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

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CHAPTER 3

# Narrative Beginnings: Queer Theory and Narratology

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

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

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

## Which Beginnings?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The State of Narrative Theory

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Narrative Identity: Some Theoretical Considerations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Focalizing Cabot Wright

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## A Supposititious Child

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Identity, Memory, and Focalization

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Crossing the Color Line

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusion: A New Narrative Beginning?

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

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

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

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

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

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