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

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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.

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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

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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 homo-sexual 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).

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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 expos-
> ing 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 inter-
> ested 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

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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 melo-drama (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, poi-sons, 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 breath-less 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 nine-teenth-century novel occurs through the mode of excess which announces itself "over and over in clear language, [it rehearses its] conflicts and combats, it re-enacts 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.