'Something Dark': Metaphor and First-Person Narratives of Female Adolescence in American Literature, Post-1950.

by

Rachael McLennan
MA English Literature, University of Glasgow
M.Phil American Studies, University of Glasgow

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Thesis Abstract

In 1904 the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall published his two volume theoretical study, *Adolescence – Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*. This text established the conventional understanding of adolescence in twentieth-century Western cultures – adolescence as a time of significant hormonal changes, as a time of turbulent and conflicting emotions. Although attention has been paid to the way in which Hall enlists late nineteenth-century discourses of race, class and gender in his construction of adolescence, less attention has been paid to the fact that Hall's construction is informed by qualities he describes as both literally and figuratively adolescent, or that he labels America as both literally and metaphorically adolescent. It is the central contention of this thesis that metaphor and the figurative are central to constructions of adolescence in American fiction and literary criticism, and that failure to note this causes misreadings of adolescence in many fictional works. This thesis also aims to show a more productive way of reading adolescence, one in which metaphor and the figurative remain central.

The introduction to this thesis illustrates how metaphor is central to Hall's work and to the work of several literary critics writing in the 1950s and 1960s, who apply Hall's notion of America as adolescent to discussions of postwar America. The introduction also shows how their constructions facilitate an erasure or distortion of female experience. As a counter to this, the subsequent chapters of this thesis examine first-person narratives of female adolescence in works published after 1950 (and which are thus informed by Hall's construction of adolescence and his notion of America as adolescent). The first chapter examines the Southern writer Jill McCorkle's construction of adolescence (one which relies heavily on metaphor). McCorkle's comments are modified for the purposes of offering a more useful understanding of adolescence, and then read alongside five fictional narratives of female adolescence in the American South – McCorkle's *The Cheer Leader* (1984) and *Ferris Beach* (1990), Thulani Davis's *1959* (1992), Josephine Humphreys's *Rich in Love* (1988), and Sylvia Wilkinson's *Bone of my Bones* (1982).

The second chapter of this thesis examines how Joyce Carol Oates uses the concept of adolescence in her critical work. Tensions and ambivalences in Oates's

construction of adolescence are revealed in one of her recent novels, *I'll Take You There* (2003). This novel is read alongside Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Alice Hoffman's *Property Of* (1977) and a short story by Toni Cade Bambara, "Sweet Town" (1972) as these three texts provide useful corrections of and correlatives to Oates's critical thoughts.

The third chapter of this thesis revisits McCorkle's metaphorical constructions of adolescence in order to show how the close connections between adolescence and metaphor reveal that the problem is one of how to signify adolescence. This chapter expands on Oates's implicit suggestion that the act of passing might be important to narrating adolescence. This chapter looks as two narratives of passing in adolescence, Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (2001) and Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2003), the former foregrounding racial passing, the latter foregrounding gendered passing. These texts demonstrate how narrating and reading adolescence necessitates careful engagement with issues of signification (particularly in Henry Louis Gates, Jnr's sense of Signifyin(g)), passing, and metaphor.

Contents

Introduction. "'Can You Feel It Yet?'": Notes Towards a Poetics of Adolescence in American Literature.

This is adolescence:
Your world has four corners
and folds up neatly
and fits in your pants' pocket
– There goes a marsupial now! –
You can put it in your pocket
and there's room left over for
cherry bombs and Marlboros
Your mother launders it every weekend
You can dirty it and leave it lying around
and she'll wash it again for free
and you can fold it and stuff it
and mount on your little
island
and be Icarus all you want.
But when you're of the age of reason
the world is no longer flat
it has no edge
it boggles Daedalus
and it wrinkles
but you can't grasp it
can't clean it
can't trade it
can't bear it
but you are in it, forever
whether you get high or not.
"Adventures on the Isle of Adolescence" (105-130).

"Adventures on the Isle of Adolescence" is the title poem from the first collection of poetry by the American performance poet La Loca (*nee* Pamala Karol).[1] The poem describes the poetic persona's encounter, at the age of thirty-six, with a group of urban

[1] La Loca, *Adventures on the Isle of Adolescence*, Pocket Poets Series 46 (San Francisco: City Lights, 1989) 41-63. Biographical and critical material about Pamala Karol is sparse. Karol was born in 1950 into a white working-class family in Los Angeles, and moved to California in 1967. Her poetry is often labelled 'confessional' or 'autobiographical' although she is reluctant to accept either term exclusively. For an introduction to her work, see John O'Kane, "Confessions of a Poor White Hipster: An Interview With La Loca," *Enclitic* 10.2 (1988): 67-82.

American adolescent boys in California and her subsequent date with one of them, fifteen-year-old Todd. The passage above is the first of two in the poem in which La Loca defines adolescence. On the second occasion La Loca explains adolescence directly to Todd during their date:

> "I mean, let me tell you
> about adolescence. I'm gonna tell you
> about adolescence. I'm gonna tell
> you about the tenth grade.
> Being adolescent is like being born
> in the caves
> in pithecanthropica
> and waking up one day on a skateboard
> on Rodeo Drive at high noon
> with braces and funnies and a tire iron
> & a T-shirt that says
> Eat Shit" (387-398).

The definitive tone of the declaration 'This is adolescence' in the first passage is undermined by the second description above, not only by its content but by the fact of its existence. La Loca must describe adolescence twice – one attempt is insufficient. It is imperative to note that while these definitions of adolescence are very different, both depend upon extended metaphorical descriptions in order to describe an individual's place in the world. However, the second passage exists in problematic relation to the first, and the first passage contradicts itself. A demonstration of this reveals some of the many difficulties which are encountered in defining adolescence. The poem's title and the first passage figure adolescence spatially; as an 'isle'. The terms 'island' and 'world' in the first passage are interchangeable. They contribute to, and complicate, the slippage between 'adolescence' and 'island' in the poem's title. That title refers to the poem in its entirety, a poem which details events that occur in a world which is not the metaphorical 'island' / 'world' of adolescence in the first passage, but California in the late 1980s. That world is peopled by adolescents and adults, as La Loca's presence and interaction with the adolescent boys testifies. The title therefore comes close to suggesting that the world (the California) of the poem is adolescent, no matter who lives in it; that is, adults or adolescents.

The first passage depicts figurative worlds specific to adolescence and adulthood (the world is flat in adolescence, no longer so in adulthood). However, La Loca's definition undermines its own depiction of separate worlds. The addressee 'you' is indeterminate. At times it denotes Todd specifically (as in the second passage), and at times (in the first passage) it addresses a universal audience – male and female – comprising individuals who may or may not be adolescent. For example, 'Your world' (106) denotes a world specific to adolescents, even as it calls for an audience, which may not be adolescent, to recognise and identify with that world. Also, the first passage claims that adolescents can refigure the world – the adult cannot. The adolescent's ability to refigure the world is seen in the fact that the adolescent can bear, be borne by, and take leave of the world. That world is conceived variously as an island, or possibly a map (which can be stored in a pocket to help the adolescent navigate) or a magic carpet – 'mount on your little / island' (117-118). The adolescent thus experiences greater mobility and more imaginative possibilities for conceptualising his or her world than the adult who is in it 'forever' (129) and 'can't bear it' (130). However, this ability to refigure the world comes at a cost. The reference to Icarus suggests that this seemingly preferable existence is in fact fraught with danger and uncertainty. Most perplexingly, though, it is the female adult, La Loca, who imaginatively creates these figurations in poetry, even though her first passage positions adulthood as a condition of stasis, a negative situation of being stuck 'in' the world 'forever', of being unable to refigure the world and one's relation to it. Repetition of the word 'can't' (126-128) describes adulthood, whereas the description of adolescence is marked by the word 'can' (110, 114, 116). This is despite the fact that by adulthood an individual should also have learnt that the world is no longer 'flat' (121), suggesting that an individual experiences a greater degree of perception in adulthood. La Loca also seems to feel that her adult status confers on her the ability to narrate what adolescence is. This raises the question of who in fact can define and narrate adolescence, and how these acts of definition and narration may reflect – or affect – the narrator's status as adolescent or adult.

Taken together, the ambiguities in the poem's title and its two definitions of adolescence present a riddle; is a depiction of existence in the world a metaphorical means of describing adolescence, or does a depiction of adolescence provide a

metaphorical means of describing the world? The answer is that both metaphorical constructions function simultaneously. 'Adolescence' functions as what Patti D. Nogales would call a 'metaphor vehicle', providing the terms by which the concept of 'the world' is to be understood.[2] But 'the world' is also a metaphor vehicle. The word 'metaphor' derives from the Greek *metaphora*. The OED defines the word's root meaning as 'to transfer' and 'to bear, carry':

> The figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable; an instance of this, a metaphorical expression.[3]

La Loca describes the act of carrying the world as central to her first metaphorical depiction of adolescence, so that adolescence is related to the acts of carrying which the definition above describes as integral to metaphor formation. The complexities raised by this discussion of the metaphorical descriptions of adolescence in "Adventures on the Isle of Adolescence" demonstrate the central contentions of this thesis: that metaphor and the figurative are central to constructions and narrations of the concept of adolescence in America, and that inattention to this fact causes (mis)readings of adolescence in many works of literary criticism which theorise adolescence and its portrayals in American fictional works. This introduction enlists La Loca's "Adventures on the Isle of Adolescence" and the African-American poet Rita Dove's "Adolescence I", "Adolescence II", and "Adolescence III" sequence in her first collection of poems, in order to illustrate the close relationship between adolescence and metaphor, to account for those relations, and to elucidate the complications (such as the misreadings mentioned above) which arise from an incomplete understanding of these relations.[4] The subsequent chapters of this thesis will suggest more productive ways of reading adolescence in American fictional works, readings in which metaphor and the figurative remain central.

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[2] Patti D. Nogales, *Metaphorically Speaking* CSLI Lecture Notes 93 (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 1999) 13-14.

[3] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989.

[4] Rita Dove, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, 2nd ed. (1980; Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1989).

La Loca's descriptions of the adolescent boys she meets owe much to dominant constructions of adolescence in America. Inconsistencies in her descriptions reveal conflicts and conspicuous absences in those constructions. Figured as a 'Swarm' (4), an 'armada' (7), as 'little / aberrations' (41-42), and 'Bigger than me. / Dinosaurian!' (44-45), and as 'fleet' (53), 'platoon' (54) and 'pack' (57), the adolescent boys bear a conflicting range of organic and technological metaphors, as if they change size and shape before her eyes. This array of descriptions illustrates a long-established uncertainty in America about how to figure adolescence (is adolescence a physiological phenomenon, and therefore presumably universal or transhistorical, or is it constructed only in a particular historical moment, influenced by various social factors?). This uncertainty is visible in, and caused by, theoretical attempts to determine the origins of adolescence and define the concept. Christine Griffin writes that

> Adolescence has been defined via an uneasy mixture of the biological and the social, with biology positioned as the major determining element, and puberty onset defined as the starting point of adolescence.[5]

Adolescence first received widespread attention in Western cultures in the late nineteenth century, because of complex changes to the family structure brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Philippe Aries argues that in European societies, prior to this time, 'People had no idea of what we call adolescence, and the idea was a long time taking shape.' There was in fact no clear distinction between what would eventually be called the separate stages of childhood and adolescence – both stages were contained by the category 'youth'.[6] Joseph Kett argues that the effects of the Industrial Revolution were seen in the migration of young people to cities (Kett suggests the dates 1790-1840 for this movement), where new, if variable, educational and vocational opportunities were available. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the development of an institutionalised education system additionally created an environment in which middle-

[5] Christine Griffin, *Representations of Youth: The Study of Youth and Adolescence in Britain and America* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993) 19-20.

[6] Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. Robert Baldick, introduction, Adam Phillips (1960; London: Pimlico, 1996) 27.

class children were encouraged to attend school, as one of many strategies designed to ensure that they would be well-prepared for future careers. As a consequence, middle-class children remained dependent on their families for a longer period. In addition, vastly differentiated economic opportunities marked divisions between children belonging to the middle-class and those belonging to what Kett calls the 'lower-class' in this period. The greater visibility of groups of young people (in schools, church and Scout movements, for example) together with the increased attention paid to their education and development, led to what Kett calls a 'massive reclassification of young people as adolescents' by psychologists, educators, and urban developers between 1890 and 1920. This reclassification constructed adolescence with a particular class-based component, as extended schooling was possible largely for middle-class families.[7]

Despite this generally accepted historical account of adolescence, one which suggests that adolescence is a social construction, the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall is regarded as defining what might be described as the dominant model of adolescence in America and contemporary Western cultures. For Hall, hormonal changes in puberty are responsible for a diverse range of feelings, so that the physiological rather than the social (Griffin's 'biology') is the determining factor. Hall's two-volume work, *Adolescence – Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*[8] describes adolescence as follows:

> There are new repulsions felt toward home and school, and truancy and runaways abound. The social instincts undergo sudden unfoldment and the new life of love awakens. It is the age of sentiment and of religion, of rapid fluctuation of mood, and the world seems strange and new. Interest in adult life and in vocations develops. Youth awakes to a new world and understands neither it nor himself. The whole future of life depends on how the new powers now given suddenly and in profusion are husbanded and directed. Character and personality are taking form, but everything is plastic. Self-feeling and ambition are increased, and every trait and faculty is liable to exaggeration and excess.[9]

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[7] Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) 5-6.

[8] G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1904).

[9] Ibid., I, Preface, xv.

Hall characterises adolescence as a time of rebellion and strong (possibly dangerous) emotions, co-existent with desires to search for identity and to discover how one relates to the world. As such, he constructs what has been the dominant narrative of adolescence in Western cultures since the late nineteenth century. However, as Griffin notes:

> 'Adolescence' was not simply a product of Hall's idiosyncratic ideas as an influential North American psychologist, nor did this represent an essential truth about 'youth' which was discovered by Hall via the techniques of scientific psychology. Hall's work reflects a particular combination of discourses around 'race', sexuality, gender, class, nation *and* age which were very much rooted in a specific historical moment.[10]

Griffin's analysis is accurate, but it fails to note the importance of an additional fact: Hall's construction of adolescence is additionally enabled by the use of metaphor and a complex interplay of qualities which Hall labels literally and figuratively adolescent. However, the connection between adolescence and metaphor has not gone unnoticed. Patricia Meyer Spacks observes that adolescence often becomes appropriated as metaphor:

> [. . .] the term has gradually enlarged its metaphoric reference and become a generalized designation, usually of blame: the middle-aged man who abandons wife and job, we say, is behaving in adolescent fashion, although teen-agers rarely have wives and jobs to abandon.[11]

The contention that adolescence is largely enlisted for pejorative purposes is inaccurate, as this thesis will later demonstrate. Similarly, Molly Childers notes that 'Critics generally agree, following Leslie Fiedler, that male adolescence functions as an essential metaphor within American literature. No major studies posit female adolescence as a crucial metaphor [. . .]'.[12] Despite this, Childers does not ask why metaphor is so

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[10] Griffin, 12.

[11] Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Adolescent Idea: Myths of Youth and the Adult Imagination* (1981; London: Faber, 1982) 6-7.

[12] Molly Childers, "Female Adolescence in the American Novel: James, Nabokov, and Oates," diss., Boston U, 1999, 25.

'essential' to the construction of adolescence. It is Hall's work which links adolescence and metaphor to a construction of America. Hall enlists the late nineteenth-century scientific theory of recapitulation, which argued that an individual's development repeats and furthers the development of his or her species, to argue that

> Adolescence is a new birth, for the higher and more completely human traits are now born. The qualities of body and soul that now emerge are far newer. The child comes from and harks back to a remoter past; the adolescent is neo-atavistic, and in him the later acquisitions of the race slowly become prepotent.[13]

The second passage in which La Loca defines adolescence provides an illustration of what Hall means. In that passage, 'being adolescent' means partaking of a prehistoric era of existence – 'being born / in the caves / in pithecanthropica' (391-393), before awaking to a presumably more advanced stage of civilisation – 'Rodeo Drive' (395). In a revealing choice of words, Griffin notes that Hall applies the theory of recapitulation 'as literally as possible' to his study.[14] She also demonstrates how 'the emerging cult of heterosexual masculinity' influences Hall's construction of adolescence.[15] The late nineteenth-century Western ideologies which Griffin analyses in Hall's work posit white, adult masculine heterosexuality as both normative and a privileged subject position. La Loca's second passage conflates adolescence and a particularly American narrative of masculinity ('high noon' calls to mind a showdown in a Western), and of masculinity as performance (Rodeo Drive signifies Hollywood, where cultural narratives are produced for consumption). The fact that an individual's passage from childhood to adulthood could, for Hall, *literally* repeat the progression of 'the race' from something called 'primitive' or 'savage' to something more advanced, allows adolescence to be linked to the construction of a national American identity.[16] Hall says of America that:

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[13] Hall, I, Preface, xiii. Dorothy Ross's biography of Hall offers a useful discussion of how Hall's thought is influenced by the concept of recapitulation. See Dorothy Ross, *G. Stanley Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

[14] Griffin, 16.

[15] Ibid., 12.

[16] Hall, I, Preface, vi-viii.

> Our very Constitution had a Minerva birth, and was not the slow growth of precedent. Our ideas of freedom were at the outset fevered by the convulsion of the French Revolution. Our literature, customs, fashions, institutions, and legislation were inherited or copied, and our religion was not a gradual indigenous growth, but both its spirit and forms were imported ready-made from Holland, Rome, England, and Palestine. To this extent we are a fiat nation, and in a very significant sense we have had neither childhood nor youth, but have lost touch with these stages of life because we lack a normal development history.[17]

Despite berating America for lack of attention to its adolescents – 'Nowhere are the great traditions of the race so neglected, the high school so oblivious of either the nature or the needs, or both, of the adolescent stage of life',[18] Hall earlier says of America that 'No country is so precociously old for its years', so that America is described as like one of its own adolescents, who 'leap rather than grow into maturity', something which explains their uniqueness as well as indicating why those adolescents need so much attention and care.[19] John Neubauer argues that Hall manages to 'envision America as a precocious adolescent' but this does not state the situation clearly enough: Hall argues that America is *literally* as well as figuratively adolescent.[20] Griffin argues that this construction was particularly attractive to post Civil-War America and beyond. Drawing on Kett's historical analysis of adolescence, she claims that the 'apparently universal nature of adolescence provided an illusory uniformity at a time when the construction of a united national identity and culture was of paramount importance for the Union.'[21]

Hall's influence is seen in La Loca's description of the adolescent boys as representing at various times a prehistoric stage of development – 'Dinosaurian!' (45) – as well as civilisation's highest potential – 'The Master Race' (52), however ironic La Loca may be about this. Her poem's focus on exclusively male adolescent experience finds a correlation in Hall's work, in which only white, middle-class boys and men may achieve and manifest the 'higher and more completely human traits' of individual

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[17] Ibid., xvi.

[18] Ibid., xvii.

[19] Ibid., xvi.

[20] John Neubauer, *The Fin-de-Siecle Culture of Adolescence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 146.

[21] Griffin, 14.

development. Hall's interest in girls focuses predominantly on their presumed future role as mothers. A woman is to be regarded as

> normally representing childhood and youth in the full meridian of its glory in all her dimensions and nature so that she is at the top of the human curve from which the higher super-man of the future is to evolve [. . .].[22]

Todd in fact associates La Loca with his mother. For example, on their date she refrains from ordering food, believing he has no money, and he comments, '"My mom diets, too"' (290). Todd's association of La Loca with his mother is based on a misunderstanding here, but the maternal role is one which La Loca assumes elsewhere in the poem: 'All I wanted to do was spank him / and order him to pick up his room. / I wanted a little white apron' (357-359). Her ambiguous 'pick up' creates an identification between herself and the mother who cleans up the adolescent's world, a world he will later carry (pick up). By narrating herself into the model of adolescence offered in her first passage, La Loca validates Hall's construction of adolescence, taking the only female role it offers – the maternal.

Again, however, the poem undermines its own description of adolescence as well as usefully exposing the complexities in Hall's theory. In the first passage La Loca invokes the image of the marsupial, which carries its young in a pouch, to clarify her metaphor of the adolescent carrying the world. Todd is the 'Aforementioned marsupial' (132). A parallel is established between the conditions of adolescence and pregnancy. This is puzzling, as La Loca and Hall focus on male adolescents. What has been termed the 'feminisation' of adolescence (hinted at in the references to the marsupial) has troubled various critics in their attempts to read Hall's work and in efforts to provide a coherent account of historical constructions of adolescence. Of the years between 1890 and 1920, during what he calls the 'reclassification of young people as adolescents', Kett argues that:

> During these critical decades young people, particularly teenage boys, ceased to be viewed as troublesome, rash, and heedless, the qualities

[22] Hall, II, 561.

> traditionally associated with youth; instead, they increasingly were viewed as vulnerable, passive, and awkward, qualities that previously had been associated only with girls.[23]

Similarly, both Childers and Catherine Driscoll note that the prolonged dependence of young people on their families, together with the late nineteenth-century ideology which conflated the role of both mothers and educators as what Childers calls 'nation-builders and citizen-shapers' informed the paradoxical idea that adolescence is actually somehow more related to female, or 'feminine' experience.[24] Similarly, Driscoll claims that 'Feminine adolescence or female youth have on the one hand been considered specific to the "other" gender/sex, and on the other hand as the most adolescent of adolescents.'[25] However, Childers and Driscoll account for this 'feminisation' differently. Childers (who focuses exclusively on representations of adolescence in America, unlike Driscoll) argues that

> This "feminization" of adolescent socialization has been given little attention in the ensuing discourse on adolescence, including, most notably, in recent feminist sociology and criticism. The Romantic emphasis on this phase as a time of rebellion, revolutionary fervor, and passionate self-absorption has, on the other hand, remained predominant. The dichotomy between femininity and adolescence, then, might be seen as inherent within adolescence itself. Adolescence has been framed upon a disjunction between, on the one hand, the feminine sentimentalization of authority and internalization of a sense of personal duty, and, on the other hand, the masculine discovery of the self and its properties, and development of a sense of individual rights.[26]

Driscoll, who does give attention to this 'socialisation' of adolescents, summarises the dilemma in the following manner: 'Adolescence is a retrospective construction of individual subjectification grounded in a dominant analogy between women and

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[23] Kett, 6.

[24] Childers, 14.

[25] Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 54.

[26] Childers, 14.

adolescents'.[27] While Driscoll goes on to say that 'The specification of behaviors and experiences as feminine or adolescent is not reliant on any biological definition despite the importance of girls' bodies to definitions of feminine adolescence', neither she nor Childers consider that sometimes Hall is discussing young people he calls adolescents and sometimes he discusses a category he has theorised, called adolescence. Hall's negotiation between discussing young people and constructing qualities he calls 'adolescent' is facilitated by movement between qualities which he is able to label as 'adolescent' but (and this is crucial), literally and figuratively so. Furthermore, this would reveal that the problem is not of determining how adolescence has been figured according to gender, or of determining how adolescence should be gendered. This kind of analysis has led to awkward justifications for including or excluding female experience under the heading of 'adolescence'. It leads Childers to frame adolescence exclusively upon questions of gender, and stereotypical assumptions regarding gender at that (seen in her constructions of 'masculine' and 'feminine'). It also leads Driscoll to formulate the category of 'feminine adolescence', a term which compounds rather than remedies the problem of understanding adolescence. The central point is that metaphor and the act of figuring are central to constructions of adolescence. This realisation allows for more productive readings of the subject and its portrayals in fiction, as well as facilitating the posing of more important questions. Why is it that figuring and metaphor are so important to adolescence? To what uses are various figurings of adolescence (culturally dominant figurings in particular) put? This thesis attempts to provide answers to these questions.

Hall's argument that '[. . .] woman at her best never outgrows adolescence as man does, but lingers in, magnifies and glorifies this culminating stage of life with its all-sided interests, its convertibility of emotions, its enthusiasm, and zest for all that is good, beautiful, true, and heroic' renders women inferior and aligns women with the childlike (something which Childers analyses expertly and at great length).[28] This is seen particularly in Hall's depiction of motherhood, in which a woman embodies, in Childers's terms, a kind of generic repository of the species, from which its new and

[27] Driscoll, 54.

[28] Hall, II, 624.

highest expression is to emerge (in the body of a white, male child).[29] If male adulthood is the highest aim of development, then boys must grow up to become adult. As such, anything adolescent about them must be strictly figurative, and laudable. For Hall, women do not grow up – their adolescence is all too literal. It is because he uses adolescence figuratively as well as referring to an experiential stage of development (denoting puberty and what would now be called the teenage years) that Hall can allocate positive and negative, experiential and figurative qualities to both genders in order to reflect the ideologies Griffin goes on to discuss. This construction of adolescence as experiential *and* figurative has not been sufficiently noticed, even though Childers's claim that 'By adolescence I mean more than an actual phase of biological or even social development. This is not to suggest that adolescence does not correspond with a measurable external reality' almost acknowledges it.[30] So does Driscoll's contention that 'However, adolescence is not a clear denotation of any age, body, behavior, or identity.'[31]

Childers describes 'a major shift in representations of adolescence in the postwar era when American literary studies becomes a prominent academic field and adolescence is defined within the newly-proclaimed canon as a particularly American literary theme'[32] but this is overly simplistic, as there is a clear continuity between pre- and postwar representations of adolescence, as well as a clear divergence. It is true that postwar American culture does influence an important new development in the history of adolescence. Financial security and rising birth-rates contributed to the construction and widespread visibility of the category of the 'teenager', a young person with independent spending power.[33] Kirk Curnutt argues that 'the teenager in the 1950s came to symbolize the unrepentant individual seeking relief from the placid complacency of modern life. Images of adolescent alienation have changed little since the 1950s.'[34] The rise of the teenager and the focus on 'alienation' goes some way towards accounting for

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[29] Childers, 68, 71-73.

[30] Ibid., 10.

[31] Driscoll, 51.

[32] Childers, 5.

[33] For an account of this shift in conceptions of adolescence, see Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996).

[34] Kirk Curnutt, *Alienated-Youth Fiction* (Detroit: Gale Group, 2001) 139.

'divergence' in postwar representations of adolescence. However, a continuity is demonstrated in postwar American literary criticism of adolescence, and it is criticism with which Childers is primarily concerned. Curnutt argues (as does Childers) that Leslie Fiedler's essays on the subject of adolescence (in which Fiedler presents a sustained argument that male American writers are unable to write mature fiction because they are unable to grow up) is responsible for increased attention to portrayals of adolescence in American literature.[35] Curnutt points out that by the early 1960s several articles on the subject had been published. Unlike Childers though, Curnutt notes a divergence between Fiedler and those critics who address the subject after him:

> While many critics recognized that Fiedler's analysis [. . .] offered a controversial perspective on the lost-innocence tradition, few shared his insistence that writers who mourned fallen youth risked artistic immaturity. Subsequent commentators instead viewed the coming-of-age process as a metaphor for America's struggle to define its identity in the post-World War II world. As critics insisted, the nation itself was caught in a prolonged state of "in-betweenness" similar to adolescence.[36]

Whereas Childers and Curnutt follow Fiedler in noting that male adolescence functions as an essential metaphor within American literature, Curnutt's sense of divergence between Fiedler and later critics is overstated. His overstatement of the degree of divergence is echoed in Childers's problematic assessment of a 'major shift' in postwar treatments of adolescence. Fiedler, like critics who follow him, such as Frederick I. Carpenter and Ihab Hassan, uses the portrayal of male adolescents in American literature in order to comment on America more widely. The only difference is that critics disagree over whether America's preoccupation with adolescence and America's adolescent character – what Carpenter calls its 'adolescent civilization' and Barton Friedberg calls its 'cult of adolescence' is something to be praised or denounced. Carpenter is probably the most optimistic, arguing that adolescent characters in American fiction reflect America's

[35] Fiedler's series of influential essays on this subject date from the 1950s. His argument that American (male) writers lamented the loss of youth and were unwilling to mature is explored in so many of his essays throughout the 1950s and 1960s that it is difficult to isolate particular examples. See Leslie A. Fiedler, *An End to Innocence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), and *Love and Death in the American Novel*, revised ed. (1960; New York: Stein & Day, 1966).

[36] Ibid., 119.

'mixed-up confusion and its splendid potentiality', while Fiedler might rank as the most pessimistic, other critics being more ambivalent.[37] Barbara A. White castigates these critics because the adolescents or models of adolescence which they discuss are almost exclusively male/masculine. She usefully demonstrates how their constructions of adolescence distort or ignore female experience.[38] Although this point is undoubtedly valid and important, White obscures the importance of what is actually happening when America is labelled 'adolescent', as do Childers and Curnutt. In fact, White's demonstration of the ways in which postwar critics have ignored or distorted female experience is inextricably involved with the notion of America as 'adolescent'. Van Wyck Brooks's comments on the importance of adolescence in American fiction begin to suggest what is at stake in this gesture of labelling. Like other critics in the 1950s and 1960s who consider portrayals of male adolescence, Brooks is concerned that America should have a mature self-image manifest in, and a national literature commensurate with, its powerful position in the postwar world. He is at best ambivalent about the fact that

> What has been said of our civilization, that it was always beginning again, at the same level, on each new frontier, might perhaps be said of our literature also. It is always beginning again as adolescent.[39]

It is this argument that reveals Childers's 'major shift' in postwar representations of adolescence to be overstated. Brooks refers to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, which, like Hall's, relies on recapitulation theory to describe a national identity figured

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[37] See Frederick I. Carpenter, "The Adolescent in American Fiction," *English Journal* 46.6 (1957): 313-319, and Barton C. Friedberg, "The Cult of Adolescence in American Fiction," *Nassau Review* 1.1 (1964): 26-35. The references from Carpenter's article are on page 319.

[38] Barbara A. White, *Growing Up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985). White pays attention to the work of Carpenter and Friedberg, as well as two other articles: Ihab H. Hassan, "The Idea of Adolescence in American Fiction," *American Quarterly* 10.3 (1958): 312-324, and James William Johnson, "The Adolescent Hero: A Trend in Modern Fiction," *Twentieth Century Literature* 5.1 (1959): 3-11, all of which posit that adolescence is important in American fiction because America is adolescent. White's argument focuses on these critics' distortion or erasure of female experience and their 'universalizing of male experience', rather than on the notion of America as adolescent. See her introduction, especially pages ix-xi, where she discusses these articles.

[39] Van Wyck Brooks, "Beyond Adolescence," *The Writer in America* (New York: Dutton, 1953) 64.

white and masculine.[40] Adolescence is enlisted in Hall's work and in that of these postwar critics as a literal descriptor for America and for the world. In one sense Curnutt is wrong to say that adolescence is enlisted as a metaphor – the postwar critics he discusses are saying that American culture is *literally* adolescent. However, like Hall, these critics construct adolescence to refer to only male, and largely white, experience, so that they enlist fictional male adolescents as representative of American selfhood. More accurately, these postwar critics enlist adolescence figuratively, but in a gesture which passes as literal. That a figurative adolescence only *passes* as a literal descriptor of America is exposed when critics such as White deconstruct the use of 'adolescent' as a descriptor for American selfhood, showing this selfhood to be constructed only on the basis of white male experience. It is then that the construction of 'America-as-adolescent' is revealed to be figurative; critics argue that a male adolescent such as Holden Caulfield is representative of American selfhood. White exposes this as false. That adolescence can be used to refer to an experiential stage and as a figurative descriptor (as in Spack's earlier definition of the 'metaphorical' quality of adolescence which enables qualities, behaviours, to be labelled adolescent) enables adolescence to be figured as both universal and culturally specific (when it is neither). In its most positive uses, adolescence is enlisted in postwar literary criticism to explain what is 'American' in American literature and what is universal about it, what makes American literature world literature and highly valued in that world. Like Hall's use of 'adolescence' as a descriptor for American identity in the late nineteenth century, 'adolescence' is used as a descriptor for national identity in the post-World War II years in order to provide what Griffin calls 'illusory uniformity' at another historical moment when there is a need for a united national identity.

La Loca's poem adds another dimension to this discussion. Her attitude towards the adolescent boys, Todd in particular, is inflected with what Donald D. Cohen labels a particularly postwar mixture of fascination, fear and repugnance. Cohen argues that in

[40] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," American Historical Association, *Annual Report for 1893* (Washington: 1894) 199-227. Rpt. in *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner,* introduction Ray Billington (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1961) 37-62.

postwar America, a desire for national conformity coupled with unease about the greater visibility and power of teenagers meant that:

> Adolescent culture, more problematic because harder to channel and control, was continually examined under society's moral microscope, scrutinized, picked apart, and cleansed, if necessary.[41]

Dominant postwar attitudes thus construct adolescence as what Julia Kristeva calls the abject:

> It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.[42]

Adolescence is typically portrayed as existing on the edges, in the margins (as La Loca's symbolism of the isle, and Curnutt's 'in-betweenness' indicate). As such, adolescence should surely be conceived as that which challenges any national identity (it does exactly that in Cohen's analysis, and indeed it did, in the 1950s and 1960s in particular), not that which embodies it. However, it is clear that labelling America as both metaphorically and literally adolescent (as the work of the literary critics previously discussed demonstrates) involves carrying whatever these critics define as 'adolescence' from its abject state and incorporating it into the adult world, in an act which, concerned as it is with carrying and transferral, mirrors the process of metaphor formation itself.

White's work shows how this narrative of America-as-adolescent inscribes a monolithic American culture and an essentialist definition of adolescence (despite the various ways in which adolescence is defined in these narratives of America-as-adolescent, the definitions are essentialist). Most obviously, as already noted, Hall and the postwar critics privilege white, middle-class male experience. La Loca's 'This is adolescence' is therefore problematic to say the least. Can she, a generation and gender separate from the adolescent boys she portrays, hope to articulate what adolescence

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[41] Ronald D. Cohen, "The Delinquents: Censorship and Youth Culture in Recent US History," *History of Education Quarterly* 37.3 (1997): 256.

[42] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 4.

means for them? Telling Todd how much she hates teenage boys, she begins "'Look, Todd, I don't want / you to take this personally, okay?'" (381-382). Humour comes from the fact that Todd cannot help doing so, but a disturbing point is raised. By narrating dominant constructions of adolescence as masculine, La Loca shows how that construction precludes any description of female experience, even her own. In offering definitions of adolescence that are relevant neither to La Loca nor to Todd, "Adventures on the Isle of Adolescence" raises several questions. Are individual adolescents always – or ever – implicated in the cultural discourses about adolescence which try to both contain and construct them? Is it possible for an individual to construct a definition of adolescence which has relevance to his or her own experience – what is involved in narrating individual adolescence, in other words? Would that construction have relevance for anyone other than oneself? Spacks argues that

> The crucial question becomes not, What is adolescence? but, How has adolescence been perceived, remembered, imagined? Although the second question allows a vast range of responses, it does not, like the first, seem utterly unanswerable.[43]

I would argue that 'What is adolescence?' is not an unanswerable question, because the ways in which adolescence is perceived and imagined in American fiction and literary criticism provide multiple answers, exposing as they do the ways in which adolescence and the figurative are inextricably interlinked. "Adventures on the Isle of Adolescence" may fail to provide satisfactory answers to the questions it raises, but the following chapters in this thesis will attempt to do so.

Rita Dove's "Adolescence" poems dramatise the negative effects of dominant constructions of adolescence (illustrated in the work of Hall and the postwar critics above) on individual experience.[44] Dove's poems also offer fruitful ways of reconsidering the concept of adolescence, because they reveal certain problems and tropes which this thesis hopes to demonstrate as central to efforts to narrate adolescence, particularly

[43] Spacks, 13.

[44] "Adolescence I", "Adolescence II", and "Adolescence III", *The Yellow House on the Corner*, Dove, 48, 49, 50. Subsequent references to lines from the various poems refer to these pages.

female adolescence. The subsequent chapters of this thesis will suggest answers to the problems and account for the significance of the repeated tropes. Susan R. Van Dyne describes Dove's poetic project as 'refiguring of traditions' and in these poems traditional constructions of adolescence are refigured. Only the titles indicate that the poems are about adolescence, as the word never appears within the poems, hinting at the elusiveness and ambiguity of their subject.[45] The titles sit hierarchically at the top of each page, proclaiming the importance of their subject but isolating 'adolescence' as a discursive term from the narrated action. In so doing, the titles dramatise how constructions of 'adolescence' may indeed exist at a remove from the lived experience of an individual – especially if, as in these poems, that individual is female and African-American. The proliferation of the Roman numeral 'I', while denoting a number, serves as a reminder that adolescence is commonly understood as a time of constructing identity – of multiple constructions of 'I'. Dove's poems are to be read as investigations of adolescence. They do not dictate what adolescence means, unlike La Loca's attempts. The fact that adolescence requires illustration in three different poems further testifies to its multiple, even contradictory nature. Each poem stands alone and none comments on any other, though the sequential numerals suggest that meaning could be carried from one poem and made to bear on the next. Only the title and poetic persona (the 'I' who is never explicitly stated as Dove herself) overtly link these poems, so that Dove's poems figure adolescence (in addition to being so many other things) as the search for a narrative which will explain and connect discrete experiences. Indeed, this search is their most vital concern.

"Adolescence I" describes awareness of sexuality, foregrounding the physiological changes to which Hall gives so much attention in his construction of adolescence. One girl imparts knowledge to others. She says, "'A boy's lips are soft, / As soft as baby's skin'" (5-6). The poem's speaker passively receives knowledge which, although second-hand, reconfigures her world – 'I could hear streetlamps ping / Into miniature suns / Against a feathery sky' (9-11). In an act of transformation through sound, streetlights 'ping' into suns in a demonstration of how metaphor transfers the

[45] Susan R. Van Dyne, "Siting the Poet: Rita Dove's Refiguring of Traditions," *Women Poets of the Americas: Toward a Pan-American Gathering*, ed. Jacqueline Vaught Brogan and Cordelia Chavez Candelaria (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

qualities of one thing to another, showing once more how metaphor is central to acts of narrating adolescence. In fact, this poem shows that Hall and the postwar critics perhaps have it the wrong way round. They enlist adolescence as a metaphor when actually it is metaphor which must be enlisted to describe adolescence. It may be that adolescence must always be defined with recourse to the figurative. In Dove's poem an onomatopaeic effect – the 'ping' of streetlamps – links sound and sense and creates new awareness in a new world. It is an effect which the poem's speaker seeks to emulate in her attempt to capture her adolescent experience. She *hears* the streetlamps 'ping into suns', she does not see them, so that her recollection of a literal event (the sound of streetlights) becomes the metaphor which imaginatively captures and re-creates her experience of transformative insight. It does so by finding a correspondence for that insight in the world. Revelatory knowledge about sexual experience is an event as momentous as streetlights pinging into suns. In a brief (and confused) discussion of metaphor and adolescence, Neubauer argues that

> [. . .] metaphors have a split identity and remain effective only if they do not harden into a logically firm meaning but readily renew themselves. Similarly, the personality that emerges from adolescence must erect walls that are tentative and 'porous', retaining thereby a readiness for change. Metaphors as well as people must remain free to redefine themselves [. . .][46]

There is plenty to dispute in Neubauer's comment. He assumes that a personality emerges 'from adolescence' assuming that adolescence is something which is taken leave of. However, the 'porous' personality he imagines as emerging from adolescence (in adulthood, then) resembles nothing less than the type of 'plastic' personality Hall describes in his construction of adolescence. Has adolescence not been taken leave of at all, or does adolescence require redefinition? What does it mean to say that metaphors have a 'split identity' or that they must not 'harden into a logically firm meaning'? Is Neubauer suggesting that adolescents are metaphors for metaphors, or that metaphors are metaphors for people, who are (metaphorically?) like adolescents? Despite these less productive aspects of Neubauer's argument, it is possible to convert his conundrums into

[46] Neubauer, 30.

something more useful. In finding something in the world which successfully describes her experience, the narrator of the poem engages in what could be called 'the work of metaphor'. She makes the action of the turning on of streetlights a metaphor for her experience of insight in adolescence, in a demonstration of the way metaphors function in language. Every female adolescent discussed in this thesis engages in the work of metaphor. In their narratives they perform acts of carrying in which the qualities of one object are transferred to another (Dove's speaker gives the qualities of suns to streetlights). In so doing, they make new connections between people and objects in the worlds they inhabit.

Dove's "Adolescence II" engages at a far more complex level than "Adolescence I" with the difficulty in narrating adolescence. The only poem of the three to employ present tense throughout, it suggests that the poem's speaker is not recalling her adolescence, but that she *is* adolescent. Reference to 'the baby-breasts' (2) signals her developing body and estrangement from that body (illustrated by the brief lapse into third-person voice). These are conventional markers of adolescence. But it is not so simple. The poem in fact dramatises the dilemma of a girl's potential accommodation into dominant discourses about adolescence. Her passivity is striking. All the girl does in the poem is wait. Three 'seal men' enter the bathroom, invading her privacy. They ask "'Can you feel it yet?"' (8), to which the girl responds with silence. She narrates how 'I don't know what to say, again' (9), suggesting that this is not their first visit. Discussing the importance of feeling to metaphor, Paul Ricoeur argues that 'To *feel*, in the emotional sense of the word, is to make *ours* what has been put at a distance by thought in its objectifying phase.'[47] The girl in "Adolescence II" is waiting to 'feel' adolescence, to make 'it' her own in acts of transfer which resemble the process of metaphor-making. She waits both for her adolescence and for a narrative which will describe 'it'.

This search for a narrative is not easily undertaken. The world the girl occupies may not accommodate her (as is dramatised in La Loca's poem). Its dominant discourses of adolescence may want to accommodate her in ways which do not correspond to lived

[47] Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," *Critical Theory Since 1965,* ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Florida: University Presses of Florida, 1986) 432.

experience and limit her aspirations regarding what that experience is to be. The 'seal men' are metaphorical, partaking of qualities of human and animal. Their 'seal' qualities enable them to be at home in the aquatic space of the bathroom. These aquatic associations, together with their stealthy entrance and calculated movements – one stations himself at the door as if to prevent escape – align them with the Navy Seals, writing them within a particularly American discourse of masculinity. The seal men seek to carry out a mission of incorporating (*seal*ing) the girl within dominant discourses of adolescence. Their confidence in her space, power to speak, and knowledge of what is happening puts them in authority. When the girl cannot give the response they seem to be looking for, they reply, '"Well, maybe next time"' (11), and disappear. The final line, 'Night rests like a ball of fur on my tongue' (15), indicates how the girl's incomprehension cannot even be articulated. She bears the weight of those dominant discourses of adolescence on her tongue as a seal might balance a ball on its nose, indicating how this poem can be read as describing one of many rehearsals for integration into a socially-sanctioned adolescence. It is an adolescence which the conversation between the girl and the seal men exposes as a performance, and therefore something which can be both confirmed and subverted by acts of repetition and revision – as seen in the references to 'again' and 'next time'. The treatment of adolescence in this poem thus finds a correspondence with the manner in which Judith Butler exposes gender as performance:

> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. [. . .] The abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional *dis*continuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this "ground." The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the

> phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction.[48]

The girl's sense that a correct answer exists to the question which the seal men pose may mean that she has no choice but to resign herself to a future moment of incorporation; she must wait to be narrated, or to narrate herself into a world which claims to already know her. However, 'I don't know what to say' might suggest not that she has nothing to say, but that she resists giving the anticipated response. It may additionally mean that she feels there is no audience for what, if anything, she has to say. As the poem repeats the seal men's strategy of not revealing what adolescence is, it is unclear whether incorporation has taken place or has been resisted. To use Butler's terms, it is unclear whether the girl's repetition of their strategy constitutes a subversive parodic repetition of dominant narratives of adolescence, or confirmation of those narratives. The ambivalence about being incorporated into dominant discourses about adolescence, or of labelling oneself as adolescent, is another common feature in the fictions analysed in this thesis. That ambivalence is expressed in Dove's poem in the darkness of night, which, like the presence of the seal men, prevents the girl from speaking (it may be seal fur which she thinks of in the poem's final line), but unlike the seal men, protects her – she appears to find comfort and solace sitting in the dark, withholding her feelings. There is no 'ping' of radiant transformative narration. Additionally, the trope of 'the dark' or the state of being 'in the dark' is central to every fiction of adolescence discussed in this thesis. 'The dark' is a trope of adolescence which is repeated and revised in these fictional constructions of adolescence, particularly with regard to female experience. The final chapter of this thesis will try to account for the significance of the trope of 'the dark'.

In Dove's "Adolescence III", the speaker's initial use of past tense suggests that she is narrating at a temporal remove from what she labels as her adolescence, and highlights the question of from what position it is possible to narrate adolescence (if at all). She recalls how it felt to fantasise about romance while simultaneously experiencing awkwardness about her changing body. She describes an imaginary lover, who is figured as older, with carnation and elaborate diction (16-19) who can magically make her scars

[48] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York: Routledge, 1999) 179.

disappear – 'At his touch, the scabs would fall away' (20). He has more power over her body than she, showing the limited scripts and imaginative possibilities which patriarchal constructions make available to female adolescents, and which most literary criticism and cultural analysis of female adolescence has devoted itself to exposing and decrying.[49] The concluding three lines of the poem shift into present tense – 'Over his shoulder, I see my father coming toward us: / He carries his tears in a bowl, / And blood hangs in the pine-soaked air' (21-23). He approaches the girl in an act of witnessing a process of exchange in which she becomes property of lover rather than family. Whether her father is mourning or thwarting the exchange is unclear. The transition to present tense signals an end to the fantasy and, paradoxically, a return to the recalled past. However, if 'us' refers to the adolescent girl and her lover, the father is included in the adolescent girl's fantasy, not disruptive of it, supported by the opening line of the poem which states that he is absent – 'With Dad gone, Mom and I worked / The dusky rows of tomatoes' (1-2). Dove's sequence of poems concludes with the speaker lost in memories and unable to return to the present, the recollected girl suspended in fantasy and detached from the experiential. However, 'us' could also refer to the pairing of the mother and daughter at the poem's opening, transporting the girl from her bedroom back to the domestic reality of the tomato rows. The poem ends with the girl positioned in a space which, while definitely recalled, may be experiential and may be figurative, reflecting the difficulty of negotiating between both in adolescence as well as separating both in representations and constructions of adolescence. In Dove's poems it is important not to resolve these tensions; the tension *is* the adolescence. This enables plural readings of adolescence. This thesis underscores the fact that adolescence can be read in multiple ways, and that this enables positive and negative readings of adolescence as a continuously repeated and revised narrative of successful or failed resistances to dominant constructions of the subject. Dove's poem ends with the father frozen in the act of carrying his tears,

[49] The following texts are some of the most dominant in the construction of female adolescence as a vulnerable time of low self-esteem and loss of voice: Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Souls of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Putnam, 1994), Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), and Jill McLean Taylor, Carol Gilligan, and Amy M. Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

emblematic of an incomplete or unsuccessful carrying, the root of metaphor. The difficulty of telling what is recalled experience and what is imagined in this poem indicates, finally, how indispensable the concepts of metaphor and adolescence are to each other, even if the meanings they create are not always complete or productive. Metaphor is something which individuals use to carry the world closer and to locate themselves in relation to the concept of adolescence, troubling boundaries between self and world, adult and adolescent.

The first chapter of this thesis examines how gender and region might come to bear in narrating adolescence. In so doing, it engages with a strand of criticism which argues that there is a particular focus on adolescence (particularly female adolescence) in literature of the American South. The region of the South was chosen for two reasons – the preoccupation with female adolescence in works by Southern writers offered a large number of texts on the subject from which particular novels could be chosen for discussion, and, most importantly, because the preoccupation with Southern female adolescence both engages with and diverges from the tradition of enlisting 'adolescence' as a metaphor for America. Fictional works and literary criticism about female adolescence in the South not only counter the tendency to focus on male adolescence but reveal particular tropes (such as friendship, loss of innocence, and a focus on the body) which in turn are brought to bear on constructions and narrations of the South, constructions which nonetheless highlight the singularity of individual voices and experience. This contradicts the manner in which male adolescent experience is often rendered universal or representative of all.

This first chapter is framed by Jill McCorkle's critical thoughts on adolescence. In an unpublished essay, *What to Wear on the First Day at Lumberton High . . .* (1990), McCorkle offers a lengthy discussion of adolescence and the ways in which it is an important theme in her fiction. McCorkle's thoughts offer a useful framework because metaphor is vital to her constructions of adolescence, and because those metaphors, like La Loca's, also enlist the act of carrying as central. McCorkle's central metaphor of adolescence is given in her description of an individual who is burdened with articles of luggage which he or she must bear or unpack. The chapter uses McCorkle's metaphors to come to a more productive understanding of adolescence. It does so by illuminating the

contradictions and complexities in McCorkle's argument. It also reads five narratives of first-person female adolescence alongside McCorkle's critical thoughts. These narratives are Jill McCorkle's *The Cheer Leader* (1984) and *Ferris Beach* (1990), Thulani Davis's *1959* (1992), Josephine Humphreys's *Rich in Love* (1988), and Sylvia Wilkinson's *Bone of my Bones* (1982). These texts are chosen because they work together in a complex interplay of likeness and difference intrinsic to the process of metaphor formation itself, in order to provide new readings of adolescence. More explicitly, the texts are chosen on the basis of what they share and what they do not. An attempt has been made to present experiences of individuals of differing ages, races, and classes, and who experience adolescence in differing historical moments and in different places in the American South.

The important events in each girl's narrative, and which stimulate their development and acts of narration, are also different. Jo Spencer, twenty-three year old narrator of McCorkle's *The Cheer Leader*, narrates the events which led to her breakdown in adolescence, and her subsequent tentative recovery. Jo is a white middle-class girl from North Carolina, and her breakdown is caused by an awareness that she cannot accommodate or articulate herself in a 1960s and 1970s Southern society in which the women's rights movement challenges traditional roles for women, so that Jo cannot decide how she wants to, or is supposed to, behave. In *Ferris Beach*, Kate Burns's narrative records a white, middle-class childhood and adolescence in the town of Fulton, North Carolina. Whereas Jo is outwardly a happy, popular teenager (as her role of chief cheerleader testifies), Kate is quiet and reserved. Her efforts to remain unnoticed are caused by her birthmark, which Kate allows to define her as different from others and which brings her to the attention of others (or so she believes). Kate's adolescence records a series of experiences which force her to reevaluate her thoughts about others and herself.

The narrator of Humphreys's *Rich in Love* is Lucille Odom, a white, upper middle-class girl growing up in South Carolina in the 1980s. Lucille recounts events in her seventeenth year, during which her mother abandoned her family and each member must struggle with the consequences and work together to live harmoniously in new circumstances. The most economically privileged of the narrators in this chapter,

Lucille's experiences differ markedly from Wilkinson's narrator in *Bone of My Bones*, Ella Ruth Higgins. Ella Ruth describes her life from the ages of nine to eighteen, between 1950 and 1958, focussing on the poverty and hardship she experiences in the town of Summit, North Carolina. An aspiring writer, Ella Ruth's narrative concerns her struggle to find her voice, something attendant upon her struggle to assume and articulate a powerful female identity. Finally, in Davis's *1959*, Katherine Tarrant, called Willie, describes the events which take place in her twelfth year. Willie is African-American and grows up in the town of Turner, Virginia. In 1959 the notion of school integration becomes a possibility, thanks to the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling outlawing school segregation. Willie is chosen as one of the students who will integrate. She describes how the anticipated integration affects herself and the members of her community, so that of all the narrators here, Willie's story is the most deeply concerned with matter of race.

As these brief summaries should suggest, the adolescent girls in these texts are all concerned to find a place (both literal and figurative) for themselves in the very different Souths in which they live. To do so, they each engage in what I call 'the work of metaphor', seeking to identify, dismantle and revise their societies' constructions of likeness and difference which enable them to refigure self and South. Each of these texts therefore constitutes an act of narrative 'unpacking' (each girl is burdened in adolescence with her own 'baggage' with which she much negotiate) and therefore engages with McCorkle's critical thoughts in order to provide an interrogation of dominant constructions of adolescence.

The second chapter attempts to account for the ambivalence regarding incorporation into dominant discourses of adolescence, and incorporation by the label 'adolescent', which is found in so many fictions of female adolescence. It does so by examining a particularly ambivalent construction of adolescence – that revealed in the critical thoughts of Joyce Carol Oates, particularly as Oates's comments pertain to the dictate or metanarrative which she herself enlists; namely that 'we are supposed to grow up'. Oates's work has been chosen for analysis because she, like McCorkle, privileges adolescence throughout her writing career and has written critically on the subject, and so her thoughts provide a framework for this second chapter in a manner similar to the way

in which McCorkle's work functions in the first. However, whereas McCorkle focuses on adolescence as it might affect an individual, and in a prolonged examination of the topic in a single essay, Oates's comments on adolescence are scattered throughout various critical essays, none of which take adolescence as their chief concern. Oates's comments on adolescence tend not to refer to the experience of individuals who could be called 'adolescent'. Rather, they relate to the philosophical questions which comprise her artistic credo: what constitutes identity - individual, national, cultural? Reading one of Oates's most recent novels, *I'll Take You There* (2003) alongside Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), uncovers intertextual relations between the two novels which function to expose flaws and inconsistencies in Oates's construction of adolescence, in addition to revealing a more complex narrative of adolescence in *The Bell Jar* than either Oates or much literary criticism ascribes to it. Both novels explore the questions of identity which concern Oates, and both do so through focusing on the adolescent experiences of their nineteen-year-old narrators (Oates's anonymous narrator's experiences take place in 1963; those of Plath's Esther Greenwood in 1953).

While the first chapter's focus on McCorkle's treatment of adolescence allows a consideration of adolescence as an experiential category (examining the experiences of five girls who have reached puberty), the second chapter's enlistment of Oates's treatment of the concept of allows a consideration of adolescence as a figurative category – that is, it looks at what the term 'adolescence' is made to bear in the work of Oates and other critics, and suggests why the uses to which the term is put are often contentious. This is illuminated by readings of *The Bell Jar* together with a short story by Toni Cade Bambara, "Sweet Town" (1972), and Alice Hoffman's novel, *Property Of* (1977). These texts are chosen because while once more portraying three very different experiences of adolescence, they combine to provide useful correlatives and correctives to Oates's critical work and *I'll Take You There*. In Bambara's short story, the African-American narrator Kit is required, at age fifteen, to decide which elements of her youth must be retained and relinquished if she is to learn from the events which occur to her that summer. Hoffman's narrator (anonymous, like Oates's) tells about her experiences at age seventeen, in an indeterminate year in the early 1970s. She lives in the Avenue, a suburb of New York populated by youth gangs. The girlfriend of a gang leader, her tale of

development necessitates her eventual departure from the Avenue and from the relationship, in order that she achieve independence. The adolescent girls in Plath's, Bambara's and Hoffman's texts achieve various degrees of resistance to the dominant discourses about adolescence which are supposed to contain them, and their active opposition to those discourses contrasts with the ambivalence expressed in Oates's work. To borrow McCorkle's metaphor, if the first chapter of this thesis concerns itself predominantly with the baggage to do with gender and place which individuals must negotiate, the second concerns itself with baggage relating to gender and specific historical moment.

The third and final chapter of this thesis engages with the two central themes in Dove's "Adolescence III" – the gesture of looking back, and the problem of defining what adolescence is. This chapter argues that these two themes are in fact interlinked, as the gesture of looking back to narrate adolescent experience involves repetition and revision of those experiences in narrative. This chapter shows that repetition and revision are central to figuring adolescence, in fiction and criticism. To repeat and revise is central to the concept of recapitulation and to Henry Louis Gates's concept of Signifyin(g), and this chapter reveals that recapitulation (the gesture, not the content of the scientific theory Hall enlists) is one of the central figures involved in narrating adolescence. In a recapitulative gesture, this final chapter re-visits and revises McCorkle's theory of adolescence once more in order to reveal that the problems of narrating adolescence are caused by the difficulties in signifying adolescence.

McCorkle's essay contains a second major metaphor for adolescence. Adolescence occupies a place, 'Point B', which must be passed through on the journey between Points A and C (childhood and adulthood, respectively). Although this represents a normative developmental pattern, McCorkle's essay expresses uncertainty about how, and even why, the journey should be taken, and even more uncertainty about what 'Point B' (adolescence) signifies. To tease out these uncertainties in more detail, this chapter provides readings of Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (2001) and Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2003), texts which tell of adolescents who perform various acts of passing. *Caucasia*'s narrator, Birdie Lee, is mixed-race, born to a white mother and African-American father. She records how she is forced to pass as white in adolescence,

so that she and her mother can flee, undetected, from Boston (her mother believes that she is wanted by the FBI because of her political activities in the civil rights movements of the 1970s). Birdie's passing is related to race. Cal Stephanides, Eugenides's narrator, is living as male at the time he narrates (at age forty-one) but lives as a girl until discovering at age fourteen that he is genetically male, so that he performs various acts of passing in relation to gendered identity. Both novels additionally raise connections between these acts of passing and questions of adolescent and adult identity, and not merely because the act of passing calls *all* identity categories into question. McCorkle's A-B-C model of progression from adolescence to adulthood is undercut by Birdie and Cal – voluntarily by Birdie, who seems keen to stress the provisional and fluid nature of development, but involuntarily by Cal, whose claims to the status of 'male' and 'adult' are hopelessly undermined by the story he tells. These texts were chosen because their narrative content and the Signifyin(g) narrative strategies undertaken by each narrator illustrate how passing concerns itself with the acts of transferral and carrying intrinsic to metaphor. Crucially, these novels allow for a discussion of how various acts of passing – to do with identity and the act of narration – are seen as central to constructions of adolescence and to its signification (seen in the way the postwar critics make a metaphorical construction of adolescence pass as a literal descriptor of America, for example).

Like Dove's poems, each of the three chapters in this thesis can stand alone, but together they work in sequence in an attempt to reach a greater understanding of what is at stake in various figurations of adolescence, and what is involved in narrating the experience. As stressed throughout this introduction, this thesis focuses on female experiences which differ vastly with regard to age, race, class and historical moment, and which engage very differently with the concept of adolescence. However, the new readings of adolescence this thesis provides, based on its readings of these texts, are not restricted to any particular gendered, raced, or classed experience. Nevertheless, female experience is foregrounded in order to provide readings (or re-readings) of texts which have previously been ignored or misread according to previous models of adolescence, and in order to show how constructions of adolescence which privilege white, male, middle-class experience constitute particular articles of luggage with which female

adolescents and narrators are burdened and feel they must negotiate.[50] With this in mind, this thesis can be seen as also engaging in 'the work of metaphor'. This is because it seeks to discover likenesses and differences among narrative constructions of adolescence in fictional and critical work. It seeks to discover what is common to many narratives of adolescence (a focus on metaphor, for example, and metaphors of carrying in particular), and common to female experience (a focus on particular metaphors, such as unpacking, and a tendency to challenge the A-B-C model of development described by McCorkle). It seeks to show how and why these metaphors function differently in various texts. Perhaps most importantly, this thesis performs the work of metaphor as Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik define it: 'Metaphor has [. . .] a subversiveness of its own: it can threaten the stability of the dominant discourse by its ability to disrupt the threshold of meaning.'[51] This thesis aims to challenge the dominant discourse about fictions of adolescence in American literary criticism.

All the texts chosen for discussion have been published after 1950. Every portrayal of adolescence in this thesis is therefore influenced in some way by the postwar critics' formulation of 'America-as-adolescent' – a formulation in which metaphor, the figurative, acts of passing, and questions of individual and national identity are central. It is additionally because questions of identity are central to constructions of adolescence that each narrative examined in this thesis is a first-person narrative. If, as the many first-person narratives of adolescence seem to imply, a search for identity involves a search for voice, then the act of narrating one's self through story is vital to constructions of adolescence. In addition to this, critical examinations of fictions of adolescence tend to look at novels. The focus on poetry in this introduction, and the inclusion of Bambara's short story in the second chapter, have been made deliberately in order to counter the relative absence of readings of adolescence in these genres.

The point of detailing various ways in which adolescence lends itself to metaphor in this introduction is not merely to offer a pocket of ideas about adolescence from which

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[50] Mary Jean DeMarr and Jane S. Bakerman's *The Adolescent in the American Novel since 1960* (New York: Ungar, 1986) provides a valuable listing of novels dealing with the subject of adolescence, as well as attempting to identify themes relevant to female experience.

[51] Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women's Fiction* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990) 4.

some can be selected, others rejected, but to make the crucial point that 'adolescence' is variously like the pocket and the muddle of ideas contained within the pocket. That this involves another risky excursion into metaphor serves to reiterate the other crucial point that it may be that adolescence must always be defined with recourse to metaphor. In the critical works discussed in this introduction so far, adolescence has been used as figurative container for various discourses – which are sometimes figured universal – concerning identity and degrees of belonging in the world. La Loca's poem and the work of Hall and various postwar literary critics illustrate how 'adolescence' functions as a repository of multiple adult narrative constructions regarding gendered, classed, raced and national identities. This is something which Spacks, more than any of the other critics here, recognises. In her conception of adolescence as an 'adult idea' she hints at the figurative quality of adolescence, even though this quality is revealed in all constructions of adolescence, not only those made by adults. In many critical discussions and dominant constructions of the subject, adolescence bears little resemblance to a stage of development experienced differently by individuals (which it is), but is in effect employed metaphorically in academic discussions as a figurative container for the uncontainable. That it is uncontainable is demonstrated by the fact that adolescence has no binary other, no exact opposite, so it can be endlessly re-figured male and female, raced and classed. In its abject, in-between state, adolescence troubles all identity categories. Undefined, multiply defined and uncontainable, adolescence has been made to mean that which it is not – American identity, or the world. But relations between metaphor and adolescence can be productive, as Dove's poems and some of the texts in the following chapters show.

An unspecified 'vehicle' (Todd's skateboard? The island or world of adolescence which the adolescent can mount like a magic carpet?) carries Todd and La Loca over and above America and into the realm of the figurative at her poem's conclusion. As they pass over America, La Loca says to Todd, "'[. . .] I didn't know it was gonna be like this. Why didn't you tell me [. . .]'" (62). Until this moment she has never considered that Todd might be able to define adolescence, although throughout the poem she does note that Todd tells her about his life – revealingly, that information is relayed in her words rather than his. However, hopefully this thesis will show that not only should La Loca ask

about adolescence but that she can ask a good question, pertinent to herself and others. It is a question which encapsulates ideas of adolescence as experiential and figurative, as contained and uncontainable in narrative, as concerning relations to, and narrations of, self to world. Taking the question out of context invites multiple and endless narratives about adolescence by any and every individual. The question also highlights the importance of the elusive 'you' who may or may not be adolescent and who is the important, yet unidentifiable, addressee of many of these narratives. At various moments in Oates's and Hoffman's texts, that 'you' is rendered as a passer-by who witnesses important moments in the adolescent experiences of the narrators, and whose very presence validates and transforms their narratives and even their constructions of adolescence. The question expresses optimism regarding the possibility of answering what Spacks calls the 'unanswerable' puzzle of 'What is adolescence?' The question is, ironically, asked by the seal men in Dove's poem – "'Can you feel it yet?'"

Chapter One. Unpacking 'Something Dark': Narrating Southern Female Adolescence in Jill McCorkle's *The Cheer Leader* and *Ferris Beach*, Josephine Humphreys's *Rich in Love*, Sylvia Wilkinson's *Bone of My Bones,* and Thulani Davis's *1959.*

In *What to Wear on the First Day at Lumberton High . . .*[1] an essay written to accompany publication of her fourth novel, *Ferris Beach* (1990), Jill McCorkle accounts for her preoccupation with the topic of adolescence. Both *Ferris Beach* and McCorkle's first novel, *The Cheer Leader* (1984), are first-person narratives of female adolescence in the American South. As the introduction to this thesis has demonstrated, constructions of adolescence in America are informed by psychological, sociological, and historical accounts of the concept which rely on diverse and intersecting historical configurations of gender, class, race and nation, just as fictional portrayals of adolescence do (with region a more prominent factor in literary portrayals of adolescence than in academic constructions of the subject). What has gone largely unnoticed, however, is that these accounts (whatever their differences) all rely heavily upon the metaphorical, or figurative, in order to present their constructions of adolescence.

McCorkle's essay is no different in this regard. It too reveals an unease about defining adolescence which is caused by – and causes – close relations between adolescence, metaphor, and narration. McCorkle's figurations of adolescence have particular ramifications for female and Southern experience. An examination of these problematic figurations allows a modification of her comments. This enables a more productive understanding of how adolescence is written and read in American literature and literary criticism. This modification also provides a contextual framework for readings of five very different fictional first-person narratives of female adolescence in the American South. These narratives are Jill McCorkle's *The Cheer Leader* (1984) and *Ferris Beach* (1990), Thulani Davis's *1959* (1992), Josephine Humphreys's *Rich in Love* (1988), and Sylvia Wilkinson's *Bone of my Bones* (1982), and the reasons for choosing

[1] Jill McCorkle, *What to Wear on the First Day at Lumberton High . . .* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1990).

these texts for discussion will be made explicit as examination of McCorkle's critical essay proceeds.[2]

What to Wear on the First Day at Lumberton High . . . comprises McCorkle's meditation on her own adolescence. It is structured around four sections, the headings of which posit responses to the essay's title question – 'The suede vest?', 'A scarf tied round the head?', 'The Indian moccasins?', and 'The same old hat?' As these headings suggest, McCorkle's adolescence is figured as a time in which identity is experimented with and fashioned, items of clothing signifying the effort of selection involved in the external production and presentation of ever-shifting identities. Barbara Bennett claims that the essay 'characterizes [McCorkle's] adolescence as one of normal insecurities, emotional intensity, and identity exploration', but this is to accept without interrogating what Bennett labels 'normal teenage years', notwithstanding the insightful readings of McCorkle's work which Bennett goes on to provide.[3] Additionally, it is an assessment which fails to do justice to the complexity of the treatment of adolescence in McCorkle's essay and in her fiction. This failing is chiefly caused by Bennett's failure to note that adolescence is not 'only one of the themes explored by McCorkle'[4] but one of the few subjects to which McCorkle has devoted attention throughout her entire writing career, which she has written a critical inquiry into, and to which she returns often in interviews. Bennett's inattention to the multiple and problematic figurings of adolescence in McCorkle's essay (she rarely refers to the essay, in fact) causes her to accommodate McCorkle and her writing into normative and simplified notions of the subject. As McCorkle uses the subject of adolescence to engage with some of the most important themes explored in her fiction (such as identity formation and individual development, with particular emphasis on gender and region), closer attention to the essay, with the essay on adolescence providing a framework for a critical survey of McCorkle's work, for example, might have led to more complex readings of that work.

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[2] Jill McCorkle, *The Cheer Leader* (1984; Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1992). Jill McCorkle, *Ferris Beach* (1990; New York: Fawcett Crest, 1991). Thulani Davis, *1959* (1992; New York: HarperPerennial, 1993). Josephine Humphreys, *Rich in Love* (1988; London: Flamingo, 1992). Sylvia Wilkinson, *Bone of My Bones* (New York: Putnam, 1982).

[3] Barbara Bennett, *Understanding Jill McCorkle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000) 3-4.

[4] Ibid., 11.

The essay offers two definitions of adolescence which demand close attention because they transcend individual experience and lay claim to universality. The first explains that

> I have always believed that at the ripe age of adolescence (*literally* ripe, as teenage girls are admonished in health classes all across America) our emotional baggage is already fully packed – every tiny article wedged into place – and strapped to our shoulders, backs, ankles (depending on the load). And that we spend the rest of our lives *unpacking*, sorting and choosing, what to treasure, what to alter, what to throw off the nearest cliff never to look at again.[5]

The essay concludes:

> The fact remains that to get from point A to point C (to get from childhood to adulthood), as scary as that may be, you must go through point B – adolescence – to pick up all of your luggage (the way you felt, the way you looked; the way you *wanted* to feel and the way you *wanted* to look). Good, bad or indifferent, it's how we all got where we are. For my fiction – and for me – the passage is fertile territory. I suspect I'll be unpacking for some time to come.[6]

Both passages, taken in their totality, constitute what Zoltan Kovecses would call 'metaphorical linguistic expressions'.[7] Not only this, however, but each relies on an assortment of 'conceptual metaphors'. Conceptual metaphors are metaphorical constructions in which one concept is understood in terms of another, just like metaphorical linguistic expressions, but the term 'conceptual metaphor' is used to designate conventional metaphors in various Western cultures (Kovecses devotes much attention to the way in which life is often described as a journey, for example).[8] The first description presents an image of adolescence as a time when the body (presumably adolescent, although not labeled as such) is weighed down with emotional baggage.

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[5] *What to Wear on the First Day at Lumberton High . . .*, 6.

[6] Ibid., 9.

[7] Zoltan Kovecses et al., *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 4.

[8] Ibid., 3.

Kovesces would say that this description utilises a conventional 'conceptual metaphor' in which difficulties are expressed as burdens, the concept of 'burden' used to explain the concept of 'difficulty'.[9] McCorkle's metaphorical descriptions are complex not only because she enlists conceptual metaphors within her metaphorical linguistic expressions, but because the metaphors she enlists to describe adolescence converge and diverge at significant moments, with particular consequences when considering female experience.

The body is not labelled male or female, although reference to 'literal' ripeness of the female body suggests that preoccupation with the physicality of the body – specifically, its capacity for reproduction – constitutes a particular 'article' of baggage for the female adolescent. That word 'literally' implicitly categorises as metaphorical the description of adolescence as universally 'ripe', so that this description of adolescence as metaphorically 'ripe' functions to simultaneously erase and mark gendered difference. The literalness of the adolescent girl's female body both critiques and confirms the metaphorical narrative which presumes to describe her adolescent experience, as she is and is not included within the description of adolescence as metaphorically 'ripe'.

Irrespective of the sex of the body, the passage is additionally reluctant to specify who is actually involved in actions of packing and strapping. McCorkle's core argument is that people are burdened with particular 'articles' and at some point make decisions about what they do and do not wish to carry. There is a suggestion that the adolescent body is intervened upon by unspecified forces that burden it with baggage and force it to carry that baggage, something which renders it powerless.

The second passage enlists what Kovesces calls the conceptual metaphor of life as a journey.[10] The potentially immobilising power of this metaphorical luggage (articles are strapped to the ankles, for example) makes it hard to imagine the journey being taken with ease. Here, focus on the adolescent body is dispensed with in favour of the depiction of adolescence as a stage entered and left on the route to adulthood, the A-B-C model of correspondences suggesting an ordered and fixed progress. Yet this description renders itself and the previously discussed passage thoroughly problematic. The luggage which is picked up, in parenthesis, metaphorically represents nothing other than the burdensome

[9] Ibid., 4, 58.

[10] Ibid., 4

conflicts which McCorkle theorises as constituting adolescence. As her essay describes it, those conflicts take the form of simultaneous and paradoxical desires; to be recognised for what one believes or wishes oneself to be (the way one wants to feel and look), and to be something other than what one fears one is or might appear (how one feels or looks). It should be noted that the conflicts are not resolved in McCorkle's model, merely picked up in their entirety.

The problems in McCorkle's definitions are as follows: the model is taken from McCorkle's analysis of her own adolescence and rendered universal; the limited definition of conflicts and desires which McCorkle defines as adolescent is debatable; most perplexingly, this passage argues that to get to adulthood, an individual passes through their adolescence in order to pick adolescence up. Adolescence exists in an ambiguous space, dramatised by the fact that McCorkle figures adolescence in luggage and in parenthesis, existing at a remove from the main body of the sentence and external to the body sentenced to pick up the luggage. If individuals leave adolescence only in the act of taking it with them, then adolescence must be objectified, rendered external to themselves before they can attain adulthood.

A number of complexities have so far been raised by the definitions of adolescence in McCorkle's essay. The purpose of examining the essay's definitions is not to reject McCorkle's formulations but to modify them in order to create a more productive understanding of adolescence. The '*literally* ripe' in McCorkle's discussions are 'teenage girls'. This phrase refers to individuals (female) of a particular age range, thirteen to nineteen, who are contained by and disruptive of a narrative of a generic and metaphorical 'adolescence'. This term 'adolescence' does not attach itself to a strict age range and is in fact used as a shorthand way of designating any single one, or multiple combinations of, the following ideas regarding individual development. These ideas are far from exhaustive, but some of the most common are: 'adolescence' can refer to the biological changes of puberty; 'adolescence' can refer to indecision over identity and choices in life; 'adolescence' can refer to a stage of life which is not childhood and not adulthood and yet partakes of elements of both; 'adolescence' can refer to a stage of

development which is arguably immature and inferior to adulthood.[11] Lacking any clear definition, not applicable to a particular age range, historical time or place, 'adolescence' is almost entirely metaphorical, struggling to bear the weight of all the discourses – informed by gender, class, race, region and nation – as they collude and collide in acts of attempting to define it.

This metaphorical quality of adolescence makes it possible for McCorkle to figure adolescence in multiple ways, though her figurations may conflict with each other, testifying to the complexity of the subject. McCorkle's figuring of adolescence as luggage illustrates (but does not make explicit) how adolescence functions as a metaphorical repository for various narratives, while her vague-yet-complex descriptions of adolescence illustrate the difficulty of defining it satisfactorily. Bearing these points in mind, it is possible to offer a new figuration of adolescence as container for various narratives, and uncontainable within narrative. This is illustrated by McCorkle's description of female experience as both incorporated into and excluded from the model of adolescence as metaphorically 'ripe'. These conceptions of adolescence as container for narratives and uncontainable within narrative offer a much more productive way of understanding portrayals of adolescence in American literature, and constitute the starting point from which readings of adolescence in literature should be made.

McCorkle's passages narrate metaphorical acts of carrying and interpret them as symbolic of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Adolescence is a time of carrying articles of baggage (in the first passage) but adolescence is also the luggage, that which is carried, more specifically interpreted as questions of identity. In claiming that this is a stage which everyone goes through (differently), the vague definitions of

[11] These dominant and popular constructions of adolescence in America are pooled largely from the work of the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall, whose two volume work *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*, 2 vols (New York: Appleton, 1904) uses late nineteenth-century discourses about gender and race and the biological concept of recapitulation to construct adolescence as a time of significant hormonal changes in the body, a developmental stage where individuals should be given a certain amount of freedom from adult responsibilities. Hall's preface in the first volume, v-xx, outlines his theory. Less attention has been given to the fact that Hall uses his model of adolescence to figure America as adolescent. The work of the psychologist Erik Erikson is particularly important to postwar constructions of adolescence, as he figures adolescence as a time of identity crisis and experimentation – see, for example, Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (London: Faber, 1968) and Erikson, ed., *Youth: Change and Challenge* (1961; New York: Basic Books, 1983).

adolescence and even more vague qualifiers ('depending on the load') erase difference even as they purport to allow for it, a miscarriage with important consequences. This new construction of adolescence as metaphorical, contained in narrative and uncontainable within narrative, demonstrates how McCorkle's focus on individual experience obscures the fact that adolescence is not merely a piece of luggage that can be picked up but a cultural construct weighted with its own problematic discourses, which must be 'unpacked' like anything else. However, modification of her ideas incorporates this. The first passage, in which the passive adolescent body is loaded with unspecified articles, does in fact dramatise (though it does not make explicit) the fact that some of those articles might represent cultural constructions of adolescence itself. The second passage highlights (again, without making explicit) the fact that adolescence does also correspond to an individual stage of development which is informed by cultural constructions of gender, race, class, region and nation. These cultural constructions constitute 'articles' of luggage for individuals to negotiate.

That adolescence can be considered in terms of being containable and uncontainable in narrative is also made possible by McCorkle's varied figurings of adolescence in space; again, this is something illustrated by the uneasy accommodation of female adolescent experience in McCorkle's narrative of adolescence as metaphorically ripe. In McCorkle's essay, adolescence is marked on the body (ripeness), external to it (a stage passed through), and objectified (in luggage). The second passage claims that adolescent confusions over identity affect 'how we all got where we are', conflating identity with the space it occupies. It also assumes a stage of development clearly marked as adulthood, and which owes its adult identity to engagement with its adolescent conflicts. McCorkle shows that discourses presuming to define individuals by equating them with spaces they inhabit – most relevant here being the aged, raced, gendered and sexed body, in addition to nation and/or region – constitute important 'articles' of luggage. The A-B-C model of the journey through life in the second passage claims that adulthood constitutes point 'C' at which unpacking takes place. The first passage, in contrast, claims that unpacking is undertaken for the duration of 'the rest of our lives', a formulation which grants the burdened adolescent body little agency in that unpacking, although it is equally clear that adolescence, with its figuring out of identity,

is also dependent upon acts of unpacking (dramatised in terms of the selection and rejection McCorkle describes in trying on clothes).

That this new figuration of adolescence as containable and uncontainable in adolescence has particular consequences for narratives of Southern female adolescence is illustrated by a passage in Josephine Humphreys's *Rich in Love* (1988). The novel's narrator, Lucille Odom, a white, upper middle-class girl growing up in South Carolina in the 1980s, recounts events in her seventeenth year. In the following passage, Lucille evaluates her feelings towards her aspiring boyfriend, Wayne Frobiness. This leads to a meditation on female adolescence and how to narrate it:

> But what I felt for Wayne was not love. What I felt for Wayne was what you feel towards Huck Finn. A kind of affection, because he is so good and American. But when you read that book, if you are a girl, you say to yourself *this kid has a long way to go*. He is so happy with his Jim, and his raft, and his old river. The light never dawns on him. Boys have that extended phase of innocence. I do not think girls have it at all. Imagine Becky Thatcher writing that book and you have an altogether different concept. You have something dark. (146)

'If you are a girl' prefaces a suggestion that there might be a shared knowledge and experience of female adolescence which Huck's story does not address. However, Lucille can only say that it would be 'altogether different [. . .] something dark.' Moreover, that difference between female and male experience is *spatial* – a girl would see that Huck has '*a long way to go.*' Lucille positions female experience as more advanced (less innocently happy, more knowing and unhappy, and hence more adult?) than male experience. For Lucille, a more valid story of adolescence would be 'that book' as written by Becky Thatcher, a female character in a fiction written by a man. This even leaves unclear whether the story told might be a darker version of Huck's experience or the marginalised, untold one of Becky's. This raises questions of whether an individual is the best person to tell their own story, and whether there might be a story of adolescence applicable to both male and female experience. It is also, finally, a story that Lucille says is not written, though in one of the rare moments in which her narrative imagines an audience, she urges her 'you', to imagine it.

Additionally, Lucille's assumption that everyone likes Huck because he is 'good and American' foregrounds national identity over regional and betrays what Jonathan Arac calls 'idolatry' of Huck's narrative. Arac defines an 'idolatrous' reading of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as one which renders Huck and his rejection of his racist society as representative of American national selfhood. It renders those who make this reading as good Americans and those who do not as un-American. Arac argues that this is likely to figure 'American' as white, because African-American readers might be less likely to make an idolatrous reading of this text, problematising where they might be located in this construction of what is 'American'.[12] Lucille, also, is not easily located within her construction of Americanness – liking Wayne for the reasons 'you' like Huck both incorporates Lucille within, and distances herself from, the interpretation she offers. Her 'you' refers to others and not necessarily to herself, and to an audience figured both female and male, as 'if you are a girl', suggests that 'you' may not be a girl.

Lucille's ambiguous position with regard to the speculations she offers is dependent upon her complex and shifting positionings of likeness and difference within constructions of gendered, racial, regional, and national identity. Of course, such negotiation between likeness and difference is something which metaphor makes available. Kovecses explains that metaphor 'invites comparison between two unlike entities',[13] while George Lakoff and Mark Johnson state that *'The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.'*[14] The word 'metaphor' derives from the Greek *metaphora*, meaning 'to carry', something with important implications given the metaphors of unpacking and carrying which McCorkle uses to define adolescence.

One of the most important implications of these definitions of metaphor is that it is possible to construct what could be called 'miscarriages'. It is possible to construct false or misleading positionings of likeness and difference, misunderstandings of one concept in terms of another. Lucille's engagement with Huck Finn and his story

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[12] Jonathan Arac, *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) 8-9.

[13] Kovesces, Preface, vii.

[14] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 5.

highlights the important fact that fictional portrayals of adolescence constitute more articles of baggage informing how adolescence is understood in America. Fictional treatments of female adolescence are often wrongly understood because of miscarriage – that is, they are frequently misread in accordance with constructions of likeness and difference which are founded upon readings of male adolescence (fictional or otherwise). Fred Hobson's treatment of narratives of female adolescence in the South offers a useful demonstration of the kinds of misreading from which fictions of female adolescence suffer. A discussion of Hobson's misreading enables consideration of how this new figuration of adolescence as containable and uncontainable in narrative affects what it might mean to narrate female adolescence in the South. An examination of McCorkle's metaphors of unpacking and a textual instance of unpacking in Josephine Humphreys's *Rich in Love* provides a more productive framework within which to consider the previously cited narratives of Southern female adolescence.

Hobson cites 'any number of contemporary renderings of *Huckleberry Finn*, usually but not always with a different voice, often with a different gender' in a discussion of themes which provide 'continuity' in Southern literature.[15] Hobson cites female characters in the work of Bobbie Ann Mason, McCorkle, Humphreys, Beverly Lowry, Clyde Edgerton and Kaye Gibbons to prove the existence of 'numerous female characters who serve as contemporary Huck Finns, an occurrence not altogether new in Southern fiction (what else was Mick Kelly in Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter?*)' The question is far from rhetorical, as Hobson suggests. Rather, this argument illustrates the kind of dangers inherent in seeking to find likeness in difference, which all efforts to narrate literary traditions seek to do. It is an effort which marks treatments of adolescence in American literature, and from which readings of adolescent girls in fiction suffer. It is important to note that while Lucille portrays Huck as representative of a male experience to which female adolescent experience can be compared, she does not suggest that she herself is to be perceived as a 'contemporary Huck Finn'.

Hobson collapses differences of historical era, class, race and gender in order to claim a fundamental similarity between vastly different characters, whose only genuinely

[15] Fred Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991) 77.

shared connection may be that they grow up in the South. His proofs of their similarities to Huck are less than convincing. The moral dilemmas of distinguishing between truth and lies in McCorkle's *The Cheer Leader* and a protagonist with an alcoholic father and 'whose best friend is black' in Gibbons' *Ellen Foster* constitute the most persuasive, and are similarities which exist on the relatively superficial level of plot and thematic detail. The 'cross-gender' names of McCorkle's Jo Spencer and Mason's Sam Hughes (*In Country*), and the 'independence' of Lucille, Lowry and Edgerton's characters constitute the least. Hobson concludes this particular argument by asking

> What does it say that most Huck Finns in contemporary fiction are female? What does it suggest that women write novels in which men seem to be excluded from community? Perhaps, to entertain a possibility, that the writers themselves are sorts of Huck Finns, finding it difficult to accept received values, old notions of honor and hierarchy, or – as Huck called Tom's romantic ideas and schemes – "Tom Sawyer's lies".[16]

In a shift in focus from text to author, Hobson diverts attention from the question he is unable to answer – why are there so many female Huck Finns in Southern fiction? – to ask why women writers write novels in which men are excluded from community. He has previously raised this latter point as another theme of continuity in Southern fiction, and now enlists it as a thematic which can be linked to the plot of *Huckleberry Finn*, in which Huck excludes himself from his community by lighting out for the territory. This allows Hobson to make the highly dubious suggestion that Southern women writers function as Huck Finns, metaphorically enacting male (and implicitly adolescent) rebellion in narrative. The focus on fictional adolescent girls – the original subject of discussion – has entirely disappeared.

Hobson's thoughts represent an old but enduring strand of literary criticism about adolescence in American literature which can account for portrayals of female adolescence only as they relate to canonical narratives of male development, such as *Huckleberry Finn* or J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. It should be noted that this does as great a disservice to portrayals of male adolescents as female, generalising about one while it ignores or distorts the other. Within this strand of literary criticism, the text

[16] Ibid., 77-78.

concerning a female adolescent must be made to fit the masculine model (as it rarely does), seen in Hobson's awkward inclusion of McCullers, whose treatment of female adolescence in *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter* is not addressed in sufficient depth if compared to Huck's narrative. Differences between Mick Kelly and Huck Finn are more important than any similarities they may have. The work of Barbara A. White demonstrates in great detail how literary criticism has erased and distorted female adolescent experience, leading her to argue that fictions of female adolescence describe situations in which girls are not allowed to grow up and represent a literary genre bereft of positive portrayals.[17] While her illustration of how female experience is marginalised is important, White's readings of narratives of female adolescence alongside dominant narratives of male development means that she is likely to find female adolescence portrayed negatively, whereas an examination of fictional female adolescence on its own terms might allow a more illuminating and positive discussion of the subject. Currently, female adolescence receives particular attention in the realms of cultural studies, sociology, and psychology. Fictional portrayals of the subject are often treated as case studies which prove or disprove various theories about female adolescents in America. For example, Mary Pipher's and Carol Gilligan's works, which provide models of female adolescence (fictional and otherwise) as a vulnerable time of low self-esteem and loss of voice, are among the most frequently cited critical texts about female adolescence.[18] Fictions of female adolescence are rarely read as contributing to a particularly American preoccupation with adolescence in literature.

Before going on to illustrate an example of this critical treatment of adolescence as it pertains to Southern fiction, it is vital to note another important, and fairly recent, trend in critical work on fictions of Southern female adolescence, a trend which goes some way towards undercutting the argument outlined above. It can be argued that recent critical work on Southern fiction (and the fiction itself) testifies to a distinct

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[17] Barbara A. White, *Growing Up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985).

[18] See Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Souls of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Putnam, 1994), Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Jill McLean Taylor, Carol Gilligan and Amy M. Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

preoccupation with female adolescence. While this preoccupation most immediately relates to questions of what it might mean to construct, define, and narrate the South, it nonetheless relates to the earlier tendency to use (overwhelmingly masculine) adolescence as a metaphor which somehow describes American culture, most fundamentally in the sense that here, once more, adolescence appears as metaphor. However, the Southern preoccupation with female adolescence is notably different, both in that its focus on female experience revises the previous emphasis on male, and because critical works on the subject often extrapolate metaphors from female adolescent experience in order to engage more widely with issues which are commonly addressed in Southern fiction and criticism. Sharon Monteith's *Advancing Sisterhood*, for example, examines cross-racial friendships in numerous works of Southern fiction. As well as devoting a chapter to friendships between young girls, Monteith argues that it is in adulthood, but most specifically with the onset of adolescence, that cross-racial friendships made in childhood begin to be interrogated, and often disintegrate or are destroyed when 'girls are maneuvered out of particular friendships as a result of the inflexibility of racial and social biases.'[19] Friendship is highlighted as a particularly important trope of female adolescent experience. Suzanne W. Jones's *Race Mixing* argues that Southern fiction set in the 1950s and 1960s, but written after the 1960s, focuses on the vulnerability and loss of innocence of young characters. Jones finds the explanation for this in:

> [. . .] the turmoil during the time when [the] authors grew up or came of age: both the injustice and violence of southern racism and the hope and disillusionment of the civil rights movement. Racism causes black children to lose their innocence much earlier than most white children. But in this contemporary fiction, the age of innocence – when children, naive about the ways of the world, believe in unlimited possibilities and feel safe and secure – is foreshortened on both sides of the color line because of racism.[20]

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[19] Sharon Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood?: Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000) 58.

[20] Suzanne W. Jones, *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction since the Sixties* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004) 19.

Jones's work calls attention to ideas of lost innocence and foreshortened youth, particularly in connection to the thematic of race, as other important tropes of adolescence (ideas similarly hinted at in Lucille's comments). Finally, Patricia Yaeger's deconstruction of the stereotypical descriptions which have dominated examinations of women in Southern fiction by white and African-American authors through a focus on three important metaphors – 'giant women' rather than the frail belle, a focus on objects of neglect such as 'the throwaway' rather than on the family, and 'the importance of the unseen' and how this might be articulated as this relates to matters of race[21] – provides yet more tropes contained in female adolescent experience grounded on notions of the body.

Caren J. Town's work, however, provides a good example of the tendency to explore fictional female adolescent experience as case study. Her critical study of narratives of female adolescence in the South, *The New Southern Girl*, is even more significant as it identifies a contemporary preoccupation with fictional female adolescence in the South.[22] However, her work fails both to account for the preoccupation and to engage in a sufficiently thorough examination of portrayals of female adolescence in American literature, an examination which would locate her titles within a literary context and highlight the importance of first-person narrative voice. As it is, *The New Southern Girl* is uneasily positioned, offering readings of literary texts in an effort to refute what Town sees as the overly bleak contemporary sociological and psychological treatments of American, and particularly Southern, female adolescence. While her readings aim to reclaim female adolescence as a more positive experience, the readings themselves are fairly superficial, as the positive resolutions to many of the texts Town chooses to discuss ensure that female adolescent experiences are clearly portrayed in more positive terms than the theories of Pipher and Gilligan suggest.

Town identifies McCorkle and Humphreys's texts, with others by writers such as Bobbie Ann Mason, Kaye Gibbons, and Tina Ansa, as part of a contemporary movement by Southern women writers in which traditional (and often negative) representations of

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[21] Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing 1930-1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), xi-xiii.

[22] Caren J. Town, *The New Southern Girl: Female Adolescence in the Works of 12 Women Authors* (McFarland: North Carolina, 2004).

female adolescence and female Southern identity are deconstructed in favour of more complex and affirmative portrayals. In her further contention that it is in portrayals of Southern female adolescence that a counter to the many depictions of 'America's troubled teens, in particular endangered teenage girls'[23] can be found, Town shows (but never articulates or interrogates) the persistence of what Richard Gray identifies as the construction of 'Southern' in opposition to a national or Northern 'other'. Gray argues that

> Whatever else Southerners may have in common (and it is sometimes very little), they have habitually defined themselves [. . .] against a national or international "other". A familiar set of oppositions performs important cultural work here: "Southern" *vs.* "American"/ "Northern"/ "Western" (the slippage between these three terms is, in itself, a measure of the Southern sense of deviation from a "norm") = place vs. placelessness = past *vs.* pastlessness = realism *vs.* idealism = mournful, deeply felt endings *vs.* millennial, vaguely fancied beginnings. In this context, "South" and "North" end up functioning rather like a photograph and its negative, in a mutually determining, reciprocally defining relationship: the South *is*, in these circumstances, whatever the North *is not* and vice versa. It may be that all cultures do this, in order to define themselves. The difference with the Southern strategy is that it customarily begins from a consciousness of its own marginality and even "failure," its position on the edge of the narrative.[24]

Although McCorkle's frame of likeness and difference most obviously concerns questions of gender and nation (adolescent girls are taught about their bodies 'all across America'), Gray's comments illuminate the crucial point that the preoccupation with likeness and difference shared by McCorkle's essay and Lucille's comments can be figured as distinctively Southern. Gray argues elsewhere that this perception of being defined in relation to a national/Northern 'other' (a perception not easily negotiable, and perhaps even refuted by Lucille's appropriation of the Southern Huck as a model of what is 'American'), leads Southerners to construct fictions of self-fashioning insisting 'on their vital connection with some, many, or all other Southerners in their *difference* – on

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[23] Ibid., 1.

[24] Richard Gray, "Writing Southern Cultures," introduction, *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, ed. Gray and Owen Robinson (Malden: Blackwell, 2004) 4.

their being alike in their aberrations.'[25] Gray is one of many critics who cites a preoccupation with voice and storytelling as perhaps the most distinctively Southern literary characteristic (Hobson enlists the use of first-person voice to justify his claim that various fictional characters constitute 'female Huck Finns'). Voice and storytelling can be perceived as the means by which fictions of likeness and difference are articulated. Linda Tate argues that an examination of voice provides one way of finding communality between writers who are 'inhabitants of multiple Souths' and who write very different fictions.[26] Lucinda H. MacKethan's study of women's voices in Southern fiction leads her to argue that 'the word "voice" has come to have for me, as it has for many women, a metaphorical dimension, encompassing all that goes into the expression of unique selfhood.'[27] If voice is a trope for Southern and especially Southern female identity, it may be an even more special trope for Southern female adolescence. McCorkle's essay reflects the conventional understanding of adolescence as a time of search for identity, and the many first-person fictions of adolescence suggest that this identity is attendant upon the search for voice. The essay enlists the trope of unpacking to suggest both the process by which identity is fashioned (selection and rejection of various 'articles' of luggage) – and with the construction of fictions – 'I suspect I'll be unpacking for some time to come' (9), thus suggesting that the construction of fictions and the construction of self (and the place from which both are undertaken) may be one and the same.

McCorkle's descriptions of unpacking complicate her already complex consideration of adolescence, not least because she introduces another metaphorical action. Of all the texts to be discussed in this chapter, *Rich in Love* is the only one to contain a scene detailing a literal action of unpacking. In the novel Lucille describes events which occurred two years prior to her act of narrating, recalling a time when 'my life veered from its day-in day-out course and became for a short while the kind of life that can be told as a story – that is, one in which events appear to have meaning' (1). The

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[25] Richard Gray, *Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000) 511.

[26] Linda Tate, *A Southern Weave of Women: Fiction of the Contemporary South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994) 5.

[27] Lucinda H. MacKethan, *Daughters of Time: Creating Woman's Voice in Southern Story* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990) 4.

event which causes this change in course is the departure of Lucille's mother from the family home, followed by the return of her sister Rae from Washington, pregnant and hastily married to Billy McQueen, a history student. These changes in the family structure threaten the security Lucille has always known, forcing upon her the difficult task of orienting herself in an uncertain world. The scene of unpacking involves Rae, observed by Lucille, unpacking a box of objects belonging to Billy. Rae says that the box represents '"Billy's history. If you can believe it"' (172). Rae's act of unpacking enables objects belonging to an individual to be used to narrate the story of an individual's life. Rae's 'if you can believe it' hints at the dangers of regarding the objects as capable of offering an authoritative truth about an individual, as all they represent is a selection of material, an interpretation of which is necessarily partial, incomplete, and subjective. However, Rae and Lucille do not acknowledge this, granting the objects in the box the power to render Billy's past and origins knowable.

The unpacking renders Billy as object of study. In his examination of institutions and practices of discipline and social control in Western societies, Michel Foucault argues that 'The examination that places individuals in a field of surveillance also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them.'[28] Although Lucille and Rae do not produce writing about Billy, their act of unpacking is undertaken for the same purposes; to capture and fix Billy by constructing a narrative about him. Rae assumes and exerts a particular kind of power over Billy, while Lucille recalls 'But I wasn't sure marriage gave a person the right to go through the other person's memorabilia' (172). Her denial of Rae's right to unpack makes the act illicit and transgressive. But Rae presumes that the legal status of marriage confers upon her a proprietary right over Billy and his belongings and, further, the right to discover, construct and produce her own knowledge of him. Rae's 'If you can believe it' is an expression of disappointment. Rae seeks what she cannot find – what she calls 'something good' and which Lucille interprets as 'something less innocent than these objects – a letter, or a photo of a naked woman. She wanted to open the Scout's wallet and find a rubber in it' (173). Lucille is in love with Billy and observes the process of

[28] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; London: Penguin, 1991) 189.

unpacking (which she does not prevent, despite her reservations) from this perspective, one of which Rae is unaware. In fact, it is only Lucille's awareness of the transgressive nature of her own sexual interest in Billy which leads her to assume that the information which Rae seeks must be of a sexual nature, because although it is clear that she is looking for something, Rae never specifies what she is looking for. This indicates that unpacking is never a neutral and objective act because the unpacker will invest their interpretation of objects with their own preconceptions and values.

Lucille disapproves of Rae's 'disrespectful and mocking air' towards Billy's belongings. She herself enters into a covetous relationship with them – 'I wanted to touch these items, these boy's things. My fingers itched' (172). So extreme is her own desire to know Billy that she steals one of his possessions:

> The window fan shook in its frame. Rae lay down and pushed her feet through the clutter. The whittled figure fell onto the floor, and I picked it up without looking to see exactly what species of animal it was. I couldn't help myself, the wood was almost pink, and I caught a glimpse of a sharp nose, the claws and nicked eyes. I pocketed it. (173)

The scene ends here. The 'clutter' of unpacked objects is disrupted by Rae's act of moving her body and is dispersed around her body as a result, a visible sign that unpacking redistributes objects in space, reconfiguring that space and the body in it (even the window fan shakes). Unpacking here is an act of deprivation and subtraction, seen in Rae's dissatisfaction over her failed task and her transformation of Billy's past into a mere scattering of objects, insignificant and lacking. It is literally lacking, as Lucille's act of pocketing (even though performed out of love) illustrates how an individual's past can become objectified, the property of others. For Lucille, the unpacked objects metaphorically stand in for Billy himself, telling a story about him in his stead, as long as there is somebody to see and examine the objects and who wants to construct a story. Additionally, absence (of a person, of owned objects) produces a particular kind of knowledge (something which Sylvia Wilkinson's and Thulani Davis's portrayals of female adolescence indicate). The objects stand in for Billy, and they allow Lucille and Rae to understand Billy in terms of items he owns, so that the objects in the bag function as metaphors for Billy. It is because they function in this way that Lucille so desperately

covets them, pocketing one in an expression of desire and possession that she cannot enact on Billy the person.

Bearing McCorkle's comments about adolescence in mind, it can be seen that Lucille's adolescence and first-person narrative of adolescence (it is imperative to note that these are not the same thing) constitute acts of unpacking. In recounting the scene of unpacking Lucille shows that she has selected and interpreted this incident as important to her own story and identity, significant in her own adolescence. Lucille's narrative takes her adolescent self rather than another person as object of study, but her 'pocketing' of Billy's wooden figure (she will now carry the figure in her pocket) dramatises the way in which telling her own story necessarily objectifies her past and herself. What Rae's action of unpacking fails in achieving, Lucille's narrative undertakes on a larger and more difficult scale.

It is the central contention of this chapter that McCorkle's *The Cheer Leader* and *Ferris Beach*, Josephine Humphreys's *Rich in Love*, Sylvia Wilkinson's *Bone of My Bones* (1982), and Thulani Davis's *1959* (1992) – five first-person narratives of adolescence – constitute narrative acts of metaphorical unpacking which tell of and create reconfigurations of the very different Southern spaces their narrators occupy, relocating the narrators within those spaces. Gray's discussion of the influx of immigrants to the New South from all over the world in the last half of the twentieth century describes precisely this process of 'unpacking' as it applies to these narratives, although Gray does not use the term:

> many of [the immigrants] find a means of locating themselves in their new Southern space by relocating the emotional and metaphorical baggage they carry with them – together with a familiar cluster of tropes gathered around the notions of a lost childhood and a dreamlike paradise. Needing a map, they make one for themselves: one that recharts their new home, using fresh but somehow familiar coordinates. In the process, they offer altered geographies, another perspective on the mixed, plural medium that the South and Southerners now more than ever inhabit.[29]

[29] Gray (2004), introduction, 18.

In an article about writing by immigrant groups in the South and critical responses to that writing, Nahem Yousaf and Sharon Monteith warn that 'Locating immigrants as strangers, foreigners rather than citizens [. . .] also perpetuates the idea of foreign sojourners in an axiomatic black and white South'. They also comment that some new fictions by members of immigrant groups 'are celebratory of the spiritual, cultural, linguistic luggage that even the poorest refugee brings',[30] enlisting that trope of baggage once more. While admittedly either white or African-American, the focus on adolescence and the narrative unpackings undertaken by the narrators of these texts nevertheless function to suggest strongly that these narrators consider themselves as both strangers *and* citizens who can reexamine and critique the values and attitudes of the Southern communities in which they live. Reconfiguration of self and South is achieved not simply through the act of narrating but by the adolescent acts of unpacking (self-fashioning) which these narratives of female adolescence describe. For each of these narrators, unpacking entails selection and re-presentation of events in order to come to a clearer understanding of individual lives. Their narratives also show that unpacking, the agency involved in selection and representation, whether with regard to self or to the act of narration – is crucial to their adolescent experiences. Narrative unpacking is not, as McCorkle's passages suggest, something which only an adult may do.

The five texts listed above have been chosen because differences of age, class, race, geographical location, and the historical moment in which adolescence is experienced renders these narrators very dissimilar. These texts thus present a variety of adolescent experiences which are complex not only individually but collectively, and which function to illustrate the necessity for modification of McCorkle's thoughts about adolescence because they intersect with her ideas in multiple correlative and contradictory ways. The narrator of *1959*, Willie Tarrant, is African American; Sylvia Wilkinson's narrator, Ella Ruth Higgins, struggles with class disadvantages. Humphreys's Lucille is the most socially privileged (she is white and upper middle-class) and this may be why it is she who finds it hardest to interrogate the values with which she grows up. Davis and Wilkinson's narrators experience adolescence in the 1950s, in a

[30] Nahem Yousaf and Sharon Monteith, "Making an Impression: New Immigrant Fiction in the Contemporary South," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 40.2 (2004): 214-224. 217, 218.

New South of the early post-World War II period which is struggling to realise (and relinquish) the dream of prosperity and advancement entertained by proponents of the New South Creed in the aftermath of the Civil War. That dream demanded that the antebellum South's power structures (based upon rigid categorizations of gender and race, and rendered precarious by Civil War defeat) be maintained in the interests of white landowning male Southerners.[31] Complex and ambivalent progress towards economic advancement in the South is marked by the urban regeneration which destroys the community in which Davis's narrator grows up, and is emblematised in the figure of Ella Ruth's father in Wilkinson's novel, who articulates the values of the antebellum South. Exerting privileges assigned to him by his community on the basis of gender and race, he wields power over his wife and daughter and over the African-Americans in his community, but wields little economic power, and although in this respect he is largely representative of his particular lower-class community in North Carolina, it seems implicit that he is symbolic of the South at this particular time. McCorkle's and Humphreys's narrators, however, experience adolescence in the 1970s and 1980s, during at a time in which that ideal of progress had manifested itself in such forms as widespread expansion of economic power and by population growth. Whereas McCorkle's novels reflect a South in the early stages of advancement (in the early 1970s), the mass-consumer, fragile society of Humphrey's novel (in which the South itself is a product) is indicative of a South in which degrees of 'Americanisation' or 'Southernisation' are implicitly contested and disputed, as the literal fact of economic expansion in the South, for some, suggested the movement towards Northern values.[32]

Despite these substantial differences, the four writers of these texts belong to what Barbara Bennett (discussing McCorkle) categorises as 'what could be called the third

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[31] For a good overview of the agenda and evolution of the post-Civil War New South, see James C. Cobb, "Searching for Southern Identity," in *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, ed. Gray and Robinson, 591-607, 591-3.

[32] For more detailed commentary on these changes, see James C. Cobb's useful essay, "World War II and the Mind of the Modern South," *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999) 25-43. This essay originally appeared in *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South*, ed. Neil McMillen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi,1997). See also John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974).

generation of twentieth-century southern writers'.[33] Bennett uses this category to describe male and female authors writing after 1970. Despite sharing much with previous generations of Southern writers such as Faulkner, Welty and O'Connor, including preoccupations with place, history, family, and voice, these writers treat these 'Southern' themes very differently (de-romanticising the notion of family, for example), particularly if the writers are women.[34] The treatment of adolescence in these texts offers a clearer illustration of Bennett's categorisation, as each text discussed in this article belongs both to this contemporary movement and to what Gray calls 'another regional fictional tradition – that of, say, Thomas Wolfe – [. . .] that might be subtitled "growing up in the provincial South."'[35]

It is through examining each narrator's unpackings of adolescence that striking likenesses can be found in these texts. Every text examined here shares a preoccupation with the tropes pertinent to female adolescence in the work of Monteith, Jones, and Yaeger; friendship between girls (in these texts, not cross-racial), loss of innocence and foreshortened youth, and a preoccupation with the body. These tropes may be regarded as constituting some 'articles' of baggage particular to female adolescent experience in the American South, and the manner in which each narrator unpacks these articles is different.

However, the major likeness between these texts is founded upon a fascination with questions of likeness and difference shared by each narrator. It is this fascination which facilitates the other major argument of this chapter; that the Southern female adolescents in these texts perform in their lives and narratives the work which metaphor undertakes in language, working to identify likeness and difference for the purpose of seeking and forging connections with others (this is illustrated by Lucille's complex consideration of Huck and his story as it might relate to female experience). These connections allow them to figure out their Souths and themselves in it. For this reason, their narratives of unpacking function as what Homi Bhabha calls 'creative interventions' – moments in which individuals create spaces in order to interrogate concepts and

[33] Bennett, 8.

[34] Ibid., 10.

[35] Gray, introduction, 17.

representations of self, community, culture.[36] Their acts of metaphorical unpacking also function as liberating gestures which allow them to resist the loads they are prevailed upon to carry because of class, race, region, nation and gender. This is demonstrated by carrying out separate readings of these texts in order to show how this preoccupation with sameness and difference functions for each adolescent girl, preserving the uniqueness of each text and narrative voice. Finally, these readings suggest answers to the questions raised by Lucille in her discussion of Huck Finn and his story – Is there a story of female adolescence, and if so, what would that story, that 'something dark', be like?

Jill McCorkle's *The Cheer Leader* details the development of its protagonist and narrator Jo Spencer, a white middle-class girl from North Carolina. At age twenty-three, tentatively recovering from a breakdown in adolescence, Jo recounts her past in an effort to understand and reconcile herself with it. Her breakdown is caused by an awareness that she cannot accommodate or articulate herself in a 1960s and 1970s Southern society in which the women's rights movement is threatening to disrupt traditional roles for women. Karen W. Martin explains that

> Torn between their mothers' traditional happy homemaker images and the brand new *career girl* option, trying to negotiate a comfort zone somewhere between the *good girl* and the birth control pill, the young women of Jo's generation struggled to establish authentic identities for themselves.[37]

Chief cheerleader in high school, Jo attains the pinnacle of popularity and success for an adolescent girl, but she soon comes to appreciate the costs of such a role. The role of cheerleader prepares her for a future in which, as an adult woman, she is allocated a secondary role in a patriarchal society which judges on appearance. The South is particularly patriarchal, with a history of idolising a (white, masculine) construction of

[36] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 3.

[37] Karen W. Martin, "The Virgin Mary, Gidget, and The Total Woman: Constructing the Self in *The Cheer Leader*," *Pembroke Magazine* 34 (2002): 72.

white womanhood. That construction of white womanhood was associated with notions of a racial purity which must be maintained and defended, often through violence, and it served as symbolic of Southern culture while denying individual women authority and agency.[38] Jo experiences adolescence at a historical moment when the dominant cultural figuration of the region (also a figuration of womanhood) is called into question.

As the novel's title suggests, it is hard to shake the trappings of objectification and external worth embodied in the role of cheerleader – a point made by Bennett, who argues that the novel explores 'the dangers of stereotyping in the formation of character.'[39] Jo develops fears about being judged over her appearance and about being wrongly categorised, fears which she carries into adulthood. However, it is important to note that Jo fears false categorisation, not categorisation itself – a point which has received insufficient attention in readings of the novel. She claims 'I had always wished that I had belonged to the previous generation where there were rigid rules and convictions, where certain appearances were upheld just like in cheerleading, team sports, the Olympics, National Honor Society' (78). Jo's reluctance to relinquish this ideal of a time where there are clear rules to follow – rules connected to appearances – is demonstrated in the repeated motif of the 'strapless gown with a tulle ballerina length skirt' (1), which her mother, in adolescence, wears in the photo Jo examines at the beginning of the novel. It is a photo which troubled Jo when she was younger because the man her mother is with is not her father. This shows that her mother should not be regarded purely in the role of mother (Jo does this) but as having an individual identity and history of her own which motherhood does not address. Despite this, Jo wears a similar dress when she is crowned May Queen, near breaking point (57). Many critical studies portray female adolescence as a time of strained relationships with the mother, but

[38] For two useful analyses of the historical construction of Southern womanhood as it deals with these complex interrelations of gender, class and race, see Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) and Kathryn Lee Seidel, *The Southern Belle in the American Novel* (Gainesville: University of Florida Presses; Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1985). Susan V. Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones also provide an extremely detailed and thoughtful discussion of the subject in their essay, "Haunted Bodies: Rethinking the South through Gender," *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts* ed. Goodwyn Jones and Donaldson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997) 1-19.

[39] Bennett, 14.

it seems that Jo would like to be like hers.[40] This is based on Jo's error of making her mother emblematic of a more simple and straightforward past. It is also possible that Jo regards the role of 'mother' as sanctioned and valued, offering an easily definable identity, requiring Jo to do little work towards finding an identity of her own.

Jo's act of narration is a crucial sign of her slow recovery from her breakdown, as throughout adolescence she struggles for words which will express her sense of not belonging and her conception of self. She wants to 'fit', to be popular and accepted by others, but fears she is not. At times, however, Jo does not want to fit, recognising how restrictive and precarious acceptance is, often founded on false conceptions. Her narrative content and structure is also an indicator of the fragile and partial nature of her recovery, as Bennett notes.[41] The novel is divided into four sections, and in the first Jo offers her interpretation of photos she has arranged into chronological order, again showing her lingering desire for fixed categorisation. She is fascinated by the fact that the photos show a time 'when it was all real' (2). She attributes to the photographs an authoritative likeness to a past reality, even the power to produce reality, all the more real because of its unalterable pastness. However, she is aware that photographs may constitute 'total misrepresentations of the given moment' (58), requiring her act of narration to give more (or less) accurate readings of events to suit the version she prefers. In the novel's second section she once more categorises events in her seventeenth year which she is about to relate, events that set in motion the process that leads to her breakdown – 'It is a home movie, a romance, a horror film [. . .]' (60). These are conventional categorisations, embedding Jo's story within genres where female adolescents play prominent if stereotypical roles which tend to cast them as passive and as victims. Since her breakdown is caused by the restrictive nature of the categorisations in her society and the limited options the categories represent, it seems indicative of Jo's partial recovery that

[40] There is a vast amount of literary criticism on mother-daughter relations, much of it based on psychological studies. To give only three examples of literary criticism on the subject: Hilary S. Crew, *Is It Really Mommie Dearest? Daughter-Mother Narratives in Young Adult Fiction* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2000), Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), and Mickey Pearlman, ed., *Mother Puzzles: Daughters and Mothers in Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

[41] Bennett, 29-30.

she cannot resist the compulsion to continually categorise herself despite knowing the dangers of doing so. The third section continues the action narrated in the second, relating Jo's breakdown in third-person voice, illustrating her alienation from self. In the final section, set in the present, Jo imagines herself as a future wife and mother of a male child (262). Given the fact that Jo's desire to be like her own mother is based on the desire for simple categorisations, it may be that Jo has still not given up that desire. These four sections illustrate that Jo's concern with categorisation leads her to experiment with genre and medium, looking for the one which will best represent her adolescent experience. By the final section she has realised that the experimentation *is* the story and is the best reflection of an adolescence spent experimenting. Repeated and plural tellings render her experience more unstable, less fixed, but conversely more accurate.

Jo's difficulty in being able to narrate herself accurately is a particularly painful problem as she likes to write poetry and is fascinated by words and their meanings. Her fascination is with words that rhyme, capturing resemblances. This shows that whereas Jo desperately wants to articulate her individual experience, she would also like it to be an experience shared by someone, comparable to something. Jo's adolescence is characterised by struggles to work out and articulate what she is like and not like in her effort to categorise herself. It is in this way that she performs the work of metaphor, specifically Alicia Ostriker's claim that metaphor's 'core function in literature' is 'to assert the force of like-unlikeness in the world.'[42] The onset of her period, for example, resembles nothing that Jo has been told in preparation for the event and makes her feel that 'everyone has lied to me', underlining her sense that there exists no accurate description of her experiences, nothing to compare them to. Attempts made by others to enlighten her are perceived by Jo as deliberate falsifications, creating her sense of alienation from family and friends. Jo says that this experience and her consequent decision to 'practice walking like a teenage lady who wasn't having a period' makes her 'want to rhyme bad words, filthy, horribly sordid words like pecker' (40). It is the meaning of the words, together with subjective opinion and society's standards of taste which make them filthy and sordid, but Jo does not overtly consider this, focusing instead

[42] Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 197.

on what might sound like those words. Her preoccupation with rhyme places appearance (sound) over content (meaning). However, her desire to 'rhyme' those words, to find likenesses for them, is a task already accomplished. The onset of her period makes her implicitly find a likeness between her bodily experience and what she regards as the 'filthy, sordid' dimensions of sexuality, figured as masculine – as the word 'pecker' indicates. Jo is engaging with the meaning of the words she wants to rhyme, and her construction is not far from the normative equation of menstruation with sexuality, as now Jo is literally ripe. Her desire to rhyme such words also constitutes a form of resistance – they are, after all, words which her society would find particularly unsuitable for a lady. Her decision to act as if she is not having a period is problematic, as the awkward category of 'teenage lady' shows Jo's desire to embody the purity of the Southern lady while simultaneously avoiding adulthood. The avoidance of adulthood is dependent on that purity, a purity which renders women childlike rather than adult in the patriarchal construction of womanhood. Overall, her response is one of rebellion – she wants to voice her anger about not being told the truth, her inability to control what is happening to her body, and the fact that these bodily changes influence how she will be regarded in society. The way in which she articulates her rebellion nonetheless problematically aligns her with the masculinity which disgusts her and shows that her central problem is that she cannot articulate what she feels and who she is.

Jo's adolescence is marked by such deeply ambivalent and ambiguous feelings – she denies and accepts being like and unlike some people and things and simultaneously attempts to forge likenesses between herself and other people and things. She describes her sixteenth year as one where she achieves an insight which affords temporary happiness. Commenting on a photo of herself and her friends lying on the beach in the sun, which she says is 'a picture of every day of the summer of 1974' she explains that:

> Sometimes when I was lying there, I would get an almost sexless feeling. It wasn't that I wasn't feminine because I was (though never the frilly type) and it wasn't that I was masculine even though I was quite athletic and prided myself on being so. There was no reason for this feeling; I wasn't beautiful like Tricia but I wasn't unattractive. I was the one that always managed to merit "cute" which is really a half-assed thing to say about someone, though superior to ugly. It was a nothing feeling that

> seemed to spread over me: not feminine, not masculine, not heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, not penis envy or any other such shit. No, it was sexless, asexual, like the tiny amoebae that I had seen under the microscope in biology, sliding, changing, splitting, totally independent, a single organism and yet, identical to the other millions. Was there an original somewhere in that green cool water where a population greater than the world fed and bred? It was such a big thought, something to hold onto, that all of the days seemed the same. (56-57)

This passage articulates the central tensions and dilemmas that constitute Jo's adolescence, containing both the cause of her breakdown and the key to her recovery. In trying to describe what she wants to be like, Jo is trying to give words to a feeling. The problem is that words come loaded with associations which reflect the value-judgments of her society. Jo tries to unpack the words from their associations and say what they mean to her alone, with the result that her description abounds with qualifiers, retractions and negatives. In a Southern society which continues to order and categorise according to rigid binaries – if not feminine, masculine, if not heterosexual, homosexual – which function ultimately to privilege white male adulthood, refusing to identify a shared likeness with one term risks incorporation by the other. Jo's inability to rid herself of the meanings that her society attaches to these categories means that she has to abolish the categories, but this leaves her with her 'nothing feeling', and even though this feeling is a pleasant one, even this is a loaded term. Despite the obvious drawbacks of associating herself with lack, deprivation, and absence, Howard (an ex-boyfriend) has previously called her 'a virgin, a nobody' (53). As the state of virginity is a desirable one for girls, possibly necessary as respectability depends upon it, the implication is that a good girl is nothing of note. Jo's happiness comes from not being bound by any single category, but there are no words for her to express what she is, and she does not want to be nothing, voiceless, which this suggests.

Not only this, but Jo struggles to narrate her 'nothing feeling' because she believes in the categories from which she is trying to withdraw. Her uneasy advances and retreats around the concepts of 'feminine' and 'masculine' show that she complies with the stereotypical assessment of masculinity as physical prowess, femininity as sexual attractiveness. She wants neither description to be inapplicable to herself, but is fearful that this will categorise her against her will as not feminine. Having to reinforce her

femininity as a result, she has to explain that she is not *too* feminine – 'never the frilly type', as she does not want completely to reject the qualities associated with masculinity. Clothes once more function to reveal identity. The word which best sums up this confusion about identity and ambivalence about belonging to various categories is 'adolescent', but Jo does not use it. This is because although adolescence constitutes a category of its own, it is also a category which people are expected to move out of, and so describes Jo's problem without solving it.

When Jo describes her feelings as 'sexless, asexual' she anticipates and rebels against her later despairing realisation that 'All beginnings have to depend on 'S-E-X' (172). At university, reading Hesiod and Anaximander, she realises how creation narratives and philosophical accounts of the world are founded on acts of procreation – 'Adam and Eve, Hesiod's "wide-bosomed earth and Tartarus of the dark mist"' (172). These narratives turn that act of procreation into metaphor in order to regard the world through gendered binary oppositions. This enables loaded metaphorical descriptions of the world and the place (status, value) of people in it – the earth as mother, for example. Jo is only able to articulate her sense of self in terms which cause unhappiness, as the terms focus on the body as their basis for evaluation. This is seen in Jo's self-conscious play with the word 'fit', which she uses to describe her body's physicality, her sense of belonging and popularity, and her preoccupation with the Darwinian theory of survival of the fittest. Speaking of her friends and her popularity, Jo explains that 'They don't realize that in being identical to them that I am so unique, that I am merely using this as a disguise. It is such a way to stay fit, to survive!' (54). The amoebae represent what Jo wants to be. Independent, separate, free to change, but like everyone else, they are the embodiment of like-unlike. That this is an unattainable aim for Jo, though, is suggested by the simple fact that the amoebae are not human, and so Jo cannot be like them. That Jo could reject her human-ness is impossible, but her attempts to do so lead to her breakdown, as they cause her to reject her own body. This is how she appears to be attempting to 'unpack' the 'article' of bodilness which Yaeger explicates. However, rather than celebrating her body as a source of power, Jo seems to abhor hers as grotesquely large. She says 'I cannot carry my weight' (148). The 'articles' of gendered

Southern adolescent identity are too heavy – Jo withdraws completely from the problem of figuring out what she is.

Even though that breakdown does not occur until Jo is at university, the sporadic happiness her 'nothing feeling' affords is destroyed long before then. At seventeen she enters her first serious relationship, judging her eventual boyfriend, Red, solely on appearance and deciding on the basis of that appearance that he is 'different' (61). It is an interpretation she believes to be confirmed when on their first date he tells her '"That's what I like about you. You're so different from the other girls"' (94). However, their differences are not the same, and Jo learns that entry into a heterosexual relationship necessitates choices which threaten to force her into those narrow categories which describe female behaviour, categories which do not apply to Red. Conforming to sanctioned but conflicting scripts, Jo has sex because she expects Red to ask her to marry him, whereas Red indulges his freedom and is disloyal, canceling Jo's script and leaving her floundering.

Jo's progress towards a more lasting happiness is attendant upon her discovery of terms which satisfactorily describe her. Earlier in her adolescence when she is going out with Howard, Jo describes her 'very mixed feelings' about her behaviour:

> I was a xeroxed either/or. All the time, an either/or. Either a cheerleader representing my school as fine moral fiber Or Howard's girlfriend and managing to fake my way through all the parties with an occasional "wow man" or "cool." (49)

The either/or construction allows Jo to articulate her position in a Southern society which reveres categorisations, particularly of the oppositional sort that allow for no collapse. However, it is important to note that the roles of cheerleader and girlfriend are not oppositional. They do not cancel each other out in the same way that 'feminine' and 'masculine' do in Jo's later meditation. It is not that if Jo is a cheerleader, she cannot be a girlfriend. Taken together, the roles of cheerleader and girlfriend make Jo a replica of an American and Southern ideal of female adolescence – the 'xeroxed' is as important as the 'either/or.' The 'either/or' here means that Jo can be only one thing at a time – girlfriend or cheerleader – and these are two of a limited pool of options for girls. These, perhaps

the most valued roles, are essentially the same. Jo's ability to call herself not 'either' or 'or' but 'either/or' is enabled by the fact that the roles are so similar. There is no choice, as both roles place her on the sidelines (in the case of the cheerleader role, literally so), occupying a minor role in a patriarchal society. She is 'Howard's girlfriend' – the status of the role dependent on the popularity of the boy to whom she belongs, and her suitability for the role judged on her external appearance, her fitness.

One of the novel's most significant moments describes Jo's open rejection of this situation. Wearing a purple dress which her mother wore one Halloween, Jo walks through town and into a drugstore:

> I decided that the only way I could drink my drink without budging from that green vinyl stool was to pretend that I was the only person in town who was normal. It worked and when I went outside and saw the way that the sun made everything look so sharp and clear, I decided I was going to be that way from then on. No acts, I was Joslyn Marie Spencer and I was no either/or.
>
> Cars kept stopping to look at me but it didn't matter, nothing mattered. Why, those people should be ashamed of themselves looking the way that they did; copies, copies, copies. Didn't they know that they were seeing an original person? Get your eyes full and then fill your pockets! (142)

This scene does not mean, as Bennett argues, that 'Jo has realized she can no longer be both people, the "either/or" – the young woman she really is and the façade she has fabricated – and in choosing one over the other, she chooses the fictional persona.'[43] As Jo's previous discussion of her role has shown, 'either/or' does not refer to two oppositional roles, one real and one fictional. It refers to a single role that manifests itself in more than one guise. Jo's costume underlines the fact that *all* 'normal', accepted identities in her society constitute fictions, performances of external appearances – something the role of cheerleader epitomises. Her rejection of all categories allows her to believe she has become what she wants most – to be an original person, free to form her own identity, seen in the fact that she defines herself by name, not function. However, her claim that she is an 'original person' lacks force. Again, Jo wears her mother's clothes, serving as a reminder of her problematic desire to be like her mother. Since they have

[43] Bennett, 19.

been worn before, they illustrate that nothing is ever truly original. To shock and reject a society that judges on external appearance, Jo expresses rebellion by calling attention to hers. Her 'Get your eyes full and then fill your pockets!' while mutinous, is an invitation to stare and judge on that appearance. The repeated focus on appearance means that Jo only subverts her society's rules from within, not creating them anew – again, nothing is original.

Jo's true rejection of her society's categories occurs when she discovers a term and category which narrate her. The term is 'inbetween', one which describes both Jo and the metaphorical space she occupies in society. Mid-breakdown, she considers Hesiod's claim that 'there is a region between the earth and the sky, the chaos, it means "gap". Yes, the inbetween person has a gap.' The gap is also the horizon, the point where earth and sky 'appear to come together' and yet cannot be reached 'because of the curve, that constant curve and the very way that the world moves' (172). This provides a metaphoric correspondence between Jo and the world she inhabits, so that she fits into a category which troubles and ruptures existing categories in her society. It is in, and from, this chaotic gap of inbetween that Jo narrates and unpacks her adolescence at age twenty-three. It is from this chaotic gap (a gap which she is and which she occupies, collapsing distinctions between person and place) that she can claim that 'I choose to believe that life is like a cardiogram where you must always be moving up and down, back and forth, past and future, briefly touching down in the present, coming some distance before a pattern emerges' (261). In another highly metaphorical description, Jo shows how she retains her preoccupation with like-unlikeness, the central defining feature of her adolescence. This retention shows that, in addition to her newfound ease with accepting that she does not have to figure everything out for once and for all, in addition to her awareness that life involves constant revision and negotiation of forging likenesses between self and world, Jo rejects the idea that she must pass through adolescence only in order to take leave of it. It may be that she is still adolescent, since she retains the preoccupations of her adolescence. The female adolescent experiences analysed here exist in similar – yet different – inbetween spaces.

Whereas Jo Spencer takes solace from the fact that she is like others but is not anyone else, *Ferris Beach* illustrates that Kate Burns's task in adolescence is to unpack

the conflicts that arise from her heightened awareness that she is not like others but wants to be certain other people. Kate – or Kitty, as her father calls her – is born with a wine-coloured birthmark on her left cheek and neck which constitutes a visible sign of difference, leading to her own (again, less than celebratory) preoccupation with her body and involuntarily calling her to the attention of others as an object of scrutiny. Her internal monologue records a white, middle-class childhood and adolescence in the town of Fulton, North Carolina. It is an adolescence spent largely in efforts to remain unnoticed, and where Kate's close observation of others enlightens her about herself. Observation is, in fact, the defining activity of Kate's adolescence. Her acts of observation allow her to maintain her preferred role as bystander and eventually force her to reevaluate and partially relinquish that role.

As a child Kate overhears a neighbour, Mrs. Poole, discussing Kate's birthmark with her mother. Mrs Poole says, "'I suspect God has his own reasons for painting her that way'" (4). For Kate, the reasons remain unclear. A belief in the existence of reasons, together with an obsessive fear of reasons lost or withheld is not only one of Kate's central adolescent concerns but a fear shared by many in her Southern community. Kate recalls how, at a childhood picnic with some of the women in that community, she is overwhelmed by the complexity of the desires of those around her. It is a scene which contains many of the 'articles' of baggage with which Kate is burdened in adolescence, and which she must unpack:

> And how could God keep it all sorted, all these *direct lines,* these prayers that were shot up to him like bullets, crisscrossing, ricocheting, contradicting, negating. *I just hope that she will live until young Owen graduates from college. Well, I just hope she dies quickly and quietly – at peace. How can you be wishing her dead like that? I for one pray that there will come a cure for cancer. I pray for the doctors in the laboratory. I have a cousin whose son-in-law is working at the NIH in D.C. I pray they don't get a divorce even though my cousin says she prays for what is best for the both of them.* [. . .] the thought of having to sort through all those requests made my head spin. (5)

The women in Kate's community express their powerlessness in the act of making requests to an all-powerful God who sees and hears – but does not answer – everything.

The requests embody everything that the women cannot do, the events they cannot control. The lives encapsulated in their bullet-requests (denoting a certain unmistakable power of the prayers to do harm) are full of conflict, sadness and despair, while not without some mocking humour. It is no wonder that Kate says their talk 'could keep you awake for the rest of your life' (5). Kate's narrative is of an adolescence concerned with the workings of God's power, with the desire for answers which will explain and define her existence in the world, and with the compulsion toward the dark subject matter of the women's requests. This is in spite of the fact that the scene is recalled in order to justify the unfavourable contrast Kate makes, as a child, between these undifferentiated women (including her mother) and her father's niece Angela, a woman with whom Kate erroneously associates 'everything beautiful and lively and good' (5), and whom Kate wishes was her mother. This fantasy illustrates the fact that Kate continually misinterprets events in her own life and those around her, preferring her fantasies to the reality of her situation, seeking the answers to her own existence in stories of her own making.

It is in adolescence that Kate seeks reasons for her appearance, a time when 'instead of getting easier, it was getting harder to deal with. It was my weak spot, like a bruise, and it seemed people knew that was the place to seek' (45). Kate's adolescence, like Jo's, is a time of learning how society makes judgments that are based on appearance. Kate is born one year later than Jo, turning thirteen in 1971 whereas Jo turns thirteen in 1970. Kate's birthmark contributes to her alienated vision of the world as cruel, the people in it deliberately trying to hurt her. The difficulties in Kate's relationship with her mother stem from her mother's misguided though well-intentioned efforts to help Kate deal with the birthmark – for which, at times, Kate blames her mother, who additionally fails to understand Kate's childhood game of pretending to be Helen Keller. The game allows Kate to dramatise her alienation yet find shared connection with another in that very alienation. Kate relates how

> I thought she had forgotten the whole Keller episode, but when I went to bed that night, she came into my room and read me a poem called "Lord Forgive Me When I Whine," which was about a person walking around and feeling sorry for himself until he passed a crippled person, a blind

> person, deaf and so on, which made him feel small and stupid and insignificant to have ever felt sorry for himself when he had legs and eyes and ears. Downstairs Bessie Smith sang "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" full blast. I think what Mama really wanted to say was something like *Be careful what you wish or be careful what you say because things come true.* (21)

The poem takes the form of a prayer, similar to the requests the women send up to God. Rather than identifying her own experience with that described in the poem, which would mean following her mother's advice that she 'accept' the birthmark, Kate retreats into fantasies of being other people. She does, however, appropriate the prayer's title, which she interjects sardonically into her narrative at occasional moments when she describes any of her adolescent worries – illustrative of the redemptive humour Kate, her friends and family find in dark situations. After recalling how she and her classmates regarded 'making out' as a sign of status, an experience she did not have, she adds '*Lord forgive me when I whine*' (48); some time after her best friend Misty's mother dies in a car crash, Kate comments, 'I saw us as a pair to be pitied, though, *Lord forgive me when I whine,* Misty had convinced herself that we were a pair to be reckoned with and envied' (106). Parodic appropriation of the prayer allows Kate to find likenesses between the unfortunate events in the prayer's text and the more serious worries in her life. It trivialises the hurt the prayer initially causes due to her mother's act of finding likeness between the prayer text and Kate's situation. Crucially, these italicised comments also function to confuse distinctions between Kate's adolescent self and the older self who narrates. Is it the adolescent Kate who parodies the prayer like this, or the narrator, who may or may not be adolescent? Kate is only sixteen when the novel's action ends. This further problematises the notion that adolescence is grown out of at all. However, if Kate's act of narrative unpacking, like Jo's, is intended to relate a series of errors made and lessons learned which have allowed her to figure out certain values and concepts which will guide her in life, then Kate's narrative signals precisely the opposite, the end of her adolescence. The actions of unpacking in these novels constitute nothing less than a questioning and redefinition of the concept of adolescence.

The Helen Keller game, by contrast, that Kate continues to play in her mind 'like a thought or a silent prayer' (22), is transgressive since it goes against her mother's wish

that she stop playing it. What Kate is praying for is made clear in an episode where she explains how her Hellen Keller fascination is replaced by one for Anne Frank's diary. Kate narrates how she regards the 'Kitty' to whom Anne addresses her journal entries in the form of letters 'as an endearment of myself': 'I read the letters so often, so snared by her "Dearest Darling Kitty", that sometimes I almost believed that I *was* her Kitty, and that she was still very much alive and writing her letters, and sometimes I caught myself suddenly filled with hope for her salvation and future.' On her porch, imagining Anne's voice with 'a Southern lilt similar to my own', Kate articulates the central desire of her adolescence:

> I wanted to cling to the sensation that there was someone out there for me, someone simply out there, hovering, loving. I wanted to believe that I, too, would one day be there, uplifted and held by the truth of it all, that there would be someone out on a sleeping porch crouched and shivering while the world spun back around to day, someone who would wonder what purpose there could be to it all, and I could, with the breath of a weeping willow, with the honesty I felt when I looked into Misty's clear blue eyes, lean down and whisper an answer as soft as ducks' down. (54)

Katherine Dalsimer illustrates how Anne's comment that '"[. . .] I want this diary itself to be my friend, and I shall call my friend Kitty"' allows the diary to function as an 'imagined "other", a fictional presence created by the adolescent and summoned into being each time the diary is addressed, as it customarily is, in the second person.'[44] What Dalsimer does not comment on is that a metaphorical connection here equates Kitty with diary, fictional character with text. Dalsimer explores Anne's figuring of Kitty as imagined other, and equates Kitty with Anne herself: '"Try to put yourself in my place," Anne says to Kitty – as if Kitty were not already *in* Anne's place.'[45] Anne (author) is now metaphorically equated with character and text. Kitty occupies an unstable space (an inbetween space) between another self (alter ego) and an other, in an intricate metaphorical play of likeness and difference. In claiming similarity with – almost claiming to be – Kitty, Kate implies equally ambiguously that she sees herself as just

[44] Katherine Dalsimer, *Female Adolescence: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Works of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 71, 72.

[45] Ibid., 72.

such an imagined other, or wants to be that other, a fictional character in an autobiographical work. Put more simply, Kate wants to be loved by someone in the way that Anne Frank loves her Kitty. As observer of the events that take place around her, hoping to find answers about herself, Kate dramatises her desire to be the one to whom things in the world are lovingly addressed. This is a role of great power and authority, even though to a large extent Kate refrains from being an actor in her own life story. Kate aspires to be like the God to whom the women pray, or to at least desires the power which enables him to have all the answers. It is as narrator of her story that she does attain a measure of this power, as othering and observing her adolescent self renders her both addresser and addressee. This episode dramatises what Gerard Genette describes as a feature of '"autobiographical" narrating' (a narrative in which a narrator recounts their life as an autobiographer would) where the reader might expect to find 'the narrative bring its hero to the point where the narrator awaits him, in order that these two hypostases might meet and finally merge.'[46] This episode does not, however, constitute the conclusion of the novel, and Kate's narrated and narrating selves may not in fact 'merge' – whether they do so would depend on whether Kate is to be described as 'adolescent' or not at the time she narrates. Nevertheless, this event does dramatise what is achieved in Kate's act of narrating. Narrating, Kate is 'upheld and lifted' by the truth she can tell. In her act of narrating she causes the world to 'spin back around' to the point at which the adolescent Kate sits, bereft, on her porch, and is able to offer 'an answer' to the questions asked by her adolescent self. The story and the act of narrating it constitute that answer, the story serving to orient Kate in past and present.

In her powerless adolescence, however, still feeling burdened by the birthmark which she believes defines her, Kate develops a fascination with a beautiful girl in her class, Perry Loomis. It is a fascination Kate compares to a crush – 'so taken with this person's appearance, so much wishing I could claim it as my own' (113). Kate's focus on appearance means that she lacks genuine empathy with Perry and is shocked that Perry rebuffs her overtures to friendship in order to class her with the other girls who are jealous of the male attention Perry receives and make up rumours about her – 'one of

[46] Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980) 226.

them; I was one of the enemy' (119). Perry shatters Kate's delusions that she can watch life from a distance without participating in it, and that watching is a neutral and objective act. Perry does not define herself by her beauty but has a 'weak spot' of her own – her consciousness of her family's poverty, which seems to prohibit her from making friends with Kate. Poverty forces her to wear Kate's old cast-off coat, another reminder that likenesses are negotiable and depend upon who is watching. Most disturbingly, Kate's old coat lies beside Perry as she is gang raped by her boyfriend (Dexter Hucks) and some boys in Perry and Kate's class, showing that beauty brings its own burdens in a patriarchal culture when those who do the watching and evaluating act upon the objectifying which watching enables. The scene takes place in the cemetery near Kate's house. Kate is present, having dared herself to go through the graveyard at night, and is forced to remain hidden in a tree for the duration of the scene. She is unable to look and unable to make her presence known lest she suffer the same fate. It is a decision that haunts her afterwards, leaving her unable to 'unload the whole horrible story' (180) to Misty because she might ask '*Why didn't you do something, Kate? Why did you just sit there and watch?*' (181). Dexter's brother, Merle, tries to prevent the rape and knows that Kate has seen it. He forces her once more to think about the precarious slippage between likeness and difference. Squeezing her arm, as many characters do to Kate in this novel when they want to convince her of something or if they simply want her to react, as if pain will impress upon her the fact of her own physicality and existence in the world, he asks her '"How would you feel if they had done that to *you*"' (185).

It is this scene and its aftermath which heralds Kate's whole-scale re-evaluation of her life. She enters into a relationship with Merle, knowing that it may be founded on their secret knowledge of the rape. Some time later, as they stand regarding the site where their recently-demolished high school used to stand – a site of which Merle says '"Looks like somebody had a war and forgot to tell us"' (226), Kate begins to assess and create, rather than merely observe, likeness and difference:

> It was an incredible thought that as suddenly as anger and hunger could make an animal kill, as suddenly as an engine could fail or brakes go bad, a bomb could be dropped and leave nothing but a big mushroom cloud and a crater filled with rubble. I imagined a person stepping outside and

> catching a leaflet in the wind, a leaflet that said, *Your city will be obliterated unless your government surrenders,* and that night at dinner that person might have said, "How can I do anything about it? Who am I to tell the government what to do?"; and maybe he didn't believe it, or maybe he did, maybe he awoke in a cold sweat as he looked from his window and waited helplessly for obliteration to come. Maybe he lived in Japan, and maybe he sat with his child on his lap, his wife there beside him, and waited, told them that he *wanted* to make it stop but he *couldn't*; he had no power. Everywhere, people were hidden and helpless and begging for it all to stop. *Dearest, darling Kitty*. (226-227)

The likenesses that Kate forges here are founded on the kinds of tragedy that the women in her community ask God to sort through. Kate begins her own work of untangling the crisscrossing lives around her, the above example showing her range of focus extending far beyond her town, region, and country. Rather than desiring to appropriate identities which entice her with their appearance, Kate evaluates the many injustices which link people all over the world. She acquires the ability to imagine more profoundly and empathetically what it is like to be other people. Though her vision is bleak, with people alike in suffering, powerlessness and lack of agency, *'Dearest, darling Kitty'*, spoken by a sufferer of prejudice, can be interpreted as a call to action by a world which is now genuinely addressing itself to Kate and to which Kate, in her imaginative connections with others, is already addressing herself.

Kate's development is hastened when the sudden death of her father forces her to confront tragedy directly, rather than watching or imagining that of others. Even her father's gravestone, with its misprinted words from Tennyson, seems to be addressing herself to her. The misprints mean that the gravestone reads, 'But the tender grave of a dad that is dead will never come back to me,' instead of "'But the tender grace of a day that is dead will never come back to me"' (233). When her mother witnesses Kate in bed with Merle, again rendering Kate an object of scrutiny, Kate initially runs away to Angela's house, but this only forces Kate to abandon her mythologising of Angela and Ferris Beach and facilitates her return home to build a more clear-sighted relationship with her mother. The taxi which her father has bought Kate for her sixteenth birthday and which is described as *'built like a tank'* (249) epitomises Kate's new agency and independence, her role as combatant, rather than passive observer, of the world, though

there is a troubling suggestion that the world is at war and its inhabitants must take arms. It is not that Kate gives up her watching and observing, though, as her act of narration testifies, showing that she has the courage to put her adolescent self under scrutiny. At the end of her story, she can even be positive. She and her mother watch Misty's majorette baton create figures in the air and fall 'neatly into her outstretched hand, a whole world of possibilities spinning around her' (278). The friendship between Kate and Misty has been one of the most sustaining and positive experiences in Kate's adolescence, alleviating some of her alienation. Being a majorette constitutes the fulfillment of Misty's dreams in adolescence, but since it is Kate's description, the world of possibilities would seem to belong to her too, especially since that powerful gesture of enabling the world to 'spin back around' allows Kate to figure out and narrate her world and her adolescence.

Caren J. Town includes Humphreys and McCorkle in her study of Southern writers who offer fictional portrayals of female adolescence. In describing *Rich in Love* as constituting 'Lucille Odom's Ride Through Adolescence', Town figures adolescence spatially, as McCorkle's second passage does.[47] Adolescence appears to be a stage passed though, existing peculiarly outwith Lucille herself. The novel opens with Lucille on her bike, in transit, attempting to make her way home. She travels through a South which, like Jo and Kate's 'New Souths', is in constant change, marked by continual urban development, destruction and construction of buildings and the constant redistribution of people and objects in space. In Lucille's lifetime (some twenty years later, in the late 1980s) these changes occur with accelerated speed – 'Where I rode, the old zones of country, town and city had run together' (2-3). She comments further that 'It was as if new places had been slapped down over the old ones, but some of the old was still showing through. I tried not to lose myself in those pockets' (3). The 'pockets' contain unclassifiable areas where old clashes with new. Interestingly, when Jo urges people to 'Get your eyes full and then fill your pockets!' (142), she is inviting them to confront her own unclassifiable nature. However, the reference to filling pockets shows how this invitation to stare invites objectification and possibly appropriation – is Jo asking people to fill their pockets with *her*, or an image of her, to carry her around? This is further

[47] Town, 71.

illustrated in Lucille's 'pocketing' of Billy's carved animal, and situates these adolescent girls in a 1980s postwar South in which identities (including Southern identity) are increasingly commodified and prone to appropriation. Lucille's fear of losing herself pervades her adolescent existence and informs her perceptions of the South. Her perceptions of the South through which she travels function to ground her adolescence in a network of values that, like the multiple and contested narratives of the South itself, are informed by gender, classed and raced discourses. Lucille's perceptions reveal what is packed into her full, loaded gaze.

To Lucille the South lies open, accessible – and puzzling. It is a maze of fictive constructions which she moves in and out of and which she must negotiate between, calling to mind Gray's claim that Southerners 'are living *between* cultures. Some are living there more openly than others, and with more sensitivity to the problems that come with the territory; among these are Southern writers.'[48] The pockets are the places where narratives overlap or collide, threatening Lucille's interpretations of the world in which she lives. She describes an area in the country with 'black people on porches, innocent as natives' (3), revealing herself participant in a white, privileged gaze that romanticises while it colonises. She also rides past what she calls a 'dream house', one of many 'started but never finished [. . .] scattered through the woods like ruins of a defunct civilization, but they were only the ruins of defunct families' (3). As the unfinished houses exist problematically in time and space, old (defunct) overlapping with new (incomplete), they constitute some of the pockets Lucille fears, and so she must supply a narrative of their existence to ensure she does not get lost. Lucille reasons that the houses are unfinished because 'the money had run out, or the wife had run out' (3). The running out of either threatens the foundation of house and home. Of the importance of Lucille's family home to her identity, Ann Henley argues that '[. . .] Humphreys links Lucille to the home place that can't house her though a reiterated association of house and woman's body and through covert criticism of a patriarchal culture that reduces both house and body to negotiable property.'[49] This is true – Lucille's phrasing implies that the status of

[48] Gray (2004), introduction, 15.

[49] Ann Henley, "'Space for Herself': Nadine Gordimer's *A Sport of Nature* and Josephine Humphreys' *Rich in Love*," Frontiers 13.1 (1992): 87.

wife can be equated with that of money, both possessed by a male. For Lucille, the incomplete house represents a man's severance from the things which are supposed to bring happiness – money, or marriage and a home. This is a situation brought all too forcibly home when Lucille arrives to find that the wife has run out. She applies the same logic to her family, believing that the absence of her mother renders her family 'betrayed' (1). It is a severance which acts as a kind of first cause, plunging her life and those of her family members into chaos and into the realm of 'story' – specifically, the genre of tragedy. However, Henley does not note that Lucille's affirmation of patriarchal culture is expressed via *metaphorical* associations equating women with property. The departure of Lucille's mother not only gives Lucille something to tell and causes a kind of loss of innocence, in Jones's terms, but it is a story in which Lucille is forced to unpack the metaphors which she uses to figure out the world. This is hinted at in Michael Malone's contention that Lucille's family members and Lucille in particular learn 'to give up the shelter of old assumptions'.[50] It is through the work of metaphor that Lucille learns the complexities of living 'between'.

Lucille claims that she has discovered in herself a quality which makes her different from others. Arguing for her uniqueness, she explains that 'When I say I was not normal, I don't just mean I had the usual adolescent delusions of being different from everyone else' (6). Dominant narratives of adolescence claim that a sense of 'difference' in adolescence constitutes sameness. Feeling different is what makes adolescents alike. This incorporates vastly disparate experiences in a normative model of growing up, masking the valid claims to difference that adolescent protagonists make. Lucille does not challenge the definition, her 'just' and 'usual' indicating that she locates her own experience within dominant constructions of adolescence. However, she does question the capacity of the dominant narratives to tell the whole story of her experience.

It is notable that of all the narrators studied here, Lucille is the only girl who labels herself adolescent, and even as she labels her past self as adolescent, she tries to extricate herself from the concept. Lucille is at pains to make clear that she, narrating, is not

[50] Michael Malone, "Rich in Words," rev. of *Rich in Love*, by Josephine Humphreys, *Nation* 10 Oct. 1987: 389.

adolescent, that she has passed though that stage. Her collusion with the normative, dominant construction of adolescence means that she sees adolescence as inferior to adulthood, and consequently an adolescent narrator would be less authoritative than an adult one. Given that she is arguing for her *genuine* difference, as opposed to the delusions of difference in adolescence, she has to say that she is not adolescent at all. This does partially bear out Town's idea of a 'ride through adolescence' as Lucille must objectify her adolescence, making it something other to her narrating self. It is not so simple though – Lucille does not want her narrative to be full of delusions, but she is trying to recall her deluded adolescent self.

Uncertain whether the newly discovered quality she finds in herself constitutes 'an affliction or a gift', Lucille names and defines it as follows:

> I called it "invision" because it was almost as if I could see into things. I could not take my eyes off physical objects – plants, dogs, faces, birds, all the world of nature – but also manufactured items such as cars, mailboxes, chain-link fencing. Things glittered at me as I rode past. They had started glittering after I read in the paper about a study done by Clemson University scientists concerning the greenhouse effect. The level of the ocean, they had learned, was on the rise. Their computer had generated a map of the coastline of South Carolina as it would appear fifty years from now. *We were not on it.* Our house, town, most of the city of Charleston, were shown in blue, i.e., covered by water.
>
> Inundation would be gradual, inches per year, but inevitable, unless everyone in the world immediately stopped burning coal, using fertilizer, and spraying aerosol deodorant. Fat chance, I said to myself. So every time I looked at my own yard, every time I rode the bicycle, I saw not the good old world I had known forever, but a world it was nearly time to say good-bye to. Beauty doubled and tripled around me. The place was doomed. (7-8)

'Invision' is caused by Lucille's heightened awareness that the world she lives in – and by extension, herself – may be destroyed in the space of her own lifetime. The study that shows the absence of her home produces a particularly sinister knowledge. She portrays herself living in a world of excess and waste where 'People my age were murder' (5). This is literally so, illustrated by her encounters with other adolescents who are always on the move and who toss waste from the windows of their cars and motorbikes, contributing to the destruction of the landscape and endangering lives – 'A jelly bean

could do me in, I realized' (6). Lucille's generation desires to travel light, unburdened by responsibility. The bike, safety helmet and backpack illustrate the 'vigilance' (5) which Lucille says is her defining characteristic. They also substantiate her claim that she is not a 'normal teenage girl' (6). However, her conception of a teenage girl, someone who has the leisure time and money to spend her days shopping for clothes, getting her hair done and lying on the beach, reveals Lucille's class bias (7). It is this bias which underpins her interpretation of the empty 'dream house', and renders Lucille's vision suspect (her full pockets fill her eyes).

Lucille's heightened sense of the perishable nature of the South (both geographically perishable, apparently, and perishable in the sense that it is being increasingly 'Americanised' in the moment in which she lives) causes her to love it more. She peppers her phrases with sea-related imagery – she marvels at how '*everything out there* – sank through a million changes before night fell onto it' (9). Rewriting her mother's letter explaining that she has left, Lucille attributes to her mother a feeling of being 'absolutely *adrift*' (18), and hypothesises an 'even keel' as the secret to a happy marriage (19). She describes her father's hands twisting 'like caught flounder' (35) and herself waiting for Rae to come home 'like someone hoping for rescue at sea' (37). Watching fish swimming futilely round and round a tank in a restaurant, the only break in the monotony occurring when they are taken out to be cooked and eaten, almost causes Lucille to pass out because the fish represent a kind of visual metaphor of the hopeless plight of her world (143-4). These examples illustrate that 'invision' is a good term for the quality Lucille has, though not as she explains it. Her ability to see into things does not mean that she perceives a quality pre-existing *in* them, but rather that she invests them with her awareness of impending doom, protecting her own views on them. It is in these acts of investment that she performs the work of metaphor. She tells Wayne that "'I see lots of things no one else sees."' This is correct, but it is intended to negate Wayne's comment that her perception (in this case, about masculine behaviour) "'reveals something about the observer rather than the observee"' (56). It is this quality of invision which allows Lucille to say, 'I loved, loved, loved the place I lived' (14), a comment which refers specifically to her home but has ramifications which reach far beyond. The absence of the word 'in' conflates Lucille and her place – in living her place, she creates

it, because she informs it with her own interpretations and so it reflects those views back to her.

The novel's title constitutes an act of invision, referring to a metaphorical phrase Lucille coins to describe herself. When Wayne tells Lucille that her conception of love is "'[. . .] a total error, three hundred and sixty degrees off,'" Lucille corrects him – "'You mean a hundred and eighty'" (131). She links the concept of love with perception and orientation, as does her previous comment about loving the place she lives. In the following chapter she explains:

> I knew what love was without the aid of empirical evidence, and furthermore, I believed that I did have it. It was in me. It had been accumulating silently over the years like equity in a house. I was rich in love, even though no one could see it. (146)

Investing herself with love that is like currency, Lucille's body is like a house in which money is stored, calling to mind her earlier reasoning about the incomplete 'dream house' and further affirming the patriarchal logic she earlier outlines. The importance Lucille allocates to money links her to her father, whose experiences of growing up in the Depression cause him to believe that "' [. . .] *if we had money, we would be safe*'" (54). It is a link which divorces them from her mother. When Lucille asks her mother how much money she is making, her mother responds, "'Don't ask me that, Lucille. You and your father keep asking me how much money I've got. The truth is, a human being doesn't need as much money as you and your father think'" (210). Earlier in the novel, eating food for comfort, Lucille thinks that 'Real comfort, as the Romans knew, is fortification' (127), thus underlining how imperative it is that she have something in her life which serves to defend her against the encroaching, dangerous, doomed world. Money is something which might provide fortification (it provides the food she eats). For Lucille, money (like love) is the major link in a chain of metaphorical equations – house, marriage, mother, family – now sundered.

In a study of metaphor, Alicia Ostriker defines its function as 'A carrying across, a getting over, a bearing there, or what? Of course, of love. Of the erotic. Metaphor: that

which joins, that which announces connection, overlap, shared essence, and yet retains the actual distance between whatever objects it brings together.'[51] She argues:

> Metaphor is the erotic element in language. This is why language without metaphor is chilling and irritating. Inhuman, not quite believable. A web of refusals. Ice. [. . .] In a discourse which lacks metaphor, a disinfected discourse, which pretends to protect itself from the st(r)ains of desire, the greedy exhausting disease of love, there is no mother's milk, the bread is old rags, the meat is sand.[52]

Ostriker's description of a discourse without metaphor (a description which nevertheless relies very much upon the figurative) is particularly relevant to Lucille's conception of her family situation, in which the mother is gone, and joins (relationships between family members) are undone. Gone with Lucille's mother is comfort and fortification. Ostriker expresses this loss of metaphor as impoverishment, involving a similar loss of comfort and sustenance – 'the bread is old rags'. Ostriker's description speaks to Lucille's situation in particular, and not only because of her equation of love and money as things which fortify. Even before her mother's departure, Lucille questions whether her mother loves her. She has learned from Rae that she is the product of a failed abortion, her existence due to an accidental oversight which failed to detect Lucille as 'the other one' of a set of twins and so misses her – Rae says, '"They didn't know you were in there"' (50). Her depiction of herself as 'rich in love', granted to her by invision, explains why her work of metaphor initially prompts her to do all she can to ensure her mother's return, bringing her parents back together, and to take her mother's place. Though she claims that 'I was seventeen! I was unprepared to be the lady of a house' (32), it is a role which is not enforced upon her but which Lucille feels she must take on, in an attempt to preserve the fortification of mother love, that which she feels is necessary to her family's survival.

Lucille's narrative, like her adolescence, is marked by a concern to make herself known and visible (to herself and others), to find a place where she belongs. Before she

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[51] Alicia Ostriker, "A Meditation on Metaphor," *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry*, ed. Molly McQuade (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2000) 157.

[52] Ibid., 158.

comes to her insight about herself as 'rich in love', Lucille prepares fish for a meal one morning, their design revealing 'the body a simple bag for the innards.' She speculates that 'And what I think of as Lucille, the visible person, may be only a container – only a *bag* – for another girl. One nobody had ever seen, who maybe had a different name. "Ellicul," maybe' (57). Lucille's 'visible person' carries her rich love inside for much of the novel, secret and invisible. As such, it works to trouble Lucille's identity, rendering her the container of another identity, pluralising and doubling her, seen in the reversal of her name. This is something which her role as a twin suggests to her, as a twin is like and unlike someone else. Lucille carries and contains her twin-self which is rich in love, full of things which she believes necessary for survival and which she feels her mother has failed to provide – a sense of home and belonging, fortification.

Lucille falls in love with Billy partly because he sees the love in her:

> 'You look so tough. You come across as a woman strong as Fort Sumter in its heyday, a bastion nobody in his right mind would try to take. But then half of your sentences start out with the words, "I love." You're saying, "I love this," "I love that." You love more things than anyone I've ever run into.' (159)

Billy correctly identifies Lucille's siege mentality, her sense that life must be lived warily, on the defence against imminent attack. But Billy makes an error in his definition. He thinks that Lucille's accumulation of love functions like a chink in armour, rendering her vulnerable. This is not how Lucille conceives of it. She says of this discussion with Billy, '"You have a lot of love," he had said. That was me; that was *the* me. I had been recognized' (160). Lucille feels that Billy has seen the hidden self, rich in love; '*the* me' shows how that self is objectified, the definite article her adolescent body carries. However, her thoughts about Billy add to the vast number of interpretive comments in this novel which are only partly correct. Error and correction are central themes in this novel and in Lucille's adolescence. This is hinted at in her concern over 'adolescent delusions' (6), and provides another reason why Lucille does not want to identify herself as adolescent at the time of narrating. This might mean that her narrative (like her adolescence) could be read as containing errors, and she wants to tell a tale in which she learns to correct her vision of the world. If this is the case, then her narrative must be

correct. However, this is not easily proven. Studying Billy on their first proper meeting, Lucille thinks that '[. . .] it suddenly hit me what was wrong with him. [. . .] The man was in love' (64). The concept of love as misrecognition and error is something that Lucille makes explicit:

> In the grass, fireflies were blinking love signals to one another. Higher, the stars twinkled. It occurred to me that a firefly could easily be fooled into latching onto that signal from outer space and falling into eternally unrequited love. From where I sat, I could hardly see a difference between the bug and the fiery star. Indication, I thought, of just how far off my judgment could be. (45)

Lucille's love for Billy is founded on a similar misrecognition, as she loves him because she feels he has recognised 'the real me' when this is not quite the case. Similarly, it is Lucille's love for her family which prompts her to make misjudgments about them – determined to perceive her family as strong and loving, different from other families, she does not see the signs which would render her mother's departure less shocking. The close relations between love and error are especially significant given that Lucille portrays herself as 'rich in love', which runs the risk of meaning rich in error. Certainly her attempts to take her mother's place and reunite her family are misguided, as it requires Lucille to force her family members into her personal vision of a happily reunited family (mother and father back in the same house) while depriving her family members the freedom to make their own choices (Lucille tries to prevent her father's new relationship with Vera Oxendine).

However, Billy's recognition of Lucille's richness in love and her consequent recognition of love for him allow Lucille to re-evaluate herself and her relations to others. This has positive consequences, as it corrects her errors. On the day her mother leaves, Lucille tries to formulate her feeling that something is wrong:

> I can only describe it by saying it was like sitting in a movie theater when something is about to happen on screen that you object to, but there you sit in the dark, stupid, seventeen, powerless. Things happen that you can neither halt nor moderate. Physically, this feeling manifests itself as a stomachache. I had named it "girlhood" and hoped to death that I would one day soon burst out of it.

Lucille associates her female adolescence as a time of lack of fortification (symbolised by the stomachache) which puts her in a powerless position – a position which renders her able only to occupy the role of audience at the performance of her life's events, unable to correct anything. This absence of power is something Lucille defines later as luck, responsible for her existence. In arguing that 'But love, luck's opposite, pulled me into the world' (233), she shows how her recognition of love (in herself and for others) enables her to take a more active part in her life's events. Love does not make Lucille vulnerable, as Billy suggests. Lucille's implicit recognition of love as power also allows her to see that it is power which underpins her metaphorical linkage of love and money. These realisations allow her to unpack her secret, richly fortified self from its place inside her. Previously fearing that she might lose that self, that the fortifying resources it provides might run out – like money or love – and so must only be saved but not used, Lucille is able to begin using those resources as living openly as her fortified self, bearing love which allows her to forge new erotic connections to others, negotiating her place in the world. Lucille's description of 'rich in love', like 'invision', is correct even if her judgement, her interpretation of these concepts, is initially a little off.

Though Lucille is finally able to present her true conception of self to others, this does not make life any less painful or error-free. Lucille's love for Billy blinds her to Rae's deep depression. Lucille and Billy make love downstairs while Rae gives birth in the bathroom and rejects her baby. It is the fortification provided by being rich in love that enables Lucille to recover from these events and to realise that she must accept her mother's departure and her new familial configuration. No longer holding her mother entirely responsible for events which befall the family, Lucille is able to grant her mother independence and autonomy. At the novel's conclusion Lucille and her mother are living in one of the dream houses, the move symbolising Lucille's shift in perspective. Lucille ends her narrative by describing how she carries Rae's baby, Phoebe, on her bike as they cycle through Lucille's South. Lucille tries to impart the tentative knowledge her adolescence has provided to the baby. In doing so, she copies her mother's action of imparting wisdom to Lucille and Rae when they were babies. Her mother tells Lucille

that she "'forgot it all'" (251). Lucille's repetition of her mother's action in her narrated act and in her larger act of narrating shows how her recognition of herself as 'rich in love' marks her adolescence as one of new connections (and corrections). These allow her to return to her mother, continuing her work of metaphor by passing on her story to Phoebe in an act which associates Lucille with the maternal. Lucille predicts 'a long and bitter adolescence' (259) for Phoebe, who she says is 'like me' (261). Passing on the story of her adolescence allows Phoebe the chance to take in and take on what tentative knowledge Lucille can impart, in an effort to aid orientation in a South in which orientation will always be difficult.

Whereas Lucille's abundant capacity for love finds a correspondence in her family's abundance of money, in *Bone of My Bones* Ella Ruth Higgins's life is marked by the lack of money and love and their capacity to fortify. In Sylvia Wilkinson's fifth novel, Ella Ruth Higgins describes her life from the ages of nine to eighteen, spanning the years 1950 to 1958. Hers is an adolescence marked by poverty and hardship in the town of Summit, North Carolina. In a review of the novel, David Quammen praises Ella Ruth's 'effective voice, graced at points with humour, richly raucous language and illuminations on the travail of female adolescence.' However, he claims that 'The voice is not enough', and finds significant problems in the text. His criticisms are worth examination:

> The problem is shape, or rather the lack of it. Sylvia Wilkinson's material is worthy enough, but she has neglected to give it any effective (or affective) shape, to subordinate trivial anecdotes to what could be climaxes, to choose between the paradigmatic and the banal, to arrange her endless small observations on behalf of any larger purpose. It is all simply there – details, crucial events, banalities, gems of minor insight – in one linear, unmodulated recitation. Because its chief organizing principles are inclusiveness and chronology, the novel reads like eight years of unedited diaries from a verbally gifted girl named Ella Ruth. It is a *Bildungsroman* that never builds.[53]

[53] David Quammen, "The Bildungsroman That Didn't Build," rev. of *Bone of My Bones*, by Sylvia Wilkinson, *New York Times Book Review* 21 Feb. 1982: 13.

Quammen sums this up by claiming that the novel has 'insufficient carrying power and no miraculous retroactive shapeliness.' The faults he finds with the novel are based on the fact that he tries to make the novel fit a pattern outwith the text – that of the *Bildungsroman*. The canonical description of the genre is summed up by Jerome Hamilton Buckley's much-quoted definition. Buckley claims that the *Bildungsroman* describes a sensitive and intelligent young man's separation from a home and family which stifle him. The move is usually from country to city, where the young man learns about urban life, has encounters with women, and works out what his career and values are to be. Buckley concludes:

> By the time he has decided, after painful soul-searching, the sort of accommodation to the modern world he can honestly make, he has left his adolescence behind and entered upon his maturity. His initiation complete, he may then visit his old home, to demonstrate by his presence the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice.[54]

As *Bone of My Bones* does not conform to this pattern, Quammen assumes that it fails. It is according to this kind of analysis that so many novels of female adolescence are judged, as White demonstrates so thoroughly. Quammen does not entertain the fact that the novel might have an alternative pattern of its own, and this causes him to profoundly misread the text even as he picks up on some of its important features – voice, observation, the search for pattern, shape, and meaning. Ella Ruth's narrative is of an adolescence spent in efforts to find her voice and to successfully reject the patriarchal narratives which attempt to define and contain her, such as that of the *Bildungsroman*. Ironically, Quammen's review embodies the sort of thinking which Ella Ruth's narrative tries to resist. An aspiring writer, it is Ella Ruth's ability to create art which provides her salvation. It is in art that she ruminates upon her life, critiquing the world in which she

[54] Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974) 17-18. For other discussions of the history and content of the *Bildungsroman*, see James Hardin, ed., *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991). For discussions of how the form may or may not be tailored to incorporate female experience, see Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland, eds., *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), 3-19.

lives and finally reconciling herself to it, in a complicated movement which allows her to claim more autonomy and power than that world is prepared to give.

The novel's title constitutes a borrowing from Genesis 2:23, which Ella Ruth repeats within the text: ""This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."'At age fifteen, Ella Ruth challenges the narrative:

> "Why couldn't God just make a woman separate? Why did he have to take her from the man? Anybody who could make a person up from scratch could just as easy make another one. I don't believe that, you know. I just think some man wrote it that way." (78)

'Bone of my bones', as the title of Ella Ruth's narrative, is a metaphorical description of an essentialist category of woman. The biblical narrative describes the woman as part and property of man. Lacking authority, agency and language to name herself, she is unlike him in ways that render her inferior. This illustrates the important point that the act of metaphor-making can be immensely powerful, as the likenesses it finds reveal prejudices and allocate power. Also, the power of some metaphorical constructions come from the authority granted the person who finds the likenesses encapsulated in metaphor, or from the values invested in the texts in which likenesses are found (such as the Bible), rather than the validity of the likenesses themselves. Ella Ruth's grandmother believes the story, granting it literal status. Her mother says '"It's just to tell a story, Ella Ruth. You shouldn't take it so serious"' (79). Nonetheless, the bible story finds correspondences in the postwar South, in which options for women – particularly a poor woman – are limited. Speaking out about the patriarchal ideology she detects in the narrative, in which man is given the authority to name and create in God's stead, Ella Ruth resists detecting likenesses between her own position and the description of the creation of Woman, but this leaves her alone and isolated.

The bible story, with its absent female voice, tells Ella Ruth that she cannot be a writer. This is a view which Ella Ruth is repeatedly forced to confront. At the age of nine, she makes a box from pieces of kindling. She calls it a 'time capsule' and uses it to store items of personal value and items she believes might be of value to a future audience,

noting that since 'We do not have much money [. . .] so there isn't much I can put in this box for you.' She includes narratives which explain her selection of objects, and offers information about the world in which she lives – 'I live in Summit, North Carolina and at the time I am burying this time capsule, the country is called the United States of America' (13). She includes stories about an independent Croatan Indian girl called Little Star, who suffers from but prevails against her treatment by white people. Ella Ruth explains that 'The Indians were here in the United States first, before me and before you and whoever might come to take over from you [. . .] Its [*sic*] like if you decided to build your house right in my backyard and acted like it was yours first. I would get mad and do things to try to make you move away. At least thats [*sic*] the way I see it' (14).

Ella Ruth explains that she puts her stories in the box because her teacher dislikes what she writes and 'said for me to write what she told me to write' (15), showing how she is unwilling to obey her teacher but is aware that there is no audience for her stories. Her depiction of the box as a 'time capsule' indicates a certain faith in the future, a hope that perhaps a receptive audience might exist for her stories. However, her phrasing – 'Its like if you' – places her future reader in the role of hypothetical coloniser, implying likeness between the imagined reader and the white people who are cruel to Ella Ruth's alter ego, Little Star. This makes sense, as the impact of the Second World War and its aftermath informs Ella Ruth's view of a world history punctuated by wars which determine the rise and fall of various groups. 'Whoever may take over from you' puts her reader in the position of someone who has taken over, but that reader is in an equally precarious position, liable to be taken over by someone stronger. This is a version of 'survival of the fittest' which suggests that even in the future, people may be no more willing to read what Ella Ruth wants to write (those who are most powerful in her lifetime refuse to listen, so why should those in power in the future).

Bone of My Bones is divided into four sections – '1950', '1954', '1956', and 1958'. This is somewhat misleading, as the narrated action within some sections does not observe the chronological bounds suggested by the section headings. For example, the '1954' section contains a significant amount of action and narrative which takes place in, or is written in, 1956. In its entirety, the novel constitutes the retrospective narration of Ella Ruth, who is at least eighteen at this point of narrating – there is no indication of her

age or location when she undertakes this larger retrospective act. That retrospection appears to take the form of internal monologue, as Ella Ruth does not specify that she is writing, and it is this with which the novel begins and closes. However, the novel juxtaposes Ella Ruth's written narratives (stories and autobiographical narratives written in childhood and adolescence at various times between 1950 and 1958) with long passages of internal monologue which, although framed by that retrospection, can also situate her within the time bounded by each section. For example, her discussion of the Bible passage exists within a section of internal monologue beginning 'Last Sunday' (76), making Ella Ruth fifteen when she recounts this episode. Lacking an addressee and not claiming the status of textual narrative, the voice which closes the novel suggests that Ella Ruth has not yet found an audience. As this description should illustrate, the novel's structure is far from simple, not simply linear as Quammen argues. However, his claim that 'it is all simply there' is understandable, testifying to a bafflement caused by the contrasting narrative strands, which do require much working out. This is borne out by the fact that reviews and criticism of the text are marked by errors, generally regarding Ella Ruth's age, illustrating the difficulty of finding pattern and coherence in Ella Ruth's narrative.[55] This is not to say that pattern is not there. The text of *Bone of My Bones* might be best conceived of as a series of overlapping pockets which locate Ella Ruth in specific chronological moments, but which she passes in and out of, inbetween.

Preoccupations with money and its absence, violence and its consequences, the need to preserve objects and create art which reflects the world's injustices while offering more positive representations of female experience – all these are contained in the story box and carried through into Ella Ruth's adolescence. She packs the box with stories as she progresses through life, adding to the stories about Little Star, whose dilemmas bear a

[55] Along with Quammen's work, reviews of the novel in the *Los Angeles Times* and *Publishers Weekly* wrongly gauge the novel's time frame. Quammen claims that the novel covers Ella Ruth's life from ages ten to eighteen; the *Los Angeles Times* and *Publishers Weekly* reviews claim ten to sixteen. Ella Ruth's first piece of writing begins – 'My name is Ella Ruth and it is 1950 the year that I will be ten years old.' This suggests that she is nine at the time of writing, and therefore is seventeen or eighteen (probably eighteen) at the novel's conclusion. See Lisa Mitchell, "Growing-Up Pains in the Rural South," rev. of *Bone of My Bones*, by Sylvia Wilkinson, *Los Angeles Times* 19 Mar. 1982: V26. Also rev. of *Bone of my Bones*, by Sylvia Wilkinson, *Publishers Weekly* 11 Dec. 1981: 50.

strong resemblance to the lives of Ella Ruth and those around her. The stories function to offer alternatives (not always positive) to the way in which events turn out in Ella Ruth's world. For example, on finding out that her friend Gretchen is pregnant, Ella Ruth pledges help only to find that it is a false alarm. Gretchen is able to laugh off the event but for Ella Ruth it is deeply distressing. She rewrites the episode for her story box, in which Starrie's pregnant friend Madelaine disappears and is presumed dead (105). The event touches on the theme of sexuality, which troubles Ella Ruth as she grows up and which intrudes upon her imaginative life, manifesting itself in Gretchen's situation and in the jokes told by boys in her class, at which Ella Ruth refuses to laugh. Walking in the woods with her father, he calls attention to her developing body, the visible sign of the growing up which she is trying to resist, realising how her freedom will be curtailed: "'I mean I'm trying to tell you what other folks is seeing. [. . .] You got to get over being so tomboyish, Ella Ruth. You're getting too old to act thataway. No matter how hard you try to be different, you're a girl and a girl you're going to stay'" (116).

At sixteen, Ella Ruth is raped by three boys with whom she has grown up.[55] Ella Ruth's description of the event and the boys' justification for the act are founded upon complex and unstable constructions of likeness. Ella Ruth's description of her rape relies upon a sequence of comparisons between herself and animals. Rolling into a ball to defend herself, she recalls seeing a possum play dead in order to escape three dogs. Closing her eyes so that she cannot see herself, Ella Ruth describes her situation as follows:

> With my eyes shut, it was only a little darker than the barn. I felt for a second that I might escape, fly out the window, a bird bouncing off the walls of a room, finding the open window and being sucked away into the sky. No. I was nailed against the floor like the chicken hawk on the side of the chicken house. I couldn't use my wings; they were as good as broken. My stomach was swollen and open, turned up between my wings, spread to show my private parts. My claws were stiff. No use. (125)

[55] The *Los Angeles Times* and *Publishers Weekly* reviews wrongly claim that Ella Ruth is thirteen when she is raped.

Initially Ella Ruth compares herself to a bird, but it is a likeness she cannot maintain, because her narrative is not one of escape but captivity – 'No.' This word signals a new evaluation of herself, where the likeness between self and bird no longer relies upon simile but the stronger device of metaphor to force its point. Ella Ruth *is* a bird, transformed into one by the rape and her narrative of it. In *Ferris Beach,* thinking about Perry's rape, Kate envisions her 'breast bone as fragile as that of a chicken ripped and torn apart' (177). The comparison, like Ella Ruth's initial one, is of simile and not metaphor, possibly explained by the fact that Kate is imagining an event which did not happen to her. Ella Ruth's transformation into bird underlines how the rape alienates her from her body and also constitutes her way of coping with what is being done by detaching herself from that body. Most significantly, it writes her within patriarchal narratives which she has been attempting to resist. Specifically, Ella Ruth (like Perry) is violently written into an American pastoral narrative. The rape literalises the metaphorical equation of women with land and the natural world, there to be plundered and exploited by male colonisers, as illustrated by Annette Kolodny.[57] Earlier in the novel, Ella Ruth rages at the patriarchal figuration of nature's destructive power as feminine:

> Another thing that made me mad as fire was the radio calling the hurricanes by girls' names. Even if I could stand Hazel at work, I wouldn't like her because her name made me think of the time I saw all the pear trees get pulled up in the backyard and my poor old chinaberry tree that was my favourite of all get torn to pieces. Hazel tore down all the best rides at Carolina Beach. If Ella ever comes though, I hope she blows all the boys in a hole full of cow shit. (84)

The naming of hurricanes as female equates a natural force with a destructive power which girls and women do not possess, and affirms the masculinist privilege of naming and allocating loaded values to items in the world, in an attempt to explain that world in a manner which naturalises patriarchal hegemony. This is also echoed in the biblical passage. The futility of Ella Ruth's anger is illustrated by the fact that she can only hope

[57] Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975) 7.

that a hurricane bearing her name would enact her anger. Identifying the hurricanes with herself and girls she knows only authorises the act of naming she hates so much. In the novel's final section, Ella Ruth discusses the rape with Al Sawyer, who was present but non-participant in it. He tells her that the boys watched her imitate the noise of a cat in heat. Whereas Ella Ruth merely teases the cat, they interpret the noise as an invitation (218), transferring the qualities of the cat to her. Ella Ruth reflects that 'We can all see the same thing and have it come out different' (226), but she does not state more explicitly that some interpretations carry more weight than others.

Immediately after the rape, Ella Ruth compares herself in rapid succession to a plant, to a bug, and to a blind person, slowly narrating herself back to a state of maimed humanity. Devoid of gender allocation, her figuring of herself as blind testifies to the fact that she is unwilling and unable to recognise and name herself under the new terms which the rape inscribes. Taking a bath at home, her mother calls out, '"Ella, that you?"' Ella Ruth responds '"Naw, mama. It's just an old hobo talking a bath in your tub"' (126). The reply is intended to be a joke – who else could it be in the bathroom but Ella Ruth? – but it signals the extent to which Ella Ruth is estranged from herself. Old and male, the hobo is unlike Ella Ruth, but she shares a bond of sameness with his displacement and unassigned identity.

The rape has several consequences. The stories in the story box describe how Starrie becomes a cripple, losing her independence and strength. As Starrie is no longer a role model the stories about her cease altogether. Thinking over the rape, Ella Ruth realises that 'They watched me' (130), and her preoccupation with being watched leads her to stay indoors more often, watching others from her back window:

> My story box was getting to be a problem. I dug it up and buried it so many times and so many places, I started worrying I might forget where it was. And you never know who's watching you. Those boys or even my daddy might see where I put it. I decided to clean it up and paint it and keep it under my bed. I felt better as soon as it was in the house with me. (138)

The action of bringing the box inside, where Ella Ruth lives her newly circumscribed existence, indicates how the box metaphorically represents Ella Ruth herself. She creates

a new alter ego, a reminder that her fictional characters also metaphorically represent her. The new alter ego is Ella Ruth Darwin, granddaughter of Charles, who dedicates her life to the study of animals and gives meaning and pattern to what might appear to be their acts of 'mindless instinct' (137). By identifying with an imaginary character who studies animals, Ella Ruth tries to protect and distance herself from the powerful cultural narratives which read her as symbolic of the land and nature (seen in the figuring of hurricanes as female, for example), even as her closeted domestic life symbolises her entrapment within patriarchal narratives.

Running alongside Ella Ruth Darwin's life, Ella Ruth's bonds to the home are further strengthened when her mother becomes ill and Ella Ruth looks after her. After her mother's death she defers a university scholarship to look after her failing, alcoholic father, planning for the future by saving the money she makes from a job in the local hospital where two female patients, Elisa Simpson and Katherine Hinshaw, provide her with more material for the story box. Ella Ruth eventually writes a play containing two female characters, Katella and Elisa Ruth, who represent aspects of herself and these patients. It is in the act of creating the play that Ella Ruth most obviously does the work of metaphor, finding shared female experiences which give her the sense of community she craves. It is also in the play that she most forcibly articulates the anger she feels at her society's injustices.

Crucially, Ella Ruth imagines the play's premiere, attended by living and dead members of her family (including her mother) and various important people in her life (such as Al Sawyer). A description of the audience taking their seats is combined with Ella Ruth's explanations about how the play is to function to bring the family together. This description is bounded, like the play text itself, by the play's title, showing that both play and audience partake of a larger fiction enabling Ella Ruth to figure out a reconciliation with those, living and dead, who have informed her life. However, even though the creation of the play shows the power of art to counter Ella Ruth's isolation and grief and to forge connections with family and friends (the play is called *The Family Reunion*), that audience is only imagined. After completing the play Ella Ruth returns to her story box, describing how she goes 'all the way to the bottom' (267). This allows Ella Ruth to narrate herself out of the story box and out of patriarchal narratives. To

understand how this is achieved, it is important to examine how Ella Ruth uses the story box and the play to help her forge connections to her parents, as Jane Gentry Vance and Joyce M. Pair note.[58]

Ella Ruth's predicament revolves around the fact that she writes a play to please her dead mother, who would have preferred her to have a baby:

> Finally I've found a way to bring the whole family together for her. I know this isn't exactly what she had in mind for me, but I wonder if she can understand. Any girl can have a baby, Mama [. . .] But I have to make my life into something it wasn't going to be naturally. (256)

Writing the play is also a gesture of defiance towards a patriarchal culture which seeks to trap her within its own narratives. Her father, representative of that culture, falls asleep before the play begins, symbolising that culture's reluctance to hear and be addressed by Ella Ruth, whose dilemma constitutes that of the figurative 'empty pack' which Sandra M. Gilbert claims that every woman, particularly women writers, receive from their literal and literary mothers. Gilbert explains that this empty pack is 'the riddle of daughterhood': when a woman writer engages in an act of creativity, she achieves a power which estranges her from her mother, even as she tells a story about her exclusion from the patriarchal power of the father. It is this empty pack with which Ella Ruth is burdened in adolescence.[59]

The story box both illustrates and resolves this dilemma. What Ella Ruth Darwin says of her father is directly applicable to Ella Ruth – "'I am my father's daughter, but he gave me nothing but my body, an empty house that I had to furnish'" (194). Ella Ruth's metaphor links the female body to the concepts of house and container, a traditional figuration which her father bequeaths to her when he tells her another creation story, this one about how babies are made. His highly metaphorical language betrays a cultural

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[58] For useful, though somewhat different interpretations of how Ella Ruth figures out her relations to her parents and explores ideas of female identity through her writing, see Jane Gentry Vance, "Fat Like Mama, Mean Like Daddy: The Fiction of Sylvia Wilkinson," *Southern Literary Journal* 15.1 (1982): 23-36, and Joyce M. Pair, "Growing Up Female: The Creative Pattern of Sylvia Wilkinson," *Southern Literary Journal* 19.2 (1987): 47-53.

[59] Sandra M. Gilbert, "Life's Empty Pack: Notes Towards a Literary Daughteronomy," *Daughters and Fathers*, ed. Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 257-258. This essay was reprinted from *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1985): 355-84.

anxiety over the appropriate words to describe certain subjects (34-5). Her father's word for the womb is 'box', and it is a language which Ella Ruth appropriates after her rape: '[Daddy] told me I had a tunnel [. . .] a tunnel to a box to make a baby in' (131). The novel's first paragraph describes how the story box is 'about big enough for a baby' (13), and even though Ella Ruth's decision to refuse to allow marriage and children to define her constitutes a rejection of her mother's values and definitions of womanhood, it seems that the box, as metaphor for the female body and possibly a child, furnished with Ella Ruth's art, allows Ella Ruth to maintain a connection with her mother through another conventional metaphorical construction – that a woman's art is her offspring.

Thinking about how her father has never abused her, Ella Ruth speculates that 'Maybe he only had bad feelings toward the people we were different from: rich people, Jews, colored people. He figured I was like him' (204). Ella Ruth claims that she is not going to be like her mother because she is 'mean like daddy.' She, too, has bad feelings for the people she is different from – most obviously, men. After her mother's death, Ella Ruth's father develops a fascination with preserving junk, valueless objects which no longer serve any function, and Ella Ruth is forced to acknowledge that 'He is just like me writing things for my story box. Except I know where my daddy went wrong' (192). Later she explains this more clearly – 'Daddy's junkyard is like my story box. Only he never figures out what to do with anything he saves' (193). Ella Ruth, by contrast, is able to covert what she saves into art which makes her existence meaningful.

Ella Ruth's existence may only be meaningful to her, though. Unpacking her story box on the night she finishes writing her play, Ella Ruth says that 'I can go in and out of my worlds now much easier, walk on the different levels, those I make up and those I find in my memory' (268). The figurative depiction of Ella Ruth moving in space dramatises her confident negotiation between life and art, not regarded as separate realms but portrayed as a comfortable inbetween space in which she lives and travels. However, even though Ella Ruth can accommodate her different selves, not having to compartmentalise and hide them in the story box, she still inhabits a world which is unwilling or uncertain about accommodating her. She wonders wistfully if 'the day will come when I can see the world through a man's eyes' (268), signaling that even though

she has constructed a more powerful identity for herself than her culture allows, the power and the privilege which white men enjoy is something she still yearns for.

The novel ends on a quietly triumphant note. Ella Ruth recalls a moment in her childhood when she found a Luna moth, something she describes as 'the most perfect living thing I'd ever seen' (271). She shows it to Al Sawyer, who rushes off to find something to preserve it. Wanting to save (not preserve) the moth, Ella Ruth heeds her mother's advice – '"all you have to do is cut off the light"' (271). The phrase is repeated as the final line of the novel. The repetition divorces the phrase from its original context in space and time and endows it with figurative, metaphorical content, in the same way that the book's title phrase functions. The phrase illustrates how Ella Ruth uses her mother's advice to help her in life. The moth functions as metaphor for Ella Ruth, liberated from the patriarchal narratives that contain her. This solves the dilemma of the empty pack because the act of heeding her mother constitutes a transmission of power from mother to daughter. Also, the act of freeing the moth functions to describe Ella Ruth's final act of unpacking the story box. The contents of the story box are redistributed in space, moving from inside the box to outside, entering into the dark world from which they have previously been excluded. The conclusion of Ella Ruth's story sets up the conditions for its existence, the release of the narratives which Ella Ruth saves and which save her – Ella Ruth can claim, 'I don't fear the dark' (270). This conclusion, contrary to Quammen's reading, is miraculous and retroactive if not altogether shapely. It explains the complex construction of the novel, a novel which shows how all Ella Ruth's past and present selves coexist on the same plane, collapsing boundaries of space and time and any idea of a linear and easily-plotted developmental pattern. Again, the close ties of past to present suggest that Ella Ruth does not take leave of her adolescence.

The narrator and adolescent protagonist of Thulani Davis's first novel, *1959*, is Katherine Tarrant, called Willie, an African-American girl who grows up in the town of Turner, Virginia. It is a year which sees important changes for Willie and for her town. Michiko Kakutani says that the novel 'is not merely the story of one girl's loss of innocence; rather, it is the story of an entire community's coming of age.'[60] This suggests

[60] Michiko Kakutani, "Growing Up as Colored Becomes Negro, Then Black," rev. of *1959*, by Thulani Davis, *New York Times* (Word and Image) 11 Feb. 1992: C15.

that Willie and her town both go through adolescence. This is because it is in 1959 that the notion of school integration becomes a distinct possibility, enabled by the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling which outlawed school segregation. This anticipated event affects all members of the community. 1959 is also the year in which Willie turns twelve in Turner. Willie's father tells her that 'they used to say twelve was the age of reason' (8), and to mark the occasion Willie has her braids cut off and starts to wear flats. It is also on her birthday that she is allowed to go on her first date. These events signal some of the most important articles of baggage – appearance, identity production, sexuality, and relations with others – which Willie will have to figure out in her adolescence and which link Willie to the other adolescent girls discussed so far.

The novel begins with a short section which functions as a kind of preface, with Willie providing introductory comments which explain how she wants her narrative to be read and the purposes she wishes it to serve:

> The way I hear it, when nomads move on from one of their weathered, disassembled villages, the animals often return to forage where there was once food, and to curl up on the hot barren land right where they once slept in the sun outside the dwelling of a human being. A child of such a line once described to me how these nomads talk to each other over the long stretches of savannah now turned to desert, how they can make themselves heard by means you would call supernormal. My tribe never practiced any magic arts, but storytellers all, they cling very close to my ear and tell softly what I have forgotten or have never known. (3)

It is Willie's position as listener, a role that she plays in her adolescence, which enables her to turn into narrator, telling the story of her listening. It is unclear where and when Willie narrates, although the reference in the final pages of her narrative to the Civil Rights Act would place her time of narration no earlier than 1969. The description of the nomads – dispossessed, moving on – function to metaphorically represent Willie and the scattered community to which she belongs, and which has now been turned out of Turner, as 'the African heart of the town' has been razed. That scattered community also partially illustrates Homi Bhabha's definition of metaphor:

> The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor. Metaphor, as the etymology of the word suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging, across the 'middle passage', or the central European steppes, across those distances, and cultural differences, that span the imagined community of the nation-people.[61]

Willie and the members of her scattered community dramatise the transferring of home and belonging which metaphor enables. However, Bhabha's conception of 'the nation' is too general and abstract. It is doubtful whether America, the nation in which Willie must forge an identity, fills any void for Willie and her people, as racism in the United States is responsible for the destruction of the African part of Turner and for the discrimination which will not grant Willie and her community a sense of belonging and equality. The place where Willie grows up no longer exists in fact, only in her fiction, which undertakes to preserve that community in the language of metaphor. Her 'tribe'– family ancestry and local community – aid Willie in her act of preserving, so that Willie functions as one of what Bhabha suggests might be 'a tribe of interpreters of such metaphors – the translators of the dissemination of texts and discourses across cultures.'[62] Willie's task in narrating is to make both herself and her community known to others. In order to do so, her narrative both re-creates and returns to what bell hooks describes as a 'homeplace', a particularly female construction:

> Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world.[63]

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[61] Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," *Nation and Narration*, ed. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990) 291.

[62] Ibid., 293.

[63] bell hooks, "Homeplace - A Site of Resistance," *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990; London: Turnaround, 1991) 42.

Adolescence, like Turner, constitutes the homeplace where Willie learns the power of listening. Her narrative creation of homeplace also allows her to narrate her own growth to power. hooks argues that a 'commitment to homeplace' will make possible the ability to 'address the needs and concerns of young black women who are groping for structures of meaning that will further their growth, young women who are struggling for self-definition.'[64]

Willie's twelfth birthday coincides with the death of Billie Holiday. The onset of Willie's adolescence heralds the death of one powerful female voice and the birth of another. However, the central irony and paradox of *1959* is that the adolescent Willie's voice is barely audible in her story, a fact all the more striking because of her older narrating voice. In a related point, Jones suggests that '*1959* exhibits the tension typical of the coming-of-age novel, the tension between the dreams of youth and the restrictions of maturity',[65] but this is to ignore the unusual nature of Willie's tale of adolescence, as this discussion of her narrative voice suggests. Willie's 'supernormal' powers of narration are rendered even more miraculous when considering that Willie herself, as adolescent, is at times not even present at events she later relates. Willie's adolescence consists of repeated turnings out – at a community picnic she is ejected both from the kitchen where the women are talking and from the room where the men are discussing integration, something which directly concerns her, showing that her age and gender disqualify her for inclusion (92, 99). Her father disputes the action of turning her out of the room but does not undo it. Faced with such impediments, Willie resorts to strategies such as climbing out of windows to listen on porch roofs, listening behind doors, and reading letters not addressed to her.

In one early scene (from which Willie is entirely absent, not even there as unacknowledged eavesdropper, so that her narrative voice assumes omniscient tones), her father's friend, Colman Boteler, tells his wife about a story a friend has written. It is hard not to perceive a likeness to Willie's position in her own narrative when he argues that '" [. . .] the white woman is just a device to let you see –"' (79). Narrating,Willie

[64] Ibid., 48.

[65] Jones, *Race Mixing*, 40.

functions as a 'device' to allow her community to be seen, something which serves to render her adolescent self less visible. The trouble is that Willie, as adolescent, is often not present to see and hear – when she is present, this is almost all she does, rarely actively intervening in events. Despite this, Willie does have an important role. Responding to her husband's interpretation of a fictional character as 'just a device', Lilian Boteler replies:

> "A device! Since when was a white woman ever just a device! Honey, a white woman is a white woman. Once you put her in there it's no longer about the Negro, it's about the race question, the ways of white folks and all that." (79)

Lilian's argument suggests that some identities are more absolute than others – a white woman can only be a white woman. Lilian's perspective also claims this irreducibility as more powerful. This position – of being none other than what one is – embodies the power that comes from being visible and significant in a particular way, because not recognised as something else, something other. Lilian's perspective reflects the dominant cultural gaze of the patriarchal South in which she lives, in which white identity grants itself subject status while rendering all else as other. Willie's adolescent experience functions to allow her later to question the kind of absolutism and essentialism that the phrase 'a white woman is a white woman' suggests. Her adolescent experiences of seeing and hearing show conversely that she too can find power in being 'a device', which in Willie's case involves turning into something else beyond cultural prescriptions.

Willie says of her adolescent self that 'And as for me, there was just too much stuff I didn't know. I was always late on the pickup' (54). She spends much of her adolescence metaphorically picking up what others tell her, sometimes agreeing with it and sometimes not, always converting what she hears to her own purposes. It is her father, for example, who provides her with two lessons which she applies to her act of narration. When she is worried about making a speech in school, he tells her '"The essence of the arrangement is that you have something to say that the audience doesn't know. As long as you have faith in that premise, you go on"' (24). It is Willie's concern about her lack of knowledge which causes her to willingly take on the role of listener and

observer, equipping herself for a future role as narrator, making information known to a larger audience. However, her father also unwittingly provides her with another strategy vital to her act of narration -- listening to her father's stories about his dead sister, Fannie, Willie adds that 'and what he didn't tell I filled in for myself' (32). Willie has to imagine Fannie's transgressive trips to watch minstrel shows because her father does not enjoy 'trying to re-create old gags he'd never seen himself' (34). Imagining things which she has never seen is something which Willie must do, as the things she can see are strictly circumscribed by adults on the basis of her age and gender. Willie describes how she and her father 'parted on the story' of Fannie because her father cannot 'make sense' of Fannie:

> Then again, the old man never could figure out why what he called "a slightly different chemical makeup" made women inscrutable. In his world everything living was chemically similar to some other living thing, so it had to be understandable. His list of mysteries was pretty short, but women were on it. (127)

Her father's inability to 'make sense' of women forces Willie to rely on her imagination when thinking about female experience. She retains her father's preoccupation with likenesses while rejecting his idea that women are unknowable, like nothing else, not fitting into a meaningful world-view -- it is only 'his world', not hers.

Members of Willie's community pay special attention to Willie's family and Willie in particular, because her mother is dead and her father is presumed incapable of looking after his children, particularly his female child. Concern over Willie's proper female development is expressed by various people, and at age twelve Willie learns from her grandmother that her father considered giving her to another family to bring up. Willie is told that it would have happened for her '"own good"' (142), but the news leaves her feeling devalued and abandoned. Asking why her father did not try to give her brother to somebody, she is told '"He's a boy. Then too, he's older"' (146).

This difficult position of being at once both more and less important than others is made manifest by the fact that Willie's presence is always noted, even if it only causes others to erase that presence, seen in the way she is turned out of rooms and forbidden to see and hear certain things. Failing that, people fall silent. One man exhorts another to

"'Watch your mouth, there's a young lady in the room'" (176), as Willie sits in a salon, watching and listening to a group of men. Her presence in the community is powerful, causing others to monitor themselves and their language. However, that presence functions to ensure that Willie is denied knowledge, particularly about sexuality – her literalness is her greatest obstacle to enlightenment. She occupies an ambiguous place within her community, not quite inside or outside. It is this awkward position which causes Willie to imaginatively fill gaps. She respects neither the bounds of space (physical, geographical) and time, nor those set up by her community's conception of the roles of women and girls. However, her turn away from the literal and towards the figurative shows the continuing power of those bounds to fix and categorise, as it is an act she turns to because she is deprived agency in the world. It is Willie's concern with what is not told and how to tell it which provides a connection between her raced and gendered experiences. Within her community, she is denied inclusion because of her gender, but this causes her to embark on the work of metaphor in order to forge connections with her community and with the outside world – it enables her later to give voice to her community, to be its voice.

Willie's grades – she is a 'good tester' – and behaviour qualify her as one of six adolescents chosen for integration to a new school. Willie comments that

> Good testers, or good athletes, or good debaters belonged to the teachers, the whole school, were community property. If they wanted me to sit down and take tests like a school representative at a testing tournament, I would be doing it. [. . .] If a kid had a talent, they identified it and put it to use. There was no choice in the matter. If you wanted to be left alone, you had to be a bum or pretty crazy. (112)

The role which Willie is allocated by her community brings her into the centre of events, once more an object of scrutiny. The anticipated integration of students relates to Willie's work of metaphor in several ways. The physical act Willie would make of journeying across town to join another school means that she must bear and negotiate what David Simpson (in another context) calls 'the problems of integration and difference of which

[metaphor] is the stylistic correlative and vehicle.'[66] As a student chosen to integrate, Willie bears a huge metaphorical burden of representation. She explains how she tries to prevent her father from noticing her in their house:

> I knew if he saw me he would think of integration, remind me that I was representing the race, and ask me about my homework. Every time he saw me it was as if I were wearing a sign on my head that said PROGRESS or FORWARD THE RACE. He had started acting as if the integration might happen and wondering aloud was I going to be able to kick butt when they sent me over there, because everybody was sure going to be trying to kick mine. Homework was no longer homework, it was the race struggle, the French teacher who once told him "Negras' " lips were too big. Homework was his old man, who'd said Negroes had to be *better*. (205)

As Willie's words suggest, the act of integration causes her to metaphorically represent her community and her race. In the act of joining a white community, Willie and the other adolescents who integrate will metaphorically represent future race relations in the South and in America. The weight of representation she bears collapses under the strain, collapsing with it all differences and identities, rendering everything in her community the same – everything is about integration. The proposed act of integration calls into question all acts of seeing and evaluating. The community must decide what criteria should govern the selection of the adolescents who integrate, and argue over the class bias of some of its members; Willie's father worries that integration into the white world will force Willie to see that others think "'that she's supposed to be dirt'" (99). Willie explains how the situation makes it 'necessary for the first time for me to imagine myself as a lot of other people – all the kids in my school, all the colored kids my age in the state' (198). Again, this task equips her for her later narrative act. In class, Willie, her friends and teacher watch the white adults who work for the education board watching them, to see if they are good enough to integrate. It is this role – one who facilitates connection, and who bears burdens of representation – that Willie later converts into narrative power.

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[66] David Simpson, "Destiny Made Manifest: The Styles of Whitman's Poetry," *Nation and Narration*, 191.

It is in class that Willie picks up another extended metaphor which proves important in her adolescent life and her narrative – that of war, with its associated tropes of fight, struggle and survival. Her teacher, Mrs. Taliaferro, explains to the class how '"If you want to use the language well, it helps to know how to break it down, take it apart. It's the same as when a young man goes into the army and learns how to use a weapon. First he must learn how to take it apart and put it back together"' (119). Willie recalls how 'She made funny sentences about language and weapons and soldiers and students, mixing up the subject of one sentence with the predicate of another. [. . .] Like many other things she said, the crazy sentences stayed with us like posthypnotic suggestions' (120). As with her father's ideas, Willie picks up the technique of metaphor-making from her teacher, carrying it further for her purposes of narration. In her recalled description of her classroom she says that 'The new situation had an ugly edge to it. The watchers never smiled. Everything we did now was driven by an enemy. We were on some scary red alert all day, as if the watchers might call in an air raid' (120). After she delivers her talk in class each morning, she analyses her performance, 'hunting for missteps, listening for the bombs until I assured myself it had been okay' (121). A class becomes particularly incendiary when Mrs. Taliaferro teaches about the Civil War and the racial and class discriminations set in place in laws which protect the interests of a landowning white male elite. It is only at the end of the recalled class discussion that Willie mentions the presence of the white people who are watching the class. Their subsequent anger is because the subject matter of the lesson '"has not been authorised by anyone"' (150). This delayed acknowledgement of the watchers forces a doubled vision of the events which have just been recounted, refiguring the classroom as an overtly politicised space. The class and its consequences raise Willie's awareness of plural and competing versions of history, as well as the power interests involved in the authorising of some narratives as official and correct, and others as wrong and '"unpatriotic"' (150). In telling her narrative of adolescence, Willie authors and authorises her own history, one which is also that of her dis-integrated town, a story which she admits is 'hard to prove' (296).

Integration never becomes more than an imagined possibility in this novel, as it never happens in Willie's adolescence. Her narrative comprises the highly difficult task

of preserving a part of town that is no longer there and describing a momentous event which does not happen. The proposed integration does, however, galvanise the local community into action. Events come to a head in 1960 when eight male students at Turner College stage a sit-in in Woolworth's, an event presumably based on the sit-ins which took place that year in Greensboro, North Carolina. Willie's narration of this event dramatises her 'supernormal' powers of narration. Willie recalls that when the event happens '[. . .] I didn't know anything about it. No one did' (197). Her narrative immediately proceeds to describe the scene inside Woolworth's and to describe the thoughts of the student protesters. The narrative then shifts to Willie's explanation that at the time of the sit-in she was sitting in her classroom, thinking about how

> I was a twelve-year-old black girl in a small southern town who thought the world was out somewhere beyond the last houses. You went out there to see how it was, and how it was reinvented you. How it was, though, was getting used to the idea that white people couldn't decide if my friends and I were good enough to sit next to their kids. After six months of watching them watch me, I was tired of white folks I didn't even know and had lost my curiosity about who they were. I had incorporated the white school across town into my imaginary life side by side with my comic books, TV shows, a new boy who had visited church, the need to have a pair of red flats, and the snow that too rarely fell on Turner. (199)

Willie engages in an act of reappraisal and evaluation which sits the integration question alongside the other items of importance in her adolescent life, an act which renders integration equally as important as her other interests, not subsuming those interests. Her act of figuring out her adolescent life constitutes a personal sit-in, one in which she (unlike everyone else) refuses to allow the integration to define her. This happens as another sit-in is taking place across town, metaphorically linking Willie and the student protesters. This dramatises how the sit-in functions for the African-American student protesters as a literal illustration of equality. However, the adolescent Willie's thoughts are attributed to her by the older Willie who narrates and who does know about the sit-in of which her adolescent self is ignorant. Willie hears about the sit-in from her father 'over dinner, acted out minute by minute' (204). In school the sit-in is discussed the next day. Mrs. Taliaferro informs her students about an event not reported in the newspapers, again

raising the question of why some things are told and some untold. Willie's father also tries to educate her about the importance of the sit-in:

> "It's a protest. I don't see how it could work just by itself, but it's very clever. It's like a metaphor that anyone can see. Just sitting there at that counter."
>
> "A metaphor, Dad?'
>
> The old man reacted to life as if it were literature, as if it had to be retold. To him, this scene he had not seen was an image that explained everything that took too long to explain. "It's like a picture of you sitting in class across town when you can't go over there and see it for yourself. What it means. Just by sitting there they let you see with your eyes a picture of something that is supposed to be impossible. They let you see how stupid the law is. A law that doesn't make any sense. As long as nobody really looks at the law, we go along. Those fool kids didn't bother about going to court and arguing the law and all that, they just went over there and sat down and everybody could see it."
>
> "But we didn't see it, and it wasn't on TV," I said, somewhat dejected to have missed this picture that had gotten him so excited.
>
> "That's not really that important." (208-209)

The confusions in Willie's father's explanation lies in the fact that he uses 'see' both to mean the visual act of looking, and as a metaphor for 'understanding' or 'interpreting'. This is illustrated by his 'see with your eyes', a phrase otherwise needlessly obvious. Willie uses 'see' only in the sense of looking, which is why she is puzzled by her father's convoluted explanation. Her father's description of the sit-in as 'a metaphor anyone can see' testifies to the visual and interpretive function that metaphor serves – perceiving likeness between two entities and rendering that likeness linguistically. As with so much else in this novel, Willie picks up what her father tells her and turns it to her own use when recounting the events, giving herself a role which is integral to the sit-in and suggesting its relevance to her own life. Taking on the suggestion that it is not important that she does not see something happening, her later narrative engages in acts of seeing and interpreting the unseen – of the students in the sit-in, of a local boy who becomes a soldier in Southeast Asia in a place where there is 'no perimeter' (295), of the thoughts of various members of her community, including her father, brother and grandmother, of her own adolescent self.

Willie's narrative concludes by relating the destruction of 'the black part of town' (297), something which she perceives as a punishment meted out to her community for their increased protests against racial injustice, such as their boycotting of shops owned by white people. Willie says that 'We all moved to pockets of black homes tucked here and there, or to the next town, or, like me, kept moving like nomads, scattered to the invisible perimeter' (297). Willie's use of the word 'perimeter' enlists the narrative metaphor of war once more, explicitly linking herself with the soldier, a comparison borne out by the fact that she grows up to take part in civil rights protests. She gives one final anecdote about herself. Sitting in a holding cell with a man who later dies, Willie recounts how the man told her 'if he was free he would just sit under a tree. But it would be a different tree than anyone before him had sat under when sitting under a tree.' Willie recounts how his death affects her:

> When you are one of the survivors you desire to get the tree over with so you can set the stories free from your own body. I have to sit under his tree. That job does not pass on. It belongs to the last of the line. (297)

Willie retains the roles of her adolescence – watcher, listener, recording and preserving the stories of others. Her activity in the civil rights movement continues the work she would have done had she been one of the students to integrate, working towards creating America as homeplace, a place in which she can belong as an equal, somewhere to fill the void left by the destruction of the African part of Turner. However, she is punished for her actions, kept in a holding cell, subject to surveillance. This incident also shows that Willie regards her act of telling the stories of others not simply as a privilege but also as punishment. She wants to 'get the tree over with', to be done with preserving and living out the ideals of others – 'I have to sit under his tree.' This will enable her to 'set the stories free' from her own body – her 'your' works to displace her and shows, perhaps, how she feels this is not something she can achieve soon. Willie is contained and burdened by the narratives of others – the stories themselves are burdens. She is uncontainable in narrative, seen (and not seen) in her ambiguous position within her own story. In effect, she illustrates the metaphorical quality of adolescence. Her narrative concludes:

> There are a lot of little things that don't mean anything much, but you notice them. I've never been in the public library in Turner, Virginia. I did swim in the water reserved for whites on Turner's beach [. . .]. I've never eaten lunch at a Woolworth's counter. It just turned out that way. (297)

None of these events – some happened, some did not – are narrated within Willie's account of her own adolescence. 'It just turned out that way' suggests a certain lack of power and agency. Things simply happen, she just happens to be there (or not). 'Turning out' is the central trope of Willie's adolescence. It encapsulates the community desire that she not be present at certain events, seen in her repeated exclusion from gatherings. It also represents the importance of her visibility, particularly as it relates to her individual female development. The community worries how she will turn out, how her identity will be externally produced. However, 'turning out' is a trope of power. 'Turning out' represents the liberating gesture of setting the stories free from her body, an act Willie achieves, paradoxically, in her act of narrating. Her act of narration, like her adolescence, is one of unpacking, deciding what to select and reject in her construction of self and community. It is useful to conceive of narrative unpackings as turnings out which reconfigure people, events, objects in space. This is something which metaphor enables in its turn away from the 'literal', that which appears to be known. That metaphorical work of turning away constitutes a gesture Willie must make in order to tell what she has not known and seen, making her adolescence almost entirely figurative.

> But what I felt for Wayne was not love. What I felt for Wayne was what you feel towards Huck Finn. A kind of affection, because he is so good and American. But when you read that book, if you a girl, you say to yourself *this kid has a long way to go*. He is so happy with his Jim, and his raft, and his old river. The light never dawns on him. Boys have that extended phase of innocence. I do not think girls have it at all. Imagine Becky Thatcher writing that book and you have an altogether different concept. You have something dark. (*RIL*, 146)

To return to Lucille's speculation: What is this 'something dark', the female adolescent voice and the story she tells? Saying that Huck's innocence causes him to fail to 'see the light', Lucille portrays innocence as a state of being in the dark. Unspecified and unknown, the story of female adolescence is also in the dark. But it is not the same dark. Huck's is the dark of innocence and the female adolescent story exists in the dark of its knowledge – the kind of dark which Ella Ruth and her narratives are thrust into when her mother urges her to cut off the light. Like so much in the narratives of these five adolescent girls, Lucille's insights and confusions are founded upon the metaphorical content of her words and the complex constructions of likeness and difference which they provide. Underpinning all her thoughts are conventional relations between seeing as perception, knowledge and understanding (being in the light), with the inability to see signaling lack of these qualities. Lucille sets up equations between light and knowledge, innocence and darkness in her interpretation of Huck's story, and between darkness and knowledge in her story of the female adolescent. In so doing, she performs her work of metaphor – the acts of investment and transfer which allow her to interpret her world and herself in it. In *Ferris Beach*, Kate explains how

> My father [. . .] handed me a piece of paper and pen. "Hey, you'll like this one," he said. "Multiply your age by seven and multiply that by 1443." He sat looking over my shoulder as I scribbled along, finally getting an answer of 131313. "Works every time," he said as I stared at the repetition of the bad-luck age. "You can count on this to work every year of your life." (77-78)

Though her father's puzzle does not give Kate anything useful to count on, this moment illustrates how for these girls, adolescence requires figuring (turning) out. When Willie notes that 'Homework was no longer homework, it was the race question' (*1959*, 205), she indicates how this act of figuring out is a kind of homework, a solving of the puzzle set by the fact of existence: finding reasons for that existence and finding means of belonging in the world, a working out of what home is. It is a puzzle shared by all five girls, but the answers each finds are very different. Doing the work of metaphor, forging connections and identities based on ideas of likeness and difference, these girls tell the story of their adolescence in efforts to solve that puzzle.

In each case it is the act of narration, of telling the story, which in itself constitutes the answer. This points directly to the conundrum expressed in McCorkle's essay, the conundrum that is adolescence itself. When McCorkle outlines her A-B-C model of the progression from childhood to adulthood, with adolescence represented by point B, it is clear that she perceives herself writing from point C – what she defines as adulthood, the place of unpacking. This position undoes her model, as it is only from point C that she can define A and B. The progression is not, therefore, one of A-B-C because B (adolescence) is not recognised as such when it is passed through. It is not until McCorkle is an adult that she narrates and analyses her adolescence. Here is the conundrum: is adolescence in the impossible position of being never recognised as such at the moment it exists? It may be that the concept of adolescence is always defined and narrated from a place and perspective other to itself. Catherine Driscoll claims that 'Adolescence is a retrospective construction of individual subjectification grounded in a dominant analogy between women and adolescents'.[67] Approaching adolescence from the perspective of cultural theory, Driscoll makes this claim of adolescence as 'retrospective' after demonstrating that many critics use the category of 'adolescence' to apply to individuals not living in a historical moment in which adolescence is acknowledged as a distinct developmental stage. As one of many examples of such an instance of labeling, she cites Mary Pipher's work on female adolescence. Pipher's study is entitled *Reviving Ophelia*, implying that Shakespeare's Ophelia can be read as adolescent.[68] Although Driscoll's formulation is accurate, the subsequent chapters of this thesis will illustrate that it is more productive to think of adolescence as narrated from a place and perspective other to itself, as this allows for the possibility that constructions of adolescence need not necessarily be retrospective (although, admittedly, they often are). In addition, this new formulation provides a better understanding of what is entailed in both theoretical constructions of adolescence and fictional narratives of individuals who undergo experiences or exhibit behaviour which could be called 'adolescent'.

If adolescence is always narrated from a place and perspective other to itself, then this would account for the fact that these female narrators either refrain from or

[67] Driscoll, 54.

[68] Ibid., 25.

experience difficulty defining their narrated selves as adolescent. It is not simply because this risks incorporating them within dominant discourses on the topic, discourses which render them 'like' when they want to be 'unlike'. Labelling their narrated selves 'adolescent' would also imply that the narrators are *not* adolescent, and would allow a distinction to be made between the self narrating and the self narrated. This is a distinction which none of these narrators, except Lucille, wants to be made, as it would confirm the clear cut distinctions between childhood, adolescence and adulthood in McCorkle's A-B-C model. It is not even that these girls (again, apart from Lucille) want the distinctions *not* to be made; each engages with and recognises herself within aspects of dominant discourses of adolescence, seen most obviously in the fact that all five narrators tell of struggles to formulate a conception of self. It is just that distinctions should not be unproblematically assumed. As Lucille says, this would not tell her whole story. But a tentative suggestion can be made. Each narrator tells a story of error and correction, revisionings of self and world. If these narrators observe the dominant model of adolescence which posits that adolescence is a separate stage from adolescence and must be left behind in order to assume adulthood, then their narratives of correction and revisioning mark the end of adolescence and position the narrators as adult, as Lucille's narrative does (though readers do not have to agree with her). No other narrator observes this model, so that they question whether adolescence is ever left behind.

This quality of being narrated from a place and perspective other to itself affirms McCorkle's metaphors of luggage. If adolescence is understood in this way then it *is* carried as other, rendered external to the narrating self. This is illustrated best in *Ferris Beach*, where Kitty's internal monologue troubles distinctions between narrated and narrating selves, and is dramatised in the episode where she imagines offering answers to her adolescent self on the porch. Ironically, it is Kate's internal monologue which most challenges the A-B-C model in the essay which accompanies the novel in which she features, because it is impossible to tell her age and the place and time of her act of narration. These narratives constitute figurings and turnings *out*, as it is the act of narrating which renders their adolescence something else, different, other. This can even mean that the narrators figure themselves right out of their narratives. Willie shows this, her act of telling made possible by her adolescence, and yet she tells of an adolescence in

which she often does not figure. These narrators, existing in and narrating from the inbetween space they figure out for themselves in adolescence, are telling their stories primarily to themselves, wanting to be those who address and those who are addressed. They are and are not adolescent, like-unlike.

The most intriguing factor in Lucille's description of the story of female adolescence is that she claims it would be something written – but not yet written. The most important bond of sameness which these narrators share is that not one claims the status of written text for their narrative – none of them write their stories. Lucille describes how she tries to obey her mother's advice that she '"Remember everything"':

> I did memory exercises such as "I went to my grandmother's house and I took with me an aardvark; I went to my grandmother's house and I took with me an aardvark and a buttonhook; I went to my grandmother's house and I took with me an aardvark, a buttonhook, and a communist," etc. I also kept a diary in order to record my events in case the brain cells failed to do so. What good is a life if you can't remember its milestones and themes? That is the aim of history, to *get it down on paper*, to be the official human memory. (52)

Lucile's memory exercise enlists the motifs of the journey and of being burdened with baggage, just as McCorkle's essay does. Although Lucille notes the importance of recording details on paper, these girls know that any official narratives are likely to exclude and erase experiences of particular individuals in order to serve distinctly political ends, illustrated by the uproar over Willie's teacher's decision to teach what is not in the textbooks. These adolescent girls suffer from being excluded from the canonical narratives of the South; they are all marginalised in different ways. Refusing to commit their stories to paper allows these adolescent girls to ensure that their stories are not appropriated by others, subsumed in and part of the 'network of writing' which Foucault describes as working to 'capture and fix' individuals. It allows them to avoid being seen as 'the official human memory', speaking for others. They speak primarily for themselves. There are obvious disadvantages to this. The preservation of Anne Frank's diary, for example, stands as testimony to her existence, which would otherwise be unknown. All of these narrators insist on the importance of telling their stories, of passing them on, but Lucille's Phoebe is the only specific audience for any of these narratives.

The question of audience is something these girls struggle with -- it is unclear to whom they are talking, who wants to hear. This problem is compounded by the fact that their narratives *are* texts. Metaphor, of course, allows one thing to be passed off as another, the qualities of one thing to be passed to another, so it may be that the most important and complex metaphorical act these narratives achieve is passing off the written as spoken (sometimes the printed text of the novel is passed off as spoken narrative) and the spoken as written (a spoken narrative is passed off as written when it is recorded in a novel).

Although the narratives of these five female adolescents illustrate points which apply to all first-person fictions of adolescence in American literature, they also offer specifically female and Southern perspectives on the subject, as these girls carry articles of baggage related to their gender and Southernness. In *Ferris Beach*, Kate contemplates the windows in her bedroom:

> My mother took great pride in the distortion of some of our windows; it meant they were the originals with all their impurities, the waves and tiny pinhead bubbles signs of imperfection. [. . .] It puzzled me, the differences made in the perfect and the imperfect, how a flawed coin or piece of glass becomes more valuable. I felt the window with my fingertips, still intrigued by my dad's explanation of how glass is a liquid and how over the years it runs, slowly, a movement hidden from sight or touch. (89)

Kate's focus on the windows highlights some of the central preoccupations shared by these five girls in adolescence and beyond – the concern with what is seen and unseen, with history, origins, home and family, with storytelling and its power to preserve. These are concerns which are labeled again and again as particularly Southern, and as particularly important to Southern women writers. Not only this, but the conundrum of narrating adolescence, as dramatised in the porch scene in *Ferris Beach*, is echoed in narrations of the South itself. Articulation of Southern identity (perhaps any identity) is also dependent upon a complex negotiation of like-unlikeness dependent upon validation from some 'other' place, as Gray's comments illustrate. More than this, though; contemporary representations of the South often involve what Elinor Ann Walker, in the first full length (though unpublished) study of McCorkle and Humphreys's fiction, correctly identifies as 'signifying (both as [Walker] Percy and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

define "signify") on established conventions of this regional language'.[69] Frustratingly, Walker introduces this idea only in the epilogue of her thesis and does not elaborate on it sufficiently. McCorkle's porch scene is emblematic of the fact that each act of narration discussed here constitutes an act of Signifyin(g) not only on the South but on adolescence, Signifyin(g) defined by Gates as 'repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference.'[70] Discussing African-American literature, though asserting that 'all texts Signify on other texts', Gates's explanation of Signifyin(g) finds a correlation in the narrative strategies of these Southern narrators and their authors.[71] To treat the familiar 'Southern' theme of family differently, for example, as Bennett argues these female writers do, involves just such a gesture of repetition with a difference. Signifyin(g), Gates argues, functions

> not to reinvent our traditions as if they bore no relation to that tradition created and borne, in the main, by white men. Our writers used that impressive tradition to define themselves, both with and against their concept of received order. We must do the same, with or against the Western critical canon. To name our tradition is to name each of its antecedents, no matter how pale they might seem. To rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify.[72]

A preoccupation with narrating relations between self and world links these girls to Huck and his story, but their figurings make them unlike him. The concern with likeness and difference exhibited by the narrators of these texts locates them within a distinctively Southern tradition. However, the work of metaphor performed by these female adolescents shows how they seek to resist and modify that tradition by Signifyin(g) on the South. Their new and highly individual constructions of likeness and difference function to allow them to engage in acts of unpacking (in Gray's and McCorkle's senses

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[69] Elinor Ann Walker, "Redefining Southern Fiction: Josephine Humphreys and Jill McCorkle," diss., U of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1994, 181.

[70] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) Preface, xxiv.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid., xxiii.

of self-fashioning), creating and telling of reconfigured Souths. For these female adolescents, the Signifyin(g) achieved by acts of metaphorical unpacking is affirmative and empowering, seen in the way in which these narrators affirm Lucille's sense of 'something dark'. Both Lucille and Ella Ruth signify on the term 'dark' so that the term is given more positive connotations. Huck lights out into the territory at the end of his narrative, into the blank space of his innocence – an innocence that is light in both senses. He chooses to reject a society which, on the basis of his gender and race, would willingly incorporate him in adulthood. By contrast, these girls work to forge connections with a society which may not value them. They seek ways to overcome the dominant narratives – of being adolescent and female in the South – which attempt to contain (by excluding) them. They insist on their literalness, without being confined by it, in order to reconfigure a South which can be figured (out) in infinite ways. They unpack because they intend to stay, and they do not travel light.

Chapter Two. The Fly, the Earthworm, the Bottle and the Bell Jar: Female Adolescents as Philosophers and Revolutionaries in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Joyce Carol Oates's *I'll Take You There*, Toni Cade Bambara's "Sweet Town" and Alice Hoffman's *Property Of.*

> I grasped the bundle I carried and pulled at a pale tail. A strapless elasticized slip which, in the course of wear, had lost its elasticity, slumped into my hand. I waved it, like a flag of truce, once, twice . . . The breeze caught it, and I let go.
>
> A white flake floated out into the night, and began its slow descent. I wondered on what street or rooftop it would come to rest.
>
> I tugged at the bundle again.
>
> The wind made an effort, but failed, and a batlike shadow sank towards the roof garden of the penthouse opposite.
>
> Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the grey scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York.
>
> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963; London: Faber, 1966) 107.

> Aged eighteen I'd left home, Strykersville, New York, with no idea of who I was or who I might be; knowing only who I was not, and did not wish to be: all that, until that time, I'd known. At Syracuse, I haphazardly cobbled together a personality out of scraps; like my grandmother's quilts made of mismatched scraps of cloth. You don't inquire into the origin of scraps but only of the shrewd use of which they are made.
>
> Joyce Carol Oates, *I'll Take You There* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003) 128.

> My so-called personality had always been a costume I put on fumblingly, and removed with vague, perplexed fingers; it shifted depending upon circumstances, like unfastened cargo in the hold of a ship. (*ITYT*, 129)

In the first passage above, Esther Greenwood, protagonist and narrator of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, dramatises her rejection of the self she has constructed during her 1953 summer placement with a ladies' magazine in New York. She dramatises that rejection in a metaphorical act, scattering her clothes over the city on her final night there. In the second passage, the anonymous narrator of Joyce Carol Oates's *I'll Take You There* speculates on the process of constructing identity by enlisting a complex assortment of metaphors. The process of constructing identity is like patching together a quilt from

scraps; later, that constructed identity is like a costume (Esther's actions indicate that she shares this thought); then like a ship's cargo. For both Oates's narrator and Esther, self-construction involves the kinds of selection and rejection which Jill McCorkle outlines in her figurings of adolescence as a time of carrying and unpacking articles of baggage. Oates's narrator moves from the assertive act of agency involved in constructing the self to admitting her lack of control over both process and end result, as her sense of self 'shifts' depending on external circumstances which she cannot control. Both *The Bell Jar* and *I'll Take You There* are extended meditations concerning their narrators' attempts to construct and negotiate identity in the very different America each inhabits. Whereas the main action in Esther's story occurs in 1953, the action in Oates's novel focuses largely on 1963 and then is carried forward to 1965. However, the novels share important similarities. Both girls tell stories about their experiences at age nineteen, at university. Their shared preoccupation with identity finds its locus in the stage of adolescence and a narrative of maturation, with both narrators narrating from an unspecified point in their futures in order to engage retrospectively with their adolescent experiences.

Of the two writers, Oates has written extensively about her artistic project. Her writing career spans some forty years and constitutes a significant body of prose, poetry, plays and essays (*I'll Take You There* is her thirtieth novel), whereas Plath's much briefer career ended with her death in 1963, the same year in which her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, was published pseudonymously in Britain. Even the most cursory examination of Oates's fiction, as well as her literary criticism about her own work and that of other writers, reveals that adolescence is central to her artistic project. The preoccupation with adolescence in Oates's fiction has been noted by several critics. Linda Wagner-Martin suggests that Oates writes often about 'teenagers' because the plots of her works are often based on 'the search for love', though she immediately adds that Oates's characters of all ages are preoccupied with 'idealized romance', something which hardly goes towards addressing the topic of adolescence and its particular importance.[1] Eileen Teper Bender notes similarly that adolescents 'figure centrally in much of Oates's fiction', and accounts

[1] Linda Wagner-Martin, "Joyce Carol Oates: The Changing Shape of her Realities," introduction, *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates*, ed. Wagner (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1979) xx.

for this by arguing that adolescents 'are literally between the categories, in perilous passage. [. . .] Protean, sensitive, on the margins of adulthood, they are striking representatives of the "lost" post-Vietnam generation. Oates's youthful characters mirror the contradictory aspirations of our culture and our time.'[2] Bender's generalised account does not engage in detail with specific adolescent characters and does not consider the fact that Oates has portrayed adolescent characters in fiction throughout her entire career – that is, pre- as well as post-Vietnam. To give one more example, Greg Johnson argues that Oates enlists adolescents as one of several 'representative "types"' that recur frequently in her work as a means of recording 'distinctive facets of the turbulent American experience.' Johnson argues that these adolescents are 'essentially innocent, romantic souls whose fantasies and ideals collide with the environment and with the imperatives of their own maturity.'[3] Once more, this generalised explanation does not consider Oates's treatment of adolescence in sufficient detail.

One of the reasons why critics have tended to offer superficial accounts of Oates's preoccupation with adolescence might be because, as the comments above show, critics look largely at her adolescent characters and not at the ways in which Oates uses the concept of adolescence in her critical work. Oates has not written at length about adolescence in any single essay, although adolescence is discussed in many. To consider Oates's treatment of adolescence therefore necessitates a cobbling together of scraps from various essays and articles in which Oates invokes adolescence as important to her work. That work concerns itself with the themes which Oates addresses repeatedly in her critical essays – the role of the writer, the writer's relation to society and culture (American society and culture in particular), and the question of what might constitute both national American identity and individual identity. Following the example of Oates's narrator, if 'cobbling' is the process by which an understanding of Oates's treatment of adolescence can be attained, then it is worthwhile to consider how that act of

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[2] Eileen Teper Bender, *Joyce Carol Oates, Artist in Residence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 120.

[3] Greg Johnson, *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987) 10.

cobbling might be put to use. An examination of what the term 'adolescence' is made to bear in Oates's critical work reveals crucial ambivalences and problems in her artistic project, which *I'll Take You There* illustrates. Although the date of publication of these essays covers a vast chronological range, from the 1970s to the 1990s, Oates enlists the concept of adolescence consistently throughout this time as a means of addressing the central concerns of her artistic project.

Oates's understanding of adolescence also informs her reading of Plath's work and artistic stance, and *I'll Take You There* can be read as a direct engagement with both. Conversely, the treatment of adolescence in *The Bell Jar*, together with a short story, "Sweet Town", from the African-American writer Toni Cade Bambara's first collection of stories, *Gorilla, My Love,* and Alice Hoffman's first novel, *Property Of,* functions in each case as a useful correlative or corrective to Oates's work and her understanding of the concept of adolescence.[4] All three texts (which, like Oates's novel, are first-person narratives of female adolescence) illustrate in different ways that Oates's theoretical ideas about adolescence exist in problematic relation to female experience and fail to consider the importance of the historical moment in which individuals experience and narrate adolescence. *The Bell Jar* describes the experience of a girl growing up in the postwar 1950s; Bambara's story explores the nationalism of the Black Power movement through the experiences of an African-American girl, while Hoffman's narrator learns to assert her selfhood in the 1970s. Finally, the tensions in Oates's construction of adolescence allow for a discussion of the metaphorical work which the term 'adolescence' is made to perform not only in her art and criticism but in the work of several literary critics, particularly with reference to American literature. This facilitates a more productive way of figuring and reading adolescence, demonstrated in readings of all four fictional texts.

Mary Kathryn Grant argues that Oates's artistic work constitutes an attempt to document the lives of Americans living in the middle of the twentieth century. Grant summarises American life as it appears in Oates's work as 'a confusion of love and money, categories of public and private, an urge to violence as the answer to all

[4] Joyce Carol Oates, *I'll Take You There* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003). Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963; London: Faber, 1966). Toni Cade Bambara, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972; London: Women's Press, 1984). Alice Hoffman, *Property Of* (1977; New York: Vintage, 2002).

problems, an urge to self-annhiliation, suicide – language is all we have to pit against death and silence.' For Grant, Oates's work is nonetheless marked by a belief in 'the power of narrative fiction to give coherence to experience and to bring about a change of heart', and also by a 'huge sense of the responsibility of the writer who, by raising the consciousness of the age, creates history and the future.'[5] All of these concerns and beliefs are to be found in an early essay in which Oates takes Plath's work as her central subject. The essay requires extensive quotation as it contains much of the framework within which Oates's thoughts on her art, on adolescence, and on what she perceives to be American culture are to be read.

In "The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath" Oates argues that Plath should be regarded as partaking in 'the concluding scenes in the fifth act of a tragedy, the first act of which began centuries ago.'[6] Elsewhere, in an introduction to a collection of her essays, Oates defines this 'art of tragedy' more precisely by claiming that it 'grows out of a break between self and community, a sense of isolation. At its base is fear.'[7] This definition of tragedy is expressed in Grant's summary of the circumstances in America which provide the material for Oates's work – circumstances which Grant believes Oates to be attempting to document and change. In the essay on Plath, Oates describes how this tragedy manifests itself in Plath's work:

> Let us assume that Sylvia Plath acted out in her poetry and in her private life the deathliness of an old consciousness, the old corrupting hell of the Renaissance ideal and its "I"-ness, separate and distinct from all other fields of consciousness, which exist only to be conquered or to inflict pain upon the "I." Where at one point in civilization this very masculine, combative ideal of an "I" set against all other "I's" – and against nature as well – was necessary in order to wrench man from the hermetic

[5] Mary Kathryn Grant, *The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978) 4.

[6] Joyce Carol Oates, "The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath," *New Heaven, New Earth* (New York, Vanguard Press, 1974). Rpt. in *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work,* ed. and introduction Edward Butscher (London: Peter Owen, 1979) 207.

[7] Joyce Carol Oates, "Forms of Tragic Literature," introduction, *The Edge of Impossibility: Tragic Forms in Literature* (1972; London: Victor Gollancz, 1976) 3.

> contemplation of a God-centered universe and prod him into action, it is no longer necessary, its health has become a pathology, and whoever clings to its outmoded concepts will die. If romanticism and its gradually accelerating hysteria are taken as the ultimate ends of a once-vital Renaissance ideal of subject/object antagonism, then Plath must be diagnosed as one of the last romantics; and already her poetry seems to us a poetry of the past, swiftly receding into history.[8]

Oates confines her attention mainly to Plath's poetry, but she does discuss *The Bell Jar*, arguing that Esther should be regarded as embodying the kind of combative "I" of which Oates so strongly disapproves. Oates describes Esther (and the combative "I") as follows:

> Absolute, dramatic boundaries are set up between the "I" and all others, and there is a peculiar refusal to distinguish between those who mean well, those who mean ill, and those who are neutral. Thus, one is shocked to discover in *The Bell Jar* that Esther, the intelligent young narrator, is as callous toward her mother as the psychiatrist is to her, and that she sets about an awkward seduction with the chilling prevision of a machine – hardly aware of the man involved, telling us very little about him as an existing human being. He does not really exist, he has no personality worth mentioning. Only Esther exists.[9]

Oates's central argument in this essay is that the kind of flawed self which Plath's work depicts is an adolescent and immature. It represents what should have been an adolescent crisis, in the sense that it should be easily solved and grown out of with the attainment of a more mature perspective, but instead that crisis is taken to terrifying extremes. However, even this single essay reveals that Oates's thoughts are ambivalent:

> The experience of reading [Plath's] poems deeply is a frightening one: it is like waking to discover one's adult self, grown to full height, crouched in some long-forgotten childhood hiding place, one's heart pounding senselessly, all the old rejected transparent beasts and monsters crawling out of the wallpaper. [. . .] So much for adulthood! Yet I cannot emphasize strongly enough how valuable the experience of reading Plath can be, for it is a kind of elegant "dreaming-back," a cathartic experience that not only cleanses us of our personal and cultural desires for regression, but explains by way of its deadly accuracy what was wrong with such desires.[10]

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[8] "The Death Throes of Romanticism," 210.

[9] Ibid., 222.

[10] Ibid., 214.

Oates wishes to portray Plath's work as representing some kind of cautionary tale for America. There are several tensions here. Plath's work is already consigned to 'history'; categorised as exhibiting an immature selfhood which is emblematic of that found in Western civilisation more broadly. Plath's work should nevertheless be revisited, suggesting that there is a certain value to (as Oates formulates it) the immature, adolescent self and crisis which Plath articulates. Even if it should be recalled only in order to be rejected, it is still worth recalling. This troubles the suggestion that it should be rejected at all, and that it belongs to 'history'. To read Plath's work as belonging to 'history', suggests that the selfhood which Oates believes her to be representative of has already progressed to become more mature, but this is not borne out in other comments Oates makes about adolescence. Discussing what she sees as the 'religious hysteria' endemic to America in the 1960s and 1970s, Oates argues:

> America is susceptible to such hysteria partly because it has a somewhat adolescent and unstable consciousness. It lacks social cohesion and an underlying cultural and religious tradition. We're not evil or wicked – just somewhat immature, as our overreaction to the Communist threat in Vietnam dramatized. We are a very young culture, after all, compared to other contemporary world cultures.[11]

So far, Oates has enlisted 'adolescent' both as a kind of synonym for what is 'immature' and as a metaphor for American national identity and for identity in Western civilisation, enlisting monolithic concepts of 'civilisation' and 'America' which are obviously problematic. Underpinning her thoughts is the assumption that the history and development of a nation and, in Oates's case, Western civilisation, finds an analogy in the growth and development of an individual. This tale of development constitutes a narrative of progress, as the narrative of development from childhood to adulthood is one of immaturity to maturity. The adolescent self is unreservedly condemned in the essay on Plath, even if it is important to recall (for the purposes of rejecting) that self; a complex act which will require further examination. However, Oates makes the term 'adolescence'

[11] "Author Joyce Carol Oates on 'Adolescent America,'" *US News and World Report* 15 May 1978: 60.

serve further ends, as her construction of adolescence is used to link both her definition of American culture and her conception of the artist's task. In "The Myth of the Isolated Artist" Oates claims that the common conception that the artist exists 'as totally separate from his culture, as other' is a myth which must be recognised as such and then rejected in favour of a more productive understanding of the relations between the individual and culture. Arguing that the tradition of separating the roles of the scientist and the artist (the scientist working in his world, the artist somehow separate from it) is partly responsible for the production of this myth, Oates states that 'I am saying not simply that every scientist is an artist but that *everyone* is an artist: he is involved in the effort of creating artifacts of one kind or another which, ultimately, add up to civilization.'[12] The main argument of the essay is that 'In surrendering one's isolation, one does not surrender his own uniqueness; he only surrenders his isolation.'[13] This is elaborated in the essay's conclusion:

> It is time for psychology to take very seriously the propositions advanced by all the great mystics – that the "self" is part of a larger reservoir of energy, call it any name you like. As long as the myth of separate and competitive "selves" endures, we will have a society obsessed with adolescent ideas of being superior, of conquering, of destroying. The pronoun "I" is as much a metaphor as "schizophrenia," and it has undergone the same "metaphor-into-myth" process. Creative work, like scientific work, should be greeted as a communal effort – an attempt by an individual to give voice to many voices, an attempt to synthesize and explore and analyze. All the books published under my name in the past 10 years have been formalized, complex propositions about the nature of personality and its relationship to a specific culture (contemporary America). The propositions are meant to be hypothetical and exploratory, inviting responses that are not simple, thalamic praise/abuse, but some demonstration that there is an audience that participates in the creation of art. Many myths must be exposed and relegated to the past, but the myth of the "isolated self" will be most difficult to destroy.[14]

Oates sets a challenge to what she perceives as old, anachronistic myths of an equally old and anachronistic isolated self which, because mythical, is immature and 'adolescent'.

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[12] Joyce Carol Oates, "The Myth of the Isolated Artist," *Psychology Today* (1973): 74.

[13] Ibid., 75.

[14] Ibid.

That term 'adolescent', with its connotations of construction of identity, is used to describe disparate constructions and perceptions of self and world which Oates labels 'Renaissance' and 'romantic' at various times. The narrative of maturation-as-progress once more underpins Oates's theory so that she conceives of the artist as a mature adult who, existing in a productive and clear-sighted relation to 'culture', tests out propositions about the relations of self and world. More tensions accumulate. Even as Oates suggests that her artistic thoughts are 'hypothetical', she argues that her conception of art and the role of the artist are to be recognised as literal truth, as correct. Her argument that 'I' and 'schizophrenia' are metaphors is puzzling, as Oates does not say what they are metaphors *for*. Rather, she equates the term 'metaphor' with the term 'myth', so that implicit in her argument is the suggestion that metaphor is aligned with what is untrue (the myth of isolated selves) and thus (according to Oates's logic) immature. Even as she calls for a rethinking about relations of self and world, Oates posits an ambiguously positioned worldview. At once ideal, something which should be striven towards and achieved in the future, the state of affairs which she hypothesises in fact already exists, only waiting to be belatedly acknowledged, seen in Oates's use of the present tense – as her phrase '*everyone* is an artist' indicates. This suggests that what is required is not any kind of overt social or political change but only a change of perception, which, effected in enough individuals, will presumably produce social change. But if the conditions already exist in which everyone is an artist, it is in an environment in which not everyone has equal membership or access to the resources which constitute Oates's monolithic 'culture', and in which not all the artifacts which add up to 'civilisation' are granted equal value. Finally, Oates's positing of the adolescent combative self as 'masculine' sits uncomfortably with her use of Plath and Esther, a female writer and fictional character, as exemplary of that self. It also sits uncomfortably with her universal 'we', which assumes commonality of experience transcending age, gender, class, and race, even as Oates describes a not-quite-extinct, or mythical selfhood which, being 'masculine', does not transcend these particulars. This serves as a useful reminder that what may purport to be universal may not be. Oates's theory may represent another myth.

Oates's thoughts so far reveal a privileging of adulthood over adolescence which is not illustrated in all comments she makes on the subject. Two of her most positive

comments about adolescence concern the role of the writer. Oates has written that 'In its earliest energies in the individual, art is likely to be expressive of adolescent rebellion, for the typical artist begins in adolescence, defining him- or herself against family, authority, a world of elders.' This too is given a distinctive American slant: 'The voice of rebellion runs through our classic American literature, which is on the whole a youthful, idiosyncratic, defiant voice.'[15] But Oates makes claims for the importance of adolescence which go far beyond this:

> As a young girl, I was fascinated by questions I did not know were archetypal philosophical questions – clichés of the intellect, one might call them. The night sky greatly interested me; the "Universe"; vast concepts of space, time; the mystery of human personality. Such questions, which even cosmologists falter in addressing, are most intense in us in early adolescence; afterward, we are supposed to grow up and forget them. Perhaps the writer – this writer, at least – is simply one who, so long as a question remains unanswered, cannot forget it, thus cannot repudiate the romance of adolescence.[16]

'We are supposed to grow up' marks the fundamental principle or cornerstone of Oates's critical thoughts. Oates has so far described this process of growing up as involving transformation of individual and national American selfhood, a selfhood Oates conflates with that in Western civilisation, together with a rethinking of the role of the artist. However, in the comment above, to 'grow up' involves *not* rejecting qualities which are figured 'adolescent' and which are here and elsewhere in Oates's work deemed essential for the creation of literature. Taken together, but dramatised most strikingly in this passage, Oates's comments on adolescence reveal a narrative which states that, ideally, individual development should entail acquisition of maturity. However, her thoughts betray confusion about what constitutes maturity and profound ambivalence, if not

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[15] Joyce Carol Oates, "Art and Ethics?: The (F)Utility of Art," *Where I've Been, And Where I'm Going: Essays, Reviews, and Prose*, by Oates (New York: Plume, 1999) 38. This essay originally appeared as a paper at a conference sponsored by *Salmagundi* and The New School, 1996, and was subsequently published in *Salmagundi*, 1996.

[16] Joyce Carol Oates, "Why Don't You Come Live with Me It's Time," *Where I've Been, And Where I'm Going: Essays, Reviews, and Prose*, 373. This essay originally appeared in *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards, 1992.*

skepticism, towards the notion that maturity is achieved by progression to adulthood. This is partly explained by the fact that Oates offers a model of maturity which differs from that which she believes to be sanctioned in America. Oates argues that in American society growing up involves forgetting curiosity about and engagement with mysteries in the wider world, something which Oates believes to be unproductive. Her ambivalence about growing into adulthood is illustrated most obviously by the fact that her essays figure adolescence as containing both negative and positive qualities (adolescence is figured as negative in the Plath essay, positive in the comment above). Oates's theoretical comments show that if the positive qualities of adolescence are not to be rejected, then adolescence cannot or should not be outgrown. The concept of 'adolescence' thus becomes the 'scrap' on which the coherence of Oates's theories of art, literature and America will hold together or fall apart. 'Adolescence', as critical concept, bears a vast amount of pressure. As the word is rarely used to describe the experience of young people who could normatively be called adolescent, Oates's 'adolescence' is figurative, in that it becomes a container for an array of narratives and themes pertaining to ideas of selfhood and maturity, which Oates labels either positively or negatively adolescent in various essays. This is reminiscent of the way G. Stanley Hall treats the concept of 'adolescence', as illustrated in the introduction to this thesis. With these ideas in mind, it is important to pay attention to the attitudes towards maturity in the tales of female adolescence, and about female maturation, which constitute *The Bell Jar* and *I'll Take You There*. An examination of these attitudes allows a more favourable reading of *The Bell Jar* than the one Oates offers. Oates's novel can be read as dramatising Oates's theories, and their tensions, in action.

Oates's greatest unfairness to Plath with reference to *The Bell Jar* is to categorise the kind of selfhood depicted in Plath's work as anachronistic – 'Renaissance' or 'romantic' – while disregarding the historical moment in which Esther Greenwood lives. Realigning Esther's story within this context allows a very different understanding of what Oates would castigate as Esther's adolescent (im)maturity. The opening of Esther's story shows the extent to which Oates's disregard of its immediate historical moment constitutes a serious misreading, as that opening foregrounds the historical, social and political moment in which Esther lives and testifies to its importance:

> It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers – goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.
>
> I thought it must be the worst thing in the world. (1)

Esther is nineteen in 1953 (the year of the execution of the Rosenbergs). It is a year in which, as her opening suggests, it is impossible for individuals to detach themselves from their present historical moment. The headlines are everywhere, it is impossible to ignore the execution. Esther grows up in American cold war containment culture, 'containment' described by Alan Nadel as a 'privileged American narrative' referring both to postwar foreign policy of the United States and also as a means of describing American life:

> [. . .] to the extent that corporate production and biological reproduction, military deployment and industrial technology, televised hearings and filmed teleplays, the cult of domesticity and the fetishizing of domestic security, the arms race and atoms for peace all contributed to the containment of communism, the disparate acts performed in the name of these practices joined the legible agenda of American history as aspects of containment culture.[17]

Esther's 'It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like', usefully illustrates Nadel's point that the American cold war is a 'particularly useful example of the power of large cultural narratives to unify, codify, and contain – perhaps *intimidate* is the best word – the personal narratives of its population.'[18] Esther's personal narrative is marked by profound ambivalence because it shows both the power of the narrative of containment to intimidate (particularly, in Esther's case, with regard to gender and age) and Esther's efforts to resist that intimidating power – her refusal to let herself be contained. Even as she says that the Rosenbergs have nothing to do with her,

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[17] Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) 3.

[18] Ibid., 4.

the prominence of the execution in her memory and in her narrative shows that her disclaimer should be examined and that the Rosenbergs may indeed have something to do with her. This point has been excellently demonstrated by Pat MacPherson, who sees a correlation between the denunciation of the Rosenbergs as, in MacPherson's terms, 'the enemy within' – other, un-American – and Esther's 'paranoid relationship to the repressive norms of the 1950s.'[19] MacPherson shows how Esther's insistence that she has nothing to do with the Rosenbergs betrays her own fear that she too, may be scapegoated, the electro-shock therapy which is supposed to 'cure' her finding a parallel in the fatal electrocution of the Rosenbergs. However, MacPherson does not address the full complexity and ambivalence of Esther's attitudes to the values of the society in which she grows up. Esther desires to conform, fears she may not conform, and actively resists conforming to the prescriptions of the society in which she lives – MacPherson does not grant that all of these readings of Esther are equally valid.

Esther's fears and indecision are exacerbated because she is growing up. The normative model of adolescence posits adolescence as a time of finding identity and making choices which will facilitate successful negotiation into adulthood, but Esther realises that as a female, growing up in containment culture, those choices are strictly limited. This is dramatised in her metaphor of the fig tree in a short story she reads:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story.
>
> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.
>
> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the

[19] Pat MacPherson, *Reflecting On "The Bell Jar"* (London: Routledge, 1991) 2.

> rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and grow black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (73)

MacPherson argues that postwar American culture was 'beginning to define both citizenship and adolescence chiefly through consumption', particularly via women's magazines like *Ladies' Day*, with which Esther is involved.[20] If this is true, then Esther's metaphor of the fig tree dramatises that her failure to make choices represents a failure to consume, to live according to the dictates of her society. This failure to consume threatens her survival. It has been less well-noticed, however, that this matter of survival is linked to the fact that Esther's dilemma is also one of *time* – she feels that she is leaving it too late to make choices. Her narrative is marked with admittances that she can never think of the correct response or punishing retort in time. When Buddy calls a poem '"A piece of dust"' (52), privileging the medical profession to which he belongs over the literary one to which Esther aspires, it is not until a year later that she thinks of the response that '"So are the cadavers you cut up. So are the people you think you're curing. They're dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together"' (53). Recalling her conversation with her editor, Jay Cee, Esther comments that her words have a 'hollow flatness [. . .], like so many wooden nickels' (29) – her words have no currency in her time. Contrary to Oates's assertion that Esther's 'adolescent' self is representative of national selfhood (and that of Western civilisation) and that that selfhood is somehow too old, outdated, Esther does not feel representative of her society but that she cannot move in time with it.

Of course, this could be read as confirming rather than critiquing Oates's notion of the adolescent, combative self which should be rendered obsolete. If that self is in fact masculine, as Oates figures it, then Esther, being female, suffers from a disadvantage in that she is living in circumstances which Oates (in a different context) describes as follows:

> The paralysis of the imagination suffered by contemporary romantic writers grows immediately out of the accelerated pace of the world and their own diminishing capacity to register it; but more importantly, it is a

[20] Ibid., 8.

> natural result of a faith in themselves as isolated "egos" burdened, if male, with the need to conquer, and if female – like Sylvia Plath – terrified of the prospect, seen as inevitable, of being conquered.[21]

Though Esther is not a romantic writer, her sense of being too late, of not making decisions quickly enough, would tie into what Oates perceives as the failure to mature from which contemporary romantic writers suffer. Esther is too slow to decide because she is not growing up quickly enough. However, this is only one way in which Esther's dilemma can be read. The above discussion should show that Esther is not to be read as representative of her times, as Oates seems to regard her, as Esther does not regard herself as part of her historical moment but out of time with it. Her narrative is related in the form of an internal monologue, and this is vitally important when considering Esther's ambivalent attitude towards her culture and towards both the process of growing up and the concept of maturity. Esther lives in a society which prioritises actions of judging and surveillance. That society judges on the external and focuses on the image in an effort to identify and threatening behaviour, which is then categorised as 'other', thus ensuring the security and authority of the 'same', the norm, the American.[22] This behaviour reveals what Nadel detects in American political discourse about Russia and atomic power: 'an invisible duality betrays appearances and confounds the powers of observation.'[23] This renders the surveillance strategies which are so vital to containment inadequate, yet paradoxically results in 'heightened vigilance, greater surveillance, more universalized authority.'[24] Esther's internal monologue both discloses and maintains that 'invisible duality', as it both conforms and refuses to conform. Her narrative is not spoken aloud to a particular audience, nor is it written, so Esther keeps her thoughts to herself. Her internal monologue thus resists appropriation by the disciplinary frameworks in her society which seek to contain her – most pertinent for Esther being the psychoanalytic discourse which seeks to cure her. Her narrative constitutes a gesture of

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[21] Joyce Carol Oates, "The Teleology of the Unconscious: The Art of Norman Mailer," *New Heaven, New Earth: The Visionary Experience in Literature*, by Oates (1974; London: Gollancz, 1976) 191.

[22] Nadel, 28-29.

[23] Ibid., 28.

[24] Ibid., 34.

rebellion in a society which judges on what is public, on appearance. By refusing to make herself known, Esther cannot be judged. At the same time, however, Esther's inward gaze is founded upon that 'speech and the moment of introspection'[25] which Julia Kristeva describes as a fundamental aspect of the process of psychoanalysis. Her narrative reveals what Nadel identifies in his discussion of Holden Caulfield's first-person narrative in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in The Rye* (1951) – 'a form of self-surveillance circumscribed by the ubiquitous possibility of appearing Other and /or the unspeakable fear of being what one appeared.'[26] That self-surveillance shows the degree to which Esther is immersed in her culture's values – she says 'I wanted to see as much as I could' and 'I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations' (12), showing her complicit, competent, use of and fascination with strategies of observation and vigilance. However, most importantly, Esther's internal monologue is constructed in the interests of self-preservation. She takes herself as subject of narration, attempting to narrate a self which is continually under threat. Contemplating making a dangerous ski trip, Esther recalls how 'The interior voice nagging me not to be a fool – to save my skin and take off my skis and walk down, camouflaged by the scrub pines bordering the slope – fled like a disconsolate mosquito' (92), showing how her internal monologue (that interior voice) is vested in survival.

Esther's internal monologue, then, can be read as an act of willing, or of coerced conformity, and also of rebellion, because the internal monologue could suggest her entrapment in, acquiescence with, or withdrawal from her culture. This makes it ultimately a powerfully complex and duplicitous engagement with strategies and tenets of containment culture, because the fact that the nature of its engagement with that culture cannot be assessed means that it cannot be contained. This is further complicated by the fact that duplicity itself is legitimate female behaviour in containment culture. Nadel argues that

> Female sexuality thus had the burden of supporting the monolithic goals of cold war America through the practice of duplicity: the woman had to

[25] Julia Kristeva, "The Adolescent Novel," *Abjection, Melancholia, And Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1990) 14.

[26] Nadel, 84.

> attract and stimulate male sexual drives but not gratify them. Female sexuality was thus always double -- it had to be the thing that would gratify a normal male's sexual desires for the rest of his life while not doing so during courtship; it had to signify abstinence and promise gratification; it had to indicate its presence through absence.[27]

This, however, is not the whole story. If duplicity was culturally sanctioned it also had the power to be subversive. Surveying female adolescent experience in the 1950s, Wini Breines argues that 'Dissemblance, even hypocrisy, were coping strategies for girls engaged in experimentation and rulebreaking.'[28] Breines expands on this, confirming the self-protective character of Esther's narrative when she argues that 'Fiction, autobiographies, and social science suggest that young women in the fifties did not, perhaps could not, present their lives honestly.'[29] Esther's narrative, then, is subversive not only with regard to her culture's general policies but specifically with regard to its dictates for female behavior.

All of this has important consequences when thinking about Oates's comments on adolescence and maturity, and her reading of Plath's work as unequivocally immature. As the above discussion should have indicated, any attempts to categorise Esther's narrative should be treated with caution, not least because in a society in which roles and opportunities for women in particular are strictly limited, Esther's resistance to taking up any definitive position is subversive. In this light, Oates's contention that 'There is a peculiar refusal to distinguish between those who mean well, those who mean ill, and those who are neutral' stands as a further misreading of Esther's situation. Esther does not refuse to make judgments because she is self-obsessed and incapable of making them, but because she is resisting her culture's invitation to make such distinctions and because her narrative is vested in her own survival. Not only this, but Esther does not engage self-reflexively with her act of narration to suggest that she conceives of it as an artwork; she does not, perhaps, conceive of herself as an artist at all, let alone the kind of artist that Oates criticises. Her narrative is primarily prompted by remembrances stimulated by the

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[27] Ibid., 117.

[28] Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 90.

[29] Ibid., 124-125.

sight of the free gifts she received as a nineteen-year-old in New York. Esther has retrieved those objects from their hiding place 'later, when I was all right again', so that their visibility is a sign that Esther perceives herself as recovered – 'I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with' (3). That 'the baby' is Esther's own is likely; but the absence of reference to a husband makes it difficult to determine whether Esther has recovered to assume the part of wife and mother, successfully assimilated into and contained within the ideal nuclear family, or whether she has carved out an alternative life for herself. Equally importantly, Esther stresses neither her recovery nor the presumed maturity of her older narrating self. Her narrative is singularly unmarked by retrospective comment or analysis. It makes no coercive demands on a reader. Partly, of course, this is because Esther's narrative, as internal monologue, has no specific audience and so Esther would not feel obliged to offer details about herself or to inform, educate or correct a wider audience. But this is only a partial explanation.

MacPherson argues that Esther 'burrows inward to find and repair the sub-atomic psychic fissure responsible for her nervous condition', and, further, that this gesture makes Esther like many of her fellow citizens in the 1950s.[30] However, this suggests that Esther's monologue takes the form of a quest or cure, that Esther is sufficiently equipped to diagnose and cure herself, and that she is representative of Americans living in the 1950s, none of which can be definitively gauged from her narrative. Underpinning MacPherson's thoughts is also a belief that Esther does have some 'nervous condition', and even this should not be taken for granted. The most important feature of Esther's narrative is Esther's refusal to posit maturity or self-knowledge. Her condition of being 'all right again' is not attendant upon, but rather precedes and perhaps facilitates her act of introspective narration. Not only this, but 'all right again' suggests that there was a time in Esther's past where she was 'all right' before now. This could refer to the fact that Esther has been cured by her time in the sanatorium and her subjection to the corrective discipline of psychoanalysis, but it also may mean that she was 'all right' before these events, and is 'all right again' despite, rather than because of them. 'All right again', rather like the ambiguous response of the girl in Dove's "Adolescence II" ('I don't know

[30] MacPherson, 6.

what to say, again') encapsulates the ambiguity of Esther's attitude to normative discourses of maturity, particularly as they relate to her historical moment. Esther is living (even at the unspecified moment at which she narrates) in a culture which does not extend to women the full adult privileges granted to white, middle-class, heterosexual men. It is a problem which Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique* (published in 1963, the same year in which *The Bell Jar* was published in Britain) calls 'the crisis of women growing up – a turning point from an immaturity that has been called femininity to full human identity.'[31] Friedan condemns the cult of domesticity which reduces options for female development, allowing women to be 'human' only insofar as they are 'feminine', and inferior to whatever is constructed 'masculine' and 'adult'.

The fascinating ambiguities in Esther's narrative stem from the fact that her 'turning point', the position from which she speaks when she calls herself 'all right again' may correspond not with having achieved a state called 'adulthood' or 'maturity' but rather in having turned away from such a state (as her society constructs it). This gesture calls into question any normative model of development – such as Oates's implicit narrative of maturity as progress and adult maturity as the goal to be attained – together with any categorisations of maturity or immaturity. This is illustrated at several points in Esther's narrative. Prior to her breakdown, Esther offers two striking metaphors which show how her adolescent self regards the future:

> I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three . . . nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth. (118)

> I saw the days of the year stretching ahead like a series of bright, white boxes, and separating one box from another was sleep, like a black shade. Only for me, the long perspective of shades that set off one box from the next had suddenly snapped up, and I could see day after day after day glaring ahead of me like a white, broad, infinitely desolate avenue. (123)

For Esther, the future is emblematised in the vision of 1950s white, middle-class suburban conformity (the white avenue, the uniformity of the telephone poles). The

[31] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; London: Penguin, 1992) 70.

future is the same as the present. No narrative of maturity and progression exists because in the culturally sanctioned paradigm of cold war female development, the present (stasis, sameness) is all there is. It is not surprising that Esther shows no faith in, or desire to grow up into, the future – rather, two of the moments in which she is happiest in her narrative reveal her desire to regress rather than progress. After a night out in New York, Esther takes a bath which becomes symbolic of her desire to erase the events and people which she feels are tainting her. In another ambiguous phrase reminiscent of Rita Dove's poem, Esther describes how she feels herself 'growing pure again':

> I said to myself: "Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure." The longer I lay there in the clear hot water the purer I felt, and when I stepped out at last and wrapped myself in one of the big, soft, white, hotel bath towels I felt pure and sweet as a new baby. (19)

On her dangerous ski trip, Esther recalls how

> I aimed straight down.
>
> [. . .] I was descending, but the white sun rose no higher. It hung over the suspended waves of the hills, an insentient pivot without which the world would not exist.
>
> A small, answering point in my own body flew towards it. I felt my lungs inflate with the inrush of scenery – air, mountains, trees, people. I thought, 'This is what it is to be happy.'
>
> I plummeted down past the zigzaggers, the students, the experts, through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compromise, into my own past.
>
> People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly. (93)

In both cases, Esther is happiest when moving backwards into her past, to a simpler state where she does not have to cope with the pressures of the society in which she lives. In each instance the reference to 'the baby' is abstract and general – Esther is not referring to a specific stage in her own past but to a hypothesised ideal stage of development. The

'pebble' in the well that metaphorically corresponds to the baby in the womb suggests that Esther's desire is to regress to a pre-linguistic state of mother-child union. Henry I. Schvey comes close to arguing this when he claims, of this passage, that Esther longs for a state of 'pre-existence before the individual is faced with the trauma of identity' and wishes 'to be unborn.'[32] Esther, that is, does not want to construct an identity for herself from the poor options her culture offers her, options which cause her to wish that she should not have to name or narrate herself. This is because Esther has some awareness that much of her unhappiness and her sense of entrapment finds its root cause in the words, language and narrative that her society uses to classify and 'intimidate', in Nadel's terms. She despises her Physics class because of 'this shrinking everything into letters and numbers' (33). At first Esther regards this shrinkage as specific purely to the sciences, expressing her rebellion and her privileging of the literary by writing villanelles and sonnets during her chemistry class. But her hatred of symbols and systems extends later to shorthand, a skill which she does not want to learn because it symbolises a limited career option for women. Esther protests that 'I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters' (72). At one of her worst moments, this hatred of shrinkage manifests itself in Esther's response to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce is one of the high modernist writers whom Kristeva discusses as performing a 'revolution in poetic language' which is achieved by a joyful disruption of the symbolic (sense, meaning) by semiotic non-sense (which Kristeva demonstrates is figured in these texts as feminine), in a gesture which symbolises a return to the mother's body.[33] Esther's decision to 'junk my thesis' (120) after struggling to interpret Joyce's text follows an attempt to write her own fiction, which is aborted when Esther thinks 'How could I write about life when I'd never had a love affair or a baby or seen anybody die?' (117).

Taken together, Esther's responses and her breakdown illustrate Margaret Homans's argument that Kristeva's concept of 'the feminine' delineates a figurative position adopted by male writers in a canonical psychoanalytic narrative of male development. That narrative is influenced by Lacan's narrative of entry into language and

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[32] Henry I. Schvey, "Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: *Bildungsroman* or Case History," *Dutch Quarterly Review of American Letters* 8 (1978): 31, 32.

[33] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, introduction Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

the symbolic, which in turn is influenced by the work of Freud.[34] That position of 'the feminine' thus does not correspond to Esther's female experience or admit such a category as the female writer (hence Esther's inability to articulate her problem, due to her awareness that language is part of the problem). Esther's desire for *literal* regression to pre-linguistic union with the mother is not satisfied by a disruption of 'sense' in language. That desire will also be co-opted by her society as a sign of neurosis or immaturity, because canonical psychological narratives of development privilege male development over female. Certainly, both of Esther's moments of happiness are temporary or end in disaster – the ski descent ends with Esther breaking her leg, showing how her desire to return to pre-linguistic union is difficult, even dangerous, to achieve and maintain. Psychoanalytic theories of development which privilege male experience do not advocate literal return to some prelinguistic state but only allow a playful, figurative, pretence at doing so in language. As long as language is being used, the pre-linguistic maternal union will always be denied. Even after her breakdown, when she is supposed to be recovering, Esther describes how she resists paying attention to her fellow resident Joan's discussion of 'Egos and Ids' (214), so that it seems that Esther has retained her distrust of all theories and formulas which purport to classify, perhaps all language itself, sensing its power to 'shrink' – to distort and misrepresent.

It is for these reasons that Esther never posits herself as mature, never presents her experiences as a series of lessons learned which further her self-knowledge or could be of use to others. It is unclear whether Esther's failure to conform to the narrative which states that 'We are supposed to grow up' is immature, as Oates would argue, or whether Esther is utilising a strategy of resistance to that narrative which renders her if not mature in the normative sense, then certainly not immature, and certainly subversive. These difficulties in deciding how Esther is to be read are additionally caused by her use of language. Esther does not relate what experiences mean or meant to her, but describes her feelings and thoughts in highly figurative language. Often she makes comments such as 'I don't know just why my successful evasion of chemistry should have floated into my head there in Jay Cee's office' (35). Esther knows what events are important and unusual,

[34] Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

but she struggles to explain why. Often one event triggers a memory of another event, but Esther cannot explain why she makes the connection between the two, as in the above example. Her narrative encourages readers to seek reasons for the connections she makes. The connections Esther makes function in the way metaphors do (one thing is perceived as being like another thing, some shared identity is found between two dissimilar, discrete entities), and indeed Susan Coyle notes that Esther 'is known most tellingly through her use of metaphor.'[35] In containment culture, Esther's use of figurative language sets up potentially very subversive connections between events. It is a strategy which may be subversive whatever the uses Esther puts it to, as to make any constructions of 'like' and 'unlike' which are not culturally sanctioned constitutes a rebellion against or challenge to that culture.

Oates is wrong to claim that 'only Esther exists.' After her breakdown, Esther acknowledges that other girls, whether they have been in the Belsize sanatorium like herself or not, sit 'under bell jars of a sort' (227), showing that Esther perceives a commonality of female experience. She realises that this gendered experience is part of her entrapment, even as the qualifier 'of a sort' indicates that individual experiences are different and Esther does not want to claim her experience as entirely representative, suffering as she has done from being incorporated into narratives not her own. In her refusal to espouse a narrative of maturity and to make her position clear, Esther indicates the provisional nature of both her position and her recovery. She has not found 'a ritual for being born twice' (233) as Marjorie Perloff argues.[36] She may still desire one, however. Neither has she emerged healed, but at the cost of having undergone a process which 'wipes the slate clean only to prepare it for the exact same message', as MacPherson argues.[37] What is clear is that Esther has neither grown up to forget, nor satisfactorily answered, the questions of her adolescence. Her adolescent experience is both contained and uncontainable in her narrative, emblematised in the ambiguous

[35] Susan Coyle, "Images of Madness and Retrieval: An Exploration of Metaphor in *The Bell Jar*," *Studies in American Fiction* 12.2 (1984): 161.

[36] Marjorie G. Perloff, "'A Ritual for Being Born Twice': Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," *Contemporary Literature* 13.4 (1972): 507-22.

[37] MacPherson, 96.

gesture of introspection which enables her to recall her experiences 'again' in her act of narration.

That there are connections between *The Bell Jar* and *I'll Take You There* has already been suggested – both narrators tell about their nineteen-year-old experiences at university. However, the connections are more intimate than this. At one early moment in her narrative, suffering from food poisoning, Esther describes how 'It didn't seem to be summer any more. I could feel the winter shaking my bones and banging my teeth together [. . .]' (41). Undergoing electro-shock therapy, she recalls that 'with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant' (138). Bearing in mind Oates's reading of Plath, it is possible to read *I'll Take You There* as engaging with *The Bell Jar* in just such an unsettling and remedial spirit – Oates's text is set in winter to Plath's summer, and it attempts to 'shake the bones' of Plath's text. It tells the story of a nameless protagonist who apparently progresses from what Oates perceives as the immature, adolescent self which her literary criticism denigrates, and which presumably plagues Plath's work and American culture more widely. The year in which the protagonist makes her transition from what Oates calls an 'adolescent' self to a more mature conception of self is 1963, the year of Plath's death and the publication of *The Bell Jar* in Britain, suggesting that *I'll Take You There* is to be read as a significant revision of Plath's work. In fact, Oates's novel can be regarded as Signifyin(g), in Henry Louis Gates's terms, on *The Bell Jar*. That Signifyin(g) involves a gesture of 'repetition with a difference', which aims to provide a 'revision and critique' of *The Bell Jar*. It thus constitutes a form of intertextuality which Gates would call 'motivated Signifyin(g)' because its critique is negative.[38]

Important differences between the two texts can be seen in the two quotations which open this chapter. Esther recounts a symbolic gesture, without any retrospective analysis; Oates's narrator speculates and ruminates from a perspective which foregrounds the retrospective nature of her narrative. Throughout *I'll Take You There*, Oates's narrator is at pains to emphasise the authority of what is posited as the adult and more mature narrating self. The narrator's opening sentences make this clear: 'In those days in the

[38] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) xxvi.

early Sixties we were not women yet but girls. This was, without irony, perceived as our advantage' (3). 'In those days' highlights the fact that the narrator tells her story from some point in the future significantly distant from the time of which she speaks. 'Without irony' suggests that irony is now supplied by the older narrator's backward glance. That glance authoritatively corrects the view held at the time – that it was better to be 'girl' than 'woman'– with the implication that it is better to be 'woman' than 'girl'. It is an assumption which legitimates the narrator's adult authority. In the world of isolated Plathian adolescent selves which Oates's narrator inhabits and perhaps is representative of for much, if not all of the novel, then perhaps it is an 'advantage' to be 'girl' rather than 'woman', but a highly complex, not to say contradictory, movement is implied in this opening sentence. The belief that 'advantage' might imply stasis in some youthful or immature realm (Esther's strategy in *The Bell Jar*?) is corrected by the dominant and normative narrative of development – that it is advantageous to be adult rather than young. Again, this sentence exhibits an ambivalence rather like that expressed in Oates's essay towards the injunction that 'We are supposed to grow up'. That ambivalence might be accounted for by the fact that canonical masculine narratives about American identity celebrate America's perceived 'adolescence' in comparison to an older (even parental) European culture.[39] In advocating a move towards a more mature and adult conception of individual and national American identity, Oates advocates a model of normative development from childhood to adulthood, but this might be 'ironic' because it contradicts what could be called an American preoccupation with and celebration of youth and adolescence in particular.

The narrator's plural 'we' in her opening sentence is misleading, as it suggests shared female experience. This is definitely not borne out in the novel, in which the narrator constantly stresses her isolation and difference from others, and in which the resolution of her problems and progression towards maturity is highly individual and personal. 'We' is also troubling because it suggests shared female *development*. In the sixties 'we' were girls, now, no longer in the Sixties, those girls are women. The implication is that communal female progression has been achieved purely with the

[39] See, for example, R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1955).

passage of time (it is no longer the Sixties when the narrator tells her story). The point of detailing the complexities in this opening sentence is to show that the adult authority Oates's narrator claims, together with her assumptions regarding her own maturity, are to be questioned, and that this questioning is necessary precisely because the narrator's attitudes and values reveal the tensions illustrated in Oates's thoughts about adolescence. The narrator is not in fact sure about what is meant by her terms 'girls' and 'women'; her implicit suggestion and belief that individuals progress *en masse* with the passage of time is debatable; and her relationship towards the dictate that 'We are supposed to grow up' is fraught with difficulty. This is illustrated by her problematic insistence that she has in fact grown up, making both her narrative authority and her supposedly adult and mature insights highly suspect.

Oates's narrator is a philosophy student at Syracuse University, New York. Her narrative is divided into three sections, the first two of which take up the majority of the novel and describe the events that befall her nineteen-year-old self in late 1962 and 1963. The entire narrative is prefaced by a quotation from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: 'A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.'[40] The quotation refers to Wittgenstein's belief that the 'essence of human language' consists in a particular picture:

> It is this: the individual words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. – In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.[41]

Wittgenstein's argument is that this 'picture' is responsible for a mistaken notion of the way language works, because it concerns itself primarily with nouns rather than other parts of speech, because it ignores the ways in which words are used in spoken language, and because it suggests that words have some essential 'meaning' which can be presumably searched for and successfully discovered. For Wittgenstein, philosophy's search for the meaning of words like 'truth' and 'beauty' is therefore flawed because it

[40] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd. ed. (1953; Oxford: Blackwell, 1968) 48.

[41] Ibid., 2.

fails to take into account the way words are commonly used – that is, in speech and in social situations. *Philosophical Investigations* was posthumously published in 1953, the year of Esther's summer in New York and the execution of the Rosenbergs. The narrator of Oates's novel describes herself and Vernor Mathcius, the African-American man with whom she is having a relationship, as 'students of philosophy, engaged in a common quest for truth; for paring back myths and subterfuge in the pursuit of truth; and what is philosophy but the ceaseless and indefatigable invention of and "solving" of problems?' (151). The 'picture' Oates addresses in *I'll Take You There* is the myth of the isolated, adolescent selves (illustrated for Oates by Plath's work) which results from a mistaken understanding of terms like 'I' and 'self', a failure to perceive how these terms function in the world. Wittgenstein reserves for philosophy the task of disclosing the error of the 'picture' as he describes it, destroying the power of the picture to hold people captive. He formulates this task in metaphor: 'What is your aim in philosophy? – To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.'[42] The nameless narrator of Oates's text is aspiring Wittgensteinian-philosopher and artist. Her growth into both roles is attendant upon maturation from adolescence into adulthood, and a reconceptualisation of the ideas of selfhood and identity. The first two sections of her narrative are called "The Penitent" and "The Negro-Lover", and both labels describe the narrator. The third, "The Way Out" seems a departure from this strategy until it becomes clear that the narrator herself, in adulthood, constitutes the way out of the bottle. She is to be read as emblematic of a more mature stage of development, which has particular relevance when thinking about American selfhood as Oates theorises it.

However, as the discussion of the narrator's opening comments should have indicated, the situation is not so simple. The narrator's problematic maturation both causes, and is caused by, the dubious success she achieves as a philosopher. That *Philosophical Investigations* has an enormous influence on the narrator's development is clear even from these preliminary comments. That influence can be seen most obviously in the opening quotation, the final chapter heading, and the abundant imagery and metaphors concerning games (especially chess, which Vernor plays) which pervade the novel. Being a girl or a woman might be an 'advantage', for example, which is suggestive

[42] Ibid., 103.

of a leading position in a game, and hints at Wittgenstein's argument that words are used in multiple 'language-games.'[43] Language-games constitute the various discourses in which words are used according to differing rules or moves. However, direct references to the helpful influence of *Philosophical Investigations* are strangely absent from the narrator's story. This is illustrated in the fact that the opening quotation from Wittgenstein prefaces the novel and is not contained within it, indicating how the narrator struggles to assimilate (or only partially assimilates) his philosophical thoughts, something which also mirrors her problematic relation to Oates's theoretical ideas about adolescence. The absence of direct references to Wittgenstein's text is all the more unusual when considering that *I'll Take You There* is primarily concerned with the influence various individuals and texts exert on its narrator, and the positive and negative effects of influence. As Jennifer Egan argues, the narrator's sense of her own isolation and alienation, and most importantly, her sense of her own lack of identity, leads her to indulge in acts of 'affixing herself to people whose identities she hopes to adopt as her own.'[44] The first section of the novel describes the narrator's attachment to a sorority, Kappa Gamma Pi. Her 'lovesick' (5) feelings extend to the sorority house itself, the girls who inhabit it, and their British house-mother, Mrs. Thayer. The narrator hopes to conceive of the girls as 'sisters' (16) and Mrs. Thayer as a maternal figure, figures who will provide the love and community that she feels is withheld to her by her family. The narrator's mother is dead, her father is presumed dead, she has no sisters and her brothers and grandparents do not show affection towards her. The narrator's description of the sorority house is prefaced by the italicised comment '*The Way In*' (6), suggesting that it is within the sorority house that the narrator becomes trapped in the picture she constructs for herself, as the girls and the house-mother cannot be made to fill these roles. The narrator has also constructed a false self, 'my Kappa self' (44), in order to be accepted by the sorority. She lies about her background on her application form, ignores her financial hardship, and fabricates a personality which is more extrovert and light-hearted than she

[43] Ibid., 5.

[44] Jennifer Egan, "The Consolation of Philosophy," rev. of *I'll Take You There*, by Joyce Carol Oates, *New York Times Book Review* (Fiction and Poetry) 20 Oct. 2002: 7.

feels she truly is. As a consequence, none of the relationships she forges in the sorority are genuine.

While in the sorority, the narrator reads the work of various philosophers in her European Philosophy course, and vainly seeks in their texts some means of understanding herself and her relations to the world. Spinoza's *Ethics* is important to her, as it attempts to explain the workings of the universe by reducing them to a series of geometrical propositions. It is a crucial difference between Oates's narrator and Plath's that Oates's narrator believes in and desires the existence of a system which will explain everything (including herself), whereas Esther comes to distrust all such theories. It is through reading that Oates's narrator hopes to find such an explanatory system. In Oates's essays, reading becomes a trope for considering the relations between self and other. In "Reading as Pleasure, Pleasure as Literature", Oates argues of the act of reading that:

> It is the sole means by which we slip, involuntarily, often helplessly, into another's skin; another's voice; another's soul. One might argue that serious reading is as sacramental an act as serious writing, and should therefore not be profaned. That, by way of a book, we have the ability to transcend what is immediate, what is merely personal, and to enter a consciousness not known to us, in some cases distinctly alien, *other* . . .[45]

As with so much of Oates's thoughts, the activity of reading is also bound up with the concept of adolescence:

> To have read Nietzsche at age eighteen, when one's senses are most keenly and nervously alert, the very envelope of the skin dangerously porous; to have heard, and been struck to the heart, by that astonishing voice – what ecstasy! what visceral unease! – as if the very floor were shifting beneath one's feet. Late adolescence is the time for love, or, rather, for passion – the conviction that *within the next hour* something can happen, will happen, to irrevocably alter one's life.[46]

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[45] Joyce Carol Oates, "Literature as Pleasure, Pleasure as Literature," *(Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities*, by Oates (New York: Dutton, 1988) 56-57. This essay was originally published in *Antaeus* (Fall 1987).

[46] Ibid., 59.

In an essay on Thoreau, Oates discusses the experience of reading *Walden* in adolescence. She argues that *Walden* is 'suffused with the powerfully intense, romantic energies of adolescence, the sense that life is boundless, experimental, provisionary, ever-fluid, and unpredictable; the conviction that, whatever the accident of the outer self, the truest self is inward, secret, inviolable.'[47] She continues:

> Thoreau's appeal is to that instinct in us – adolescent, perhaps, but not merely adolescent – that resists our own gravitation toward the outer, larger, fiercely competitive world of responsibility, false courage, and "reputation". It is an appeal as readily described as existential, as Transcendentalist; its voice is unique, individual, skeptical, rebellious.[48]

The adolescent reader's responses represent the most productive and destructive consequences attendant upon the experience of reading – the most intense and fulfilling encounter with what is 'other' and the greatest risk of losing the self's identity. It is surely no accident that Oates chooses texts which have as their content two very different ways of regarding the world. These ways of regarding the world both, nonetheless, challenge authority by privileging individual experience, something which raises striking parallels between the adolescent self in these essays on reading and the 'romantic' self which Oates portrays so negatively. Thoreau is seen as the voice of optimism, offering what Oates regards as a more immature (and, it would seem, specifically American) way of dealing with the difficulties of the adult world – withdrawing from adulthood by withdrawing from the world altogether. Nietzsche is enlisted as an example of a more dangerous reading experience, and Nietzsche's philosophy concerns itself with challenging familiar frameworks which ground conventional perceptions of the world. For Oates he possibly paves the way for some kind of adolescent rebellion, suggesting that norms and rules can be broken and changed. However, the Nietzschean universe, with its competitive selves, is not one Oates would endorse. Also, *Walden*, earlier chronologically, is enlisted in describing early adolescence, while Nietzsche is regarded as emblematic of the slightly more mature experience of late adolescence, showing that

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[47] Joyce Carol Oates, "Looking for Thoreau," *(Woman) Writer*, 154. This essay was originally given as a paper at the annual Thoreau Society conference, July 1985.

[48] Ibid., 155.

Oates does seem to subscribe to a historical model of maturity and progress in which maturity is achieved simply with the passage of time (to be born in a time in which Nietzsche is read is to be more mature than to be born in a time when he is not). However, one of Oates's most positive comments about adolescence troubles her discourse of maturity once more:

> Perhaps the ideal reader *is* an adolescent: restless, vulnerable, passionate, hungry to learn, skeptical and naïve by turns; with an unquestioned faith in the power of the imagination to change, if not life, one's comprehension of life. To the degree to which we remain adolescents we remain ideal readers to whom the act of opening a book can be a sacred one, fraught with psychic risk. For each work of a certain magnitude means the assimilation of a new voice [. . .] and the permanent altering of one's own interior world.[49]

Once more, positive qualities are associated with adolescence, and the idea that it would be beneficial to remain adolescent, to whatever 'degree', troubles the dictate that 'We are supposed to grow up'. The narrator's experiences in *I'll Take You There* reflect, without resolving, the ambivalences expressed in Oates's depiction of the adolescent reader. The narrator wishes to encounter 'other' voices but makes the mistake of allowing them to alter her world too much, or altering her world in a negative way. Her desire for her house-mother's love and approval causes her to take the blame for increasing disorder in the sorority house, which actually she has had nothing to do with:

> For how could I explain to Mrs. Thayer *Better to think that there is only one responsible, and not many. Better to think that the universe is rational and you might come to know a tiny portion of its truth, however false that truth.* (71)

The narrator's thoughts are framed in the form of philosophical propositions and show both the extent to which her reading informs her actions and its negative effects. It is in Mrs. Thayer's interests to be presented a false version of events; a false or invalid explanatory system is better than none at all (Esther would not agree with this view). The

[49] Joyce Carol Oates, "'Zero at the Bone': Despair as Sin and Enlightenment," *Where I've Been, and Where I'm Going: Essays, Reviews, and Prose*, 65. This essay originally appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, July 1993, and was reprinted in *The Seven Deadly Sins*.

narrator falls in love with Vernor's voice before she meets him, something which echoes Oates's idea of reading as seduction by a powerful 'voice'. This is illustrated further by the narrator's tendency to attribute thoughts to Vernor rather than to record his thoughts in direct speech. Vernor's thoughts are often given in italics, the same means by which the narrator expresses her own 'interior voice', indicating how she assimilates Vernor's voice and how she does not regard him as separate from herself.

Although Oates's description of seduction by a powerful 'voice' is grounded in physical experience (she talks of the 'porous' skin of the adolescent's body), the narrator's preoccupation with voice provides her with a means to avoid the ways in which her body relates to her identity, both as she constructs herself and as she is constructed by others. Vernor shares this avoidance, particularly with regard to his race. The narrator says that he thinks '*I am who I am, none of you can trap me with your language*' (155). Similarly, she distances herself from questions of gender – '*For I was not truly female in certain crucial ways and both anguished and gloried in this fact*' (121). Egan argues correctly that both the narrator and Vernor have a faith in the powers of philosophy to 'rescue them from their personal histories and allow them to create themselves anew.'[50] However, Egan does not specify that this need for rescue is related to their mutual reluctance to accept their involvement and complicity in a world which categorises and privileges on the basis of race and gender. Refusing to allow categories like 'race' and 'gender' to define them, the narrator and Vernor are thus examples of the isolated selves Oates discusses in her essays. They are forced to recognise that their belief in the self's isolation is an illusion when they realise that they cannot ignore the ways in which words are used to discriminate, categorise, and subordinate. It is the narrator's response to this problem which complicates her narrative of maturity and her relation to the tenets of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

The narrator's efforts to construct a self in isolation are seen in the fact that she lies about her Jewish heritage (erasing her personal history) in order to ensure her acceptance to the sorority – later in the novel, she recalls how 'A fractional Jew, I could pass' (155). However, when she wishes to leave the sorority, she makes a public claim that she might have Jewish heritage, which would necessitate her exclusion, showing how

[50] Egan, 7.

she turns her culture's prejudices (and her personal history) to her advantage when necessary. Considering the elitist practices of the sorority members, the narrator recalls her response to their 'world of explicit and outrageously unapologetic preferences and discriminations': "This was intolerable, this was un-American, you wanted to laugh in derision' (41). But the narrator learns that these hostile and combative (Oates would say 'adolescent') selves are very American. That timely invocation of 'Jewish blood' (80), together with the narrator's frequent admittances of culpability for acts which she did not commit, and her destruction of the two most important relationships of her nineteenth year (with Mrs. Thayer and Vernor) by reading material to which she is not privy, confirm Mrs. Thayer's final words to the narrator, on discovering her rummaging through her belongings in her private rooms: '" [. . .] How could you! Betray me! You are a pawn, a pawn in their bloody game! Run, run for your life!"' (92). The narrator calls these words 'senseless' (92) but they hint that the narrator is all too competent to survive in the world (to play the game) of those competing adolescent selves.

The narrator encounters Wittgenstein through Vernor, who expresses both idolatrous and hostile feelings towards Wittgenstein's work. The narrator's relationship with Wittgenstein is in the same vein:

> I had been reading Wittgenstein. There are no philosophical problems, only linguistic misunderstandings. Was this so? If so, why write at such length about it? (150)

Whatever the narrator's attitude, however, it is clear that the older narrating self enlists *Philosophical Investigations* as a central framing text for her narrative. The narrator's questioning voice in her comment above, as well as her tendency to stand from a distance to speculate and question the motives of her nineteen-year-old self, all suggest indebtedness to the interrogatory or playful style in Wittgenstein's text. The novel's structure is also indebted to *Philosophical Investigations*, as certain chapters can be read as constituting propositions in the manner of Wittgenstein's text. What is unclear is whether Wittgenstein's influence on the narrator is any more than stylistic. This can be seen in the narrator's thoughts about gender and in her appropriation of the metaphor of

the fly and the bottle. During the sorority alumni event at which she discloses the fact that she might have Jewish heritage, the narrator reaches a critical insight:

> I saw in a flash that I might revolutionize all of philosophy by daring to ask *Why do you wish to believe what you claim to believe?* Breathing open-mouthed, dazed by my sudden brilliance, I foresaw that such an inquiry would meet with hostility from (male) philosophers; and all philosophers were (male); though never once in all of classic philosophy is a penis acknowledged, let alone the concept *penis*. My inquiry would meet with hostility because it presupposed that there were purely contingent factors in life having little, or nothing, to do with philosophical speculation, only to do with the haphazard motions of individuals desperately seeking to survive. Only survive! (79)

While the narrator anticipates Wittgenstein (she has not encountered him yet at this point) in her sense that the study of philosophy risks ignoring the manner in which people actually behave in the world even as it is complicit in the dominant ideologies of that world, her focus on gender raises a difficulty which feminist criticism may encounter with Wittgenstein. Naomi Scheman outlines the problem:

> [. . .] it seems at least odd to make an alliance between someone who urges us to bring our words back home to their ordinary uses, leaving everything as it is, recognizing that it is our agreements in judgments and forms of life that ground intelligibility, and those whose theoretical task it is to articulate a radical (down to the root) critique of what *we* say, of the commonplaces of everyday life, to problematize and disturb precisely those taken-for-granted agreements in judgments and forms of life.[51]

The narrator awakens to the fact that the discourse of philosophy is male-dominated and privileges male experience, and that philosophical systems might serve to further the interests of particular groups, partly because of their denial of the body and, with that, specific historical and social constructions of categories such as gender and race. However, this is not an insight which she builds upon, as she prefers to believe that there may be a philosophical system which will account for all existence and enable her to

[51] Naomi Scheman, Introduction, *Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein*, ed. Scheman and Peg O'Connor (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002) 1-2.

make her own existence meaningful. It is with Vernor that she begins to realise that her belief in the powers of philosophy may be flawed. Neither Vernor nor the narrator take part in the civil rights protests at the university in 1963; the narrator comments that Vernor sees that movement as 'a distraction from the purity of the philosophical quest: to know what *is*' (133-134). Vernor himself says that '"The only truths that can possibly matter, that can *really* matter, are truths that transcend time"' (134). As their relationship progresses the narrator begins to dispute this view. In response to the murder of the activist Medgar Evers, the narrator recalls how Vernor thinks '*That's what happens when you step into history: history grinds you flat beneath its boot heel*' (226). Vernor's inability either to ignore or to admit the fact that 'history' is not something that can be stepped in or out of, but something in which he is enmeshed precipitates the decline of his ability to study philosophy. The narrator comments that 'I did not think at the time *If you fail to step into history, history erases you*' (229).

It is this awareness of living in history that facilitates the narrator's growth towards maturity. The second section of the novel ends with the narrator and Vernor sitting outside Vernor's flat:

> How strange to be sitting beside this man on these wooden stairs smelling faintly of rot, at such a time; gazing out toward the rain; a couple seated together gazing out into the rain; they live upstairs and have come outside for fresh air, the man smoking and the woman seated close beside him; a harsh, sibilant rain blowing along the pavement beneath streetlights, with a look of antic excitement. Another time we heard the remote sonorous tolling of the Music School bell tower; more chimes than I could count, it must have been midnight. How strange, how uncanny and how wonderful, what elation flooded my small gnarled heart on the eve of my twentieth birthday as I sat beside Vernor Matheius on the stairs at the rear of the shabby stucco building at 1183 Chambers Street, Syracuse, New York on the rain-swept night of June 18, 1963.
>
> If you'd driven by, and noticed that couple, wondering who they were, they were us. (239)

The narrator's thoughts reveal more tensions and ambiguities in Oates's theory of the necessity of assuming a more mature selfhood. Although the narrator and Vernor have ended their relationship, the narrator misrepresents their situation – 'they live upstairs'. She regards herself and Vernor both from the vantage point of her older narrating self and

from the perspective of someone – 'you' – who might not know who they are. This misrepresentation – which takes the form of a romantic love story with happy ending – testifies to the multiple interpretations and readings which can be made of various people and events, but it sits uneasily with the narrator's need to fix times, dates and places. The invocation of 'you' in this manner is made for the first time in this text, and suggests that the narrator is narrating to a specific audience – something which has not been stressed in the text so far, and which suggests the possibility of both including and excluding a reader. 'You' may refer only to people who could have been driving by in that street, at that time, in 1963. Made after Vernor has admitted that people cannot escape their personal histories, that they cannot invent themselves in isolation, this hypothesised 'you' further testifies to the fact that both Vernor and the narrator are coming to terms with the fact that they have stepped 'into history' and that they are not alone – 'you' are 'in history' also.

The narrator's specification of particular dates and times sits oddly with her claim that the night is the 'eve of my twentieth birthday', even though previously in her narrative, at the opening of this second section, she claims that 'I was nineteen years five months old when I fell in love for the first time. This seemed to me a profound, advanced age; never can we anticipate being older than we are, or wiser; [. . .] At nineteen, to my disgust, I continued to look much younger' (106). The narrator falls in love in February 1963, which would mean her birthday is not in June, as she says in the passage above, but September. At other times in this novel, she makes equally confusing statements about her age and how she regards herself. In the first section, recalling her hurt feelings over the treatment by a girl in the sorority, the narrator comments of herself that '*For you are not a child. Nineteen years old, an adult*' (16). Speaking to the Dean of Women at the university, who berates her for being involved in a relationship with a man of another race, the narrator says 'And the Dean of Women summoned me, I hadn't any choice but to obey. I would soon be twenty years old' (209). However, protesting against her treatment by the Dean at that same meeting, the narrator says "You have no right to intimidate me. I am twenty years old, an adult!' (211)

These comments reveal that the narrator (both when she is nineteen and when she is older, narrating) is profoundly unsure of what is constituted by terms such as 'girl' and

'adult' (as indicated in her opening sentence), and how one might negotiate between these categories. This means that she is at a loss as to how to regard and classify herself. This is illustrated by the vagueness that surrounds her precise birth date and age. She is not even sure how many times the bell chimes – 'it must have been midnight' – but if this is the case then she *is* now twenty, it is not the eve of her twentieth birthday. At the same time that she exhibits this confusion, however, the narrator is able to use terms such as 'adult' as powerful 'tools' (as Wittgenstein would argue words are used[52]) in order to achieve certain results; to make the Dean of Women take her seriously, for example. Often she calls her nineteen-year-old self a 'child', 'like a child', or 'childish', in order to stress her naivety and innocence, and the gulf which exists between her narrated and narrating selves. Like her invocation of her Jewish heritage and the invasive strategies she resorts to in order to learn more about others, the narrator's ability to play on ambiguities surrounding her age and maturity show how she is equipped to survive in the world of hostile and competing (adolescent?) selves in which she inhabits.

The central point is that the narrator's equivocations around the subjects of her age and maturity function to seriously undermine the story of successful maturity and development into adulthood which she wishes to narrate. The point of recalling that moment on the steps is, after all, to recount a kind of new birth into a more mature self, a self aware of the fact that she lives in interaction with others and cannot deny their influence. In the third section of the novel, aged twenty-one or twenty-two, she travels West to visit her father, whom she and her brothers believed to be dead. He is in fact alive, but dying. The narrator receives this news in June 1965, almost exactly two years since the night on the steps with Vernor which closed the previous section. She claims that 'the first fully adult act of my adult life' (288) involves arranging to ship his body home to their home town of Strykersville, New York.

If the first two sections of the narrative stress the narrator's role as reader, this section stresses her position as writer – she has had her first book of 'elusive "poetic" stories' published. On her way to visit her father the narrator describes her hope that

[52] Wittgenstein, 7-8.

> He would live to see my name, which included his name, on the dust jacket of the book; he would hold the book in his hand and tell me how beautiful it was, and he loved me. (255)

The narrator's awareness that she and her father share the same name suggests that she is moving towards a reconciliation with her past and her family (literally so, as she journeys towards her father). There is a sense that she and her father have collaborated together in the creation of the book, suggesting how the narrator has realised that '*everyone* is an artist', as Oates argues in "The Myth of the Isolated Artist". Not only this, but the book the narrator has written is highly autobiographical. In the second section, describing her intense feelings for Vernor, the narrator adds that

> One day, fever dreams of this time would be transcribed into the formalist prose pieces of what would be my "first book" unknown and unguessed-at, as a galaxy many light-years distant, in this fevered time. (148)

The narrator thus embodies Oates's conception of the artist who has not forgotten or rejected the qualities of romantic intensity and philosophical curiosity which Oates designates as 'adolescent', even as she has moved on (or says that she has moved on) to a more mature world view. However, the narrator's actions do not suggest that she has entirely left her more negatively regarded 'adolescent' self behind – Oates's theory of the artist may constitute another 'picture' which has the power to trap, to hold individuals captive. The narrator equates her father with 'Death' (270) and disobeys his injunction that she never look at him (by viewing him through a mirror) to see the ravages that cancer has caused to his body, an act which hastens his death. The aura of mystery, ritual, and rules transgressed which surround the narrator's relations with her father give the third section an atmosphere which would seem to belong to the genre of fairy-tale. This is in contrast to the first two sections, which privilege the discourse of philosophy. Those sections also make it clear that the narrator believes the story of her origins to resemble a nightmarish fairy tale, so that the fairy-tale is associated with the family from which she dissociates herself. With typical ambivalence, the narrator claims that 'I didn't believe in fairy tales or in those ridiculous romances beginning *Once upon a time*. A fairy tale of a kind had prevailed at my birth and during my infancy but it had been a cruel, crude fairy

tale in which the newborn baby isn't blessed but cursed' (5-6). It is difficult to tell whether the narrator's disobedience towards her father is to be read as a gesture similar to the self-destructive acts she makes regarding Mrs. Thayer's and Vernor's possessions, or whether the narrator is to be read as killing Death itself – that is, rejecting the suppressive, combative masculine authority which her father represents and which is shown to be destructive. This reading would correspond with the comment which opens the third section – '*To show the fly the way out of the bottle? Break the bottle*' (243). The narrator seems to have decided that her new maturity, the way out of the trapped picture, is to be achieved through a violent gesture which bears a close correspondence to the kind of behavior Oates's negatively adolescent selves indulge in. The novel's conclusion confirms this. The narrator describes how she flies back to Buffalo for the poorly attended funeral:

> For the joint grave I would replace my mother's marker with a small but, I thought, beautiful granite marker engraved with both my parents' names, birth- and death-dates. I would not be joining them in that rocky soil, but my family was now complete.
>
> If things work out between us, someday I'll take you there. (290)

This final comment could be read as revealing the narrator's final reconciliation with her family and her past, seen in the fact that she would like to take 'you' to the gravestone. The phrase 'If things work out' suggests a loving, if fragile, relationship between the narrator and the unspecified 'you', a relationship in which the narrator has been honest about her past and her conception of self. As her narrative is also called *I'll Take You There*, it would seem that the narrator has just made that statement of honesty, so that 'you' can refer to readers of the novel. The reference to 'you' once more underlines the narrator's perception that she does not live in isolation from others. If the narrator is 'the way out' then 'I'll take you there' represents a liberating movement in which the narrator has a responsibility not only to herself but to others, to show 'you' the dangers of the adolescent trap of regarding selves as isolated, and then showing the way towards a more mature conception of self. However, there is an implication that the narrator may have to force or coerce her 'you' as 'I'll *take* you there' suggests a gesture which is similar to the capture of a piece in a game of chess. The narrator may want to seduce or colonise her

readers ('you') with her powerful narrative voice. Given the narrator's previous attitudes towards the identities of others, her final promise or invitation seems more sinister. The fact that she may have to assert the correctness of her own vision through tactics familiar to Oates's adolescent selves undercuts her authority. It also renders her professed maturity and her final promise, 'I'll take you there', highly suspect.

In an early essay on Norman Mailer, Oates suggests that she is aware of these tensions in her discourses of maturity and in her designation of certain qualities as negatively and positively adolescent:

> To be a mature adult in our society, one usually surrenders the privileges and limitations of adolescence; but to get back into a more vital self, as Twain and Salinger (in all his works) have shown, one must sometimes go back into adolescence, though with a conscious adult sensitivity. It must always be the adolescent as Antiadult, not the adolescent as Preadult, who has the power to analyze, to judge the adult world. It is true, obviously, that adolescents do express judgments, many of them negative, on the adult world, but they do so without having being adults; Huckleberry Finn, Holden Caulfield, Alex (of *A Clockwork Orange*, [. . .]) and Mailer's boy are adults-as-adolescents, vehicles for adult writers who feel, for reasons that may be psychological as well as literary, that they *must* go back in order to possess the freedom to tell what they see of the truth. The childhood and early adolescence of boys is characterized by a fascination with obscenity and other taboos, as if the expression of such things were a magical shortcut into adulthood, as well as a way of defining their powers and setting them apart from girls. (When the "girls" appropriate this language, the "boys" are demoralized and frightened [. . .]) In our culture this behavior is probably normal, or at least it is commonplace; only when it persists into adulthood does it become peculiar [. . .].[53]

In Oates's formulation, adolescence is something that can be taken leave of and then revisited, even if the possibility of this movement (adult-as-adolescent) raises the question of whether adolescence is ever taken leave of at all. Implicit in the comments above is a privileging of the 'adult' writer. It is useful to compare Oates's comments with those of Charles Molesworth, whose analysis of postwar American culture attempts to account for the importance of adolescence in American literature. Molesworth considers Richard Ohmann's argument that perhaps the dominant postwar American

[53] "The Teleology of the Unconscious: The Art of Norman Mailer," 186-187.

narrative concerns that of an individual who, in the face of the pressures of a capitalist and patriarchal society, believes him- or herself to be sick, one of the signs of sickness being a desire to cling to childhood. Ohmann says that this is an adult crisis, as the person who wants to cling to childhood usually has an adult role in society but is only pretending to be properly integrated into adulthood. Summarising Ohmann, Molesworth says that 'Easily recognized adolescent social misfits, in a long tradition stretching from Huck Finn to Holden Caulfield, were now depicted as grown men and women, but the problems, in novels as various as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *An American Dream*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, *The Bell Jar*, and *Herzog*, remained the same.'[54] Again, both Ohmann and Molesworth collapse differences between very different texts. Esther, for example, never claims adult status or even pretends to be adult. Ohmann's assumption that a desire to cling to childhood is a sign of 'sickness' endorses the prescription that 'We are supposed to grow up', a prescription which Esther can be read as challenging, so that her 'problems' are not at all the same as those in the other texts mentioned.

Molesworth argues:

> An adolescent sensibility cloaked in an adult role thus allowed the post-war novelist a way to mediate the powerlessness of individuals in a mass, postindustrial society with the continuing belief in the power of the single, sensitive personality. [. . .] Again, questions of pessimism and optimism resurface: is the adolescent psyche of the prototypical character in American literature a way of burying and yet preserving our self-image, or merely a way of avoiding the unpleasant truths about the direction of our social development since 1945?[55]

Whereas Oates perceives a movement which she calls 'adult-as-adolescent', Molesworth perceives something which he formulates as 'an adolescent sensibility cloaked in an adult role.' Oates talks of the writer, Molesworth of the character. Oates sees the movement as a return to adolescence; Molesworth thinks the departure from adolescence is never made. Oates sees the return to adolescence as a means of expressing some kind of 'truth' whereas Molesworth sees the extension of adolescence as possibly a means of avoiding

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[54] Charles Molesworth, "Culture, Power, and Society," *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, General ed. Emory Elliot (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 1031.

[55] Ibid., 1031-1032.

truths. To add to these contrasting viewpoints (perhaps the only point at which Oates and Molesworth concur is their belief that the 'adolescent' is used as a trope exploring ideas of freedom, individuality and identity), Julia Kristeva offers yet another complex construction of adolescence and adulthood. Kristeva argues that

> Like a child, the adolescent is one of those mythic figures that the imaginary, and of course, the theoretical imaginary, gives us in order to distance us from certain of our faults – cleavages, denials, or simply desires? – by reifying them in the form of someone who has not yet grown up.[56]

Kristeva shares with Oates and Molesworth the belief that there are qualities or attitudes which can be claimed as 'adolescent' (though they disagree on what these qualities are). Similarly, all three critics construct versions of 'adolescence' or qualities which they label 'adolescent' which may or may not have anything to do with adolescence as a stage in the development of an individual – even if Kristeva's reference to the adolescent 'figure' serves as a reminder that this is indeed the case. However, Kristeva quickly dismisses the question of individual adolescents – 'Whatever real problems are posed by the adolescents of our time, it appears, from the point of view I will take today, that to speak of the "adolescent" and even more so of "adolescent writing" consists in interrogating oneself on the role of the imaginary and its efficacy in the care of the patient, as well as for the analyst.' Stating that she regards adolescence not as an 'age category' but 'an open psychic structure', Kristeva explains what she means by this:

> The evolution of the modern family and the ambiguity of sexual and parental roles within it, the bending or weakening of religious and moral taboos, are among the factors that make for these subjects *not* structuring themselves around a fixed pole of the forbidden, or of the law. The frontiers between differences of sex or identity, reality and fantasy, act and discourse, etc., are easily traversed without one being able to speak of perversion or borderline – and perhaps this would only be because these 'open structures' find themselves immediately echoing the fluidity, i.e. the inconsistency, of a mass media society. The adolescent is found to

[56] Kristeva, "The Adolescent Novel," 8.

> represent *naturally* this structure that can be called a 'crisis' structure only through the eyes of a stable, ideal law.[57]

'Adolescent' for Kristeva marks a highly contradictory category, bearing pressures which it struggles to sustain and make meaningful. Adolescence 'naturally' marks a condition constituted by non-recognition of constructions of likeness and difference. This condition is in some way deviant or transgressive because it recognises no boundaries, and yet it has no real transgressive power because there can be no transgression where there is no 'fixed pole', no law which marks the forbidden. For Kristeva the 'fluidity' which the adolescent open structure represents 'naturally' (another reason why it is not properly deviant) finds a correspondence in 'mass media society' so that adolescence has specific importance for the late twentieth century. Kristeva's comments suggest that adolescence is intricately bound up with what John McGowan would consider to be the circumstances on which postmodernism is predicated:

> The Western world has achieved what the high romantics wished for; a monolithic world in which everything is subsumed under a universal principle. But this monolith is capitalism itself, utterly triumphant in the West and almost completely triumphant (through economic imperialism) throughout the rest of the world. Within this monolith, willful modernist self-exclusion, the claim to stand outside, is only a delusion; the postmodernist insists that everything is included, that nothing can achieve the autonomy or distance in which the modernists found their last defense against all-encompassing capitalism.[58]

At the same time however, the adolescent's 'open structure' is founded upon some of the conditions which McGowan cites as heralding modernity:

> The challenge to Catholicism by the various Protestant sects, the challenge to Eurocentrism in the discovery of radically different societies in other parts of the globe, the challenge to religion manifested in both new scientific discoveries and new economic practices, the challenge to monarchy/obligarchy in the rise of popular, democratic agitation, and the challenge to traditional patterns of social integration in changing modes of

[57] Ibid., 9.

[58] John McGowan, *Postmodernism and its Critics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) 13.

> production and distribution and the growth of towns and cities all combine over a three-hundred-year period (1500-1800) to transform Europe.[59]

Like Kristeva, McGowan's focus is primarily on Europe rather than America. With this in mind, Kristeva's 'natural' is highly suspect, as is her use of 'adolescent' to refer to solely male characters in solely European texts, the earliest of which she mentions being written in the fifteenth century. This is a time in which many critics would argue that any conception of such a thing as 'adolescence' does not even exist – many historical accounts of adolescence argue that adolescence does not become an important developmental category until the late nineteenth century.[60] It is also a term which has been figured and constructed as distinctively American – the work of the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall is widely credited as constructing the dominant understanding of adolescence in the twentieth century, a construction which Hall relates to ideas of American national identity.[61] This is something which Kristeva does not mention although she relies on Hall's construction in her understanding of adolescence. Kristeva's use of the term 'adolescent' betrays insufficient awareness of its historical construction, which makes her own description of its 'open structure' (something nevertheless informed by specific historical factors) highly suspect.

Kristeva makes 'adolescence' work even harder. She considers the example of an adolescent girl in therapy, for whom writing functions as a therapeutic 'semiotic practice that facilitates the ultimate reorganization of psychic space, in the time before an ideally postulated maturity.' From this analysis Kristeva formulates the conclusion that 'adolescent writing (written sign + fantasy filtered through the available imaginary codes) reactivates the process of the appearance of the symbol.'[62] Kristeva has moved from the example of an adolescent who writes to the construction of a category called 'adolescent writing' in a linguistic shift which moves 'adolescent' from noun to verb, and makes it

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[59] Ibid., 4.

[60] See, for example, Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

[61] See G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1904).

[62] Kristeva, 10-11.

possible for her further contention that the novelistic genre is 'largely tributory, in its characters and the logic of its actions, to the 'adolescent' economy of writing.' Kristeva argues that works in the 'novelistic genre' would be

> the work of a perpetual subject-adolescent which, as a permanent testimony of our adolescence, would enable us to retrieve this immature state, as depressive as it is jubilatory, to which we owe, perhaps, some part of that pleasure called "aesthetic".[63]

Kristeva thus joins Oates and Molesworth in positing that adolescence is something which might be productively not grown out of, or contains qualities specific to itself which could be somehow incorporated into adult experience. She argues that

> The writer, like the adolescent, is the one who will be able to betray his parents – to turn them against him and against themselves – in order to be free. If this does not *mature* it, what an incredible loosening of the Superego, and what a recompense for the reader – this child, who, himself speechless, aspires only to be adolescent.[64]

The narrator of *I'll Take You There* does in fact partially illustrate Kristeva's conception of the writer-as-adolescent. Embodying the rebellion and revolutionary energy which are commonly attributed to adolescence, she betrays her father in order to create a new world in which she and that world have hopefully acquired a certain maturity. Kristeva's qualification 'If this does not mature it' suggests that the revolutionary aspirations of the writer-as-adolescent may not be successful, as seen in the narrator's ambiguous final invitation to 'take you there' and the fact that the means by which she attempts to create her new world are strikingly similar to the strategies she wishes to reject. This ambiguity and ambivalence about progression to maturity also dramatises and justifies Molesworth's striking suggestion that adolescence is a means by which identity (he specifies national identity, but for Oates and Kristeva his comments apply to individual identity also) is both buried and preserved. The anticipated visit to the gravestone of the narrator's parents suggests both that the narrator has reconciled herself to her past and

[63] Ibid., 11.

[64] Ibid., 14.

also that she has moved on from it (her parents are dead and buried, she cannot exist in the same relationship to them as she once did). Her invitation to 'you', who will join the narrator in reading the engravings on the tombstone, may not literally be a child, but if Oates's narrator's revolutionary action is successful, the reader will join the narrator in having made the transition to a maturity which is and is not 'adolescent'.

The connections between Oates's narrator and Kristeva's novelistic writer who is a perpetual subject-adolescent are valid in spite, and because of, Kristeva's use of exclusively male adolescent characters and writers. Oates's narrator believes that there are essential 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities. Describing the sorority building, she comments that

> The large, stately front door of the Kappa house was made of oak with an iron knocker; there was a doorbell that, when rung, emitted delicate, melodic chimes deep in the interior of the house. This "feminine" doorbell contrasted with the heavy masculine architecture and may have suggested something of the atmosphere within that was sly, subversive. (7)

This belief in essential 'masculinity' and 'femininity' reflects the kind of attitude to language which Wittgenstein warns against; this is despite the fact that the quotation marks surrounding the word 'feminine' (but not the word 'masculine') suggest that the narrator may not be entirely convinced by her own construction. Even though she is ambivalent about recognising herself within her conventional, patriarchal description of the feminine, she does not seem to make the connection between her troubled feelings and her belief in her categorisations. The narrator's philosophical interrogations do not extend to challenging constructions of gendered identity (the comment above foregrounds the older narrator's voice), and perhaps this indicates one reason why she is somewhat hostile to Wittgenstein. Oates's comments about the male adolescents who are drawn to obscenities and 'other taboos' as a 'shortcut to adulthood' is strikingly reminiscent of Kristeva's thesis in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, and suggests that male adolescent experience (as Oates sees it) might partake of a semiotic revolution which paradoxically constitutes normative progression to maturity and adulthood. This also indicates that if *I'll Take You There* is to be read as a corrective to *The Bell Jar*, *The Bell Jar* should be read as constituting a challenge to Oates's theoretical thoughts, particularly as they

extend to language and words. Esther's scepticism towards all-encompassing systems and theories, and in particular her feeling that words do not reflect some essential 'meaning', contradict the arguments of both Oates and Kristeva. This is especially important when considering that Oates's narrative of progression to adulthood and a new kind of selfhood is underpinned by the conception of a monolithic 'America'. Oates's and Molesworth's comments can be read as revealing the error Wittgenstein wishes to correct; that of believing that there are objects, recognisable and agreed upon by all, of which it can be argued that the words 'America' and 'civilisation' stand. In her critical work and in *I'll Take You There*, Oates subjects the words 'self', 'identity' and 'I' to scrutiny, but she does not subject all words to the same analysis. This has important consequences when considering that her model of a more mature selfhood, while supposedly beneficial for all, is rooted in essentialist concepts of 'America', 'civilisation', 'masculine' and 'feminine'.

Taking that narrative gesture of 'I'll take you there' out of context does in fact offer a very productive way of considering what may be involved in narrating adolescence, and might offer a way out of the bottle in which the concept of 'adolescence' is trapped – that it is trapped should be seen in the complex handlings of the concept in the work of Oates, Molesworth and Kristeva. The narrator posits a future journey to a site which is symbolic of the past – 'there' is the site of the gravestones of her parents, so that going 'there' involves a trip back to the narrator's origins, even as it is only with her presumed maturity that the trip is possible. Maturity, in fact, involves being able to revisit and assess the past. It is a gesture which is repeated in the act of telling the story itself, which requires the narrator to revisit her past; specifically, her adolescence. It is useful to hypothesise that 'there' is actually the spot which 'adolescence' as critical concept (as opposed to talking about an individual's lived experience) occupies in the thinking of the critics mentioned above. 'Adolescence', as utilised in critical debates, functions as it does in the narratives of the Southern girls in the previous chapter; it is theorised from a place and perspective other than itself. Adolescence is, moreover, not valued as it is experienced (seen in the fact that it is hardly ever used in these discussions to describe the teenagers or young people who might actually be called adolescents or be perceived as going through a phase of development called adolescence). Rather,

adolescence is valuable for whatever positive qualities are labeled 'adolescent' and which are designated as being worthy of carrying over into, or being revisited from, adulthood. This is the assumption which underlines the arguments of Oates, Molesworth, and Kristeva, even though each offers a very different interpretation of the negotiations between adolescence and adulthood.

This enables the realisation that 'adolescence' functions in these critical discussions in the way in which Wittgenstein argues that words are used (in comparison to what he sees as the mistaken belief that words express some essential meaning). 'Adolescence' functions as a tool which can be put to very different critical uses, and it is important to distinguish between the uses to which it is put. 'Adolescence' can be envisaged as a kind of counter or piece which allows these critics to make particular 'moves' in the 'game' of their own critical discourse – 'adult-as-adolescent' constitutes one such move, while 'an adolescent sensibility cloaked in an adult role' constitutes another. In this respect it is no different from any other word. However, adolescence allows particularly transgressive and liberating moves – difficulties in defining it mean that there may be no rules governing its use (in this sense Kristeva's notion of an 'open structure' is correct). Additionally, the idea that adolescence can be revisited from the perspective of adulthood, or prolonged and carried into adulthood, troubles what could be called, in Jean Lyotard's terms, the grand narrative which insists that 'We are supposed to grow up'. Lyotard could have been describing Oates's narrator when he says that

> A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an *event*; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization (*mise en oeuvre*) always begin too soon. *Post modern* would

> have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).[65]

The story and the action which are emblematised in the novel's title and the narrator's final, qualified promise ('I'll take you there') constitute an 'event' which is undertaken in the effort to formulate new 'rules' about individual and national identity, and maturity. However, Fredric Jameson's assessment that 'Lyotard is in reality quite unwilling to posit a postmodernist stage radically different from the period of high modernism and involving a fundamental historical and cultural break with this last' could also be applied to Oates and her artistic theories.[66] The transition she outlines between different perceptions of selfhood could be characterised as a shift from a modern world-view (selves are isolated, autonomous) to a postmodern world-view (autonomy is not possible). It is a postmodern world-view which retains much of the modern – the role of the artist and the artist's power to change society are privileged, or at the very least not questioned, while the difficulty of acknowledging or progressing towards an autonomous self raises the question of whether the break from modern to postmodern is ever made. In contrast, it could be argued that if 'incredulity toward metanarratives' is the defining feature of postmodernism, then it is Esther, rather than Oates's narrator, who emblematises the postmodern and its potentially self-destructive qualities, since Esther is incredulous towards *all* narratives – most especially the one that says 'We are supposed to grow up'.[67] Whereas Oates's essays and the narrator of *I'll Take You There* express credulity towards this narrative, however, the reluctance to dispense with everything which is labeled 'adolescent' reveals that that credulity is tested, because it is unclear what it means to be grown up and whether being grown up is a good thing.

All of these tensions find their locus in that term 'adolescence'. 'Adolescence' or 'adolescent' are words which provoke Wittgenstein's shift to the philosophical stance he forges in *Philosophical Investigations* – his realisation that there are some words which

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[65] Jean Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, foreword, Fredric Jameson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 81.

[66] Frederic Jameson, foreword, *The Postmodern Condition*, xvi.

[67] Lyotard, xxiv.

cannot be accounted for in the picture that 'Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.' This goes some way towards understanding why 'adolescent' is so frequently enlisted as a metaphor for both individual (adult?) and American national identity, even though the constructions themselves (what it means to be adolescent) vary according to various critics. The crucial difference is that whereas critics use the term 'adolescent' with varying degrees of awareness that it can be used to describe almost anything, they do not use terms like 'America' in the same way. Discussing Aristotle's theory of metaphor, Paul Ricoeur contends that

> Metaphor occurs in an order already constituted in terms of genus and species, and in a game whose relation-rules – subordination, co-ordination, proportionality or equality of relationships – are already given. Second, metaphor consists in a violation of this order and this game. In giving to a genus the name of a species, to the fourth term of the proportional relationship the name of the second term, and vice versa, one simultaneously recognizes and transgresses the logical structure of language.[68]

Ricoeur's contention – which is heavily indebted to Wittgenstein – well describes the manner in which the term 'adolescence' functions in the work of several literary critics. The definitions of 'adolescence' and 'adolescent' offered by the various critics here are made for the purposes of recognising and transgressing canonical narratives of growth and development, as well as to make comments about what might constitute national identity. Etymologically, metaphor means 'to carry' and this also aptly fits with the way 'adolescence' is made to bear both a vast range of meanings and the way in which critics use the term to both preserve and bury elements which they believe to be valuable or invaluable to the theories they wish to offer. 'Adolescence', for Oates and for Molesworth, is indispensable to constructions of what they perceive as 'American' even if their difficulty in describing what is 'adolescent' functions to trouble and undermine

[68] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czeny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) 21.

precisely those constructions of what is (or should constitute) 'America' or 'the American'.

Toni Cade Bambara's "Sweet Town" and Alice Hoffman's *Property Of* offer highly individual engagements with some of the themes which adolescence has been enlisted to discuss in these various critical discourses. Bambara's earliest short story, "Sweet Town" was published in *Vendome* in 1959. The story is included in Bambara's first collection of stories, *Gorilla, My Love*, published in 1972. Elliot Butler-Evans situates the collection within the 'broad context of black nationalist fiction in the 1960s', even though several of the stories predate that movement, one which Butler-Evans summarises as follows:

> In the mid 1960s, narratives emerged that significantly affected the production, reception and criticism of Afro-American literature for nearly a decade. Under the broad rubric of the Black Aesthetic, these texts focused on the semiotic mediations of Black "reality" by Black artists and critics, challenged and deconstructed received definitions of literature, and, perhaps above all, were in opposition to the dominant literature.[69]

Butler-Evans claims that three aims crucial to this artistic enterprise were the production of a 'counter-discourse' which attempted to displace dominant constructions of 'Black "reality"' through self-representation, production of narratives of a mythical Black nation, and experimentation with form and genre (with a particular emphasis on oral or performative forms) in an effort to highlight the powers of art to effect political change.[70] Against this context, Butler-Evans contends that the focus on female experience and development in Bambara's collection 'disrupts and often preempts the stories' primary focus on classic realism and nationalism.' Elizabeth Muther has convincingly demonstrated how this contention, as well as Butler-Evans's use of terms such as 'submerged' and 'subtext' to describe the female experiences in Bambara's collection is debatable, given the fact that the use of female narrators ensures that a primary focus is on gendered experience. She makes the important point that Butler-Evans's analysis

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[69] Elliot Butler-Evans, *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) 19-20.

[70] Ibid., 20.

suggests that he regards raced and gendered experiences as disparate experiences, and race as more important than gender.[71] Although the Black Aesthetic movement did privilege masculine experience and marginalised women (in this sense female experience was 'submerged'), Bambara's work does not counter the sexism of the movement by foregrounding 'gender' over 'race', as Muther comes close to arguing. Rather, Bambara's stories show how gendered and raced experiences are linked, in an effort to reconceptualise what Muther calls '[Bambara's] own cultural nationalism' – a more inclusive nationalism.[72] In addition, "Sweet Town" reveals that that inclusivity may extend even beyond a focus on African-American and 'national' experience.

That Bambara's work concerns itself with a nationalist discourse indicates how it might be regarded as existing in counterpoint to Oates's theoretical thoughts. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Bambara says of her artistic approach that

> I want to lift up some usable truths – like the fact that the simple act of cornrowing one's hair is radical in a society that defines beauty as blonde tresses blowing in the wind; that staying centered in the best of one's own cultural tradition is hip, is sane, is perfectly fine despite all claims to universality-through-Anglo-Saxonizing and other madnesses.[73]

Oates's thoughts on the romantic or adolescent immature self which Plath's work and the character of Esther apparently emblematise betrays exactly the kind of Anglo-Sazonising of which Bambara is wary. Oates's construction of 'civilisation' is marked by white, Anglo-Saxon history, which means that if her hypothetical descriptions of the artist, American selfhood, and adolescent selves may not properly address female experience, they may fail to address African-American experience, something else which troubles her entire theory of progress and maturity. Despite this, Oates and Bambara share important similarities. Bambara says that

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[71] Elizabeth Muther, "Bambara's Feisty Girls: Resistance Narratives in *Gorilla, My Love*," *African American Review* 36.3 (2002): 451.

[72] Ibid., 448.

[73] "Toni Cade Bambara," *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (Harpenden: Oldcastle, 1985) 18.

> What I strive to do in writing, and in general [. . .] is to examine philosophical, historical, political, metaphysical truths, or rather assumptions. I try to trace them through various contexts to see if they work. They may be traps. They may inhibit growth.[74]

Bambara and Oates, then, are both interested in what constitutes 'growth' – what might constitute maturity and self-development, and how this might affect individuals and America. Whereas Oates perceives herself as searching for 'truths' by exposing myths – and therefore implies that she believes there is such a thing as 'truth', Bambara wants to examine the uses to which 'truth' is put in American society to discover if the truths are valid or if they only serve the interests of particular groups. If Oates's approach implies a belief in the 'picture' of language, Bambara's approach implies a belief in the theory of language in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

"Sweet Town" can be read in light of these comments. The shortest and earliest story in Bambara's collection, it tends to receive little critical attention, perhaps because it enlists the African-American vernacular and describes its community to a lesser degree than the other, later stories. That lack of critical attention may also suggest that the story is perceived as having a less overtly political agenda than Bambara's later work. Butler-Evans argues that Kit, the narrator, finds that her 'idealized vision of eroticism and romance is completely shattered when she is forced to recognize the crude opportunism and cynicism that mark a vision that is antithetical to it.'[75] Nancy D. Hargrove argues that the story concerns the 'enduringly human and universal experience of disillusionment: the failure or disappointment of young love.'[76] It is imperative to note that Butler-Evans's 'romance' does not find a correlation in Oates's 'romantic'. Butler-Evans's 'romance' and the 'delightful romanticism'[77] Hargrove detects in Kit refer more closely to what John Stevens calls certain 'experiences' (emotions such as love, honour, terror and adoration; events and motifs such as the quest and an idealised love relationship) and

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[74] Ibid., 23.

[75] Butler-Evans, 100.

[76] Nancy D. Hargrove, "Youth in Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love*," *Southern Quarterly* 22.1 (1983): 90.

[77] Ibid.

'genres' (such as medieval romances and the Gothic novel).[78] It is in this sense that any discussions of the term 'romantic' in this story should be understood. However, both Butler-Evans and Hargrove misread and simplify the story in their contentions that it is purely about loss and betrayal – "Sweet Town" is far more complex.

The story's opening paragraph makes its narrator's standpoint clear:

> It is hard to believe that there was only one spring and one summer apiece that year, my fifteenth year. It is hard to believe that I so quickly squandered my youth in the sweet town playground of the sunny city, that wild monkeybardom of my fourth-grade youthhood. However, it was so. (121)

Kit recounts her story from an unspecified point in the future. The year and location in which the action takes place are also unspecified, though the other stories about young girls in this volume describe their experiences on the streets of Harlem, New York. Bambara says that these stories constitute 'what I would call on-the-block, in-the-neighbourhood, back-glance pieces.'[79] The stories can be read as blending the specific ('on-the-block' means that they describe urban experience) and the general (it might be any block; the experiences described are supposed to be recognisable). That 'back-glance' is more ambiguous. Few of the first-person stories position their narrator as speaking at a remove from narrated experience. "Sweet Town" is one of the few exceptions to this, in that it does position the narrator as speaking retrospectively, although this story is very similar to *The Bell Jar* in that it is singularly unmarked by retrospective comment and analysis, a feature which is bound up with the narrator's attitudes towards maturity, as with Esther's narrative.

Kit's opening paragraph indicates that her story celebrates youth and laments the fact that it has been 'squandered'. The reference to 'wild monkeybardom' testifies to the delight in play with which her narrative is infused. The following paragraph of Kit's narrative describes a letter she writes to her mother:

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[78] John Stevens, *Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches* (London: Hutchinson, 1973) 16.

[79] Tate, 24.

> "Dear Mother" – I wrote one day on her bathroom mirror with a candle sliver – "please forgive my absence and my decay and overlook the freckled dignity and pockmarked integrity plaguing me this season." (121)

The reasons for Kit's absence from her family home are accounted for by her 'pockmarked integrity'; puberty signifies her adolescence. With Kit's adolescence comes a desire for independence and a need to explore the world beyond her home. She returns back to her mother's apartment to 'escape the heat', showing how Kit is nevertheless attached to her mother and home and slightly ambivalent about making ventures beyond it. However, Kit's sense of play is shared by her mother, who returns her letters in similar inventive ways. Kit writes 'mad cryptic notes on the kitchen sink with charred matches' (121). Her mother responds by writing on the kitchen table with cake frosting – ""My dear, mad, perverse young girl, kindly take care and paint the fire escape in your leisure . . ."" (121). Kit notes 'And as if we ever owned a fire escape' (122). Her mother's reply, while revealing their close relationship, also hints that the reason, as Kit says, that 'we so seldom saw each other' (121) is not only because of Kit's new independence but because her mother is working while Kit indulges in 'leisure'. The mention of domestic chores and of the absent fire escape constitutes a reminder of the 'reality' of their working-class lives, although this is a story in which what Butler-Evans perceives as 'classic realism' is not foregrounded. The chaos and upheaval caused by Kit's adolescence is confirmed when Kit states that 'I even sometimes wrote her a note on paper' (121) – the world which she inhabits in adolescence is one in which unremarkable events are unusual. Kit and her mother inscribe on the domestic space they inhabit, signaling their imaginative power and agency to construct their surroundings – perhaps they are Oatesian artists who work with the means available to them in order to construct their own 'culture'.

Kit describes what she perceives to be the conditions responsible for her behavior:

> There is a certain glandular disturbance all beautiful, wizardy, great people have second sight to, that trumpets through the clothes, sets the nerves up for the kill, and torments the senses to orange explosure. It has something to do with the cosmic interrelationship between the cellular attunement of certain designated organs and the firmental correlation with the axis shifts of the globe. My mother calls it sex and my brother says it's groin-fever time. But then, they were always ones for brevity. Anyway, that's the way

> it was. And in this spring race, the glands always win and the muses and the brain core must step aside to ride in the trunk with the spare tire. (122)

The feelings Kit describes concern the awakening of sexuality which corresponds with puberty. But the description attributes physiological change in the body – 'cellular attunement' – to changes in the seasons. The setting of the story in spring and summer does not provide merely a metaphorical correspondence with the changes in Kit's body but actually seems to cause those changes. This suggests that Kit's puberty could only have arrived under these specific seasonal circumstances – or that the feelings and behavior Kit exhibits have nothing to do with puberty and adolescence. Her mother and brother, after all, do not call Kit's condition 'adolescence' but relate it purely to sexuality, even though neither mother nor brother is described as being affected in a similar way that summer. Her vague explanation – 'something to do with' contrasts with the more authoritative 'That's the way it was', in which the narrator ensures the authenticity of her recalled experience precisely by admitting her incomprehension and inability to describe it.

The confusion is only exacerbated as the story progresses. As the above comment indicates, Kit feels that the combination of summer and physiological changes cause her to lose her reason – a battle rages between mind and body, and 'the glands always win'. Kit describes how, as a consequence of this, 'I bent my youth to the season's tempo and proceeded to lose my mind' (122). Kit cites this loss of reason as responsible for her consequent attachment to B. J., an adolescent boy she meets. B. J. is described as 'wearing his handsomeness like an article of clothing, for an effect, and wearing his friend Eddie like a necessary pimple of adolescence' (122). Kit's implication that pimples and pockmarks are 'necessary' in adolescence, effectively a badge of membership, again suggests that 'adolescence' could be the explanatory term for her own condition. B. J. and Eddie share Kit's feelings – she describes how they share 'such we-encounters with the phenomenal world at large as a two-strawed mocha, duo-jaywalking summons, twosome whistling scenes, and other such like we-experiences' (122). B. J. suggests that they '" [. . .] hitch to the coast and get into films"' (122) and Kit comments that 'We liked to make bold directionless overtures to action like those crazy teenagers you're always running into on the printed page or MGM movies' (123). Kit and B. J. style themselves

on the normative view of postwar adolescence as portrayed in film and literature – that the 'crazy teenagers' are generally white and middle-class is not something they appear to take into consideration, though it also shows how Kit and B. J. are confident about their own talents and ability to succeed. Kit says '"We were made for celluloid – beautifully chiseled are we, not to mention well-buffed"' (123).

Kit, B. J. and Eddie spend the summer together, increasingly isolated from friends who 'couldn't keep the pace' (123). Kit's youth is abruptly brought to an end when B. J. announces that Eddie has stolen money from his grandmother and so the two boys are going to leave the city. He wakes Kit at night, throwing pebbles at her window, to tell her the news. The change this news causes in Kit is reflected in the fact that she cannot speak honestly about what she feels:

> "Look here," I said with anger. "I don't know why the hell you want to hang around with that nothing." I was really angry but sorry too. It wasn't at all what I wanted to say. I would have liked to have said, "Apollo, we are the only beautiful people in the world. And because our genes are so great, our kid can't help but burst through the human skin into cosmic significance." I wanted to say, "You will bear in mind that I am great, brilliant, talented, good-looking, and am going to college at fifteen. I have the most interesting complexes ever, and despite Freud and Darwin I have made a healthy adjustment as an earthworm." But I didn't tell him this. Instead, I revealed that petty, small, mean side of me by saying "Eddie is a shithead." (124-125)

The flight of B. J. and Eddie is made because of criminal activity, not corresponding to the romantic and ambitious 'overtures to action' which have previously been conceived. Both that imaginary romantic flight and the fugitive departure in reality are instigated by B. J., something which highlights the fact that Kit has not been in control over events. B. J. says '"It's been real great. The summer and you . . . but . . ."' (124), showing how his decision to leave calls a halt both to the summer and to Kit's perception of self. It is perhaps for this reason that Kit cannot express herself in the same vein of confidence and exuberance which has characterised her narrative so far. Sentiments which would not previously have been out of place when spoken aloud are now presented as her internal thoughts, and Kit's flat and unproductive responses indicate how she is not yet equipped to converse in the new world into which she has been thrust. B. J.'s decision to leave has

effectively functioned to contain and suppress Kit's romantic discourse (B. J.'s actions in fact function rather like a bell jar, sealing Kit off from the world because her vision is no longer in harmony with it). He does not extinguish that discourse altogether, though, as critics have failed to note. The only difference is that Kit's thoughts are not spoken aloud. The responses Kit would like to make regard the future she and B. J. might have had together and then function to affirm her own worth. Kit's reference to the earthworm is extremely significant. Darwin's work celebrates the earthworm and argues that its constant labor is vitally important and heroic – the earthworm recycles waste material, transforming what has been rejected and perceived as valueless into something useful. The earthworm's work ensures that the world continues to be habitable and fertile. Its labour is also unacknowledged. Indeed, Adam Phillips demonstrates how Darwin's exposition of the earthworm's crucial role provides a means of rethinking conventional systems of value.[80] In claiming that she has adjusted 'as an earthworm' Kit suggests that she has the capacity to perform a similar vital (though unacknowledged) role in society. That she has made this progression 'despite' Darwin and Freud indicates her awareness that she does not conform to the theories of female development expressed in Freud's work, and possesses the ability to survive even if she lives in a world in which narratives exist which do not attribute to her the qualities that would make her most 'fit' to do so – she is young, female, and African-American, not white, male, and adult.

Kit's story ends with her adolescent self imagining how her future will turn out:

> Maybe we will meet next summer, I told the mailboxes. Or maybe I'll quit school and bum around the country. And in every town I'll ask for them as the hotel keeper feeds the dusty, weary traveler that I'll be. "Have you seen two guys, one great, the other acned? If you see 'em, tell 'em Kit's looking for them." And I'd bandage up my cactus-torn feet and sling the knapsack into place and be off. And in the next town, having endured dust storms, tornadoes, earthquakes, and coyotes, I'll stop at the saloon and inquire. "Yeh, they travel together," I'd say in a voice somewhere between W. C. Fields and Gladys Cooper. "Great buddies. Inseparable. Tell 'em for me that Kit's still a great kid." (125)

[80] Adam Phillips, *Darwin's Worms* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

Kit's imagined trip West and her use of the quest narrative involves appropriation of motifs which are usually associated with masculine and perhaps specifically American development. Hargrove notes the appropriation but only comments that as Kit makes them 'her romantic nature briefly takes over' so that Hargrove does not examine what such appropriations might entail.[81] In these appropriations Kit has the central role – 'And legends'll pop up about me and my quest. Great long twelve-bar blues ballads with eighty-nine stanzas' (125). That the legends are conveyed via the medium of blues ballads shows that Kit remains rooted in her African-American culture and heritage, even as she engages with canonical narratives which are conventionally figured white and masculine. This complex intermingling and rewriting of both African-American narratives and Western patriarchal narratives is a central feature in this story, and one which has been ignored by critics. "Sweet Town" occupies a complex position in this volume, both because of its early composition date and because more than any other story in the volume, it includes the white world and its narratives. Kit shows her awareness of classical European texts – she mentions Apollo, Pan, Penelope – as well as the canonical male developmental narratives listed above. The actors she names above, on which she models her voice, are white. Freud and Darwin are white and European. When B. J. throws pebbles at her window she laughs because 'It wasn't a casement window and there was no garden underneath' (124). She describes how 'I went to the window to see who I was going to share my balcony scene with' (124), parodying the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. It is in this appropriation and rewriting of texts and genres that Kit shows her adjustment as the earthworm. She works to recycle and re-create texts in order to accurately recount her experiences, something which is also dramatised in her acts of writing with unusual materials and on unusual surfaces.

"Sweet Town" may thus seem to sit oddly in a volume which is generally perceived to foreground a Black Nationalist agenda which revises the masculinist bias of the dominant nationalist discourse. Here, in fact, it seems that Kit envisages a far more integrationist world, seen in her borrowings from both African-American and Western European cultural forms. The final sentence of her narrative reads 'Days other than the here and now, I told myself, will be dry and sane and sticky with the rotten apricots

[81] Hargrove, 91.

oozing slowly in the sweet time of my betrayed youth' (125). That 'I told myself' marks the first moment at which Kit engages in introspection in this story. B. J.'s departure and the betrayal of her youth have facilitated a developed sense of self-analysis. This may be something she is forced to do because her thoughts can no longer be spoken aloud to a receptive audience, but her introspection, even while possibly suggesting alienation, shows that she has developed the ability to scrutinise herself.

Butler-Evans's and Hargrove's readings of the story as one in which Kit is disabused of her romantic world-view overstate the case. The oozing of the apricots happens 'slowly', in a lengthy process that can be usefully regarded as a metaphor for the way in which Kit's romantic vision trickles into and infuses her older narrating voice, meaning that her youth may be betrayed but that it has not been lost. Hargrove's comment that Kit's romantic nature 'briefly takes over' is inaccurate, in that it too has never been lost. The oozing of the apricots also suggests a process of decay which, given the recycling and regenerative powers which Kit claims for herself (like the earthworm) means that Kit can transform her feelings of betrayal and her youthful experience into something more positive – seen in the existence of her narrative itself, which recycles and transforms her experience in language. This can be further illustrated by the way in which Kit plays with and transforms words. Her use of language directly contradicts Ruth Elizabeth Burks's argument that

> while Bambara uses language to capture the speech pattern of the characters she idiomatically places in their time and space, Bambara eschews language, words, rhetoric, as the modus operandi for the people to attain their freedom.[82]

Notably, Burks does not address "Sweet Town" at all – a story which entirely refutes her contention (with regard to the entire volume of stories) that 'Words are only barriers to communication', as it is entirely through language that Kit expresses freedom and recaptures (or retains) her youth. Kit's linguistic improvisation both links her to the blues ballad tradition in which she imagines her quest being related and foreshadows the

[82] Ruth Elizabeth Burks, "From Baptism to Resurrection: Toni Cade Bambara and the Incongruity of Language," *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)* ed. Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 49.

linguistic strategies of Alex in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). Both Bambara's and Burgess's narrators are fifteen years old, both use language as a means of suggesting their alienation from their world and as a subversive means of resisting and rebelling against mechanisms of social control. Reading one of her mother's notes – 'All the *i*'s were dotted with marmalade, the *t*'s were crossed with orange rind', Kit comments that:

> Here was a sight to carry with one forever in the back of the screaming eyeballs somewhere. I howled for at least five minutes out of sheer madity and vowed to love her completely. [. . .] "Zweep," I yelled, not caring a damn for intelligibility and decided that if ever I was to run away from home, I'd take her with me. (122)

By the time Kit narrates, she does care about intelligibility. She is not as alienated from her family as Burgess's Alex (even if she imagines herself alone on her quest for B. J., earlier she imagines taking her mother with her, showing the importance of her relationships with family). Her linguistic inventiveness is more limited than Alex's (words are more recognisable in her narrative than his), and her transformation of words is primarily undertaken not in order to distance herself from others but to illustrate the intensity and exuberance of her adolescence. It is critical to note that the older Kit, narrating, has not lost this ability to play with words, and is able to preserve her adolescent voice. In so doing, she has retained the ability to reinvent (and the joy in doing so) which marked her adolescence. It would seem, then, that Kit has not entirely left her adolescence behind, since she retains some of its traits – most particularly, her recycling and transformative powers. Her nostalgia and regret for her youth's passing not only valourises youth and adolescence – privileging it over some more adult, mature and older stage, but in fact continues the romantic strain of her narrative. In Molesworth's terms, Kit tells a story in which her youth is buried even though the act of telling the story preserves that youth. In fact, it could be argued that in her act of narrating, Kit presents a recycled romanticism, in which the powers of the imagination remain crucial to her creative work.

As previously discussed, the version of romanticism in this story is one which bears little resemblance to the romanticism which Oates describes. However, this is not to

say that the recycled romanticism in Bambara's story cannot be usefully discussed in relation to Oates's construction of the 'romantic'. While generally designating the historical/cultural/ artistic movement called 'Romanticism' which flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Oates's attitude to the term 'romantic' reveals an ambivalence mirrored in her treatment of the term 'adolescence', and is additionally complicated by the fact that Oates's 'romantic' occasionally designates the kind of 'romantic' discussed by Butler-Evans and Hargrove. The kind of romanticism of which Plath is apparently representative is negative; 'romantic' in Oates's essay on Plath is used to designate the privileging of the isolated or alienated individual which marks the Romantic movement. Oates claims that this self is mythical, adolescent, and dying out by the mid-twentieth century. However, the kind of romantic vision which Oates believes to be expressed by Thoreau is portrayed in more positive terms (and also used to describe forms of rebellion against the world which Oates also calls 'adolescent'). Oates's 'romantic' receives its most positive treatment when used to describe 'the romance of adolescence', as quoted earlier:

> As a young girl, I was fascinated by questions I did not know were archetypal philosophical questions – clichés of the intellect, one might call them. The night sky greatly interested me; the "Universe"; vast concepts of space, time; the mystery of human personality. Such questions, which even cosmologists falter in addressing, are most intense in us in early adolescence; afterward, we are supposed to grow up and forget them. Perhaps the writer – this writer, at least – is simply one who, so long as a question remains unanswered, cannot forget it, thus cannot repudiate the romance of adolescence.

The 'romance of adolescence' is expressed in the questing and interrogative spirit of an adolescent. The adolescent refuses to relinquish this spirit although society suggests that this must be done in order for her to grow up. In this act of rebellion, the adolescent expresses a kind of individualism which Oates elsewhere criticises. This positive treatment of 'romance' occurs within the context of an autobiographical recollection (the adolescent here is Oates herself; her retention of the 'romance of adolescence' is offered as a positive quality which is important for 'the writer'). Also, this 'romance' bears a resemblance to the 'romantic nature' Butler-Evans and Hargrove detect in Kit.

Incidentally, the 'philosophical questions' noted here are precisely the questions which so trouble the narrator of *I'll Take You There* and so provide another reason why that narrator should not be regarded as having made unproblematic progression to the more mature selfhood Oates favours. These examples show how Oates does not interrogate what can clearly be seen as her own plural romanticisms. Not only this, but the portrayals of female adolescent experience in Plath's, Bambara's and Hoffman's texts are engaged much more self-consciously and carefully with Romantic and romantic motifs. The engagements with various 'romanticisms' in these texts are performed in order to explore female experience in a manner which provides another useful revision of, or counter to, Oates's thoughts. Most powerfully, they show Oates's construction of the dying romantic tradition to which she thinks Plath belongs to be both premature (in the sense that it is not in fact dying out; Oates's claim is made too early) and pre-mature, in that *The Bell Jar*, "Sweet Town" and *Property Of* offer more complex (mature?) reworking and recyclings of Romantic and romantic motifs than those offered by Oates.

Richard R. Lingeman opens his review of Alice Hoffman's *Property Of* by asking

> Whatever happened to Youth? The pangs of adolescence, the torrents of spring? Has the sturm und drang blown over? Has the politicization of the '60's made it obsolete – or the Vietnam war, irrelevant? Or now has it retreated into careerism or drugs? Or been renounced in exchange for the peace of mind of Jesus or even the Rev. Sun Myung Moon?[83]

Lingeman contends that *Property Of* functions to 'provide some clues' to these questions but does not actually specify what those clues are. The question he raises and the way in which he formulates it, however, are important. Lingeman understands adolescence in conventional terms – as a time of emotional upheaval and turmoil which is marked by intense feelings. His characterisation of adolescence owes much to Hall's construction of adolescence, a construction which in turn owes much to the Romantic celebration of the isolated, alienated self.[84] His question, 'What has happened to Youth?' even seems to find

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[83] Richard R. Lingeman, "Books of the Times," rev. of *Property Of*, by Alice Hoffman, *New York Times Book Review* 14 Jul. 1977: 16.

[84] Many critics have noted the influence of Romantic thought on Hall's construction of adolescence; Dorothy Ross, Kirk Curnutt and Molly Childers are only three.

an echo in the bafflement and romantic nostalgia with which Bambara's narrator laments what she perceives as the rapid passing of her youth and adolescence.

Lingeman also subscribes to the idea that adolescence, while transhistorical, is marked by events in the historical moment in which adolescence is experienced, and that adolescence is generic, informed by the same events and manifesting itself in the same way in everyone in that particular historical moment (something with which Oates's thoughts on adolescence would seem to concur). In addition to all this, he struggles to understand how adolescence might be informed by the moment in which he writes (the late seventies), and the dominant tone in his opening paragraph suggests that he believes adolescence might not exist at all. He suggests that it has 'blown over', that it is possibly 'obsolete', 'irrelevant'; it has 'retreated' or been 'renounced'. Whether Lingeman thinks that the possible disappearance of adolescence – or the qualities which he calls adolescent – has resulted in cultural progress or decline is unclear. That Lingeman attributes to adolescence a certain kind of immature revolutionary power can be seen in the fact that he thinks the civil rights movements of the Sixties may have rendered it obsolete – more serious and weighty issues such as Vietnam have made it meaningless. Yet again, if adolescence does exist it may have been buried in the pursuit of a career, an act which seems adult and more mature, in keeping with the more serious nature of the times. Finally, these adolescent qualities may have been rendered ineffective by drugs, suggesting a withdrawal from the adult world which could be perceived as immature.

Lingeman's confusion about how to characterise the moment in which he lives is mirrored in his confusion about adolescence – it may or may not exist and if it doesn't exist this may or may not be a good thing. This confusion is echoed in Bambara's comparison of the sixties to the seventies:

> The energy of the seventies is very different from that of the previous decade. There's a different agenda and a different mode of struggle. The demystification of American-style "democracy," the bold analytical and passionate attention to our condition, status and process – the whole experience of that era led us to a peculiar spot in time, the seventies. Some say it's been a period of retreat, of amnesia, of withdrawal into narcissism. I'm not so sure. I'd say the seventies is characterized by a refocusing on the self, which is, after all, the main instrument for self, group and social transformation.

> [. . .] There's a difference between the apathy/retreat characterization of the seventies and what's actually going on, at least as I'm experiencing it on campuses, in prisons, in community groups. We didn't *seem* to be in a period of intense political activity as we defined its terms in the sixties. We were trained by the sixties to perceive activity, to assess movement and progress, in particular modes – confrontation, uncompromising rhetoric, muscle flexing, press conferences, manifestoes, visible groups, quasi-underground groups, hitting the streets, singing, marching, etc. On the other hand, the workings of the seventies, while less visible and less audible and less easy to perceive, to nail down and define, were no less passionate and no less significant. People attempted to transform themselves cell by cell, to organize block by block. Both seem to me essential prerequisites to broad-based organizing and clear-headed strategizing.[85]

Lingeman's difficulty in characterising both adolescence and the moment in which he lives implicitly suggests that adolescence unproblematically reflects the moment in which it is experienced. This is paradoxical, given that the emotional intensity and upheaval which mark his construction of adolescence signal an individual's turbulent relationship with the world in which he or she lives. *Property Of* reflects this tension through its focus on the development of an unnamed narrator who is and is not representative of her times. If the seventies are concerned with a renewed focus on the self, then the narrator's tale of how she comes to recognise the value of an independent self indicates how she emblematises what Bambara interprets as the distinguishing feature of the decade in which the narrator grows up. But the world which the narrator inhabits exists is outside the law, and she does not present her experiences as representative of anyone other than herself. Anonymous, her race and ethnicity are never divulged.

In addition to this, the narrator's story lacks detail which makes it possible to determine the circumstances and date at which she narrates, or the precise year in which the events she describes take place. The events in *Property Of* take place largely in the Avenue, a street on the fringes of New York City. The narrator describes how her seventeen-year-old self falls in love with McKay, leader of a gang called the Orphans, which occupies the North end of the Avenue and engages in warfare with its rivals in the South end of the Avenue, the Pack. The world they inhabit is one in which adults are

[85] Tate, 13.

almost entirely absent, as is any concrete detail about the economic or social circumstances which may be responsible for the existence of the gangs. The only adult who appears to be trusted by the Orphans, Monty, tells the narrator that he and McKay's uncle, Red Stuart, came to New York from Ireland together, suggesting that the Orphans may be a gang of young people descended from Irish immigrants (48-49). However, the names of former and current gang members and the girls associated with the gang (Alf Cantinni, Jose, Irene La Loy) suggest that the Orphans are comprised of individuals belonging to various ethnic minorities and whose common allegiance, other than their socio-economic disenfranchisement and their youth, may be territorial. In this respect, the Orphans are unlike most youth gangs. Claudia Durst Johnson writes that the large majority of gangs are 'rigidly, narrowly ethnic, and their enemies are those unlike themselves'.[86] Johnson also writes that by the 1970s, Los Angeles rather than New York was becoming the American city most synonymous with youth gangs. She argues that the conception of New York as 'the capital of youth gangs' is influenced by 'the romanticized stage play and film *West Side Story*', and it would appear that the lack of precise information regarding the factors which cause the existence of the gangs in the novel allows just such a romanticized treatment of them.[87]

In contrast to Oates's narrative, which ends with the phrase 'I'll take you there', the narrator of *Property Of* opens her narrative with the phrase, "'Look,' I said, 'I'm going with you'" (3). The narrator is talking to Danny the Sweet, a member of the Orphans. The occasion is the Night of the Wolf, a night when members of the Orphans hunt members of the Pack, and she wants to attend the Orphans' club meeting so that she can meet McKay. Taking these concluding and opening lines out of context, it is possible to see how *Property Of* can be read as engaging in dialogue with the values and pattern of self-development detailed in *I'll Take You There*. 'Look, I'm going with you' exists in discordant relationship to the invitation 'I'll take you there' and is suggestive of the manner in which certain strong parallels exist between Oates's and Hoffman's texts, even though Hoffman's text presents a challenge towards and modification of the hypothesis regarding maturity and development in Oates's.

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[86] Claudia Durst Johnson, *Youth Gangs in Literature* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004) xxv.

[87] Ibid., xii.

In an article on Hoffman's work, Terri Brown-Davidson praises the 'Romantic individuality of [Hoffman's] vision, the delightful quirkiness of details celebratory of her "cult of the individual" [. . .]'.[88] However, she excludes *Property Of* from this praise, describing the novel as 'insistently literal, and thus ultimately stiff, wooden, in its rendering of life.'[89] Oddly, Brown-Davidson claims that this 'literalness' is expressed most clearly (most detrimentally, in other words) in Hoffman's 'lack of skill as a realist'. Brown-Davidson's comments are worthy of detailed examination, as they reflect some of the novel's dominant concerns even as they constitute a serious misreading of *Property Of*:

> [Hoffman's] lack of skill as a realist, in *Property Of*, becomes most evident through her inability to accurately record any world she sees; she doesn't record but reports through clichés, secondhand observations, reflected here in the regrettable spareness of her vision, the thinness of her style.[90]

Brown-Davidson then quotes a passage from the novel to illustrate this point. The passage is taken from the narrator's first meeting with the Orphans:

> The Sweet was right: the Orphans ignored me, but I could feel the eyes of the Property as they turned occasionally from McKay to steal a glance at me. All right, I was looking also. I recognized Starry. Her reputation as a loner, as a fighter, as the Number One Property, was known all along the Avenue. Tonight her pale hair was pushed away from her face and she wore no make-up. She looked no more than fourteen, though she was probably closer to twenty. The way she drank from a bottle of tequila, the way her pale eyes surveyed the room, made it obvious that she was no child. (12)

Brown-Davidson then comments on the passage:

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[88] Terri Brown-Davidson, "'To Build Is to Dwell': The Beautiful, Strange Architectures of Alice Hoffman's Novels," *Twayne Companion to Contemporary Literature in English*, vol. 1, ed. R. H. W. Dillard et al (Gale: New York, 2002) 461. This essay was originally published in *The Hollins Critic*, 33.5 (1996).

[89] Ibid., 464.

[90] Ibid.

> This passage suffers from what I like to call "the adolescent-narrator fallacy": the belief that, for the sake of verisimilitude, a novel written from the perspective of an adolescent narrator must be recorded with the diction and perspectives appropriate to such a narrator.[91]

Brown-Davidson's criticisms of the novel centre on the concept of adolescence, rather like the way in which Oates's critical theories find their tensions in Oates's treatment of the concept of 'adolescence'. Brown-Davidson's criticisms of the voice of Hoffman's adolescent narrator betray an assumption that an adolescent voice is immature, both stylistically and developmentally unformed and deficient. Indeed, Browne-Davidson goes on to suggest that the 'belief' she discusses above is 'directly at odds with the empathetic reach of *art*, which insists that the effect is more important than the literal reality' so that in addition to offering a questionable definition of 'art' and condemning the novel for failing to adhere to this definition, Browne-Davidson's comments are rendered even more simplistic when considering that she equates Hoffman's vision (a faulty vision, in Brown-Davidson's eyes) with that of her narrator. That there might be reasons for portraying a narrator who reports, who uses cliché, is never suggested. In actual fact, the description of the 'spareness' of the narrator's vision does that voice and vision a great disservice. Words and narration are central to the story of identity and development which the narrator of *Property Of* relates, and the narrator's 'style' and 'vision' can be read as illustrating a particular recycled Romanticism (and romanticism) which Brown-Davidson fails to recognise. Most critically, the flaws in Browne-Davidson's discussion are caused by her failure to question what 'adolescent' means. The difficulty of defining 'adolescent' is hinted at in the passage from the novel which she quotes, in which Starry looks no more than fourteen, might be nearer twenty, but exhibits behaviour which proclaims her to be 'no child'. Browne-Davidson reads and judges the adolescent narrator of *Property Of* according to what might be called clichés of adolescence – the narrowness of vision belongs to Browne-Davidson, not to Hoffman's narrator, or Hoffman.

Property Of could have been written as a textbook example of the destructive effects caused by the negatively figured adolescent American selves which Oates perceives. The Avenue is marked by crime, violence and fear – it is a contested space,

[91] Ibid.

fought over by the male-dominated world of the gangs. The term 'property' refers to the position of girls who are affiliated to male members of the gang and who wear jackets emblazoned with the words 'Property Of' to indicate their objectified and subordinate status. The narrator initially refuses to consider that she too has become 'property' by entering into a relationship with McKay, but eventually realises that her relationship with McKay and with the Orphans is destructive and does not allow her to form any sense of her own individuality, agency and value. The fact that the narrator never wears the jacket bearing the words 'Property Of', but nevertheless reflects on the condition of being 'property' ensures that the condition is not specific to the Orphans but enables the narrator to speculate about the themes of love and selfhood. The narrator's most extended analysis of her situation occurs after she has a conversation with Starry, who does wear one of the jackets. In response to the narrator's promise that she will never wear a jacket with those words, Starry tells her that '"the words are already written there"' (70). The narrator recalls how she thought that 'it is not so very despicable to belong':

> Oh yes, yes, I know: cities have been pillaged, countries ruined. Yes, I know the position of Property is always on its back. But still, it is not so very despicable to belong. I admit belonging, being owned is always sad. You think that is a peculiar word to apply to tragedy? You think "sad" is an inadequate word for a historical force? But I do not speak of the property of capitalism, the historical sort that is discussed at the cocktail parties of the world. The Property I speak of is the self. The self that does not belong, is not owned by itself but by others. By another.
>
> This Property is the self which is sold because its position is on its back, because it is starving, dying of thirst, it is suffering the torments of plague, civil war, and sadness. And when the self is dying of thirst, it is not unusual for a canteen to be accepted in trade. Particularly when what is sold has never belonged to itself.
>
> So Starry wears an emblem on her back which states that she is owned, she belongs, she is Property. And then she sells what really is no longer hers – her self. And did you want a revolution from the Property of the Orphans? Property cannot even speak to Property. A revolution when the enemy is each other, themselves, herself? [. . .] A revolution when the enemy is unknown?
>
> Everyone agrees, of course, that it is best to belong to oneself. When this is not possible, when there is no water, when there is only hiking through the desert with small particles of sand clinging to the desert garments, there is not much choice but to sell the self in the hope that the

> canteen will be passed and water will finally touch the lips and the throat. Also the tongue.
>
> There is nothing disgusting or immoral about this transaction; there is nothing despicable about selling the self under these desert conditions. There are no political or economic references I wish to make at this point. I was not Property, I was not one of them. I could not find fault with the bargaining for tequila and survival. I had nothing to do with them, or with the effects of selling the self; that action which seems to cause temporary blindness and permanent sadness, and which seems to break the heart.
>
> (70-71)

The narrator's complex and ambivalent attitude when describing what Oates might call the 'once-vital Renaissance ideal of subject/object antagonism' (echoed in the narrator's sense that what she is describing is a 'tragedy') is obscured and troubled by her highly figurative language. Although she says that she does not talk about 'property' in the sense meant by capitalism, her metaphorical references to trade and selling function to link rather than sever connections between capitalism and selfhood – particularly because the self is sold in the interests of survival and the self is forced to live in conditions of poverty. Her reference to 'cocktail parties' at which capitalism and 'historical forces' are discussed indicates her awareness that theories and academic study may exist at a remove from events as they are experienced. To be able to discuss such events at a party might indicate both leisure time and a degree of material comfort which is not shared by all. The narrator's scepticism towards any kind of systematic theorising and her refusal to make moral judgments reflects not only her own unwillingness to address the fact that she may be involved in the situation she describes, but constitutes the important point at which she diverges from Oates's perspective. Oates's narrator manages to live at a remove from the world which she inhabits, one characterised by hostile and combative adolescent selves, and her narrative is supposed to detail the progression to a more mature worldview which others should hopefully adopt at some point in the future. Hoffman's narrator, however, cannot perceive of any such revolution in thought and perspective. Although she, like Oates's narrator, is aware that people act in certain ways because of a fundamental need to survive, she cannot envisage the world being other than it is, and so she concerns herself with what is necessary to survive in that world rather

than attempting to imagine or construct a new one. It is for this reason that she withholds judgments about what she posits as the necessity for selling the self.

The narrator's thoughts regarding the self's being owned or appropriated by others also offer a useful counterpoint to Oates's thoughts. Her sense that is 'not so despicable to belong' suggests that she believes some kind of relinquishing of autonomy is necessary to counter the self's isolation – being owned by someone is better than being alone, not belonging to anyone at all. Although Hoffman's narrator seems to concur with the idea that existing in isolation is destructive, she seems to believe that surrendering independence is attendant upon not being isolated. A way out of this problem might be found by considering that although Oates's theoretical thoughts concern a selfhood which she figures masculine, it is a female character in *I'll Take You There* who exposes the destructive nature of that kind of selfhood and posits a more mature movement beyond it. In contrast, Hoffman's narrator roots her descriptions of 'the self' in female experience. Her figuring of the 'self that is sold because its position is on its back' describes a self which is not allocated a particular gender – the conditions of poverty and civil war could mark everyone alike, for example. However, the notion of the self 'on its back' constitutes a reference to Stokely Carmichael's remark regarding the position of women in the SNCC, and is used to support the narrator's contention that no improved conditions can be achieved by communal female action.[92] The condition of prostitution underlies the narrator's thoughts on selling the self for survival, so that female experience provides the metaphor for describing the position of the powerless self which is incapable of politically revolutionary action and is forced to survive by whatever means it can. If the belief in and valourisation of an isolated self is particularly masculine, as Oates suggests (the gang is called the Orphans, after all, testifying both to its male members' alienated sense of disenfranchisement from society as well as their joyful perception of themselves as living outside the law), then the development of each female narrator discussed here takes its starting point from the narrators' desire not to live in isolation, but to nonetheless

[92] Stokely Carmichael, an active member of the Civil Rights Movement, remarked that "the only position for women in SNCC [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] is prone." Adam Fairclough calls the remark 'lighthearted' but notes that it has been often cited as an illustration of 'male chauvinism within SNCC.' See Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality 1890-2000* (New York: Penguin, 2001) 260.

maintain a sense of an independent self, something which has been traditionally denied to women. The narrator thinks selling a self is more acceptable 'when that self has never belonged to itself', when the self has never had the kind of agency which would allow it to consider itself its own, let alone isolated. The narrator's thoughts, while controversially seeming to endorse a selling of self, show that Oates's model of selfhood reads female experience only within the terms of the masculine experience it privileges and does not consider female experience on its own terms.

The narrator's difficulties stem from the fact that not only do she and McKay subscribe to different value systems, but that the narrator wishes to force McKay to adopt her way of viewing the world, one which would involve McKay accepting that he belongs to her just as she belongs to him. Although the narrator claims that she is not interested in belonging to the Orphans and does not want to become Property, she is attracted by McKay's status as President of the Orphans. She explains her feelings – 'Because the truth is McKay was in love with his vision of the Orphans, with his vision of himself. And I was in love with them both. That's all' (18). However, she repeatedly shows that she wants McKay to value her above the Orphans – when they first make love he refuses to remove the jacket which proclaims him as President, and one of their fiercest fights is caused by the fact that McKay insists on ensuring that members of the Orphans can contact him even when he is supposed to be spending time alone with the narrator. Their diverging worldviews are emblematised in the war of words which characterises their relationship, and underscores the fact that their differences of perspective find their root cause in the fact that each endorses different concepts. The word which means most to McKay is 'honor', which he defines to the narrator the morning after the violence of the Night of the Wolf:

> "There's no winning," said McKay. "There's only defending your honor. You do a good job of it, or you don't."
>
> "Honor," I said.
>
> "Yeah, that's right," said McKay. "What do you think it's all about?"
>
> I didn't know.
>
> "Shit," said McKay. "It's honor. Like when I race this Chevy." [. . .] "You think I race for money?" said McKay. "Shit, I could make more money pulling a job on one liquor store than I can in a month of racing. It's knowing you're the best, see?" (37)

McKay does not notice the tensions expressed in his own words – that if there is no winning then there can be no point in wanting to be the best. His subscription to a code of honour leads him to believe in codes of violence and revenge which place McKay in the realm of Renaissance tragedy and perhaps confirms Oates's categorisation of the masculine American adolescent selves as 'Renaissance,' and hence anachronistic. Lingeman also notes that 'McKay and the heroine are like tragic lovers in a courtly romance', something revealed particularly through their language.[93] McKay's worldview allows him to disregard a sense of the value of individual lives. Towards the end of the narrative, the narrator and McKay dispute the meaning of Danny's death:

> McKay nodded. "It's to get to me," he said. "That idiot Sweet," McKay said softly. "They know I have no choice but to avenge an Orphan."
>
> McKay walked from the kitchen and I followed. "You're not going," I said.
>
> "I am," said McKay. "And you know I am. I have to go. The Pack knows the Sweet was only worthless while he lived."
>
> "That's not the way it is," I said.
>
> McKay shook his head. "Don't talk to me of what it should be, girl. I'm telling it to you like it is. And it is honor now. And it is war." (106)

The narrator and McKay fight over what they see as 'what is', both believing that their own perception of events is more valid. McKay's acknowledgement that things 'should be' different is quickly dismissed in favor of his conviction that he accurately perceives what 'is'. A similar confusion marks both Oates's perception of American selfhood as governed by a mythical (inaccurate) sense of individual isolation, as her sense that a perception of selves as not living in isolation both describes what is ('*Everyone* is an artist') and what should be ('As long as we have a society obsessed with adolescent ideas)'. At stake in the differences and similarities between Oates's and Hoffman's narrators are questions about concepts of the present, the future, and progress, together with how to narrate lived experience.

In contrast to McKay, the narrator has a different objective:

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[93] Linegeman, 16.

> I thought, after all the months, the words, the kisses, I still have not gotten what I wanted. Yes, McKay allowed me to unpack my suitcase in his closet; but he would not allow me into his soul. And I wanted nothing less. If you say that was too much to ask, I will agree. And then I will repeat: I wanted nothing less. It seemed I could not get what I wanted. (95-96)

Once more the narrator's figurative language reveals that she is talking about the self as property. She sets up a metaphorical correspondence which indicates how she regards McKay's 'soul' as similar to the closet – a space to which she should be allowed access and where she can make herself at home ('unpack'). The inequalities in their relationship are suggested by the fact that it is McKay who gives her permission to unpack in his space. He determines how close she is to be to him, and this indicates that the narrator's desire to be close to McKay disguises her desire for her own value system to be prioritised over his. The metaphor of taking up space in his soul, with its implications of colonisation, is reminiscent of the fights over space and territory which dominate gang warfare on the Avenue, and shows how the narrator and McKay's viewpoints are not as diverse as might appear. When McKay shoots the leader of the Pack in the back, the narrator comments that 'One accident in the dark, one error of perception and the movement of one foot and my enemy, Honor, was dead' (130). Not only are the narrator's comments premature – McKay cannot envisage living in any other terms other than those dictated by honour, and so honour is not dead – but the narrator's envisaging of herself as engaged in battle shows how her worldview overlaps with that of McKay.

To achieve her aims the narrator commits self-destructive acts. The worst occurs when she encourages McKay to give her heroin:

> I looked into his eyes and I wanted every secret of mine to be his, every secret of his to be mine. I began to know the spells; the spell was love, the spell was honor, and the easiest spell of all was what McKay now spoke of: heroin. (96)

The narrator's belief in 'spells' and 'magic' constitutes one of the most puzzling aspects of her narrative, because it is extremely difficult to work out what she means by either term. However, both concepts are central to her self-development and so her thoughts on magic require careful consideration:

> Who said there was magic? Who knows? I said it, everyone did. Herbs that can be boiled down into tea serve as potions. They can keep away the bark of the dog at morning, the howl of the cat at night. Magic grows like weeds in the cracks of the Avenue sidewalk. It flowers there, and it goes to seed. But this is small magic, difficult to see, for it rarely grows strong enough to climb like ivy, like vines over the glass of storefront windows.
>
> The big magic is there as well. It is cheap, it is not difficult to find. It is patented in liquor stores, in drugstores, in uptown apartments where it is cut with strychnine or sugar. This magic is terribly easy to see, unless one is blind. And control of the spell, and control of the mood, is due to this big magic. It keeps away the bark of the dog in the morning, the howl of the cat at night. Only much more effectively, much quicker, and surer.
>
> The Avenue is littered with wizards. Sometimes, often, they are in disguise. A Cuban woman of eighty once sat blinded by some island disease in the doorways of abandoned buildings on the north side of the Avenue. But she was not Cuban, nor was she an eighty-year-old woman. She was the magic that sent Sendor Inez to the slammer for life on the charge of robbery, assault, and causing heart attacks by earthly forms of big magic.
>
> Hard to tell – with magic, with charms. Some big, some little. Difficult to categorize, until, of course, the consequences are seen. The little magic only causes a smile, but the big magic always seems to end up in the slammer or at a wake. (52-53)

The narrator outlines two kinds of magic – 'big' and 'small', though she admits it is hard to tell the difference until their work is done. Both types of magic keep fear and threats at bay, though 'big magic', the controlled substances which can be bought or stolen, always lead to destruction of the self and others. The narrator's description of 'small magic' is much more important. In an already highly metaphorical description, she offers two abstract definitions of small magic. The first is that 'Magic grows like weeds in the cracks of the avenue sidewalk.' She does not actually say what the magic is or what it does – only that it is 'like weeds'. The implication is that small magic is somehow linked to or aligned with the natural world. Magic grows 'like weeds' both because it is easily ignored if not looked for properly, and it is also little valued (exactly like the earthworm). But as the narrator describes it, the small magic is not useless and has profound consequences. The weeds grow 'in the cracks', suggesting that they have a subversive quality – they grow where they are not wanted, they do not respect rules. The Cuban woman described by the narrator in her second attempt to explain 'small magic' is old,

blind and homeless, apparently disadvantaged and powerless, but her ability to pass for something she is not (she is neither Cuban nor eighty) suggests that that subversive quality of 'small magic' relates to not respecting boundaries of identity – the self can be transformed through empowering acts. The Cuban woman has some power to make the Avenue a safer place. The small magic is thus further aligned with a subversive power for good which is figured as having particular relevance to female experience (Starry's ability to be near twenty, look no older than fourteen, and express herself as 'no child' suggests a similar, though untapped, capacity for small magic) .

Not only this, but small magic is specifically connected with words – it causes a criminal to be removed from the Avenue 'on a charge' – and it is described by the narrator through the use of metaphor and by telling a story. It is the narrator's growing awareness of the power of words and her own capacity for 'small magic' which allows her to finally assert her own independent selfhood and leave the Avenue. Her comment, above, that 'the spell was love, and the spell was honor', indicates that she is starting to realise that people can bewitch themselves and others by the stories they tell themselves and that the consequences can be both positive and negative. The narrator makes her preoccupation with words and their effects known from the opening of her narrative – wanting Danny to take her to the Orphans' meeting, she says 'I considered words of persuasion' (3). At a racing event with McKay and the Orphans, she says that 'I stayed close to McKay, and used words which made him promise that we would not spend the night in a sleeping bag, on the sand, surrounded by Orphans' (92). Eventually, when the narrator decides that she must leave, it is because she realises that none of her words can make either McKay or the Avenue change, but she can bring about a change in herself:

> The Avenue was stuck in the mood; I was not. And what I left would not be McKay, would not be heroin or the Avenue. It was only the mood. I slowly moved a foot that had been paralyzed by air; I decided to leave the circle. (215)

The narrator finally acknowledges her entrapment at the moment when she acknowledges her power to break loose from the trap. They make love one final time before she leaves, though McKay does not take her seriously when she tells him that she is leaving:

> We made love for a long time. And for once I did not have to fake love; this time I made it. I forgot old movements and sighs; I forgot the Avenue, its spells and faces. I was myself; I felt and moved as myself. It was because I was going that I was able to come. (217)

The narrator's decision to leave coincides with her sense of individual agency, which is expressed in a moment of Kristevan *jouissance*. This is achieved through the narrator's knowing play with words, which constitutes a disruption of sense analogous to Kristeva's conception of the subversive powers of the semiotic, and creates the consequences which Kristeva describes as attendant upon '*signifiance*' – 'a structuring and de-structuring *practice*, a passage to the outer *boundaries* of the subject and society. Then – and only then – can it be jouissance and revolution.'[94] As McKay retreats into heroin, the narrator leaves and boards a subway train:

> I slid open the door leading to the next subway car and stood on the platform, my suitcase beside me, the wind around me. Already I imagined his eyes were closed. I lit a cigarette. I rode through the tunnel between cars, unable to see into either because of the underground grime that covered the windows. And as the subway followed tracks, and as it hit hard against the tunnel walls, I traced the letters of my name in the dust of the window. I erased the print with my palm. Then I wrote my name again with the very edge of my fingertip, and I could not help but smile. (218)

The narrator's 'smile' hints at her earlier contention that small magic 'only causes a smile'. That smile testifies to the profound revolution which has taken place in her sense of self and perception of the world. Even more crucially, it shows how the narrator's capacity for 'small magic' finds its correlation in Kit's contention that she has 'adjusted as an earthworm'. The action of writing her name is an obvious sign of her claim to independent identity, and could be read as an example of Kristeva's therapeutic adolescent writing, in that the narrator's writing of her name may function to inscribe her within Kristeva's realm of the symbolic. This is even as her refusal to make her name known might constitute a refusal to make her position unclear – the narrator names herself for herself alone. The narrative ends with the narrator on the train, in process, with

[94] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 17.

baggage, travelling towards a presumably more independent existence – the site of Kristeva's 'ideally postulated maturity' perhaps. This is also reminiscent of McCorkle's description of adolescence, which concerns metaphors of baggage and journeys. For Kristeva's 'then', in her description of *jouissance*, it might be better to substitute 'there', as the narrator's unspecified future destination corresponds with her projected (more mature?) self. These ambiguities, together with the fact that she does not tell what she is doing at the time she narrates, makes her future uncertain, her happiness fragile.

The narrator directly engages with the subject of youth when she describes the moment when she and McKay make love for the first time on the George Washington Bridge. The narrator is at pains to stress that they are unseen and do not get caught:

> Sorry if I disappoint you, if you wanted to hear sirens or see flashes. And are these sights and sounds expected because of youth, of leather? It is so easy to forget being young when young; easier still when cloaked in black leather. Was McKay young? Twenty-two, and his body, you've seen some of it, still young. But the skin and the muscles and the blood know the streets at midnight and at dawn, they know Chevy engines and honor. Do you call that young? We did not. For it is easy to forget that we were once young when we didn't even know it at the time.
>
> A matter of perspective? Perhaps. That morning on the bridge would the driver of the tow truck have known I was in love? Could he have known how young McKay was? But why ask you? You passed us by that morning without seeing McKay's eyes or feeling the touch of his hand on your skin. If a warning had been tossed from the window of a Jersey-bound Ford, I would have smiled and wrapped my legs around McKay, and smiled again. If the note had had scrawled across it, "This is a matter of perspective. And you're not seeing," I would have turned to McKay with a wink and a nod. If the telephone that waited in the frozen cement of the emergency parking area had rung, I would never have answered. Of course, it is easiest to forget what is never known. And that telephone could have rung for hours.
>
> See us, surrounded by cement and wind. Against the bed of maroon velvet. The winter and the Chevy and youth hidden by language and leather. See how little I knew; not even the letters of my own name. (35-36)

The narrator's narrative is marked by her awareness of how her story will be perceived – as a story of youth's deviance, as a story about juvenile delinquents who should be caught and subjected to correction. At no point in the story does the narrator express regret about

her actions; she only expresses the fact that she will disappoint those who want to hear a morality story or cautionary tale. Rather, her continuous use of 'you' functions to simultaneously include and exclude an audience, rather as Oates's narrator's 'you' functions in the two moments at which she enlists it. Like Oates's narrator, Hoffman's narrator brings her audience into the action – 'you passed us by'. The narrator's use of 'you' is present at all moments in her narrative so that her story functions to dramatise her development – while achieving a sense of selfhood, she is aware of her existence in a wider world and believes in her own capacity to change that world by telling her story, engaging an audience and challenging its perceptions through her own use of small magic. Describing small magic as 'hard to see', the narrator tries in contrast to make her audience (real or imagined) see her own experiences, and it is because she insists upon making her audience see that she can say that they were there. The perceptions the narrator wants to challenge are most obviously to do with youth – something which she suggests, like Lingeman, might actually not be 'there', at all.

Hoffman's narrator's thoughts on youth express the kind of paradox embodied in Oates's narrative gesture of 'I'll take you there' in that they posit the acquisition of maturity as attendant upon a journey to the past. Although Wittgenstein argues that philosophical problems arise when language is not used carefully, he probably does not take sufficient note of the fact that unusual uses of words do function – as in the case of Bambara's Kit and Hoffman's narrator – to provide a radical rethinking of self and world, framed around adolescence and recycled R/romanticisms. Bambara does not like Plath, saying that 'Sylvia Plath and the other obligatory writers on women's studies list [*sic*] – the writers who hawk despair, insanity, alienation, suicide, all in the name of protesting woman's oppression, are not my mentors'.[95] However, "Sweet Town" and *The Bell Jar* share a valourising of youth, the imagination, and nature (think, for example, of Esther's metaphor of the ripe figs and MacPherson's contention that Esther 'burrows' inward in her act of narration, something which suggests the regenerative powers of the earthworm, which transforms and recycles material 'again'). They also stress the importance of self-scrutiny and introspection. These are characteristics which mark some Romantic

[95] Toni Cade Bambara, "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyhow," *The Writer on Her Work*, ed. Janet Sternburg (New York: Norton, 1980) 73-74.

literature and which demonstrate a significant link between Plath and Bambara, as these Romantic motifs are recycled for the stories of female adolescence each wishes to tell.

Bambara also says that she prefers the 'championship tradition' of literature. She cites Muhammed Ali as an example of someone who continues to rise after what appear to be irrecoverable setbacks.[96] Bambara's work can be read as engaging with this 'championship tradition'– here she diverges from Plath, as *The Bell Jar* cannot be read as unequivocally positive in its resolution. Bambara's comments on boxing provide a useful link to Oates, who has written repeatedly about boxing, describing the world of the boxing ring as an adolescent universe. In *On Boxing*, Oates claims that 'Boxing's very vocabulary suggests a patriarchal world taken over by adolescents. This world is young. Its focus is youth.'[97] Later in the same book, she argues that the final scene of a boxing match shows 'one man collapsed and unconscious, the other leaping about the ring with his gloves raised in victory, the very embodiment of adolescent masculine fantasy.'[98] This shows – if any more illustration were needed – how Oates's thoughts on adolescence and her negative portrayal of the combative, masculine, adolescent American self foregrounds male experience. Bambara's short story, however, constitutes a powerful counter to the limited and subservient female experiences which seem to be all that Oates's model allows for.

If Esther's attitudes towards maturity and youth in *The Bell Jar* reflect her condition of being trapped in the bottle of 'isolated selves' and of discourses of maturity as Oates describes them (Esther's 'interior voice' is described as like a 'mosquito', reminiscent of the trapped fly), and *I'll Take You There* demonstrates an attempt to get out of the bottle which is not entirely successful, then the accomplished narrator-philosophers in Bambara's and Hoffman's texts, telling about progressions to maturity through revolutionary acts of recycling and transformation, show that the way out might involve becoming more like the earthworm. Paradoxically, it is these texts, rather than Oates's, which reveal their narrators to be involved in creating 'artefacts' – their acts of storytelling describe revolutionary redefinitions of self and go some way towards re-

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[96] Ibid., 186.

[97] Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (New Jersey: Echo Press, 1994) 73.

[98] Ibid., 186.

visioning the America in which they live. Like Ricoeur's description of metaphor, Kit and Hoffman's nameless narrator transgress the rules of the world they live in – through their actions, their figurative language, their narratives, and perhaps most of all through their ability to interrogate and even resist the narrative which dictates that 'We are supposed to grow up'. Resistance ensures their development, because these narrators recycle and transform their adolescence in the act of revisiting (or not taking leave of) that adolescence. They seek and create new rules to live by, even if their gestures towards progress are tentative and provisional. They do not offer to take you there; they are not even sure where 'there' is. But they ensure that you can go with them. That passage 'there', and what is signified by 'there' will be explored further in the following chapter.

Chapter Three. 'So, to recap': Signifying Adolescence in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* and Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex.*

> The fact remains that to get from point A to point C (to get from childhood to adulthood), as scary as that may be, you must go through point B – adolescence – to pick up all of your luggage (the way you felt, the way you looked; the way you *wanted* to feel and the way you *wanted* to look). Good, bad or indifferent, it's how we all got where we are. For my fiction – and for me – the passage is fertile territory. I suspect I'll be unpacking for some time to come.
> Jill McCorkle, *What to Wear on the First Day at Lumberton High . . .* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1990).

> The fact remains that to get from Point A to Point B (to get from childhood to adulthood) as scary as it may be, you must go through adolescence and pick up all your luggage.
> Jill McCorkle, Series Folders 156-160, ms. coll., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The first of the two passages above is taken from the published version of Jill McCorkle's essay, *What to Wear on the First Day at Lumberton High . . .*, which is about adolescence and writing. The second is taken from a draft version of that same essay, and differs in small but significant detail. In the first passage, adolescence corresponds to 'point B'. In the second, adolescence occupies a similar space somewhere between childhood and adulthood, but is not allocated a definite point of correspondence – here, adulthood corresponds to 'point B'. McCorkle's act of allocating adolescence a 'point' of its own is undertaken only in the final draft of her essay, a retrospective act which illustrates what her essay and fiction has already been shown to reveal in the first chapter of this thesis – that adolescence is perhaps only narrated from a place and perspective other than itself. Her retrospective act also grants adolescence a different space of signification (arguably of greater signification) than previously – adolescence is now marked, whereas originally it was unmarked. However, the initial portrayal of adolescence as unmarked may be more accurate; McCorkle's essay, which constantly refigures adolescence, reveals uncertainty about where and what, in fact, adolescence actually is. McCorkle's A-B-C model of progression of childhood to adulthood relies

upon the sequential order of the letters of the alphabet, a Western signifying system, to present a fixed order of human development which her essay, with its multiple figurings of adolescence, does more to undermine than underline (the alphabetical sequence is arbitrary, its order not intrinsic to itself). McCorkle's re-writings of adolescence indicate puzzlement not only over what adolescence signifies – 'point B', or something else? – but how to signify it – by 'point B', on the way to adulthood, or by some other means, or perhaps not at all?

McCorkle writes that 'the passage is fertile territory'. Her essay drafts are consistent about the fact that adolescence is something which could be passed through, although this is where the consistency ends. If the final version argues that passage through adolescence is necessary, the earlier draft is not as insistent. The injunction 'to' pick up luggage in adolescence replaces 'and', which renders unclear whether the picking up of luggage takes place during or after passage through adolescence. This serves to further confirm how McCorkle's figuring of adolescence as luggage to be picked up and unpacked succeeds in blurring distinctions between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. It is notable that both adolescence and adulthood are signified by 'point B' in McCorkle's various versions, suggesting that it is passage between these categories which causes most concern. Indeed, Joyce Carol Oates's construction of 'adult-as-adolescent' and Charles Molesworth's construction of 'an adolescent sensibility cloaked in an adult role' (discussed in the previous chapter) indicate that passage between these two categories is contentious and takes multiple forms. In addition to raising doubts as to whether and how adolescence is taken leave of at all – whether adolescence passes – the comments of McCorkle, Oates and Molesworth indicate that efforts to signify adolescence may be intricately bound up with the act of passing itself. Oates's formulation of 'adult-as-adolescent' implies that an adult passes as an adolescent, while Molesworth's 'adolescent sensibility cloaked in an adult role' suggests that an adolescent passes as adult. McCorkle's description of the baggage that is picked up in adolescence – 'the way you felt, the way you looked; the way you *wanted* to feel and the way you *wanted* to look' suggests that in adolescence individuals appear other than what they wish to be. Elaine K. Ginsberg notes how the OED defines to "pass (for)" as

> to be taken for, to be accepted, received, or held in repute as. Often with the implication of being something else.[1]

Originally associated with 'the discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumption of a fraudulent "white" identity', but also discussed in relation to discourses of gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality, a consideration of the phenomenon of the passing act is nonetheless pertinent to discussions of adolescence.[2] Ginsberg writes that passing is about identities:

> [. . .] their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing. Finally, passing is about specularity: the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen.[3]

Adolescence is normatively considered as a time of discovering and constructing identity. It is also described as an ambiguous liminal developmental stage partaking of elements of both childhood and adulthood, despite often being discussed as occupying a delimited space between both childhood and adulthood (point 'B' is not point A or point C). With its focus on identity and boundary crossing, adolescence therefore can be considered in light of Ginsberg's statements. Juda Bennett's exploration of the phenomenon of passing suggests another reason why adolescence can be usefully considered in relation to this concept:

> Will any discussion of "passing" (here specifically defined as that phenomenon of light-skinned blacks allowing and even encouraging people to mistake them for white) always need to first differentiate itself from other passings? The passing of time? Space?[4]

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[1] Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed. *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 16.

[2] Ibid., 2-3

[3] Ibid., 2.

[4] Juda Bennett, *The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996) 36-37.

Bennett's comments indicate both that considerations of the passing act may be too exclusive, and that discussions of passing, like those about adolescence, are concerned with signification. Discussing the 'act of revising' which he argues is so important to the act and the terminology of passing, Bennett argues that

> In the supersession of one term for another is a sort of enactment of the passing act, an erasure of the racially inflected term which retains, or even emphasizes, the trace.[5]

Passing calls into question what is signified by identity categories such as 'race' and 'gender' as well as calling attention to the uses to which signifiers (for example, the words 'white', 'black', 'masculine', and 'feminine') are put. Similarly, McCorkle's complicated (and, it should be noted, revised) A-B-C model of passage from childhood to adulthood, together with the multiple figurings of adolescence which have been presented and discussed in this thesis so far, have revealed that the conflicting uses to which the signifier 'adolescence' is put are caused by – and cause – the problem of signifying adolescence.

Oates's and Molesworth's comments indicate how passage/passings between adolescence and adulthood constitute a form of boundary crossing that provokes a cultural anxiety which may be particularly American. Ginsberg outlines how the act of passing and the anxiety it evokes have implications for American culture:

> Finally, the genealogy of the concept [of passing] in American culture reveals the origins of passing in the sexual exploitation of black slave women by white men. The children born of these encounters inherited the abject status of the mother even as, through successive generations, a visible, albeit culturally inauthentic, "whiteness" was reproduced from "black" female bodies. At the same time, to insure the reproduction as well as the purity of his whiteness, the white man also needed to exert control over the sexuality of both the white woman and the black man, effectively enslaving the former and emasculating the latter. Consequently, in American history, race, sex, and gender have been inextricably linked first through a system of slavery that placed white men in control of the productive labor of black men and the productive and reproductive behavior of both black and white women, and then nationally

[5] Ibid., 16.

> through an economic and political system and a cultural ideology that established a fundamentally racist and sexist hierarchy of privilege and oppression.[6]

Ginsberg concludes this discussion by arguing that 'critical to the process and discourse of "passing" in American history and in the American cultural imaginary are the status and privileges associated with being white and being male.'[7] Although Ginsberg focuses only on race and gender here, it is clear that the 'status and privileges associated with being white and being male' are equally critical to discourses of adolescence in American culture. This is because theoretical discussions of adolescence have typically erased or ignored raced and gendered experience in favour of a white, heterosexual, middle-class male experience which is figured universal, and because the culturally sanctioned model of human development (progression from childhood to adulthood) has also previously foregrounded, if it is not in fact built upon, white male experience. G. Stanley Hall's work on adolescence comes close to arguing that any individual not white and male might be denied access to 'adulthood'. It is therefore appropriate for this discussion to modify Ginsberg's 'being white and being male', to 'being white, being male, and being adult'. One crucial difference between constructions of adolescence and the act of racial or gendered passing is that McCorkle's A-B-C passage to adulthood is culturally sanctioned, whereas racial and gendered passing has previously been illegal or rendered transgressive. However, that A-B-C passage lacks a narrative which explains how the passage is to be undertaken and how the boundaries between various categories are marked. However, both Oates's and Molesworth's constructions are transgressive – 'adult-as-adolescent' suggests passage *back* to adolescence while 'an adolescent sensibility cloaked in an adult role' suggests a refusal to pass from adolescence to adulthood, only a pretense at doing so.

With this in mind, it is possible to read Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998) and Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2002) as offering important meditations on the concepts

[6] Ginsberg, 5.

[7] Ibid.

of adolescence, signification and passing.[8] Both texts constitute narratives of female adolescence, and are concerned with the act of passing. Birdie Lee, the narrator of Senna's novel, is a mixed-race girl born to a white mother and African-American father, and tells of an adolescence in which she is forced to pass as white. Cal Stephanides, the forty-one-year-old hermaphrodite who narrates Eugenides's novel, describes the circumstances which cause him to live as a female until the age of fourteen, and his consequent decision to live as male thereafter. Birdie and Cal's ability to engage in acts of passing is afforded by their bodies. Those bodies are additionally going through the changes of puberty in certain sections of the narrative, so that the preoccupation with adolescence in both texts means that they can be read in relation to McCorkle's A-B-C model of passage. The bodies of both Birdie and Cal exhibit what Alicia Ostriker has called the task of metaphor in literature: 'to assert the force of like-unlikeness in the world.'[9] Birdie's and Cal's bodies assert this force of like-unlikeness because they challenge binary notions of race and gender. Their bodies assert this force in different ways, and without the consent of their owners. In the act of telling their stories, however, both Birdie and Cal assert this metaphorical force of like-unlikeness by engaging in what could be described as highly self-conscious strategies of narrative passing. These strategies have important implications for considering the signification of adolescence. This final chapter enlists what Adrienne Rich calls the strategy of 'Re-vision' – 'the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction', because it is with these re-visionary objectives in mind that it re-visits McCorkle's theoretical thoughts on adolescence.[10] This act of re-vision is undertaken in order to suggest what might be involved in signifying adolescence, and because it will be demonstrated that the act of revision is central to that signifying process.

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[8] Danzy Senna, *Caucasia* (New York: Riverhead, 1998). Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (London: Boomsbury, 2002).

[9] Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 197.

[10] Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, by Rich (London: Virago, 1980) 35. This essay originally appeared in *College English* 34.1 (1972) and was slightly revised for *American Poets in 1976*, ed. William Heyen (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976).

Caucasia, Senna's first novel, opens with a brief section in which Birdie briefly summarises the main events with which her narrative is concerned. This opening prefaces the events which will be narrated afterwards, and so constitutes a guide as to how the following narrative is to be read. Despite this, the opening is notable for what it conceals:

> A long time ago I disappeared. One day I was here, the next I was gone. It happened as quickly as all that. One day I was playing schoolgirl games with my sister and our friends in a Roxbury playground. The next I was a nobody, just a body without a name or a history, sitting beside my mother in the front seat of our car, moving forward on the highway, not stopping. (And when I stopped being nobody, I would become white – white as my skin, hair, bones allowed. My body would fill in the blanks, tell me who I should become, and I would let it speak for me.) (1)

Birdie's opening indicates that if her narrative describes events in which she lets her body speak, that narrative exists because Birdie, rather than her body, speaks for herself. The means by which Birdie comes to speak for herself is usefully addressed by Brenda Boudreau's article on Senna's novel, via a discussion of what is at stake in categorising and narrating racial identity.[11] Birdie's narrative stands in for her body, telling the story of its disappearance, indeed reenacting that disappearance (the body is absent from the text) at the same time as it re-presents that body in text. Missing from Birdie's opening is any information pertaining to the construction of her narrating self – its age, name, geographical location, or (perhaps most importantly) any indication of how the narrator conceives of her racial self. The concluding sentence of the opening section reads 'This is what I remember' (1). While revealing that the narrative which follows constitutes recalled events, it is unclear what has prompted the remembrance, whether that narrative is spoken or written, or whether it is addressed to a particular audience. Most perplexingly, if the narrative is merely a series of recalled events, then there is no sense of what has enabled Birdie to make the transition from allowing her body to speak for her to allowing herself to speak for her body. Birdie narrates a past when she was a passenger, a body in transit, a self in search of signification. This situation does not seem far removed from that of her narrating self, and so blurs boundaries between past and

[11] Brenda Boudreau, "Letting the Body Speak: 'Becoming' White in *Caucasia*," *Modern Language Studies* 32.1 (2002): 59-70.

present, calling into question whether any passage has been made at all – asking, that is, if Birdie's narrative is one in which stasis is passed off as passage.

Birdie narrates the circumstances which lead up to her disappearance, recalling an idyllic childhood spent with her sister Cole. The intimacy between the sisters is so close that Birdie views Cole as 'the reflection that proved my own existence [. . .] That face was me and I was that face and that was how the story went' (5). Birdie and Cole speak their own language, Elemeno. Cole explains to Birdie that Elemeno 'wasn't just a language, but a place and a people as well' (7):

> We whispered questions and answers to each other like calls to prayer. *shimbala matamba caressi. Nicolta fo mo capsala.* The Elemenos, she said, could turn not just from black to white, but from brown to yellow to purple to green, and back again. She said they were a shifting people, constantly changing their form, color, pattern, in a quest for invisibility. According to her, their changing routine was a serious matter – less a game of make-believe than a fight for the survival of their species. The Elemenos could turn deep green in the bushes, beige in the sand, or blank white in the snow, and their power lay precisely in their ability to disappear into any surrounding. As she spoke, a new question – a doubt – flashed through my mind. Something didn't make sense. What was the point of surviving if you had to disappear? I said it aloud – *peta marika vandersa?* – but just then the door to our room flew open. (7-8)

Although the story is Cole's creation, it prefigures not only the major act of passing which precipitates the act of 'disappearing' of which Birdie speaks in the novel's opening, but describes the manner in which Birdie conceives of herself throughout the entire novel. One of Birdie's earliest memories concerns her effort to test out the theory that she may be 'really invisible' (14), while attending a gathering at her aunt Dot's house. Birdie's account of the contentious means by which she is given her own name also illustrates how Birdie does not construct herself but is constructed by others. Describing her parents' failing relationship, Birdie explains that

> Sometimes I wondered if it were my fault. I knew their marriage had begun to sour at about the same time as my birth. They couldn't even agree on a name for me, which is how I ended up Birdie. My sister had been born when they still got along. They named her Colette, after the French writer, though everyone shortened it to Cole. But when I was born,

> my father wanted to call me Patrice, as in Lumumba, the Congolese liberator; my mother wanted to name me Jesse, after her great-grandmother, a white suffragette. Cole just called me Birdie – she had wanted a parakeet for her birthday and instead got me. For a while, I answered to all three names with a schizophrenic zeal. But in the end, even my parents grew tired of the confusion and called me Birdie, though my birth certificate still reads, "Baby Lee", like the gravestone of some stillborn child. (19)

Birdie's eagerness to please those around her and her tendency to look to others for confirmation of her own existence is the partial cause of her ability to disappear into any surrounding, her ability to be whatever others want her to be. The concerns expressed in the arguments over her name – her father foregrounds race over gender, her mother foregrounds gender over race, whereas Cole simply wants a pet, companion or toy – represent the different aspects of Birdie's identity (race, gender, family ancestry and relations) with which she must negotiate. Birdie's sense that there is a cost to the acts of successful passing in Cole's story of the Elemenos is reflected in her questioning of 'the point in survival' and implied in the anonymous birth certificate, the reference to the 'stillborn child' an indication that Birdie's development is at stake.

However, Birdie's eagerness to please is not the only cause of her Elemeno-characteristics. Despite sharing the same parents, a white mother and African-American father, Birdie and Cole look different. Cole's skin colour is more 'black', Birdie's more 'white.' Growing up in Boston in the 1970s, both sisters witness the city's racial tensions as manifested in events such as the emergence of Black Power politics and the controversies over school integration, and in their parents' failing marriage. Their parents' decision to separate prompts a dispute about which school the sisters should attend, a dispute which reveals some of their parents' racial prejudices. Their father insists that they attend a Black Power school in Roxbury, to which Birdie's mother responds:

> "Come off it, Deck. I mean, I guess the school makes some sense with Cole. But Birdie? Look at her sometime, really look at her. Try to see beyond yourself and your goddamn history books. She looks like a little Sicilian." (27)

Birdie's father's response and justification for his choice of school is that

> "I know what my daughter looks like, thank you. Maybe you need to cut this naïve, color-blind posturing. In a country as racist as this, you're either black or you're white. And no daughter of mine is going to pass." (27)

Birdie's mother enlists colour as the predominant signifier of race. In her opinion, judging by this criterion means that the Black Power school is suitable for Cole, but not Birdie. Her father, by contrast, suggests that race is about more than skin colour. He draws attention to its cultural construction, particularly the importance of labeling (words as signifiers of race rather than colour), especially in America, where unequal values and privileges (economic, legal, social) are attached to race and where the act of labeling dictates what those privileges will be. His own allegiance to Black Power politics causes him to insist on Birdie's African-American heritage while ignoring the white, Anglo-Saxon heritage of both his daughters. Birdie and Cole's mother belongs to a wealthy Cambridge family; her mother, Birdie's grandmother, claims that their family is descended from Cotton Mather (99). Crucially, both parents make accusations of short-sightedness, of failing to see properly. If nothing else, their exchange makes clear that race is a site of multiple and conflicting significations. That it is Birdie over whom her parents are predominantly arguing illustrates Boudreau's point that Birdie's parents 'are both racist, basing their understanding of race almost exclusively on color.'[12] Cole's blackness is not debated.

The Nkrumah Black Power school, which both girls eventually attend, offers other ways of thinking about race. Cole is accepted as 'black' by her classmates far more readily than Birdie, of whom it is speculated, '"She a Rican or something?"' and who is asked variously, '"What you doin' in this school? You white?"' (43) and '"So, you black?"' (63). Birdie's schoolmates finally accept her as black because Cole says that she is. Cole defends Birdie against one girl in particular who bullies her by threatening to cut her hair:

[12] Boudreau, 61.

> Cole grabbed Maria by her long thick hair. I stood back, terrified for Cole. She was also new in the school. But she whispered to Maria, "Listen, metal mouth, Birdie isn't white. She's black. Just like me. So don't be messing with her again or I'll cut off your hair for real this time." (48)

Birdie and Maria eventually become close friends, indicating that although the girls have absorbed some of America's racial and gendered prescriptors (implicit in Maria's bullying of Birdie is the suggestion that Maria believes Birdie's 'whiteness' renders her more sexually attractive to other boys in their class), they are also willing to reject those prescriptors. Of this episode and the questions which Birdie is asked about her racial identity, above, Boudreau argues that 'the children are more willing to accept Birdie's self-affirmed identity, rather than what their eyes see, a point even her parents seem incapable of comprehending', but it is not Birdie who affirms her identity here; Cole identifies Birdie.[13] Also, Boudreau does not acknowledge that visual signifiers of racial identity, together with the cultural privileges attached to those labels, still play a part in the assessments those children make of Birdie. Boudreau does note correctly that it is at the school that Birdie and Cole learn that 'blackness' or racial identity can be performed through language use (Cole laments that "'We talk like white girls, Birdie"' (53)), hair styles, and clothes.[14] It is Birdie's ability to perform blackness with the use of these signifiers which causes Maria to eventually initiate friendship with Birdie by asking "'So, you black?"' (63). Perhaps the most notable effect of the school is that whereas Cole comes to define herself as black, Birdie is not so sure – she answers Maria's question with only a nod 'as if unsure of it myself' (63). Cole complains that "' [. . .] Mum doesn't know anything about raising a black child. She just doesn't"' (53). Cole speaks only of herself; she does not seem to regard Birdie as black, so that Cole's self-definition is not only also predominantly based on colour but is coincident with a diminishing of the closeness Birdie has previously shared with her. Birdie can no longer look to Cole as a reflection of her own identity.

Birdie says that 'I learned the art of changing at Nkrumah, a skill that would later become second nature to me' (62). This art of changing becomes necessary when her

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[13] Ibid., 62.

[14] Ibid., 62-63.

mother comes to believe that her political activism (the exact nature of which is never specified) has put her in danger and that she must go into hiding. The family is split, with Cole, her father, and her father's girlfriend Carmen moving to Brazil, and the eight-year-old Birdie and her mother going into hiding. Their act of hiding is facilitated by Birdie's ability to pass as white. Birdie recalls how her mother explains the situation:

> The FBI would be looking for a white woman on the lam with her black child. But the fact that I could pass, she explained, with my straight hair, pale skin, and my general phenotypic resemblance to the Caucasoid race, would throw them off our trail. The two bodies that had made her stand out in a crowd – made her more than just another white woman – were gone; now it was just the two of us. My body was the key to our going incognito.
>
> With her new copper hair – she flipped her locks – and me simply relabeled as white, no one would ever suspect the truth. We'd be scot-free, she told me, a couple of new people overnight. (128)

It is this act of passing which Birdie discusses in the novel's opening when she recalls her disappearance. That 'disappearance' refers not only to her act of going into hiding but to the fact that her entire construction of self becomes a fiction. It is additionally a fiction not authored by herself, but by her mother, who chooses Birdie's new name (Jesse) and her 'history':

> "You've got a lot of choices, babe. You can be anything. Puerto Rican, Sicilian, Pakistani, Greek. I mean, anything, really." Then she paused. A slow smile filled her face.
>
> "And, of course, you could always be Jewish. What do you think?" It was a strange thing to be such a blank slate. It reminded me of the games Cole and I used to play with that trunk of costumes, but now I wasn't sure I liked the feeling. I shrugged, "I don't know. Italian, maybe? I like spaghetti – "
>
> She cut me off: "Jewish is better, I think." (130)

The first of *Caucasia*'s three sections concludes with Birdie 'knighted a half-Jewish girl named Jesse Goldman, with a white mama named Sheila – and the world was our pearl' (131). The second section begins with Birdie's overview of the four years she and her mother 'ran between motel and commune' (135). Their longest stay is in Aurora, a

woman's commune in upstate New York. Birdie describes their time on the run as involving 'always, the blurring world beyond our windshield, glimpsed in passing' (136). Birdie's play on the word 'passing' indicates both the transitional nature of the existence she shares with her mother and also the fact that both view the world through the perspective lent them by their fictive identities – Birdie's mother has a new name and history also, though unlike Birdie she has not transformed her racial identity. The word 'blurring' suggests that these fictive identities might cause Birdie and her mother to fail to see the world clearly, but more strikingly, 'blurring' might signify that the world Birdie and her mother occupy is one in which boundaries and categories are permeable – *all* identities are fictive. Certainly, most of the women Birdie and her mother meet at the commune are reinventing themselves anew.

The notion that all identities may be fictive is not one which Birdie seems to entertain while in hiding, however. Her time on the run comes to an end when her mother decides that she wants more stability in her life – stability means stasis, and Birdie and her mother begin a new life in New Hampshire. It is while on the run that Birdie passes into adolescence, although this is not acknowledged until Birdie reaches New Hampshire. Boudreau claims that

> The adolescent girl's body becomes a perfect stage on which to illustrate the tenuousness of both whiteness and blackness because so much of a girl's identity is intricately linked to her physical body, and it is on the physical body that we expect racial identity to make itself visible. During adolescence girls look to the external world for a reflection of their bodies, and, by extension, of themselves.[15]

Boudreau's decision to focus only on how Birdie's sense of identity relates to ideas of race causes her to downplay the significance of adolescence in Birdie's story. Although noticing the 'destructive' consequences of Birdie's mother's assumption of control over Birdie's new identity, for example, Boudreau does not note that the control Birdie's mother exerts means that Birdie's indeterminacy with regard to her identity is not limited only to racial labels.[16] To describe Birdie's adolescent body as a 'stage' runs the risk of

[15] Ibid., 60.

[16] Ibid., 64.

letting Birdie's adolescent body speak for her – something which Birdie's mother allows when she assumes adult authority (as older, as mother) over Birdie. Adolescence, for Boudreau, is signified by puberty and by a renewed focus on the body, a focus which she believes to be particularly pertinent to female experience. Boudreau gives a careful analysis of how Birdie is defined by ideas of race, but she writes Birdie into prescriptive narratives of female adolescence, and the treatment of adolescence in the text goes unexamined. Birdie's engagement with adolescence is far more complex than Boudreau presumes, and adolescence provides more than just a 'stage' for her experience and her narrative. The indication that adolescence is a 'stage' is nonetheless useful, because it suggests that adolescence is something which might be performed. In this case, a consideration of adolescence merits the same attention to signifiers, and allows for the possibility of the phenomenon of passing, in the same way that the concept of race does.

Of her time prior to New Hampshire, Birdie only mentions that she 'grew into a lanky twelve-year-old' (139). Meeting the Marsh family, owners of a cottage which her mother wishes to rent, Birdie speculates on how she and her mother must appear:

> They heard her accent, so like their own, and knew she would do just fine. Never mind that thin, glowering, dark adolescent by her side, they thought. They saw a woman and a child. No man? No problem. They knew she was one of them. (150)

Birdie's transition into adolescence has gone unmarked and unnarrated (corresponding to McCorkle's early model). It is merely part of the time on the run which Birdie describes as follows:

> There's something unreal about the time we spent on the run. Soft. Unfulfilled. Dreamlike. Something about the unseen, the undocumented, the off-the-record that still feels unmentionable. (136)

Birdie's labeling of herself as adolescent is made from a place and perspective other than itself, both in the sense that she is telling a retrospective narrative of adolescence and in the sense that something has happened prior to this moment of labeling, justifying the term 'adolescent', but Birdie does not say what it is. Not only this, but this labeling is

framed through what Birdie imagines to be the perspective of the Marshes – Birdie does not even indicate that she considers herself adolescent, but that they do. That ambiguous 'dark' hints at the moodiness commonly attributed to the stage of adolescence and revealed in Birdie's 'glowering' expression, but more problematically, it hints at Birdie's 'dark' complexion which both does and does not signify her racial identity. Later, watching the Marshes' son, Nicholas, Birdie comments that 'He was older than me, a real teenager' (160), signaling that she feels there is something inauthentic about her own 'adolescent' identity and that whereas 'teenager' represents something more definitively literal, something of the figurative clings to the term 'adolescent'. When Birdie does eventually meet Nicholas, she lies about her age, claiming that she is fourteen when she is twelve. Birdie says that she 'lied automatically, not really sure why' (163) – but she does so in order to pretend that she is older and to secure Nicholas's interest by assuming the identity of a 'real teenager', a lie she is forced to embellish by explaining that she is in eighth grade at the age of fourteen because '"I'm retarded and stayed back a grade"' (163). Birdie's construction of self necessitates constant passage back and forward between various categories, and constitutes a reminder that one particularly adolescent trait is the desire to pass as older in order to achieve particular (adult?) privileges and status, a complex gesture that constitutes transgression even as it attempts to hasten what is merely the normative path of developmental progress towards adulthood. Birdie's equivocations around categories finally underline how her sense of her own indeterminacy extends to all aspects of her identity, not only her race but her age and even her gender. On leaving Nicholas, she notes how her voice cracks 'like a boy's' (164).

Birdie's crisis of identity deepens when her mother becomes involved in a relationship with Jim, a man living in New Hampshire. Birdie comments that when her mother tells Jim the story of their fictive identities 'the lie sounded different to me, weightier, more like the truth. It was as if the past four years had only been a dress rehearsal in preparation for this opening night' (177). Birdie feels that the performance of their identities is becoming the reality, that what had once possibly been 'a game' (189) is now more serious. This causes her to fear for her old self (a self which was able to articulate its African-American heritage) and for her relationships with her father and

sister, with whom she has always believed that she and her mother will reunite. In an effort to find out 'some kind of evidence' (228) about Jim which will cause her mother to end her relationship with him, Birdie sneaks into her mother's bedroom one morning. She proceeds to undertake two acts of unpacking – McCorkle's central motif when considering adolescence in her essay – which offer a useful exploration of how adolescence, signification and the acts of passing so central to Birdie's existence are related. McCorkle's comments about unpacking frame one of her definitions of adolescence:

> I have always believed that at the ripe age of adolescence (*literally* ripe, as teenage girls are admonished in health classes all across America) our emotional baggage is already fully packed – every tiny article wedged into place – and strapped to our shoulders, backs, ankles (depending on the load). And that we spend the rest of our lives *unpacking*, sorting and choosing, what to treasure, what to alter, what to throw off the nearest cliff never to look at again.[17]

The first act of unpacking Birdie makes concerns Jim:

> I had no real idea of what I was looking for. Just a vague sense that it was probably hidden in the closet, in Jim's overnight backpack. As I fumbled in there, I imagined what I might find. A notepad with scientific descriptions of my mother's and my every move. An FBI identification card with his real name on it. A Wanted poster with a crude police sketch of my mother's face. A book of interrogation methods. A Vietnamese child's dried ear inside a tin box, a souvenir from his days as a murderer in the war.
>
> But as it turned out, his backpack had nothing of much interest in it. I did find a black diary, but when I flipped through it, I saw that there were only notes on how to renovate the house, and a couple of Bob Marley lyrics, with crude drawings of a sun and palm trees drawn around them. He was better than I thought at his job. (228-229)

This first act of unpacking is unsuccessful, as it does not provide Birdie with the incriminating evidence she so desires. Birdie's speculations regarding the objects she hopes to find in Jim's backpack convey her sense that he too, like her mother and herself, has constructed a fictive identity, and that the objects in the backpack will expose his

[17] *What to Wear on the First Day at Lumberton High . . .*, 6.

fictive identity and reveal who he really is. Birdie's interpretation of what she believes Jim's luggage to signify corresponds to McCorkle's use of the metaphor of items of luggage which represent identity: 'the way you felt, the way you looked; the way you *wanted* to feel and the way you *wanted* to look.' Birdie's act of unpacking reveals only that Jim is who he says he is – unless, in fact, Birdie's 'He was better than I thought at his job' indicates that she thinks Jim is so good at disguising his true identity that he has managed to hide all traces of it . 'His job' may refer to the work he carries out in the house or to the work Birdie imagines he carries out as an FBI agent.

After this first act of unpacking, Birdie notices another bag in the closet, one which belongs to her mother:

> It was [the bag] she didn't let me go through – a silver men's sports duffel that was tearing at the seams. She hadn't let me see what was inside all those four years we'd been on the run together. She said it was filled with "grown-up stuff." I had never tried to look in it before, assuming it was sex devices. Now I picked it up. I wondered if there would be answers in there – answers to the questions I had asked myself so many times: *Where are they? What did you do that was so big, that could make us run so hard and so long, that could make us disappear?* (229)

Birdie's mother's prohibition against looking in the bag is based on the explanation that it is full of 'grown-up stuff'. The implication is that Birdie is not grown-up and so not only should the objects in the bag hold no interest for her, but it would constitute some kind of trespass to view them. The explanation that the objects are 'grown-up' has previously been enough to deter Birdie from looking inside; she even makes her own interpretation of what 'grown-up' signifies – something to do with sex. Now, however, Birdie re-evaluates her mother's story, acknowledging that it is no longer a sufficient explanation. She decides that 'grown-up' may mean something different from what she has imagined, and that 'grown-up' may not be an accurate representation of the objects in the bag at all. It is, after all, a man's bag that her mother is carrying, an indicator that all is not as it seems. However, Birdie's decision to unpack the bag means that she considers herself 'grown-up' enough to view what is inside. Her disobedience of her mother's command represents a kind of adolescent rebellion in which Birdie asserts her own independence and maturity. Rather like her decision to pretend to Nicholas that she is older than she

really is, Birdie's decision to unpack the bag underscores her adolescence at the same time it constitutes Birdie's expression that she is 'grown up'. Birdie's act of unpacking therefore raises the same questions of passage suggested by McCorkle's A-B-C model.

Not only this, but McCorkle's depiction of unpacking as a trope of self-fashioning (selection and rejection of various 'articles') involves a process of revision which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. enlists as central to the technique of Signifyin(g). Gates defines Signifyin(g) as a particularly (though not exclusively) African-American technique of 'formal revision or intertextuality':

> To name our tradition is to rename each of its antecedents, no matter how pale they might seem. To rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify.[18]

Gates defines Signifyin(g) more explicitly as 'repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference.'[19] For McCorkle and Birdie, unpacking (which could be viewed as repetition with a difference in one sense, in that it literally repeats, but reverses, the action involved in packing) becomes a figurative means of Signifyin(g) upon the construction of the self. Signifyin(g) is achieved through the process of reconstructing that self. Gates's repetition of 'rename' suggests how Signifyin(g) is concerned with questions of identity (racial, in his case). Juda Bennett's discussion of the linguistic aspect of the passing act, in particular his claim that 'In the supercession of one term for another is a sort of enactment of the passing act, an erasure of the racially inflected term which retains or even emphasizes, the trace', can be read in conjunction with the act of revision involved in the practice of Signifyin(g). Gates argues that the relationship between what he calls the 'black' term 'Signification' and the 'English' term 'signification' involves 'a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity.'[20] According to Gates, the identity relations are manifest in the signifier, the difference manifest in the signified – that is, the words look and sound, but do not mean, the same. In Gates's terms, the relationship of difference and identity described here directly illustrates the conundrum of

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[18] Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) xxiii.

[19] Ibid., xxiv.

[20] Ibid., 45.

signifier/signified which Birdie's body represents when she passes as white. Gates believes that this relationship of difference inscribed within a relation of identity is 'inherent in the nature of metaphorical substitution and the pun', discussing the 'chaos of ambiguity that repetition and difference [. . .] yield in either an aural or a visual pun.'[21] Birdie's body, in her act of passing and its disruption of signifier/signified relations, dramatises a visual pun of its own, because Birdie's act of passing constitutes Signifyin(g) on the word 'white'.

However, an important qualification needs to be made here. In Gates's construction, 'signifier' corresponds to 'word' and 'signified' to meaning. This oversimplifies signifier/signified relations. The work of Ferdinand de Saussure illustrates how words constitute signs, 'sign' being a third term which Gates does not use. For Saussure, a sign is composed of a 'signifier' and a 'signified', with 'signified' referring to the mental concept to which an individual understands a particular word to refer – to use one of Saussure's examples, the word 'tree' corresponds to the concept 'tree'.[22] Gates's construction of signifier/signified actually conforms to the theory of linguistics which Saussure criticises and complicates; the theory which suggests that language consists of a 'naming-process only – a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names.'[23]

However, Birdie's acts of unpacking indicate that the concept of Signifyin(g) is important not only to her body and its acts of passing, but to the story of development she is to tell, her attitudes to identity, and her narrative practice, all of which relate to what might be involved in signifying adolescence. Birdie says of the bag's contents that

> Inside, it was mostly what I'd expected – a diaphragm, a picture of [my mother] and Bernadette nude, *The Joy of Sex*, and *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. (229)

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, in collaboration with Albert Reidlinger, trans. Wade Baskin, introduction, Jonathan Culler, revised ed. (London: Fontana, 1974) 67.

[23] Ibid., 65.

The bag's contents so far confirm what Birdie believes 'grown up' to mean. But underneath these items Birdie finds a copy of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, a Christmas present from her father to her mother. Birdie says:

> My mother had told me she had kept nothing but the clothes on her back when we left Boston. She had told me that holding on to the past would have been a big mistake, a surefire way to get caught. But she had kept this. (229)

Opening the book and reading the inscription inside, which speaks of a happier time in her parents' relationship, Birdie discovers photographs of her parents and her sister, proof of the former lives she and her mother have lived. Rather than the contents of Jim's backpack revealing an alternative identity for him, Birdie realises that her mother has been carrying material which could expose both her identity and Birdie's as fictive. In addition, not all her mother has told her is true, and she does not necessarily follow the rules she sets out for Birdie.

Describing one of the photographs, of her mother and Cole, Birdie mentions a detail which initially seems unimportant:

> Behind them you can just make out the corner of a poster – one that hung on our living room wall, opposite the Cotton Mather print – a poster of a black child's afroed silhouette, the words "Not Yet Uhuru" above the face. When I was little, I thought the child looked hungry and imagined that Uhuru must mean "dinnertime" in another language. (230-231)

What Birdie recounts here is a story of an error in signification, something with wider implications in the context of the acts of unpacking she has undertaken. Not knowing the meaning of the word 'Uhuru', Birdie interprets the expression on the child's face as corresponding in some way to the word she does not understand. 'Uhuru' is the Swahili word for freedom, pertaining to emancipation from slavery and national independence. In her belief that the picture holds the clue to the meaning of 'Uhuru', that the child's expression somehow corresponds to the word, Birdie (like Gates, in his understanding of signifier/signified relations) subscribes to what Wittgenstein calls the erroneous 'picture' of human language:

> It is this: the individual words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. – In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.[24]

Birdie's subscription to this theory of linguistic signification is seen in the fact that she literally looks to a picture to provide the meaning of the word she does not understand, seeking in it the 'object' to which 'Uhuru' corresponds. The picture in fact signifies absence, rendered particularly poignant given that it exists in a photograph of a past existence which Birdie is no longer able to claim publicly as her own. The objects which Birdie has unpacked from her mother's bag stand as signifiers of their former identities. In so doing, they also illustrate how signifier and signified may not exist in the conjunction which Wittgenstein describes in his 'picture'. However, the 'picture' may have more power and usefulness than Wittgenstein allows. Earlier in the text, discussing her first day of school in New Hampshire, Birdie describes the pleasure she experiences in the company of the girls she sits with at lunch, 'gabbing about who was who, what was what' (222). The world of the white girls at this school is one where signifier and signified relate in a manner corresponding to the 'naming-process' model which Wittgenstein's picture describes. Birdie, on the other hand, is aware that the signifier 'white' under which she passes does not in fact signify her accurately. Birdie's two acts of unpacking can be seen as emblematic of the two models of signification outlined so far. The objects in Jim's bag, which Birdie is able to align unproblematically with the identity she understands as belonging to 'Jim', are emblematic of the nomenclaturist model of signification which Wittgenstein describes in his 'picture'. The objects in her mother's bag, which reveal the false and fictive identities of Birdie and her mother, are emblematic of the fact that there are alternative models of signification, even that – as Gates argues – it is possible to Signify on signification. That signification is related to notions of identity and self-construction is crucial to Birdie's tale of development and to her narrative project.

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[24] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd.ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (1953; Oxford: Blackwell, 1968) 2.

'When I was little' indicates that Birdie wishes to suggest that she has since come to a more mature understanding of processes of signification. Gates argues that 'Learning how to Signify is often part of our adolescent education.'[25] His connection of the practice of Signifyin(g) to the concept of adolescence is never satisfactorily explained. Gates discusses Signifyin(g) as an intertextual practice which is not restricted to African-American texts – 'Lest this theory of criticism, however, be thought of as only black, let me admit that the implicit premise of this study is that all texts Signify upon other texts, in motivated and unmotivated ways.'[26] He also describes Signifyin(g) as rhetorical play which takes place in the African-American vernacular. While noting that scholars have paid great attention to these language games as played by teenage males, Gates praises the work of H. Rap Brown and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan because they stress that the practice is neither male- nor teenage-specific.[27] Sometimes, however, Gates seems to feel that the connection between Signifyin(g) and adolescence requires defending:

> Similarly, there is absolutely nothing infantile about Signifyin(g) either, except perhaps that we learn to use language in this way in adolescence, despite the strangely compulsive repetition of this adjective as a pejorative in the writings of linguists about Signifyin(g).[28]

He also claims that 'Signifyin(g) is an adult ritual, which black people learn as adolescents' and 'Teaching one's children the fine art of Signifyin(g) is to teach them [. . .] a second language that they can share with other black people. Black adolescents engaged in the dozens and in Signifyin(g) rituals to learn the classic black figures of Signification.'[29] Taken together, Gates's comments reveal uneasy slippage between the concepts of childhood, adolescence and adulthood, again suggesting that passage between the categories is unclear. He suggests that the ability to Signify constitutes one means by which an African-American individual passes from adolescence to adulthood. His eagerness to ensure that Signifyin(g) should not be regarded as 'infantile' betrays a

[25] Gates, 52.

[26] Ibid., xxiv.

[27] Ibid., 72.

[28] Ibid., 58.

[29] Ibid., 75 and 76.

feeling that whatever is adult is more significant than that which is adolescent. Signifyin(g) additionally is a way of proclaiming one's 'blackness'. At the same time as an individual is educated (through Signifyin(g)) into adulthood, that individual is taught a means of challenging the dominant, white signifying system through a rebellious gesture of self-assertion which might be read as profoundly adolescent (it might be useful here to think of Birdie's adolescent gesture of unpacking what is 'grown-up').

For Gates, the renaming and revising inherent to Signifyin(g), and its concomitant concern with issues of identity and difference through various kinds of linguistic play is 'another sign of the maturation process demanded to move, as it were, from the repetition of tropes to their application.'[30] It could be argued that Birdie's act of unpacking her mother's bag enables her to make just such a transition, in which she moves from an understanding of Signifyin(g) to an ability to Signify (and to Signify herself). In her mother's bag, Birdie finds a postcard addressed to her mother from Dot, Birdie's father's sister. It reveals that Dot is living in Boston and wants to hear details about her family. This communication upsets Birdie as it appears once more that her mother has not been truthful with her. Birdie comments that

> There was a time when I told my mother everything. But the postcard was the end of all that. It seemed there was nothing more to say between us. I began to watch her with a distant suspicion. Jim was no longer the focus of my investigation. My mother was the betrayer, had withheld vital information from me – information that might help us find Cole and my father. (232-233)

This act of unpacking provides the information which results in Birdie's eventual realisation that if she is to find her family, she must find them herself – and find herself in the process. Birdie's awareness that this task requires the ability to Signify (to revise, to self-fashion) grows slowly. Not long after her actions of unpacking, Birdie describes how on a trip to the supermarket one day with her mother, Jim, and Birdie's friend Mona, they encounter a girl from Birdie's school. The girl is African-American, and very visible in the white world of the New Hampshire town in which Birdie and her mother live.

[30] Ibid., 85.

Birdie's mother is upset because the girl reminds her of Cole. Asked why she did not speak to the girl, Birdie replies:

> "Like Mona said, she's a loser. Everybody hates her. Nobody speaks to her except the school genius, Nora, and she's a loser too."
> [. . .]
> My mother's voice sounded thick as she said, "A loser? Jesse Goldman, I never thought I'd hear you talk about another human being in such terms. [. . .] That girl is no different from you. Do you hear me?"
> "You mean we're both black?" It had come out before I could stop it.
> My mother breathed in sharply, and we stared at each other. (237-8)

Birdie signifies on her mother through an act of rhetorical play – specifically, one which focuses on what might be meant by the word 'black'. Birdie and her mother know that Birdie is passing as white, so that Birdie's act of Signifyin(g) functions to expose the fictiveness of her own identity (as Jesse Goldman) as well as suggesting that racial labels may be false. In her act of Signifyin(g), Birdie additionally seems to be moving towards reclaiming her African-American heritage. In the following chapter of the novel, Birdie describes how she has recently begun adding (packing) objects to a shoe box of 'Negrobilia' (127) – items which her father and Cole left for her when the family separated. The box and the objects it contains are an obvious indicator that Birdie has had to suppress, but not reject, her African-American heritage (which, by extension, constitutes her connection to her father and Cole) when she passes as white. Birdie describes how her 'latest addition' (241) to the box is a page from a library book about Brazil, specifically about a god called Exu-Elegba 'who the book said represented potentiality and change':

> It said that although many people thought Exu was the devil, he was really just a trickster, always shifting his form, always at the crossroads. I had a feeling that Cole would like Exu. (242)

Exu is the figure whom Gates calls Esu-Elegbara, an African trickster figure who exists in 'separate but related' manner to the Signifying Monkey, an African-American figure. Both figures, in Gates's view, 'stand for certain principles of verbal expression', with Esu serving 'as a figure for the nature and function of interpretation and double-voiced

utterance.'[31] Although Birdie says of her picture of Exu that 'I didn't know why I had stolen it' (242), it seems that she identifies with the trickster figure. Passing as white, and in adolescence (she is thirteen here), she occupies a position on the threshold. Additionally, she is learning to Signify, in the sense that she is able to make tentative acts of self-assertion and self-construction, seen in her transgressive acts of unpacking and her ability to Signify on her mother. Birdie's claim of her own ignorance also constitutes a form of rhetorical 'indirection' which Gates lists as one means of Signifyin(g). Gates praises Roger D. Abrahams's work because its definitions of Signifyin(g) 'emphasize "indirection" and "implication," which we can read as synonyms of *figurative*.'[32] Although Gates's use of 'figurative' is vague here (and elsewhere in his text), and often accompanied by problematic use of the term 'literal', it is possible to read Birdie's declaration of ignorance about her own motivations as figurative, in the sense that it is not true (literal). That Birdie engages in an act of packing when she stores the picture about Exu suggests that she performs a self-conscious act of revision and self-construction. The claim that Cole would like Exu suggests further that Birdie detects the parallels between the character of Exu and herself, as the person whom Cole likes most is (or was, before the family were separated, at least) Birdie.

Birdie's greatest act of self-assertion occurs when she decides to leave New Hampshire to find her family. Preparing to run away to Boston, she ponders the consequences of casting off various identities:

> I wondered, as I passed the clear abandoned lake – silver, still, silent – if I too would forever be fleeing in the dark, abandoning parts of myself that I no longer wanted, in search of some part that had escaped me. Killing one girl in order to let the other one free. It hurt, this killing, more than I thought it would, but I kept walking, repeating a pattern of words under my breath, words that I no longer understood but whispered just the same. *kublica marentha doba. lasa mel kin.* (289)

Birdie's conception of herself as containing several identities – several girls who must be killed off for others to function – reveals how she is as yet unable to come to any kind of

[31] Ibid., xxi.

[32] Ibid.,75.

positive understanding of how her different selves might cohere or exist in harmony. Additionally, she continues to see herself as someone for whom existence is achieved and maintained in passing (like the Elemenos) – both in the sense that she feels she must always assume some identity which is not her own, and in the sense that she conceives of herself as always in process, always in motion. 'The dark' once more symbolises an ambiguous space of signification (one that is frightening, in this instance) which Birdie occupies. When Birdie visits her grandmother (her mother's mother), her grandmother comments on Birdie's appearance by saying '"Well, goodness. You look awful – like Anne Frank"' (364). This serves as an ironic reminder that the identity of the Jewish girl called Jesse may not be as easy to kill off as Birdie imagines, even as the reference to Anne Frank, with its implications of persecution and violence, illustrates Laura Robinson's point that Birdie is 'forced through violence to disavow her membership' with the various communities and racial groups for which her various identities are fashioned.[33]

The differences and parallels between Birdie and Anne Frank are worth consideration. Anne's Jewish identity is the cause of her persecution and death, and necessitates the act of going into hiding (disappearing like the Elemenos) in order to survive. Birdie, by contrast, assumes the label of 'Jewish', a label she can take up or discard at will. She stops wearing her Star of David after a boy makes an anti-Semitic comment to her on the street (247), signaling that she has the ability and means to continually revise and signify (on) her identity in the world, something not available to Anne. Birdie's fictive identities are not assumed because her life is at stake but because her mother is trying to evade capture by the police. However, the sense of threat Birdie feels is real. In one of the rare moments when she alludes to her act of narrating, she says of the year in which her family split up that

> There is still a lot about that spring that I feel unable – or unwilling – to tell. When you've been let in on a secret, told that your very existence and your mother's freedom and even the negritudinal forces of the universe

[33] Laura Robinson, "Performative Passing in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*," diss., Indiana U, 2004, 40.

> depend on your keeping that secret, you kind of lose the ability to speak it, even after the secret's reasons are no longer clear. (94)

Birdie feels that her act of narrative, that any effort to construct and define her identity may have devastating consequences. To name her self is to risk destroying that self, something which might explain her reticence about signifying herself in her narrative's opening.

Eventually tracking down her father and Cole in San Francisco, Birdie realises that both her parents have neglected her – her mother does not consider how her actions affect her immediate family, whereas her father is more concerned with his theories and his intellectual work than his children. When Birdie asks her father if he cares about what has happened to her over the past years, and confesses that she has been passing as white, he responds

> "Of course I care where you've been, Birdie. I want to hear all about it. I love you. Of course. But baby, there's no such thing as passing. We're all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion, make-believe. It's a costume. We all wear one. You just switched yours at some point. That's just the absurdity of the whole race game." (391)

Her father's comments illustrate the complexity of the passing act. The fact that everyone is 'pretending' – passing, in other words – somehow cancels out the phenomenon of passing. When Birdie is reconciled with Cole, they discuss his theory. Cole says that

> "He's right, you know. About it all being constructed. But" – she turned to me, looking at me intently – "that doesn't mean it doesn't exist." (408)

Cole's insight provides Birdie with a major revelation about her own existence, one which provides the means for Birdie to change her attitude towards her own identity:

> Everybody had their own way of surviving. My mother had her way, my father had his, Cole had hers. And then I thought of me, the silent me that was Jesse Goldman, the one who hadn't uttered a word, the one who had removed even her Star of David. It had come so easily to me. I had become somebody I didn't like. Somebody who had no voice or color or conviction. I wasn't sure that was survival at all. I spoke my thoughts

> aloud. "They say you don't have to choose. But the thing is, you do. Because there are consequences if you don't."
> Cole shrugged. "Yeah, and there are consequences if you do." (408)

Robinson describes Birdie's dilemma in *Caucasia* as that of 'how to be someone who understands that race is a human invention but still maintain relationships with people who see race as a natural category.'[34] If this is the case, then the passages (and passing acts) above illustrate that Birdie realises that her self-development and survival are dependent on her ability to construct and voice her own identity, although this will result in fractured, temporary and ever-shifting relationships with others. Boudreau sums up the novel's final events by claiming that

> As Birdie and Cole have both learned, the construction of race varies across lines of class and gender, and race is far more complicated than simply skin color or phenotypical characteristics. Interrogating how these social constructions are interpreted and represented and lived is the key to destabilizing an overly simplistic understanding of the connection between race and visibility [. . .].[35]

Both Robinson and Boudreau hint at, but do not articulate the fact that Birdie's dilemma is that the world she must negotiate is one of differing signifying systems, one where various significations of race have various effects. If, as Ginsberg argues, the act of passing calls into question essentialist notions of identity, it also calls into question the validity of, and the consequences which arise from, Wittgenstein's 'picture' of language.[36] Although Wittgenstein says that the picture is mistaken, that it can hold people 'captive', it is nonetheless a picture that exists, something which his use of the past tense may seem to contradict.[37] This is seen in Birdie's sufferings when she allows her body to speak for her – to allow herself to be signified by certain essentialist categories of 'black' or 'white' is to stifle part of herself. Ginsberg argues that

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[34] Ibid., 40.

[35] Boudreau, 60.

[36] Ginsberg, 16.

[37] Wittgenstein, 48.

> In its interrogation of the essentialism that is the foundation of identity politics, passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress.[38]

Leading on from this, it seems that the phenomenon of passing offers opportunities for new systems of signification, showing how the signification of self is inextricable from signification in or through language. However, despite Birdie's advancement in self-knowledge, constituted by her realisation that she can no longer allow her body to speak for her, it is unclear finally how Birdie will proceed to think of herself This is indicated by the fact that even when narrating, Birdie does not give concrete details about herself. The novel concludes with Birdie taking an early morning walk in San Francisco. Birdie's continued indeterminacy is echoed in the weather – 'Outside, it wasn't clear yet what kind of day it would be' (413). Birdie examines the faces of children passing in a school bus:

> They were black and Mexican and Asian and white, on the verge of puberty, but not quite in it. They were utterly ordinary, throwing obscenities and spitballs at one another the way kids do. One face toward the back of the bus caught my eye, and I halted in my tracks, catching my breath. It was a cinnamon-skinned girl with her hair in braids. She was black like me, a mixed girl, and she was watching me from behind the dirty glass. For a second I thought I was somewhere familiar and she was a girl I already knew. I began to lift my hand, but stopped, remembering where I was and what I had already found. Then the bus lurched forward, and the face was gone with it, just a blur of yellow and black in motion. (413)

The girl whom Birdie confusedly believes she recognises is reminiscent of Cole (the cinnamon-colored skin) but also of Birdie herself – 'She was black like me, a mixed girl.' Birdie has decided to label herself with the signifier 'black', yet another indicator that she is no longer willing to let her skin colour define her. The novel ends with Birdie standing, no longer passing and in motion. She additionally seems to regard herself as more mature. Her discussion of the 'kids' suggests that she does not view herself as one of

[38] Ibid.

them, even though her recognition and identification with the girl suggests that Birdie still moves in and out of different categories. Even her identification itself moves between categories – 'black' means that Birdie is no longer allowing color to signify race, while 'mixed' suggests that she is aware of the inadequacy of labeling. Her narrative is called *Caucasia*, suggesting that Birdie is content to move between multiple categories as long as she is doing the labeling.

The ambivalences expressed in this final passage show how Birdie's narrative technique is actively engaged in the passage between categories with which her narrative is so concerned. These categories do not only pertain to race but relate to McCorkle's A-B-C model of passage to adulthood. Birdie's near-recognition of the girl on the bus suggests that Birdie's desire to return to the childhood intimacy she shared with Cole is still present. However, her remembrance of 'where I was and what I had found' expresses multiple and complex positions at once. Birdie has re-discovered something approximating that closeness with Cole, but she also still feels something is missing. She still looks for connection with the girl on the bus, still looks for confirmation of her own identity in others. Finally, though, her decision not to make contact with the girl (or perhaps Birdie realises that she cannot make contact) suggests her awareness that she must forge her own identity in the future. Birdie's complex positioning takes the form of a meditation on where she is to be found in McCorkle's A-B-C model, and it is her decision not to signify herself in these terms that allows her to make various acts of passing in her act of narrating.

Back in New Hampshire, Birdie describes how the pressure of living according to the dictates of a fictive identity accentuates her estrangement from her own body:

> Something else changed in New Hampshire, something I never told anyone for fear of being called crazy and sent away, like a girl I had seen on an after-school special. It was simply a sensation I had at times, when I experienced a sense of watching myself from above. It happened only occasionally. I would, quite literally, feel myself rising above a scene, looking down at myself, hearing myself speak. I would gaze down at the thin girl sitting by the fence, the one with her brown hair falling into her eyes, drawing patterns in the dirt, and watch this girl with the detachment of a stranger. And in these moments I would notice things about myself, about my body – the faint dusky mustache that made me look dirty in the

> wrong light; the bunions on my feet that twisted my toes inward like sad, beaten dogs; the remarkable length of my fingers; the knobby knees; and the flat feet. I saw these things as neither beautiful nor ugly, but simply as facts. I would look at my own body the way that I looked at another's. I would think, "You," and not "I" in those moments, and as long as the girl was "you," I didn't feel that I lived those scenes, only that I witnessed them. (190)

In this passage Birdie conceives of herself in the first, second and third-person, something enabled by her ability to pass out of her own body, and all of this framed by her adolescent indeterminacies regarding identity -- she compares herself to a teenage girl in an after-school special. This ability is echoed in her act of narration itself, in which Birdie recounts (in the first-person, retrospectively) a state of being displaced from her own body. This complex passage in and out of her own bodily experience, represented here as a source of concern, in fact represents a strategy of narrative displacement or narrative passing which Birdie enlists on several occasions for specific purposes, and which suggests that she has not moved out of a state of provisional self-construction which could be called adolescent. This strategy serves to problematise the tale of development which Birdie wants to tell, and complicates what might be involved in signifying and narrating adolescence. One such moment of narrative passing occurs when Birdie recalls her jealousy over what she perceives to be the greater degree of attention and affection which her father devotes to Cole:

> Cole was my father's special one. I understood that even then. She was his prodigy – his young, gifted, and black. At the time, I wasn't sure why it was Cole and not me, but I knew that when they came together, I disappeared. Her existence comforted him. She was the proof that his blackness hadn't been completely blanched. By his four years at Harvard. By my mother's blue-blood family wedding reception in the back of the big rotting house in Fayerweather Street. [. . .]
>
> Cole was his proof that he had indeed survived the integrationist shuffle, that he had remained human despite what seemed a conspiracy to turn him into stone. She was his proof of the pudding, his milk-chocolate pudding, the small dusky body, the burst of mischievous curls (nappier than his own), the full pouting lips (fuller than his own). Her existence told him he hadn't wandered quite so far and that his body still held the power to leave its mark. (55-56)

Birdie's narrative position varies as this passage progresses. She moves from admitting her awareness of her father's preference for Cole – 'I understood' – to admitting that she cannot account for the preference – 'I wasn't sure why'. Although she is describing circumstances which existed until she was eight years old, she goes on to supply the knowledge and understanding which she has just denied to herself. Significantly, she does so without marking the fact that she is speaking at a remove from her eight-year-old experience – 'She was the proof'. Birdie passes in and out of her eight-year-old experience, narrating from an unspecified point in the future. Not only this, but her narrative comes close to appropriating her father's voice. Birdie is speculating about how her father must have thought about Cole, but his thoughts are not presented as Birdie's speculation but rather as something more closely resembling a process of reflection in her father's mind, as if Birdie is passing in and out of her father's consciousness. Birdie additionally shows a flair for linguistic play – 'his proof of the pudding, his milk-chocolate pudding', which reveals not only that she is able to signify (in Gates's sense of repetition with a difference) but that she has a highly developed understanding of the motivations which lie behind the various alliances between members of her family, alliances based on similarities and differences in skin colour. However, this awareness on the part of the narrating self, made manifest through an act of narrative passing, is something which Birdie is equally able to suppress when it suits her. When her mother talks to herself in enigmatic statements about her father's anticipated trip to Brazil (114), Birdie does not explain her mother's comments or even acknowledge her own incomprehension of them, allowing events to unfold until she notes 'It was clear, finally, that they were leaving me' (121).

In a more complex gesture of narrative passing, Birdie recalls how she stares at her twelve-year old self in a mirror:

> Before bed that night, I stared at the bathroom mirror and saw a twelve-year-old girl who might be a boy if it weren't for the scraggly ponytail falling down her back. The dark trace of a mustache over her lip, and eyebrows that met faintly in the middle. There were no curls, no full lips, still no signs of my sister's face in my own. There had been a time when I thought I was just going through a phase. That if I was patient and good enough, I would transform into a black swan. I mouthed the word

> *shimbala* at myself in the mirror. It was somewhere between a noun and a command in Elemeno, but I couldn't remember what it meant. (180)

In this passage, the word *shimbala* functions for Birdie as a signifier with an absent or missing signified. Her inability to remember the meaning of the word corresponds to the fact that she is at a loss as to how to account for herself. She does not know what she signifies, so that oddly, *shimbala*'s lack of meaning comes to signify Birdie's condition – its absence of meaning becomes meaningful. However, this is the second appearance of the word *shimbala* in the novel. It appears much earlier in the narrative, when Cole tells Birdie about the Elemenos – 'We whispered questions and answers to each other like calls to prayer. *shimbala matamba caressi. nicolta fo mo capsala*' (7). *Shimbala* is not translated here, but the implication is that the word is used correctly, its meaning understood. Birdie's inability to remember its meaning later suggests that she has lost the closeness she initially shared with Cole. It is notable that in the act of narrating her story, Birdie is able to recall *shimbala* used in its proper context, with its original meaning. However, recalling how she later forgets the meaning of the same word, her narrating self does not supply the meaning, although she has evidently remembered what it means by the time she comes to tell her story. It may also be the case that 'shimbala' means something close to the word 'pass'. Between a noun and a command, when Birdie mouths this word to herself in the mirror she may be inciting herself to move out of the 'phase' believes she is passing through. The first time the word is used, however, it seems to take the form of a question, indicating the tentative manner in which Birdie regards herself – she may be going through a phase, she may not. 'Somewhere between a noun and a command' means that Birdie may be naming or describing herself (noun) or advocating a revision of self.

Birdie's ability to manipulate her narrative has particular ramifications when thinking about adolescence. She recounts a time in New Hampshire when her mother confides her fears to Birdie regarding the fact that Cole will have had her period without her mother around to show what her to do. As so often in this novel, consideration of what might have happened to Cole prompts Birdie to reflect on her own experience:

> I first got mine when we were living at Aurora. That evening my mother had been out on the fire escape, talking to Bernadette, telling her about her dead Jewish husband while they passed a bong back and forth. I stood in the first-floor bathroom and could hear them talking, their words floating across the night air and into the open window. [. . .] I stood alone in the group shower, trying to wash the stains out of my underwear while the showerheads around me seemed to stare one another down, ready for a cockfight. I watched as my own dark mess floated into the drain, and thought about Cole, wished she was there so I could tell her, so she could show me what to do. The blood was darker than I had expected, not the cartoonish crimson I had imagined it would be. After my shower, I folded toilet paper into my underpants, dressed, and went outside to break up the herbal rendezvous and tell my mother the news.
>
> My mother was staring at me, the corners of her mouth turned down in anguish. I had to get out of there. The house felt oppressively small all of a sudden. (157)

Once more, Birdie's adolescence is signified in retrospect, as her experience of having her period is not related at the time it occurs but some time afterwards. It is also narrated to show how both Birdie and her mother suffer the loss of Cole – anything which happens to Birdie functions as a kind of surrogate for Cole's experience while only making Cole's absence more poignant, so that Birdie's own identity is not significant in itself but only notable for what it signifies about Cole. The world which Birdie inhabits at the onset of her period is the commune's underground world of transitional identities. Her mother is engaged in a homosexual relationship with Bernadette, indicating how all aspects of identity are open for experimentation. In the bathroom the atmosphere is hostile, alienating and frightening, with Birdie alone in the group shower. Birdie personifies the showerheads so that they seem to metamorphose into something animal and masculine, seen in her reference to the cockfight. The passage between paragraphs here also corresponds to a passage between chronological moments. The first paragraph concludes with Birdie's decision to leave the bathroom and tell her mother 'the news'; the following paragraph could initially be a continued recollection in which Birdie tells her mother the news, but in fact returns to the moment in New Hampshire where Birdie's mother is bemoaning the loss of Cole.

The point of detailing the various ways in which Birdie's adolescence is signified from a place and perspective other than itself is to show that Birdie's adolescence is

central to her acts of narrative passing. More than this, however, but Birdie's retrospective narratings of adolescence, as well as her acts of narrative passing, constitute a gesture of Signifyin(g) on McCorkle's A-B-C model – it might be more properly called a narrative – in that Birdie literally repeats it with a difference (it is unclear whether Birdie has left adolescence or, conversely, if she has ever been adolescent). In so doing, she constructs a revised model of passage (or non-passage), a new signification in which she is free to occupy various categories.

If *Caucasia* is marked by Birdie's subtle exploration of what might be entailed in Signifyin(g) on the conventional developmental narrative of progress from childhood to adulthood, *Middlesex* makes its Signifyin(g) obvious from the very beginning of Cal Stephanides' narrative:

> I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974. (3)

Cal's narrative challenges McCorkle's A-B-C model of individual development first by its assertion of two births, and then by its assertion that the births constitute the formation of individuals of different sexes. Cal's story is occasioned by the fact that he is a pseudohermaphrodite with 5-alpha reductase deficiency syndrome. Although genetically male, with an XY karyotype and chromosomal status, Cal's chromosomal deficiency means that his genital anatomy does not resemble that of a boy and so he is labeled 'female' at birth and raised as a girl – Calliope – until the age of fourteen. None of this, however, is explained in the narrative's opening. Instead, Cal offers intriguing and enigmatic details about his life. His birth certificate announces him to be 'Calliope Helen Stephanides'; his current driver's license lists his first name 'simply as Cal.' For 'most of my adult life' (3) he has been an employee of the U. S. State Department. Unlike Birdie, he posits an adult identity for himself – one which corresponds with his male, narrating self. This comment points up the vital contrasts between Cal's experience and Birdie's, as well as showing the different motivations behind their acts of Signifyin(g). Whereas Birdie's acts of passing find their locus in constructions of race and are enabled by Birdie's skin colour, Cal's acts of passing – if passing they are – find their locus in

constructions of sex and gender and are facilitated by the indeterminate nature of Cal's anatomy. Whereas Birdie is aware of her acts of passing (both racial and narrative), Cal notes that 'I was raised a girl and had no doubts about this' (226). Cal's passing as female is not something of which he is aware. This suggests that definitions of passing could be revised (does passing have to be a self-conscious act?) or, conversely, renders it debatable whether Cal can be described as 'passing' at all – certainly with regard to the time in his life when he lives as Calliope.

At the time he narrates, Cal explains that 'I operate in society as a man' (41). He could be described as passing as a man because he does not have the genital features attributed to the male sex, and because to be accepted as a man he keeps this biological fact, like that of his pseudohermaphrodite status, a secret. Although Cal gives descriptions of the careful strategies of subterfuge and dissemblance he resorts to (in public bathrooms and in romantic situations with women in particular) he never uses the word 'passing'. It is in his act of narrating that Cal discloses the fact of his hermaphroditic status, an act that still keeps his status as 'man' intact – only those who have read Cal's narrative and who know Cal, who can align the signifier 'Cal Stephanides' to the person, will know about his hermaphrodite status. Although Birdie's Signifyin(g) exposes the arbitrary nature of racial and other signifiers (seen in her ability to pass as white, her labeling of herself as 'black, mixed' at the end of her narrative, and in her questioning of what constitutes movement between 'adolescence' and 'adulthood'), Cal's Signifyin(g) takes place in order to hide and suppress certain aspects of his story which do not fit the model of development which he wishes to tell, one in which, by the time he narrates, Cal claims the status of 'male' and 'adult'. However, the fact that he turns to the strategy of Signifyin(g) in order to construct himself as 'adult' (a strategy which highlights the plural and provisionary nature of self-construction and signification) means that his narrative strategy can be turned back on itself. Entering Cal's text from a different direction problematises his story of development. Nonetheless, despite the fact that he wants to tell a story of development, Cal is wary of the act of self-definition. Like Birdie, Cal is aware of cultural and personal imperatives to define himself, but is unwilling or unable to surrender some of the advantages and privileges that indeterminacy allows. The most significant similarity between Cal and Birdie is that

both use the fact of this indeterminacy, their ability and skill in passing, in order to manipulate their narratives by undertaking certain forms of narrative passing (something like narrative license, in that it suggests a freedom that comes from not respecting various boundaries). In both cases this strategy has direct bearing on the significance and signification of adolescence.

In the opening to his narrative, Cal announces that 'But now, at the age of forty-one, I feel another birth coming on' (3). This is nothing less than the urge to write his story:

> After decades of neglect, I find myself thinking about departed great-aunts and -uncles, long-lost grandfathers, unknown fifth cousins, or, in the case of an inbred family like mine, all those things in one. And so before it's too late I want to get it down for good: this roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time. Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome! Sing how it bloomed two and a half centuries ago on the slopes of Mount Olympus, while the goats bleated and the olives dropped. Sing how it passed down through nine generations, gathering invisibly within the polluted pool of the Stephanides family. And sing how Providence, in the guise of a massacre, sent the gene flying again; how it blew like a seed across the sea to America, where it drifted through our industrial rains until it fell to earth in the fertile soil of my mother's own mid-western womb.
>
> Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic, too. (4)

This opening reveals what Cal is later to describe as 'the themes of my life – chance and sex' (216). These themes are cast in the guise of epic, seen in Cal's invocation of a muse and his listing of the details of which the muse is to 'sing'. Of the book's structure, Eugenides has said in an interview that

> Since I was writing about a genetic condition, it also seemed incumbent on me to pass on classical literary forms to what is, after all, a 21st-century book. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. The traits of the ancestors show up in us today. I wanted *Middlesex* to be like that, a kind of novelistic genome.[39]

[39] Jonathan Safran Foer, "Jeffrey Eugenides," *BOMB* (Fall 2002): 76.

The word 'recapitulation' functions to describe not only the subject matter of the novel but its narrative strategy. For Cal (and Birdie), both self-construction and narrating the self necessitate Signifyin(g), or repetition with a difference. That genetics has become a subject for epic, for example, shows how Cal signifies on the traditional content of the epic. The prevalence of genetics in this opening – which suggests that a gene is the hero of this story – also serves as a reminder that throughout all of the changes which befall Cal in his narrative, his genetic condition remains constant, something which does not pass away. This is important when considering the strategy of calling on the 'muse'. The Greek muse of epic poetry is Calliope, for whom Cal was originally named. Cal's invocation of the muse hints that his story will invoke his former, female self – Calliope – someone of whom he says later, 'Hers was the duty to live out a mythical life in the actual world, mine to tell about it now' (424). Cal's former self – of whom he is sometimes able to speak as if Calliope is a different person altogether, or here, in the role of muse, as embodying a fictional or figurative existence – becomes the motivation for his story and the means for its existence. Cal's strategy of invoking the muse also writes him into the traditional role of male epic writer, calling on female muse. This both reinforces Cal's status as 'man' and shows how, by the time he narrates, he takes on what Ginsberg would call the privileges of being male, even as he exists in problematic relation to that category of 'male'.

Regarding the unique circumstances he alludes to in his opening sentence, Cal says only that 'Like Tiresias, I was first one thing and then the other' (3). The character of Tiresias fascinates Cal and functions as further inspiration for his complex narrative strategy. The most common account of Tiresias's life relates that one day, walking in the woods, Tiresias witnessed two snakes mating, killed the female, and was turned into a woman. Seven years later, happening on two snakes once more, he killed the male snake and was transformed back into a man. At a later date, Tiresias is asked by Zeus and Hera to settle their dispute about whether it is men or women who experience most pleasure in love (Zeus argues that women do, while Hera argues that men do). Tiresias answers that women do. In response, Hera strikes Tiresias blind but Zeus grants him the gift of

foresight, or prophesy.[40] As a teenage girl, Calliope plays the part of Tiresias in a school play. Cal, narrating, recalls Calliope's fitness for the part:

> [. . .] I was a shoo-in to play the old, blind prophet. My wild hair suggested clairvoyance. My stoop made me appear brittle with age. My half-changed voice had a disembodied, inspired quality. Tiresias had also been a woman, of course. But I didn't know that then. And it wasn't mentioned in the script. (331)

The adolescent Calliope, playing Tiresias, offers a literal illustration of Molesworth's 'adolescent sensibility in an adult role', whereas the self-styled adult Cal, narrating, enacts Oates's construction of the 'adult-as-adolescent'. Cal's ability to occupy more than one category at once ('male', 'female', 'adolescent', 'adult') shows how he does not narrate from a position which can be unproblematically labeled 'adult' or 'man'. The parallels outlined between Calliope/Cal and Tiresias are dramatised in Cal's acts of narrative passage, in which he assumes the blindness and foresight of Tiresias as well as relating the experience of having lived as both female and male. Calliope's ignorance about her own biological condition finds a metaphorical parallel in Tiresias's blindness; Cal's anticipation of a future revelation (a new identity in the future) functions as a similar parallel to the foresight and gift of prophesy with which Tiresias is granted. All of these correspondences are enabled by the fact that Calliope's indeterminate adolescent body enables various literal and figurative passings (as older, as male, as a different person altogether) which the older Cal narrates and explicates.

Cal enlists the attributes of Tiresias in his act of narration in order to manipulate his narrative, which in addition to being so much else, takes the form of a meditation on the nature of chance and fate, particularly as these themes relate to self-determination. The first chapter of Cal's narrative, for example, describes the immediate events leading up to his conception and birth. He argues that 'I'm the final clause in a periodic sentence, and that sentence begins a long time ago, in another language, and you have to read it from the beginning to get to the end, which is my arrival' (20). Having introduced himself into his narrative, and argued that to understand him it is necessary to read the

[40] J.E. Zimmerman, ed., *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 255.

entire text of which he is a part, he says that he is going to 'unwind the film', again showing how he enlists multiple generic forms in order to tell his story – he passes off his written text as film. Cal enlists the metaphor of unspooling a film in order to be 'back at the beginning' (20), to the start of the sentence.

The genetic condition responsible for Cal's unusual history causes him to extend his story backwards, beginning with events in his family history which result in that birth. Cal begins his story in 1922, describing the lives of a brother and sister, Desdemona and Eleutherios ('Lefty'), who are living in Mount Olympus, part of the Greek territory in Turkey. When the Turkish army attacks the Greek army, Desdemona and Lefty obtain false visas naming them as French citizens, and they escape the massacre in Smyrna by boarding a ship bound for America. In the first sentence of this section, Cal indicates that Desdemona is his grandmother. Desdemona has been previously named in the first chapter of Cal's narrative, which discussed his birth. It becomes clear that Cal has chosen these events as the starting point to begin explaining his existence because, as it turns out, Desdemona and Lefty are not only brother and sister – Cal notes that Lefty is 'my great-uncle (among other things)' (31), but become engaged in an incestuous relationship which culminates in marriage on board ship to America. Desdemona and Lefty are brother and sister, husband and wife, and finally also Cal's grandparents. In narrating the details of his grandparents' former lives, Cal reveals the blindness and foresight which Tiresias possesses, in the sense that he hides and reveals information in order to suit the demands of narrative suspense. Describing Desdemona and Lefty's arrival on the ship, for example, even before they are married, Cal notes of them that 'I can say it now, finally, my grandparents' (64), although there is no reason why it is possible for Cal to reveal these identities at this moment and not at any earlier one. Cal additionally assumes a kind of omniscience in order to tell their story which does not prevent him from interjecting it with his own reflections, so that his narrative passing transgresses chronological bounds.

Cal's further justification for the kind of narrative passing he enacts is revealed when he discusses his grandparents' genetic condition:

> Without their knowing, my grandparents, on their way to America, were each carrying a single mutated gene on the fifth chromosome. It wasn't a recent mutation. According to Dr. Luce, the gene first appeared in my bloodline sometime around 1750, in the body of one Penelope Evangelatos, my great-grandmother to the ninth power. She passed it on to her son Petras, who passed it on to his two daughters, who passed it on to three of their five children, and so on and so on. Being recessive, its expression would have been fitful. Sporadic heredity is what the geneticists call it. A trait that goes underground for decades only to reappear when everyone has forgotten about it. That was how it went in Bithynios. Every so often a hermaphrodite was born, a seeming girl who, in growing up, proved otherwise. (71)

What appears to be Cal's foresight (his act of divulging information to which the characters it pertains are not privy) is actually retrospection. Lefty and Desdemona do not realise that they carry this gene inside them; the medically-diagnosed Cal, looking backwards, does. Cal is informed by an understanding of his own condition because he has grown up in a historical moment where the study of genetics is more advanced. Pondering the possible reasons behind Desdemona and Lefty's attraction to each other, Cal engages in a long meditation:

> [. . .] Was it love or reproduction? Chance or destiny? Crime or nature at work? [. . .] I try to go back in my mind to a time before genetics, before everyone was in the habit of saying about everything, "It's in the genes." A time before our present freedom, and so much freer! Desdemona had no idea what was happening. She didn't envision her insides as a vast computer code, all 1s and 0s, an infinity of sequences, any one of which might contain a bug. Now we know we carry this map of ourselves around. Even as we stand on the street corner, it dictates our destiny. It brings onto our faces the same wrinkles and age spots our parents had. It makes us sniff in recognizable, family ways. [. . .] And this can be extrapolated backward in time, so that when I speak, Desdemona speaks, too. She's writing these words now. Desdemona, who had no idea of the army inside her, carrying out its million orders, or of the one soldier who disobeyed, going AWOL . . . (37-38)

Cal's engagement with the subject of genetics is complicated by his use of metaphor, his engagement with questions of literal and figurative. He wants to argue that each individual's genetic code functions as a kind of frame of signification. Not only this, but each frame of signification Signifies on the frames of signification of an individual's

ancestors – the codes repeat, with multiple differences, codes which have gone before. This does not prevent Cal from claiming that 'when I speak, Desdemona speaks [. . .] she's writing these words now', so that he uses the fact of the gene which he shares with Desdemona as a justification for constructing her voice in his narrative. For Cal, genetic codes function as metaphors do – they transfer, carry, or pass on the qualities of one thing to another, they deal in likeness and difference. For Cal, who defines himself by his unusual genetic condition, the metaphoric power of the genetic code not only inspires his preoccupation with likeness and difference but justifies his narrative strategy. But Cal enlists the metaphor of a map to describe this genetic frame of signification, and he attributes to this 'map' the ability to dictate destiny. However, maps do not dictate. They only serve as representations. They can aid in orientation, but equally, they can mislead. An important example might be to think of McCorkle's A-B-C model of signification as a kind of map (since it concerns itself with the idea of life as a journey, with different stages of life marked by signposts) which serves, contrary to its purpose, to disorient and misinform, particularly as it purports to signify adolescence. Perhaps Cal means to suggest that the genetic frame of signification acts as a map in that all human action can be explained by something in the genetic code; but even so, the genetic frame does not function as a map. People may know that they carry the frame around inside them, as Cal argues, but actions are not dictated to the extent that people know what they will do in advance. They do not know their destinies, in other words. Cal's problematic use of the metaphor of the map functions to lay bare the central crisis with which he is concerned in his narrative act. He wishes to find order and pattern, significance, in his life, and he wants to find it pre-existing, so that his life seems fore-ordained. But the only order Cal finds is the order he constructs for himself. Cal's inability to understand, or accept this, means that he tends to pass off self-determination for fate. He claims, for example, that

> Parents are supposed to pass down physical traits to their children, but it's my belief that all sorts of other things get passed down, too: motifs, scenarios, even fates. (109)

In his act of narrating, Cal seeks to account for his own existence by discovering what has been 'passed down' to him and influenced his own destiny. His story, though, like

himself, is entirely self-constructed. The connections are Cal's; they are there because he wants to see them.

The manner in which Cal's brother's name relates to the structure of Cal's narrative demonstrates some of these tensions. Cal's brother is called Chapter Eleven, and no explanation is ever given for this. Given the degree of Cal's self-awareness about his own narrative and its textual status, it seems likely that some indication regarding the significance of this name might be found in the narrative itself. The eleventh chapter of Cal's narrative constitutes the final chapter of the second of the narrative's four sections, just under half-way through the novel. Its title is 'Ex Ovo Omnia'. Cal provides both context and translation: from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the phrase means 'Everything comes out of an egg' (198). Cal opens his chapter with the words, 'So, to recap'. Chapter Eleven of Cal's narrative begins with a gesture of recapitulation in which Cal goes over some of the main details so far, pertaining to the precise nature of the relationships between various family members:

> Sourmelina Zizmo (nee Papadiamandopoulos) wasn't only my first cousin twice removed. She was also my grandmother. My father was his own mother's (and father's) nephew. In addition to being my grandparents, Desdemona and Lefty were my great- aunt and -uncle. My parents would be my second cousins once removed and Chapter Eleven would be my third cousin as well as my brother. (198)

If the gene which causes Cal's genetic condition first occurs in the body of his great-grandmother to the ninth power, then Chapter Eleven, the name of Cal's brother, might signify that this is the eleventh chapter of the Stephanides family to carry the recessive gene. Cal's brother's unusual name foregrounds the problem of the reading and significance of signs. Cal's gesture of recapitulation, after all, concerns the various acts of passing involved in the multiple identities and relations that exist between his family members. In writing his narrative, Cal performs another act of recapitulation (or repetition with a difference) in that he turns his brother's name to advantage when structuring his text. His eleventh chapter, concerned with recapitulation and family history, underlines the fact that the repetition of tropes, the motifs and metaphorical connections which Cal wishes to enlist as demonstrations of a fated or pre-determined

narrative, are arbitrary – they demonstrate this sense of being fated only because this is the story which Cal wants to tell.

Cal's act of recapitulation is echoed not only in the act of passing but in Cal's particular situation of a second birth, a second identity which does and does not resemble the first. The stage of his life to which Cal devotes the most of his recapitulative attention is adolescence, as it is with the onset of puberty and his teenage years that Cal's unusual condition manifests itself, is finally discovered and diagnosed, and leads him to live his life differently, as male. His self-discovery and self-construction is therefore bound up with normative discourses of adolescence as a time of identity formation, and embedded within a narrative of progression to adulthood. Cal explains how Calliope 'arrived at puberty not knowing much about what to expect' (283). His positioning of puberty as a destination towards which he travels, is reminiscent of McCorkle's figuring of adolescence in her A-B-C model. Despite this, however, Cal's adolescent development is discussed largely in terms of stasis:

> I am in math class, sometime during the winter of sixth grade. Miss Grotowski, our youngish teacher, is writing an equation on the blackboard. Behind her, at wooden-topped desks, students follow her calculations, or doze, or kick each other from behind. A gray winter Michigan day. The grass outside resembles pewter. Overhead, fluorescent lights attempt to dispel the season's dimness. [. . .]
>
> And behind our teacher's back, in our desks, we are flying through time. Thirty kids, in six neat rows, being borne along at a speed we can't perceive. As Miss Grotowski sketches equations on the blackboard, my classmates all around me begin to change. Jane Blunt's thighs, for instance, seem to get a little bit longer every week. Her sweater swells in front. Then one day Beverly Maas, who sits right next to me, raises her hand and I see darkness up her sleeve: a patch of light brown hair. When did it appear? Yesterday? The day before? The equations get longer and longer throughout the year, more complicated, and maybe it's all the numbers, or the multiplication tables; we are learning to quantify large sums as, by new math, bodies arrive at unexpected answers. Peter Quail's voice is two octaves lower than last month and he doesn't notice. Why not? He's flying too fast. Boys are getting peach fuzz on upper lips. Foreheads and noses are breaking out. Most spectacularly of all, girls are becoming women. Not mentally or emotionally even, but physically. Nature is making its preparations. Deadlines encoded in the species are met.

> Only Calliope, in the second row, is motionless, her desk stalled somehow, so that she's the only one who takes in the true extent of the metamorphoses around her. [. . .] But there's still hope, isn't there? . . . because the desks are flying, day after day; arranged in their squadron, the students bank and roar through time, so that Callie looks up from her ink-stained paper one afternoon and sees it is spring, flowers budding, forsythia in bloom, elms greening; at recess girls and boys hold hands, kissing sometimes behind trees, and Calliope feels gypped, cheated. "Remember me?" she says, to nature. "I'm waiting. I'm still here."
> (285-286)

Throughout this passage Cal's narrative voice weaves in and out of different positionings in a manner not unlike Birdie's. Initially Cal uses the present tense and first-person: 'I am in math class'. The descriptor of the onset of puberty in Cal's classmates coincides with a shift to first-person plural: 'we are flying through time'. Cal then talks of Calliope in the third-person: 'Only Calliope [. . .] is motionless'. The distancing achieved by talking of Calliope in the third-person stresses Calliope's alienation from others. Being motionless, she is captured and objectified. It also suggests Cal's distance from Calliope. Cal also passes between the literal and figurative, as the equations in math class become a metaphor for the puzzles of puberty. This illustrates how Cal takes the literal details of his life and invests them with symbolic import. Underpinning Cal's discussion is an equation of motion, the $d=st$ equation to which Calliope is not conforming. Other girls are traveling towards the physical changes that herald womanhood (again, even as the girls enter adolescence, that descriptor 'womanhood' suggests that they are already leaving it, or passing as women), Calliope is not. Although, like the others in her class, Calliope travels through time, from winter to spring in the passage of three paragraphs, it appears as if she is in stasis because her body is unchanged.

Cal, therefore, narrates a complex situation where Calliope is anxiously waiting for adolescence to be signified on her body. However, even though she feels different from others, this sense of difference and alienation actually incorporates Calliope within dominant discourses of adolescence, where adolescence is not necessarily constructed in terms of being written on the body. This sense that Calliope's unusual situation is actually incorporated or contained by the fact that she is going through adolescence (that difference can be inscribed within identity) is something which Cal makes use of in many

ways in his story, and has implications for his narrative strategy and his construction of himself as 'man' and 'adult'. Unlike Birdie, Cal has no difficulty in using the signifier 'adolescence' to describe events which he experiences as Calliope. This functions as an extreme example of how adolescence is narrated from a place and perspective other to itself – Cal, male, narrates Calliope's adolescence, an adolescence lived at least partly as female.

One of the major events of Calliope's adolescence is her infatuation and eventual relationship with a girl at the all-girls' school she attends. Cal, narrating, describes why he will not reveal the girl's name:

> Allow me an anachronism. Luis Bunuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* didn't come out until 1977. By that time the redheaded girl and I were no longer in touch. I doubt she ever saw the movie. Nevertheless, *That Obscure Object of Desire* is what I think about when I think about her. I saw it on television, in a Spanish bar, when I was stationed in Madrid. I didn't catch most of the dialogue. The plot was clear enough, though. An older gentleman played by Fernando Rey is smitten with a young and beautiful girl played by Carole Bouquet and Angela Molina. I didn't care about any of that. It was the surrealist touch that got me. In many cases Fernando Rey is shown holding a heavy sack over his shoulder. The reason for this sack is never mentioned. (Or if it is, I missed that, too.) He just goes around lugging this sack, into restaurants and through city parks. That was exactly how I felt, following my own Obscure Object. As though I were carrying around a mysterious, unexplained burden or weight. I'm going to call her that, if you don't mind. I'm going to call her the Obscure Object. For sentimental reasons. (I also have to protect her identity). (325)

Cal's 'anachronism' takes the form of a disingenuous recapitulation of the film's plot, which he says he doesn't care about, denying its significance. This denial of significance constitutes a particularly complex form of Signifyin(g) on the reader through indirection, because Cal's narrative is one in which he wishes to convince readers of the validity of the connections he makes. His unwillingness to connect events of his life to the film's plot is undermined by the fact that he recounts the plot, something which suggests that Cal does want the plot to have a bearing on his story, even if he cannot say so. Although Cal says it is the sack that he is interested in, he draws an implicit parallel between Calliope's infatuation and a man's heterosexual desire. While this is unproblematic in

retrospect – Cal, narrating, has made the decision to 'operate as a man', at the time the events occur it is Calliope, the adolescent girl, who is involved in what seems to be a homosexual relationship. This description of the film's plot, made before Cal's recollection of his infatuation, suffices to locate Cal's relationship within a heterosexual frame. Naming the girl 'the Obscure Object' functions to disguise her gender even as it writes her into the feminine position of desired other. The sack which the male character carries is notable for its unexplained presence, its lack of significance. Cal supplies significance in his act of narrating, though, in which he makes the sack a metaphor for the inexplicable nature of attraction itself. That attraction is embodied in the person of the girl (in the film and in Cal's life). Additionally, Cal performs the acts of transfer and carrying intrinsic to metaphor when he constructs a parallel between the situation in the film and his own life. His description is notable for the way in which he highlights some features (the action of carrying the sack) and eclipses others (the plot, the gender of the protagonists). This illustrates the strategy which Cal enlists throughout his entire narrative, as well as exposing its inherent instability. Finally, Cal's anachronism – an introduction of information to which he is not privy at the time of the events which he is about to narrate – displaces adolescence as the main locus of the action, even as it attempts to provide a context of significance within which that adolescence is to be read. Calliope's adolescence is not only narrated from a place and perspective other to itself, but may in fact be given a narrative which is other to itself (that is, not accurate).

However, perhaps Cal's use of *That Obscure Object of Desire* is not as disingenuous as first appears. Meditating on his feelings for his own Obscure Object, Cal asks of Calliope, 'Did she ever, while the Obscure Object passed in the hall, think that what she was feeling was wrong? Yes and no' (327). While Cal notes that 'It was perfectly acceptable at Baker & Inglis to get a crush on a fellow classmate', he describes the school's atmosphere as 'militantly heterosexual' (327). Calliope is aware that the strength of her feelings seems different from these crushes, and Cal describes how every day Calliope 'hid out in the basement bathroom to think the matter through' (328). He seeks refuge in the bathroom because it allows for privacy and solitude but also because of the graffiti which covers its walls. Cal notes that the graffiti drawings are mostly of bodies:

> It was an education both in what was and what might be. Over the grey marble this new, jagged etching of bodies doing things, growing parts, fitting together, changing shape. Plus also jokes, words to the wise, confessions. In one spot: "I love sex." In another, "Patty C. is a slut." Where else would a girl like me, hiding knowledge she didn't quite understand herself – where else would she feel more comfortable than in this subterranean realm where people wrote down what they couldn't say, where they gave voice to their most shameful longings and knowledge? (329)

The bathroom is a place where society's order and conventions are overturned in creative acts of female adolescent transgression which constitute Signifyin(g) on conventional constructions of gender. The bathroom is a place of what Judith Butler would call 'gender trouble'. Butler writes that

> If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a "ground" will be displaced and revealed as a stylized configuration, indeed, a gendered corporealization of time. The abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional *dis*continuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this "ground." The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction.[41]

Gender trouble is manifested in the form of Calliope, who sits, distraught, in the bathroom, worrying about her failure to conform (to repeat) the heterosexual ethos of the school, and who is dimly aware of the fact that her anatomy may not resemble that of other girls. Cal recalls that

> For that spring, while the crocuses bloomed, while the headmistress checked on the daffodil bulbs in the flower beds, Calliope, too, felt something budding. An obscure object all her own, which in addition to

[41] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York: Routledge, 1999) 179.

> the need for privacy was responsible for bringing her down to the basement bathroom. (329)

Gender trouble is also made manifest in the drawings which envision alternate constructions of sexed identity. The drawings and confessions on the walls constitute what Margaret J. Finders would call 'hidden literacies'. In her study of the unofficial literate practices of junior high adolescent girls (their acts of writing which took place outside the classroom or were not classwork), what she calls their 'literate afterlife', Finders claims that adolescent girls use such practices to assert their identity and challenge authority:

> It may be assumed that a girl's "rite of passage" bursts into her life biologically; hence no outward 'rite' has to be performed. But in this society, physical maturation is not accepted as a sign of adulthood for males or females, so the need exists for other forms of recognition of "passage". Literacy serves such a need, marking the passage. Girls use literacy to control, moderate, and measure their growth into adulthood. I would argue that a new independence is granted to adolescent females through literacy.[42]

Although Finders claims hidden literacies are a means of asserting identity and power, the texts of gender trouble in the bathroom owe their existence to anonymity (they are hidden), something facilitated by the private space of the bathroom. Although Calliope feels the suitability of the bathroom as a place of refuge, she is unable to articulate why, and she does not share the sense of delight in play with regard to her own anatomy which the texts exhibit. It is the older Cal, narrating, who constructs a narrative which constitutes a similar 'hidden literacy', a narrative which Cal intends to be read as a mark of passage to adulthood. Cal is also able to invest his own experiences with a sense of play – calling his own anatomy an 'Obscure Object' indicates how his adolescent dilemma of gendered signification is both resolved and confused by his inclusion of the film plot.

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[42] Margaret J. Finders, *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997) 18.

Ultimately (though not unproblematically), it is to the dominant narrative of adolescence as a time of experimentation and self-discovery that Cal turns in order to validate and contain, his experience. This constitutes another move which both confuses and clarifies the story Cal wants to tell. Like Birdie, Calliope undergoes an out-of-body experience one night, which Cal describes as resembling the Greek state of ecstacy – 'From the Greek Ekstasis. Meaning not what you think. Meaning not euphoria or sexual climax or even happiness. Meaning, literally: a state of displacement, of being driven out of one's senses' (374). At the age of fourteen, Calliope, the Obscure Object and her brother Jerome, together with another boy, Rex Reese, go to a cabin in the woods near the Object's house, where Rex kisses the Object and Jerome kisses Calliope. Cal recalls how

> High for my first time, drunk for my first time, I felt myself dissolving, turning to vapor. Like the incense at church my soul rose toward the dome of my skull – and then broke through. I drifted over the plank floor. I floated above the little camp stove. Passing by the bourbon bottles, I hovered over the other cot, looking down at the Object. And then, because I suddenly knew that I could, I slipped into the body of Rex Reese. I entered him like a god so that it was me, and not Rex, who kissed her. (374)

Calliope's experience is explained by reference to Greek heritage, but it is facilitated by the experimentation which Cal believes to characterise adolescence. Describing the clandestine nature of his relations with the Obscure Object, Cal says that

> So that was our love affair. Wordless, blinkered, a nighttime thing, a dream thing. There were reasons on my side for this as well. Whatever it was that I was was best revealed slowly, in flattering light. Which meant not much light at all. Besides, that's the way it goes in adolescence. You try things out in the dark. You get drunk or stoned and extemporize. Think back to your backseats, your pup tents, your beach bonfire parties. Did you ever find yourself, without admitting it, tangled up with your best friend? Or in a dorm room bed with two people instead of one, while Bach played on the chintzy stereo, orchestrating the fugue? (385-386)

Cal's 'that's the way it goes' suggests that he seems to believe (rather like McCorkle) that there is a generic or universal model of adolescence applicable to everyone. Cal and

McCorkle offer highly figurative descriptions of adolescence. Both also account for adolescence by arguing that it consists of everyone going through the same thing, but differently. However, the thing that they say is the same for everyone is different. This is seen in the metaphors each uses, McCorkle with her metaphors of luggage and unpacking, Cal with his idea that adolescence is improvisation in the dark. Moreover, Cal enlists a generic 'you' as a means of appealing to an audience, whom he incites to look back and remember an adolescence which presumably resembles his own. Cal uses adolescence retrospectively as a means of describing his experience, by implication suggesting that he does not imagine his readers to be adolescent but to have passed through adolescence. In so doing, he attempts to normalise his own experience by framing it within a construction of adolescence, even as that construction of adolescence presents individual experience as lacking any normalising script – adolescence is a time of secret and unspoken experimentation. Additionally, Cal's use of 'in the dark' complicates this. 'The dark' in this passage, as in Birdie's narrative, corresponds to a realm of ambiguous signification to which adolescent sexual experimentation belongs. However, describing his act of narration at another stage in his narrative, Cal claims that

> If this story is written only for myself, then so be it. But it doesn't feel that way. I feel you out there, reader. This is the only kind of intimacy I'm comfortable with. Just the two of us, here in the dark. (319)

Cal's relationship with a reader – secret, intimate, in the dark – corresponds closely to the conditions under which his relationship with the Obscure Object take place. That the relationship exists in a similar realm of ambiguous signification problematises whether Cal has moved out of the category he calls 'adolescence', and intriguingly, the above passage is followed by Cal's assertion that 'Things weren't always like this'. That is, he has not always been alone, he has had other kinds of relationships. He describes how, in college, he had a girlfriend called Olivia. Olivia was raped at the age of thirteen and Cal says that the incident has 'arrested her development' so that rather than 'doing the normal things a high school girl did, she had had to remain that thirteen-year-old girl on the witness stand.' Cal and Olivia's relationship is founded on the fact that they have 'remained in key ways emotionally adolescent' (319). The crucial paradox of Cal's

narrative is that he uses dominant, canonical narratives of adolescence (which are founded upon male experience) to describe his own female adolescence. That the narrative functions to narrate Calliope's adolescence in a retrospective way here leads to more gender trouble: is the masculine model of adolescence used in a valid manner by Cal because he describes himself as male when he narrates? Or does he write Calliope into a model of masculine adolescence because he wants to pass as male and adult at the time of narrating?

Calliope's biological condition is diagnosed when she is knocked down while trying to run away from the Obscure Object's brother, and taken to hospital. Consequently, she is treated by a Dr. Luce, a gender specialist who is to decide her gender identity. Cal explains that Dr. Luce believes that nurture rather than nature establishes a person's gender identity (that is, rearing rather than anatomy is more significant), and that such identity is established 'very early on in life, about the age of two' (411). Dr. Luce's eventual decision that Calliope has a female gender identity is caused by the fact that he (like Cal in his later act of narrating) finds in Calliope what he wants to see. For example, he decides that the most important factor in deciding that Calliope has a female gender identity is that Calliope 'has been raised for fourteen years as a girl and indeed thinks of herself as female' (427). Dr. Luce does not tell Calliope or her parents that she has the genetic and genital structure of a male, instead telling them that 'Callie is a girl who has a little too much male hormone.' As Cal notes, Dr. Luce is also influenced in his decision by Calliope's portrayal of herself as a heterosexual adolescent girl – she declares that she is attracted to boys when she is not. Cal explains this by saying that

> The adolescent ego is a hazy thing, amorphous, cloudlike. It wasn't difficult to pour my identity into different vessels. In a sense, I was able to take whatever form was demanded of me. I only wanted to know the dimensions. Luce was providing them. My parents supported him. The prospect of having everything solved was wildly attractive to me, too, and while I lay on the chaise I didn't ask myself where my feelings for the Object fit in. I only wanted it all to be over. I wanted to go home and forget it had ever happened. So I listened to Luce quietly and made no objections. (434)

Calliope's later decision to live henceforth as a male is occasioned by her opportunistic reading of Dr. Luce's case notes. If her construction of herself as a heterosexual adolescent girl is made in the interests of being an obedient child who wishes to cause as little distress to her parents as possible (Cal talks of how Calliope's mind is blank with 'the blankness of obedience' (434)), her decision to live as male is portrayed as coincident with the passage from adolescence to adulthood. That decision involves separation from her parents. Calliope runs away from them to forge a new identity as male, believing that this new identity cannot be easily maintained where she/he is already known to others as female. It also involves a rebellion against the adult wishes of her parents (of whom Cal says 'They wanted me to stay the way I was' (434)) and of Dr. Luce's desire that Calliope's story fit the paradigms of his own theories on gender identity. That Cal's decision to live as a male facilitates entry into masculine discourses of adolescence is indicated in that fact that the first chapter describing Calliope/Cal's new life as a teenage boy is entitled 'Go West, Young Man' (440). This indicates how the journey Cal takes in order to leave home and determine his own identity already writes him into a particularly American and masculine coming-of-age narrative, suggesting that even if markers of passage from adolescence to adulthood are not clear, as Finders says and McCorkle's work illustrates, they have been presumed to be clearer for male experience. Early in his new life as male, Cal asks

> How did I think I could defect to the other side so easily? What did I know about boys, about men? I didn't even like them that much. (442)

As Cal's narrative indicates, his transition to 'the other side' may be easily made because in Butler's terms, there exists a stylised performance of maleness which Cal can learn, one that is seen in the fact that he writes himself into a male coming-of-age narrative. This is despite the fact that that ease of passage exposes gender as performance and troubles any claims of an identity as 'man' which Cal may make in the future.

Cal writes of his eventual reconciliation with his family that

> After I returned from San Francisco and started living as a male, my family found that, contrary to popular opinion, gender was not all that

> important. My change from girl to boy was far less dramatic than the distance anybody travels from infancy to adulthood. In most ways I remained the person I'd always been. Even now, though I live as a man, I remain in essential ways Tessie's daughter. (520)

Cal's claim that 'My change from girl to boy was far less dramatic than the distance anybody travels from infancy to adulthood' constitutes a gesture which, in terms of indirection, ranks alongside Birdie's denial of her motives for packing the picture of figure of Exu. Cal does in fact define his progression to adulthood almost entirely on his decision to change from girl to boy. Not only this, but that change complicates the A-B-C model which Cal has been at pains to uphold (and struggled to uphold) throughout his narrative. When his mother asks him if it would not have been easier to remain the way he was (i.e. female), Cal replies that "'This is the way I was"' (520). When his grandmother asks what has happened to him, Cal replies, "'I grew up"' (526). For Cal, growing up means returning to the way he has always been, that is, acknowledging his genetically male status. Recalling his adolescent self, Cal suggests towards the end of his narrative that

> I hadn't gotten old enough yet to realize that living sends a person not into the future but back into the past, to childhood and before birth, finally, to commune with the dead. You get older, you puff on the stairs, you enter the body of your father. From there it's only a quick jump to your grandparents, and then before you know it you're time-traveling. In this life we grow backwards. It's always the gray-haired tourists on Italian buses who can tell you something about the Etruscans. (425)

The novel ends with Cal guarding the threshold of his family home during his father's funeral. The act is performed in order to ensure that his father's spirit cannot pass the threshold, a Greek Orthodox tradition carried out by male family members. Cal (an American pseudohermaphrodite) Signifies on the traditions of his family at the same time as he underscores his re-inscription within it, in a manner which finds a parallel in the way in which his narrative Signifies on normative developmental patterns despite Cal's efforts to write himself within them. This final gesture of guarding the threshold (barring passage) is another indicator of the way in which Cal's Signifyin(g) is motivated by an impulse which is antithetical to Birdie's – whereas Birdie generally Signifies in order to

extricate herself from normative patterns of development, Cal Signifies to include himself within them. That his effort to write himself into a normative pattern of development also involves Signifyin(g) indicates how Cal's narrative passage is possibly less successful than Birdie's, because he is less tolerant of fluid transition between categories. Both Cal and Birdie, however, narrate stories which trouble any attempt to categorise and which defy attempts to contain their narrators within a singular narrative of development, something which questions whether there might be a generic model of development at all.

Conclusion: To recap, again.

Caucasia and *Middlesex* both constitute an exploration of the act of passing as this act relates to the concept of adolescence and the narrative of individual development which advocates progression to adulthood. Both novels also indicate that these concerns are related to the notion of what it might mean to be American. In *Middlesex*, Cal describes his grandfather's feelings on board the ship to America:

> [Lefty] seized the opportunity of transatlantic travel to reinvent himself. He wrapped a ratty blanket over his shoulders like an opera cape. Aware that whatever happened now would become the truth, that whatever he seemed to be would become what he was – already an American, in other words – he waited for Desdemona to come up on deck. (67)

Cal claims an 'American' identity for Lefty before he sets foot on American soil. It is an identity which Lefty can lay claim to because he is engaged in an act of self-construction, because he is aware that he can perform his identity – he can engage in acts of repetition and revision in order to construct a new self. It is an ethos to which Cal seems to want to subscribe; Cal tells a story which argues that if he seems to be a man, he will become a man; he must in fact be a man. Cal subscribes to a belief in identity as performance, a belief which privileges the external, the visual. It is precisely this faith in visual performance which Birdie's narrative questions. This passage (a passage of text, a text about passage) can be compared to a passage in *Caucasia*, in which Birdie, beginning her journey in search of signification, describes her feelings on the bus to Boston:

> It wasn't clear to me then why I had fled New Hampshire on that particular night and not another [. . .]
>
> Later these questions would cross my mind, but for now, on that bus ride to Boston, I simply watched the world float by outside the bus window, beyond my own pale reflection, and thought that this was where I felt most safe – on a moving vehicle, rolling toward some destination but not quite there. (293)

Birdie engages in another of the acts of narrative passing with which her story is infused. Although her act of narrating means that she is recalling events, she passes between past,

present and future. 'It wasn't clear to me then' foregrounds her act of narrative in the act of looking ahead to it. Birdie anticipates a time when she is distanced from the events she is currently describing and will have a greater understanding of her own actions, even as 'for now' displaces that act of narrating, passing off the past (her bus journey) as present, and her present act of narrating (which occupies the category of 'later') as future. Birdie's journey on the bus involves the same conundrum of past, present and future with which Lefty engages in his act of self-construction – 'that whatever he seemed to be would become what he was', even if she does not place the same faith in the visual. It is worth recalling the OED definition of 'to pass':

> to be taken for, to be accepted, received, or held in repute as. Often with the implication of being something else.

Lefty's self-construction and Birdie's sense of herself as happiest in process, in passing, do suggest that 'Americanness' is concerned with the act of passing. To be 'American' for Cal (since it is he who offers this description of Lefty), is to have the ability to revise and signify upon the self. However, the definition of passing suggests that it is also possible to 'pass' as American. This implies that the thing one might be held in repute as, with the implication of being something else, is 'American'. This is because 'American' is an identity category like any other; albeit, in every text in this thesis (in *Middlesex* in particular), a category which is defined as involving precisely the ability to Signify upon identity categories. However, Ginsberg's illustration of the historical circumstances surrounding the phenomenon of passing and the motivations for undertaking the passing act suggest that this ability is not granted to everyone. Race and gender passing, for example, threaten the essentialist categories of 'white and 'male' experience which have been enlisted in essentialist constructions of what it is to be 'American'. McCorkle's figuration of the luggage to be unpacked in adolescence – 'the way you felt, the way you looked; the way you *wanted* to feel and the way you *wanted* to look' – suggests that adolescence, with its dominant signification as a time of constructing identity, is also concerned with the act of passing, and that a consideration of the signification of adolescence functions as both correction and correlative to the construction of Americanness in *Middlesex.*

That adolescence functions as both correction and correlative is seen in the fact that adolescence can be signified in multiple and overlapping ways. Although written on the body, signified by puberty and commonly understood to refer to the teenage years of existence, adolescence is also enlisted to contain a range of tropes regarding selfhood and identity. It is for these reasons that 'adolescence' has so often been enlisted as a metaphor for American culture. This has been demonstrated most obviously in the work of G. Stanley Hall, several postwar literary critics, and the critical work of Joyce Carol Oates. The construction of 'America as adolescent' actually constitutes a complex act of Signifyin(g) on the conventional narrative of individual development (the A-B-C model of progression from childhood to adulthood which McCorkle outlines). However, it is an act of Signifyin(g) which has not been recognised as such. It is also one which has been constructed as normative. To say that 'America is adolescent' almost has the status of a canonical narrative. In fact, each claim that 'America is adolescent' constitutes a form of recapitulation, of repetition with a difference, because there is no consensus over what is constituted by 'adolescent' or if this construction of 'America as adolescent' constitutes a positive or negative assessment of America. These gestures of Signifyin(g) also tend to enlist essentialist notions of 'America' and 'adolescent' which usually foreground male experience.

This discussion points to the fact that it is so difficult to signify adolescence because the word 'adolescence' can be enlisted both in the way words are used in the picture Wittgenstein describes, and otherwise. That is, 'adolescence' is enlisted in an essentialist manner, to point to an experiential condition (when it is enlisted to describe the condition of an individual who is going through puberty, for example). It is also enlisted in the way Wittgenstein thinks words are used – in various 'games' of discourse. The irony is that when 'adolescence' is used in this particular Wittgensteinian way (as it is when it is enlisted metaphorically to describe America), it is still used to describe essentialist notions of identity. Conversely, it is when 'adolescence' is used to signify a particular individual's existence (enlisted in a way corresponding to the 'picture') that it foregrounds factors such as gender and race, and exposes the essentialist manner in which critics tend to use the term.

At stake here is a further complication – that 'adolescence' is enlisted in terms which, for lack of other terminology, could be described as 'literal' and 'figurative'. The narratives of female adolescence examined in this thesis suggest that, taken together in their plurality, the two significations of adolescence in McCorkle's essay which opened this chapter might constitute a more accurate means of narrating the concept of adolescence as it pertains to American literature and criticism. This is not least because of the practice of revision with which they are engaged. The final draft, in which adolescence signifies something specific – 'point B' – indicates that adolescence can be conceived of partaking of the literal, in the sense that it can be written on the body. However, the earlier draft of McCorkle's essay, in which adolescence lacks any point of correspondence, suggests that adolescence means something figurative. McCorkle's two versions of signifying adolescence illustrate what is perhaps the central point of this thesis: that adolescence, in American literature, is both contained and uncontained in narrative, and that the uses to which the signifier 'adolescence' is put demand close attention.

McCorkle's use of 'point B' to signify adolescence indicates another crucial point. Narrating adolescence involves engaging in the work of metaphor – searching for correspondence and likeness. This is true whether 'narrating adolescence' involves using the concept of adolescence in a Wittgensteinian sense (for example, when it is used as a metaphor for America) or whether 'narrating adolescence' means narrating an individual's experience. The experience of the various adolescent girls in this thesis, while very dissimilar, share the desire to engage in the work of metaphor. In their adolescent experience and in their acts of narrative these girls seek – and usually find – constructions of likeness and difference which allow them to find a place for themselves in the different Americas they inhabit. For each girl, this involves Signifyin(g) on constructions of America, gender, race, as well as on conventional narrative patterns of development (such as the *Bildungsroman*) and definitions of adolescence itself, in an effort to re-vision what might be meant by all of these terms. The ultimate paradox, then, is that these girls actually re-inscribe the model of adolescence as Cal and McCorkle use it – as something which everyone goes through, but differently. Their experiences, taken together, constitute an example of inscription of identity within a relation of difference.

Gates has characterised this phenomenon as akin to the nature of metaphorical substitution, something which is also made manifest in the relation of the white, Standard English term 'signification' in relation to the African-American term 'Signification'. It is additionally something which has been seen to take place not only in the act of passing but in the disruption of signifiers which the passing act entails.

Gates argues of the relation of 'signification' to Signification', of a relation identity inscribed within a relation of difference', that

> This dreaded, if playful, condition of ambiguity would, of course, disappear in the instance at hand if the two signs under examination did not bear the same signifier.[1]

This 'dreaded if playful condition of ambiguity' is expressed in the trope of 'the dark', which is enlisted in nearly all of these texts to describe the experience of adolescence, and which is also a space of self-construction, a space figured as both liberating and terrifying. The trope of 'the dark' expresses something both literal and figurative, and points to the way in which the signifier 'adolescence' is used in two very different ways (one which corresponds to Wittgenstein's picture', one which does not). 'In the dark', with its figurative connotations and its suggestion of something difficult to discern and articulate, finally underlines the importance of both the visual and vocal when considering identity. This is something with which both *Caucasia* and *Middlesex* are particularly concerned. It is clear that use of the signifier 'adolescence' to describe both individual experience and constructions of individual or American cultural identity produces another condition of ambiguity. This condition of ambiguity is more dreaded than playful, because not enough careful attention is paid to distinguishing between how the signifier 'adolescence' is used.

Still thinking of the two signs of 'signification', Gates goes on to argue that

> We can, then, think of American discourse as both the opposition between and the ironic identity of the movement, the very vertigo, that we encounter in a mental shift between the two terms.[2]

[1] Gates, 45.

[2] Ibid., 50.

It is possible that a more careful approach to the uses of the signifier 'adolescence' in American literature and criticism will facilitate the production of an American discourse which allows for a more fruitful understanding of adolescence and how this understanding relates to questions of identity and signification – a discourse that might be summarized, in Lucille Odom's terms, as 'Something dark'.

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