Vital Signs

towards affirmative fiction:
gender, autofiction, fiction

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy

by Marli Roode

January 2020

Abstract

This thesis speculates on how the Deleuzian concept of 'becoming-other' required in fiction might enable fiction to be affirmative. It takes an interdisciplinary approach, steering between fiction, philosophy, criticism and autofiction. The first section is a critical exploration, where a nomadic lens inspired by the philosopher Rosi Braidotti is used to read the autofictional works of Chris Kraus, namely *I Love Dick* (1997), and Rachel Cusk, namely her Outline trilogy (2014's *Outline*, 2016's *Transit* and 2018's *Kudos*). Working through the body, desire and feminism, the five chapters in this section consider whether autofiction is an adequate new representation of the times in which we live and sketch a framework for what I call 'affirmative fiction'. In chapter one, I consider the history and development of the autofictional genre, demonstrating how gender is key to both the production and the consumption of autofiction. In chapter two, I situate Braidotti's work between the vitalist neomaterialism of Deleuze and the corporeal feminism of Luce Irigaray. I show how Braidotti's enfleshed materialism, which draws on sexual difference theory and the politics of location, produces a nomadic subject, one that is ethical, politically activated, accountable and affirmative. In chapter three, I read Kraus's desire and body through the lens of the monster, demonstrating how the work remains caught in the binary logic of dialectical thinking, and thus in the negative. In chapter four, Cusk's annihilated subject is examined in the light of collectivity and embodiment to demonstrate how this emergent subjectivity cannot move beyond the negativity of oppositional consciousness, nor can it truly think beyond the (human) self. Each chapter is introduced by my own venture into the autofictional form, intended to respond to and incorporate the theory that surrounds it. These interstices work through the questions raised by reading Kraus and Cusk alongside posthuman, nomadic philosophy, tracing the ways in which my work is connected to theirs and, ultimately, where it diverges: my belief in *fiction's* ability to move beyond the negative, to enable a becoming-other.

The second part of this thesis is an original novel written in tandem with the critical work. It opens as CCTV cameras track Ellen Malan's progress down a Winnipeg street. She enters an underpass but does not exit on the other side of the darkness. A few minutes later, an ambulance speeds into frame. Her children, Noel and Louise, clash at her hospital bedside, just as they've done everywhere else. They aren't prepared for what they're about to learn about their mother. Neither do they know how to tell their father, who has just begun the train ride from Vancouver. He hasn't liked to fly since the cancer spread to his bones. He suspects this will be the last time he makes the long journey cross-country. He is looking forward to seeing Ellen, their dogs. He doesn't think his life can change again.

A nomadic, posthuman approach is made explicit in the structure of the novel, which uses third-person focalisers as well as, amongst others, the points of view of the Canadian wilderness, the death processes taking place in a corpse, the proliferating cells in a cancer patient. It demonstrates a new approach to the enmeshing of creative practice and philosophy, an attempt to stretch the realist novel as a form in a posthuman direction, one that imagines not just what we are but what we want to be.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Deryn Rees-Jones and David Hering, for their enthusiasm for this project, their belief in its progress and their patience and guidance. I would also like to thank the Centre for New and International Writing and the School of the Arts for funding both my research and my attendance at the Posthuman Ethics: Pain and Endurance Summer School in Utrecht, allowing me to grow and change as a writer and thinker in ways I could never have anticipated. To my University of Liverpool PhD colleagues, Sarah Hymas, Ruby Robinson, Pauline Rowe and Cat Owen, who provided support, laughter and an invaluable sense of community. And to Catherine Cole, for her guidance at the start of this project.

Thank you to my friends and family for their patience and support: Mila Roode, Sara Owen, Jess Ludlam, Jill Pendlebury. Special thanks to Genevieve and Jack Collister Brown for providing a home, cups of tea, tea as in dinner and a cat for company. And thank you to Renée Hložek for reading and for believing in me and my novel when I couldn't. Thank you to Phil Wolstenholme for distraction, for Saturday night mash-ups and Sunday morning improv, for having the right tool for the job. And to my mother, Lise Roode, for everything, for more than she knows.

Contents

Introduction

This thesis addresses the relationship between autofiction and gender, specifically, women writing the self. It addresses subjectivity, embodiment, desire and feminism to explore the autofiction of Chris Kraus and Rachel Cusk as two models of how contemporary women writers engage with anxieties around the narrative voice, in this case, the enunciating 'I'. Autofiction is a term coined in 1977 by French writer Serge Doubrovsky to designate novels that feature a protagonist with the same name as the author. It disrupts not just the binary of fiction/autobiography but also of theory/practice. Autofiction brings together empirical material – the lived life – and theoretical discourse about the nature of subjectivity and the construction of the self. As Doubrovsky notes: 'Neither autobiography nor novel, then, strictly speaking, it exists in a perpetual oscillation between the two, inhabiting a space that only the operation of the text makes possible or accessible' ('Truth' 33). In this thesis, Rosi Braidotti's work will be crucial to my thinking, because in thinking 'through the body and not in flight away from it' (*Metamorphoses* 5), her philosophy offers a politically activated and ethically aware intervention, grounded in the politics of location and the corporeal feminism of sexual difference, one that exhorts us to interrogate our implications with power. She also put forward a nomadic approach to literary studies, one which I attempt to adopt here, that creates connections between texts and the world: 'reading literary texts is looking at the world through colliders: they are vectors or navigational tools…You *do* the texts, and it isn't disrespectful, because you let the texts direct and diffract the flows' ('Joint' 180). Braidotti emphasises the need for new self-representations in order to adequately represent the times we live in. This thesis asks whether autofiction is such an adequate new self-representation. To both Kraus and Cusk, first publishing in the 1990s, women writing the self is radical. For Kraus, 'the sheer fact of women talking, being, paradoxical, inexplicable, flip, self-destructive but above all else *public* is the most revolutionary thing in the world' (*Dick* 210). Cusk has spoken of a 'feminist principle of autobiography', in that 'where there is a disjuncture between how women live and how they actually feel – which to [her] there is, in motherhood and marriage' (Wade), women

should feel entitled to attempt to articulate it. I take these claims to writing the self's radical, feminist nature seriously in my analysis of their work.

This thesis understands autofiction by women as making a claim to subjectivity, historically denied to women, and moreover as narrativising the process of becoming-subject. As Braidotti observes, 'what sustains the entire process of becoming-subject is the will to know, the desire to say, the desire to speak' (*Metamorphoses* 22). Our desires – in this case, the desire to speak – are political. Autofiction as a practice centres the author of the text in the text; writing it is an inherently self-reflexive practice and autofictions are self-consciously literary, textual inscriptions of authorial self-consciousness. Whereas the subject has been historically understood as being a white male, autofictional practice – yoking the enunciating 'I' to a real-life person – holds this assumption up to the light: gender, sexuality, race and class are no longer incidental; they are understood as key to both the production and consumption of the work.

My interest in autofiction, as a writer of more straightforwardly fictional texts, lies in what autofiction's disruption between binaries allows, what, if anything, it might do better than realist fiction. By fiction, I generally mean works of invention that have constructed an imaginary world (which, though it might be very similar to this one, does not strictly adhere to it), works that acknowledge their fictionality and do not rest on an intimate autobiographical connection between the author and narrator. As James Woods puts it: 'fiction is both artifice and verisimilitude' (2). By virtue of writing novels, biography and autobiographical essays, Virginia Woolf offers me a useful perspective on fiction. 'It is the gift of the novel', Woolf wrote in her essay 'Phases of Fiction', 'to bring us into close touch with life' (144). Writing in 1929, when prose was 'still so youthful that we scarcely know what powers it may not hold concealed within it', she observed that the 'novelist can do anything' (141), that the novel can 'follow life; it can amass details. But can it also select?' she asked. 'Can it symbolise? Can it give us an epitome as well as an inventory?' (145) At the same time as she was beginning to conceive of what would become *The Waves*, Woolf's criticism sketches a view of the novel of the future, increasingly sceptical about its traditionally narrow focus on the lives of individuals, their romances and thoughts. Instead, '[w]e long,' she wrote in 'The Narrow Bridge

of Art', 'for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations, for poetry' (19). Instead, she argues for fiction that 'will give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude':

> We have come to forget that a large and important part of life consists in our emotions toward such things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset, life, death, and fate; we forget that we spend much time sleeping, dreaming, thinking, reading, alone; we are not entirely occupied in personal relations; all our energies are not absorbed in making livings. ('Narrow' 19).

Fiction thus defined is about our relations to more than each other. It is about more than the individual; rather it is about trying to capture that which makes individuality inconsequential: the complexity of life. 'Every moment is the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed' Woolf writes. 'Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it' ('Narrow' 23). In other words, it is the job of fiction to move (us) beyond the individual.

Fiction, like the novel, is a discursive category, dependent on historical context and cultural practices. At the time Woolf was writing, to navigate fiction's discursive paradigms was to acknowledge the definition of fiction as that which was opposed to fact.[1] That this distinction is still important to modern readers is apparent from the controversy surrounding James Frey's 2003 'memoir' *A Million Little Pieces* or Binjamin Wilkomirski's 'Holocaust-survivor memoir' *Fragments* (1995).[2] When John Updike reviewed Abdul Rahman

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[1] Not that Woolf would reproduce this paradigm without complicating it. See, for instance, how Woolf frames *A Room of One's Own*: 'Fiction is here likely to contain more truth than fact… Therefore I propose, making use of all the liberties and licences of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming here' (4).

[2] Frey's book was published as memoir and was a bestseller, before being outed by Oprah Winfrey as mostly fictional. Similarly, *Fragments* was actually written by a Swiss Gentile called Bruno Grosjean. Ben Yagoda explores the difference this discovery made to the reception of the latter book. He quotes Ruth Klüger, a Holocaust survivor, as saying: '[h]owever valid it may be that much of this may have happened to other children, with the falling away of the authentic autobiographical aspect and without the guarantee of a living first-person narrator identical with the author, it [the memoir] merely becomes a dramatization that offers no illumination' (246). Memoir has a lower bar to clear in terms of quality of writing, Yagoda argues,

Munif's *Cities of Salt* in 1988, he criticised the author for being 'insufficiently Westernized to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call the novel' ('Salt' 566) and argued that '[t]here is none of that sense of individual moral adventure…which, since *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe*, has distinguished the novel from the fable and the chronicle' (563-4). Updike's use of 'we' and his fury that Munif failed to pay homage to the dominant traditions of the European and American novel underscore just how contingent the discursive category of fiction is. As such, rather than adhering to a restrictive and prescriptive definition of fiction, I want to acknowledge that fiction works in many ways: as imagination, as transformation (sometimes of lived experience), as a splitting of the self and of ideas. It can be written in first, second or third person[3]; it can be a straightforward imitation of a factual narrative or be self-consciously fictional. Fiction's ability to get to some truth (as opposed to fact) is important to me[4]; as Ali Smith says, '[f]iction tells you, by the making up of truth, what really is true' (*Paris*)[5]. The other major influence on my thinking about fiction is what Amitav Ghosh observes in 2016's *The Great Derangement*, that its great power is its ability to imagine: 'what fiction…makes possible is to approach the world in the subjunctive mode, to conceive *as if* it were other than it is: in short, the great, irreplaceable

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and without the autobiographical connection, the narrative 'deteriorates to kitsch': '[m]emoir is to fiction as photography is to painting, also, in being easier to do fairly well. Only a master can create a convincing and compelling fictional world. Anyone with a moderate level of discipline, insight, intelligence, and editorial skill – plus a more than moderately interesting life – can write a decent memoir' (240). I tend to agree with this assessment.

[3] For more on narratological attempts to define fiction, and for definitions of fiction based on person – for instance, Käte Hamburger's assertion that only third-person fiction is properly fictional, as first-person novels are indiscernible simulations of authentic autobiographical stories – see Genette, Gérard, 'Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative'.

[4] I take a realist view of the metaphysics of fiction, specifically the possible-worlds theory of fiction, which treats fictions as descriptions of individual fictional worlds, which are in themselves a sub-class of possible worlds. This theory treats fictions as things that can be true: 'For a proposition to be "true in fiction" is for it to be true at the possible world described by the fiction' (Bourne 16). For more on the ontology of fiction, see Bourne (2016).

[5] Indeed, Geir Farner, in *Literary Fiction: The Ways We Read Narrative Literature*, maintains that on account of mimesis – ie the likeness between the fictional world and the real world – 'fictional events shed useful light on the general structure in the real world' (40) and argues that the primary function of literary communication is to '[give] insight into the problems of the real world and their possible solutions' (286).

potentiality of fiction is that it makes possible the imagining of possibilities' (128).

Fiction thought of this way is interested in the other: other worlds, other people, inhuman others. Roses and nightingales. But this kind of writing is also becoming less popular, or to put it another way, the social status of memoir – writing that is very much about this world, this person, this human – is growing. According to Yagoda, US memoir sales rose 400% between 2004 and 2008 (*Memoir* 7). Hywel Dix refers to 'the saturation of the print and broadcast media with so-called "reality" narratives' (*English* 10). This is sufficient reason for any writer of fiction to begin to worry. But the genesis of this thesis also has its roots in the fact that I had begun questioning the project of writing fiction, something I have been trying to do for the past decade, after the events of 2016, chiefly the Brexit referendum and Trump's election, which put pressure on lived identities (and bodies) in terms of gender, sexuality and race, pressure that has only grown in the ensuing years.[6] I began to see autofictions everywhere I looked. As Alex Kitnick notes in *I, etcetera*, and as the above sales figures suggest, there has been 'a marked use of the I, or the first-person singular, in a broad range of cultural practices' (45) over the past few years. It is easy to connect this resurgence to technological platforms that centre the 'I' in order to mine its data. Indeed, in her article 'The Monumental Knausgård: Big Data, Quantified Self, and Proust for the Facebook Generation', Inge van de Ven argues that the big data philosophy and the ensuing quantification of the self has precipitated a shift away from narrative, as the chief method of making meaning out of the world, towards databases, which are less discriminatory. van de Ven focuses on Knausgård's autofictional *My Struggle* series, six novels published in Norwegian from 2009-2011 and in English from 2013. The series is 3,600 pages long and exhaustively details the banalities of the author's life, including information about his family that prompted both

[6] Similarly, writing fiction in a post-truth era is a new challenge. As Ali Smith observes: 'We are living in a time when lies are sanctioned. We have always lived in that time, but now the lies are publicly, rhetorically sanctioned. And something tribal has happened, which means that nobody gives a shit whether somebody's lying or not because he's on my side or she's on my side. In the end, will truth matter? Of course truth will matter. Truth isn't relative. But there's going to be a great sacrifice on the way to getting truth to matter to us again, to finding out why it does, and God knows what shape that sacrifice will take' (*Paris*).

Knausgård's father's family to attempt to block publication and a frenzy in the Norwegian press. van de Ven argues that the shift towards databases is taking place in literature, too: the *My Struggle* series 'adopts an aesthetics of scale: a quantitative mode of narration in which causality and closure make way for seriality and accumulation' (320). Neither Kraus nor Cusk attempt this sort of aesthetics of scale: *I Love Dick* is the only book by Kraus to feature a narrator called Chris, and Cusk has held firm that her trilogy will remain just that, a trilogy. Instead, their works are selective, imposing hierarchies on events, using symbol and synecdoche – in other words, narratives. Kitnick argues that 'not all work that begins with the self capitulates to the powers that be' (*I* 52). The self, in works of autofiction, is constructed, he says, not given, and 'used unconventionally, it allows us to analyse our current state of being, complicate and reanimate contemporary demands, and project alternative futures' (52). As a feminist writer, my interest in autofiction, and in these autofictions in particular, is thus also tied to their ability to resist capitulation to the powers that be, to project alternative futures.

This study focuses on *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus and Rachel Cusk's Outline trilogy, two definitive models or moments in autofiction. *I Love Dick* was originally published in the US in 1997, becoming a cult classic in artworld circles, probably because it named names, but was largely overlooked in literary ones. It was reissued in 2006, when it found a new audience and came to be seen as a 'crucial and widely celebrated feminist text' (Epps); it was eventually published in the UK in 2015, where it was hailed as 'the most important book about men and women written in the last century' (Gould). Written in the 90s, the novel has deep roots in post-structuralism and second- and third-wave feminism; moreover, such experimental writing was at the fringe rather than mainstream, as it is now. The novel was Kraus's first book, the form allowing her to access her voice for the first time: 'But just by [writing these letters] I'm giving myself the freedom of seeing from the inside out. I'm not driven anymore by other people's voices. From now on it's the world according to me.' (*Dick* 64-65). In the novel[7], Kraus is trying to claim a subject

[7] I will refer to my chosen texts as novels as per the definition of autofiction given by Doubrovsky and others. See chapter 1.

position, that of speaking woman. She is, as Braidotti puts it, going through a phase of 'identity politics' in trying to 'claim a fixed position…because you cannot give up what you have never had…a subject-position that you have never controlled' (*Metamorphoses* 84). *Outline*, the first in Cusk's trilogy, was published in 2014. The trilogy has been nearly universally acclaimed, with Cusk's autofictional, stripped-bare style being hailed as 'the most genuine way to write a novel today' (Franklin). The novels' style is deeply influenced by technological advances and digital mediation that Cusk believes has produced 'a homogeneity…in terms of our environment and how we live and how we communicate' (Schwartz). Cusk's autofictional turn comes after a number of novels and a poorly received foray into strict autobiography: following her autobiography about her divorce, *Aftermath*, Cusk could not write or read for almost three years; she felt she was 'heading into total silence' (Kellaway). Autofiction was her way out of that silence. However, the novels are written in such a way as to reject rather than claim a definitive, embodied subject position: she tries to move beyond being a woman, even if, in my view, she ultimately fails.

Both Kraus and Cusk are theoretically informed. *I Love Dick* engages with the work of Deleuze, Baudrillard, Kierkegaard, Haraway; it references *Madame Bovary*, *Ethan Frome*, *The Golden Bowl*. Cusk has written extensively about the feminisms of de Beauvoir, Woolf and Greer, as well as the writing of Austen, Lawrence and Wharton, to name only a few. In other words, these are writers who have thought seriously about where to situate themselves and their work. Both writers use the 'I' unconventionally, as Kitnick says, 'to step back from themselves, to self-alienate' (*I* 60), with Kraus 'both relishing and [being] repulsed by how easily [she] transform[s] into persona'. Cusk, on the other hand, annihilates that persona, subverting expectations based on her reputation and previous reception to her autobiography. Both works refuse the label of confessional; as Kraus argues, 'while confession pursues its cheaply cathartic agenda (will everything 'change' once the confession is made? Doubtful...), candour is essentially disinterested. Candour is a willingness to speak to the present with a certain presence' ('Facts'). Instead, there is a distance between experience as it is lived and as they write about it; they abstract, and the self is at once object and creator. In these texts,

the subject, the 'I', emerges as a contested site, and in their preoccupations with gender[8], the authors 'make [their] problems social' (*Dick* 202). Writing in *Metamorphoses*, Braidotti argues that 'the analysis of Woman in opposition to but also in complicity with real-life women activates the distinction that separates institution or representation (Woman) from experience (women)' (26). The space this distinction creates, she argues, allows a feminist repossession of subjectivity. As a feminist woman writer writing in 2020, my interest in autofiction thus also lies in whether and how it activates the distinction between institution and experience.

And as a feminist writer committed to writing about the present, I agree with Braidotti's assertion that writing is 'a form of political and ethical engagement' ('Writing' 163) and that creativity 'entails the active displacement of dominant formations of identity, memory and identification so as to open them up to that roar that lies on the other side of silence' (170). In other words, imagination is of political importance: 'The point is not to know who we are, but rather, at last, what we want to become' (*Metamorphoses* 2). This thesis reimagines Braidotti's nomadic, posthuman intervention as a tool of feminist literary criticism of self-representations by women: as a reader, I want to explore the overlap and tensions between the theory and the work to track lines of flight that provoke creativity and create new possibilities. That said, I'm a writer too, and as such, the thesis also uses the autofictions as test cases for Braidotti's theories in order to explore what kind of affirmative writing is possible: what does the intersection of artistry and affirmativity look like? Does all that theory make for a good book?

In the first two chapters, I lay out the literary and theoretical framework I will be working with. Chapter 1, 'The Adventure of Language', outlines the origin of the generic category of autofiction and its development. In France, where the term was invented, the definition of autofiction has since been so contested as to be described as a theoretical soap opera (*Me* 3). I focus on three main definitions in the francophone tradition. I then consider anglophone

[8] This thesis resists the dichotomy so prevalent in anglophone feminist discussion of sex/gender, which is founded in accusations of essentialism and a conception of the body as having only discursive validity. I recognise that 'sex'/'gender' has three dimensions of differentiation: grammatical, biological and social. I use the term gender to refer to notions of a sexed body as the site and genesis of subjectivity.

theoretical discussion to tease out some key strands, namely, how we can come to understand gender-specific production of autofiction and notions of the author/authority.

Chapter 2, 'The Desire to Know', focuses on the work of Rosi Braidotti. I situate her work between Deleuze's neomaterialism and Irigaray's corporeal feminism to give an account of Braidotti's nomadic subject, an embedded and embodied subject that is not split along traditional axes of mind/body or reason/imagination. In this mode of thinking, difference is positive and the body is the root of subjectivity. The negativity of Hegelian-Lacanian thought and the affirmation of Braidotti's philosophy are contrasted.

Chapter 3, 'This Painful Elemental State', takes up the question of how subjectivity and the body are linked in *I Love Dick*, arguing that desire is an animating force. Using the image of the monster – both physical and conceptual – I trace how the body and art are linked in the novel. The novel was first published by an imprint of Semiotext(e), an independent publisher run by Kraus's then-husband, Sylvère Lotringer, which was responsible for introducing the work of French theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard to American audiences. The novel is deeply embedded in the discourse of its time. Unsurprisingly for a novel named after the phallic referent, the text suggests intersections with psychoanalytic theory. In particular, I explore the text through then-current narratives of so-called French feminist theory, such as Kristeva's theory of the abject and Irigaray's theory of sexual difference and its concomitant imaginaries suggested in 1977's *This Sex Which is Not One*, specifically mucosity. I explore Kraus's engagement with theory to conclude that ultimately, the novel is caught in the same dualistic structure that has historically held woman as other and monstrous, and as such is working in the negative.

Chapter 4, 'The Sum of Human Parts', reads Rachel Cusk's trilogy – *Outline* (2014), *Transit* (2016) and *Kudos* (2018) – alongside its posited theory of the subject as at once feminine but disembodied, and without will or desire. I examine how the novels' form is linked to ontological desire by attending to the novels' structure, diegetic practices and language. It is my contention that form is both generative and determinative in these novels, in that they enact

the erasure of women that they describe. My analysis considers the gendered quality of the narrator's silence or lack of desire, and through close reading of key scenes involving water, suggests that her (female) body cannot be ignored.

In the final chapter, I reflect on these autofictions' claims to authority, suggesting that their use of the first person might be traced back to the unquestioned whiteness of the authors. Drawing on Braidotti's definition as style as an ethical choice, I attempt a definition of affirmative fiction and argue that these autofictions do not go far enough to imagine alternative futures.

This thesis arises from my engagement with the question of what is a of writing that measures up to the times in which we live. Each chapter is introduced by my own venture into the autofictional form. These interstices are intended to respond to the critical work that precedes them, showing how I have incorporated theory into my thinking and living over the course of my PhD and, ultimately, moving me beyond the critical moment to a moment of creation.

The final section of the thesis is the novel *Vital Signs*. It is narrated in the third person, and uses character focalisers as well as narrating from the perspective of the Canadian wilderness, a corpse, the proliferating cells in a cancer patient, in order to stretch the form of the novel in a posthuman direction – perhaps a new kind of generic indeterminacy – and, hopefully, begin to develop an affirmative, ethical model of feminist writing.

‘The adventure of language’ | Autofiction: francophone, anglophone

i. Autofiction’s francophone roots

Lejeune & Doubrovsky

The genre of autofiction was created to occupy the space between the novel and the autobiography, specifically autobiography as defined by Phillipe Lejeune, who attempted to give a definition in his influential work *On Autobiography*: ‘Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality’ (4). He later broke down the criteria into their parts, distinguishing between categories that *can* be satisfied in part (1, 2, 4ii) and those which *must* be fully satisfied (3, 4i):

1. Form of language
    i. Narrative
    ii. In prose
2. Subject treated: individual life, story of a personality
3. Situation of the author: the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical
4. Position of the narrator
    i. The narrator and the principal character are identical
    ii. Retrospective point of view of the narrative[9]

For Lejeune, autobiography is a referential genre that claims ‘to provide information about a “reality” exterior to the text’ (6). The pact is a ‘a contract of identity...sealed by the proper name’; in other words, the contract ‘supposes that there is *identity of name* between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about’ (12). For Lejeune, this onomastic connection between author and narrator, where the enunciating ‘I’ is attached to the writer’s own name, differentiates autobiography, now an intersection between the textual ‘I’ and its extratextual counterpart, from fiction.

[9] Lejeune, 14, as translated by McDonough, *How to Read Autofiction,* 81.

Serge Doubrovsky coined the term autofiction on the back cover of his 1977 novel, *Fils*, which recounts true events of the author's life in the first person using unconventional and disruptive syntax, chronology and perspective: 'Fiction, of facts and events strictly real, if you prefer, autofiction, where the language of adventure has been entrusted to the adventure of language in its total freedom' ('Autofiction' i). Doubrovsky was directly responding to Lejeune's ideas, writing, in a letter to Lejeune, that he wanted 'to fill the "square" that your analysis left empty'[10], that of the protagonist of *a novel* having the same name as the author, in other words, by writing a work of fiction in which the 'I' both did and did not refer to the author. In so doing, Doubrovsky showed that onomastic connection between the writer and protagonist is not constitutive only of the autobiographical genre and therefore that the correlation between extratextual author and author-character is slipperier than Lejeune's pact would have it.

In 2008, Philippe Gasparini's *Autofiction: un aventure de langage,* a historical account of the evolution of the genre, expanded Doubrovsky's criteria for when a text could be considered to be autofiction to include, among others, subtitle of 'novel', pursuit of an original literary form, a reconfiguration of linear time, a strategy that aims to require active engagement from the reader and the effort to 'reveal one's self truly'[11], which Ferreira-Meyers has astutely dubbed the 'focus on the (psycho)analytical process ('Imaginaire' 107).

Doubrovsky believed that autobiographies such as Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) – which, given its migration of the confessional form into the secular world and its privileging of both the individual's inner life and the story being told, is considered as the origin of modern autobiographical practice – are no longer possible: there have been too many modern cultural developments, such as psychoanalysis, modernism and post-structuralism, that have changed historical conditions since the days of classical autobiography. Unlike autobiography, autofiction, Doubrovsky asserted, can be written at any time of life, rather than retrospectively, and by anyone, not

[10] Letter from Serge Doubrovsky to Philippe Lejeune, 17 October 1977. Philippe Lejeune, *Moi Aussi* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), 63, my translation

[11] Gasparini, Philippe *Autofiction: Une Aventure Du Langage* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008), 209.

just those with high sociological status. It presents an opportunity of self-exploration for the writer and places the subject endlessly in question, as Dix observes in *Autofiction in English*, foregrounding the mediated nature of the content of any narrative and serialising multiple fictive aspects of the narrating self (13). Doubrovsky and other French theorists of autofiction such as Jacques Lecarme thus recognise the careful construction involved in telling, that, as Dix puts it, 'the lived experience is itself subject to distortions of the imagination and the act of fictionalising affects the content of the memories' (6). They also place in question the notion of a stable, factual object/subject to which autobiography is taken to uncomplicatedly refer. Indeed, in an interview given in 1997, Doubrovsky expanded his definition following the post-structuralist notion that all narrative is inherently fictional because of its construction, what is left in and left out:

> The meaning of one's life in certain ways escapes us, so we have to reinvent it in our writing, and that is what I personally call autofiction…*Fils* is an attempt to write, not an account of, but an experience of analysis within one day of the narrator's life. It is obviously fictitious, because it is a forced totalization, it is totalized only by the text, it is not a recapturing of my whole life in one day. (qtd Célestin 400)

As Marjorie Worthington says: 'For Doubrovsky, autobiography retraces a *life*, while autofiction presents a *self*' (*Me* 9). Doubrovsky, working in the post-structuralist context, also understood the self/subject as constructed through language:

> For any kind of writer, but perhaps less consciously than for the autobiographer (if he has undergone psychoanalysis), the movement and the form itself of the writing are the only possible inscription of the self. The true 'trace', indelible and arbitrary, simultaneously entirely fabricated and authentically faithful. (qtd Hunt 183)

However, it is worth noting that Doubrovsky, who came to write *Fils* after psychoanalysis, also uses Freudian ideas of digressions – repetitions, distortions, gaps – in the novel in an attempt to heal splits in the psyche.[12] In his attempt to think about the subject as real, he aligned himself with the work of Julia Kristeva, who retains a role for the body in her understanding of subjectivity. She writes in *Powers of Horror*:

> [A]s in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. (3)

In her analysis of the formation of the subject and the making of meaning, Kristeva distinguishes between the semiotic – pre-representational drives and desires, movement, sounds; in other words, bodily feeling – and the symbolic, language with a referent, that gives names and public meaning. Kristeva argues that the symbolic, which silences the body and stifles creativity, bears a trace of the semiotic, and that the semiotic is fundamental to art. Kristeva reads these two poles as masculine – the Symbolic Law of the Father – and feminine – the felt maternal chora – respectively.[13] Hunt notes that Doubrovsky used this dichotomy to understand the fundamental split in himself, an 'insurmountable bisexuality' (183). Through autofiction, Doubrovsky argues, the author effectively becomes his own therapist and enacts a 'radical alteration of autobiography's romantic solitude' (qtd de Bloois). The authorial subject is thus multiplied, and, as Joost de Bloois argues, its 'insurmountable division is related to a reflection of the medium and genre(s) wherein this division is enacted'. According to Doubrovsky, de Bloois argues, the endorsement of fractured subjectivity in a practice that defies genres gives way

[12] For more on Doubrovsky and psychoanalysis, see Hunt (2018).
[13] The concept of the chora is adapted from Plato's *Timaeus*. In this context, chora is usually translated as 'receptacle'. The receptacle is the mother and the source the father. For more on the semiotic and symbolic in Kristeva, see Covino.

to the subject's antithetical and impossible desires. In the context of post-structuralism, it is worth noting Doubrovsky's retention of the felt body and of desire, and the way in which he ties them to autofictional practice. The foundational role of psychoanalysis is also important. Psychoanalysis critiques the symbolic order that underlies patriarchy, but as Braidotti notes, while psychoanalysis has improved our understanding, it has done little to change the conditions of patriarchy. Braidotti contrasts this with feminism, which also critiques the symbolic order, but which prioritises affecting change (*Nomadic* 182).[14]

Like in psychoanalysis, for Doubrovsky, in autofiction, the unconscious is made conscious. He hoped writing autofiction would 'help heal the splits' ('L'initative' qtd Hunt 181) within him. As Hunt reports, Doubrovsky later rejected the Freudian approach. Kraus, in her preference for candour over confession, also rejects the notion that autofiction will bring about catharsis, which is the aim of psychoanalysis. However, Doubrovsky's hope that autofiction would heal the insurmountable division within him makes it clear that autofiction has its roots in a philosophy of dualisms. Moreover, it is my contention that in assigning a therapeutic role to autofiction, Doubrovsky's concept of the form ensures that it will remain within the framework of those dualisms, a product of them, rather than tracing a line of flight away from them.

Autofiction beyond Doubrovsky

The second definition of autofiction, adopted by Gasparini in 2008's *Une Aventure Du Langage*, expands the term beyond referentiality creatively rendered to something more hybrid, 'a border space, where fantasies, illusions, aspirations, cultural imagery rooted in the author are embodied and written'[15]. Vincent Colonna is another major proponent of this definition of autofiction, one that emphasises invention. As Ferreira-Meyers observes: 'According to Colonna, the term autofiction encompasses all the processes of

[14] Psychoanalysis also conceives of desire as an insatiable lack, an impotent personal force that is usually sexualised, and it is clear that Doubrovsky, in talking about his impossible desires based on his 'insurmountable bisexuality', follows this same conception of desire.
[15] Robin, Régine as translated by Ferreira-Meyers, 'Belong' (45).

fictionalization of the Self, the other main feature of the autofictional process, insofar as the author is fantasizing his own existence, a project in which imaginary characters are more or less close extensions of his/her Self' ('Imaginaire' 106). Colonna still requires that the author is a character in the story, but suggests this may be done by using the writer's own name but an entirely invented character, which he calls a 'figurative autofiction'; conversely, the author may also be a character in the story through a more indirect manner than through onomastic connection, provided the identification is clear to the reader.[16] As such, I will be using this second definition when discussing Cusk's Outline trilogy. The trilogy does not meet the criterion of onomastic identity of author and author-character. However, the narrator is only named once in each novel, and as such, verges on anonymous. The narrator also very closely resembles Cusk herself – divorced, a mother of two, a writer: identification is clear. The trilogy takes the form of non-mimetic soliloquys told to Faye; the narrator shapes the story and the emergence of her own subjectivity takes places through accumulation. Cusk is thus pursuing an original form, one that requires active engagement from the reader and, as such, one I will define as autofiction.

In its emphasis on fantasy and invention, this second definition recognises that autofiction can employ fictional elements to construct the truth of the self through narrative. In other words, while some autofictions will be closer to Lejeune, requiring a referential reading, and others will follow the novelistic pact, suggesting a fictional reading, the hybridity of the genre, and a text's designation as autofiction, will leave readers uncertain as to which kind of autofiction they are dealing with. Because autofiction makes clear that a text participates in rather than belongs to a certain genre (what Derrida calls the 'law of genre'), Colonna argues that it serves as an instrument for reading. As Ferreira-Meyers notes, quoting Doubrovsky, '[t]his is not a unidirectional movement of the writer to the reader, this is a double movement: "the readers support us, provided we really give ourselves away, they feed on us, we on them, there is transfer, transfusion of life"' (108).

[16] See Colonna, Vincent *Autofiction & autres mythomanies littéraires*. Editions Tristam, 2004.

The third definition which will be useful for our purposes here was suggested by Gérard Genette in 1993's *Fiction & Diction*. Genette still insists on the onomastic connection but embraces the fictional; he differentiates what he calls true autofictions, 'whose narrative content is, if I may say so, authentically fictional,' from 'false autofictions which are "fictions" only for legal purposes: in other words, veiled autobiographies' (77n31). He considers *The Divine Comedy* to be a quintessential autofictional text in that the author-character "Dante" implies: 'I, the author, am going to tell you a story of which I am the hero but which never happened to me' (76)'. In my view, Genette's definition describes Kraus's *I Love Dick*, an epistolary novel that privileges the author's fantasies over real-life events (for instance, regarding the question of whether she and Dick ever consummated their relationship), straddles criticism and fiction and resisted a proposed legal challenge by the Dick of the title. Kraus's *I Love Dick* is presented as a novel and uses letters and other fragments to construct a non-linear account of the writer falling in love with her husband's colleague. The novel's narrator is also called "Chris Kraus"; her emergence as an enunciating 'I' and artist is a central concern. Kraus moves between third and first person and writes extensively about theory. The novel thus requires a mix of referential and fictional readings; it also uses multiple forms (letter, transcriptions of conversation, art criticism) and includes an appropriation of what Gasparini calls 'documentary evidence'. As such, an analysis of the novel requires a wide-ranging understanding of autofiction and its mechanisms not limited to one definition. Moreover, cleaving to any one definition of autofiction would be a fundamental misunderstanding of what novels participating in the genre, if it could even be said definitively to exist qua genre, are attempting to achieve.

As Marjorie Worthington summarises:

> Autofictions are not autobiographies or memoirs by another name but *novels* that play with the expectations evoked when the protagonist and author share a name and some biographical information, but when that protagonist engages in clearly fictional endeavours. (12)

Every writer hopes for an active, engaged reader. And it is clear that, as Worthington points out, by playing with a reader's expectations of how both memoir and fiction should behave, autofiction 'calls into question – and, ultimately, mak[es] a case for – the importance of distinguishing between fact and fiction' ('Ironic' 474). However, there is no denying that public and journalistic responses to many autofictions have focused on trying to draw straight lines from characters and events in the works to reality (see, for example, how the press responded to Knausgård's autofiction by attempting to track down the family members he mentioned).[17] Although autofiction, by these definitions, works on the constant shifting between referential and fictional readings, I want to acknowledge that the referential too readily becomes the dominant mode of reception and promotion, driving sales and scandal, as in the case of Knausgård. If such autofictions go on claiming the privileges of fiction – 'I made it up' – as they fuel the scandal, do they risk accusations of disingenuity? Book-writing and -selling are precarious businesses and I understand that having one's cake and eating it too in that context means more press, higher sales figures, potentially better advances for authors – in short, more cake for everyone. But I wonder whether there is a more important effect of the 'perpetual oscillation' of autofiction: if determining what is true and what is fiction is the most important mode of engaging with the autofictional work, what other the possibilities can it offer?

Nevertheless, it is clear that autofiction, as a definition or genre, is a contested site. Like Karen Ferreira-Meyers, I am more interested in what 'new developments in writing practice and critical theory are made possible by autofiction' ('Belong' 39): in the consequences of texts' resistance to classification, in the results of the breaking of a predefined pact between writer and reader. As such, I choose not to attempt my own definition of autofiction or the autofictional pact and instead focus my analysis on these absences, and on how gender and the body come into play in determining and being affected by this generic indeterminacy.

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[17] For more on the fallout from this series, see Hughes, Evan. 'Karl Ove Knausgaard Became a Literary Sensation by Exposing His Every Secret'. *The New Republic*, Apr. 2014. https://newrepublic.com/article/117245/karl-ove-knausgaard-interview-literary-star-struggles-regret. Accessed 3 Jan. 2020.

Shirley Jordan has observed that the academy, in its grappling with autofiction's premises,

> has most frequently sought to relate them to 'safe' (male/canonical) authors, treating as secondary the substantial range of experimentation by new women writers that constitutes some of autofiction's most distinctive practice…[W]omen's work has borne the brunt of misgivings about autofiction's legitimacy. (77)

Jordan notes that there has been a lack of criticism that takes gender-specific production or consumption of autofiction into account. By focusing on autofiction by women, this study hopes to build on the work Marjorie Worthington has done on male autofiction to begin to remedy that lack.

ii. Autofiction in English

The author is dead, long live the author

As we have seen in the discussion of the debate surrounding autofiction's premise, it took time for autofiction to be accepted by the French academy. The emergence of autofictional theory and practice in English is relatively recent, and as Ferreira-Meyers has observed, 'look[s] for an answer on how to live and how to create, not on how to truthfully write how one lives' ('Belong' 33). Like the anglophone autofictional tradition, then, my project is less concerned than the French tradition is with narrow questions of truth, fact and fiction, and more interested in what autofiction allows.

In her gender-specific study of American male autofiction from the late twentieth century to present, *The Story of "Me"*, Marjorie Worthington connects the emergence of autofiction with anxieties about authorship provoked by post-structuralist literary theory and by the rise of feminism (or, more broadly, the expansion of what kind of subject might be considered an author) (91). Although her study is limited to autofiction by white men, it is worth dwelling for a moment on her argument, as it provides a cultural and critical context for my project.

Autofiction as a practice centres the author of the text in the text, whether in heterodiegetic or homodiegetic narration. Writing autofiction is an inherently self-reflexive practice. Moreover, it is self-consciously literary, what's at stake yoked firmly to the linguistic, the question of the enunciating 'I'. Worthington links this self-consciousness to the concept of the death of the author, famously put forward by Roland Barthes in 1967, when he argued that a text's author is irrelevant to its interpretation once it is published. Autofiction, Worthington argues, is a corrective to the statement that the author is dead (63).[18] In the American context, Worthington contrasts Barthes's pronouncement with the metafictional writing of John Barth, who in his essay *The Literature of Exhaustion* laments the loss of the image of author as a singular genius and calls on writers to 'paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work…by so doing he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation' (71). In other words, the 'used-upness' of the fictional literary form requires a skilled author to revive it by chronicling that very same exhaustion (Worthington 74). Barth's suggestion: craft 'novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of the Author' (72).

This anxiety about the exhaustion of fictional literary forms certainly seems to be present in Rachel Cusk's work. In an interview with *The Observer* that coincided with the publication of the first novel in her trilogy, Cusk said she felt that fiction was 'fake and embarrassing': 'Once you have suffered sufficiently, the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together seems utterly ridiculous. Yet my mode of autobiography had come to an end. I could not do it without being misunderstood and making people angry' (Kellaway). She chronicles this exhaustion in the novels, too: 'not enough was left any more for another story: enough time, enough material, enough authenticity. Everything has been used up' (*Kudos* 173). This new form, her take on autofiction, is her solution.

For Barth, authorial intrusion allows the author to shape the interpretation of the story, and of their authorial personae, or their public faces.

[18] For more on the death of the author and autofiction, see chapter 2 of *The Story of "Me"*.

This is certainly true in *I Love Dick*, which for the most part only ever gives us Chris's side of the story. Moreover, the story would not exist without it. Authorial intrusion also allows authors to explain and defend their works. Whether an author is successful at exerting control, it remains the case that as Worthington points out, authorship is a constitutive element of the reading process of autofiction, and in its use of the author-character, it at once asserts the presence of the author while forcing the reader to recognise 'the difference between that intratextual character and the extratextual author' (67). In other words, the author is not dead, nor is she irrelevant to the text.

Patriarchal privilege

Importantly for our purposes here, Worthington also links the self-consciousness of autofictional practice to the self-consciousness of the culture at the time, 'which focused on the nature of subjectivity and the place of the subject in the world', with an increasing understanding of the impact of gender (26). This is another way in which autofiction by white men, she argues, can be read as a response to the anxiety of obsolescence prompted by the rise of feminism: 'they feel the challenge to their traditional patriarchal privilege and newly recognise the limited perspective their cultural position provides them' (47). White male authors could no longer remain invisible, hidden behind, and empowered by, omniscient narration; instead, authors were expected to reveal their positionality (51). Autofiction allows them to do this, but through its strategy of particularisation, autofiction also 'often acts in the service of recuperating masculine authorial privilege by exploiting the spectacle of the author-character' (52).

Worthington argues, not entirely correctly[19], that autofictions by women and people of colour are 'shockingly rare' (89) and that those that do appear

[19] See, for example, Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), Susanne Antonetta's *Body Toxic* (2002), James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953), Christine Brooke-Rose's *Remake* (1996), Colette's *Claudine* series (1900-1904), Louise Erdrich's *Shadow Tag* (2010), Siri Hustvedt's *The Sorrows of an American* (2008) and *The Blazing World* (2014), Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1997), Jenny Offil's *Dept. of Speculation* (2014), Yuko Tsushima's novels, Harriet Wilson's slave narrative *Our Nig*

often ‘employ the third person to represent their author-characters’. She contrasts this with the writing of white male writers, speculating that author-characters in autofictions by women or people of colour ‘are reluctant or unable to assume the authority of the first person’. Her brief analysis of works by Ruth Ozeki and Percival Everett concludes that because these authors are from underrepresented groups, they have never had enough power to fear the loss of cultural supremacy, and as such, their author-characters do not seem to be trying to assert authorial control (91). This is an interesting counterpoint to *I Love Dick*, where the authority of the first person is assumed precisely as a claim to subjecthood.

Finally, it is worth noting that the same critical suspicion that has dogged writing by women – as novels about the kitchen sink and other trifles unworthy of attention or accolade – is detectable in the reception of autofiction by women. As Hywel Dix observes, although many French writers of autofiction are women, ‘their writing has been historically marginalised and has only recently received critical attention’ (9). This is true in the anglophone tradition, too, where, as Rachel Sykes points out, male authors such as Ben Lerner and Karl Ove Knausgård are seen as ‘incarnations of Proust’ while their female counterparts are dismissed as ‘oversharers’, ‘unworthy of literary note’ (10).

There is no doubt, then, that gender plays a crucial role in both the production and reception of autofiction. This study takes it as self-evident that there is no pan-historical female form or voice. Both Kraus and Cusk place gender at the centre of their work, and their anxieties about the narrative voice are intrinsically linked to their anxieties about female subjectivity, woman as devalued other, woman as invisible.

(1859), Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1992), not to mention all four of Chris Kraus’s autofictional novels, *I Love Dick* (1997), *Aliens & Anorexia* (2000), *Torpor* (2006) and *Summer of Hate* (2012). Conversely, it should also be noted that fictional works by writers of colour are often assumed to be autofictional or autobiographical, speaking for or as a group of people. For more on the publishing industry’s framing of writing by people of colour, see Washington, Bryan. ‘Based on a True Story’. *The Awl*. 26 Sept. 2017. https://www.theawl.com/2017/09/based-on-a-true-story/ Accessed 3 Jan. 2020.

‘The Desire to Know’ | Desire and the body in Braidotti

Rosi Braidotti, an Italian-born philosopher now working in Utrecht, is known as a ‘new materialist’, nomadic, posthumanist thinker. Her philosophy has its roots in the neomaterialist turn taken by Gilles Deleuze in his reading of Spinoza. She combines this with the corporeal feminism she finds in sexual difference theory as put forward by Belgian-born French philosopher Luce Irigaray to create her own kind of enfleshed materialism.[20] The result is an ethical philosophy that offers a radically affirmative model of difference and emphasises the joyful discontinuity of the self. It is a philosophy of affirmation rather than of negativity[21]. Affirmation is not optimism, blind positivity or sanitised corporate confidence; instead, it is the practice of transforming pain into knowledge, into options; it is being active, not reactive, and resisting the composition of a common humanity bonded in fear and vulnerability. And it is a philosophy that emphasises the importance of creativity in creating new forms of thought and self-representations. That is why it appeals to me, not just intellectually but in a felt way: there is no revolution coming to save us. We have to save ourselves.

ii. Negativity and affirmation

In Braidotti’s philosophy, the ethical has two main, interrelated characteristics, which she elucidates most clearly in *Nomadic Theory*. Firstly, it is relational. The effects of power – as restrictive and positive – that a subject’s actions have on the world is where that subject’s ethical core lies. ‘The ethical ideal,’

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[20] Michel Foucault’s work on power, the death of ‘Man’, the politics of living and dying and joyful discontinuity also provide a critical baseline for Braidotti. Deleuze wrote extensively on Foucault and although they disagreed about concepts such as desire and pleasure, there was much mutual admiration between the two men. For Braidotti, they represent philosophical innovators who ‘critically dis-engage from the rules, conventions and institutional protocols of the academic disciplines. This nomadic exodus from disciplinary ‘homes’ shifts the point of reference away from the authority of the past and onto accountability for the present (as both actual and virtual). This is what Foucault and Deleuze called “the philosophy of the outside”: thinking of, in, and for the world – a becoming-world of knowledge production practices’ (‘Theoretical’).

[21] It is important to note that when Braidotti talks about negativity and affirmation, she is talking conceptually rather than psychologically.

Braidotti writes, 'is to increase one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others' (286), others which are not limited to human otherness but can be non-, post- or inhuman. Braidotti's non-unitary subject grows through and in relation to others and rejects self-centred individualism. Secondly, it is about overturning the negative[22], a conviction that negative affects can be transformed: Braidotti's nomadic perspective conceives of ethics as 'essentially about the transformation of negative into positive passions, ie moving beyond the pain' (290). This is what affirmation is. Rather than allowing traumatic or negative events to have the effect of 'arrest, blockage and rigidification' (288) and dwelling in negative passions that harm the self and its capacity to relate to others, the ethical subject depersonalises the event to transform the negative charge. I recognise the critiques leveraged against Braidotti by otherwise sympathetic critics like Lisa Baraitser and Clare Hemmings that argue that this formulation puts the onus on the traumatised, the less powerful. I am persuaded by the argument that the effect of asymmetrical power relations on the nomadic subject is under-theorised in Braidotti's work.[23] Nevertheless, as one who has felt blocked, rigid, I find the conceptual move Braidotti makes to action one can take, action that shifts the repetition of negative patterns, to be compelling.[24] Braidotti's vision of ethics figures harm done to others as harm done to the self through loss of potential,

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[22] A note on how the negative functions in Braidotti's notion of political subjectivity. In dialectics, the negative is necessary as a structure of thought: thesis, antithesis, synthesis. In other words, the negative is the ground for critical theory rather than something that critical theory actually engages with. As such, it transcends. Braidotti, drawing on Foucault and Deleuze, suggests instead a foregrounding of the creative/affirmative elements of the process of overturning the negative instance. In other words, resistance does not have to mean 'the negation of the negativity of the present' (*Nomadic* 286), a double negative that is supposed to engender a positive. Political subjectivity and oppositional consciousness are instead affirmative and about creating alternatives.

[23] For an example of this thread of critique, see Burke Carmichael, Adam. 'Post-National Foundation of Judith Butler's and Rossi [sic] Braidotti's Relational Subjectivity'. *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice / Études Critiques Sur Le Genre, La Culture, et La Justice*, vol. 37, no. 2, part 2, Jan. 2016, 140.

[24] I must, of course, recognise here the privilege inherent in my ability to put aside this very valid criticism of this aspect of Braidotti's work. Whatever blockages I have faced or felt are still those of a white, middle-class, bisexual woman living in the Western world and able to speak the dominant language etc. In other words, I must recognise my implications with power. More on this in the next section.

ability to relate and, therefore, freedom. 'Affirmative ethics is not about the avoidance of pain, but rather about transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost and dispossessed' (289). This is what it is to be ethical: to be affirmative so as to create the conditions for endurance and therefore for a sustainable future (295).[25] And to be affirmative is to be active rather than reactive, to create 'sustainable alternatives geared to the construction of social horizons of hope' (267).

i. 'Through the body and not in flight away from it'

Between desire…

We're not all humans, 'or not human to the same degree', Braidotti writes, if *human* refers to the 'dominant vision of the subject as white, male, heterosexual, urbanised, able-bodied, speaking a standard language and taking charge of the women and children' ('Metamorphic' 1). The other – sexual, racial, natural, technological – is devalued: 'the system of difference-as-pejoration fulfils a structural and constitutive function in subject formation' (1), at once necessary and disruptive. She notes that these others have always been disposable to the dominant/majority subject, physically and socially (leading to oppression, domination and depletion), but also symbolically. They are objects of horror, monstrous and alien, 'the sites of formation of negative counter-subjectivities' (3), casting light on the thresholds of otherness. In contrast to this vision of the dominant subject, Braidotti offers the nomadic subject, which is radically anti-essentialist, removed from the dualistic scheme of transcendental philosophy through the process of becoming:

> The nomadic subject is not split along the traditional axes of mind/body, conscious/unconscious, or reason/imagination. On the contrary, the notions of embodiment and immanence posit it

[25] Each subject or body has a threshold of sustainability – a level of intensity that they can take. Whereas for Spinoza, suicide is ethically improper, as death can only come from the outside, both Deleuze and Braidotti recognise it as an ethical gesture, an act of no longer being able to sustain the threshold (for example, Woolf's death, which was self-styled and relational). See the section 'Powers of Affirmation' in *Nomadic Theory* for more on sustainable ethics.

> as one energetic, forever-shifting entity, fundamentally driven by desire for expansion towards its many-faceted exterior borders/others. (*Metamorphoses* 131)

Braidotti is indebted to Deleuze's vitalist nomadology. Deleuze rejects the concept of identity, because it is underwritten by the dualism of same/other, and instead conceives of the subject as a cluster of forces: the subject is a complex, intensive assemblage that can connect with others in many ways. In contrast to identity, Deleuze offers the concept of becoming – ie becoming different. According to Cliff Stagnall, writing in *The Deleuze Dictionary*, 'becoming is the very dynamism of change, situated between heterogenous terms and tending towards no particular goal or end-state' (26). Becoming is not an event that happens to something, rather 'things and states are now viewed as *products* of becoming' (27). This is true, too, of the human subject, which is not stable but rather a constantly changing assemblage of forces. As Inna Semetsky writes in *Deleuze, Education and Becoming*, becoming 'is a distinctive feature of Deleuzian thought: becoming-animal, becoming-woman, becoming-world, always becoming-other and always bordering on the element of minority. It is a minority, surviving on the margins, that serves as a medium of becoming' (3). Thus, rather than being problematic, the other is a moving horizon, and difference (and thus the feminine) is positive rather than negative. In Deleuze's philosophy, unlike in the traditional Hegelian framework, difference is not pejorative, something to be subordinated to identity, but rather something to be joyfully affirmed. Difference is ontological, relational, a movement beyond dualism, and becoming is the productive return of difference. Deleuze understands difference as difference in degrees of power. There are two kinds of power: *potestas* and *potentia* (in French, *pouvoir* and *jouissance*, respectively). *Potestas* is the power to dominate others, it is restrictive; *potentia* is the affirmative, empowering power to act, to affect and be affected, to form assemblages. Drawing on Spinoza, Deleuze thinks of affect and desire as ontological passions. The desire to be, to go on being, to persevere and endure, is the fundamental foundation of everything that lives. For Braidotti, as for Deleuze, desire is positive, 'the first and foremost step in the process of the constitution of the self' (*Metamorphoses* 71), rather than

negative, as it is for Lacan, Hegel and other philosophies founded on dialectics. Desire is related to power: '[t]he constant negotiation between the two poles of power can also be formulated in political terms in the notion of subjectivity as power and desire' (*Metamorphoses* 21). In turn, subjectivity, is closely related to the body. Thinking has an affective foundation and philosophy requires, as Braidotti puts it in *Metamorphoses*, 'its embodied, fleshy starting-block' (74). The desire to know, which thinking expresses, cannot be adequately expressed in language because it itself sustains language. It is not surprising, therefore, that Braidotti, like Deleuze, is critical of the 'linguistic paradigm of mediation' ('Affirming') that has dominated the North American reception of post-structuralism.[26] She also follows Deleuze in rejecting the 'dialectics of Lack, Law and Signifier which have dominated Lacanian psychoanalysis, Derridian deconstruction and [some] queer theories' ('Affirming'). The desiring subject does not yearn for that which it lacks, but instead for change and transformation of 'the self, society and of its modes of cultural representation' (*Metamorphoses* 75).

In Deleuze's philosophy, exiting the phallogocentric mode of thought (ie Lacanianism) that has historically dominated the western logos requires a new way of thinking, a new mode of theoretical representation. For Deleuze, this takes the form of becoming-minority, or becoming-nomad or becoming-molecular. Because man is the standard referent for subjectivity, becoming-woman is the first, vital step in the process of becoming-minority. As such, Deleuze wants to move to an overcoming of sexual difference – becoming-woman as a dispersal of sexuality into generalised becoming. This is where Braidotti, following Irigaray, disagrees with Deleuze.[27] Instead, she sees it as the task of feminist philosophy to move beyond the Hegelian take on difference and to do so by thinking *with* sexual difference, not beyond it.

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[26] See for example, Braidotti's critique of the linguistic as the dominant paradigm in Judith Butler's work in Braidotti, Rosi, and Lisa Regan. 'Our Times Are Always Out of Joint: Feminist Relational Ethics in and of the World Today: An Interview with Rosi Braidotti'. *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 28, no. 3, July 2017, pp. 171-92.

[27] Deleuze and Irigaray's philosophies have other points of divergence, chiefly in their views on the unconscious. See Braidotti's 'Teratologies'.

…And corporeal feminism

Braidotti views the body as key in the feminist struggle for the redefinition of subjectivity, arguing that it should be 'understood as neither biological nor a sociological category, but rather as a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic and the material social conditions' ('Becoming' 43). The bodily roots of subjectivity should be revalued and any universal or gender-free understanding of human embodiment should be rejected. This is in stark contrast to the tradition of somatophobia in much of western philosophy. Arguments that identify the subject of the western logos as male are well known.[28] As many feminist thinkers have observed, western logos depends on defining those who are other – the feminine other, the racialised other, to name but a few – as dangerous, separate; in other words, it functions by framing difference as both foundational and pejorative. Also prey to this mode of thinking is the body.

The body's relationship to subjectivity, where subjectivity develops within it and is inscribed on its surface, has been at the centre of philosophy's consideration of being for thousands of years, with the view of flesh as *other* to the mind finding its epitome in Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. This historical mind/body dualism privileges the mind as the centre of being; its concomitant relegation of the body has been noted by many contemporary thinkers, such as Elisabeth Grosz, who has argued that 'since the inception of philosophy as a separate and self-contained discipline in ancient Greece, philosophy has established itself on the foundations of a profound somatophobia,' (*Volatile* 5) tracing the etymology of the word *body* (*soma*) to its introduction 'by Orphic priests, who believed that man was a spiritual or noncorporeal being trapped in the body as in a dungeon (*sēma*)'. Plato views the body as the 'denigrated and imperfect version of the Idea' and as such, the material body becomes not an embodiment of the Idea but its flawed other, eliding it from the 'I' of subjectivity and limiting the body to being merely *res extensa* (extended matter in the Cartesian ontology, and opposed to *res cogitas*, the mind) (5).

[28] See, for example, Genevieve Lloyd's *The Man of Reason* and Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman.*

Historical philosophical suspicion of the body is undoubtedly linked to the wider patriarchy's positioning of women as other to men: in this view, women's bodies both justify their inequality by being biologically inferior to men's, and underwrite their otherness, for women are seen as much more closely connected to the body, more corporeal, more biological, more natural than men. The mind as put forward from Plato to Descartes – as disembodied subjectivity – is in direct contradiction with the formulation of the female subject as constituted by her body. The irrational, changing flesh of a woman's body is contrasted with male rationality and found inferior. As Simone de Beauvoir observed, '[Man] thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it' (*Second* 8). In its fluidity, its ability to change, its seepage – common themes in literary representations of women – the female body is found to be threatening.

Braidotti draws on the work of Luce Irigaray on sexual difference to offer a different view of the body in general, and of female bodies in particular. Irigaray argues that 'the feminine as experienced and expressed by women is as yet unrepresented, having been colonised by the male imaginary' ('Becoming' 45). She draws on psychoanalysis to make a connection between the morphology of the imaginary body and the morphology of different thought processes, equating the symbolic phallus with western rationality's principles of stable form, identity and individuation and contrasting its 'one form, of the individual, of the (male) sex organ' with 'the contact of at least two (lips) [which] keeps woman in touch with herself' (*Feminine* 59). In her study of Irigaray, Margaret Whitford notes that for Irigaray, who locates her work in the domain of the symbolic and the imaginary rather than in empirical materialities, the symbolic is a 'monosexual structuration of subjectivity that, because it is an overarching symbolic structure, determines individual subjectivity' (*Feminine* 38). And because in this structure, to be a subject is to take the male position, she argues for the future advent of the female speaking subject via the creation of a feminine symbolic form. Women must thus, as Braidotti puts it, 'speak the feminine, they must think it, write it and represent it in their own terms' ('Becoming' 45). The feminine is here defined without recourse to essentialism;

instead, it is virtual, the effect of the project to move beyond dualistic oppositions, in other words, to be something other than the Other of Man (ie to be what Irigaray calls the other of the Other rather than the other of the Same). For Irigaray, this project entails a working through of stock cultural images of women as codified by the patriarchal culture in which we live (*Metamorphoses* 41) in order to undo them, a process she calls strategic mimesis. Sexual difference rejects naturalistic assumptions and emphasises instead 'the social and discursive formation of embodied materiality' (*Metamorphoses* 28). It also emphasises the political importance of desire 'as opposed to the will, and of its role in the constitution of the subject' (*Metamorphoses* 22). In these ways, and in their desire to move beyond Lacanianism, Irigaray and Deleuze's thinking is aligned. But as I noted above, they differ with respect to becoming-woman. For Irigaray, Deleuze's dispersal of sexuality into a general becoming 'results in undermining feminist claims to a redefinition of the female subject' (*Metamorphoses* 76). This issue is not resolved in Deleuze's work, according to Braidotti, who, rather than moving beyond gender, asserts that the 'positivity of sexual difference…posits a female, sexed, thinking subject, who stands in a dissymmetrical relationship to the masculine. The feminine thus defined is not the structural "other" of a dualistic system but is radically and positively other' (*Metamorphoses* 82). In other words, women go from 'designated other [to having] a speaking stance that is incommensurable with that of man' (*Metamorphoses* 82). Where Deleuze offers the figuration of becoming-minority, Irigaray emphasises 'fluidity and fluid mechanics…mucosity and interstitional humidity such as the placenta, blood and other bodily fluids' as alternative figurations of the self, 'and the necessity to find adequate expressions for them' (*Metamorphoses* 112). These expressions are positive rather than framed through lack or dispersal, because Irigaray 'aims to recombine that which patriarchal power had separated, namely the embodied subject from her or his *potentia*' (*Metamorphoses* 113).[29]

[29] I am sympathetic to Judith Butler's point that for Braidotti, the turn to gender (away from sexual difference) depoliticizes feminism, whereas for other thinkers, such as Butler herself, that turn 'is a way of insisting that feminism expand its political concerns beyond gender asymmetry, to underscore the cultural specificity of its constitution as well as its interrelations with other politically invested categories, such as nation and

iii. A politics of location

Braidotti adopts what she calls a zig-zagging approach to Deleuze and feminism, to sexual difference in order to identify productive areas of overlap and differentiation: both Deleuze and Irigaray put forward radical philosophies of immanence, that 'resist the separation of self from society, the psychic from its outsides, the symbolic from the material' (*Metamorphoses* 113). To this approach, Braidotti adds the politics of location, a concept she develops from Adrienne Rich, which is a 'practice of accountability (for one's embodied and embedded locations) as a relational, collective activity of undoing power differentials' (*Metamorphoses* 12). She links this practice to narrative, arguing that politics of locations are:

> Cartographies of power which rest on a form of self-criticism, a critical, genealogical self-narrative; they are relational and outside-directed. This means that 'embodied' accounts illuminate and transform our knowledge of ourselves and of the world…Feminist knowledge is an interactive process that brings out aspects of our own existence, especially our own implication with power, that we had not noticed before. (*Metamorphoses* 12-13)

With the politics of location, which is not an individual activity, but which requires a social network of exchanges, Braidotti is calling for materially embedded, embodied accounts of one's own power relations. In other words, the embodied self is important to political subjectivity, as is imagination, memory and sexuality. As such, her philosophy is useful for me as a way to think not just about the world in which we now live, but about what we want to become, two challenges I think it is crucial for creative writing to meet.

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race' ('Feminism' 43). For Braidotti, the politics of location functions in this same way, as we see below, but there is no doubt that her emphasis on sexual difference as *the* difference is a product of her situation as a European feminist. There is also no question that Braidotti views grants a greater explanatory power to feminism than to other critical theories (43).

Similarly, both Kraus and Cusk make gendered subjectivity the explicit subject of their work. Kraus asks who gets to speak. Cusk frames the final book in her trilogy through the question of sexual difference. The desire to speak, to act – or the lack of that very desire – is a key question for both writers. To read their work alongside Braidotti's is, I hope, generative of new ideas and lines of flight, both critically and in terms of creative practice. Her account of the historical identification of difference with monstrosity underpins my reading of Kraus, as does her reading of positive and negative philosophies derived from psychoanalysis, such as the work of Irigaray and Kristeva, respectively. Braidotti's emphasis on the body's role in women's struggle to redefine subjectivity as their own grounds my engagement with Cusk's work, as does her thinking about collectivity, passivity and becoming-other. In both cases, my aim is to test whether these writers develop, as Braidotti puts it, 'figurations of contemporary female subjectivities that would do justice to the complexities and the contradictions' ('Teratologies' 158) of the world and times in which we live. Finally, I draw on Braidotti's understanding of the body – as the root of subjectivity, as gendered, not universal or neutral, as material and socially and discursively produced. In other words, I will recognise that the body cannot be understood in any simply ahistorical, precultural or purely natural way. I will also use Braidotti's formulation of desire as more than libidinal but ontological, the desire to be. Where I refer to feminism, it will be as a political position. I understand femaleness as a matter of biology and femininity to be a set of culturally defined characteristics. I use *woman* to refer to the symbolic or representational order, whereas *women* denotes lived experience.

‘This Painful Elemental State’ | Embodiment & the Female Artist in *I Love Dick*

When Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick* was originally published in 1997, critical response to it, largely limited to the US art world, found it to be a ‘a cautionary tale about the fast-disappearing boundaries between private and public in American culture’ (‘Stalking’ 30) and deemed it ‘a book not so much written as secreted’ (Rimanelli). In 1990, Kraus had started the Native Agents imprint of Semiotext(e), an independent publisher founded by her then-husband, Sylvère Lotringer, ‘with the idea of transferring some of French theory’s legitimacy to some friends in New York, all of them women’ (‘Universal’). *I Love Dick* was one of the first books to be published by the imprint, the goal of which, Kraus said, was to promote female writers engaged in ‘an enactment of the theories of subjectivity found in French theory’ (Nordeen).

Prior to *I Love Dick*, Kraus, a self-described ‘diehard feminist’ (*Dick* 16), was a filmmaker little known outside the New York art world. For almost 20 years, Kraus, like her narrators, was on the margins; in *Summer of Hate*, she offers an ironic description of her own readers:

> She saw no boundaries between feeling and thought, sex and philosophy. Hence, her writing was read almost exclusively in the art world, where she attracted a small core of devoted fans: Asperger’s boys, girls who’d been hospitalised for mental illness, assistant professors who would not be receiving their tenure, lap dancers, cutters and whores. (16)

However, when *I Love Dick* was reissued in 2006, it found a new audience and came to be seen as a ‘crucial and widely celebrated feminist text’ (Epps); it was eventually published in the UK in 2015, where it was hailed in *The Guardian* by Emily Gould as ‘the most important book about men and women written in the last century’. Kraus has speculated this is because ‘the world had changed…In a milieu of female blogs and third-wave feminism, *I Love Dick* was seen as prescient’ (‘Real life’). In its unflinching examination of the author-character’s desire and abjection, *I Love Dick* was at the vanguard of what

continues to be a growing experimental metafictional practice in the US. Kraus has since published art criticism, a biography of Kathy Acker and written three other novels: *Aliens & Anorexia*, part movie treatment, part recuperation of Simone Weil; *Torpor*, a picaresque about the breakdown of a marriage, the media revolution in Romania and the trauma and guilt of a Holocaust survivor; and *Summer of Hate*, which tackles the Bush years, the US prison system and the real-estate market, the impending financial crash of 2008 haunting the text. These novels, like *I Love Dick*, are autofictional in nature, 'using events from [her] recent past' (Epps), and formally experimental.

I Love Dick is a book about love, and about D/dick, but it is also a book about power and value, the interplay between the personal and the structural. It tells the story of 'a 39-year-old experimental filmmaker', 'Chris Kraus'[30], and her husband, 'a 56-year-old college professor' named 'Sylvère Lotringer', who spend an evening with 'Dick _____', a 'friendly acquaintance of Sylvère's' and 'English cultural critic who's recently relocated from Melbourne to Los Angeles' (3), after which Chris declares that she is in love with Dick. The married couple begins collaborating on *billets doux* to Dick, sharing their letters with each other, and the project becomes, according to Sylvère, 'something in between cultural criticism and fiction' (43), 'some new kind of literary form' (258). Chris eventually leaves Sylvère, sleeps with Dick and is rejected by him, but still the letters continue, ranging in subject matter from schizophrenia to the art of Hannah Wilke; the letters are now a form and end to themselves.

In this chapter, I read the emergence of Chris as a feminine subject – and artist – alongside the emergence in her own awareness of her desiring body. The author-character expresses both libidinal and ontological desire: she wants to be, to speak feminine. The novel attempts to root the enunciating 'I' in the body, rejecting a universal and gender-free understanding of both subjectivity and the body, through the image of the monster. The monster, in this case, is both conceptual – Chris wants to become an artist – and bodily: her body leaks; it is not bounded. It is my contention that the novel is more

[30] To avoid collapsing the distinction between author and author-character, I refer to Kraus when discussing the author and Chris when in reference to the protagonist of the novel. Similarly, I will refer to Lotringer when discussing the French critic and Sylvère when in reference to Chris's husband, and likewise to Hebdige and Dick.

ambivalent towards embodiment than many critics have suggested: the imaginaries of Irigaray's sexual difference, primarily mucosity, are outweighed by the body's abjection in the text. Kraus was deeply embedded in post-structuralist and feminist theory of her time, which is apparent in the novel, and I engage with those theories to analyse its workings as a self-proclaimed radical feminist text of the time. However, I also use Braidotti's (Deleuzian) interpretation of those same theories to test the novel as a radical feminist text of and for our present. The novel is self-aware about its status as a woman's self-representation, and explicitly refers to other cases of women's representation. In this way, and by trying to root subjectivity in the body, the novel engages with the political dimension of subjectivity. However, the novel remains caught in the phallogocentric system of representation of both women and men, making the title more than a simple knowing joke. Chris is other, but she remains the other of the Same, of man – in other words, caught in the dualisms that have structured western logos.

i. The body, the 'I'

When the book opens, Chris is a 'money-hustling hag' (12) and it is so obvious that she and her husband are no longer having sex that her neighbour mistakes him for Chris's father (61). Instead, she and Sylvère achieve intimacy through deconstruction: she tells Sylvère that she believes she and Dick have just experienced a 'Conceptual Fuck' (5). But when Dick calls later that day, Chris sweats during the conversation; she has turned into 'a jumpy bundle of emotions, sexually aroused for the first time in seven years' (9). Sylvère, presumably to keep this intimacy and arousal going, suggests she write Dick a letter. She accedes, but only if he writes one too (and, in fact, he writes the first letter). In her first letter to Dick, she describes the aftermath of a phone call with him:

> I couldn't talk, and hung up on the bottom end of the romantic equation with beating heart and sweating palms. It's incredible to feel this way. For 10 years my life's been organised around avoiding this painful elemental state. (11)

Her infatuation with Dick has ended her voluntary disembodiment and she tingles 'all over waiting for the phone to ring' (41). While Sylvère wonders if this whole affair is simply a means for him and Chris to have sex, if the letters are a manifestation of 'the alienation of the post-modern intellectual in its most diseased form' (26), Chris is sure that '[a]ll she'd really wanted, for the past seven days was a chance to kiss and fuck Dick' (27). For her, 'the game is *real'* (12). But the text notes her ambivalence of her reaction to this new feeling, as she 'hate[s] being thrown into such a physical state…my face flushed, my heart was pounding' (44).

The novel was written at a time of severe suspicion of sexuality. Braidotti notes that American feminism in the 1990s made 'sexuality the sole and central source of women's oppression' (*Metamorphoses* 30). Sexual agency was thereby denied women and the structurality of patriarchy was downplayed. Chris's initial ambivalence is thus not surprising. Equally, it should be noted that the novel offers a more holistic account of women's oppression and that Chris, at least at first glance, seems to view her coming into her sexuality as a positive. That said, it is clear that an ambivalence about heterosexuality remains: 'My entire state of being's changed because I've become my sexuality: female, straight, wanting to love men, be fucked. Is there a way of living with this like a gay person, proudly?' (*Dick* 186) I will return to the issue of heterosexuality below.

As her body emerges, so too does the figure of Chris the writer. Until now, she has made independent films, a career that means the couple is always juggling money, but with her help, 'Sylvère's career was becoming lucrative enough to offset the losses incurred by hers' (16). On the same day that she learns her film will not screen at the Berlin festival, Sylvère is 'asked to edit a catalogue on Antonin Artuad for the MOMA – the gap between us widens' (53). It is that gap – the fact that Chris will always be Sylvère's plus-one, not on the guestlist under her own name – that prompts her to leave the marriage a month later. But to begin with, this is a collaborative project between husband and wife, and Sylvère sees its potential as a new form, thinks the 80 pages they've written in three days are potentially publishable in

Semiotext(e) (48)[31]. As the letters proliferate, Chris develops the 'vague belief that writing is the only possible escape to freedom' (62). The failure of her film, and this new project, leaves her exhilarated:

> For two years I was shackled to [the film] everyday…For two years I was sober and asexual every day, every ounce of psychic anima was channelled into the movie. And now it's over; amazingly, and with your help, I feel almost okay…And sometimes I feel ashamed of [these letters], how it must look to you or anyone outside. But just by doing it I'm giving myself the freedom of seeing from the inside out. I'm not driven anymore by other people's voices. From now on it's the world according to me. (64-65)

It is clear, in this passage, that Kraus is linking the emergence of her own point of view or voice to her re-embodiment, and that the novel could be described as a *Künstlerroman*. The 'inside' she refers to here is thus double, not only a newfound, speaking subject position but an embodied position at that, one that seems to eschew the traditional Cartesian split: 'The arteries of the hand & arm that write lead straight into the heart' (121). Chris recognises that there is no 'fixed self or persona' (122) and that writing charts the movement of the self that exists; she recognises that subjectivity is rooted in the body. Writing, traditionally seen as a product of the mind, is here also figured as a product of the body. In this regard, she is aligned with the French post-structuralist feminism, which figures the female body as a medium of communication.[32] Hélène Cixous argues in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' that writing the female self will bring liberation, for the body, too: 'By writing her self, woman will return to the body that which has been more than confiscated from her, which has

[31] It is worth noting here that while Semiotext(e) offers Kraus opportunities for self-actualisation as an artist, this is arguably attenuated by her relationship with its founder, her husband, and that her readership was initially limited by virtue of it being an academic publisher.

[32] She also draws directly on Deleuze's work on schizophrenia for her conception of subjectivity, equating the Deleuzian schizophrenic with woman, since 'the divided self is female subjectivity' (225).

been turned into the uncanny stranger on display…Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time' (880)[33]. Art is a product of both the mind and the body. This opens up the role of artist to Chris, who as a woman is traditionally seen as closer to her body than men. At the same time, it also, necessarily, connects her to the role of monster as defined by man and the male gaze, because woman, and her body, are so other as to be monstrous. For Cixous, this monstrosity is positive: she argues that Medusa is 'not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing' (885). But that positivity is much less certain in *I Love Dick*, as we will see.

ii. Woman as monstrous

The other, as different from the same, plays an important role in the constitution of the subject in the western logos. As Braidotti observes: '[T]he monstrous other is both liminal and structurally central to our perception of normal human subjectivity' ('Signs' 141). Margrit Shildrick draws on this observation in her study of the embodied monster, noting that the figure of the monster has haunted the western imaginary, but 'it is in its operation as a concept – the monstrous – that it shows itself to be a deeply disruptive force' (1). The monstrous is something we project onto others because it undermines our sense of our own boundaries. But it is never only exterior: it leaves a trace, 'the spectre of the other who haunts the selfsame' (15). There are many definitions of the monster[34], which is an other, often – but, following Ruby de Vos's analysis, not necessarily – marked by deviant embodiment and 'generally refer[s] to those marginalised groups associated with the corporeal side of the Cartesian divide: people of colour, disabled people, and women' (181). Braidotti notes that both monsters and the female body evoke a blend of fascination and horror. This logic of attraction and repulsion is, she argues, what psychoanalytic theory takes as 'the fundamental structure of the

[33] This can be usefully read against Freud's essay on the Medusa in which he connected the logic of attraction and repulsion to female genitalia as *nothing to see* leading to castration anxiety in the male gazer. See Freud. 'Medusa's Head'. https://www.freud2lacan.com/docs/Medusa's_Head.pdf.

[34] For an overview, see Mittman, Asa Simon, and Peter Dendle. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*. Ashgate, 2013.

mechanism of desire' (*Nomadic* 81). While at odds with the ontological desire Braidotti puts forward, this definition is useful nonetheless, because as we shall see, the logic of attraction and repulsion gives rise to abjection (of Chris's body, of the text).

Personal, universal

The concept of the monster is evoked by Kraus herself, who is explicitly concerned with woman's status as devalued other and about women's representations of the self. Writing about Hannah Wilke, Chris notes that Wilke's work threw 'the weirdness of male response to female sexuality wide open' (197). One critic wrote that Wilke's vagina was now as familiar as an old shoe, not something anyone would ever say about a male artist's penis, Chris observes. Wilke's art was intensely personal, and the parallels with *I Love Dick* are easy to draw. Chris notes how art critics saw Wilke's willingness to use her body in her work as narcissism and argued that her self-exposure was facile. Chris disagrees: 'As if the only possible reason for a woman to publicly reveal herself could be self-therapeutic. As if the point was not to reveal the circumstances of one's own objectification' (199)[35]. This leads to a conversation with an artworld friend who called Wilke the 'wrong kind' of monster because 'she started taking everything so personally…Her work was no longer art' (201). Chris considers how Claes Oldenburg, Wilke's former partner managed to erase huge portions of Wilke's life because he was more famous and respected than she was. She explains the difference between male and female monsters to her friend. 'Female monsters take things as personally as they really are,' she says:

> Monstrosity: the self as a machine. The Blob, mindlessly swallowing and engorging, rolling down the supermarket aisle absorbing pancake mix and jello and everyone in town. Unwise and unstoppable. The horror of The Blob is a horror of the

[35] This another reminder of how Kraus's conception of her writing differs from Doubrovsky's psychoanalytical view of autofiction.

> fearless. To become The Blob requires a certain force of will…I aim to be a female monster too. (202)

Ruby de Vos reads this monstrosity as conceptual, 'primarily cognitively threatening; it brings together elements that are generally compartmentalised' (184). Following Shildrick, she traces the link between the monstrous and the feminine that has run through historical accounts, and that understands the female monster as at once being recognisably female and either lacking or having added an element that is at odds with traditional conceptions of femininity (185). de Vos uses this duality to understand the monstrosity of the female artist, a category that remains unstable, the word artist requiring qualification.[36] In bringing together two separate categories, that of woman and artist, the female artist could therefore, de Vos argues, be said to be monstrous. This reading clearly aligns with Chris's reading of Wilke above: Wilke's use of the personal – contrasted with the traditionally male value of the universal – in her art makes her a monster; her body and her subject matter are distinctly female, but she is too public, lacking shame. The notion that art supersedes the personal is a philosophy that has served patriarchy well (230), Chris notes, and she rails against the double standard at play:

> Because most 'serious' fiction, still, involves the fullest possible expression of a single person's subjectivity, it's considered crass and amateurish not to 'fictionalise' the supporting cast of characters…When women try to pierce this false conceit by naming names because our 'I's' are changing as we meet other 'I's', we're called bitches, libellers, pornographers and amateurs. (55-56)

Indeed, the one and only time 'Dick' writes back, he tells Sylvère that he does not believe his 'right to privacy should be sacrificed for the sake of [Chris's] talent' (244). Chris's art involves engorging and absorbing, unwise and

[36] For an exploration of the issues raised by the implicit (male) gender of the word *artist*, see Nochlin, Linda. 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?'

unstoppable, even in the face of rejection by Dick. By laying bare the contradictions at play, she self-consciously courts the role of monster: 'If women have failed to make "universal" art because we're trapped within the "personal", why not universalize the "personal" and make it the subject of our art?' (211).

de Vos reads her inhabitation of the role of monstrous female artist as a 'path towards possibility' rather than a 'terrifying stigma' (194). Kraus's autofictional narrator of *Torpor*, her third novel, notes: 'In the months before she left [her husband], she'd started writing love letters to a man who didn't love her. In L.A. she continues writing to this man, and then she just continues writing' (280-281.) Although it is true that she continues writing and that inhabiting the category of monster has subversive potential, I want to suggest here that this sense of possibility pointed to by de Vos is complicated by both the body, in *I Love Dick*, and the autofictional form. I also want to highlight the universal/personal binary raised by Chris and suggest it is indicative of a dualistic mode of thinking that is not, ultimately, rejected or escaped in the novel.

Self-containment, seepage

As I have indicated above, monstrosity functions more widely in the novel than simply with regards to the female artist. Shildrick notes that in western discourses, 'where corporeality is scarcely considered a proper component of identity, then the potential of corporeal irruption into consciousness – an irruption that is a feature of all bodies – constitutes an understandable threat to self-containment' (4). One cannot help but think, here, of the painful elemental state described by Chris, whose inability to contain herself 'in the course of this three-day totally fictitious romance' (12) makes her sick. But as the novel progresses, she seems to embrace the threat to self-containment her body poses: 'I want to move outside the limits of myself…to exercise mobility' (65). She notes that female desire is supposed to take the form of passivity. But Chris will not play by the rules. 'Desire isn't lack,' she writes, 'it's surplus energy – a claustrophobia inside your skin–' (223). This is in direct opposition to the Lacanian formulation of desire and seems to align Kraus with

a more Deleuzian understanding: desire to speak, to know, as ontological, outward-bound, impersonal.[37] Chris's use of the word 'skin' gestures towards the body, if not directly to the flesh: skin is porous, a threshold. Desire is thus about wanting to break free of individuality and cross thresholds to make connections. Desire as surplus is also evocative of the designation of women as monstrous because they are 'driven…by an uncontrollable desire for sexual expression and maternity (Shildrick 39): women are both excess and lack.[38]

Braidotti notes that a woman's body is 'capable of defeating the notion of fixed bodily form, of visible, recognisable, clear and distinct shapes as that which marks the contour of the body. She is morphologically dubious' (*Nomadic* 80). This is because her body is marked, in western thought, by the absence of a phallus, a clearly visible object/organ, and because her body can undergo drastic changes, such as during pregnancy. In embracing the threat to self-containment contained in Chris's body, the novel begins to explore the threat that she now poses, to herself, to Dick, but also to the wider discourse. Like Shildrick and de Vos, I am interested in 'those places where the signifiers [of femininity and monstrosity] are doing similar work, in both supporting and contesting the structure of the western logos' (Shildrick 36). Monstrosity as figured by Chris – as The Blob, swallowing and engorging – is threatening. Her male friend's response to Wilke's work makes this clear. It is formless, it entraps. It lacks self-containment. Chris's reference to the film *The Blob* suggests the monster is viscous and secreting. In this way, it is almost identical to the view of the female body taken by the western logos. As such, Chris is not just a conceptual monster: her body, too, is threatening, monstrous.

Viscosity, mucous

Chris, in her desire, is sticky, viscous, undeniably female. In the middle of a page about her past trouble with first-person narration, in parenthesis, she wonders:

[37] See 'Desire' in The Deleuze Dictionary.
[38] It is worth noting that Chris mentions having had three abortions, and *Torpor* is about trying to adopt a Romanian orphan.

> Is there a place in this to talk about how wet I've been, constantly, since talking on the phone to you 8 days ago? Talking, writing, teaching, working out and dealing with this house, this part of me is melting & unfolding. (122)

This is an important moment in the novel, as her libidinal desire is placed directly alongside her ontological desire: wetness and first person. She at once asks if there is a space to talk about her wetness while claiming it, permission turned performative utterance. The use of the word '[u]nfolding' evokes Deleuze's concept of the fold, which Simon O'Sullivan notes in *The Deleuze Dictionary* is 'a critique of typical accounts of subjectivity that presume a simple interiority and exteriority (appearance and essence, or surface and depth)' (107)[39]. Here, in Chris's acknowledgement of her wetness, her desire finally no longer seems so painful to her. She begins to criticise 'academic shit about The Body as if it were a thing apart' (120).

While stickiness and viscosity are features of both the monstrous and the abject by virtue of being associated with the female, they also function in the work of Luce Irigaray, who advocated for positive representations of women, ones in which women could recognise themselves, as opposed to representations of women as women-for-men. In order for these representations to make a difference to women's place in society, a specifically female structure is required to underly them. For Irigaray, this takes the form of two images of the body: the "two lips"[40] and mucous:

> To seek to discover-rediscover a possible imaginary for women through the movement of two lips re-touching…does not mean a regressive recourse to anatomy or to a concept of "nature," nor a recall to genital order – women have more than one pair of two lips! Rather it means to open up the autological and tautological

[39] The fold can 'also be understood as a name for one's relation to oneself' (107), and in Deleuze's readings of Leibniz and Foucault, the fold is the name of the dominant relationship of oneself over one's 'self'.
[40] See Irigaray, Luce. *This sex which is not one*. Cornell UP, 1985.

> circle of systems of representation and their discourse so that women may speak (of) their sex [parler leur sexe].[41]

For Irigaray, wetness, or mucous, represents the most unthought in western culture, a threshold that is never theorised. It refers, amongst other things, to the possibility of woman as a desiring subject. This is because, as Whitford argues, it cannot be reduced to the maternal-feminine body, which is important because the male imaginary claims that body as its own: in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray writes that '[f]or men to have the possibility of thinking themselves or imagining themselves *causa sui*, they have to think that the container "belongs" to them' (86). The wetness is interior, and so cannot be reflected in Lacan's mirror[42], which Irigaray writes in *Speculum of the Other Woman* 'reflects the greater part of a women's sexual organs only as a hole' (89n). The wetness is also more easily touched than seen, and therefore not subsumed under the visual economy of subject/object. It is always partly open; it is no part-object, cannot be swallowed or spat out or detached from the body. Mucous, Whitford writes, 'corresponds both to women's sexuality and to women's speech' (*Symbolic* 103), which is certainly how it has been positioned in *I Love Dick*, related to both Chris's blooming desire and her desire to speak. Mucous also moves away from the dichotomy of castrated/not castrated that constitutes the male imaginary. As Whitford argues:

> Its provocation lies in its insistent referentiality, the attempt to re-place the female body in the symbolic order, its wager that the female body could be as adequate for symbolization as the male body and the phallic referent, and not only that, but that its symbolization could overcome the split on which all of western culture is based: celestial and terrestrial, transcendent and sensible, life and death, Eros and Thanatos. (106)

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[41] Irigaray, Luce. *Parler n'est jamais neutre*. Minuit, 1985, 282. As translated by Whitford, Margaret. 'Irigaray's Body Symbolic'. *Hypatia*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1991, 101.

[42] For an overview of Irigaray's philosophy in relation to Lacan, see, for example: McDermott, Patrice. 'Post-Lacanian French Feminist Theory'. *Women & Politics*, 7:3, 1987, 47-64, DOI: 10.1300/J014v07n03_05

In a book literally named after the phallic referent (Dick is cleaved from the real and forced into the symbolic as dick, then phallus), wetness is the woman's body's strongest claim to adequacy, but it is my view that the novel ultimately fails to fully overcome the split. For Irigaray, mucosity is a ground for joyfully encountering the other: mucous 'always leaves a trace behind…a wound seeking a place deeper than the skin, a quest for a way into or out of the self and the other, for an encounter with the other which is always in excess of situation and expectation' (*Ethics* 108). But this is not the case in *I Love Dick*. When Chris eventually has sex with Dick, she describes watching him touch her, how they both watch her nipples get hard. She writes: 'Later on, you run your index finger across the outside of my cunt, not into it. It's very wet, *a Thing Observed*' (145, emphasis mine). Here her wetness is no longer tied closely to her subjectivity; it is distanced – *it* is wet, not *I* am wet – by Chris, and then named by Dick. Although Dick's fingers do not part her two lips, the use of title case suggests that Dick's naming approaches claiming. He speaks of her sex. Chris wants to sink down on him but is scared to talk. Instead, in a move to subservience, she asks to be his lapdog. (Kraus has written extensively about her interest in BDSM and appreciation for the freedom its roles bring: 'Character is completely preordained and circumscribed…There isn't any room for innovation in these roles.'[43]) Dick acquiesces. She whimpers. He tells her to be quiet and they have sex until 'breathing feels like fucking' (145).

While some critics, notably Sykes (166), have read this description of sex as humorously hyperbolic, I would note that the scene contains not one mention of pleasure or enjoyment. Pleasure is key in Irigaray's thought: 'everything is exchanged, yet there are no transactions. Between us, there are no proprietors, no purchasers, no determinable objects, no prices. Our bodies are nourished by our mutual pleasure' ('Lips' 76). This is not a BDSM scene; instead, the sex they have, with Chris submitting and Dick shushing her, could be said to be a rather stereotypical representation of heterosexual sex in the phallic manner.[44] This is not some radical vision. Similarly, although in

[43] *Video Green*, 86-87.

[44] More charitably, it could be read as an imitation of the stereotypical representation of heterosexual sex, thereby offering a commentary – or perhaps a working through – rather than a straight reproduction. It is possible to read *I Love Dick* is strategically mimetic, in this scene and in its use of tropes, for instance: 'being in love with you,

Irigaray's work mucous resists recapture by the male imaginary, there is no doubt that Chris's emergence as a speaking subject threatens Dick (not least because he tells her to be quiet). In a bar four days later, he remarks upon her wetness again, destabilising the polite détente they'd established. 'My heart opened…Were you seducing me again or just alluding to things I'd written in my manifesto…which you'd finally ready that afternoon? I didn't quite know how to take this' (155). But before Chris can reply to his comment, Dick glances brusquely at his watch, gazes across the room at someone else. She knows then that he never wants to have sex with her again. He also fails to recognise her writing in this scene, and thus, arguably, her subjecthood. When Chris leaves their meeting, she is shaking 'so much [she] couldn't see the road in front of [her] or stay in the right lane' (124). She stays in a motel; a suicide attempt is alluded to: 'a bottle of scotch & two fresh percoset refills' (123). In the absence of recognition by Dick, she falters. Mucous is no longer a way out herself or into the other; instead, the self/other split is reinforced and she is found lacking, both by Dick and the phallocentric system, but also, it seems, by herself.

iii. 'There's terror here'

In *I Love Dick*, Kraus attributes her second novel, *Aliens & Anorexia* to Dick, quoting him – quoting herself – as following philosopher Simone Weil beyond the body. 'If I'm not touched it becomes impossible to eat' (120)[45], Chris writes,

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being ready to take that ride, made me feel 16, hunched up in a leather jacket in a corner with my friends. A timeless fucking image' (12). At times, Chris's use of tropes verges on performance: 'Tight jeans, red lips and nails this morning, feeling really femme and like time for this isn't on my side' (71-72). I am not convinced that the novel goes far enough, especially when it comes to sex, to subvert the images or instances of women-for-men – to be productively mimetic rather than just reproductively mimetic – and therefore properly function as a strategically mimetic act. That said, mimesis, as a feminist strategy, is closely tied to performance and theory – see, for instance, Irigaray's notion of the philosopher's wife, who is a silent mirror reflecting the philosopher's narcissism – both of which feature prominently in Kraus's work and a further exploration of her entire oeuvre alongside these feminist strategies may be productive. For more on Irigaray's fling with the philosophers, see Clack, Beverley. 'Introduction: A Fling with the Philosophers'.

[45] Since Semiotext(e) was responsible for bringing the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze to US audiences, and because, as I have noted above, Kraus calls the writing published by Native Agents, including her own, the practice of Deleuze and Guattari's

quoting her own writing in *Aliens & Anorexia* / 'quoting' Dick. 'Intersubjectivity occurs at the moment of orgasm: when things break down. If I'm not touched my skin feels the flip side of a magnet. It's only after sex sometimes that I can eat a little.' This is an interesting counterpoint to their actual sexual encounter, in which she watches him 'feel [her] tits' and they 'both watch [her] nipples as they get hard' (145): tactility is subsumed under the visual, the visible. The gaze fixes the other at a distance; it is objectifying and disciplinary (Shildrick 104). In other words, her body is made object in this scene. Orgasm is not described and no intersubjectivity occurs: after having sex again in the morning, they argue bitterly about their relationship, with Dick calling Chris 'evil and psychotic' (147).

Shildrick frames Irigarayan corporeality as:

> [P]ositive precisely insofar as it is mediated by touch, by mucus…it is as though the regulative negativity of the abject, the mechanism that forces separation between self and other, has been overcome…in place of the detachment and control associated with the disembodied gaze, Irigaray calls for a sensuous engagement both with the other and with the world. (114)

While Chris's speech was initially linked to her embodiment, in the sexual encounters with Dick, her wetness, at first so closely connected to the emergence of her ability to speak as 'I', becomes something claimed by Dick, and later used against her. Touch figures very little in her corporeality. It is true that she is not symbolically subdued by penetration, but neither is her body found to be adequate for symbolisation; instead, it is objectified. The

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radical theories of subjectivity, it is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on how anorexia functions in Deleuze's work. Masochism and anorexia, both of which feature in Kraus's/Chris's life, are micro-political practices of ascetism. Masochism, as a micro-politics, operates outside the specular, between the 'I' and the 'You', whereas anorexia is within the visual domain and operates between the 'I' and small social groups. Anorexia is the process of experimenting with the form of the body and the politics of disturbing the socially imposed order of everyday life. For more on anorexia and new experimental femininities in Deleuze, see Arsic, Branka. 'The Experimental Ordinary: Deleuze on Eating and Anorexic Elegance'. *Deleuze Studies*, vol. 2, July 2008, 34–59.

boundaries between self and other remain intact. Indeed, towards the end of the novel, she casts doubt on the desirability of this intersubjectivity, worrying about empathy becoming dissolution: 'No one...can live in this heightened state of reflective receptivity forever. Because this empathy's involuntary, there's terror here. Loss of control, a seepage. Becoming someone else or worse: becoming nothing but the vibratory field between two people' (216).

To fear seepage is to fear the female body. Chris has both represented herself in this way – as uncontrolled, as viscous, as secreting, as engulfing – and lives this way. Towards the end of the novel, she thanks Dick as follows:

> I wanted you to know how much good you've done me…'I've finally moved outside my head – I don't think I'll go back,' I said. Three days before I'd written in my notebook: 'Since knowing D. my eyes have moved into my ribcage. My body's turned to liquid glass and all the pieces fit...' (151)

Her gaze is embodied, but the domination of the visual, which insists on a ready separation between subject and object, remains. The novel thus cannot live up to the positivity of Irigaray's corporeality. Moreover, some critics have described *I Love Dick* as a study in female abjection[46], which literally means the state of being cast off. Writing in the foreword to the 2006 reissue of the novel, Myles in particular has argued that in the case of Chris, 'abjection…is the road out from failure.…She's turned female abjection inside out and aimed it at a man' (15). It is useful for our purposes here to focus briefly on the term *abjection*, especially Kristeva's interpretation of it, as it provides another way into the link between subjectivity and the body sketched out in the novel. While Chris certainly is cast off by Dick, for Kristeva, writing in *Powers of Horror*, abjection is about those parts of us that we ourselves refuse, aspects of being embodied that 'we do not welcome as a part of the constitution of ourselves as subjects' (Covino 4). The abject does not fit into either category of the subject or object and instead is that which is 'radically excluded…the place where meaning collapses' (Kristeva 2). The abject figure thus 'disturbs identity,

[46] See, for instance, Eileen Myles, de Vos and Watkins Fisher.

system, order…does not respect borders, positions, rules. [And resides in] the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (4). Elizabeth Grosz explains that abjection 'is a sickness at one's own body beyond that "clean and proper" thing, the body of the subject. Abjection is the result of recognising that the body is more than, in excess of, the "clean and proper"' (*Subversions* 78). The abject body leaks fluids and waste, making plain that there are no clear boundaries between what we are and what we reject: 'I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within in the same motion through which I establish myself' (Kristeva 3). As such, a subject must disavow the abject, 'most notably sticky, viscous, amorphous things associated primarily with the female' (Shildrick 85). The monstrous, like the feminine, comes to embody those things which the normatively embodied subject must try, and fail, to abject.

Chris's wetness is not something she tries to cast off. But her body does remain abject, repeatedly violating its own boundaries and disrupting the hope for self-control and social acceptance. And the threat to self-containment is now figured as a negative. She breaks out in three separate rashes after seeing Dick, one of which makes her eyes swell closed (232). A few days after they have sex, she reports having a yeast infection and cystitis (233). After a phone call in which Dick is distant, she throws up twice before getting on the plane to leave LA (257). She vomits when she hears that Dick described that first dinner as 'some strange scene' (107). She describes shitting in the yard when the pipes are frozen (137). On the way to have sex with Dick, she finds she needs to urinate:

> [P]issing suddenly became so problematic. I didn't want to have to do it the moment I walked into your house, how gauche, a telltale sign of female nervousness.…I…slid my jeans down past my knees and pissed into the empty cup. The cup was full before my bladder emptied but what the hell, I'd hold the rest. With shaking hands I tipped the brimming cup of urine in the grass.
>
> That left the evidence. Several large drops still clung to the styrofoam, what if it smelled? I was afraid to litter. Dear Dick, sometimes there just isn't a right answer. I scrunched the cup up,

> tossed it under the back seat and wiped my hands. By this time I was feeling very drawn. (135)

The abject is between the subject and the object; the abject body, in its leakage of wastes and fluids, violates the desire for a clean and proper body and a boundaried self. Chris tries to throw her urine away from herself, is worried about the trace it will leave: the abject is never fully externalised. The abject body remains cast off until it 'reenters the cultural logic that articulates health and beauty' (Covino 23). This is a logic that Chris will never be able to enter: she has Crohn's disease and is an 'Ugly Girl' (181):

> "Fassbinder was such an ugly man," I said. "That's the real subject of his films: an ugly man who was wanting, looking to be loved."
>
> The subtext rested on the table in between us like the sushi. Because of course I was ugly too. And the way you took this in, understanding it without any explication, made me realize how everything that's passed between us all came back to sex and ugliness and identity. (171)

Here, again, Chris links the body, in its abject state, to identity. In this way, Chris is making clear how the experience of her body as not self-contained is at once a threat to, and constitutive of, her female subjectivity. According to Braidotti, Kristeva's abject stresses 'the structural function played by the negative, the incomprehensible, the unthinkable, the other of understandable knowledge' ('Affirmation' 11) in psychoanalysis and Lacanian/Hegelian thought. For abjection to be key to Chris's identity makes it clear how much negativity still plays a role in this conception of the subject. Her engagement with the world and the other is not sensuous, it is full of shame and refusal of parts of herself. Moreover, the emphasis on identity, which is produced by the opposition between same and other, indicates that she is still caught in the dualisms of same/other, man/woman and phallus/lack (and in Chris's case, pretty/ugly). She fears herself and her body as man does woman. She remains the other of the Same.

iv. ‘Who gets to speak’

I Love Dick takes a reclamation of a marginalised subjectivity as a battle cry:

> Writing to you seems like some holy cause, cause there's not enough female irrepressibility written down. I've fused my silence and repression with the entire female gender's silence and repression. The sheer fact of women talking, being…*public* is the most revolutionary thing in the world. (194).

The novel is openly concerned with the status of woman as devalued other, with a particular focus on theory and art. The question of the positionality of speech – in this case, as determined by sexual difference – is a key issue for Kraus. ‘Who gets to speak, and why?’ she writes. ‘That is the only question’ (175). This is a question she returns to in her consideration of female and ‘kike’ art, and in her consideration of her own:

> The most important entitlement…remains the right to speak from a position…For years I tried to write but the compromises of my life made it impossible to inhabit a position. And “who” “am” “I”? Embracing you & failure’s changed all that ‘cause now I know I’m no one. And there’s a lot to say… (204-205)[47]

Sylvère notes that she writes without any destination or authority (190), unlike himself and Dick, who only write when asked to or paid. That said, the structure of address of her writing is important. Dick becomes less necessary as the novel progresses: ‘“Dear Dick,” she wrote, “I guess in a sense I’ve killed you. You’ve become Dear Diary…”’ (74). However, it is ‘impossible to write alone’ (81). The novel, American first-person fiction, is her attempt ‘to understand the

[47] We should note here that in speaking for women and in making generalisations about women, Kraus is not accounting for her position as a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman. The novel’s version of Sylvère, however, does seem to be aware when he asks her ‘why let us to white guys decide the course?’ (41)

large…through the small' (138), what she calls a case study, because 'the only material we have to work with in America is our own lives' (139). Sniader Lanser points out that the history of the epistolary novel is grounded in evading 'the distinction between public and private discourse that has…deterred women not from writing as such but from writing to and for men' (45). Epistolary novels of the 18th and 19th centuries were usually comprised of letters between women, and where the framing device of an editor was used, the editor was usually male (46n). This is a useful context for *I Love Dick*, which uses the rhetorical frame of the letter to embrace many topics and discursive modes, but is explicitly addressed to a man and which does not maintain the illusion of private discourse: Chris wants to be public. The novel also uses many of the structures that Lanser identifies as constituents of authority: 'generalisations in the narrator's voice, explicit allusions by the narrator to literature or history, direct addresses to a public narratee and explicit references to the narrating subject or the narrative act' (48). By using the epistolary form in her project of self-authorisation as an author, Kraus thus creates not only, as Lanser suggests, a fiction of *authority*, she also exposes the *fiction* of authority as the western novel has produced it (8). Of course, this is complicated by the fact that it was Sylvère that suggested Chris write her first letter. The project is arguably not self-authorised, even if it lives on beyond Sylvère's involvement.

There is also the question of the reply from Dick. We have no way to know whether Dick ever reads the letters – in fact, when he does finally reply, he spells her name, which she uses to sign each letter, incorrectly, calling the attention 'disturbing', 'unwarranted' and 'uninvited' (259-260): 'I can only say that being taken as the object of such obsessive attention on the basis of two genial but not particularly intimate or remarkable meetings spread out over a period of years was, indeed still is, utterly incomprehensible to me.' The tone of his reply, which seems to deny that they ever had sex (or suggest that if they did, it was not intimate), underscores the power of the letters and the challenge it poses to dominant discourse. To put it another way, early in the novel, Sylvère longs 'for an elegant conclusion to this adventure; didn't the form dictate that Chris end up in Dick's arms? And it would end there. Dick and Chris wouldn't need to ever do this again. Sylvère would never have to know' (51). But it does not end there. Kraus's diarising of the letters means they come

to exceed their original form. Chris has figured the artist as engulfing, as swallowing, but the work itself could arguably be said to leak: it is uncontrollable (the letters do not stop when Dick asks them to), entrapping, lacking self-containment. The paratactical form of the letters, both in their internal construction (for instance, the letter *Route 126* which intercuts meeting Dick with writing about Jennifer Harbury and Guatemala City) and in their non-chronological presentation, gives the author-character more omniscience than strict internal focalisation would allow. As Kraus notes in *Torpor*, parataxis:

> flashing back and sideways, holding back the outcome of events…functions to fracture old familiar and heroic tales into contradictory, multiple perspectives. It becomes impossible to move the story forward without returning to the past, and so the past both predicates the future and withholds it. (70)

In her use of tape recordings and Sylvère's diary entries and Dick's letter (neither of which we can say for certain were not written by Kraus herself), Kraus's practice is one of what Genette calls paralepsis, telling more than the narrator is supposed to tell (*Narrative* 195). There is an excess, here – women are both excess and lack, because women are always becoming-metaphor – and the form enacts it, as monstrous as the woman at its centre, helping, as Braidotti puts it, to illuminate the paradoxical and dissymmetrical power relations within western theories of subjectivity' ('Teratologies' 164).

Anna Watkins Fisher understands Kraus as modelling 'feminist tactics that feed on and destabilize patriarchal forms' (223). Fisher reads Kraus as successfully deconstructing Dick and rebelling against post-structuralist theory (her husband's chosen field):

> Kraus's feminine subterfuge turns Dick's own logic against him, as she insists on the excess produced by the system's supplementary parts – bad taste, affect, contamination – that by dominance's own logic cannot be taken into the court record. (227)

I agree that Chris's love for Dick seems, at least in part, to be a performance for Sylvère, but I do not think the text supports Fisher's conclusion that the form is a 'way out of the same old gender binary' (233). Rather, as a description of living within those binaries, the novel exposes the limiting rituals of heterosexual romance. The novel remains stuck within the male imaginary of Freud and Lacan, the logic of attraction and repulsion, of dualisms.

Sylvère tries to codify Chris's desire for Dick, 'labeling it through other people's eyes – Adultery in the Academe…Faculty Wife Throws Herself at Husband's Colleague.' But Kraus objects: 'This presumes that there's something inherently grotesque, unspeakable, about femaleness, desire' (122). It is clear that to the men in her life, there is: Sylvère blames the 'detumescence of [his] once glorious erections' on her desire not being 'heartfelt' enough (95). Dick wishes the letters would stop; he holds her 'desire up to the light as if it were a strange and mutant thing' (63). Both men view her desire, both libidinal and ontological – and her femininity – as incomprehensible at best, grotesque at worst. Chris is in a (love) triangle with two wise older men – her European intellectual fathers – who do not understand or want her. But Chris, who does not figure her desire as lack – instead it is excess, a need to move beyond herself – is not silenced. Her desire is political; she continues to write, she claims the 'I'. Perhaps this is a rare Kunstlerroman in which the woman's love relationships do not negate or stop her art, although they do, of course, affect that art's very transmission, reception and position in the world.[48]

Fisher argues that Chris's acknowledgement and performance of her status as devalued other through the epistolary form, traditionally seen as a benign feminine literary form used for courtship and to indicate a relationship between two senders, allows 'reading and writing to become the conditions of possibility for turning "the law of the father" against itself, letter by letter' (224). The 'law of the father' is a term that has its roots in Freud's Oedipal complex but has latterly come to be more associated with Lacan's work on how children enter the patriarchal culture. In Lacanian thought, it serves as a principle of

[48] See Huf, Linda *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Writer as Heroine in American Literature* (1986) for an exploration of the female Kunstlerroman.

differentiation and separation (from the mother's body, characterising the feminine as an object of abjection), is the law of language and is necessary for the existence of desire. There is no doubt that this psychoanalytic view 'over-emphasises the figure of the father and the power of the Phallus in the constitution of human desire' (*Metamorphoses* 39). That said, this novel is named for the phallus. It was catalysed by an encounter with a man. It was Lotringer himself who published the novel, and Dick's real name appears in almost every piece written about the book. In other words, Chris's enunciating 'I' is contingent upon that of the dominant subject position. That is part of the point she is making. The novel would not feature so many references to marriage plots otherwise, nor would it end on Dick's reply. The form Chris chooses ensures her abjection.

When Dick writes back to Chris at the end of the novel, she finds he has simply photocopied his letter to Sylvère. The authority of the European intellectual father is not meaningfully challenged. Instead, the difficulty of escaping him and the law of the father is dramatised. Woman remains trapped in the phallocentric imaginary as Other of the Same. As a self-representation, the novel shows us the circumstances of Chris's objectification, an act for which it may very well be considered radical, but which no longer seems enough in the modern context and when read alongside contemporary iterations of the theory referred to in the book. We bear witness to her bodily abjection in the letters, and to her being cast off by Dick. '[D]oesn't witnessing contain complicity?' (155) Chris asks hopefully. For all its talk of monsters, difference is not, ultimately, figured as positive, and the novel remains in the negative, remains structured by the same dualisms that confound Chris. She does not rebel against post-structuralism, or the law of the father. Fisher suggests that Chris instead deconstructs it. Deconstruction is an approach originated by Jacques Derrida. Braidotti notes that Derrida's ethical tradition 'is centred on the relationship between the subject and Otherness in the mode of indebtedness, vulnerability, and mourning' ('Affirmation' 3). This produces a melancholy and split subject. On the contrary, Braidotti's subject, like Deleuze's and Irigaray's, is affirmative rather than in mourning or the negative: 'an open-ended web-like subject' (3) whose desire is driven by transformation

of negative passions into positive ones.[49] If *I Love Dick* is, as Emily Gould wrote, the most important book about men and women written in the past century, it is because it shows us what we are. Where it falls short is in showing us what we want to become.

[49] We can think of this in two ways: in life and in literature. As to the former, for Braidotti, this entails defending the 'complexity and multiple ways of being human' to compose a 'we' that is 'grounded, accountable and active', that has 'sustainable horizons of hope through resistance' ('Agonize'). It entails rejecting consumerist individualism and nihilism and xenophobia, and listening to the practices of feminists, anti-racists and trans-national justice movements. 'The answer is in the doing, in the praxis of composing alliances, transversal connections and in engaging in difficult conversations on what troubles us. "We" need to re-radicalize ourselves'. An example of this would be the Xenofeminist Manifesto (2018), which attempts to articulate a feminism fit for the 21st century. It is an upbeat text, as Braidotti observes, which 'embrace[s] contemporary sciences and new writing technology, telling us right to our faces what needs to be done' ('Joint' 178). Braidotti also cites Maria Alyokina of Pussy Riot as 'an example of what happens when we act in the world and for the world, using the text as a transformer or vector of intensity that conveys your relationship to the outside world, not the inside of the linguistic sign' (178). Transforming negative into positive can also be done in literature. For Deleuze, this can be done through the concept of 'minor literature', developed in his 1975 book on Kafka, written with Guattari. There are three characteristics of minor literature. 1. It 'doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language…in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization' (16). 2. Everything in minor literatures is political: each individual intrigue is connected immediately to politics, so that the individual concern 'becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it' (17). 3. Everything in a minor literature takes on a collective value; it 'produces an active solidarity in spite of scepticism' (17). 'Minor' designates 'the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature…And to do that, finding his own point of underdevelopment, his own patois, his own third world, his own desert' (18). For an example of how Braidotti understands the transformation in literature, see page 106.

‘The sum of human parts’ | the female subject in Rachel Cusk’s autofiction

Rachel Cusk is the author of seven novels, three works of autobiography, a book of essays and an autofictional trilogy, comprising *Outline*, *Transit* and *Kudos*. Prior to *Outline*, which was published in 2014, Cusk’s memoirs about motherhood – 2001’s *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother* – and divorce – 2012’s *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* – had ‘people reaching for their knives’ (Kellaway): she was accused of ‘child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed…of being too intellectual’ (‘Honest’). Following *Aftermath*, Cusk could not write or read for almost three years; she felt she was ‘heading into total silence’ (Kellaway). Fiction, she said in the interview, had become ‘fake and embarrassing. Once you have suffered sufficiently, the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together seems utterly ridiculous.’ Yet, she observed, ‘[her] mode of autobiography had come to an end’.

The Outline trilogy, with its strange combination of autofictional elements and annihilated perspective, was her way out of the silence. Because it is autofiction, it is governed by what Cusk calls the ‘feminist principle of autobiography’, which understands a woman writing about her own life as inherently radical. The trilogy’s narrator closely resembles Cusk herself: middle-aged, divorced, a mother of two, a writer. These details emerge slowly over the course of the novels. *Outline* is concerned with intimacy and separation, the idea of marriage as ‘a system of belief, a story’ (12). In *Transit*, the narrator undertakes the renovation of a London flat, and feels change ‘moving far beneath the surface of things, like the plates of the earth blindly moving in their black traces’ (260). *Kudos*, the final volume, finds her at two writing events in unnamed European counties in a post-Brexit-referendum world, remarried and ‘trying to get the better of…laws…by living within them’ (225).

Each novel consists of a sequence of monologues – about marriage, truth, writing – delivered by the people the narrator meets: Cusk’s speakers are ‘often provoked into feats of self-revelation by means of a simple question’

(144), a question which a journalist notes, in *Kudos*, enables these characters to write her novels for her, so to speak. The narrator is named but once in each novel and is often silent, always near invisible. In this way, Cusk eschews realism, character and plot, opting instead for highly constructed non-mimetic monologues that expose the illusions of both fiction and life. This approach has been hailed as 'the most genuine way to write a novel today' (Franklin).

The narrator listens while keeping her story largely untold, a sort of 'anti-description' or 'reverse kind of exposition'. Anne, a woman she meets in Athens in *Outline*, describes this anti-description in a passage that gives the first novel its title: '[S]he began to see herself as a shape, an outline, with all the detail filled in around it while the shape itself remained blank. Yet this shape, even while its content remained unknown, gave her…a sense of who she now was' (239-240). The form of the novels seamlessly unites with this idea. The novels thus put forward a notion of the subject that at first glance seems more aligned with Braidotti's nomadism than Kraus's – the subject as collectively produced rather than an in-depth interiority ('Intensive' 46). The novels' form is also linked to desire, or the lack thereof: in *Outline*, rejecting the idea of entering into another relationship, the narrator, in a rare and fleeting moment of forthrightness, says she 'has come to believe more and more in the virtues of passivity, and of living a life as unmarked by self-will as possible…[She] had decided to want nothing at all' (170). The annihilated perspective of the novels, particularly *Outline*, aligns with this figuration of the narrator as a non-desiring subject. It is also connected to the absent body in these novels, because although Cusk is interested in the construction of subjectivity, her take on it separates the subject from the body almost completely. Like in *I Love Dick*, form, desire and the body are linked, and Cusk, like Kraus, creates her own theory of the subject in these novels. However, here the subject is feminine but not embodied (ie not female) and is constituted neither through will nor desire but through interaction with others. In an interview with the New Yorker upon publication of *Kudos*, Cusk explained it as follows: 'The idea that…anyone…could find a different way of living, by a different way of inquiring and listening—that's an idea that I have, of not necessarily what my book could do, but what any book could do' (Schwartz).

In this chapter, I will examine how the form the novels take is linked to ontological desire by attending to the novels' structure, diegetic practices and language. It is my contention that form is both generative and determinative in these novels, in that they enact the erasure of women that they describe: these novels are full of women railing against being invisible and yet, they have no stylistic autonomy, because everyone sounds like the narrator. Does that amount to being seen? Furthermore, I show that the form cleaves the subject from the body and argue that filtering the trilogy through a disembodied 'I' assumes a body with so much integrity (as opposed to leakiness) as to be able to be forgotten. I begin with a consideration of the subject put forward by these novels, with reference to Braidotti and Virginia Woolf, to examine how this subjectivity might be understood as more nomadic than that found in the Kraus. I go on to examine how erased desire is enacted across the novels, with reference to narratological devices, and address Cusk's stated aim of objectivity and universality. I explore the narrating 'I', and test it against Cusk's stated aim of communal storytelling, finding that the communal 'I' is ultimately made unfeasible by the narrator's body and associated power struggles at the level of language. Through a close reading of the final scene in the trilogy, I go on to examine how the body is an absent presence in the novel, arguing that it cannot be transcended, and ultimately, that the theory of subjectivity posited by the novels both does not hold and leaves Cusk unable to transform the negative.

i. 'A temporary banishing of the self'

'More intimate and less divided'

In each dense, economical vignette, a story is told to the narrator, one that resonates with the central preoccupations of the novels. The narrator, we come to find out late in the first novel, is called Faye. The word, suggesting both faith and frivolity, is a shock after so long spent with the anonymous 'I'. She is first named by an employee of a mortgage company, phoning to tell her that her application to increase her loan has been rejected. Faye thanks her for calling and walks towards the entrance to the building she has been

teaching in. ‘I stood there in the glare while the cars and people passed, as though I was expecting something to happen or for some alternative to present itself’ (211-212). In *Transit*, after dinner, her date puts his hand on her arm. ‘A flooding feeling of relief passed violently through me, as if I was the passenger in a car that had finally swerved away from a sharp drop. Faye, he said’ (206).[50] Both of these instances use what Genette in *Narrative Discourse* calls modalising locutions – *as though, as if, appears, such as* – which usually act to ‘allow the narrator to say hypothetically what he could not assert without stepping outside internal focalisation’ (203). Here, however, they are used by the narrator to describe herself, her own internal landscape, thereby highlighting the limits of what she can know or recognise in herself. The novels also make frequent use of paralipsis, the omission of some important action or thought of the author-character which the narrative chooses to hide from the reader (195). Faye’s speech is always reported, even when, as in the example above, direct speech would fulfil the same dialogic function, effectively distancing the reader from the narrator.[51]

The people of the novel are without stylistic autonomy or naturalism; instead, each story remains stylistically undifferentiated in the non-mimetic soliloquys that make up the novels:

> Whatever it was, he and his wife had built things that had flourished, had together expanded the sum of what they were and what they had; life had responded willingly to them, had treated them abundantly, and this – he now saw – was what had given him the confidence to break it all, break it with what now seemed to him to be an extraordinary casualness, because he thought there would be more.
>
> More what? I asked.

[50] It is worth noting, here, the explicit focus, in these novels, on heterosexuality. More on this below.

[51] See Genette on distance of reported speech: ‘this form never gives the reader any guarantee – or above all any feeling – of literal fidelity to the words "really" uttered: the narrator's presence is still too perceptible in the very syntax of the sentence for the speech to impose itself with the documentary autonomy of a quotation’ (171).

> 'More – life,' he said, opening his hands in gesture of receipt. 'And more affection,' he added, after a pause. 'I wanted more affection.' (*Outline* 16)

Interlocutors' speech ranges from first-person direct speech to tagged and free indirect discourse. Although the narrative is what Genette would call autodiegetic – the 'I' who tells the story is the story's protagonist (*Narrative* 227-247) – no special access to the narrator's interiority is afforded to the reader. Instead we have only surfaces, the narrator reflected in others. Divorce has traumatised her[52], just as an attack has traumatised Anne; as a result, they both lack 'what might be called a vocabulary, a native language of the self' (*Outline* 238). Faye thus constructs her narrative through other people's stories, experimenting with the 'notion of the unitary self being broken down, of consciousness not as an imprisonment in one's own perceptions but rather as something more intimate and less divided, a universality that could come from shared experience at the highest level' (*Transit* 192-3). The narrative comprises long paragraphs in which discourse moves from one speaker to another: a typography of closeness, perhaps even interchangeability. Writing about Woolf's 'intensive genre of becoming', Braidotti argues against the conception of the thinking subject as an in-depth interiority or as the enactment of 'transcendental models of reflexive consciousness' ('Intensive' 46). Instead, it is a 'collective assemblage, a relay-point of complex relations' (46). Cusk's subject shifts as she moves through different groups of people. In this way, she offers a more emergent vision of the subject than Kraus. Becoming, Braidotti writes, is about 'emptying out the self, opening it up to possible encounters with the "outside"' (46). In other words, others are part of your own becoming. This model of subjectivity is arguably present in Cusk's trilogy, the shared experience of divorce, womanhood and motherhood driving the plot, such as it is. And this understanding posits difference as positive; the possibility of moving away from the dualisms of same/other etc arises. Free indirect speech, which the novels make extensive use of, is central to the 'nomadic vision of the subject as a heterogenous assemblage' (48), Braidotti

[52] For more on autofiction and trauma, see Part II of *Autofiction in English* (2018).

writes. Intersubjective space opens up between speakers, or in the case of Woolf and Sackville-West, senders of letters.[53]

Woolf's influence looms large in Cusk's novels, both at the level of form and preoccupation with the relationship between women and art. The influence of Woolf's thinking in *A Room of One's Own* is apparent in a discussion with a female TV interviewer that takes place in *Kudos*. The interviewer describes works by the artist Louise Bourgeois in which she is portrayed as a spider in what appears to be children's drawings: 'It is hard to think, she said, of a better example of female invisibility than these drawings, in which the artist herself has disappeared and exists only as the benign monster of her child's perception' (190). The interviewer notes that for a woman to have territory, she must 'live as Bourgeois's spider, unless she is prepared to camp on male territory and abide by its terms '(197), in other words, ignoring her femininity and avoiding topics that male intellectuals find distasteful. In *Coventry*, Cusk argues that feminism tasked woman with assimilating with man: 'superficially this situation resembles equality, except that it occurs within the domination of "masculine values"' (176). Rather than renouncing one's femininity, she suggests, following de Beauvoir and Woolf[54], that 'equality can only be arrived at by the route of difference' (166). In this way, her work can be read alongside Braidotti's, with its foundation in sexual difference.

Another way in which one can trace Woolf's influence is in the trilogy's view of subjectivity. Faye sees subjectivity as fatal, as not allowing one to see

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[53] The exchange between Woolf and Sackville-West is an obvious contrast with *I Love Dick*, where Chris writes and writes and only ever receives one reply, which is not even addressed to her. As such, as we have seen, there is no intersubjective space between her and Dick. The letters do not create a communal space, but one that coincides fully with Chris.

[54] Cusk notes in *Coventry* that both thinkers based their ideas about women's writing on the concept of property (164). The essay concludes with a provocation that 'the room itself may be the embodiment of ['masculine values'], a conception of "property" that is at base unrelated to female nature' (171), noting that both Austen and Brontë wrote in shared domestic spaces. Although this essay was written in 2009, I find it an interesting counterpoint to the trilogy, specifically *Transit*, in which Faye buys a flat and many of the conversations are about houses and construction. Although the flat will be a domestic space she shares with her sons, they are sent to live with their father during renovation. Moreover, Faye's status as a mother is referred to but rarely concretised in these novels. Similarly, we never 'see' Faye write; as in the case of the women in Chekov's *Three Sisters*, neither the force of creativity, nor its effects, are factored into this representation of a woman's life.

things as they really are (*Outline* 75). Late in that novel, one of her students says that [she] would like to see the world more innocently again, more impersonally, but [she has] no idea how to achieve this, other than by going somewhere completely unknown, where [she has] no identity and no associations (157). This is echoed in the narrator's account of being trapped for three weeks in Athens by volcanic ash: she didn't call on her friends during that time because the 'feeling of invisibility was too powerful' (248) and instead got to know the Agora, headless statues of goddesses, mute and anonymous women. Indeed, form and content – what is described as having happened – are closely tied: the narrator is often mute, functionally anonymous, completely invisible. As such, Woolf's 'philosophy of anonymity' (*Writer's* 206) also seems relevant. Woolf repeatedly lectures herself to 'practise anonymity' in order to 'forget one's own sharp absurd little personality' (*Writer's* 119). Anonymity enabled her to 'go on adventuring, changing, opening my mind and my eyes, refusing to be stamped and stereotyped. The thing is to free one's self: to let it find its dimensions, not be impeded' (*Writer's* 206). The letter 'I' signified unmitigated masculinity, she wrote; that way lay war and fascism. As Marjorie Worthington summarises, 'Woolf calls upon impersonality, not to make an implicit case for a masculine literary tradition but to make an *explicit* case for the development of a feminine one' (34). This is an interesting counterpoint to Cusk, who uses impersonality to strip the female from her work.

In *Outline*, the narrator finds the complete symphonic works of every major composer in the Athens apartment in which she's staying, reflecting on 'a sort of objectivity that arose when the focus became the sum of human parts and the individual was blotted out. It was, perhaps, a form of discipline, almost of asceticism, a temporary banishing of the self and its utterances' (54)[55]. In their digressive, rhythmic narrative, the trilogy's novels enact this asceticism. They echo the symphonic – not singular – notion of identity expressed by Woolf's *The Waves* and similarly reject traditional conceptions of plot, character and action. However, there are important differences between

[55] In traditional music, order is created by repetition, as it is in this trilogy. For a Deleuzian view on a different kind of music or sound, see 'Met(r)amorphoses' in *Metamorphoses*.

Woolf's work and the trilogy.[56] The six speakers in *The Waves* have their own characteristic images and expressions[57], yet everything is coloured by the invisible narrating consciousness and its nuances. This consciousness appears explicitly only insofar as the word 'said' is used, implying that someone is reporting the characters' speeches, and in the interludes, which are separate from the characters' minds. The novel did not start out this way: the first draft features a mix of omniscient and first-person narration. JW Graham charts Woolf's three-and-a-half-year-long struggle to establish a narrator's point of view in *The Waves*, noting that '[o]ne effect of this intrusive author-narrator is an extreme detachment from the speakers, whom the reader is led to examine rather as if they were material for a case book' (198). It is my contention that the effect Graham describes is true of Cusk's trilogy. While the author-narrator is not necessarily intrusive, she casts a judgemental eye over her characters. Moreover, the trilogy's generic designation as autofiction makes the author-narrator central to our reading of the novels. Graham observes that Woolf, in her initial drafts of *The Waves*, was 'bothered by the usual problem of a first-person narrator – that of making her a person vivid enough to be present in the book, yet neutral enough to avoid becoming its centre of interest' (197). In those terms, Faye is both underwritten by Cusk's real-life counterpart and, arguably, under-written, thereby avoiding the first requirement, that of being vivid enough. Conversely, the stylistic choices Cusk makes regarding passivity and silence, and the novel's autofictional designation, ensure that the narrator does indeed become the novel's centre of interest.

Finally, a note on style. Braidotti refers to Woolf's 'floating attention or a fluid sensibility that is porous to the outside' (46). In order to perceive assemblages with precision, Woolf, Braidotti writes, is at once cartographer

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[56] In 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', while speculating on what future fiction might be like, Woolf writes that '[i]t will give, as poetry does, the outline rather than the detail. It will make little use of the marvelous fact-recording power, which is one of the attributes of fiction' (18). The resonances with Cusk's fiction are clear. However, in the same paragraph, Woolf goes on to say that 'it will express the feeling and ideas of the characters closely and vividly', which is a divergence from Cusk's trilogy.

[57] See, for example, Aspeslagh, Ellen. 'Language as Ideology: Transitivity and Ergatvitiy in Female Voices of Virginia Woolf's The Waves'. *PALA: The Poetics and Lingustics Association*, Occasional Papers no. 10, 1999.

and sensualist. Sensorial perception is heightened in Woolf's writings, especially those about Sackville-West. While Woolf's influence is clear, this is a marked difference from Cusk's writing, which is cool and cerebral. For Woolf, it is 'life so full & flush; and all the doors opening; and this is I believe the moth shaking its wings in me' (*Diary* 287). In encountering Vita, Woolf's *potentia* is activated. For Cusk, it is 'change far beneath me, moving deep beneath the surface of things, like the plates of the earth blindly moving in their black traces' (*Transit* 260). Change is elsewhere, blind, almost mechanical. What kind of power is this?[58]

An unmarked life

Cusk's formal experimentation opens up new figurations of the subject, one that is communally produced and nomadic. However, the reader is only very rarely given a flavour of Faye's interlocutor's own words, and even when they are allowed to speak for themselves, the interlocutors tend, for the most part, to sound very similar: a 15-year-old student at a writing class in Greece speaks in the same formal, multi-clause sentences that Faye's cousin Lawrence does. The effect is of a single authorial voice that the reader is nevertheless distanced from, making clear Cusk's suspicion of point of view. The absence at the centre of the trilogy – that of desire and the female body – also complicates claims that Cusk's vision of the subject is positive.

The form, and Faye's foundational decision in favour of passivity, situate the reader firmly in her lack of desire, which we should remember is also makes Faye depoliticised and cut off from her *potentia*. This is exemplified by a scene from *Outline* that takes place on a boat, out to sea, where Faye has gone with the man who sat next to her on the plane on the way to Greece. Her neighbour declares that he is attracted to her, like 'an actor about to deliver a too-famous line' (176), and then comes towards her:

> He…tried to embrace me from the side, putting one arm around my shoulders while attempting to bring his face into contact with

[58] For Cusk on Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, see 'Shakespeare's Sisters' in *Coventry* (2019).

> mine. I could smell his breath, and feel his bushy grey eyebrows grazing my skin. The great beak of his nose loomed at the edge of my field of vision, his claw-like hands with their white fur fumbled at my shoulders; I felt myself, momentarily, being wrapped around in his greyness and dryness, as though the prehistoric creature were wrapping me in its dry bat-like wings, felt his scaly mouth miss its mark and move blindly at my cheek. Through the whole thing I stayed rigidly still, staring straight ahead of me at the steering wheel, until at last he withdrew, back into the shade. (176-7)

The reader is struck by the fact that Faye does not speak or move in her defence; she only waits for him to stop. Although there is arguably an element of politeness, denial and/or freezing occurring here, this passage demonstrates just how far – alarmingly so – Faye's passivity will go. After this incident, Faye goes for a long swim, and when she returns to the boat, she finds the neighbour cutting ropes with a Swiss Army knife. He approaches her, still holding the knife; her reaction to this is presented, again, without any interiority. Instead, Faye thanks him for taking her to the cove, says she values friendship most and 'if he didn't mind, we probably ought to be getting back' (178).[59] Earlier in the novel, after their first meeting, the neighbour asked for her telephone number: 'My neighbour asked me for my telephone number: perhaps we could have dinner some time, while I was in Athens' (29). The glut of reported speech makes it unclear what the narrator externalises and what she does not, situating the reader firmly in her lack of desire. Similarly, the

[59] The incident with the knife calls to mind Peter Walsh's pocket-knife in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the knife functions as a symbol of his indecisiveness and defensiveness. Walsh, like the neighbour, has failed at many of his ventures in life and has been rejected by Clarissa, as the neighbour has by Faye. In her introduction to the novel, Elaine Showalter acknowledges the knife's phallic/penetrative symbolism: 'Constantly fiddling with the pocket-knife which symbolizes his masculinity, Walsh fantasizes about sexual adventures, and even follows women in the streets' (xiv). The neighbour's knife certainly has similar connotations. However, Clarissa's reaction to Peter's pocket-knife is rather different: 'He had his knife out. That's so like him, she thought' (44). Moreover, not only does the narrative offer the reader insight into both characters' thoughts and feelings in this scene, Clarissa herself is "armed" with her sewing scissors, so the characters are on more of an equal footing.

neighbour's use of modal verbs when making plans with the narrator, in the absence of a reply, turned from permission to obligation, and he uses them again now, on the boat, to tell her to wait until he himself has had a swim. She sits on board while he swims, and when his phone rings, she waits for it to stop (178). This scene clearly demonstrates how the novel mirrors Faye's erased desire at the level of language and content. This scene is also noteworthy because it is the first time her body is truly in the text: it takes shape only when surrounded by his, when outlined. But is Faye silent because her body is invisible, or is her body's invisibility a necessary pre-condition of her silence?

The use of animalistic descriptors for the neighbour could be read as heavy-handed, but I would suggest that Cusk is pointing, in this passage, to language as the only power available to Faye. And indeed, *Outline* ends with a phone call from this same neighbour, whose texts Faye has been leaving unanswered. When she says she cannot meet with him, he replies that in that case '[he] will spend the day in solicitude.' Faye corrects him: 'You mean solitude' (249).[60]

In this way, although the narrator's desire is erased, she sets herself forth as an authority (and leaves a trace of herself in the text). It is a female authority marked by the privileges of race, nationality and class. Because the narrative is autodiegetic, her authority is more contingent, and it risks the reader's resistance if she transgresses the limits of the acceptably feminine. This is in contrast to heterodiegetic narrators, who do not need to be identified by sex, thereby allowing women to access what was traditionally seen as '"male" authority by separating the narrating 'I' from the female body.' (Lanser 18) And yet, despite being a specifically female narrator, the 'I' in these novels *is* separated from the female body, which Faye also attempts to transcend, an issue I will return to momentarily.

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[60] In *Transit*, there are more instances of the narrator correcting malapropisms, and it could be argued, since the speakers in those cases are Polish builders, that these instances reinforce existing power structures rather than claiming any new space for the female narrator, or reclaiming power taken away. The linguistic playfulness, if it can be called that, carries through to *Kudos*, where the novel notes that kudos as a noun became a plural by back formation: 'the choice of this false plural was quite interesting [as] the individual had been superseded by the collective.' (98) This clearly ties into the form of the novel – many stories making up the narrator's story. The emphasis on the linguistic as Faye's only power also aligns with Faye's general mediation through language and rejection of the felt body.

‘Commonality of experience’

In the middle volume of the trilogy, when the narrator receives a spam email from an astrologer, telling her a ‘major transit’ is coming in her sky, she notes that the astrologer was likely a computer-generated creation: ‘her phrases were too characterful, and the note of the character was repeated too often; she was too obviously based on a human type to be, herself, human’ (3). Although the narrator pays the fee to see the astrologer’s report, Cusk herself remains suspicious of character per ‘the Victorian template of novel writing’, saying:

> [T]here’s a homogeneity afoot that I think everyone would accept in terms of our environment and how we live and how we communicate, and those things seem to be eroding the old idea of character. I’m seeing [the subtleties of self-expression or different personal experience] as more oceanic and as things that you can enter and leave in certain phases of your life that aren’t completely determined by the fact that you’re Jane and this is your life. I’m trying to see experience in a more lateral sense rather than as in this form of character. (Schwartz)

It is true that the trilogy, which operates more on stasis than through conventional novelistic movement, eschews traditional definitions of plot and character.[61] There is little action. The narrative does not show us who the speakers are; instead, people tell us about events that have already happened. There is a homogeneity of voice and speakers echo and return to the same themes. Indeed, in *Transit*, Faye’s recently divorced friend has grown to love the female voice on his GPS for it is more devoted to him than his wife ever was. He finds it soothing, ‘that this oceanic chorus was affixed in no one person, that it seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere…the erosion of individuality was also the erosion of power to hurt’ (*Transit* 3). Cusk has said

[61] Like in Woolf’s *The Waves*, the trilogy’s characters, such as they are, are more about the idea or image that the fiction seeks to represent than about any one individual.

that the aim of the trilogy's technique is to neutralise pain by operating like the therapeutic experience, revisiting without re-experiencing ('Brexit')[62]. Foundational narrative principles and therapy both involve a person recounting events after the fact, she argues, and this 'became a sort of basic therapeutic position that also evokes some commonality in experience' (Schwartz). Indeed, Cusk says, communal storytelling is the 'whole basis of *Outline*'. If this is her aim, the lack of ontological desire makes sense: there is no desire to speak 'I'; rather, a 'we' is the goal.

It is true that divorce has ruptured not only the narrator's sense of identity, but that of a number of speakers, too. In *Outline*, Faye's former family home is now something she 'could no longer definitively call either a reality or an illusion' (11). Faye's aeroplane neighbour recounts his reaction to his ex-wife's unavailability to him:

> She could not be called upon to recognise him, and this was the most bewildering thing of all, for it made him feel absolutely unreal. It was with her, after all, that his identity had been forged: if she no longer recognised him, then who was he? (23)

Later, Faye's friend Paniotis tells her about calling his ex-wife when he doubted his ability to cope with a crisis with their children. Instead of responding with sympathy or concern, she is silent, failing 'to come in on time and take up…her part in our lifelong duet' (120), leading Paniotis to realise that he and his ex-wife had 'looked at the world through a long lens of preconception' which provided 'a kind of safety but also created a space for illusion' (119). Later still, when Anne recounts calling her ex-husband (out of habit) after her mugging, she notes that because the person she was before her marriage no longer existed, 'when the incident occurred it had been two kinds of crisis, one of which was a crisis of identity' (237). Themes are returned to, ideas echoed and repeated slightly differently, as a community tells its stories.

[62] Although both Cusk and Doubrovsky refer to therapy, Cusk's vision of neutralising pain is, in my view, quite different from his notion of healing the split, a difference which is clear in the control and unity/uniformity apparent in Cusk's form.

In Susan Sniader Lanser's study of 19th and 20th century women writers, she delineates the notion of the communal 'I', which is relevant here because of Cusk's oceanic chorus. 'Singular' communal narrators, Lanser argues:

> are constructed through subtle but important departures from autodiegetic practices, for while the narrators retain the syntax of 'first-person' narrative, their texts avoid the markers of individuality that characterize personal voice and thereby resist the equation of narrator and protagonist. Rather, the narrator's identity becomes communal: not only is she an authoritative mediator of the community, but the community is represented as the very source of her (textual) identity. (241)

One cannot help but think, here, of the outline, which gives Faye a sense of who she is. Her textual identity is due solely to the people around her who provide reflections and delineations. The communal 'I' both limits and expands the singular 'I'. In novels featuring a communal singular narrator, which are often about ways of telling rather than showing, facts of the individual's life are suppressed in favour of the communal. Other traits Lanser identifies are heterodiegetic presentation (247), characters who share a collective vision (249), sequential narration (255) and a single authorial voice (263).

By heterodiegetic presentation, I follow Genette to mean that the text looks like what is traditionally called third-person narration (*Narrative* 244-245). Although each instalment of the trilogy opens with a firmly autodiegetic sentence, the novels frequently lapse into long paragraphs in which readers are invited to equate the narrator with the author:

> They gave an appearance of constant watchfulness and anxiety, since it was their responsibility to make sure that everyone attended their events or caught the bus, and were often to be seen locked in sombre consultation, their eyes glancing frequently around the hotel lobby as they talked. (*Kudos* 129)

This instance of heterodiegetic writing lasts for more than three pages. Cusk uses passive and impersonal phraseology to avoid first person. This strategy allows Faye to melt away as the narrator of the work, and allows other speakers to step in.

Collective focalisation – a focalising consciousness that represents itself as 'we' – is evidence of characters who share a collective vision. For example:

> *We passed* through a concrete lot surrounded by decrepit graffitied buildings, where laurel trees were putting out their red spiky flowers. A strange music came in eddies on the wind from somewhere nearby: it was the sound of someone playing a pipe or flute, and presently a boy *could be seen* standing half-concealed in the shrubbery in the ruins of a graffitied wall, the instrument lifted to his lips. (*Kudos* 140, my emphasis)

The narrator reports on the perceptions and experiences of a group as though she is authorised to represent other characters. Although she does not report their thoughts or feelings, this is because she barely reports on her own. Instances such as these are rare within the novels, but their breach of narrative decorum is worth noting in the light of Cusk's aim of communal storytelling.

Sequential narration features each voice speaking in turn so that a 'we' is produced from the series of collaborating 'I's. This strategy is very clearly in use in the Outline trilogy. It also helps to explain why everyone, even speakers who do not have English as a first language, tends to sound the same: 'When novels produce…a dispersal, narrative voice becomes one of the major mechanisms for containing the narrative as a unity' (Lanser 263). In other words, when a novel transgresses expectations of plot, as these novels do, a single voice builds formal coherence. One thinks, here, of the speakers who use the similar phraseology to describe divorce ('can't imagine a future'), who observe, separately, that Rome and Athens do not get dark. But then one remembers the speakers whose convenient malapropisms ('homestruck' for homesick, for example) are corrected, the subtle (and not so subtle) judgements passed by the narrator, and the biggest trouble of all, the narrator's

gender, and it becomes more difficult to find in favour of the trilogy as an undeniable example of communal storytelling. As Lanser observes about the singular communal 'I': 'For all its effort to represent a community with which the narrator is both separate and identified, this discursive singularity means that the narrative "I" is still formally distinct from the community and in control of its representation' (253). Unlike Woolf and Sackville-West in their letters to each other, the characters here cannot produce a relationship or an intersubjective space. Faye's interlocutors do not get the chance to write themselves, or her.

Despite Cusk's stated ambitions, the novels remain autodiegetic, filtered through Faye's cool consciousness: although the text is interrogative (per Benveniste's distinction between three fundamental types of speech), the narrating 'I' does not completely 'unfix' itself as the subject.[63] As much as the journalist might think Faye's novels are written for her by the people who answer her questions, these works of literature are still the product of single authorship. This is underscored by the first two counterexamples I mentioned above – malapropisms and the narrator's judgement – which surface, at the level of form, an issue long simmering in the trilogy: power and control. And these issues are implicated in the third obstacle to communality, the question of the narrator's body, to which we will now turn.

ii. 'The caveat of gender'

Although the subject in the trilogy is formed in relation to others, seemingly moving beyond the dualism of same/other, and although female experience is a key question in these novels, for both the narrator and many of her interlocutors, the novels seem to contend that the body is neither the site for subjectivity nor for femininity. While the narrator is known only in outline, there remains, invariably, a trace of her in the text. For one thing, her femaleness cannot be scrubbed from the text. For another, her concerns about gender and its role are foregrounded as the trilogy continues. In *Outline*, we know many intimate details about two male interlocutors long before the narrator reveals

[63] For more on interrogative texts, see Belsey, Catherine *Critical Practice*. Methuen. 1980, chap. 4.

that she ‘lived alone with my children…where for seven years before that we had lived together with their father’ (11). This is the first detail the narrator reveals about herself that is not observation of her environment, and it is worth noting the centrality of both heteronormativity and motherhood to our reading of the narrator as grammatically feminine. That said, even if one were to read this detail as ambiguous, the paratext of *Outline* makes clear the narrator is a woman. Beyond the author’s feminine-coded name, on my copy, a front-cover blurb by Jeffrey Eugenides identifies the narrator as a woman (‘Rachel Cusk’s nearly nameless narrator flickers into visibility only through her encounters with a series of amazingly eloquent and fascinating interlocutors’), and the front dust jacket flap begins ‘a woman writer goes to Athens in the height of summer to teach a writing course’, suggesting her gender is more important than her name. The novels’ epitext and generic positioning as autofiction also emphasise the narrator’s female gender. As the trilogy progresses, that the narrator is a woman becomes increasingly important; equally, it is my contention that her silence and lack of desire or passivity can be understood as hallmarks of the dualistic, patriarchal structure that underwrites both the text and the world we live in.

At a literary event, the narrator is on a panel with two writers, both of whom are men. The first speaker has written a best-selling memoir about the childhood abuses he suffered at the hands of his stepfather and describes himself as ‘a cupboard rammed full with junk: when he opened the door everything fell out’ (*Transit* 100). The other speaker, a thinly veiled nod to Knausgård, has written a 1000-page book that turns the mundane into the grotesque in order to capture attention: 'eating and drinking and shitting and pissing and fucking’ (107). Their talks are reproduced at length, but when the narrator gets up to read, the narrative falls silent. ‘I read aloud what I had written. When I had finished I folded the papers and put them back in my bag, while the audience applauded.’ Although all three are working in the autofictional genre, the contrast between the narrator and these male novelists is clear: ascetism versus indulgence, silence versus verbosity.

Throughout the novels, many speakers’ stories take as their subject power relations between the genders, expressing concern about the notion of difference as pejorative, and therefore woman as devalued other. The

narrator's ex-husband takes little responsibility for their children; in *Transit*, Eloise, her cousin's new wife, is in the same position. In *Kudos*, fellow writer Sophia's ex-husband leaves their son alone on his weekends to go play tennis, in order to deprive Sophia of her 'freedom and peace of mind even when [she has] some time to herself' (155). The ex also prompts their son to take sides, 'inculcating in him…the beginnings of a much greater tribal identity' (134) one that fears women and is dependent on them. When the son takes ill, he realises his father never visits. Translator Felícia's ex-husband poisons her daughter against her and takes the car under cover of night, safely protected by the law, forcing her to realise her that '[she] had been holding onto a delusion, when even an hour earlier [she] would have sworn [she] had no delusions left' (218). Publisher Paola has no doubt that if it ever became legal to kill another person, her ex-husband would be on her doorstep 'before even a minute had passed' (219). A male novelist called Luis – who the reader will recognise as another writer modelled on Karl Ove Knausgård – has recently been hailed as heroic and received every national literary honour for writing about 'subjects our other male writers would not deign touch' (138), namely domesticity. 'Though of course if he were a woman,' Sophia tells the narrator, 'he would be scorned for his honesty, or at the very least no one would care.' The women of these novels, especially of *Kudos*, are concerned with power, their lack of it. Patriarchy is limiting their *potentia*.

Sexual difference – and just what constitutes equality between the sexes – becomes a key concern as the trilogy progresses. The title of the final novel in the trilogy is drawn from a conversation with a teenage tour-guide: Kudos is the name given to prizes handed out at his school for the 'most outstanding male and female student' (94). He notes that some objected to the 'caveat of gender' as it 'obscured the triumph of excellence'. However, his mother disagreed: 'if there was no caveat, she had said, then there was no way of ensuring that excellence would remain in a moral framework and not be put in the service of evil' (94). The novel, then, is framed through this question – how does gender affect what recognition is given and what taken away, or falsely claimed by someone else? And how does gender advantage or disadvantage a person? And yet, the narrator's understanding of gender is peculiarly disembodied, seemingly solely discursively constituted rather than

having any roots in materiality. The narrator is passive, lacks desire – traditionally feminine traits per the patriarchy – and this is structural, an absence at the level of sentence. But if there's no desire to be, and there's no body, what, exactly, is the subject? And where is she speaking from?

iii. 'Our separate and untransfigurable histories'

Faye moves through these novels largely disembodied. Her subjectivity does not have its roots in the body. Not only that, but her awareness of physicality is peculiarly truncated. In her portrayals of her interlocutors, she relies on repeated physical descriptions. In *Outline*, the neighbour's lips (12, 15) and back (70, 172) are fleshy, his hair a plume (5, 58), his nose beak-like (58), his face bird-like (76). Henrietta's eyes are twice doll-like, Sophia's laugh doubly bell-like. Spanning the final two novels, both the Chairman and Paola's eyes are described as button-like. The repetition of buttons and dolls underscores just how divorced from the fleshy body these speakers are; instead, they are more like mannequins or puppets, lacking their own interiority, being spoken for. It is also worth noting that these are novels about looking, watching, rather than touching, reinforcing the divide between subject and object even as the text makes claims to a communal 'I'.

One reading of the repeated physical descriptions would be that they function to contrast stable physical presentation with the characters' changing accounts of themselves, showing how unreliable bodies are. Another reading, in the light of Cusk's comments about communal experience, might be that the use of repetition is an indicator of Cusk's frustration with the individuation required for embodiment. On seeing her neighbour from the plane topless for the first time, Faye is overcome by sadness, remarking that '[h]is aged back seemed to maroon us both in our separate and untransfigurable histories' (*Outline* 70). However, the neglect of the body in these novels, by both the narrator and the author, in favour of the mind, and the concomitant opposing of subjective to universal, indicates a reliance on the historical dualisms Braidotti rejects (not to mention, sits uncomfortably alongside the trilogy's focus on gender). On such a reading, singularity, rather than communality, is the point. Margrit Shildrick notes that the western logos is founded on the

‘taken for granted stability and autonomy of the singular human subject at the centre of the logos, of a self that is foundational without being embodied, and a body whose integrity is so unquestioned that it may be forgotten, transcended’ (54). It is true that Faye starts the trilogy thrown by her divorce and questioning reality, and that there is perhaps little stability in her life. However, while the form of the novels means she only emerges in relief, it would be difficult to argue that it supports a reading of her as unstable or lacking autonomy. Everything is subsumed under her cool voice. She subtly passes judgement on her interlocutors and rather than answer questions posed to her, the text breaks for the next chapter (see, for instance, *Outline* 49). Cusk has written in *Coventry* that ‘if a woman’s body signifies anything it is that repetition is more powerful than change’ (164). Perhaps it is possible to read these novels as an attempt to circumvent that automatic signification, to instead tackle questions of repetition and change in other ways (such as formally). While Faye is a mother, we never witness her with her sons; they are only ever on the other end of the phone, crying or asking when she’s coming home.[64] In *Kudos*, she reveals that one of her sons has gone to live with his father. As such, the novels both define Faye by her motherhood and manage to leave her body out of it. Like Bourgeois, Cusk does not shy away from ‘feminine’ topics in these novels.[65] Unlike Bourgeios, Faye is not the object of her children’s perceptions, far from it. Cusk has written ‘the artist is a perceiver, and the mother the first and fundamental object of perception’ (*Coventry* 141). By leaving Faye’s children out of the novel, but for their beleaguered phone calls, Cusk permits Faye to remain perceiver and escape objectification by her children. In this way, she could arguably be said to

[64] In *Outline* (150); in *Transit* (132), where he asks why they can’t be normal, and in *Kudos* (226), where it is the final conversation of the trilogy.

[65] Cusk specifically addressed the question of writing about feminine topics in *Coventry*: ‘And in my own experience as a writer, it is in the places where honesty is most required – because it is here that compromise and false consciousness and "mystification" continue to endanger the integrity of a woman's life – that it is most vehemently rejected. I am talking, of course, about the book of repetition, about fiction that concerns itself with what is eternal and unvarying, with domesticity and motherhood and family life. The sheer intolerance, in the twenty-first century, for these subjects is the unarguable proof that woman is on the verge of surrendering important aspects of her modern identity’ (175-6). This raises the question, for me, about the honesty of the choice to leave the experience of being embodied out of these novels.

escape reduction to the maternal-feminine. That said, Faye is not woman as a desiring subject, either. In Faye, Cusk is making the case for a disembodied subjectivity that is still, nevertheless, distinctly feminine. The contrast with Kraus could not be starker. Here, the 'I' at the centre of this text, its foundation, is disembodied, transcendent. The body is forgotten. But it is my contention that Cusk's stylistic and ideological choices to ignore the body do not allow Faye to escape her body, or her status as a woman, as is made powerfully clear in the final scene in the trilogy. The body can't be forgotten, especially not if it is female.

'My suspended distance'

In this scene, Faye leaves her literary conference to go to the beach. It is the only scene in the entire trilogy in which she is not in conversation with someone. She passes men 'either naked or sometimes wearing a simple loincloth' some of whom turn to look at her 'like animals surprised in a grove':

> I found an empty stretch of sand and began to take off my clothes…I went down to the water, pressing quickly forward through the barging waves. The beach shelved so steeply that I was quickly sucked out into the moving mass, whose density and power seemed to keep me effortlessly on the surface so that I rose and fell along with its undulations. The men had turned to watch me. One of them got to his feet, a huge burly man with a great curling black beard and a rounded stomach and thighs like hams. Slowly he walked down towards the water's edge, his white teeth faintly glimmering through his beard in a smile, his eyes fixed on mine. I looked back at him from my suspended distance, rising and falling. He came to a halt just where the waves broke and he stood there in his nakedness like a deity, resplendent and grinning. Then he grasped his thick penis and began to urinate into the water. The flow came out so abundantly that it made a fat, glittering jet, like a rope of gold he was casting into the sea. He looked at me with black eyes full of malevolent

> delight while the golden jet poured unceasingly forth from him until it seemed impossible that he could contain any more. The water bore me up, heaving, as if I lay on the breast of some sighing creature while the man emptied himself into its depths. I looked into his cruel, merry eyes, and I waited for him to stop. (231-232)

This is a complex scene. The men, presented as naked or in loincloths, are presumably partaking in ritualistic behaviour, the nature of which is unclear: Faye had noticed the 'rounded shapes of [a young man's] buttocks beneath [another] man's hand' (231) as she passed. The phallus here is functional while still sexual – *merry* carries sexual connotations – and the urine is both a bridge and a contamination. The scene uses arguably mythic language and imagery – golden rope, the sighing breast of a creature, a deity – in the service of describing something at once shocking and ordinary. The man watches her. She is the object of his gaze, occupying the passive role of being looked at. He is both cruel and merry, resisting interpretation; we cannot give one definitive reading of him, or of the scene. Wanting is transposed to waiting, here as on the boat when the phone was ringing.

This final scene invites comparison with that of another book concerned with fate[66]: Kate Chopin's feminist classic *The Awakening*, in which Edna Pontellier, whose husband and two sons need 'not have thought they could possess her, body and soul', walks into the sea, that place where she had her first experience of independence, after she realises her would-be lover would only see her as property, not the free woman she has come to be. Where for Edna, the touch of the sea is 'sensuous', 'enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace' (113), Faye does not feel the water. But unlike Edna, Faye looks back at the beach, knowing that the impulse to swim miles out to sea is not a summons from the larger world but an attempt to escape what she has for an illusory freedom. And it is here that her gaze comes into play.

[66] Indeed, intertextuality is a noted feature of autofiction. see Walker, Amelia. 'Autofictionalizing Reflective Writing Pedagogies' in *Autofiction in English*.

She is the only woman on the beach, arguably putting herself in a dangerous position, and as such, resisting a common-sense narrative of women's behaviour. This scene could be as simple as a man staring at a female nude in the sea, but that it is not specified whether or not she undresses to nakedness opens up questions about her intention and how we are to read what follows. Moreover, it renders her body unimaginable in what follows, concretising what has been true in throughout the trilogy: her invisible female body is a presence in its own right.

Earlier in the novel, a writer who has lost half his body weight remarks on a level of control 'in which one could become virtually invisible and therefore invulnerable' (117). Her invisibility throughout the trilogy can, I would suggest, be read as an attempt to claim power. But while Faye remains intangible, irreducible, resisting characterisation, the final scene underlines that there is no escaping the disadvantage inherent in being a woman. The cumulative effect of other women's stories in these novels – of being mugged, of their ex-husbands controlling them, of the limitations placed on their lives by the cultures they live in – informs this moment, too, because the reader is painfully aware there is very little Faye can do. Indeed, whether or not Faye is interested in her femaleness, it is apparent that it is and will always be a factor, a fact the trilogy's ending forcefully emphasises.

Because she moves through the novels relatively disembodied, incidents such as the neighbour playing with the knife and the man urinating into the sea are even more shocking to both Faye and the reader precisely because they serve us inescapable reminders of her body and its power and vulnerability relative to others'. Moments like these, moments of violence, abuse and conflict, also serve to pierce the fiction of a communal 'I'. This 'I' is separate, always watching. She is called a bitch by her downstairs neighbour, groped by the neighbour on the boat. The things that happen to her are things that happen to women. That said, she is not part of the community of divorced women that establishes itself in *Kudos*, women who are flabbergasted by her decision to remarry. In the penultimate scene, her publisher, Paola, notes that: 'In law the woman is temporary, between the permanence of the land and the violence of the sea. It is better to be invisible,' she said. 'It is better to live outside the law…An outlaw' (225). Faye now lives within the law: she has

remarried. And while she might have thought she'd found a way to be invisible, the final scene makes clear she was mistaken.

It also suggests that the form of the novels is laying bare specific conditions of women in society, raised and required to facilitate others. Equally, one could read the scene as undermining those representations because Faye is not only looking back, objectifying the man, she is also speaking/writing from her position of invisibility. She is both surveyor and surveyed, both, to use the language of visual art called on not long before this scene, artist and model. And herein lies the fundamental tension at the heart of Cusk's entire project: how to be without ontological desire while still writing 'I'?

'The empty space'

In *Outline*, Faye is without desire, both libidinal and ontological. The work tries to make the case that it is possible to be without both will and desire. If not an actively desiring subject, what is she? The text suggests that 'the role of the artist might merely be that of recording sequences, such as a computer could one day be programmed to do' (206). However, Faye's judgement and authority and narrative strategies such as paralipsis make it clear that she is far more than mere camera.

In *Transit*, she renovates her flat and it creates a disturbance. She had 'believed that it was only through absolute passivity that you could learn to see what was really there' (198). But she has recently become angry and has 'started to desire power, because what [she] now realised was that other people had had it all along'. In that novel, the Chair to a literary panel she was on walks her home, their arms and shoulders touching: 'I felt a realisation begin to arise, a dawning of understanding, as if some incomprehensible component had suddenly slotted into place' (126). At the door, he comes towards her:

> His body reached mine and he pushed me back against the door and kissed me. he put his warm, thick tongue in my mouth; he thrust his hands inside my coat. His lean, hard body was more insistent than forceful…
>
> 'You're like a teenager,' he said.

> He kissed me for a long time. Other than that remark, no one said anything. (126-127)

She becomes aware of her wet hair and musty smell – again, the discomfort with her body. Other than the fact that she does not push him off, it is quite difficult to read this scene as expressive of desire or pleasure. As such, it is rather shocking when, later, she receives a text from the Chair: 'He said he was afraid he wasn't free to meet me on Thursday, as I had suggested. Some other time perhaps, he said' (162). Is she going along with his clearly stated desire for her, like a leaf on water, or is she trying to make something happen because she wants it? It is unclear. This highlights how paralipsis is strategic, in these novels, and, ultimately, how artificial the choice is to not to desire anything. The choice to make the body invisible is artificial, too. Moreover, as Braidotti observes, '[b]oth Deleuze and Irigaray stress that it is the specific materiality of female flesh that is erased by the phallic regime' (*Metamorphoses* 45). This erasure makes it possible for the masculine to kidnap the symbolic order. So why is Cusk herself erasing female flesh? One potential answer could be that the novels are attempting a strategic mimesis. Faye is passive and invisible, like women are supposed to be in the phallocentric order, but the novels reveal that passivity to be nothing more than a fabrication and incite the invisible body to speak. However, such an interpretation is made somewhat more difficult by the absence of the body and the presence of the phallus in the final scene. To end the trilogy on a scene in which a phallus is contrasted with the narrator's invisible female body is striking, in that it refocuses our reading of the entire trilogy through the notion of stereotypical representations of women, as lack, dispersed, nothing to see. The phallus signifies the 'law of the father'. Where Irigaray argues that the function of symbolic signifier as a principle of order, separation or differentiation could be fulfilled by something other than phallus, the last scene, like *I Love Dick*, seems to insist that it can and must only by fulfilled by the phallus (*Metamorphoses* 48).

If we read the absence of the female body as an attempt to claim power, to seek invulnerability – in other words, as signalling an awareness of the disadvantage inherent in being female – rather than being absent, the

narrator's invisible body is everywhere, making the power structures that govern it visible. However, I want to venture here that the power Cusk is trying to claim is that of *potestas*: it is ascetic, limiting. It is not affirmative; it cannot transform the negative. The absent body is a body not allowed to be object; neither is it treated as the site of subjectivity. However, it is not, in these novels, transcended. It is tied to the 'I', and, I would suggest, is the unacknowledged grounding for the female speaking subject. Faye's erased desire is supposed to allow her to see what's really there, the truth. The novels see this ascetism, the banishing of the self, its body and its utterances, as objectivity, and subjectivity as stopping one from seeing things how they really are. Images of the mirror, paradigms of clear-sightedness, litter the novels. Shildrick notes that 'to look into the mirror of nature or of the soul, to reflect on matters of judgement, is to exercise a distinctly human capacity in which the enquiring mind constitutes distance and objectivity as the mark of truth' (105). But in fixating on objectivity at the expense of a specific desiring female subject in all her fleshy embodiment, Cusk continues to privilege the old binaries; just because she is trying to show that objectivity and transcendence are not just the realms of men, that women can access it too, does not free the work from a reading of upholding dualisms rather than achieving its stated feminist aims. Moreover, in stripping desire and the bodily root of subjectivity from the work, Cusk remains in the negative, unable to affirm. If desire is about a yearning for change, not preservation ('Intensive' 48), and sketches out conditions for the future (55), without it, we cannot know what we want to become.

Resistance/ethics

Autofiction exposes the 'I' as constructed, a contested site. Cusk's and Kraus's autofictive practice allows them to be both model and artist and in so doing, enact and describe the tension between two normatively incompatible categories, that of woman and artist. As we have seen, the subject of western logos is implicitly male. Unsurprisingly, the objectivity and universality attributed to men in general also extended to the category of the artist, a fact that has been argued by many feminists.[67] As David Rosen points out in his study of masculinity, '[w]hat not so long ago was called the 'human' experience, whether analysed by history, literature, psychology or whatever, was actually the 'male' experience, one that ignored women and took men for the norm' (*Masculinity* xi).

According to Hywel Dix, autofiction can be read as an attempt to claim a space for female, artistic subjectivity, in other words, not simply a space for a female enunciating 'I' but for one with authority. He posits that a major context within which autofictional scholarship in English can be understood is the increase in status of women's writing (*English* 10). Dix draws on Linda Anderson's work, which argues that for some female writers of the 1970s and -80s, autobiographical writing could do more than reflect criticism, it could exceed it, and so a new form – in this case autofiction – was required. They veered away from feminism and post-structuralism 'as disciplines that appeared to herald a dissipation and evanescence of the subject; such writers had *not yet achieved critical recognition for the cultural expression of female subjectivity* and were therefore reluctant to yield it in the face of those counter-narratives' (10, my emphasis). Following Deleuze, these writers were resisting the Oedipalising impulse and opposing the 'necrophiliac cult of dead white men' (*Metamorphoses* 66), choosing instead to create, choosing theoretical anarchy.

Susan Sniader Lanser recognises the implicit understanding of the artist as male in her study of women writers and narrative voice. She links social identity and narrative form by taking as a point of departure 'the

[67] See, for example, Susan Bordo, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Elaine Showalter.

hypothesis that female voice – a term used here simply to designate the narrator's grammatical gender – is a site of ideological tension made visible in textual practices' (6). Lanser postulates that a voice or text's authority is produced by both social and rhetorical properties and that discursive authority – 'intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value claimed by or conferred upon a work, author, narrator, character, or textual practice' (6) – is produced interactively, in relation to the communities that receive it. Discursive authority has historically been more attached to white men, and as such, Lanser argues, a 'major constituent of narrative authority…is the extent to which a narrator's status conforms to this dominant social power' (6); another is a work's textual strategies, which Lanser notes 'even socially unauthorised writers can appropriate' (7). Because autofiction's defining textual strategy is an inscription of the author into the text – in other words, a transfer of the author's social power to the narrator – I read autofiction by women, a socially unauthorised group, as engaging directly with questions of authority through its production of a narrative voice. The narrator of the Outline trilogy emerges only in relief, given shape by her interlocutors: 'a form of discipline, almost of asceticism, a temporary banishing of the self and its utterances' (*Outline* 54). And yet the novels use the first person to construct that shape, so that everything is filtered through the narrator's consciousness. In *I Love Dick*, Chris asks: 'Who gets to speak, and why?' (175) *And how?* might as well be another question she asks, as she is explicitly concerned with the production of her voice:

> Whenever I tried writing in the 1st Person it sounded like some other person, or else the tritest most neurotic parts of myself…But now I think okay, that's right, there's no fixed point of self but it exists & by writing you can somehow chart that movement. That maybe 1st Person writing's just as fragmentary as more a-personal collage, it's just more serious: bringing changing & fragmentation closer, bringing it down to where you really are. (122)

I follow Lanser as understanding 'the act of writing a novel and seeking to publish it…[as] a quest for discursive authority: a quest to be heard, respected,

and believed, a hope of influence' (7). In other words, through the use of personal story, both Chris Kraus and Rachel Cusk are claiming public authority.

Worthington argues that autofictions by women rarely use the first person, that they are 'reluctant or unable' (89) to assume that authority. This is an interesting provocation but a generalisation nonetheless, given that autofictions by formerly underrepresented peoples continue to proliferate and that Worthington's study overlooked many such authors to call such texts 'shockingly rare'. However, both Kraus and Cusk do use the first person. They interrogate its use, but they do use it. I want to venture a reading of that use that also thinks with the politics of location. The women's experiences described in these texts are undeniably white, heterosexual and middle-class. I do not read the autofictional turn in Kraus and Cusk as attempts to hit back against the waning cultural power of the white female author, as per Worthington. In *I Love Dick*, Chris is abject, emotionally degraded; any victory she might have, such as in getting published, is inherently compromised. In the Outline trilogy, the narrator is almost completely disembodied but still culture will not let her escape her womanhood and the trilogy ends with a cruel act that reminds her of her place as devalued other. In other words, it is my contention that both authors are concerned more with claiming space and the right to speak as women (and highlighting the disjunct between Woman and women), through an appropriation of a mode of writing that is associated with male subjectivity (Sykes 153), than they are with reasserting power as a waning cultural force. But this is not to say that they do not have any power. Indeed, while the author-characters could be said to be self-aware of their heterosexuality and their class status – indeed, they foreground their heterosexuality – their whiteness is taken for granted. It seems possible to me that this whiteness is at least partly responsible for the authority asserted by using first person. I would argue that Faye is only afforded her chosen state of being largely disembodied by the world because that body is white: there is an invisibility that comes with whiteness, a privilege the novels do not seem to recognise in any way. Similarly, Chris writes about fusing her silence with the entire female gender's silence and repression (194), which suggests she thinks she can speak for all women, even women of colour. I do not wish to be

unfair to these writers or misrepresent their stated aims for their work. However, as a creative practitioner myself, I think it is important to acknowledge that there are more power relations at work in these texts than their authors (can, following Braidotti) see. As a critic, I want to acknowledge the limits of my study in terms of the experiences represented, while also suggesting that reading these texts together presents an opportunity to analyse the construction of white, heterosexual female body as the standard through an examination of the difficulties otherwise privileged women have in claiming the enunciating 'I' for themselves and in experiencing and thinking embodiment.

In Kraus, autofictive practice allows for the very emergence of the 'I' as an embodied subject, leaky and monstrous: Chris likens first person to collage, which is a bodily practice, and she uses fragmentation to explore herself and to elude herself. 'I want to make the world more interesting than my problems,' she writes. 'Therefore, I have to make my problems social' (196). Kraus wants to generate theory from life, move beyond her limits. Desire is an animating force, and even if the novel does not ultimately succeed in a positive expression of sexual difference, Chris wants to *be*. But being is not becoming, and she remains caught in the negativity of the Lacanian conception of woman as both excess and lack.

Cusk's trilogy is written in response to her lived experience of writing autobiographies using a purely referential 'I'. In her work, the generic designation of autofiction allows for many hallmarks of realist fiction to be dropped. For her, autofiction seems to be an ideological practice, since fiction is 'fake and embarrassing'. While I agree that the proliferation of technology and the homogenising of culture has no doubt had the effect of making us all sound the same – the 'oceanic chorus' – I do not see how deliberately ignoring the body can be said to be authentic. The form dominates the body. I would also suggest that the effect of the oceanic chorus is of the other being consumed in the text, which raises questions about the ethics of the practice of this style of writing, and potentially about autofiction as a whole, for even if the 'real-life' counterpart of the characters being subsumed are not identifiable, being subsumed hardly constitutes entering into meaningful relations with others. In its ascetism, erased desire and implicit reference to binary

oppositions – active/passive, speaking/silent, visible/invisible – that correspond to the underlying binary opposition Man/Woman, the trilogy risks defining the other in terms of negative difference, and never moves beyond that negativity to a moment of affirmation.

Rosi Braidotti follows through on the theoretical point made by post-structuralism, that language is an ontological precondition for the constitution of the subject while at the same time constitutive of the subject: 'the relations to socio-symbolic structures, the relation to others, is the defining feature of all subjects and of our common humanity' ('Writing', 164-65). There are strategies to deal with this realisation: 'style' is the name we give to these tactical choices (165). And style comprises two options: resistance and ethics. Resistance entails 'loosening the despotic grip of language over the process of subject formation' (165) and making clear the power of language and discourse in producing subjectivity and knowledge. Resistance is a reflection on power itself. Ethics involves 'acknowledging the importance of a text's relationship to others', the constitutive presence of otherness within the self; a text both exposes and holds accountable the power and meaning it enacts (165). Style, then, is important. And she has high expectations for writing: she sees the 'literary text as an experiment in sustainable models of change' ('Writing' 175).

Neither of the autofictions analysed in this thesis has enough to say about what we want to become. They do not imagine alternative futures. Both autofictions dwell in the negative; there is little that moves beyond the negative to a moment of affirmation. The sanctity of the past and the authority of experience outweighs any sense of possible transformation. While the author-characters have encounters with others, desire, in these novels, coincides only with the individual autobiographies of the authors. They are not mobilised beyond their embodied roots (if their bodies are even acknowledged). As such, there is no space, in these autofictions to become-other.[68] Nor do I think the models of change proposed in these autofictions are sustainable: both models of female subjectivity are ultimately undermined by the form, its dualistic roots

[68] It is possible that other autofictions might be more successful. To my mind, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) is one such example in its engagement with both Vuong's mother(-character) and first boyfriend(-character) and its attempt to work through the pain.

of fact/fiction confining the texts, the women within them and their readers to perpetual oscillation rather than a line of flight to a new possibility.

To be affirmative means moving beyond the negative. Affirmativity means engaging with 'the present in a productive manner, while upholding an oppositional and critical stance' ('Affirmation' 280). Negativity still exists and has a function, but it is just a point, and not a foundational breaking point, in a sequence that leads not only elsewhere, but to an open and non-teleological horizon. Braidotti writes that movements like feminism, anti-racism, post-colonialism and environmentalism 'are concrete forms of affirmative politics that philosophers merely theorised': they change the scale because 'one has to start from micro-instances of embodied and embedded self and the complex web of social relations that compose that self' ('Affirmation' 281). Critical thought has a creative force. This force needs a necessary dose of oppositional consciousness, Braidotti writes, to follow the example of the feminists, the environmentalists, the anti-racists, who pioneered concrete forms of the politics of affirmation, resulting in 'subtler and more effective analyses of how power works in and through the body, and it leads to an increased awareness of the vulnerability of embodied subjects' (281).

Affirmative fiction is geared towards creating possible futures. It understands that power can be both repressive and positive. It imagines what the world could be and works towards that vision. It both belongs to and resists its context and historicity. It is fascination to presume, not containment. It holds that, as Zadie Smith says, 'in front of a book you are still free' ('Defense' 10). It understands that freedom as freedom to become-other in the encounter with the book. Where much of autofiction is a display of wilful disinterest in anything but the self, affirmative fiction allows for the cohabitation of subjectivities, becomings, points of view and forces. Affirmative fiction is 'an assemblage, a relay-point for a web of complex relations that displace the centrality of ego-indexed notions of identity' ('Intensive' 46). It is anti-solipsism. It does not trade in surfaces and slipperiness; it understands style as a serious choice rather than an aesthetic exercise. It practices disidentification from familiar and comforting identities, losing 'cherished habits of thought and representation' (*Transpositions* 83) in order to become-minoritarian. In order to try for new kinds of representations adequate to our times. In order to change. Braidotti

writes that ‘affirmative relations create possible – and possibly more hospitable – worlds by mobilizing resources that have been left untapped, including our desires and imagination’ (‘Affirmative’ 282).

I think about Kraus: ‘Desire isn’t lack, it’s surplus energy – a claustrophobia inside your skin–’ And Cusk*:* ‘I had decided to want nothing at all.’ And I want to imagine the world as more than it is.

In Jedediah Purdy’s *After Nature: A Politics of the Anthropocene,* he writes: ‘It should be clear that far from being frivolous make-believe, imagination is intensely practical’ (7). I want to imagine not just what we are but what we want to become.

Imagine a thunderstorm, the sudden darkness on a hot day.

Imagine a language you do not speak, a forest.

Imagine changing someone’s mind.

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