signifies a transformation in her views of citizenship and her relationship with her community, what, then, is Alma's attitude towards her neighbors to begin with? I have already mentioned Alma's disapproval of Clara's indulgence in Christian Science. Clara is introduced through an episode that Alma remembers and in which her religious beliefs are said to have almost caused Clara's death. After having her teeth pulled without the aid of anesthetics, as the use of medicine runs counter to the dogmas of Christian Science, Clara was found by Alma in a delirious and semiconscious state (211). Alma is convinced that she saved Clara from a painful death, and they regularly have bitter arguments about Clara's religious convictions. Alma's distrust of Christian Science inspires a vigilant attitude in Alma as to Clara's every movement, since she fears that Clara might try to convert other members of the community (249). Finally, as the self-appointed guardian of the

community's values, Alma plots with her neighbors against this threat of conversion to "the wrong church" as she is "fired with enthusiasm at the thought of stepping in between Clara and a proselyte" (313).[5]

The aggression with which Alma tries to undermine Clara's religious beliefs echoes what Lauren Berlant recognizes as Puritan "desires for counterrevolution [...] or the return of the (sexual) repressed" that are proposed by Hawthorne's imagining of America's pre-Revolutionary National Symbolic (*Anatomy of National Fantasy* 132). Alma cannot bring herself to associate her memorial with the teachings of Christian Science, since it deviates from her Calvinist convictions. The suggestion to write a memorial originated in Clara's attempt to convert Alma to Christian Science, but when Alma tells Boyd about the initiative, she refuses to admit the idea came from Clara in the first place (225).

Alma's zealous moralizing stretches beyond her religious feud with Clara. Two friends, Faye Laird and Mrs. Van Tassel, are also measured against Alma's moral convictions. While their transgressions play a lesser role in the narrative, they still function as negative formulations against which we can discern Alma's conception of "good citizenship". Alma suspects Faye, a middle-aged spinster who lives with her bedridden mother in order to take care of her, of taking delight in her mother's illness (219). Mrs. Van Tassel bears Alma's moralistic scorn for renting out a room to Minnie Clyde Hawke, an alcoholic widow who refuses to remarry (214). Again, her disapproval prompts her to become the self-appointed arbiter of decency. When Boyd shows no interest in her concerns over Mrs. Van Tassel's tenant situation, she tells him: "I don't think what happens to a friend and neighbor can be construed as just talk. If you had any kind of community feeling, you would *care* what happens to little Mrs. Van Tassel" (216–217, original emphasis). Her condescending tone towards Mrs. Van Tassel underlines her own sense of moral superiority which frames every interaction that she engages in.

Against the moral lapses of her neighbors, Alma imagines herself the embodiment of American values: the small-town, or in her case suburban, belief in surveillance and condemnation that also shaped the social fabric of the early Puritan settlements – at least as represented in *The Scarlet Letter*. This is evidenced by her condescending tone towards her community and her sense of entitlement that leads her to expect extended personal correspondence from the government regarding the whereabouts

5 As is often the case in Purdy's novels, the name of the protagonist is significant. Alma, in Latin, means "nourishing" or "nurturing". Both towards Cliff and towards her community, Alma imagines herself as *alma mater*, or nourishing mother.

of her nephew. But her desire to subject her community to her own moral code is perhaps best represented by her attempts to literally colonize her community. Alma has been systematically buying up plots of land surrounding her house, and indeed, at the beginning of the novel she discusses the possible purchase of yet more land, the purpose of which, we learn, is to protect her own suburban way of life. "If the business part of town continues to move down here", she exclaims, "we will be protected against office buildings and the like springing up around us, for the first thing a business concern would buy up would be a greenhouse, especially if Mrs. Van Tassel were the owner!" (204). By buying up the land surrounding her house not only does she physically colonize the land, but it also enables her to shore up the moral bastion onto which she founds the very reasoning that justifies her colonization. The community is in danger of moral corruption and thus Alma sees it as her civic duty to take control of her neighbors' property before corporate America has the chance to do so. Again we see in Alma's actions the traces of civic myths that make up the narratives of the American National Symbolic. We recognize in Alma's physical and moral expansionism the topos of Manifest Destiny, which is so closely tied to the myth of the frontier and Midwestern America (Pease 20).

Alma's zealous desire to safeguard her community against moral turpitude, however, forces her into an awkward position when she has to interview precisely the people that she accuses of un-American behavior for her memorial. While Faye, Mrs. Van Tassel, and Mrs. Hawke do not adhere perfectly to Alma's image of virtuous citizenship, she nevertheless considers them friends. Furthermore, they can provide her with only little information about Cliff. Because of their limited association with Cliff, Alma's idealized image of her nephew does not risk contamination with their lower moral standards. She does not need to actively disavow their moral failings, as she did with Clara's Christian Science. Other members of her community, however, are less fortunate as they were deeply involved in Cliff's life and thus have the most information that can help Alma write her memorial.

Three men, Professor Mannheim, Willard Baker, and Vernon Miller, pose the greatest threat to Alma's views of citizenship, as they represent communism (Professor Mannheim) and homosexual desire (Willard Baker and Vernon Miller). As their political and sexual identifications are misaligned with the ideal citizen which Alma imagines her nephew to be, she must work hardest to disavow their identifications and prevent any contamination by their perversion with her memorial to Cliff. Yet Alma's relationship with these three neighbors is complex and her investment in them is shaped by contradictory impulses of abjection and attraction. This dynamic is central to the transformation of her memorial, and its function as mediator between

Alma and the National Symbolic. The more she attempts to untangle the problematic associations of her nephew with an avowed communist and practicing homosexuals, the more she pushes the image of her nephew into abstraction, stripping him slowly of any individuating qualities and disolving his image into the unidentifiable remains that inhabit the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Communist Threats

Professor Mannheim, Cliff's former college professor, is highly suspicious of Alma's moral zealousness. His position is clearly expressed when he describes Alma as a "de-sexed [pillar] of the American Revolution" (304). When he is first introduced in the narrative, Alma does not mince words either. She remembers how he had cheated on his wife, who died under mysterious circumstances, after which he married the student with whom he had an affair (234); she mentions how she refused to let him enter her house, boasting that "such a moral leper would never step into her front room" (235); and finally she accuses him of being a drunk (236). Yet, Alma also needs Mannheim's testimony, since "Cliff *liked* Professor Mannheim" (236, original emphasis). Discussing with Mrs. Van Tassel the need to talk to Mannheim, the two friends express a mutual desire to qualify Cliff's relationship with his former teacher, or at least disclaim the effect that Mannheim could have on Cliff's moral constitution.

> "Professor Mannheim lent him so many books. He was a real influence on Cliff. Cliff spent hours there, you know."
>
> "Well, it never affected Cliff, I'm sure." Mrs. Van Tassel rolled her eyes vaguely. "Cliff was such a … good boy."
>
> "Of course we know Cliff didn't know about Professor Mannheim," Alma intoned, and then stopping, colored violently. (237).

The thought of Mannheim's blatantly un-American politics and the possible influence this might have had on her nephew fill Alma with anger. Still she realizes that she will have to engage in conversation with the professor if she wants to write about Cliff's experiences in college. It is through the expression of her contempt for Mannheim that we get the strongest sense of Alma's fantasies of "good citizenship". Her consideration of Mannheim's communist political views "dangerous, if not treasonous" (233), in combination with her constant confusion about his nationality, frames Mannheim as an alien threat to Alma's suburban values. Ironically, consider-

ing the Cold War context in which the novel was written, Mannheim's communism poses a threat alongside, and not against, the encroaching capitalist businesses from which Alma tries to shield herself by colonizing her neighborhood.

When Alma expresses her desire to talk to Mannheim, she and Boyd are confused about whether Mannheim is Dutch or German (241). The external narrator, too, muses on his perceived foreignness. His first wife was German-born (232), there is mention of his English seeming "another language in sound and pronunciation" (302), and a few pages later he is said to smoke a German pipe (304). The most condemning opinion of his foreignness, however, is expressed by Alma's ally, Mrs. Barrington. She "disapproved of him at every level of his being. His being a Jew was the least of it there, and his political opinions – which he now never uttered – and his books were less unacceptable than the way he wore his clothes and spoke English. Mrs. Barrington could not reconcile what he *was*, in fact, with what she thought a lifelong resident of Rainbow [Center] and the college campus should be" (295, original emphasis).

Bearing in mind that the novel was written under the cultural influence of the Cold War – and indeed, noting that the novel is set against the backdrop of the Cold War's first great proxy war and the political climate of McCarthyism – it is unsurprising that the constant focus on Mannheim's foreignness is equated with his un-American politics, and even the suggestion of treason. Given the novel's historical context, his Marxist beliefs might form the biggest threat to Alma's idealized image of Cliff, which is why she must disavow his potential influence on her nephew time and again. For Alma and her moral equals, Cliff's Americanness must render him unsusceptible to Mannheim's corrupting ideas: "'And what would Mannheim know about an American boy?' [Mrs. Barrington] went on. 'An old sitting-room pink of a past generation'" (277). Mrs. Barrington here serves once again as Alma's ally in delineating the boundaries of their moral worldview. In conjunction with Mrs. Barrington's estimation of the value of Mannheim's information about Cliff, Alma too doubts the validity of Mannheim's contributions. Yet this time she also introduces the issue of gender that makes her question any contribution to her memory of Cliff that does not align with her and Mrs. Barrington's moral paradigm: "Professor Mannheim, like Boyd, was only a man and could never tell her – could never tell Mrs. Barrington, that is – the certain things she felt she must know if she were to write the memorial" (254).

Alma's suburban values, then, are placed outside of the communism-capitalism binary. Instead, her values are based on a relationship with the state regardless of its ideological organization. For her, it is this relationship that is first and foremost the property of "good citizenship" and individual beliefs should be disregarded in the interest of the state. This corresponds to what Berlant identifies as the "social theory

of the Puritan conscience" in which "the subject's personal identifications – bonds of family, class, race, ethnicity, gender, or nation – are subsumed under the more pressing project of acting in the colony's providential, political interests" (*Anatomy of National Fantasy* 98). As we have seen, a similar disregard for personal identifications can be found in the Unknown Soldier memorial: the strong identification with the state that the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier represents runs across ideological, familial, classist, or ethnic identifications (Anderson 17–18; Wittman 9). The shared properties of Alma's attachment to the state, and the cross-ideological identification to the nation that the Unknown Soldier represents, allows for Alma to redefine her own ideas of "good citizenship" without suffering a moral crisis.

If I have dwelt at length on the moral high-ground that Alma imagines herself to occupy in relation to the "un-American" Professor Mannheim, that is because the greatest shift in Alma's understanding of citizenship can be understood through her changed attitude towards him. Alma's initial definition of citizenship was informed by a belief in a self-governing community that is organized around an absolute set of morals, held in place by social control and surveillance. Alma's commitment to surveillance as a means of safeguarding the community's moral values is based on her conviction that she could write the "*formal* facts about him [Cliff]" so that she is able to "know all there is fundamentally to know about Cliff" (258, original emphasis). The redefinition of her relationship with her neighbors that is effected by her changing image of Cliff pushes Alma away from a notion of citizenship that is based on absolute morals and surveillance, and towards a more democratic view of community in which moral laws are relationally defined.

Alma's investment in Cliff's memorial is based on her belief in an absolute and fundamental truth embodied by her nephew. The shift in her attitude towards citizenship, then, is provoked by her understanding that she could not possibly write a biography of Cliff. Despite her belief in surveillance, she has failed to know him. Furthermore, she realizes that Cliff shared more in common with those neighbors she had so abhorred than with the absolute moral law to which she had always subscribed. Her conviction that Cliff wanted to remain in Rainbow Center (197), her firm belief in his excellence (199), and her pride in his being awarded the Purple Heart (228) begin to ring false as her idealized image of Cliff is slowly chipped away by the intimations of those she once deemed unworthy of Cliff's attention. The realization that her image of Cliff as ideal citizen, which was so crucial to the establishment of her moral position within society, had always been false catalyzes Alma's transference of his image onto the secular symbol of the Unknown Soldier. Through Alma's search for a symbol to help her redefine her own position within the community, Purdy's novel questions

the validity of the American National Symbolic's Puritan foundations. If the image that for her epitomized the moral foundations of "good citizenship" are revealed to be misconstrued, what would a more secular and democratic National Symbolic look like for Alma? Would there still be room for her nephew in her transformed relationship with the National Symbolic?

A closer reading of the novel suggests that Alma's transition from a Puritan to a democratic National Symbolic is not without its sacrifices. As discussed above, crucial to the effectiveness of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is the inherent tension between the identifiability and anonymity of the remains that it houses. As Alma's memorial to Cliff transforms from a biographical project into the empty vessel that represents national fantasies, Alma is also faced with a melodramatic impossible plot situation that makes her choose between familial identification with her nephew and national identification with the Unknown Soldier. To redefine her place within her community, Alma must relinquish Cliff altogether. While previous critics identify Alma's failure to write her memorial as a "nonperformance", I argue that this failure produces a new sort of meaning-making. Alma's failure transforms her project into a memorial through which she can renegotiate her understanding of "good citizenship". The record book that was supposed to become a biography of Cliff remains empty, but its emptiness makes it no less a memorial – just a different kind of memorial. Yet, before the memorial can take up a wholly different function – that of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier – the narrative must also ensure that Cliff disappears as well.

Cliff's Disappearance

In addition to from being declared MIA, Cliff goes missing on multiple levels in the narrative. At first, his disappearance is enacted by the discontinuation of his letters. As the narrative moves forward, other parts of Cliff to which Alma still grasped also recede into the background, making him vanish both physically and as a character with individuating features. This latter disappearance is set in motion by information that Mannheim offers Alma after she has sufficiently distanced Cliff's memory from his Marxist politics. After some intervention by both Boyd and Mrs. Barrington, Alma musters up the courage to approach Mannheim and ask him for some of Cliff's old exams and papers. Instead of giving useful information for the biographical memorial that Alma still at this point intends to write, Mannheim offers her the first gesture that transforms her project into the erection of an Unknown Soldier

memorial. After expressing his disbelief that "his papers should have been the ones to survive", the most relevant information that Mannheim has to offer is that Cliff "did not distinguish himself". Even if there had been something exceptional about the boy, it had yet to develop (299). Despite this unfulfilled potential, Cliff did not stand out from his peers, although Mannheim had kept Cliff's old schoolwork, but none of any of his fellow students. These written traces of Cliff's life seem insufficient to amount to even a biographical sketch. On the contrary, the external narrator suggests that it is exactly because Mannheim still holds on to these traces of Cliff that his character slowly recedes from the narrative: "Cliff's biography – if he had one – was likely to consist of the very elements which a man would not be apt to tell a woman. Even supposing that the professor knew the elements, he might not be able to know or to recognize the important ones – the real ones – in Cliff's life, and would perhaps content himself with relating anecdotes that could have happened to anybody" (254).

Mrs. Barrington's estimation of Cliff as a typical American boy and Mannheim's comments that he did not distinguish himself make Cliff's image all the more ubiquitous. That is, especially in his failure to stand out, he could be each and any American boy. In an ironic turn, the quality of Cliff that enabled Alma to distance his memory from Mannheim's communist affiliation – Cliff's being all-American – is also what strips his individuality from him – what could have happened to Cliff could have happened to anybody. Mannheim's remarks about Cliff's failure to stand out begin to resonate with the changing purpose of Alma's memorial. Her imagining of his identity, or any individuating qualities out of which she could construe a narration of his identity, are replaced by a shared anonymity that Wittman identifies as the Unknowns Soldier's transformative relation to the state (10).

However, there is one piece of information, which Mannheim doesn't share with Alma, that might have made Cliff much more distinguishable. Yet when Mannheim hints at this information in conversation with his wife, he immediately ties it to Alma's inability to write. Cliff had once confided in Mannheim a secret which the latter has kept to himself ever since. It is this secret that Mannheim considers "the only thing about him worth telling", yet at the same time the secret is also something that "you couldn't write down or that his aunt would never understand enough to be able to write down" (306). Otherwise completely indistinguishable, Cliff's most defining feature, according to Mannheim, defies being written down. Especially by Alma, who after all tries to write down the story of Cliff's life, based on the sheer notion that she would be unable to understand what this secret might mean.

While Cliff's identity slowly vanishes from memory, his physical body goes missing too. I have already pointed out that at the beginning of the novel Alma receives a

telegram saying that Cliff was missing in action in Korea, and that his letters, which consisted more of lack than of text anyway, stop arriving as well. The papers that were still in Mannheim's possession, too, remain missing for a long time: only after Alma has made amends with the realization that she will never write Cliff's memorial does she receive his old school records and assignments (362). In conjunction with Cliff's missing body and Alma's realization that her connection to him is voided, the memorial she is writing also remains empty. Alma manages to write in her "record book" only "a few indecisive sentence fragments" (309). The written traces that testify to Cliff's existence have disappeared alongside him, or they signal his disappearance in other ways. The letter that eventually confirms his death states that there "wasn't even enough left of him to ship home in his casket" (338). As Alma bemoans that there "should have been something left *from* him for us" (338, original emphasis), she realizes that Cliff was not only missing physically, but was also missing from every aspect of their lives, to the extent that Alma can no longer claim kinship to her nephew. That is, the Cliff that Alma had imagined for herself was never really there in the first place. In a startling revelation Alma exclaims that she "never *knew* Cliff", to which Boyd responds: "we're all pretty much strangers to one another" (338, original emphasis).

Patrick Brantlinger offers a thematic reading of all characters and events that go missing in *The Nephew*. He argues that this prevalence of absent persons signifies a lack at the center of our sense of the self: "Our seemingly substantial experience is never truly present, its center (essence, meaning, origin, goal) is always mysteriously decentered, sliding away, and we ourselves are 'missing in action'" (28). This seems true for Alma's understanding of Cliff's identity. The more she learns about him, the more she realizes that what she held to be true about him slips away from her understanding. Cliff turns out to be wholly decentered and so is Alma's memorial to him – completely void but for those "indecisive sentence fragments."

Brantlinger's assessment of Alma's empty memorial as a testament to the lack at the center of Cliff's identity is reminiscent of Geoffrey Hartman's play on the "whodonut", which imagines identity as having a core that defies representation in language.[6] Yet, as Barbara Johnson already suggests, on the referential level, what we perceive as a lack already functions as a signifier (496). If we read Alma's empty memorial through the lens of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, we see that despite the perceived emptiness at its center, her memorial still signifies, only in different ways than she originally imagined it would do. Acknowledging that the narratives

6 See Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of Hartman's and Johnson's use of the "whodonut" figure.

Alma has created about Cliff are empty inventions, Brantlinger interprets her gradual realization that she never really knew her nephew as her resignation to the fact that she will never know a nephew other than the one she had invented. Brantlinger makes the move from "knowing" to "believing" and argues that in the final pages of the novel "Alma appears to solve the mystery of her missing relation by 'believing in' Cliff" (40). By reducing Alma's discoveries about her nephew to a personal crisis, Brantlinger fails to account for her changing attitude towards her neighbors and to recognize its significance: that she has reimagined her sense of citizenship through her unwritten memorial.

"Cliff hated Rainbow"

Afraid that Cliff will recede even further into anonymity, Alma's mind lingers on the secret that Mannheim hinted at, but refused to share with her. While this secret represents for Alma the last point of possible attachment to Cliff, as soon as she discovers what it is, it too contributes to the further stripping away of Cliff's individuating features. In a series of events and conversations with two of her other neighbors, Alma discovers some details about Cliff's life that again shake her belief in an idealized image of her nephew. However, it isn't only this falling from grace that challenges the symbolic value that Alma has attributed to Cliff. The final and definitive blow to Alma's idealization is the literal destruction of Cliff's image – a destruction that not only effaces Alma's idealized image of Cliff, but also contributes to his physical disappearance.

Where Professor Mannheim is the political adversary to Alma's ideas of "good citizenship", two other neighbors, Willard Baker and Vernon Miller, represent her sexual adversaries, even if she at first refuses to acknowledge this. Throughout the novel several characters suggest that the two men are in a romantic relationship. It seems that the whole neighborhood is aware of their homosexuality, except for Alma. When at the beginning of the novel Boyd hints at Willard's homosexuality, Alma expresses ignorance on the subject: "If there's something I should know about him, for heaven's sake tell me, and don't imply that there's more to his character than I could ever hope to understand" (204). This self-imposed ignorance allows Alma to engage with Willard and Vernon, since as long as she is able to deny their homosexuality, she can ask them about their relationship with Cliff without soiling her memory of him.

Just as Alma's resistance to Mannheim's anti-nationalist ideologies is rooted in her investment in absolute morals, so too does her blindness to homosexuality

stem from a worldview in which homosexuality deviates from "good citizenship."[7] If part of her idealized image of Cliff hinges on the disavowal of Mannheim's political convictions, then the disavowal of possible homosexuality seems even more pertinent to her project of immortalizing Cliff's memory. When Faye Laird confronts her with Willard and Vernon's homosexuality, Alma can only respond with a dismissive "I don't know homosexuals" (333). However, this dismissal is immediately followed by Alma's realization that her worldview does not correspond to the reality of her community: "I am afraid I don't know a good many things" (333).

While for Alma the revelation of Willard and Vernon's homosexuality certainly comes as a surprise, she has already begun to change her attitude towards her neighbors. The disavowal of Cliff's possible homosexuality, which Alma eventually coaxes from Vernon, can thus be explained in two ways. For one, it could be a means to safeguard her memory of Cliff from contamination with identifications that run counter to her ideals of citizenship. But perhaps, when read through the lens of her memorial's transformation and her changing relationship with her neighbors, this disavowal rather amounts to another attempt to divest Cliff of any individuating qualities. In stripping him of homosexuality, Alma again turns Cliff into the empty canvass – the average, indistinguishable American boy – onto which Alma's changed relation to her neighborhood can be projected without presenting her with a moral crisis.

To elaborate on this second possibility, I will consider two pivotal events that both thematize Cliff's disappearance and Alma's falsely idealized image of Cliff. When Vernon and Willard are away on holiday, Alma is asked to look after their house. One night, the night during which Boyd has a nightmare of a hydrogen bomb exploding on Rainbow Center, they notice that Willard and Vernon's house is on fire. Running into the house, they discover that the fire mysteriously started in Vernon's locked room. Alma eventually succeeds at forcing the door open, but what they find inside the room is perhaps more shocking than the fire: "A series of almost life-sized photos of the nephew stretched across the walls of the room by wires, raced giddily before them in the reflection and consummation of the fire" (323). As soon as they make

7 The fact that communism and homosexuality appear in conjunction as the greatest threats to Alma's conception of "good citizenship" adds to the political background of the Cold War against which the novel is set. Senator Joseph McCarthy's campaign to purge the United States of any "un-American activity" often brought combined charges of communism and homosexuality against defendants who had to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee. This period was later dubbed the "lavender scare" by David Johnson (2004). See also Kimmel (236–237) and van den Oever (32–36).

their discovery, these pictures are consumed by the flames. Once again any physical traces that testify to Cliff's identity vanish altogether. Since early in the novel Alma laments that she has only one photograph of her nephew, this final gesture seems all the more compelling. Right at the moment she rediscovers the image of her nephew, it immediately disappears in flames, and he recedes ever further into anonymity.

Another event that convinces Alma that her idealized image of Cliff is mistaken happens right after she shares the news of Cliff's death with Boyd. In response, Boyd hands Alma a sum of money that had belonged to Cliff. Boyd confesses to Alma that he had found Cliff coming home drunk from a farewell party at Willard and Vernon's, and the money had fallen out of his pocket. Not sure how to respond to this new information, Alma now begins to connect her suspicion of Willard and Vernon's homosexuality to Cliff. Alma finally realizes that she needs to adjust her image of Cliff, which no longer corresponds to her notion of "good citizenship". "I was afraid that maybe his image had got spotted for you", Boyd cautiously tells her, to which she responds: "It has upset things a bit, I suppose" (341).

After being notified of the fire in their house, Vernon and Willard hurry home and in their haste end up in a car crash that kills Willard and leaves Vernon with his leg in a cast. Desperate that she has only Vernon left to ask about their relationship with Cliff, Alma forces herself to set aside her prejudices and asks him directly about the events that occurred just before Cliff left for the army. Alma interrogates him about the photos in his room, the money, and finally her suspicion that Cliff was homosexual. Even though she invites Vernon into her house, her engagement with him is still rooted in feelings of moral superiority. Despite the realization that her image of Cliff has been mistaken, she still looks to Vernon to deny any suspicion of what she considers to be immoral behavior in her nephew. When Vernon claims he recognized something of himself in Cliff, a harsh "what does that mean" from Alma prompts Vernon to add, "he wasn't a homosexual, if that's what you're worried about" (348).

At this point Alma's moral superiority receives a final mortal blow. If she had hoped for another chance to redeem her idealized image of Cliff by Vernon's denial of Cliff's homosexuality, Alma learns a secret even more terrible than Cliff's possible sexual deviance. "Cliff hated Rainbow", Vernon tells Alma, who is in a state of shock:

> He hated taking your and his uncle's charity. You were his Children's Home. He hated everything, I think. He hated being without parents and thinking he was unwanted. He hated for you to feel you had to love him. He never wanted to come back here or hear from anybody. He told me, 'If I had the money I would never be back.' (348)

The final blow to Alma's idealized image of Cliff is that he felt he did not belong in Rainbow Center. He did not want to, or felt that he could not, conform to Alma's notion of family, or beyond that, vision of citizenship. Instead, he wanted to escape the stringent moral worldview that he felt was imposed upon him. At the beginning of the novel Alma had transferred her moral beliefs to her conviction that she would be able to write a record of Cliff's life that reflected her idealized notion of citizenship. Learning that her nephew felt contempt for the notion of citizenship she wanted to write into his biography, Alma can no longer subscribe to that image either.

Threshold of Assent

Reading Alma's realization that she cannot contain her image of Cliff within her ideals of citizenship as the beginning of her own transformation into a democratic citizen offers a viable alternative to the repressive foundations of the American National Symbolic. Towards the end of the novel, Alma has made a somewhat utopian turn and has come to view her relationship with her community as democratic rather than autocratic. The chapter in which this occurs, curiously entitled "Threshold of assent", illustrates not only Alma's changed attitude towards her neighbors, but also indicates her changed ideas of what "good citizenship" entails.

After Alma has come to terms with the fact that she has lost her familial bonds with Cliff, and peace and quiet has been restored to Rainbow Center, the novel makes a full circle by ending again on Memorial Day. This time, however, Alma has not yet hoisted the flag in commemoration of the national holiday. Instead of a pristine flag flying over their house, Boyd actually rips the flag when he tries to retrieve it from the attic. Even though Alma tries to repair the torn fabric, it turns out the flag "was not so easily repaired … once she began working over it" (353). The flag had apparently been in poor shape for a long time now: "other long hidden snags and rents in the material suddenly asserted themselves, as if in conspiracy with the first rent in the fabric, and soon Alma saw that what she held was a tissue of rotted cloth, impossible to mend" (353). The symbol that previously represented Alma's belief in the American nation, and in which she had taken so much pride, is now reduced to a disintegrated piece of fabric that has lost its ceremonial function.

S. Adams does not read the title "Threshold of assent" as signifying a change in Alma's estimation of her neighbors. Instead, he remains convinced of her moral constitution that, however it might have been shaken, continues to measure her neighbors' shortcomings against her own fortitude and remains deeply rooted in

her steadfast moralism. He writes, "Alma opens herself to the healing faith, to the calming authority of one who has known similar sorrow and can 'read' the 'omissions' of others in the dazzling light of her own, and so she arrives at the 'Threshold of assent' as this last chapter is so aptly entitled with its further hint of her readiness for the final peace of that other 'Great Physician' – death" (73). Adams frames Alma's "assent" much differently than Chupack, who calls her "a more understanding Alma" (59). Schwarzschild, too, sees a positive change in Alma, who in the final chapters renounces "the rules and tradition that prevented her from loving" (43). Now that Alma has shed the convictions that brought her to condemn the moral failings of her neighbors, she is finally able to make peace with them.

Once the memorial is finished, the community moves on and restores the "civil order" that had governed it before Alma began her disruptive queries. Professor Mannheim's reputation at college is vindicated, Vernon Miller and Faye Laird decide to marry after the events that had befallen them, and even the alcoholic Minnie Hawkes receives her redemption and takes the bedridden Mrs. Van Tassel on a restorative trip to South Carolina (351–352). Alma even brings herself to include Vernon in her immediate circle of friends. During their interview after the car crash, Vernon remarks that "this is the first time [he'd] been invited inside a Rainbow house" (344), after which Alma writes a dedication on his cast reading "*To Vernon Miller/From His Friend And Neighbor/Alma Mason*" (345, original emphasis) and urges him to call her Alma instead of Miss Mason (350).

The significance of these scenes of reconciliation are underlined by another, but final transformation of Alma's memorial. After seeking her peace with Vernon Miller, the subject of Cliff's secret – his money – also becomes part of the transformative process that was initiated by her memorial. Vernon suggests that Alma "use those four thousand dollars as some kind of memorial for [Cliff]", and proposes "a plot of flowers or flowering trees or something between your property and mine" (350). The plot of land that Vernon refers to is exactly the one that Alma wanted to buy in her colonizing attempt to protect the neighborhood from corrupting capitalist influence. Turning it into a garden as a memorial to Cliff signifies that the memorial itself has now also obtained a different relationship with the community. Although Alma felt that her biography was publicly commissioned, it nevertheless remained a private project through which she renegotiated her relationship with Cliff and the state. A garden between two properties, on the other hand, is by definition a public memorial through which all members of the community can define their relationship with the National Symbolic. Rather than a singular and absolute vision of how Cliff embodied "good citizenship", Alma's memorial literally becomes a symbol that connects her

with the elements of the community that she used to abhor. Whereas Alma's idea of "good citizenship" used to entail a community that expressed a steadfast belief in absolute morals, safeguarded through surveillance, she now sees her community as relational. She no longer invests in absolute morals against which to measure her neighbors. Instead, she creates a space in which the members of her community can meet despite their differences. Alma's relation to the National Symbolic, through this final change in her memorial project, changes from autocratic and monolithic to democratic and inclusive.

In this chapter I have directed the focus of my reading of Purdy's work away from a strictly narratological methodology, and introduced intertextual readings and interpretational framing devices that each interact differently with the novel's conceptualization of citizenship. Reading *The Nephew* alongside *The Scarlet Letter* places the novel in a tradition of literary works that reevaluate the Puritan foundations of the United States by scrutinizing the objects that represent the relation of these works' protagonists to the National Symbolic. Just as Hester Prynne can be seen as renegotiating America's Puritan heritage after the Revolution, Alma Mason can be read as renegotiating her outlook on citizenship in the political climate of the Cold War.

By reading Alma's mission to write a memorial to her missing nephew against symbols that structure American citizens' relations to the National Symbolic – national holidays such as Memorial Day, civic myths such as the frontier and virgin land, and national monuments such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier – I have traced how her complex feelings about "good citizenship" transform along with the changing function of her own writing project. What other critics have seen as failure, I see as an opportunity for Alma to renegotiate her own relationship with her community. Reading failure not as the absence of signification, but as an performative act in and of itself as Halberstam urges us to do, has opened the novel to a redemptive reading of Alma's attachment to her nephew. The changing nature of the symbol through which Alma attaches her own identification with the state, which is prompted by her failure to write it, exposes how the National Symbolic is not a fixed set of narratives and symbols, but rather a screen onto which different identifications are projected differently, each producing different results. Unlike *Children Is All*, then, *The Nephew* offers a hopeful reading of our attachment to the National Symbolic. Despite Purdy's obvious cynicism towards Alma's naive investment in her own moral worldview, as clearly expressed by the characters surrounding her, Alma participates actively in the transformation of the symbols that represent her views on citizenship.

Finally, if we see her failure as a performative act, as an act that produces new meanings, we recognize that Alma has learned to accept Cliff's disappearance without suffering a crisis of faith. Returning to the second Memorial Day with which the novel closes, Alma suggests to Boyd that this day "was his day" (363). Cliff is now represented by the national holiday that commemorates fallen American soldiers and that is so closely tied to the rhetoric of the Unknown Soldier memorial that now symbolizes her new relation to the nation. Cliff is no longer missing; he is now part of Alma's transformed, democratic vision of citizenship, which allows for a more inclusive identification with her community. This inclusion is the assent that Alma moves into. Now she can interpret Cliff's failure to write substantial letters to her in the light of her own transformative failure: "Cliff knew we cared … and that made him care too, at last, though he never said it, and he didn't have the gift, you and I know, to write it" (363).

CONCLUSION

Queer Death/Queer Resistance

On 13 March 2019, a small group of people gathered at the cemetery of the St Peter and St Mary Church in the village of Weedon Lois, about thirty minutes outside of Northampton in the UK. The crowd assembled on the tenth anniversary of James Purdy's death to bury him next to the grave of the English poet Edith Sitwell. It had always been Purdy's wish to be buried next to her, as he firmly believed that she singlehandedly gave him the opportunity to publish his debut collection of stories *Color of Darkness* in 1956.[1] At the time, Purdy had little success with publishing in America and thus had some of his short stories privately printed so he could send these out to authors he admired. Of the few authors who responded, Sitwell showed the most enthusiasm for his work, and the two writers struck up a friendship that lasted until her own death in 1964. It is because of this friendship, Purdy always maintained, that he gained his first publishing contract with Victor Gollancz, after which American publishers followed suit. Although it might be debated whether Purdy's initial success as an author can be fully ascribed to his friendship with Sitwell, the event of his burial reifies this specific reading of his authorship's beginnings. Indeed, the leaflet accompanying the ceremony reads, "[hers] was encouragement enough to set James Purdy on an extraordinary literary course" and "[t]hanks initially to the recommendation of Dame Edith, Purdy would gain many admirers among English writers" (Lock n.p.).

I turn to the scene of Purdy's burial to end my dissertation for several reasons. Quite obviously there is a compositional reason: since I opened my introduction with an anecdote of how Purdy orchestrated the narration of his own birth year, opening my conclusion with a story of how Purdy orchestrated his own burial feels satisfying on a narrative level. It also points to Purdy's lifelong preoccupation with the narration of his own life. If, as I suggested, it is indeed true that Purdy lied about his age to ensure the association of his work with a younger generation of authors, then his wish to be buried next to Sitwell organizes yet another aspect of his literary biography. The ceremony not only enshrines Purdy's friendship with Sitwell, but also recasts this friendship as a relationship between patron and protégé, which, as Frank

1 Shortly after Purdy's death in 2009, John Uecker mentions this wish in his introduction to the publication of selected plays by Purdy (xii).

Baldanza has pointed out, is a dominant theme throughout his oeuvre ("Paradoxes" 347). The narrative of Purdy's burial functions as a palimpsest superimposed onto other narratives of his literary origins, for these can no longer be narrated without the knowledge and consideration of the former. Finally, the scene of Purdy's burial and the way in which this scene can be considered a final attempt of Purdy to narrate his own life foregrounds yet another theme that runs throughout this dissertation: queer death.

While my primary occupation was to read Purdy's work through the lens of melodrama and analyze the ways in which he interrogates the fiction of identity, I have been particularly attentive to the consequences that Purdy's resistance to identity has had for his own characters. Daniel in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, Fenton in *63: Dream Palace*, Cabot in *Cabot Wright Begins*, both Billy and Edna in *Children Is All*, and in a sense also *The Nephew*'s Cliff, resist the superimposition of a totalizing identity fiction, challenge dominant readings of their identity, or propose alternative narrations of their own or others' identities. Some of them emerge relatively unscathed from their acts of resistance. Cabot might have suffered memory loss and impotence, but he eventually finds a way to claim ownership of his own identity narration. Fenton, too, seems to emerge reasonably unharmed. In fact, he seems to be the one assaulting those who try to fix a particular identity narrative onto him. Less fortunate is Edna, who finds her own narration of her son's identity can only be made manifest when she slips into insanity. Cliff, who might already be dead before the narration of *The Nephew* even begins, further recedes from the narration until he is eventually devoid of all identity. Finally, Daniel and Billy find their deaths because they resist a totalizing reading of their sexuality or national identity (Daniel), or because they cannot be read on their own terms (Billy). Resisting, refuting, or interrogating identity, then, comes at the great risk of social or even literal death.

Death is an important theme for queer thinking, especially in the wake of the AIDS crisis, the most devastating period of which coincided with the time at which gay and lesbian scholars began to organize under the umbrella term of "queer theory". In Chapter 2, I discussed how this led to a theorizing of promiscuity as a counterhegemonic and anti-homophobic response to homophobia and sex negativity in dominant discourses. For example, in his seminal essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?", Leo Bersani theorizes promiscuity in relation to the Freudian death drive. Gay sex – more specifically, anal penetrative sex between two men – during the AIDS crisis, he suggests, has become emblematic for masculinist fears of self-shattering through sexual pleasure ("Rectum" 220). For Bersani, to receive anal pleasure constitutes a radical rejection of heteronormative social structures

and confronts society with its own fear of latent homosexuality; a fear that resulted in a long history of homophobic and misogynistic criminalization of sex between men. This position, which Bersani further developed in *Homos* (1995) and which has been dubbed the "anti-social thesis in queer theory" (Caserio et al. 2006), has gained much traction among queer scholars who seek to imagine ways in which queer subjects can subvert heteronormative social structures, or who seek to produce counterhegemonic knowledges that foreground queer experiences within these structures. This mode of queer negativity, as some scholars have dubbed this stance (Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2011), politicizes the nonnormative and antisocial subjectivation of queerness by positing it as a more ethical alternative to the repressive subjectivating mechanisms of heteronormative and patriarchal societies.

Writing that concerns itself with the antisocial thesis in queer theory tends to center on acts or objects that refuse to conform to social norms as world-making in their own way. Thus, as I have discussed in Chapter 5, Jack Halberstam proposes to read failure not as nonperformance or the absence of meaningful acts, but as acts of world-making that puncture hegemonic knowledges and "exploit the unpredictability of ideology" (*Queer Art of Failure* 88). While perhaps never spoken aloud, a strong undercurrent in these accounts of queer antisocial resistance is the assumption that nonnormative subject formations are ethically privileged over their normative counterparts. If normative subject formations are inherently oppressive, even for those who seem to embody these norms, then surely accounts of subject formation that undermine the seeming self-evidence of the norm must occupy an ethically preferable position. However, such a wholesale celebration of counterhegemonic practices tends to overlook that these practices might often employ the same vocabularies and strategies of meaning-making as the dominant culture that they seek to subvert. In Chapter 1 I have touched upon the subject of privileging a subjectivating mechanism that seemingly opposes normative heterosexual subject formations: "coming out of the closet". Although "coming out" has been, and is arguably still, an important strategy to socially and politically mobilize queer-identified people, the mode of confession that structures the narrative of the closet lends itself to a truth-claim that renders "coming out" both as the only alternative to heterosexual subject formations and as the dominant subjectivating mechanism for queer people. Thus, not only does the confessional mode of "coming out" entrench pre-existing norms, but it also becomes a norm in and of itself. I argue in Chapter 1 that Daniel does not resist sexual desire per se; if anything, Daniel acts out his desires through the mode of sleepwalking. Instead, his crisis is induced by the social demand

to confess to a certain sexual identity based on his sexual acts. For Daniel, "coming out" would subject him to the same oppressive identity categories that the narrative of "coming out of the closet" is believed to subvert.

Daniel's resistance to identity is similar to that of other characters we find in Purdy's novels. Far from rejecting sexual desires – either normative or nonnormative – characters such as Fenton, Cabot, and, *in absentia*, also Cliff, resist the inscription of their sexual acts onto the fantasy of identity. Of these characters, Daniel is arguably most successful in his resistance: until the moment he dies, he refuses to confess to a specific sexual identity category. That Daniel dies because of his sustained resistance to identity makes him emblematic to discussions that seek to identify world-making acts of queer resistance in the occasion of queer death. In my Chapter 2 I have discussed Daniel's death in relation to José Esteban Muñoz's notion of disidentification, for it is in his death that Daniel can both give in to Captain Stadger's "savage embraces" and disavow the confines of restrictive identity categories. Indeed, Muñoz is emphatic in his claim that "disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival" (*Disidentifications* 5, original emphasis). Although Muñoz draws much of his thinking from utopist reflections on futurity, he too recognizes a mode of world-making or an emancipatory gesture in the theme of queer death. As such, Muñoz opts to read the suicide of New York dancer Fred Herko as a denaturalizing performance which gestures toward the ethical implications of staging and performing death. Ultimately he claims that "[t]o denaturalize the way we dwell (move) in the world is to denaturalize the world itself in favor of a utopian performativity" (*Cruising Utopia* 151).

Although I do not wish to dispute the validity of reflections on the performative and world-making operations of queer death, I do want to caution against an all too celebratory theorizing of queer death as the ultimate gesture of disavowal and counterhegemonic knowledge production. Even if Daniel's death dramatizes a sense of liberation that is embedded in the radical rejection of the demand to live life in a certain way, it also takes away Daniel's opportunity to resist the narration of his identity beyond his conflict with Stadger. While Daniel's disidentifying performance allows him to both resist the category of identity and act out his sexual desires, this is only successful insofar as his performance of disidentification is directed at Stadger's totalizing reading of his identity. Identity narratives produced by others are unaffected by Daniel's actions and, to some extent, even reduce his resistance to "severe mental disturbance" (ECW 239), if they take his resistance into consideration at all. After his death, the narration of his identity continues in a letter from the army informing Eustace that Daniel "had died of injuries sustained in basic training" (239).

What happened between Daniel and Stadger is no longer part of how his death is narrated by others. Daniel's act of disidentification is ignored in favor of a narrative that makes his death seem like a mere accident. This time around, however, Daniel is no longer present to confront this fixating of his identity.

Similarly, Cliff in *The Nephew* could be considered to have lost agency over his identity-production. Although the reader can only construe Cliff's relationship with his family and neighbors retroactively, since he already died before the novel's beginning, this relationship can certainly be considered antisocial and queer. The disavowal of his community by enlisting in the army recalls the topos of "going away" that Stephen D. Adams identifies in early queer writing (*Homosexual as Hero* 56), or at least gestures towards Robert L. Caserio's 1997 reflection on the complicated relationship between gay men and the army in post-World War II queer writing. Yet, here too, death not only signifies an escape from restrictive identity categories, but also prevents Cliff from sustained resistance. In fact, his death even brings these identity categories to the front and center of the narration. Only after his death does Alma begin to occupy herself both with the narration of Cliff's identity and her categorization of the identities of the people around her. Although Alma's sudden preoccupation with identity grants her new meaningful relationships with her neighbors, it comes at the cost of Cliff's own narration. As the novel progresses, Cliff's image gradually recedes into the background, until he becomes an empty canvas onto which Alma can project her own changing attachments to her community.

Cliff's death, as is the case with Daniel's, resists being sentimentalized in a way that an all too celebratory theorizing of queer death runs the risk of doing. Although their deaths indeed radically undermine the ways in which their identities were narrated prior to dying, they also leave open a space for new identity narrations. These new narratives do not necessarily adhere to the radical rejection of identity that the antisocial thesis in queer theory wishes to see. Instead, these identity narrations might return to normative and repressive modes of subjectivation, or perhaps even result in new and unexpected insights for those telling the stories. As such, Purdy's novels move away from the ethical privileging of the antisocial thesis in queer theory. Instead, they dramatize the many different effects that this theoretical position produces. His novels suggest that the effects of reading for identity do not necessarily terminate with the performance of antisocial practices. Reading practices continue beyond the physical encounter with the subjects being read. For Purdy's queer characters, survival means the ability to navigate the plethora of coexisting and contradicting identities that are produced in the repeated act of reading. Resistance against the category of identity, then, is not so much a question of radical rejection of heteronormative

social structures; rather, resistance is located in the constant interrogation of the narrative foundation of identity itself. If identity is an effect of narration, if identity is indeed wholly fictive, then understanding how these narratives operate and how reading practices contribute to the production of different identity fantasies is a key strategy for those who wish dismantle the restrictive nature of identity categories. Exposing identities as the product of narration arms those who wish to defend themselves against the totalizing and violent force that reductive reading for identity entails.

The identity narratives that I have focused on in my dissertation almost exclusively pertain to fictions of sexual and national identities. While Purdy undoubtedly also interrogates other identity categories, such as gender, race, and class, the categories of sexuality and nationality remain the most pervasive in his attempts to undermine the narrative production of identity.[2] To be sure, I have separated discussions of sexual and national identity by focusing in my first three chapters on sexual identity, while turning my attention predominantly to national identity in my last two chapters. This separation, I admit, is artificial at best. Like Siobhan Somerville, who demonstrates that in early-twentieth-century America fantasies of homosexual identity were part and parcel of racist and xenophobic discourses, I want to suggest that a critique of sexual identity requires a consideration of national identity, and vice versa. Indeed, throughout my dissertation these identity categories have bled into one another, despite my best efforts to separate them for the sake of analytical clarity. Thus, as evidenced in Chapters 1 and 5, the army as an institution that organizes the relationship between the citizen and National Symbolic also enforces a compulsory heterosexuality onto that citizen. As such, sexuality, and in particular the type of sexuality that is promoted by a heteronormative patriarchal society, can be considered a national fantasy insofar as it organizes the way in which individual subjects attach to the National Symbolic. In Chapter 4, I demonstrated how institutions, such as national holidays and the prison industrial complex, structure the fantasies through which subjects attach to the National Symbolic. In Chapter 5, on the other hand, I suggested that these attachments can be remodeled through an investigation into the operation of these institutions. Alma, who in writing a memorial attempts to appropriate Cliff for her own idealized image of national identity, ultimately reconsiders her own notion of national identity and her relationship with her community when the memorial she is writing transforms her own attachment to the

2 See, for example, the introduction to a discussion of gender in the short story "Don't Call Me by My Right Name", the novel *Malcolm*, and Chapter 3 for a discussion of race in *Cabot Wright Begins*.

National Symbolic. Whereas at first she cannot imagine a national identity that can include homosexual subjects, she eventually moves to an understanding of national identity in which diverse sexualities can coexist.

Finally, in the preceding chapters I identified several strategies with which Purdy's characters attempt to undermine the restrictive and oppressive force of identity fantasies. Some of these strategies – such as disidentification (Chapter 1), epistemic promiscuity (Chapter 2), and the performative force of failure (Chapter 5) – I have borrowed from, or based on, queer scholarly writing. Others I have found in literary theory, and narratology in particular. In considering narrative devices such as mise-en-scène (Chapter 1) and focalization (Chapter 3), but also the mode of melodrama, as enabling readings that undermine the totalizing force of identity fantasies, I hope to make a valuable intervention into the critical mode of queer theory, which, as I have shown in Chapter 3, "remain[s] suspicious of narratology's formalist priorities and binary frames" (Warhol and Lanser 2). For one, I argue that theoretical reflections on queer and nonnormative subject formations are to a great extent embedded in a narratological understanding of concepts such as time, repetition, actor, action, space, and place. More importantly, however, I maintain that if we consider the fantasy of identity as an effect of narrative, queer theory's interrogation of these fantasies is no longer incompatible with narratological approaches that investigate the operations of narrative itself. On the contrary, narratological analysis contributes to the examination of oppression and violence that reading sexual acts for sexual identities entails. If Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser suggest that queer theorists are leery of narrative theory's perceived categorizing impulse which reduces a text to binary oppositions, I contend that careful narratological analysis shows that there are always multiple possible narratives at stake, even if subsumed by a totalizing identity fantasy. It is the task of the narratologist, then, to show that the experience of a stable identity is the effect of narration itself. This task is, if anything, a queer task indeed.

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Samenvatting

In dit proefschrift, *Woeste omhelzingen: James Purdy, melodrama, en het vertellen van identiteit*, staat het werk van de Amerikaanse schrijver James Purdy centraal. Purdy debuteerde in een periode uit de Amerikaanse geschiedenis waarin identiteitspolitiek sterk op de voorgrond trad. Zijn werk is in dit licht interessant omdat hij zich vanaf zijn debuut *Color of Darkness* (1956) juist sterk verzette tegen de notie dat mensen ingedeeld kunnen worden in vaste en onveranderlijke identiteitscategorieën. In zijn werk dramatiseert Purdy steevast de desastreuze effecten van het geloof in een vaste en onveranderlijke identiteit. In plaats van dit geloof in vaste identiteitscategorieën, ziet Purdy identiteiten als narratieven: ficties die verteld en gelezen worden, en die bij iedere vertelling of lezing opnieuw geïnterpreteerd worden. In mijn proefschrift beargumenteer ik dat kennisname van de manier waarop deze identiteitsnarratieven verteld en gelezen worden essentieel is voor het verzet tegen het geweld dat alomvattende en gefixeerde identiteitscategorieën, met name in Purdy's werk, letterlijk kunnen aanrichten.

Binnen het oeuvre van Purdy zijn twee identiteitsfantasieën dominant: seksuele identiteit en nationale identiteit. Hoewel ik beargumenteer dat alle identiteiten een narratief product zijn, is het wel mogelijk om onderscheid te maken tussen de manieren waarop deze narratieven tot stand komen. De productie van seksuele identiteit komt tot stand door andere verteltechnieken en narratieve mechanismes dan de productie van nationale identiteit. In mijn lezing van Purdy's werk analyseer ik de werking van deze verschillende narratieve strategieën bij de productie van verschillende identiteiten door deze narratieven te benaderen als melodrama's. Melodrama, zo betoog ik, is niet enkel een theatraal genre, maar ook een transmediale leeshouding die ons de mogelijkheid geeft om tijdens de interpretatie van een tekst de nadruk te verschuiven van plot naar verteltechnieken en naar andere narratieve aspecten of elementen.

In navolging van Peter Brooks (1976/1985) en Thomas Elsaesser (1972/1991) behandel ik melodrama als transmediale leeshouding in plaats van als theatraal genre. Hun onderzoek naar melodrama vormt de fundering voor mijn eigen interpretaties van Purdy's romans en toneelstukken. Respectievelijk schrijvend over melodrama in naturalistische romans en Hollywood-cinema, betogen zij dat de vertelmodus van melodrama elementen uit de tekst naar voren haalt die over het hoofd gezien worden als uitsluitend gekeken wordt naar de plot. Vanuit deze optiek zijn juist esthetische en verteltechnische ingrepen interessant voor de interpretatie van een

tekst. In zijn filmtheorie stelt Elsaesser bovendien een interpretatiemethode voor die de mise-en-scène (het geheel van kleurgebruik, filmmuziek, ruimte, speelstijl en montage) van de tekst een centrale plek geeft. In navolging van Ernst van Alphen (2018), die aantoont dat deze interpretatieve nadruk op mise-en-scène ook toegepast kan worden op andere narratieve genres, stel ik voor om Purdy's werk te interpreteren door te kijken naar de mise-en-scène van de identiteitsnarratieven die hij bevraagt.

Mise-en-scène beschouw ik als de ruimtelijke ordening van alle componenten die effect sorteren op het narratief. Dit omvat niet alleen elementen die behoren tot de plot, maar ook focalisatie, personage, de beschreven ruimte, objecten in de ruimte, stilistische ingrepen en het taalregister van het vertelde. Ik stel dat deze losse narratieve elementen verhalen en associaties activeren die niet direct gerepresenteerd worden door de plot. Zo laat Purdy's werk zien hoe bepaalde handelingen of bepaalde basisplots vaak geïnterpreteerd worden als betekenaren voor homoseksualiteit, ondanks dat dit op plotniveau niet expliciet gemaakt wordt. Door het werk van Purdy aan de hand van mise-en-scène te lezen, onderzoek ik niet alleen hoe deze associaties en verhalen gekoppeld worden aan gefixeerde identiteitsfantasieën, maar laat ik ook zien op welke manieren Purdy de lezer de mogelijkheid tot verzet tegen deze procedés biedt.

In de inleiding van dit proefschrift zet ik de theoretische grondslag van mijn leeswijze uiteen. Deze is globaal opgedeeld in twee onderdelen. In het eerste onderdeel bespreek ik de manier waarop identiteit functioneert in Purdy's oeuvre. Hoewel er al veel geschreven is over identiteit in het werk van Purdy, betoog ik dat de meeste academici die zijn werk interpreteren blijven vasthouden aan de idee dat er zoiets bestaat als een "ware", innerlijke identiteit die schuilgaat achter de identiteitsnarratieven die Purdy ondermijnt. Ik beargumenteer daarentegen dat Purdy juist aantoont dat ook deze zogenaamde "ware" identiteit een narratief product is en daarmee net zo fictief is als identiteiten die expliciet verteld worden. Mijn bijdrage aan het debat over Purdy's verzet tegen identiteitscategorieën is dan ook de stelling dat Purdy zich veel radicaler afzette tegen identiteitsfantasieën dan tot nu toe is aangetoond. In het tweede gedeelte van de inleiding bespreek ik de theoretische fundering voor mijn gebruik van melodrama. Ik behandel melodrama als historisch genre, als vertelmodus en als politiek discours. Uiteindelijk voert melodrama als vertelmodus de boventoon in mijn analyses, maar ook de geschiedenis van het genre en de manier waarop melodramatisch politiek discours gevoelens over nationale identiteit vormgeeft, zijn een belangrijke fundering voor mijn lezing van Purdy's romans. Het begrip van melodrama als politiek discours ontleen ik aan het werk van Lauren Berlant (1991; 2011)

en Elisabeth Anker (2005; 2014). Hun werk stelt mij in staat om de samenkomst van nationale identiteitsfantasieën in wat Berlant het Nationaal Symbolische noemt, te lezen aan de hand van mise-en-scène.

Naast de inleiding bevat dit proefschrift vijf hoofdstukken die elk een ander werk van Purdy onder de loep nemen. Hoewel Purdy's literaire carrière vijf decennia omvat en zijn oeuvre bestaat uit romans, korte verhalen, toneelstukken en poëzie, heb ik ervoor gekozen om slechts werk uit het eerste decennium van zijn carrière te bespreken. De periode die dit proefschrift beslaat begint met de publicatie van zijn verhalenbundel *Color of Darkness* (1956) en eindigt met *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967), wellicht zijn meest controversiële roman. Deze teksten bespreek ik echter niet in chronologische volgorde. In plaats daarvan heb ik de hoofdstukken opgedeeld in twee groepen die ieder ingaan op een ander belangrijk aspect van de identiteitsfantasieën die Purdy in zijn werk onderzoekt. De eerste drie hoofdstukken bevragen het onderwerp seksuele identiteit, terwijl in de laatste twee hoofdstukken de focus verschuift naar nationale identiteit. Zodoende begin ik mijn proefschrift met wat chronologisch de laatste roman in de reeks is, waarna ik vervolgens door de tijd heen en weer spring.

In het eerste hoofdstuk bouw ik voort op de uiteenzetting over melodrama als vertelmodus die ik ben gestart in de inleiding. Ik ben vooral geïnteresseerd in de interpretatieve mogelijkheden die melodrama ons biedt wanneer we identiteitsfantasieën beschouwen als een mise-en-scène waarin verschillende identiteitsnarratieven samenkomen in een schijnbaar coherent geheel. Deze fantasieën hebben de functie om de tegenstrijdigheden en inconsistenties van deze verschillende narratieven glad te strijken, zodat de fantasie van een coherente en ware identiteit niet in gevaar komt. Echter, door de nadruk te leggen op de mise-en-scène van deze fantasieën toon ik aan dat er altijd elementen ontsnappen aan het totaliserende geweld van identiteitsfantasieën. In dit hoofdstuk beargumenteer ik dat een specifiek genre exemplarisch is voor het moment waarin verschillende identiteitsnarratieven verstarren tot identiteitsfantasieën, namelijk de confessie. Het uitspreken of "opbiechten" van seksuele identiteit in bijvoorbeeld het "uit de kast komen"-narratief, vangt het subject in een vaststaand patroon van identiteitsnarratieven, en zodoende wordt de ervaring van seksualiteit gereduceerd tot identiteit. In dit hoofdstuk lees ik *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* aan de hand van dit inzicht. Deze roman onderzoekt de manier waarop de confessie seksuele identiteit produceert, terwijl ze tegelijkertijd juist de vraag opwerpt of de identiteit die door confessie geproduceerd wordt überhaupt waar kan zijn. Gelezen vanuit de melodramatische vertelmodus worden in de roman zowel identiteit als het opbiechten

van identiteit verdacht gemaakt. Daarmee opent de roman de mogelijkheid tot een strategie van verzet, die ik in navolging van José Esteban Muñoz *disidentificatie* noem.

Hoofdstuk twee onderzoekt hoe de fantasie van seksuele identiteit wordt geproduceerd in de handeling van het lezen. De korte roman *63: Dream Palace* (1956) behandelt verschillende ontmoetingen waarin het handelen en spreken van het hoofdpersonage, Fenton Riddleway, obsessief gelezen worden als betekenaar van zijn seksuele identiteit. In dit hoofdstuk beargumenteer ik dat zulk obsessief lezen gezien kan worden als een vorm van geweld ten opzichte van degene die gelezen wordt. Echter, om mijn punt kracht bij te zetten, doe ik precies datgene waartegen de roman zich probeert te verzetten: ik lees het handelen en spreken van Fenton juist als indicatoren van zijn seksualiteit. Ik doe dit om aan te tonen hoe een dergelijke leeswijze bij voorbaat gedoemd is te mislukken, aangezien het onmogelijk is om iemands handelen en spreken te reduceren tot een identiteitsfantasie. Er blijven altijd tegenstrijdigheden en inconsistenties bestaan die niet tot een identiteitsfantasie terug te brengen zijn. De roman frustreert dus een manier van lezen die een personage reduceert tot een alomvattende identiteitscategorie. Ik beargumenteer dat in plaats daarvan een identiteitsbegrip naar voren komt dat ervan uitgaat dat er altijd meerdere en elkaar tegensprekende interpretaties van een personage bestaan, en dat deze interpretaties gelijktijdig werkzaam zijn zonder dat deze elkaar volledig uitsluiten. Het verzet tegen een alomvattend identiteitsbegrip door middel van het nadrukkelijk naast elkaar laten bestaan van onverzoenbare lezingen noem ik *epistemische promiscuïtiet*. Net zoals in hoofdstuk een breng ik Purdy's werk zodoende in dialoog met vormen van *queer theory* die proberen aan te tonen dat identiteiten niets anders dan fantasieën zijn.

Het derde hoofdstuk rondt mijn onderzoek naar het bevragen van seksuele identiteitsfantasieën in het werk van Purdy af. Echter, waar ik in hoofdstuk twee onderzoek hoe de fantasie van een coherente identiteit geproduceerd wordt door het lezen van de tekst, laat ik in hoofdstuk drie zien hoe een dergelijke verstarde fantasie ook kan ontstaan door het vertellen van iemands identiteit. In dit hoofdstuk behandel ik de roman *Cabot Wright Begins* (1964). Deze roman, zo beargumenteer ik, dramatiseert de manier waarop de handeling van het vertellen een schijn van coherentie creëert, terwijl de roman dit proces tegelijkertijd ondermijnt door te laten zien hoe de verhalen die verteld worden narratieve constructies zijn. Voor mijn analyse van *Cabot Wright Begins* maak ik met name gebruik van het narratologische begrip focalisatie en het concept narratieve identiteit zoals ontwikkeld door Paul Ricoeur (1985/1990; 1992). Deze geven mij de middelen om aan te tonen hoe Purdy consequent

de ogenschijnlijke stabiliteit van identiteit ondermijnt, juist op het moment dat deze zich lijkt te verankeren in narratief. Met mijn focus op narratologie in dit hoofdstuk probeer ik deze literatuur-wetenschappelijke methode in dialoog te brengen met *queer theory*. Er bestaat maar een geringe interactie tussen deze twee benaderingen terwijl, zo betoog ik, deze juist veel van elkaar kunnen leren. Door het vertellen van identiteiten te ontleden met het narratologische begrippenapparaat, laat ik zien hoe deze discipline bijdraagt aan Purdy's *queer* strategieën om de ficties van vaste identiteitscategorieën aan het wankelen te brengen.

De laatste twee hoofdstukken van dit proefschrift gaan over het vraagstuk van nationale identiteit. Zoals ook het geval is met andere vormen van identiteit, wordt nationale identiteit geproduceerd door middel van narratief. Echter, nationale identiteit omvat wellicht nog meer dan seksuele identiteit een veelheid aan verschillende identiteitsfantasieën die samensmelten tot een schijnbaar coherent geheel. Bovendien wijst in het werk van Purdy nationale identiteit altijd op een spanning die ontstaat tussen collectieve en individuele identiteitsfantasieën. De identiteitscrisis die veel personages in het werk van Purdy ervaren ontstaat vaak precies op het moment dat zij zich moeten voegen naar een collectieve identiteit die niet overeenkomt met hun eigen identificaties. In hoofdstuk vier analyseer ik de manier waarop verschillende identiteitsnarratieven samenkomen in de fictie van nationale identiteit, opnieuw door middel van het concept mise-en-scène. In navolging van Berlant noem ik de figuur waarin nationale identiteitsfantasieën samenkomen het Nationaal Symbolische. Met mijn focus op de mise-en-scène van het Nationaal Symbolische laat ik zien hoe ook deze collectieve en individuele nationale identiteiten narratieve constructies zijn. Dit doe ik in hoofdstuk vier via een analyse van het toneelstuk *Children Is All* (1961). Ik beweer dat de verhouding tussen subject en het Nationaal Symbolische noodzakelijkerwijs leidt tot het verkeerd lezen van andere identiteiten. In het toneelstuk herkent Edna haar verloren zoon niet meer omdat ze niet in staat is hem te "lezen" binnen het kader dat haar geboden wordt door het Nationaal Symbolische. Ook hier ondermijnt Purdy de fictie van identiteit door juist de gevolgen van zulk verkeerd lezen te dramatiseren.

Het laatste hoofdstuk bouwt voort op het inzicht dat het Nationaal Symbolische de fantasie van nationale identiteit structureert. De roman die ik in dit hoofdstuk bespreek, *The Nephew* (1960), toont de veranderende opvattingen over ideaal burgerschap van het hoofdpersonage Alma. Ik lees de roman aan de hand van twee intertekSten die elk op hun eigen manier gezien kunnen worden als fundamentele bijdragen aan de constructie van het Amerikaanse Nationaal Symbolische. De eerste intertekst is Nathaniel Hawthornes roman *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Zowel in *The Nephew* als *The*

Scarlet Letter staat de relatie van het hoofpersonage met de staat centraal en verandert deze relatie naar gelang de verhouding van het hoofdpersonage met het symbool dat de staat representeert. De tweede intertekst is het fenomeen van het Graf van de Onbekende Soldaat. Dit monument functioneert als een scherm waarop verschillende fantasieën over nationale identiteit worden geprojecteerd, ongeacht de ideologische fundering van deze fantasieën. Het Graf van de Onbekende Soldaat illustreert hoe de mise-en-scène van het Nationaal Symbolische nationale identiteitsfantasieën structureert en fixeert. Net zoals het geval is in *Children Is All* kan Alma een geliefde niet identificeren binnen het raamwerk dat haar geboden wordt door het Nationaal Symbolische. Echter, waar het verkeerd herkennen in het toneelstuk zich manifesteert in de handeling van het lezen, manifesteert hetzelfde fenomeen zich in *The Nephew* in Alma's poging om een "gedenkteken" voor haar overleden neef te schrijven. Zoals ook in voorgaande hoofdstukken het geval is, laat Purdy in *The Nephew* ruimte voor verzet tegen het geweld dat achter een allesomvattend identiteitsbegrip schuilgaat. Juist in haar falen ziet Alma de kans om haar eigen verhouding tot de staat opnieuw vorm te geven. Het falen van Alma is, zo beweer ik ten slotte, een performatieve daad die bijdraagt aan Purdy's *queer* pogingen om alomvattende identiteitsfantasieën te ontmantelen.

In de conclusie reflecteer ik op de manier waarop het lezen van Purdy's oeuvre vanuit de modus van het melodrama handvatten biedt voor een alliantie tussen *queer theory* en narratologie. In plaats van een tekst tot een bepaalde betekenis te reduceren, zo betoog ik, laat narratologie juist zien dat een tekst altijd op verschillende manieren betekent, en dat deze verschillende betekenissen met elkaar kunnen contrasteren zonder dat ze elkaar volledig hoeven uit te sluiten. Dit inzicht uit de narratologie kan ook toegepast worden op gangbare opvattingen over identiteit in *queer theory* als we, zoals Purdy in zijn werk voorstelt, identiteiten zien als ficties: verhalen die we aan elkaar vertellen over onszelf en over anderen.

Curriculum Vitae

Looi van Kessel was born on April 2, 1987 in Tilburg, The Netherlands, and finished his secondary education there in 2005. He was awarded a *propedeuse* in Japan Studies at Leiden University in 2007, yet he decided instead to switch to the Film and Literary Studies BA program, also at Leiden University, from which he graduated *cum laude* in 2011. During his BA, he spent one year (2007–2008) at Ca' Foscari University in Venice on an Erasmus fellowship. In 2012 he obtained an MA degree, *cum laude*, from the Literary Studies Research Master program at Leiden University. After graduating, he taught in the International Studies BA program at Leiden University (2013–2015) until he undertook a PhD at the Leiden University Center for Arts in Society (LUCAS) under the supervision of Prof. dr. Ernst van Alphen and Dr. Johanna C. Kardux. With the help of the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, Looi spent a semester as visiting researcher at Dartmouth College (2016–2017) and was awarded a dissertation fellowship from the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin (2017). During his doctoral research he has visited workshops and presented papers at conferences in Amsterdam, Belgrade, Boston, Giessen, Groningen, Leiden, New York, and Northampton. Looi is a member of the editorial board of *Arabesken*, the bi-annual journal of the Louis Couperus Association, since 2014, and since 2018 also a member of the editorial board of the *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*. Together with Liesbeth Minnaard and Eliza Steinbock he co-edited a special issue of the *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* entitled "Trans*: Approaches, Methods, and Concepts" (2017). Looi has published articles on the authors James Purdy and Louis Couperus, the television program *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and performance artists Brennan Gerrard and Ryan Kelly. He is currently an Assistant Professor at Leiden University.

Stellingen behorende bij het proefschrift "Savage Embraces: James Purdy, Melodrama, and the Narration of Identity"

1. Identity is always the result of narration.
2. Instead of reducing a text to categories and binary systems, narratology opens up the text to a plethora of coexisting readings.
3. Narratological analysis contributes to the examination of oppression and violence that reading sexual acts for sexual identities entails. Hence, the discipline of narratology is an ally of queer theory, rather than its adversary.
4. Besides being a popular theatrical and film genre, melodrama is a narrative mode that employs aesthetic excess to foreground ethical struggles of a world in which the social codes must continuously be renegotiated.
5. The analysis of the mise-en-scène of a narrative brings into view cultural and social assumptions that are otherwise not represented on the level of plot.
6. Social media has radically changed the way in which identity is both produced and politicized by the narratives told on these platforms. It would be unwise to turn away from narrative theory if we want to understand how these changes in identity production operate.
7. The root of widespread homophobia in Western societies and its homophobic obsession with the policing of anal pleasure is, in fact, misogyny. It belies a sexist fear that men who engage in passive anal sex assume a feminine position in a society that values women less than men.
8. James Purdy's refusal to adopt identity politics in his writing has cost him the readership and support of an identitarian-minded gay movement, leaving him with only a few admirers.
9. Anal pleasure is not the same as homosexual desire; in other words, straight-identified people can enjoy being penetrated anally too.
10. Lying about your age sometimes pays off.

Looi van Kessel, Leiden, December 2019