FEELING POWER: AFFECTIVE ATMOSPHERES AND THE REPRODUCTION OF LIFE

by

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(Under the Direction of Channette Romero)

ABSTRACT

Novels produce affective atmospheres, complexes of feeling that circulate through text and reader as characters try to maintain, (re)make, or endure their lives. If a novel tells the story of a life, that life is made comprehensible in no small part by representing the affects that accompany the processes of reproducing life: navigating social relations within and without family and other institutional structures, obtaining access to food, shelter, clothing, employment, and companionship, and squaring one's values and life experiences with those of the dominant norms of particular historical periods, geographic locations, and communities. My dissertation investigates how Lynda Barry's *Cruddy* (1999), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), and Fran Ross' *Oreo* (1974) represent the affects that suffuse the project of life-making for young women and girls alienated from the happiness promises of twentieth-century America due to the interrelations of their race, class, and gender status.

INDEX WORDS: affect, affective atmospheres, affect studies, American literature, Lynda Barry, Nella Larsen, Fran Ross, twentieth-century novels

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B.A., Antioch College, 2005

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA 2023

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May 2023

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It Feels Personal

I came to write about affect in novels because of the feelings that books have always brought to me. Like many readers, from childhood I found deep, transportive, nearly hypnotic pleasure in being absorbed in the lives of fictional protagonists; a good book meant my consciousness was "lost" in the text, unable to hear parents or teachers calling for me to do the boring or rote things real life required, like eating meals with the family (where I wasn't allowed to bring a book to the table), attending school (where I was often caught reading novels under my desk), or going to temple (you guessed it: no novels allowed). It felt like pure magic to access an object which could so thoroughly transport me from the material world around me, in which I felt desperately shy and anxious, so often demanding I complete tasks that I mostly came to see as unnecessary interruptions to my reading. When I inhabited the world of a book, I collaborated with the author to make a rich, engrossing film that played in my head, a world that gained detail, depth, and texture with the accumulation of every word on every page. All the while feelings that the characters and I would experience together became more and more entangled as the tale of their lives was transmitted to mine.

When I think back on reading particularly beloved childhood books, I rarely remember the details of the stories but rather how those books made me feel, what affective residue stuck with me such that I sought out re-entering their atmospheres again and again by re-reading them

two, five, ten times over. These affects weren't necessarily pleasant but had the draw of inciting exhilaration nonetheless: as a young teen I read Joyce Carol Oates' first-person fictionalization of Jeffrey Dahmer's murders, *Zombie*, a great many times, disgusted and amazed that a text could so vividly capture what felt at the time like an affective atmosphere otherwise unimaginably alien. I remember almost nothing about *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which I re-read amidst relentless repeat viewings of the 1959 film, but have never forgotten the force of my weeping, clutching my bedsheets, shaking and howling with all the drama of a soap star, at the book's end, where Anne wrote that she still believed that people were mostly good. How could such a sensitive, alive girl, in whom I saw so much of myself, have lived in a world as horrible as the one she did, and how could I continue to live in that same world when all that was left of her was this testament to girlhood lived under the direst of circumstances? Then again, so many of the books I loved and which inspired equally passionate re-reading were insipidly stupid vessels for reifying white supremacist, heteropatriarchal values– here's looking at you, *Sweet Valley High*. But I loved them no less passionately, wrote fan letters to *SVH*'s Francine Pascal as if she were Edith Wharton, praising her rendering of the nineteenth century in the special edition *Wakefield Legacy* and hoping that one day I too would be a "perfect size six" with "sun-kissed skin" just like the titular Wakefield twins (one was smart and bookish and one was popular and mean, but every single book in the series opened with the same praising description of their allegedly unmatched beauty).

It was early adolescence that brought me to all the sad girl protagonists of what Lauren Berlant terms the "minoritized arts," all the trials and tribulations of girls and women attempting to make lives for themselves while alienated from dominant culture in various ways: Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*,

Michelle Tea's *Valencia*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* (both these last ones discovered through recommendations from '90s alt-queen of sad girl songs, Tori Amos) (*Female* ix). These books were all balms for and confirmation of the righteousness of my teenage angst, which emerged alongside a growing consciousness of the relationship between that nebulous thing called happiness so associated with highly prescribed lives and the raced, classed, and gendered systems that put some in such close proximity to that happiness and others perilously far from it. From these books I garnered not lessons in surviving different forms of alienation (though some of that too) but stories about lives lived in tension with the happy promises supposedly wrought by the status quo. Increasingly disenchanted with the prospects of having the kind of life my family insisted I cultivate to maintain their own promises of happiness– happy, white, obedient Jewish heterosexual children who will eventually bear more happy, white, obedient Jewish heterosexual children– novels became places where I could imagine different kinds of lives for myself and witness women and girls create those lives for themselves (or die trying). These novels kept me tethered to the promise that there were other ways to have a life, one which may not make me happy (a temporary affect in even the most comfortable social and material circumstances) but which could put me in relation with others made unhappy by the unhappy promises of what bell hooks names white supremacist capitalist imperialist patriarchy (hooks xv). Though Brigitte Bargetz writes that "[e]mphasizing the potentialities [of affect]…recirculates within a liberal logic by politically romanticizing emotions and thus risks falling prey to the restorative and liberating power of affect," I don't propose that novels' reminders that affective alienation is a shared condition are or need to be "restorative or liberating" (Bargetz 581). Rather, I propose that it is worth studying what kind of lives and social relations some authors have found particularly useful for holding the complex circulations of

affective atmospheres that accompany the reproduction of life for those alienated from the promise of happiness by their positionality in what Patricia Hill Collins terms the matrix of domination (Hill Collins 227-228).

So why choose the three novels that comprise this study? What affective atmospheres and strategies for circulating them do Lynda Barry, Nella Larsen, and Fran Ross put to use and to what end? All three novels, written decades apart across the twentieth century, feature young women and girls trying to reproduce life during periods of personal and national transition in (mostly) the U.S.: *Quicksand*'s Helga Crane, twenty-three, biracial, Black, is searching for radiant life crash bang in the midst of the roaring '20s and Harlem Renaissance; *Oreo*'s Christine "Oreo" Clark, sixteen, genius, Black, Jewish, is spewing Yiddish all over early '70s NYC in search of an absent *schmuck* of a father; and *Cruddy*'s Roberta Rohbeson, alternately eleven and sixteen, white, poor, and grounded-for-life abuse survivor stumbles her way through the LSD-soaked late '60s/early '70s with a cadre of other runaway teens. All three set out on adventures that they hope will change the conditions of their lives, in Helga and Roberta's cases to make lives bearable enough to keep living and in Oreo's case to discover the "secret of her birth" that will, unbeknownst to her, end up equipping her with a new and fittingly generative source of power. While Helga and Roberta seek out lives with markedly different social relations from the unhappy, alienated ones in which their stories begin, Oreo seeks only to clarify the mysterious nature of her origins as a form of self-edification, a rite of passage that proves along the way that no one and nothing can harm her after a lifetime of being bolstered by a family and community of outcasts reproducing weird and wonderful ways of living. In stark contrast to Helga and Roberta's rejecting, cruel families, Oreo has a loving, matriarchally-helmed family who encourage and cultivate her idiosyncratic genius; while *Quicksand* and *Cruddy* both end on the

verge of their heroines' deaths, *Oreo* ends instead with the death of an inconsequential patriarch before literally putting the power to reproduce– or put an end to a "kosher" (i.e. white, as per her racist grandfather) branch of her father's genetic line directly into Oreo's hands. Despite the fact that one of these books ends quite unlike the others, they all share in common lively portraits of women and girls attempting, with various successes and failures, to reproduce life in twentieth century America, a historical period marked by the continued circulation of political "progress" as an ever-accruing achievement that has nevertheless failed to eliminate the vulnerability of certain lives to the systems of domination that continue to structure the nation's social relations.

I approach my exploration of affective atmospheres in these novels with several questions at the forefront: what are the respective survival strategies of each protagonist, what interferes with their attempts at survival, and what affects congeal in and around them as they encounter others during attempts to continue reproducing their lives? When authors create a fictional world in which their characters will live, regardless of how much that world resembles or doesn't resemble our own, they create the version of the world most capable of effectively showcasing those character's strategies (or lack thereof) for reproducing life. Whether those strategies serve and/or hinder these characters from making a life that adds up to something, the world and inhabitants that contextualize their life come alive through a dynamic circuit of affects that act on the reader. Reading a novel about a someone trying to live a life– a much more complicated task than merely being born and staying alive– can be a way to learn about what it means to be in relation with others in a world structured by relations of domination that we all inherit and are forced to navigate in the course of having a life. If you were asked to describe what it feels like to be a person in this world, to have that thing called a life which is the vehicle for your personhood, how could one even begin to answer, knowing the millions of variables that make

some lives so different from others? Novels, with their infinite number of lives lived and ended in an infinite number of circulating narratives and attendant affective atmospheres, are one avenue to help us think about the overwhelming task, both affective and material, of reproducing life with and alongside so many others.

When I put these three novels in conversation with each other here, which all feature girls and women living lives deeply affected by their most intimate familial relations, I am considering how much easier or harder it can be to a have a life depending on the relations into which we arrive and/or are able to foster in the course of things. In a 2012 interview with Marxist feminist Silvia Federici she describes the reproduction of life as not "only in the sense of procreation, although that is part of it, but all the activities necessary for the reproduction of human life– from housework to subsistence agriculture, to the production of culture and care for the environment" (Federici 55). I extrapolate out from Federici's definition to include considerations of the affects and affective circulations necessary for people to stay engaged in the pursuit of reproducing life– their own as well as those of the people around them. Sharing affective atmospheres, which include how we feel about the world we've inherited and in which our lives must be lived, can be a significant element in the quest to reproduce life. I use affective atmospheres to denote the way "affect exerts a force on those that are surrounded by it, and like the air we breathe it provides the very condition of the possibility of life" (Anderson 78). Affect is a social animal, a collective creation that we carry with us and which is malleable at sites of encounter with objects, people, places, and all that makes up the space of a life lived on earth.

My study of the affective atmospheres in these novels draws on work by Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and Kathleen Stewart, all of whom center affect as a force significantly shaped by distributions of power in the matrix of domination. Ahmed, for example, cites happiness as

"the object of human desire, as being what we aim for, as being what gives purpose, meaning, and order to human life," despite that "it does not mean we know what we wish for in wishing for happiness" (*Promise* 1). Identifying happiness as the affective state that people have been taught to aim for as the goal of life-making, how then do we frame the affective circulations that congeal around those made to inherit the unhappy histories of systemic social domination? As Hazel Carby describes it in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, her study of African American women novelists, "stereotypes only appear to exist in isolation while actually depending on a nexus of figurations which can be explained only in relation to each other" (Carby 20). Dehumanizing stereotypes of the angry Black woman and jade, as Carby explores, or the unhappy queer and feminist killjoy, as Ahmed investigates, function not only to recirculate associations with unhappiness and unacceptable sexuality with Black women, queers, and feminists, but to maintain the perceived integrity of those framed as their happy inverses: white, sexually "pure," heterosexual, gender-compliant women who literally and figuratively reproduce a way of life compatible with white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. What Ahmed does know about that happiness is that it is the promise that follows around objects, identities, and social relations capable of reproducing social norms, meaning that inversely, unhappiness, that life-negating affective force that untethers people from the desire to reproduce life, is a promise that follows around people systemically degraded by intersecting systems of race, class, and gender.

Novelists invariably produce affective atmospheres that circulate as characters try to maintain, make, or endure their lives. If a novel tells the story of a life, that life is made comprehensible in no small part by relaying what that character or characters feel (or don't feel) as they tackle the reproduction of life: navigating social relations within and without family and other institutional structures, obtaining access to food, shelter, clothing, employment, and

companionship, and squaring their values and life experiences with those of the dominant norms of their particular historical period, geographic location, and community. How do novels transmit these affects, which so often animate readers' attachments to the text? On one hand there is a simple and boring answer: an author writes about a life or lives and in learning of the good, bad, and ambivalent terms of their lives we feel feelings with or about them: happy for their happinesses, sad for their sadnesses; or perhaps, with a villainous protagonist, happy at their sadness and sadness at their happiness. But most novels accumulate affects that then act cumulatively on a reader: what is the affective mélange we're left with in the end, and why does it resonate as pleasurable, dissatisfying, or any of the other affects that linger after engaging with a text? How might a novel that ends in a beloved character's death, such as *Quicksand* or *Cruddy*, bring us comfort, or a novel's happy end leave us melancholy or annoyed? To use Lynda Barry's description of her writing process for *Cruddy*, when we read a good novel "something alive" (a text) meets something else alive (a reader) and, in the best-case scenario, produces something else alive: an affective atmosphere collaboratively congealed out of one life's accumulations meeting another. What happens when we read a book, even a sad book, can be life-affirming, assisting the reader in the reproduction life by reminding us, as Berlant puts it, that "you are not alone." This is not a didactic lesson per se, but an intimate entanglement that can sustain life nonetheless by offering a kind of transformation necessary to survival in a precarious world. As Judith Butler writes,

> if we undergo the experience [of dialogue] then we enter the conversation as one kind of person and but emerge as another kind. This is simply to say that the best kind of dialogue is that which offers the possibility for each participant to be transformed through the process itself. (Butler 82)

Butler is writing about dialogue happening between two people, face-to-face or perhaps voice-to-voice, but nonetheless I find her analysis resonant for the practice of reading the books that other people write. When we finish a novel, especially one that for whatever reason means something special to us, we have added to the survival kit that assists in keeping us alive even when the world wears us down. A novel alone is incapable of making a life (other than the fictional ones its author portrays) but can be an important tool in the accruing collection of affective engagements that make up what Ahmed calls a feminist survival kit, what we accrue "[w]hen you are not supposed to live, as you are, where you are, with whom you are with..[w]e have to work out how to survive in a system that decides life for some requires the death or removal of others" (*Living* 237). Books can be significant contributions to these survival kits, not just to make us feel less alone but to put us in the lineage of community "shaped by passing books around; the sociality of their lives is part of the sociality of ours" (*Living* 17).

Thinking about what to include in the introduction to this project, which grapples with how authors represent affect as a force central to the reproduction of life for girls and young women in the twentieth century United States, kept bringing me back to a phrase that circulated prodigiously during my time as young girl: "*Get a life!*" A haughty, valley girl-tinged comeback, the retort implied that whoever it was being said to had been derailed from taking care of their own business such that they no longer had a life of their own. The idiom also works as an admonishment: to be told to "get a life" implied that you had none, and that made you and whatever semblance of life you'd cobbled together pathetic. Not having a life meant not having value, not having the quality of liveliness that defined having a life: going places, doing things, meeting people, connecting with the world of others. To be told to "get a life" was a way to cut someone down to size, the implication being that a life was what one needs to be a person of

consequence. One could only hope to avoid being told to "get a life!"– it was embarrassing to lack what seemed so inherent to the state of being alive.

Ahmed describes feminism as an engagement with "the struggle for more bearable worlds," a way of doing life (*Living* 1). I think about this all the time. I like the openness of this phrasing, the way it describes the desire for a life that is "bearable." When I am overcome by the horror of a story in the news I often find myself feeling that it is unbearable to be alive while knowing such pain and exploitation exists; even more so, that the world is doling out such suffering while I sit on my couch or bed, reading about this horror rather than experiencing it. Why should anyone have to experience something so horrible, and another person not? The fact of this: that some suffer terribly and frequently in the course of having a life, and others far less so, and that much of that suffering is not inevitable but forcefully produced through the systems of power that dominate life in the U.S. and have often protected me from specific kinds of suffering, whether I wanted that protection or not.

In my first chapter, on Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, I investigate protagonist Helga Crane's prolonged, and ultimately unsuccessful, search for a life worth living. I use the phrase "life worth living" to denote not just being alive, which is often simple enough, but having a life that contains enough moments of pleasure, intimate connection with others, curiosity, care, and sustenance to more or less continuously inspire the desire to continue reproducing that life. Of course, characters and people alike may have a life deemed worth living by others (or even themselves) but still abhor or wish to eliminate that life. Helga manages to hold onto the promise of happiness, Ahmed's way of describing "a complex set of learned attachments and fantasies" that "redescribe social norms as social goods" and which "[shape] what coheres as a world," for three different iterations of her life before losing it completely, a crisis of health, poverty, and

young children finally dooming her to a promised early death (*Promise* 2). Helga, a twenty-three-year-old woman with an absent Black father and deceased white mother, is trying to find her place in the world. We follow her from the American South to Chicago to Harlem to Copenhagen, back to Harlem and finally to Alabama, learning in the process that everywhere and every type of relation feels bad. If you guessed that the interrelation of racism, classism, and sexism are the cause of this bad feeling you'd be right.

Quicksand is one of the two novels I discuss lead by alienated protagonists, who tend to share an affective atmosphere of disenchantment with the systems allotted for making one's way in life. Lauren Berlant describes these novels of alienation as doing the work of "tell[ing] identifying consumers that 'you are not alone'…this is something we know but never tire of hearing confirmed, because aloneness is one of the affective experiences of being collectively, structurally unprivileged" (*Female Complaint* ix). She explicitly ties the affective state of alienation not the realm of individual psychology, to which feelings (especially negative ones) are so often relegated and dismissed, but to the collective state of having to reproduce life within systems of domination that assign affirming and negating affective atmospheres to our existences even before we are born into them. Novels of unhappy protagonists, whose unhappy lives are frequently the result of navigating social relations defined by hierarchies of race, class, and gender, can be novels of resistance, even when they end unhappily. Helga Crane never finds what she is looking for: though she finds chic friends who share her aesthetic tastes and the tiresomeness of uplift rhetoric, accepting Danish family whose wealth allot her every beautiful dress and jewel she could ever dream of, and even a last ditch attempt at "having it all" with a rural preacher and the children she bears him, she is never able to find interpersonal intimacy in which she can honestly share her feelings about the complex of affects and effects of a life lived

in the borders of the color line, left without any Black family and relegated to white family members who would like her either gone entirely or at their disposal to exploit through racialized tropes of exotification.

My reading of the novel builds on analysis by Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, and Cheryl Wall. Patricia Hill Collins' analysis of the matrix of domination and the multiple levels on which it affects people helped me locate sites of analysis in the protagonist's lives; reading *Quicksand* through the lens of Black feminisms and feminist affect theory re-centers Larsen's representation of the troubled and troubling conditions for life-making: what makes life possible is not only social legibility through the lens of the normative, but also *feeling* the "right" way about inhabiting that normative life, or, feeling *with* rather than *against* the streams of affect that cohere national and local cultures. To not find contentedness is any of the lives she tries out renders her an affect alien everywhere she goes, Ahmed's phrase for those people who "convert good feelings into bad" and "who are alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world or how they affect others in the world" (*Promise* 49, 164). The things which should make her happy don't, and those things which make others happy tend towards that which Helga finds unbearable. Though she catches occasional glimpses of the kind of life she might lead if she could either not be affected adversely by others' judgments or give in to making someone other than herself– her aunt and uncle, her friends– happy, she ultimately finds herself an affect alien through and through no matter where she goes. I argue that her discontent is not the product of an irritating and frustrating personality, as some critics have, but rather a product of trying to reproduce life under conditions that, even when radically different in some ways, are ultimately always demanding that she capitulate to the dehumanizing ideologies of race and racism that are circulated by both Black and white communities in which she becomes embedded, though under

the guise of different sets of fantasies about the meaning of Blackness, whiteness, and their meetings when people reproduce lives alongside and with each other.

Considering *Quicksand,* and later *Oreo,* in the greater context of African American literature, the conversation around what kind of representation was "good" for Black people– i.e. what might insert positively coded affects about their existence and reproduction of life into white American monoculture– contribute to ensuring greater freedom, and concurrently whether this was even a concern that Black artists should be tasked with, became a major debate around literary production during the Harlem Renaissance, the period of *Quicksand*'s release. Historical context gives some account to the ways minoritzed arts have long been entangled in arguments about what kind of affects a text "should" be expected to produce in order to manage the public receptions of an entire class of people– and whether such a broad burden should ever be the domain of artists and art-making at all. J.A. Rogers, in a 1927 review of Langston Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, accuses the book of being "designed for white readers" and calls on Black readers to "discourage the marketing of such books…that help but to tighten the chains of social degradation" (Rogers 12). In Rogers's view representing what he saw as "unsavory" aspects of Black life in America could only impede the furthering of Black freedom– and therefore happiness– by confirming for white readers racist stereotypes of African Americans unacceptable to their limited white standards of social propriety. His argument was not, he claims, with the book's attention to working class Black life, but to the "jazzy, degenerate, infantile and silly vogue" that he assigns as the purview of poems such as "Red Silk Stockings," in which Hughes writes on the complexities of desire, sexuality, and miscegenation rendered in a Black Southern dialect typical of many jazz songs of the period (Rogers 12). In an interview with the same paper in which he responds to the review, Hughes declares that his "only fear is that the

hostile attitude of our critics will frighten other younger writers away from writing about themselves...[t]he only true and lasting art that an artist can produce is that based upon what he himself knows best" (Calvin 26). Hughes's response directly engages the question of authorial autonomy and how artists might craft authentically affective texts, the freedom to create what an artist feels moved to create rather than what they are trying to compel someone else– someone not copacetic to the facts of their existence– to feel: how can Black writers be free to make "true and lasting art," authentic to their affective and material lives, if they are tasked with a duty to only represent Black life that conforms to the rigid strictures of what white supremacy has deemed acceptable reflections of humanity? Hughes then continues that he "hope[s] no one will accuse him of trying to write about the Negro race. I am not the Negro race and don't pretend to know all about it…In my first book, 'The Weary Blues,' I tried to hold up the sadness of cabaret life. I did not preach, 'Go to the Cabaret'" (Calvin 26). His purview as an artist is not "the Negro race" because he is one person, with a highly specific set of experiences that have come to inform his personhood. Sadness is what he perceived in cabaret life, and so it infused his portraits of it. White supremacy dictates that Black individuals are judged not as themselves but as representors of their entire racialized group, and he rejects the idea that he– or any single Black artist– should have to carry such a heavy affective burden. As Hughes understands it, the purpose of art was to feel and create in response to that feeling, to be moved to craft an atmosphere that might be apprehensible to others, not to create didactic texts which only reify who gets to be in charge of deciding which behaviors and affects are acceptable and which are not. Larsen, whose book was reviewed positively but rarely with an understanding that its unhappy ending was a social critique rather than a critique of its protagonist, might have loved Fran Ross' *Oreo*, attended to later in this introduction, which could, by the time of its publishing

nearly fifty years after Larsen's novel, find joyful comedy and jubilant life-making in Oreo's holistic, seamless embodiment of both what was racialized as her Blackness and Jewishness in tandem.

In my second chapter I write on the affective circulations in Lynda Barry's *Cruddy*. Barry tackles childhood as one of my most precarious periods of one's life, for being a child means being uniquely vulnerable to the machinations of all systems of power that govern the reproduction of life in the U.S., run by adults whose age automatically grants them power to decide the terms of children's lives. Childhood is not a safe, happy place for Roberta; being a child has only ever meant being seen as a pawn or receptable of violence for the adults who have had the most access to her. The novel follows two intertwined narratives of different times in Roberta's life: one (1966) in which she is eleven years old and on a dangerous, murder-filled road trip with her abusive father, and one (1971) in which she is sixteen and trying to leave home on a drug-fueled road trip with new, delinquent teenage friends with whom she shares, for the first time in her life, the tale of the road trip taken with the father, which ended in her murder of him in self-defense. Roberta, too, is an alienated heroine: the novel, which is fashioned as her found notebook, begins with her suicide note, which announces even before her tale begins that if someone (i.e. you, dear reader) is reading this book then she has gotten her "happily ever after": death by her own hand. Alienated by the horrific experiences of her childhood and continued abuse by her mother, Roberta has had no friends until a chance meeting with a fellow dispossessed teen sends her on a series of psychedelic adventures imbued with the pleasureful, intimate affective encounters she'd long been craving.

Barry poses questions about life, creativity, and story-making throughout another of her books, *Picture This*, that serve as useful guides for considering *Cruddy*'s contradictory affects, a

regular trait of the bildungsroman form. Barry asks, for example, if "experience have a shape? Can this shape be passed from one person to another?" and "Why do we talk about things that shape character? Or shape the course of our lives? What is it that takes 'shape'?" (*Picture* 54). Working in the lineage of the bildungsroman, a form dedicated to explaining how character is shaped and which shapes add up to something legible within nationally sanctioned scripts for success, Barry uses *Cruddy* to show what takes shape when a smart, sensitive, and wily girl is born into a cruddy, cruddy world. Roberta takes shape as not just particular protagonist in a specific time and place, but a narrative form (entity acting as the vehicle for a set of affects) capable of holding and exploring life's contradictions. And of course, it is death that takes shape– all murder, gore, flesh, knives, rotting smells, suicide. But Barry also gives space to the aliveness of that tumbling toward death, makes clear through her hyper specific portrait of girlhood at the margins that all the life lost to these systems of power is a devastating loss to continued reproduction of the world as we know it.

What the world of *Cruddy* loses with the deaths of Roberta and her friends is life and liveliness; there is not a single adult in Cruddy City with even a hint of joy, hope, or playfulness. Snuffing out bright, vulnerable people is a way to kill vibrancy, to dim the lights of liveliness, to cut off a path to imagined futures that includes those who might know the most about how systems of power funnel life and death out to people with exacting precision. Later in the same book, Barry asks "[w]ho does war belong to? Who does death belong to?" before relaying that "[m]y mother was a kid in a village just outside of Manila when the bombing raids began on December 7, 1943," then wondering "[w]ho inherits these things?" and "[w]hat happens to the unspeakable? What happens to the unthinkable?" (*Picture* 206-207). Connecting her mother's experience of military violence to her own mourning of American military violence (Barry lists

the American wars on Iraq and Afghanistan and racist, classist U.S. negligence in the wake of Hurricane Katrina as devastating affective events), in a book on creative practice no less, makes explicit her conception of how intimately affective atmospheres are shaped by the apparatuses that mete out socioeconomic power. "Who does death belong to" seems a particularly relevant question for *Cruddy*: why is it that in this novel death, the unspeakable, and the unthinkable, all "belong" not to the U.S. state or military, to morgues or the elderly, but to a child? Roberta's familial inheritance– poverty, knives, murder, and every imaginable form of abuse– belong to her, Barry suggests, because she is a child who lives in a cruddy universe systemically constructed to put its greatest affective and material burdens on those most vulnerable to its hierarchies of power. Readers might wonder how and why Roberta Rohbeson's cruddy tale begins with the urgent message she wishes to pass along before her suicide: the seemingly life-affirming, profound, LSD-laced realization that "Truth plus Magical Love Equals Freedom" (*Cruddy* 11). Barry sets to answering this question by narrativizing a life affirmed and negated in quick and annihilating succession, making use of the literary traditions of the bildungsroman and fairy tale to tell a tale of how good it can feel to have a life worth living, if only briefly, to just for a moment reproduce life under just the right conditions and with just the right people.

In my third and final chapter I explore how novels of happy or empowered protagonists, whose lives are often insulated through social relations that affirm their alienation from dominant norms, as in Fran Ross' *Oreo,* can also be at the helm of novels of affective resistance, their survival a testament to the significant role that shared affective orientations can play in keeping one attached to the reproduction of life. Rather than impairing Oreo's ability to flourish and have a life, as in the novels of Helga and Roberta's lives, a union of two families initially vexed by racism and antisemitism gives way within the first few pages to the harmony of Helen and

Louise's (Oreo's mother and grandmother) Philadelphia household. Oreo's white, Jewish paternal grandmother "dropped dead of a racist/my-son-the-bum coronary" at the news that her son would be marrying a Black woman, while her Black, antisemitic maternal grandfather is rendered paralyzed and silent by the same news (Ross 3). Rid of family members who disapprove of Helen and Samuel's relationship (and rid of Samuel once fear of losing his "father's *gelt*" sinks in), Helen and Louise proceed by modeling the pursuit of one's pleasures, passions, and curiosities, offering a template for how to have one's own life while also contributing to the collectively beneficial set of relations that bind their community together (Ross 79). Oreo's autonomy, so precious to the novel's plotting, is explicitly constituted through these detailed portraits of the social and familial commitments that have cultivated it. Extravagant gourmet recipes executed to perfection, abstract math worked for fun, sentences-as-word-problems meant to be unraveled in the course of conversation, psychic predictions of winning lottery numbers shared with the whole neighborhood: innovation, genius, procreant paradox, and shared resources become the name of the Clark family game. Accordingly, the novel's inversions of the affective atmospheres of alienation and freedom congeal through Oreo's thrilling immunity to harm throughout her adventures.

Ross's project of writing a young Black girl's freedom to think, adventure, and deflect, defeat, and avenge violence engages an inquiry long central to Black feminist art: what conditions constitute and enable the freedom to have a life worth living, and what might such freedom feel like when embodied by a fictional character? Chattel slavery and the horror and wealth it produced in tandem communicated unequivocally that to be racialized as Black in America was to be not-free and consequently unhappy, treated by white citizens as objects which could be owned, controlled, and abused with impunity and stereotyped as docile servants in

literature and film that hoped to reify the safety that could allegedly be bought by "staying in one's place" and being happy with that paltry lot. Even those African Americans who were born free or managed to escape and/or buy their freedom risked being kidnapped and (re)sold into slavery, as Solomon Northrup documents in *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853). After emancipation, the terms of freedom shifted yet again: to not be enslaved was only a nominal freedom that did not actually guarantee the freedom to have a life worth living. As Saidiya Hartman writes, "[t]he longstanding and intimate affiliation of liberty and bondage [in the U.S.] made it impossible to envision freedom independent of constraint or personhood and autonomy separate from the sanctity of property and proprietorial notions of the self," ensuring that freedom promises only "the subjugation that rights' instigate and the domination they efface" (Hartman 115-16). Emancipation meant that Black Americans were freed from being owned by individual white person(s), but then "owned" themselves only in the sense that they must now sell their own labor back to a market that continued to dehumanize (and therefore render them infinitely exploitable) in revised but ultimately familiar forms. In this way "the texture of freedom is laden with the vestiges of slavery," the very conception of American liberation inextricable from slavery and the ideology of race (Hartman 116). Oreo, however, is free to meander through the world as she pleases: nowhere in the text is she bested by anyone who wishes to harm or mislead her, and she is always free to "dispose as [she] wishes of [her] own wealth, honour, time and body" (Foucault 105). Though she has caretakers who legally and socially have the right to control her, neither her mother nor grandmother try to prevent her from acting as she wishes, and in fact encourage her meanderings in search of the knowledge that would continue to equip her with the tools she needed to reproduce life.

When trying to describe affect to my students, I use an example from Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*, a book cataloguing (as a means of describing) the way affect works as a force in our lives. She tells a story about going to a bar, which was quiet, just a few patrons scattered about, not speaking to each other much. Then a couple entered the bar who had just had a motorcycle accident; shaken and telling their story, the bar becomes alive with their shock, fear, surprise, and pain. Patrons are all speaking to each other now, telling their stories, people are asking after the hurt couple (Stewart 11). This is affect: someone or something meets another someone or something and the effect of these two atmospheres colliding produces an atmosphere of its own, changing and growing as it accumulates through the presence and removal of people, objects, smells, stories, sounds, and everything else. Everyone carries around an affective atmosphere, changeable as weather but also congealed from a lifetime of experiences lived within the matrix of domination. Some people, as Ahmed has shown, bear the brunt of racism, classism, and sexism, and the atmosphere they are forced to carry by history makes getting along difficult. We learn to feel through engaging with the culture and cultural products we consume, and generally expect that if we feel in happy agreement with those cultural artifacts, we will be more comfortable, will have an easier time reproducing a life that adds up to something worth holding onto. To feel some affective resonance in the values and aspirations of dominant culture in the U.S. is not a guarantee, but nevertheless one of the most tried and true tools for surviving what can otherwise be an alienating and precarious existence; most people don't have the choice of compliance if they have already been marked unhappy by the nation-state, which has and continues to exert its power to help reproduce some lives and negate others.

Those who don't get along have stories told about how, exactly, they did not get along. This was moral instruction– think Radclyffe Hall having to kill her dyke protagonist in *The Well*

of Loneliness, all those long-suffering Thomas Hardy girls, William Wells Brown throwing poor Clotel over a bridge. Now, some writers can publish books about marginalized people behaving "badly" and the message is no longer *WARNING WARNING: GUARANTEED DEATH AHEAD* but rather *It's hard to get along when you don't get along*: a very different proposition for readers, some of who receive pleasure and are affected powerfully through reading about rude or vengeful affect aliens trying to carve out the best way to escape a morose series of affective atmosphere that might be described as "die," "suffer silently," "get over it," and "freak out." Affective circulations help us learn about how to have a life and how to have it with others; though reading is usually a solitary act, it puts us into encounters with so much of life we could otherwise never touch, whole worlds and lives to feel with, through, and into– and they into us.

CHAPTER 2

SEARCHING FOR RADIANT LIFE: AFFECTIVE ATMOSPHERES IN NELLA LARSEN'S *QUICKSAND*

Helga Crane is all alone in the world. With little to no family and few friends, her refusal to accept the restrictive ideologies of race, class, and gender that underwrite the sociality of her communities– ideologies that implicitly promise contentment and belonging so long as one adheres to them– renders her affectively isolated even amongst those with whom she shares other values. While initially each community she moves to offers relief from the tension of wherever and whoever came before, that temporary contentment always fades, and events at the novel's close render Helga unable to move on to the next thing. In telling Helga's life story Larsen surfaces the affective contours of Helga's everyday experiences, produced through national ideologies of belonging, citizenship, and personhood.[1] As a work of art investigating a young biracial Black woman's attempts to make and maintain a way of life that remains bearable to her, Larsen's detailed narration of Helga's affective states draws attention to how everyday circulations of affect direct the conditions for life-seeking, rather than merely resulting from them.[2] I refer to Helga purposefully as biracial *and* Black rather than one or the other because her inhabitation of both designations at once contribute significantly to the both/and portrait of

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[1] For more on how affect structures everyday experience, see Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*.

[2] Jeanne Scheper has noted the significance of circulation in and around *Quicksand*, writing that "Larsen's novel works as a gift of social documentation, preserving raced and gendered material histories through storytelling" (680).

selfhood Larsen creates with Helga. While it is her status as biracial that alienates her within Black communities, whose critical evaluation of miscegenation stems from its association with slavery, rape, and the violent subjugation of Black women, she is also racialized as Black by whites' adherence to the one-drop rule.

In mapping the affective turns of *Quicksand*, I build on the work of Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, Deborah E. McDowell, and Cheryl Wall, who have previously theorized the complexity and depth of Larsen's critique of race, class, and gender systems.[3] I then utilize this intersectional framework to consider Larsen's staging of these critiques through encounters in which Helga's tension with her intimate circle becomes unbearably articulated.[4] As Anne Hostetler writes, this tension congeals through Helga's "view[ing of] herself through a confining construction of race or gender" that is then given increased resonance through the affectively alienating encounters with her community (Hostetler 40). Engaging work by Sara Ahmed on what she terms "affect aliens" and Berlant's work on affect and social relations, I intervene in a pattern of critical assumptions that find Helga's flight from each place and community without clear reason. Reading *Quicksand* through this lens re-centers Larsen's representation of the troubled and troubling conditions for life-making: what makes life possible is not only legibility through the lens of the normative, but also *feeling* the "right" way about inhabiting that

[3] I approach affect in this paper through the lens of the sociopolitical, as shown in work of Sara Ahmed, Berlant, Sianne Ngai, and Stewart in which following affect and its social circulations offers the opportunity to consider how race, class, gender and other axes in the matrix of domination (Hill Collins) shape and are shaped by pre-conscious feeling. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth write in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, "affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves" (Gregg and Seigworth 1).

[4] See Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race & Sex" (1989).

normative life, or, feeling *with* rather than *against* the streams of affect that cohere national and local cultures.[5]

Readers first meet Helga at Naxos, an African American school based on Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, which she has just decided to leave in search of greener pastures. Frustrated with the hypocrisy of the institution, which purports to uplift Black students while kowtowing to white supremacist hierarchies of race and class, Larsen then follows several formative years in Helga's search for a life worth living: from Chicago to Harlem to Copenhagen and back again to Harlem, to her final home as a preacher's wife and mother in rural Alabama, Helga's story is one of drive and movement– until it's not. Propelled by the congealing circuit of happy and unhappy affects that circulate through gender, race, and class ideologies, she must continuously question whether the social relations of each community are capable of reproducing life in terms she finds bearable. [6] While Helga's day-to-day life in Naxos, Chicago, Harlem, Denmark, and rural Alabama often appears in summary, an accumulation of months and years condensed into a single paragraph, the encounters that predate her abandonment of each place are slowed down, magnified, with careful attention to the affective circulations between her and the character with whom she argues.[7] Tracking these scenes that slow down time to detail the

[5] In a 2012 interview with Silvia Federici she describes the reproduction of life as not "only in the sense of procreation, although that is part of it, but all the activities necessary for the reproduction of human life– from housework to subsistence agriculture, to the production of culture and care for the environment" (55). In this article I extrapolate out from Federici's definition to also include a sense of belonging and shared affective orientation as necessary for human beings to want to continue the practice of living– the affective circulations that binds people to the pursuit of living.

[6] Gregg and Seigworth describe affect as "the name we give to those forces- visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion- that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability" (1).

[7] "Little by little the signs of spring appeared, but strangely the enchantment of the season, so enthusiastically, so lavishly greeted by the gay dwellers of Harlem, filled her only with restlessness" (Larsen 47); "Well into Helga's second year in Denmark, came an indefinite discontent" (Larsen 81).

interactional dynamics of Helga's affective atmospheres, I analyze how these encounters expose the specific contours of her alienation in each place, precipitating her precision-cut extractions from one life to another. Additionally, I examine the parallel scenes in each city during which Helga is made to encounter abstractions of herself through the distorting stereotypes of racialized and gendered othering, further confirming the limited life-making capacities of existence under white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Examination of the affective circulations in these scenes assists in refuting the notion that Helga lacks clear motives for leaving each community, in the process illuminating Larsen's canny rendering of affect's powerful ability to divert agential life-making.

Quicksand has received significant scholarly attention since its recovery by scholars of African American and women's literature in the 1970s.[8] Carby describes Helga as an "alienated heroine," a Black woman unable to fit comfortably into the limited variety of social scripts available to her (Carby 169). Carby argues that *Quicksand* might be read as *refusing* this standard definition of alienation as "a state of consciousness," instead attributing Helga's lonesome affective states to "existing forms of social relations" rather than individual dissatisfactions (169). Such a reading importantly moves the onus of responsibility for Helga's failure to make a life primarily to the realm of the national, social, and collective rather than the psychological and individual. Another pattern in *Quicksand* scholarship, as shown in the work of Barbara Johnson, Deborah McDowell, and Sianne Ngai, takes for granted that readers are, to the novel's detriment, never told or shown conclusively what causes Helga to flee several relatively comfortable lives only to find herself trapped in a decidedly uncomfortable one– also of her own

[8] The novel was out of print from the 1930s through the 1970s.

choosing– at the novel's close.[9] Her pluck and determination to pursue life on her own terms in the first three quarters of the novel seem to imply that eventually this pattern will resolve– Helga will eventually prevail and "settle down" in some right environment. Yet the final pages find Helga on the brink of death after a series of back-to-back pregnancies, infant deaths, and illnesses, having made the quite sudden– and, according to some critics, incongruous– choice to marry one Reverend Pleasant Green and move to Alabama with him to tend his flock. This disruption of previous life-seeking patterns, in conjunction with Helga's fickleness regarding all the places and people she has encountered, has produced a distinct sense of annoyance and frustration for some readers. Johanna M. Wagner, for example, describes Helga as "off-putting and conflicted"; Ngai writes about irritation as the primary mood permeating *Quicksand*, Helga being both irritated by the wrong things while also irritating others (characters in as well as readers of the novel) with her presence (Ngai 129; 175). Johnson, quoted by Ngai, writes that:

> Helga repeatedly reaches states of relative contentment—in Harlem, in Denmark, in Alabama—only to fall into depression again *for no obvious reason*. Chapter breaks often occur where *psychological causation is missing*. . . . And it is the *difficulty of defining the causes of Helga's suffering* that leads to irritation in many readers. (Johnson 42, emphasis mine)

In light of Helga's explicit critiques of social relations throughout the novel, I am interested in further excavating assumptions used to anchor such readings of *Quicksand*, which find "no obvious reason" for her bouts of depression and flights from one place and life to another.[10]

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[9] Keguro Macharia takes up this issue through the framework of Black nativism: "Helga doesn't simply fail; she fails to cohere as a normative subject as defined through nativist guidelines" (Macharia 256).

[10] Critiques of the novel in which Helga's decision-making is interpreted as inscrutable appear in the public record almost immediately upon *Quicksand*'s first publication in 1928. A review from November of that year by Katherine Shepard Hayden makes simple work of summing up the novel, stating that it "is essentially the story of her inner life; the outer events are for the most part of secondary importance, merely the result of her inner conflicts, tangles,

Ngai ascribes “an incongruity or disproportionality” to Helga’s affective shapes and swings, a notion I find both compelling and incomplete (Ngai 175). How can any of Helga’s pains, annoyances, and quick, cutting decisions to leave each community be considered simply incongruous or disproportionate when the systems that structure her life are so brutally and calculatingly designed to eviscerate her personhood? If we read Helga’s numerous flights and depressions as overreactions or missing “psychological causation,” how might such a reading miss the use of Larsen’s uncomfortable narrative turns?

Yves W.A. Clemmen asks whether readers “might wonder where the book has taken us and why. What has motivated such a quest that ends in a negation of life?” (Clemmen 458). Central to Clemmen’s question is curiosity about Larsen’s motivation for ending the novel the

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inexplicable moods and impulses” (345). Hayden’s review figures Helga’s “inner conflicts, tangles, inexplicable moods and impulses” as causes of, not reactions to, “outer events.” This assumes that the propulsive problem of the novel is primarily centered within Helga, rather than as part of an exchange between Helga and her environments. Likewise, *Quicksand*’s very first review, published anonymously in the *New York Time*s under the title “A Mulatto Girl,” claims that the novel is decidedly not in the tradition of a Stowe or Van Vechten (despite the fact that many African American novelists were in print and circulating at the time, this anonymous reviewer only managed to offer as context two white ones). This reviewer praised Larsen for being “aware that a novelist’s business is primarily with individuals and not with classes.” As such, the reviewer continues, “[Larsen] *confines* herself to the life of Helga Crane” (emphasis mine). I pause with this pattern in the novel’s early reviews because it does such neat and airy work of misreading the novel’s (not particularly subtle) performance of social relations. These reviewers understood Helga’s cycle of desire, contentment, alienation, joy, pleasure, belonging, anger, shame, and curiosity as a sealed vault separating Helga from her environments, rendering the novel a predominantly internal battle in which Helga’s primary opponent is herself. This willful ignorance of the carefully constructed sociality through which Larsen undoes fantasies of belonging, happiness, and alienation can be understood in the context of the period’s primary conception of race– as a more or less fixed, black and white affair, despite every evidence to the contrary– and its place as a subject in art and culture, how it should or shouldn’t be used and to what end. White reviewers, as well as Larsen’s own publisher, Knopf, wished to present the novel as an “objective,” and therefore superior, African American novel, one palatable to a wider (whiter) readership. The jacket copy that originally accompanied the novel begins, “This is almost the only Negro novel of recent years which is wholly free from the curse of propaganda” (*Quicksand,* 1928). Such an approach tries to single out Larsen’s novel as being of unique quality specifically because of its lacking “the curse of propaganda.” Propaganda, presumably a shorthand for describing novels by African Americans with an overt uplift or political agenda (as if any text could ever be free of politics), “curses” a novel socially and economically, rendering it not for the general public, only the beleaguered few with a bone to pick. Helga Crane’s problems, the jacket copy continues, “are of the individual and not of a class or a race.” In defining Larsen’s “thoroughly charming and civilized” novel as one free of racial discourse, Knopf used Larsen’s construction of Helga’s web of feeling as a marketing tactic that would help to maintain the myth that socioeconomic stratification in the U.S. is the failure of individual wills rather than systemic privilege and oppression.

way she did: what is it that Helga sought, and why should the seeking of it result in a "negation of life" rather than reproduction of it? Clemmen goes on to note that, since critical consensus on the novel is generally positive, perhaps *Quicksand* smartly "conceal[s] its logic" (458). Readers are left understanding that Helga has a low threshold for the frustrations of everyday sociality, yet remains surrounded, as most people are to greater and lesser degrees, by these affective disruptions. But what she spends the entirety of the novel rejecting is not simply everyday sociality– though that too can be a drag– but the violence of history and ideology *disguised* as everyday sociality, allowing hierarchies of power to continue to move relatively unperturbed through culture, nebulously identified as "feeling." Emotion, intangible and unseen, is easy to demote to a consequence of individual psychology– feeling, something personal and individual, something mutable and subjective– rather than symptomatic of power structures that assign (un)happiness with exacting precision.[11] What a cruel journey Larsen narrates, the task of trying to build a coherent and comfortable life when one has been marked before birth with bad feelings; this may indeed produce irritation and ambivalence about the available normative scripts for happy life-making. Ann Hoestetler writes that "Larsen dared to explore the failure of her heroine to adjust to such a life"; perhaps this failure might instead be attributed to the limited and limiting terms that define the reproduction of life in each of Helga's communities (Hoestetler 36).

[11] Berlant writes that "[t]he displacement of politics to the realm of feeling both opens a scene for the analysis of the operations of injustice in lived democracy and shows the obstacles to social change that emerge when politics become privatized" (*Female* xii).

"Very Positively She Wanted It"

Before delving into an analysis of the encounters that represent the terms of life-making in Naxos, Harlem, and Copenhagen, it is important to understand the terms by which Helga defines (or doesn't define) happiness, the driving, abstract fantasy around which the novel's plot is configured. Helga explicitly considers the idea of happiness early in the novel as she readies herself to leave Naxos, musing that

> there was, she knew, something else. Happiness, she supposed. Whatever that might be. What, exactly, she wondered, was happiness. Very positively she wanted it. Yet her conception of it had no tangibility. She couldn't define it, isolate it, and contemplate it as she could some other abstract things. Hatred, for instance. Or kindness. (Larsen 24)

While Helga knows certainly that this "good life," as Berlant terms it, will include "material security, gracious ways of living, a profusion of lovely clothes, and a goodly share of envious admiration," she does not define these things *as* happiness; rather, the clothes, money, and manners will together congeal to produce an affective atmosphere of "envious admiration" around her (Larsen 24). This atmosphere will then mark her as one of the envied happy people: to be happy is to have the commodities that others want, which is also to be perceived as being made happy by these commodities, a strategy for constructing an affective atmosphere that others can register as happy. One must perfect the equation– must really be made happy by the objects and encounters that have promised happiness– for it to take, to convincingly saturate one's life for all to witness. For Helga these social relations are key to imagining how happiness will change her life: authentically embodying it will make it impossible for the gap between her self-perception and others' perception of her to exist. If there seems to be a tension inherent in her desire for the pleasures that money can buy despite her belief that money is not itself a

harbinger of happiness, it is "precisely the contradiction between her alienated, commodified self and her bourgeois desires that makes this novel so interesting" (Dawahare 28). Helga is aware that the accoutrements of happiness do not exactly guarantee that intangible thing called happiness. Rather, happiness is associated with these resources and objects such that those who have them become associated with happiness; those associated with happiness become desired objects themselves, promises that happiness is possible, is just around the next corner if one can put oneself into proximity with the right things.

Ahmed takes up Helga's question of what exactly happiness might be in *The Promise of Happiness*, in which she figures happiness as a complex set of learned attachments and fantasies that "redescribe social norms as social goods" and which "[shape] what coheres as a world" (Ahmed *Promise* 2). Marriage and family, for example, come to be defined as social goods not because they are inherently good (one person's happy family is another's hell) but because they are marked as goods nearly synonymous with happiness, directing subjects into relational forms that undergird nationally sanctioned projects of stratified race, class, and gender systems.[12] Identifying happiness as the promise that follows around objects, identities, and social relations capable of reproducing social norms, Ahmed dissects the rhetoric of happiness to map some of the narrative paths inscribed by those she describes as "affect aliens," people who "convert good feelings into bad" and "who are alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world or how they affect others in the world" (Ahmed *Promise* 49, 164). Helga is *all* affect alien: feeling the wrong thing at the wrong time, leaking her unhappy feelings about happy objects into nearly everyone with whom she becomes intimate. Whatever happiness may be, Larsen appreciates its

[12] Writing on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Ahmed notes that "[u]nhappiness becomes an inheritance of the violence of history…[t]his family is not white, not middle class, where 'being not' means being unhappy," pointing out how the rhetoric of (un)happiness is always already raced, classed, and gendered; a failure to achieve happiness is contextualized by who and what have already been marked (un)happy by history (*Promise* 80).

narrative force, propelling Helga's wanderings only so long as it is theoretically achievable somewhere else– and so long as Helga is able to physically and financially pursue that somewhere else. Helga's wish to "define, isolate, and contemplate" happiness in order to make it "tangible," perhaps rendering it apprehensible, is never fulfilled (Larsen 24). She comes into contact with it as a pleasurable sense of general contentment in each new place she arrives, only to wonder, shortly thereafter, at losing it yet again. Happiness is an unstable and therefore alluring promise, its value increased by its enigmatic ability to be both invoked and eradicated by the same objects or events.

"It Was Too Bad"

The interrelation of anger, resentment, and amazement that incites Helga's decision to leave Naxos in the novel's opening chapters is incited by Helga's quarrel with the institution's uplift politics. For her, its capitulation to a limited vision of freedom for its students amounts to no less than a promise of death; we learn that liveliness (or a lack thereof) becomes part of the measure of whether Helga can bare to stay somewhere. A whiff of death, used by Helga as a metaphor for lifeless life in which bright freedom is exchanged for dull assimilation, becomes a marker of whether a place and community are bearable. Helga sees images of death and the negation of Black life everywhere at Naxos even though it purports to support and serve Black life (a promise that had drawn her to work there in the first place). Readers first meet Helga as she reels from a recent campus event with a heady impact: a visiting white preacher had commended Naxos' students and administrators for "[knowing] enough to stay in their places" (Larsen 5). Helga recalls this with "hot anger and seething resentment" as well as "amazement at the memory of the considerable applause" offered this speaker by the audience (Larsen 6). She is

furious at the audacity of this rhetoric, spoken so patronizingly by a white visitor to campus, and shocked that the Naxos community should not only greet such words with approval but also encourage its students to heed them. The preacher's rhetoric offers only a small box in which Black students may enjoy life: their paltry promise of happiness remains intact only so long as they restrict their dreams to "their place" as defined by whiteness; such dreams of a life worth living can only extend so far if they wish to live comfortably alongside (never quite amongst, for that would be extending beyond "their place") white America. Feeling so sad, bewildered, and disturbed by this event that it renders her unable to continue performing the everyday-ness of life at Naxos, Helga muses about all the ways she hasn't fit in since arrival: her clothes too bright and lovely, her aesthetic tastes so particular, her lack of storied Black family (or any family at all). Even her fiancée, whom she'd initially bonded with over shared feelings of alienation as new hires at Naxos, had now found himself an easy center of social life there even as she remained apart.[13]

Larsen further clarifies the rift between Helga's own values and vision for a life worth living versus that of the Naxos' during a brief conversation with Margaret, the first colleague she informs of her plan to quit. As she converses with her, Helga silently observes that Margaret's "probably nice live crinkly hair" had been straightened into "a dead straight, greasy, ugly, mass" (Larsen 14). Naxos' ideologies are manifested in Margaret's hair, a storied site of politicized aesthetics for African Americans: in Helga's estimation Margaret's hair has been made devoid of its "nice live" qualities by the imperative to be proximate to whiteness in order to get along with

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[13] The sheer casualness with which Helga's leaves her fiancée, which she decides is necessary if she is to truly put Naxos behind her, renders this romantic entanglement mere afterthought. It is both funny and sad, a combination imbued in Helga's character and certainly part of the reason why I find her so compelling a protagonist. A whole paper could be written about Helga's conception of what part men play in the fulfill of women's happiness promise: mostly by being anonymous stepping-stones (good, bad, and otherwise) on the path to cementing a legible future.

whiteness. Meanwhile, Margaret tries to convince Helga not to leave Naxos, telling her that everyone enjoys her presence, "[e]ven the dead ones. We need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives" (Larsen 14). Well aware that Helga thinks her peers "dead," Margaret tries to soothe Helga by stoking her ego, affirming Helga's perception of the gulf between her and them: they are dead, having acquiesced to a safe albeit boring life that capitulated to white fear, and she is alive, in pursuit of a truly free, radiant life guided only by her own tastes and desires (Larsen 14). If Helga wishes to really live, she simply cannot stay. While admiration could be a pleasure, being a "decoration" that scandalizes others does not a radiant life make.

Helga's conception of what *does* constitutes a lively life is first illustrated as she walks across campus towards dean Dr. Anderson's office to give her notice. The surrounding trees become subsumed into Helga's frustrated reflections on Naxos' hypocrisy and cookie-cutter mold, which she describes as "a big knife with cruelly sharp edges cutting everything to a pattern, the white man's pattern" (Larsen 4). Violent and all-consuming, this mold of racialized concession is an affront to her exacting sense of freedom. As she walks, Helga notes that the landscape is

> [S]o incredibly lovely, so appealing, and so facile. The trees in their spring beauty sent through her restive mind a sharp thrill of pleasure…The trees, she thought, on city avenues and boulevards, in city parks and gardens, were tamed, held prisoners in a surrounding maze of human beings. Here they were free. It was human beings who were prisoners. It was too bad. In the midst of all this radiant life. (Larsen 16)

The land on which Naxos sits, so beautifully populated by these idyllic trees, brings Helga "a sharp thrill of pleasure," a direct contrast with her dissatisfaction with Naxos' ideologies and accompanying aesthetics (Larsen 16). The permission to revel in beauty, to cultivate it in one's

surroundings, is a sensory and affective event that soothes her uncomfortably busy stream of thoughts. Helga moves through the novel held ever so slightly aloft by Larsen's use of free indirect discourse, constantly evaluating the world while simultaneously being evaluated by the invisible narrator. Often her thoughts are consumed with taking measure: intuiting where and when she fits badly, stuffed messily into an uncomfortable mold ultimately constructed by whiteness but enforced by all regardless of racial status. The beauty of the trees existing so freely in space, contrasted with memories of city trees "held prisoner," reveals Helga's affective affinity for life unfettered by the structures of power that organize human relations.[14] "Radiant life" reads as something like beauty plus freedom, an easiness of being that can come only from being unbeholden to anything but one's own loveliness, existence sans judgement or an imperative to act "as if." That the human shaping of environment should interfere with what might otherwise be easy, "natural" dreaminess and pleasure becomes a familiar pattern in this first section of the novel, recalling the novel's opening pages in which Helga attempts to enjoy her lovingly decorated private rooms as an antidote to the indignities of her workday. If at Naxos the trees have the space to exist as they are, lovely and thriving where they were planted, free to grow as they please, it is precisely their "unhuman" nature that has allowed them to do so, a lack of self-consciousness and obligation beyond just *being*. This fleeting encounter with freedom is one Helga perceives only twice in the novel– and both times beauty and indifference to human judgment mark her perception of that freedom. Tellingly, the trees are described as "unhuman": not "inhuman," which still relies on notions of the human to define itself against, but "un-" something completely separate from the human rather than merely lacking the qualities of it.

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[14] *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, edited by Camille Dungy, offers a wide range of responses to the idea and space of "nature" as they appear in African American literary traditions.

Frequently shifts in Helga's emotional state happen "suddenly," each change a horror movie villain's looming shadow accompanied by shrieking violin strings. Helga began her walk angry with Naxos, but this anger is quickly redirected at herself for having this feeling to begin with. Always animate and shifting as she processes the events that have led to her dissatisfaction, Helga's relations with her social world are marked by anxiety as she contends with the question of whether it's the world that's the problem– or her. Continuing to Dr. Anderson's office, her reflections on Naxos turn to

> [irritation] at finding herself wondering just how she was going to tell [Dr. Anderson] of her decision…[s]uddenly, her own resolve loomed as almost direct unkindness. This increased her annoyance and discomfort. A sense of defeat, of being cheated of justification, closed down on her. Absurd! (Larsen 17)

Why should Helga now feel that *she* is the problem when she has already identified Naxos' hypocrisy as the problem?[15] Aware of her status as affect alien, Helga is consumed with guilt for potentially turning her bad feelings about Naxos into Dr. Anderson's bad feelings about *her*; weighing the two, she nervously considers who or what comprises the real problem.[16] Even before the encounter with Dr. Anderson takes place, Helga has brewed a fearful sense of defeat arising from the mere potential to be "cheated of justification" if she allows her fear of disagreement to subsume her rightful critiques in the moment of encounter. In giving him her notice, she wishes not just to put the nail in the coffin of her time at Naxos but also to potentially have her affective orientation toward Naxos' affirmed by its most powerful institutional figure:

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[15] "You point to structures; they say it is in your head. What you describe as material is dismissed as mental…the political labor necessary of having to insist that what we are describing is not just what we are feeling and thinking" (Ahmed *Living* 6).

[16] Ahmed writes that to "expose a problem is to pose a problem" (*Living* 141).

yes, this ideological space is not doing what it purports to do, and yes, it is reasonable that such an environment would be unbearable. This desire for affirmation of her experience of their shared world augments Helga's irritation: if she is to discover that her own interpretations of events are not the "correct" ones, she will be cheated of a justification that might provide some comforting confirmation of her experience of the world as valid, meaningful, and shared by others in her community.

Helga has mastered performing comportment in the interest of deflecting vulnerability; despite feeling as though she wants to leave Dr. Anderson's office as soon as she arrives, she dons a mask of indifference that allows her to continue the encounter. The omniscient narrator observes that "it was a point of honor, almost, with her never to give way to it…instead of turning away, as she felt inclined, she walked on, outwardly indifferent" (Larsen 17). That the ability to mask her true affect is an honorable undertaking for Helga suggests that she considers vulnerability a potential sabotage, an inconvenient pest that gets in the way of her doing something she wants or needs to do. There is uncomfortable tension that arises in the conflict between the atmosphere Helga wishes to project in any given encounter and the mood she is attempting to obscure; she is all too aware of how one's mood can affect whoever receives that mood as well as the atmosphere of the environment in which the encounter takes place.[17] Helga arrived at Dr. Anderson's office "in a mild rage" which morphs into a "sudden attack of nerves"

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[17] In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler writes about the use of gender as a way to organize a messy set of experiences and materials (a person) into something called a "self." A performance like drag disrupts the promise of gender (that it is real, singular, constant, and inviolably ordered) such that the joke of gender (it is what we make it) is exposed. C. Riley Snorton's "'A New Hope': The Psychic Life of Passing" challenges the medicalization of trans people: what happens, he asks, if we think instead about the psychic life of trans people in relation to discourses of passing, consider interiority rather than (or in addition to) the material body? Throughout *Quicksand* Helga tries to perform affects that communicate varying states of being: happy, uncaring, ignorant, wealthy. She experiences varying levels of success with each performance, each one constructed and read through her status as a biracial woman, and such experiences eventually become difficult, exhausting, and life-dampening.

at the prospect of having to parade through the lobby, past all the potential judgments of staff at work in the office (Larsen 17). Once perceptible by other people, the anger directed towards herself and Naxos narrows into a stream of self-consciousness. After Dr. Anderson's secretary tells Helga that he will be right with her, she finds that this short direct encounter with another has "dissipated her self-consciousness and restored her poise" (Larsen 17). A minute, pin-prick of engagement with another has the power to alter Helga's affective atmosphere, to usher in a new permutation of feeling that in this case makes her feel stronger, more in control of her own affective emissions. Larsen uses these encounters with others as generative moments, a touch to the surface of still water that sees it ripple and finally settle again, re-organizing existing affect. Helga's presence in the world constantly congeals and re-congeals the atmospheres she enters, feeding the engine of the novel's narrative by propelling her to and fro. Once again sure of her purpose, Helga is "able to sit calmly" admiring the view from a window, ready to meet Dr. Anderson and explain exactly why life at Naxos is an untenable life for her (Larsen 17).

To be met on equal ground– if not in *type* of feeling then at least in the other party's level of investment– is to share an affective environment of relative equity. To be met with something like indifference, however, is a repudiation. Helga understands the power in having one's affective atmosphere reflected to oneself through another, especially another with greater power social power. Finally admitted to Dr. Anderson's office, confronted with the person to whom she must give her notice and who she fearfully hopes will provide some empathy for her decision, Helga becomes overwhelmed by the weight of this moment: will someone, finally, understand her refusal of Naxos, or will she be relegated to affect alien status once again, turning good feelings about an honorable institution into poison? Helga steps into Dr. Anderson's office gripped with this "inward confusion" combining "strangeness and something very like hysteria"–

an affective brew which transmutes into an “almost overpowering desire to laugh,” the absurdity of her anticipatory tension crackling with nervous energy (Larsen 19). Electrically charged enough for her to be struck with feeling a total lack of control, Helga swims in this liminal atmosphere for just one moment before Larsen shifts her into “a complete ease, such as she had never known at Naxos” (19). This useful affective turn allows Helga to continue an interaction that would have otherwise been unmanageable, as had been the case when she entered the office’s lobby; while anxiety wracks her anticipation of these encounters, she has taught herself how to collect that tension into a protective mask that enables moments of potential conflict to happen.

After sitting down and declaring that she has “made up her mind to leave,” Dr. Anderson asks Helga why she hates Naxos, his tone by her estimation “detached, too detached” (Larsen 19). The immediate lack of tonal engagement with her very serious quandary causes Helga to feel “a desire to wound,” furious with Dr. Anderson’s “blatantly unconcerned” demeanor which seems to indicate that she will not, in fact, receive the sympathy and affirmation she had been hoping for (19). To not be taken seriously– to have her own intensity met with something other than its equal– feels like a humiliation to Helga, and humiliation makes her want to wound, to re-set the stage of the encounter and regain control of the affective atmosphere. Helga is sensitive to the ripples she introduces into these affective atmospheres, can feel them congeal and turn the tides of power even before her opponent can say his piece. Stepping into her power as an affect alien, Helga now actively seeks turning what she assumed are Dr. Anderson’s good feelings about Naxos into bad, a move that might rebalance the power dynamics of the encounter. Helga declares her every quarrel with Naxos: she “hate[s] hypocrisy,” “backbiting, and sneaking, and petty jealousy,” and compares the school to “some loathsome, venomous disease” (Larsen 19). In

response to this barrage, Dr. Anderson placatingly asks Helga if she thinks that sticking around might be a way to help "cure" Naxos of its ills. Helga brings her dissatisfaction to the table, and in a clever rhetorical move that re-constitutes the affective atmosphere yet again, Dr. Anderson moves the focus of their conversation away from the institution of Naxos and towards the complexity of service work, which he describes as being "like clean white linen, even the tiniest speck shows" (Larsen 20).[18] Weighted with trying to redefine the very terms of African American life in the U.S., racial uplift and the institutions tasked with spreading it were no less beholden to the pettiness and missteps of any and all great movements for systemic change; of course such "specks" of trouble like hypocrisy and gossip might feel especially horrible next to the integrity and necessity of such political work. Helga's youth, Dr. Anderson continues, will give way to learning that "lies, injustice, and hypocrisy are a part of every ordinary community," and that "a sort of protective immunity" will develop to make these quarrels, which currently feel so impossibly unbearable to her, as endurable as other everyday annoyances and human contradictions (Larsen 20). Dr. Anderson boils Helga's frustration down to a simple matter of the hot tempers of youth and inexperience that, while understandable given the stakes of the work at hand, would dissipate and smooth out over time through a process of social adjustment. Helga is legitimately moved this short speech, propelled into a state of "mystified yearning which sang and throbbed in her" (Larsen 20). The call to service, to do meaningful work that will positively impact her imagined (and assigned) Black community, consumes her, leaving her newly "shamed, yet stirred" (20). The leap from her anger and frustration to a resolve to stay and serve is lightning fast and wholly consuming, driven not by Naxos– which may very well remain

[18] Dr. Anderson's invocation of the purity of uplift work, through the metaphor of whiteness no less, foreshadows his invocation of Helga's lady-like "breeding" through the assumption of a "good" family.

annoying and flawed– but by Dr. Anderson, who offers Helga a new frame through which to view Naxos' ills as a manageable matter of the general bother of life lived amongst fallible, ever reaching humans in noble pursuit of justice. His summation of the dedication to service work inspires Helga to want to follow him unquestioningly into the promise of happiness that accompanies communal uplift, of being part of a community working to improve the lot of said community. In short, Dr. Anderson offers Helga an affective avenue back into the sense of belonging that had initially pulled her to Naxos, a fantasy of being one of many with a shared goal. She rebukes the feelings that had been so strong just shortly prior, "compunction tweaking at her heart" for having considered leaving not just Naxos, but Dr. Anderson, this wise, calm leader of community (Larsen 20). In this moment he becomes an island of respite, a reason for staying, a sympathetic person who manages to absorb Helga's bad feelings and reorient them back towards the impassioned ideals that had steered her towards Naxos in the first place. Dr. Anderson usefully extracts the reality of Naxos' institutional particularities from the equation so that the *possibility* of Naxos' project– its promise of happiness, not just for Helga but for the community she serves– to become the focal point around which Helga's affect swirls.

But Dr. Anderson makes a disastrous mistake, a miscalculation of Helga's propensity for identifying, in this case, the normative systems of power that invade and reproduce hierarchies even within progressive political environments. Having already brought Helga over to his side and convinced her that she must, indeed, stay at Naxos for the sake of the work, he then prattles on about what makes Helga such an asset there. Dr. Anderson declares that he can "best explain it by the use of that trite phrase, 'You're a lady.' You have dignity and breeding" (Larsen 21). Trying to play to Helga's sense of her own rarity (as her co-worker Margaret had previously done), he uses the seemingly respectable compliment of calling her a "lady," here specifically

meaning a woman of "good stock" (21).[19] But this supposed compliment only sets off the alarms of Helga's tenderest vulnerability– her lack of a Black family legacy and its ensuing connections– all of which had relegated her to a sort of nowhere land amongst the Black middle class environment in which she was ensconced, free-floating alone in a nation where some of the greatest resources a marginalized person can have come from family and belonging to a community.[20] Affective atmosphere quickly reconfiguring yet again, she replies tersely that she doesn't in fact have any family and was "born in a Chicago slum"; searching to placate, Dr. Anderson decrees that "[f]inancial, economic circumstances can't destroy tendencies inherited from good stock" (Larsen 21). His conflation of family, "breeding," and inherited social value slams down on Helga's affect alien button: he assumes that this will make her feel good, but because Helga does not have the "breeding" and therefore inherited traits he mentions, it does just the opposite. Larsen describes Helga's following reply as "drops of hail," hard pellets cracking the thin window of conviviality Dr. Anderson had worked so hard to create: "The joke is on you, Dr. Anderson. My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married. As I said at first, I don't belong here" (21). Dr. Anderson had implied that it was Helga's moral character– bestowed through "breeding," attainable only through belonging to a long line of good, honorable people– that makes her such an asset to Naxos, but Helga's alienation at Naxos has come in no small part from *not* having the very "breeding" that he praises her for. Family and community of origin are weighty cornerstones in the mythology of propriety espoused by the teachers and administrators of

[19] "The man chose his words, carefully he thought." (Larsen 21)

[20] "No family. That was the crux of the whole matter…Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society, If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong'" (Larsen 8).

Naxos, and those who do not or cannot comply with the standards set by elite black families– a group that includes many of the students, with whom Helga actually empathizes– remain on the outskirts of a social project that purports to provide forms of home and belonging for all who share the lot of being racialized as Black. [21] Berlant asks "[w]hat…it mean[s] to lose the way you have lived without knowing what else to do?" (Berlant *Female* 235). In turning away from Naxos Helga turns away from "the forms that have stood for virtue, value, social intelligibility, and optimism" thus far in her life, not knowing what else might be possible but sure that remaining at Naxos, where she is expected to absorb and abide by an ideology that pushes her to the margins, no longer "[adds] up to something" worth pursuing (Berlant *Female* 235). Glowing fantasy of service work and its attendant community disappeared into the ether, Helga sets off for a short stay in Chicago and then Harlem in search of some other way, some other life whose promises remained as yet unbroken.

"I'm Afraid I Don't Quite See"

Helga's arrival in Harlem, though well-connected and auspicious, leaves her "feeling like a criminal" (Larsen 43). This guilt is induced by the sympathetic welcome she receives from her new housemate Anne Grey, who believes Helga to be recently orphaned and so welcomes her with open arms. Mrs. Hayes-Rore, the wealthy "'race' woman" who employs Helga in Chicago and creates the fiction of Helga's orphanhood to ease her entrée into Harlem, explains that "[c]olored people won't understand" Helga's vexed origins, for "it is tacitly understood that

[21] After Helga hears another employee scolding students in the dormitory for behaving like "savages from the backwoods," Helga, with typical acerbic humor, "wonder[ed] if it had ever occurred to the lean and desiccated Miss MacGooden that most of her charges had actually come from the backwoods. Quite recently too" (Larsen 26).

[interracial relationships] are not mentioned– and therefore they do not exist" (Larsen 37, 41, 39). If "these things" do not exist, then neither does Helga– at least not authentically– and it is this introductory erasure that foretells Helga's eventual alienation in Harlem. Mrs. Hayes-Rore, however, sees a future for Helga in Harlem, and for some time Helga sees this future too, happy at last to "belong somewhere" amongst people equally as unimpressed by Naxos as she (Larsen 44). When the conditional nature of that belonging is revealed through a series of encounters with herself and others at a jazz club one evening, Helga loses her attachment to Harlem's promise of happiness for good.

Larsen writes looking and seeing as affectively electric world-building activities with the power to move people around from place to place: country, city, train car.[22] What Helga sees becomes what she feels as she perceives those around her perceiving her. Her eye falls critically most places, measuring the distance between herself and others, seeing how she always ends up standing somewhat apart, never quite secure amongst those whose security appears to be a given. But in Harlem one Audrey Denney, a glamorous stranger, receives Helga's understanding and admiration in full. Audrey circulates socially in ways that anger the Harlem elite that comprise Helga's community, and, perhaps most important to Helga, Audrey doesn't let that stop her from doing as she wishes. Helga, tragically, *can't* not care, but she desperately wishes she could, for indifference to the judgement of others increasingly appears to be a necessary ingredient for attaining the radiant life that keeps eluding her. Importantly, Audrey remains at a distance for Helga, never interacting with her directly; easy to admire someone distant and perfect in their abstraction, the manifestation of a desire to identify other ways of being and so necessarily aspirational. Audrey appears indifferent to all the eyes on her, but neither Helga nor the reader

[22] On the train from Naxos to Chicago Helga has to bribe a porter to let her have an overnight car (Larsen 25).

know if she really *is* indifferent or if, like Helga, she is merely performing, blanketing herself protectively in the obscuring affect of nonchalance.

Because she watches others so carefully to ascertain where she does and doesn't fit, Helga is also uncomfortably aware of also being watched, judged, defined by the gazes around her. During a night out at a Harlem jazz club with friends ("one of those places characterized by the righteous as a hell," not least of all because these clubs served as sites of racial mixing), including her closest friend, housemate, and Mrs. Hayes-Rore's niece, Anne Grey, Larsen offers readers the chance to watch Helga watching both herself and her new community in action (Larsen 58). Upon arrival at the club, Helga experiences a thrilling, fully embodied encounter with freedom and pleasure on the dance floor, where

> [s]he was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her…[s]he wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature. (Larsen 59)

Radiant life envelops and "drugs" Helga, dancing felt as "the essence of life": nourishment, an ecstatic, nearly religious life-sustaining manna. She is freedom embodied, guided only by the rhythmic beat and pull of the band, caught up in a violent and joyful purging of self; feeling "blown out, ripped out, beaten out," dance empties everything inside her out, out, out. Anxiety, frustration, and self-consciousness briefly disappear, for Helga's encounter with live(ly) music finds her, ever so briefly and for the first time in the novel, as free as the trees she witnessed at Naxos, unbeholden to anything but the experience of pure being. But the song eventually ends,

and everything she had purged on the dancefloor rushes back into her, forcefully returning her to self-consciousness. The first affect Helga registers once returned grudgingly from the land of freedom is shame that she had been "in the jungle," her metaphor for losing control of her careful self-fashioning only to become the wild, uncivilized figure of Africa that ideologies of whiteness needed to eroticize, exotify, and fetishize a less-than-human Other. However good it felt to lose self-consciousness and just *be* in intuitive response to her environment– like Naxos' trees, nourished by the soil they were planted in and basking in the warm sun that bathed them– it felt worse to consider that she may not only have been acting like a "jungle creature" but also *enjoyed* the experience, complicit in her own dehumanization.

As Helga sees it, letting herself become a "jungle creature"– in public, no less– meant willingly giving up some of her hard-won ability to fashion a dignified, human self. This induced the horrible consideration that she might, after all, be what whiteness claimed all Black women were: wild, inhuman, animal. As Amelia Defalco writes in her essay on primitivism and *Quicksand*, Helga's fear of being a "jungle creature" has its roots in

> a history of primitivist assumptions operating in medical, artistic, and popular discourse that work to turn the black female body into a fetish, a grotesque convergence of pathology and hyperbolic, animalistic sexuality. These assumptions contribute to the construction of an oppressive racist mythology that stifles subjectivity. (Defalco 20)

What Helga seeks is the radiant life of a tree planted in the open country: the ability to exist, to simply *be*, without the constraints of race, class, and gender imposing limited and limiting narratives of who and what one is and can ever hope to be. A life boxed in by these barriers is not radiant but tarnished, rusted into the paralysis of an Othered object entirely disconnected from the reality of one's lived experiences and multifarious selfhood. Though dancing joyfully to

music that moves her envelops Helga in an affective atmosphere of exuberant freedom, she can't unknow that to be seen harnessing such joy is to be vulnerable to the dehumanizing stereotypes designed to wrest that joy away. A 1920s Harlem jazz club becomes a diorama of Helga's dizzying affective journey from life-making joy to life-negating shame, revealing how ideologies of racial difference are internalized and experienced as a complex negotiation of competing affects. Helga self-monitors for signs of the "jungle" in an attempt to preserve her humanity, that most-prized quality so integral having a life worth living.

Trying to save face, Helga purposefully projects an air of "faint disgust," affective atmosphere donned as a coat of armor, as she sits down to observe the crowd, musing over the sheer range of skin tones (Larsen 60). How *different* they all look despite sharing a racial designation that bound them together in this neighborhood, this country, this tangled search for radiant life! Amidst these contemplations of difference and sameness, Helga's eyes land on Audrey Denney, a "girl in a shivering apricot frock" accompanied by none other than Naxos' Dr. Anderson (Larsen 60). Helga meets Dr. Anderson's eyes and receives a small bow of acknowledgment, quickly dropping her eyes only to lift them again to better take in Audrey. Through Helga's eyes Audrey appears a glamorous, moody jazz age vamp, her skin of "a peculiar, almost deathlike pallor" next to a red, "softly curving mouth" bearing "sorrowful" affect (Larsen 60).[23] Beneath her flimsy dress her skin is "delicate, creamy…with golden tones," the invocation of "creamy" skin calling to mind language used to describe a character suspected of being biracial in Pauline E. Hopkins' *Contending Forces*.[24] Beautiful, mysterious, and of

[23] Audrey shares with Helga a mouth that mirrors her feelings, Helga's own mouth being described as "sensitive and sensuous" with a "slight dissatisfied droop" (Larsen 60).

[24] Upon seeing the white-skinned Grace Montfort arrive from Bermuda at the wharf, Bill Sampson remarks that "thet ar female's got a black streak in har somewhar…[t]har's too much cream color in the face," an assumption that leads to the eventual murder of her husband and her own presumed suicide (Harper 41).

impeccable aesthetic tastes, encased in an air of melancholy that belies weary knowledge of her flagrant beauty and its effects on others, Audrey might be a looking glass version of Helga. The multiple invocations of her skin's paleness reflect Helga's prior ruminations on the wide variety of skin tones that fall under the designation "Black"; not insignificantly, Audrey is also in the company of a man of distinction who also happens to be explicitly aware of Helga's unhappy origins. The conclusive "Bang!" of the song's ending cuts Helga's view short as people return to their tables from the dance floor, interrupting the private picture window through which she has been observing Audrey (Larsen 60). Joined by Anne, an intrigued Helga asks curiously after this woman who has so captured her attention.

Anne Grey has none of Helga's appreciation for Audrey's glamorous indifference, or rather, the presence of Audrey and her cool composure elicits Anne's contempt with startling power. Declaring Audrey a "disgusting creature!," Anne's sanctimonious adherence to the rules of the color line in late 1920s Harlem, where racial mixing at parties simultaneously represented a white fantasy of exotified decadence as well as a degradation of Black solidarity, is on full display (Larsen 60). Significantly, Anne uses the dehumanizing epithet "creature" to describe Audrey just after Helga's fearful judgement of herself as a "creature" as well, confirming for Helga that one must traverse one's Blackness carefully to emerge unscathed from the complex of anxieties produced through race and gendered stereotypes. The conversation that ensues becomes a tug of war between Helga and Anne that, like Helga's meeting with Dr. Anderson at Naxos, makes crystal clear to Helga why she cannot stay in Harlem, a nail in the coffin of that once shiny promise of happiness. Larsen usefully makes readers privy to the words Helga and Anne exchange as well as the thoughts that cluster silently behind Helga's words; offering access to her interiority as well as the public face she performs for Anne, readers can note the

discrepancies between what Helga says and what she wishes to say, the gap between the performance and lived experience of affects where unhappiness congeals. Through such discrepancies appears Larsen's bas relief of Helga's affective alienation: for Black women being is limited to a strict set of parameters that reinforce the false binary of the color line rather than challenging it. As readers we are already privy to so much that Anne is not, namely Helga's own history of estrangement due to the very racial ideologies espoused by Anne (and much of the rest of nation's population, Black and white).[25]

Picking at her the wound, Helga wishes to know what, exactly, makes Audrey so grotesque to Anne, noting that even as Anne spoke "three of the men in their own party…were now congregated about the offending Miss Denney" (Larsen 60). Was Anne merely jealous? But her reply– that Audrey "goes about with white people…and they know she's colored"– belies a disgust with miscegenation that digs into Helga's skin, already raw with the memory of her dancefloor abandon (60). Anne's comment that "[white people] know [Audrey's] colored" confirms that Audrey must be light-skinned enough to pass as white, revealing the extent to which Anne's disgust is entangled in the same stereotypes about race, gender, and sexual propriety that drove Helga's anxiety about her dancing. Passively pushing Anne to keep talking, Helga pointedly– and powerfully– feigns ignorance, simultaneously goading Anne and critiquing her, replying "I'm afraid I don't quite see, Anne. Would it be all right if they didn't know she was colored?" (Larsen 61). Helga, slipping seamlessly into affect alien mode, performs a willful misreading of Anne's words, a refusal to "see" that holds wide open the growing rift between the two women. Miffed by Helga's sarcastic reply, Anne curtly replies that she "knows very well what I mean"– but "Helga didn't see, and she was greatly interested, but she decided to let it go"

(Larsen 60). Helga *does* "see" what Anne is saying, but she also wishes to see the core of Anne's disgust laid bare (60). If Audrey is a "disgusting creature" then surely Anne would categorize Helga much the same should she learn of her family of origin. As a condition of Helga's arrival in and introduction to Anne Grey's set in Harlem, Mrs. Hayes-Rore, the "race woman" who connected Helga with Anne, said she would introduce Helga as an orphaned family friend– this preferable to revealing Helga's status as biracial because "[c]olored people won't understand it" (Larsen 41). An important part of the context through which life-making connections are made– as Helga knows from her time at Naxos and the boarding school attended before it– she has had to hide her family origins to be legible amongst the Harlem elite.

Anne, however, is not ready to let this conversation go, and Helga accordingly continues her performative naivete: if Anne insists on hedging around saying what she means, Helga will spur her into articulating explicit meaning with sarcastic, antagonistic inquiries that register her disagreement. As in her final words to Dr. Anderson upon resignation from Naxos, Helga reframes Anne's euphemisms and directs them back toward her, forcing Anne to finally articulate exactly what makes Audrey so unacceptable. Anne takes the bait, accusing Audrey of "giv[ing] parties for white and colored people together. And she goes to white people's parties…it's positively obscene" (Larsen 61). Her invocation of obscenity further fleshes out the portrait she wishes to convey of Audrey as morally decrepit, suggesting not only indecency but unacceptable lewdness inextricable from her character as a whole. In a canny bit of conversational maneuvering, Helga has led Anne to admit that the only reason she is aware of what goes on at said parties is because their friends attend them as well; Helga points out that this must mean the parties can't be all that "obscene" after all. But they *drink*! retorts Anne. So do we, here in Harlem! volleys Helga, having done so with their party– including Anne– that

very night. Finally, exasperated, Anne walks neatly into the trap Helga has set for her: what makes these parties and Audrey so awful– so "obscene"– is the fact that "the white men dance with the colored women. Now you know, Helga Crane, that can mean only one thing," Anne says, "cold hatred" in her voice (Larsen 61). The inutterability of that which Anne references– sexual relations between Black women and white men– leaves Helga simultaneously disappointed and triumphant, having finally confirmed that what Anne hated in Audrey was unnervingly close to Helga's own family secret.

Anne's repulsion at this particularly erotic pairing is absorbed from already existing affective atmospheres created and circulated by slavery. As Carby writes of African American literature

> [A]s [a] narrative figure, [the mulatto] has two primary functions: as a vehicle for an exploration of the relationship between the races and, at the same time, an expression of the relationship between the races. The figure of the mulatto should be understood and analyzed as a narrative device of mediation. (Carby 89)

Helga's positionality as a biracial Black woman navigating segregated Black and white spaces allows Larsen to craft a deft "exploration of the relationship between the races." Particularly attendant to the double-bind of existence in what Anzaldúa calls the borderlands– neither here nor there, but, uncomfortably, everywhere– Helga's search for a radiant life has been stifled by rejection from her white family and the threat of rejection from her Black communities, whose defensive racial politics depend on maintenance of the very racial binary that has made having a life so difficult. In Anne's view, Audrey's facilitation of Black women dancing with white men implicates her in a history of domination laden with the painful affects inherent to hierarchical racial categories: it is not merely dancing this pairing performs but a tawdry re-enactment of the

social relations upon which American slavery depended. In these social relations the dehumanizing stereotype of Black women as what Helga would call "jungle creatures"– wild and sexually available, the opposite of white True Womanhood– was used to justify the rapes of Black women by white plantation owners. For Anne, allowing white men to dance with Black women meant no less than that Audrey was actively participating in the continued degradation of Black women's dignity and humanity. Yet Helga *admires* Audrey for that same lack of adherence to the raced and gendered rules of social relations. Helga knows all too well that allegiance to the color line, regardless of the terms of that allegiance, produces only alienation and displacement for those caught in its false binary. Refusing to structure one's life according to the arbitrary distinction of race was a powerful refusal to let racism stifle the pursuit of an autonomous radiant life, that elusive goal which the promise of happiness gestured towards. If Helga was afraid of revealing herself to be a "jungle creature" due to the stereotype's agency-stripping effects, denying herself the continued pleasures of the dancefloor, Audrey didn't let the likes of Anne Grey stop her from circulating as she wished, despite those circulations being powerful enough to alter the affective atmospheres she brought to the tony Harlem social scene.

Helga, all seething irony, lands another blow to Anne, obliquely letting her know that she found Anne's position on Audrey patently ridiculous. Helga tersely inquires whether "the colored men dance with the white women, or do they sit about, impolitely, while the other men dance with their women?," making a joke of Anne's haughty disapproval (Larsen 61). Helga's positionality allows her to understand better than her familied peer that the divide between Black and white is not only arbitrary but ridiculous: her very being disputes the notion that ne'er the two shall meet, though Anne's insists on the maintenance of this divide, inadvertently signing off on the ideologies of difference espoused by whiteness, against which Blackness was invented,

while purporting to fight against it. This is not to say that Helga's desire for the freedom to live unmarked by her ambivalent racial status is morally superior, only that the notion of racial difference itself, and that a moral perversity had been systemically made inherent to the relations between Black and white, has had a direct negative impact on Helga's lived experience. With family both Black and white, the raced, classed, and gendered meaning of Helga's existence is pre-woven into the sociality in which she arrives, a fact that denies her the much-desired power of self-making.

Caught uncomfortably in the affects congealed around her encounter with Anne and Audrey, the atmosphere full to bursting with the weight of history and the ideologies of race, gender, and class that engendered that history, "a touch of anger" visits Helga, who just as quickly "masters it"– that old survival skill. When an affect appears that could potentially unravel her protectively cool demeanor, as with Helga's anxiety at Dr. Anderson's Naxos office, Helga squashes it, ensuring that she will be spared the anguish of that potential humiliation, at least. A form of defensive damage control, Helga silences her anger to contain the growing atmosphere of uncongeniality she had just fostered, cauterizing the wound opened during this encounter. She retreats into her head, only half-registering Anne's prattle about "the principle of the thing": racial mixing is "treason" ("That's what's the matter with the Negro race") (Larsen 61). If it hadn't been clear enough already, here it was: consorting with white people was political death, unforgivable abandonment of one's self and community. Helga doesn't bother responding, for "it would be useless to tell them that what she felt for the beautiful, calm, cool girl who had the assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people" (Larsen 62). What Helga admires in Audrey is something she identifies and admires in others as well: her atmosphere of "calm, cool" indifference to rules that didn't serve

her, an appearance of being unrattled by the social conventions she broke. Helga is awed, too, by Audrey's ability to "ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people"; Audrey did not let the color line decide for her what life could or couldn't be, what she could or couldn't do (Larsen 62). She associated with whoever she pleased, gossip be damned, and treated people as individuals whose personhood was of their own making rather than as flat projections of their racial status.

Perhaps most importantly, watching Audrey produces in Helga that feeling of "envious admiration" that she had identified as being a central ingredient for happiness (Larsen 24, 62). Helga desired what Audrey had and she lacked: not only an atmosphere of indifference to the judgement of others, which Helga could manage well enough, but a life led in defiance of it. What Audrey appears to have is a life worth living, one lived according to one's own perceptions rather than those stiff, unhuman ones allotted by the color line. As Larsen never allows readers into the vault of Audrey's subjectivity, letting us see Audrey only as much as Helga can see her, she is easily able to encapsulate the powerful indifference that Helga assigns to her. Whether or not Audrey has protectively self-fashioned this affective atmosphere, as Helga had done that evening, remains unknown. But her implied status as biracial, her sad mouth that mirrors Helga's own (perhaps hinting at a history that, like Helga's, has been touched by tragedy), makes Audrey a perfect target onto which Helga can project the fantasy of another way of life. In this life she, too, might "give her attention" to who and what calls to her soul, rather than being limited only to what others condone based on binaries that her very existence prove are fabricated forms of social control. When Helga sees Audrey she sees the path to the radiant life she longs to live; when Helga sees Anne seeing Audrey Helga is made to see what Anne might hate in Helga if only she really knew her. The difference between what Helga and Anne see in Audrey is a

crumbling impasse, a "useless" project of translation, that would require Helga to articulate the personal history which led to her and Anne feeling so differently about a woman who eschewed the color line in her pursuit of having a life worth living. Turning away from Anne, Helga goes back to watching Audrey, now dancing "with grace and abandon…with obvious pleasure…swung by that wild music from the heart of the jungle" (Larsen 62). What Helga had been too self-conscious to continue enjoying Audrey now did with easy amusement. Helga preserves this vision of Audrey as a model for radiant life– beautiful, highly visible, much discussed, in defiance of the color line, and unambivalently occupying that affective location Helga identifies as "the jungle"– but as she is soon to discover, such a life can come with its own set of unbearable affective atmospheres.

"A Peacock's Life"

Sick of the hypocrisy of Harlem, in which the fight against the color line required adhering to its limitations just the same, Helga is struck by timely good fortune when she receives an early inheritance from Uncle Peter, her mother's brother, only shortly before the auspicious night at the jazz club.[26] While the large check comes hand-in-hand with the painful news that her uncle can no longer have a relationship with Helga (his wife, he writes, "feels very strongly about this"), it also allows Helga the purchase of a ticket to Copenhagen, where her mother's sister Katrina Dahl and her husband eagerly await her arrival (Larsen 54). Helga experiences a quick duo of feelings in response to this simultaneous economic windfall and excision from family: first wondering "unreality," her last tether to family in America snapped, which then "changed almost immediately into one of relief, of liberation" (Larsen 54). Having

[26] Earlier in the novel Uncle Peter turned Helga away from his doorstep when she sought him out after leaving Naxos; he tells Helga never to return because his wife (and life) can't bear the relation to anyone Black.

the unexpected means to leave Harlem reignites the lost promise of happiness with the possibility that a different kind of life, more bearable, was waiting for her somewhere else– in a foreign country and culture no less. If Harlem had failed to nurture the making of a radiant life just as Naxos had, Copenhagen awaited her yet.

The money itself "was still not very important to Helga"; what she registers as crucial are the liberatory affects this surprise money introduces back into her atmosphere, which as of late had been desperately unhappy and claustrophobic (Larsen 54). Money re-opens a path to self-determination that had lately been eluding Helga, for in the weeks and months leading up to the events at the jazz club Helga's

> frayed nerves grew keener. There were days when the mere sight of the serene tan and brown faces about her stung her like a personal insult. The care-free quality of their laughter roused in her the desire to scream at them: "Fools, fools! Stupid fools!" This passionate and unreasoning protest gained in intensity, swallowing up all else like some dense fog. Life became for her only a hateful place where one lived in intimacy with people one would not have chosen had one been given choice. It was, too, an excruciating agony. (Larsen 53)

Helga's life had become "a hateful place," a somewhere populated with feelings she couldn't stand or escape in Harlem, where she was surrounded by Black people whose happiness seemed infuriatingly assured, easy. The metaphor of her life as a place she hated to inhabit is apt, for Harlem has become for her a geographic location made up not of streets and buildings but the powerful negative feelings that infused her reception of life in its borders. Larsen uses the atmospheric metaphor of a "dense fog" to describe the texture of Helga's troubled affective state leading up to her decision to leave. This thick atmosphere obscures and consumes everything in

its path, rendering the anonymous citizens of Harlem only "stupid fools" unable to grasp their predicament: that they had all been labeled, tossed together to try and reproduce life with no care for whether they shared anything in common but a racial designation. Their lot was pre-decided for them, limiting life to an insufferable degree. How could they– how could *she*!– accept this socially and legally enforced restriction of agency that confined life to such a small box? Psychic pain and resentment cause the veil of belonging and community to fall far, far away into the ether of vague memory; no longer did she feel "that magic sense of having come home" that marked her early months to Harlem (Larsen 43). Life had become, again, unbearable. Copenhagen, on the other hand, would mean no longer being "shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race…Why, she demanded in fierce rebellion, should she be yoked to these despised black folk?" (Larsen 54-55). Being free from the class of people who comprised the primary social context through which her selfhood was defined (and denied) in the U.S. incites another alluring promise: one of happiness cultivated through individuation. Against this circuit of distressing affects the fantasy of Copenhagen coheres: Helga might gain agency merely by being set against a different background, contextualized only by the undeniable loveliness of her carefully curated self. Copenhagen promises "no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice," and best of all, no America, where "Negroes were allowed to be beggars only, of life, of happiness, of security" (Larsen 55, 82).

Copenhagen, however, is not without its own conditional promises of happiness. Helga finds that *she* is a promise of happiness for the Dahls, a relation that exposes Helga's value to them as that of a rare family heirloom, an object they can strategically use to procure a higher and more rarified place on the social ladder and, therefore, their own happiness– at the price, ultimately, of Helga's. Ahmed writes that "[g]oing along with happiness scripts is how we get

along: to get along is to be willing and able to express happiness in proximity to the right things" (Ahmed *Promise* 59). Helga's eventual decision *not* to follow the happiness script written for her by the Dahls reveals the extent to which the affective atmosphere conferred by racialized otherness puts her in tension with the directive to "get along," marking her once again an affect alien, soured on the things that she "should" want and that would make the Dahls happy. Their plans to climb to a more exclusive rung of Copenhagen society relies on marrying Helga off to Axel Olson, a rising young painter high on the fumes of his own ego, who they hire to paint Helga's portrait and, in the process, secure her hand in marriage. Becoming Olson's wife offers Helga a potential site of closure in her search for belonging: by doing as her aunt and uncle wish she could secure their happiness and, in the process, say goodbye to America forever while deepening family ties to the Dahls and beginning a family of her own. For these reasons Helga briefly entertains trying to "[pass] as happy—in order to keep things in the right place," but finally sets off once again for America, following the promise of happiness re-ignited by rose-colored memories of life in Harlem that can only emerge by being set against the backdrop of Copenhagen's disappointments (*Promise* 59).

Copenhagen is rich with the things Helga has always longed for: kind family, fine clothing, immaculate décor. Troublingly, she finds all too quickly that she is also to be treated as one of the fine riches belonging to the Dahls, but her reception of this dynamic remains ambivalent for some time, as the luxuries of her new life "blotted from her mind all else" (Larsen 67). Waking from a nap in her room at the Dahls on her first day in Copenhagen, Helga basks in

> [t]hat sensation of lavish contentment and well-being enjoyed only by impecunious sybarites waking in the houses of the rich. But there was more than mere contentment and well-being…it was the realization of a dream that she had dreamed persistently ever since

> she was old enough to remember such things as day-dreams and longings. Always she had wanted, not money, but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things, things, things. (Larsen 67)

Even Larsen's language here takes on a lavish sumptuousness, "impecunious sybarites" the textual equivalent of a bejeweled headband, lush and ornate language to that reflect Helga's feelings of plenty and splendor. Once again, Helga insists that it is *not* money which brings happiness, but the context which money could give her. Money could buy the background against which she should rightly be set to best understand her soul, inviting her to be judged not as one belonging to a "despised race" as in Harlem but as a person whose place in the world was undeniably valuable (Larsen 55). Money procured a tangible, material atmosphere with which she could artfully reflect the beauty of her unique self; money itself wasn't beautiful but could buy the beautiful, valuable things amongst which "she belonged. This was her proper setting. She felt consoled at last for the spiritual wounds of the past" (Larsen 67). Her whole life had been a struggle to accurately see herself, vision obscured by the fog of the color line which could tell her only that she didn't belong, was of lesser value whether here or there. But in these rooms, in this country, set against *this* beauty, she could flourish; she could finally see herself as she had seen herself in her dreams. Here was a place conducive to happiness.

Yet only moments after these satisfied thoughts, Helga receives her first intimation that there are other machinations driving the Dahls quick embrace of their niece into their lives. In contrast to the primness of Naxos, which had advocated dressing mutedly for the sake of not stepping "out of line," and Harlem, where she and Anne had once decided that a dress she had bought was "too *outré*" to wear (perhaps too much in the vein of Audrey's "shivering apricot frock"), Aunt Katrina sweeps into Helga's room and immediately eschews the "plain blue *crépe*

frock" she's chosen to wear to her welcome tea (Larsen 56, 60, 68). Aunt Katrina picks another dress, causing Helga to balk and ask if it wasn't "too– too– *outré*?"– to which Fru Dahl replies, tellingly,

> "Oh dear, no. Not at all, not for you. Just right"…For she was, in spite of all her gentle kindness, a woman who left nothing to chance. In her own mind she had determined the role that Helga was to play in advancing the social fortune of the Dahls in Copenhagen, and she meant to begin at once. (Larsen 68)

Perhaps for a *Danish* girl, she implies, this dress would be a scandal, but for Helga such a dress would emphasize precisely the effect Fru Dahl hoped: beauty predicated on an exotic, erotic racialized difference that would set the Dahls apart from the many other wealthy socialites just like them. Whisking Helga off to the jewelers, Fru Dahl chooses pieces which made "Helga feel like a veritable savage," a feeling only heightened by "the many pedestrians who stopped to stare at the queer dark creature" (Larsen 69). Both "savage" and "creature," callbacks to Helga's frightening brush with "the jungle" on the Harlem dancefloor, accurately describe the picture the Dahls wish to paint of Helga as an exotic treasure from abroad. This exchange illustrates the beginning of what comes to be "the guiding principle of her life in Copenhagen," which Helga describes as

> Incited…She was incited to make an impression, a voluptuous impression. She was incited to inflame attention and admiration. She was dressed for it, subtly schooled for it. And after a little while she gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired. Against the solid background of Herr Dahl's wealth and generosity she submitted to her aunt's arrangement of her life…Intentionally she kept the slow, faltering Danish. It was, she decided, more attractive…She grew used to the

> extravagant things with which Aunt Katrina chose to dress her. She managed, too, to retain that air of remoteness which had been in America so disastrous to her friendships. Here in Copenhagen it was merely a little mysterious and added another clinging wisp of charm. (Larsen 74)

Helga "gave herself up wholly," a phrase which works doubly to indicate her acquiescence to Aunt Katrina's training and the ambivalence of her agency in these matters, partially traded in for the divinely beautiful clothes and finery that ornamented her new "peacock's life" (Larsen 81). A jump in class status and new national context mean she can now wear such aesthetic provocations elegantly, lightly even. While a less affluent woman might be punished for wearing such styles, the Dahl's money and social status bestows a protective atmosphere of propriety; while in America such *outré* dress may have marked her a "jade," in Copenhagen such outfitting could be used to highlight the difference that Aunt Katrina knew could be traded on for a form of attention that fed her ego. Aunt Katrina outfits Helga to produce a specific reaction– "envious admiration"– from her friends and community, a result Helga too can enjoy because it "gratified her augmented sense of self-importance" while showering her in "so many new and expensive clothes" (Larsen 74). In this way the promise of happiness Aunt Katrina chases is aligned with Helga's: their shared goal of learning how to best incite "envious admiration" allows Helga to become a co-creator of this iteration of herself so that she too could partake in the pleasurable affects of being perceived as beautiful, glamorous, and elegant. Augmenting Aunt Katrina's vision for her, Helga takes to performing a lesser grasp of Danish than she really had, working her previously troublesome "remoteness" to her advantage, fine-tuning the glamorous, austere persona. Acutely aware of how race, class, gender, and nationality work in tandem to produce her perception by others, in the wealthy arms of the Dahls and the European soil of Denmark

Helga can enjoy, even enhance, a version of herself that reflected much of what she had envied in Audrey. Viewed from her perch in Copenhagen, the U.S. is "too humiliating," a place suffused with "humiliations" and where "every dark child was handicapped at the start by the shroud of color" (Larsen 75). That Larsen uses humiliation twice to describe Helga's memories of life in America illustrates the extent to which Helga's racial status in America was suffused with the life-negating shame, an affect that limited her agency by causing her to self-monitor in an attempt to avoid it. Shame at being seen and treated as less than human, shame at being stereotyped as an over-sexed "jungle creature," shame at being "boxed up" with "that despised race" to which white America harnessed all its worst fears and nightmares, shame to feel unhappy with what appears to make others happy.

The Dahl's facilitation of Helga and Axel's relationship further clarifies the equation through which they have measured her value to them; in turn, their valuation of her decorative presence in their lives erodes Helga's happy attachments to the Dahls as well as the new life they offered. When the Dahls introduce Helga to painter Axel Olsen, his admiration is exactly in line with the effect Aunt Katrina had hoped to produce with the *outré* dresses and sparkling jewels: after staring at her "for what seemed to [Helga] an incredibly rude length of time" he declares her "amazing," followed by extended much commentary on her unique beauty directed to Aunt Katrina in Danish, as if Helga weren't even there. His bold staring, discussion of Helga as if she weren't present, and use of the adjective "amazing" expose how his perception of her beauty is inextricable from the dehumanized objectification out of which the Dahls have fashioned Helga: racial difference decorously packaged with class and gender to present her as a rare commodity. By the time Axel gets around to asking for Helga's hand in marriage, she has already put him into the category of only "convenient to have about" after he makes a thinly veiled attempt to

entice Helga into a pre-marital affair during one of her portrait sittings, which for propriety's sake she pretends not to have heard (Larsen 71). Such a performance allows her to evade any dramatic discussions of the event with her aunt and uncle, who have unwittingly marred her ability to communicate with them honestly by virtue of their blatantly exploitative machinations. She worries that should she share the story the Dahls will merely "put it down to the difference of her ancestry" (rendering Axel's insinuations a mere misunderstanding) rather than see it from her perspective (as an insulting proposition predicated on Helga's presumed sexual availability based on stereotypes of Blackness, which the Dahls had so carefully packaged as titillatingly exotic) (Larsen 84). Helga fears are well-founded.

A frank conversation about Helga marrying in Copenhagen gives ever finer dimensions to Helga's growing ambivalence about her "peacock's life" and the prospect of continuing to make a life in Copenhagen. When Aunt Katrina rattles off a list of names of men who Helga might marry, all of them wealthy, dashing, white Danes, Helga tells Fru Dahl that she doesn't "believe in mixed marriages, 'between races, you know.' They brought only trouble – to the children– as she herself knew but too well from bitter experience" (Larsen 78). Fru Dahl considers Helga's comment only to declare that

> "your mother was a fool. Yes, she was! If she'd come home after she married, or after you were born, or even after your father– er– went off like that, it would have been different. If even she'd left you when she was here. But why in the world she should have married again, and a person like that, I can't see. She wanted to keep you, she insisted on it, even over his protest…She loved you so much, she said–. And so she made you unhappy…Karen was always stupid." (Larsen 78)

Aunt Katrina assesses Helga's unhappiness and unwillingness to entertain the idea of an interracial marriage only to blame not systemic racism, segregation, and Helga's lived experiences thereof but rather the foolishness of her mother. As with the tendency for unhappiness with one's life to be understood as individual rather than in relation to systems of social domination, Aunt Katrina assumes Helga's troubles could have been easily solved if only her mother had made better choices. She does not comfort Helga, offer her condolences, or even gesture towards understanding why she might have unhappy associations with interracial couplings. Implicit in her response is a dismissal of Helga's life, which has been so shaped by the ideology of race that Helga had fled the U.S. in search of a life that might be less beholden to it. As this encounter with her last remaining family ties illustrates, Denmark is no less beholden to this ideology– it just gives it a different context, one in which Aunt Katrina can feel perfectly comfortable using Helga to her own ends regardless of Helga's clearly stated discomfort. Why, Aunt Katrina posits, should Helga make such a fuss over something (a something that, to her, is a nothing) that was merely a product of her mother's stupidity?

As in her encounters with Dr. Anderson and Anne, Helga can't help but push a little harder against what lays just below the surface of Aunt Katrina's words. Wary, she slips on the old armor of practiced aloofness to ask yet again "if [she] didn't think, really, that miscegenation was wrong," to which Aunt Katrina coldly replies, "Don't…be a fool too, Helga. We don't think of these things here. Not in connection with individuals, at least" (Larsen 78). Having been dressed up and paraded about town by her aunt since her arrival, Helga knows that the Danish do, in fact, "think of these things"; why else has she been treated as so exquisitely valuable and yet without needs of her own? Likewise, Aunt Katrina's qualifier of "not in connection with individuals" suggests that here, where there are few to no other Black people against which she

might be measured for proximity to a stereotype, Helga can be assured of being received "only" as herself, not as a member of her racial class. Yet Aunt Katrina's deployment of the white imagination's eroticized, exotified Blackness on Helga's person– colorful opulence, risqué dresses– suggested nothing so much as not seeing Helga as an individual person so much as a convenient signifier of gendered, racialized otherness. Larsen's crafting of this exchange, as in the previous ones explored, is designed to showcase the meanings and affects assigned to race, class, and gender statuses.

Helga's performed indifference is cracked by anger at being called a "fool" for communicating only the truth of her life experience, the reproach leaving her with "a feeling of nakedness. Outrage" (Larsen 79). Her aunt has exposed and scoffed at the wound that has driven her rootless, pained searching for belonging, treating it as a trifle sprung from the silly misapprehensions of a young girl who couldn't know better. She is quite sure that she understands better than Helga what it means to flout racial conventions in Denmark, though it is only Helga who has had to bear the brunt of being ogled by strangers as she walks its streets, only Helga who has had to flee the U.S. in search of a place where she might live a life chosen by her rather than for her, while Aunt Katrina has reaped the benefits of the attention her relation to Helga has incited. Helga, as she tends to be when she feels she is in danger of spilling her bad feelings such that an affective atmosphere is irreparably soured, is unsettled. She fears turning Aunt Katrina's good feelings about her to bad, even as her own feelings about the Dahls have had increasingly diminished returns. Fru Dahl, trying to win Helga over to her view, "touched Helga's hand with her fingers…[v]ery lightly" and declares that marrying Axel "would be, she remarked with a return of her outward casualness, by far the best of all possibilities. Particularly desirable" (Larsen 79). With a literal light touch, Aunt Katrina communicates just how much this

union would mean to her–and how good life could be for Helga if she would only agree to fulfill the promise of happiness she represented to the Dahls. Helga sits quietly for a moment, for

> [t]here was, she knew, so much reason– from one viewpoint– in her aunt's statement. She could only acknowledge it. "I know that," she told her finally. Inwardly she was admiring the cool, easy way in which Aunt Katrina had brushed aside the momentary acid note of the conversation and resumed her customary pitch. It took, Helga thought, a great deal of security. Balance. (Larsen 79)

Helga understands perfectly well why Aunt Katrina feels the way she does about marriage to Axel Olson: her "viewpoint" makes happy feelings about the union a foregone conclusion. But that viewpoint is limited by Aunt Katrina's perceptions: of her sister's "foolish" decisions, of just why life had been unhappy for Helga, of Helga's Blackness as a chic outfit that functions only to procure desirable attention for herself and those around her. Helga attributes this collected sureness, this ability to compose oneself in the face of unpleasantness, to "security" and "balance"– one must feel very safely secured in one's own life, unafraid of having it taken away or turned to dust by the bad feelings that circulate around one's assigned status, to be able to shrug off a loaded argument and quickly resume one's quest to induce the desired result of one's machinations (Larsen 79). Affective atmospheres mingle, clash: Fru Dahl's selfish desire (for Helga to marry "well" and secure the Dahl's social status), Helga's desire (for her aunt to take seriously her quandary about interracial marriage and therefore acknowledge the depths of her humanity and lived experience), all congeal thickly, unbearably, in and around Helga.

Acutely tuned in to the atmospheric circulations clicking in and out of place during their conversation, Helga feels

> her whole body…tense with suppressed indignation. Burning inside like the confined fire of a hot furnace. She was so harassed that she smiled in self-protection. And suddenly she was oddly cold. An intimidation of things distant, but none the less disturbing, oppressed her with a faintly sick feeling. Like a heavy weight, a stone weight, just where, she knew, was her stomach. (Larsen 80)

Ahmed writes that one might "work on one's own body in an effort to be accommodating" and that one "might thus feel obliged to conceal your unhappiness in order to protect [another's] happiness" (*Promise* 91). Here Helga works silently to contain the blistering heat of her concealed bad feelings, fit to bursting, to keep them from further contaminating Aunt Katrina's judgement of Helga's currently "difficult" nature. Helga knows that the intensity of her feelings about marriage to Axel, already deemed unreasonably stupid by her aunt, will only further confirm for Aunt Katrina that Helga was stupid, just like her mother, and allowing that silliness to ruin what could be a perfectly wonderful life if only she would disabuse herself of the notion that race mattered in the way she knew it did. Helga discerns that resisting this social good– marriage that will put her in closer proximity to whiteness, money, family, and status– will be received not as the result of legitimate concern based on her experience but as a sign of willful unhappiness, an inability to see what was good for her that made her as stupid as her mother had been. Then, suddenly, a protective icy cold descends, dousing the previous fire and preventing it from consuming the already strained atmosphere of politeness her aunt has pulled back together. Larsen tracks Helga's affective shifts meticulously, narrating the difficult process of "rearrang[ing] your own body" in the effort "to rearrange the past" of domination, suffering, and unhappiness that informs the present moment (*Living* 132). As in the previous confrontations, Helga's sparring partners think that the conversation they're having is about one thing, while for

Helga they are about quite another: uncomfortable affects are the fabric of her life, have constructed the limits of her entire world. The difference between the conversation she is trying to force and the conversation her partner is having is all the confirmation she needs of the untenability of this life or that one; what was the point of trying to make someone see it your way when their way is the one upon which power makes its way? Helga collides forcefully with the weight of her vulnerability; she "smiled in self-protection," knowing that only perceived acquiescence will halt the circulation of bad feelings from being directed her way.

Though her uncle professes that the Dahls only want Helga to "be happy," Helga knows she has failed to do "the only thing" they required of her to make them happy, killing the promise of happiness she had represented and so destroying the affective atmosphere that made living in the world they had crafted for her bearable (Larsen 93). Following the confrontation with Fru Dahl over marriage to Axel, Helga's dissatisfaction with her life in Denmark intensifies, causing her to wonder

> what was the matter with her? Was there, without her knowing it, some peculiar lack in her? Absurd. But she began to have a feeling of discouragement and hopelessness. Why couldn't she be happy, content, somewhere? Other people managed, somehow, to be. To put it plainly, didn't she know how? Was she incapable of it? (Larsen 81)

Helga is troubled by her troubling relationship to happiness. Though the thought that it was a problem of her individual character is declared "absurd," she can't seem to put her finger on just why it was that she could not manage what other people seemed to, why time and time again her contentment gave way to "indefinite discontent" that made continuing on the path currently set before her impossible (Larsen 81). She "desired ardently to combat this wearing down of her satisfaction with her life, with herself" but has no idea how to do so, for to know how to do so

would be to know what happiness is and therefore be able to make a plan to have it (Larsen 81). Helga assumes that there is something wrong with her, that she doesn't know how to fix herself; it never occurs to her that the slipperiness of happiness is a result of social relations under systems of domination. Ahmed notes that "[r]ather than assuming happiness is simply found in 'happy persons,' we can consider how claims to happiness make certain forms of personhood valuable" (*Promise* 11). Helga worries that she is all wrong, that she is not a "happy person," though she also understands that such an idea is "absurd"– her life has, after all, been full of happy times, fleeting or no. A happy life remains unattainable because the history of raced, classed, and gendered ideology has been an unhappy one for people raced, classed, and gendered as she is, but acknowledging this may also prevent happiness– for what is to happen if this promise of happiness is taken away, leaving her no direction forward at all?

"All These Agreeable, Desired Things"

Ahmed writes that "[t]o suffer can mean to feel your disagreement with what has been judged as good" (*Promise* 210). Helga Crane suffered for what she refused to accept as good, one life after another stripped of its happiness promise by conditions unacceptable to her but integral to social relations under white supremacist capitalist imperialist patriarchy. She cycles through these periods of relief and suffering only for Larsen to end her story in the liminal space that precedes certain death, a space that, like the one she'd always been forced to occupy at home and abroad, was neither here nor there. Disagreeing with the social goods she has been offered as consolation prizes while in pursuit of radiant life– Naxos' honorable African American uplift, Harlem's chic Black society, Copenhagen's "peacock's life"– Helga returns to the U.S. and Harlem to briefly put her disagreements to rest through the vector of religion and marriage to

Reverend Pleasant Green. Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, this final, radical change eventually finds her discontent with this life, too, humiliatingly worn down after a few edifying years in rural Alabama: "She had, to put it as brutally as anyone could, been a fool. The damndest kind of fool. And she had paid for it" (Larsen 133). Harkening back to her condemnation of the happy faces of Harlem as fools and Aunt Katrina's declaration that her mother had been a fool, Helga now finds that she has acted the fool, has, in the search for a bearable life, thrown herself intractably into a life that is unbearable in every way.

Helga's disagreements with her social environs had, up until this point, kept her alienated but also engaged in the continued pursuit of life. If not here, she said, then elsewhere, surely. If Larsen has taken us on a journey of Helga's search for a place in which she could bearably be herself only to end it in a "negation of life," she also reminds readers that a refusal to get along with happiness directives can also keep one alive: these disagreements move Helga out of untenable situations, if only to move her towards new, differently untenable ones (Clemmen 458). Helga turns good feelings to bad when she encounters the limiting raced, classed, and gendered ideologies of her allegedly accepting communities, and in doing so pokes holes into the sustaining promises of happiness that accompany each iteration of life. For Helga the freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to be affected unhappily by what is unhappy, to live a life that might affect others unhappily such that social relations become reconfigured in pursuit of addressing said unhappiness (Ahmed 195). Larsen, too, becomes an affect alien with her choice to end *Quicksand* unhappily. If readers held out hope that Helga might find that elusive happiness she's been so relentlessly chasing– as so many African American novels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had done, in service of creating a promise of happiness for Black citizens– Larsen cuts to the quick of that hope by leaving her protagonist (and, therefore,

readers) dangling at the precipice of death. Helga lives and dies an affect alien, never having found a life that could make her happy with what is not a happy-making world; her "unbearable life 'breaks' or 'shatters' under the 'too much' of what is being borne" (*Promise* 97). After all the world's interminable unbearableness, it is she who "had ruined her life" and "[m]ade it impossible ever again to do the things that she wanted, have the things that she loved, mingle with the people that she liked" with her desperate decision to try a radically different kind of life to the ones she'd tried before (Larsen 133). Her discontent reveals a truth about radiant life: it is very difficult to make life out of a set of structural conditions that only foster life for some people. It is not bad feelings about the unbearable world into which Helga has been born that make life unbearable but rather systems of power and domination designed to confer bearable lives to those most proximate to power.

In his 1928 review of *Quicksand* in *The Crisis*, W.E.B. DuBois wrote that "[t]here is no 'happy ending' and yet the theme is not defeatist...Helga Crane sinks at last master of her whimsical, unsatisfied soul. In the end she will be beaten down even to death but she will never utterly surrender to hypocrisy and convention" (DuBois 187). Despite an unhappy ending, readers might be invigorated by Helga's refusal to let go of what the world cannot let go. Early in the novel Dr. Anderson told Helga that with age and experience the ability to bear the "hypocrisy and convention[s]" of the world would be strengthened, suggesting that she might become desensitized to the raced, gendered, and classed conventions that so trouble her. After all, he continues, "if [people] didn't, they couldn't endure" (Larsen 20). Larsen writes Helga's braided refusal and inability to become "immunized" to the troubling conditions of life-making as quite literally unendurable. The world hasn't become any happier for Helga during the course of her life– why *should* she be made happy by it?

CHAPTER 3

"TRUTH PLUS MAGICAL LOVE EQUALS FREEDOM": SURVIVAL AND SUICIDE IN LYNDA BARRY'S *CRUDDY*

The first chapter of Lynda Barry's *Cruddy* (1999), one short paragraph, introduces the crux of sixteen-year-old Roberta Robheson's troubles: the relations meant to promise or inspire continuity of life are broken so badly as to now incite only fear. Roberta is alienated from what Ahmed calls an "affective community": she does not "experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good" because, in *Cruddy*, those objects– God, family– are *not* good (*Promise* 41). She recounts moving to the "cruddy" town where she now lives and the mother's hanging of a "haunted…light-absorber" Jesus on a cross in her and younger sister Julie's shared room, a Jesus who disturbingly "glow[s] green" and appears to be doing a "tragic ballet"; perturbed, Roberta asks "when the thing that is scaring you is already Jesus, who are you supposed to pray to?" (*Cruddy* 1). Authority, protection, and safety in the form of parent and God is tainted to the point of inversion: what is meant to protect and nurture only harms, sucks up the light and spits it back bearing a spooky shade of green. Opposite the text of this first, haunted chapter is author/illustrator Barry's black and white ink portrait of Roberta and her half-sister Julie. Looking back over her shoulder at Julie, Roberta's brows are furrowed, dark hair stringy and limp. Her skin is pale, bags droop under her weary, wary eyes, and her nose's bridge is wide and darkened, possibly bruised or broken (the mother is not averse to bashing it in). Julie hovers over Roberta's left shoulder, eyes closed in sleep, seemingly unconcerned or oblivious to

Roberta's worries. If Helga Crane managed to maintain a relation of cruel optimism with life for most of *Quicksand*, happiness always potentially on the next horizon, Roberta has rarely had much hope for anything. Following a drug-induced emergency room visit, the "famous author Roberta Rohbeson" has begun to compose "the famous book" *Cruddy*, an account of her life and death that readers now hold in their hands (*Cruddy* 3).

Roberta has been troubled by the world, and to survive it she has had to trouble it back. Corroded by the dissolution of their own power and leading lives immobilized by poverty, illness, and abuse, adults in *Cruddy* tend to exert brutal control over the children and adolescents they encounter. Making trouble becomes a necessary part of staying alive for Roberta, who must regularly defy, flee from, or destroy the adults put in charge of her or risk death. While social structures meant to ensure the reproduction of life such as the heterosexual nuclear family are normatively constructed in the U.S. as morally good, safe, and therefore a desirable institution for a child's flourishing, a great many children in both literature and life have experienced otherwise. Referred to throughout the novel only as "the mother" and "the father," Roberta's parents are two of the greatest threats to Roberta's life, what must be worked out or around if she wishes to live.

Cruddy, which Barry formats as Roberta's found notebook, consists of two intertwining narratives. Readers meet Roberta in 1971, recently re-grounded after already spending the previous five years leading a highly "restricted life" in the wake of a bloody, murder-packed road trip with the father. When police discovered eleven-year-old Roberta alone in the desert at the road trip's end, covered in blood and silently clutching a ratty dog named Cookie, she faked shock (an idea gleaned from the horror film *The Thing!*) to avoid having to tell anyone what had happened. On the anticlimactic fifth anniversary of what newspapers dubbed the Lucky Chief

Motel Massacre, a now teenaged Roberta meets fellow high school student and drug-enthusiast Vicky Talluso, setting off a series of delinquent adventures that expand Roberta's sense of what is possible in the world, including what kinds of bonds might be forged between one person and another. Unloosed from the adult-mediated confines of their humdrum, cruddy lives, Roberta, Vicky, and their cohort of stoned, suicidal teen runaways make a bid for reproducing life against all odds. Not the restricted semblance of life they had all been trapped in prior to meeting each other, but life as a prolonged state of liveliness: rushing, dangerous, exciting, and gleefully free to pursue pleasure for pleasure's sake. Like-minded souls with whom Roberta can commune, adventure, and seek connection beyond the confines of social domination and acceptability, Vicky, the Turtle, the Great Wesley, and the Stick also have neglectful and abusive parents and caretakers, must also flee from the institutions and families that have reduced their lives to cruddy simulacra of living which could only doom them into becoming versions of the miserable adults who control their lives. Through them Roberta encounters, for the first time, human intimacy driven by affective identification, and decides that these will be the people to whom she finally tells the story of the father's road trip and all it entailed.

Documenting both her memories of the road trip and the burgeoning friendships into which she releases them, Roberta plans to finish this account of her life, sneak out of the house with Vicky to be front row for Neil Young's live performance of "Cinnamon Girl," and then commit suicide, for once the truth has finally been set down in ink "the author must die" (*Cruddy* 13). The novel then dually serves as a record of the horrific conditions that lead to Roberta's premature death at her own hands as well as an account of how that life finally came to be witnessed with care, attention, and reverence for the first and last time. If Larsen shows us how a lack of shared affective atmospheres within one's communities eventually undoes the promises

that makes reproducing life possible, Barry writes the bittersweet joy of a group of outsiders finding each other to ride a wave of shared affects into an uncertain future.[27] Such shared sweetness does not, however, result in life-affirming closure, a promise of future happiness, or even the continuance of our protagonist's life. Instead, as in *Quicksand*, the reader is left lingering around the promise of death: Roberta, as readers learn in the suicide notes that comprises the novel's first and last pages, is ostensibly dead by the book's end, or has at least made an earnest attempt to end her life.[28] Connection and identification, electric as it is, cannot solve the problem of how difficult and Sisyphean it is to attempt life-making under harrowing and precarious conditions. In fact, all of Roberta's new friends, save the inexplicably confident Vicky Talluso, have also committed suicide by the time we arrive at the novel's final pages. There is no upward mobility at the close of Roberta's story, no moral echo except a certainty that true horror, abuse, friendship, laughter, and adventure can and do exist alongside each other, and that there is very little other than a total re-making of the world that can solve the total vulnerability of being a child at the mercy of abusive adults.

Ahmed writes that "we learn about affect by reading about the how of its distribution" (*Promise* 163). In a book about the lives and deaths of a group of teens who mostly don't survive the grotesque bloom and doom of adolescence, Barry explores which social relations foster liveliness and which diminish it to the point of negation. How is the very resource of having a life distributed, the ability to imagine the future as a habitable place its own kind of resource necessary to the reproduction of life? A great many novels about teen girls craft tales out of the

[27] "Atmospheres are the shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge." (Anderson 78)

[28] Barry said in an interview that even she is not sure whether Roberta is dead or alive, only that Roberta's voice has never again come to her (Chicago Tribune).

hyper-gendered transition from childhood into adolescence and adulthood, during which these girls encounter difficult but essential lessons about what it means to make a life within the confines of normatively gendered scripts for happiness. In classics of this genre such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *Little Women*, and more recently *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *The House on Mango Street*, and *Persepolis*, amongst others, girls slowly accrue experiences of themselves in relation to their communities and the larger world, and in the process build agency such that their stories can serve as inspirational tales for young readers looking for guidance as they navigate these transitions in their own lives. But instead of writing a book about surviving the trials and tribulations of one's teens years, Barry has written a novel about *not* surviving these years, despite Roberta's valiant and successful efforts at avoiding death as a young child. For a long time, Roberta endeavors "to become willing" in a bid to placate the violence of the mother and father and stay alive, hoping these capitulations will bring the "relief from pressure" that doing as one is told is alleged to offer, but it is only at the times when she makes the choice to *stop* being willing to do as her parents wish that the pressure of trying to stay alive is (temporarily) relieved (*Living* 75). Readers watch Roberta's life wax and wane depending on her proximity to her biological family, but it is only after she witnesses her new friends– a short-lived chosen family– take their own lives to avoid being returned to abusive homes that she comes to understand self-annihilation as the only way to ensure the "happily ever after" promised in fairy tales (*Cruddy* iii).

I look to scenes of identification in this novel of social discord to better understand the affective circulations which Barry represents as necessary to foster survival and agency for a girl whose historical moment is defined by the dreams and disappointments of countercultural movements, which earnestly proposed love as the antidote to long-standing structures of

domination. Additionally, I consider how Barry represents the effects of Roberta's affective atmosphere on others, seeing to whom and how her humanity becomes legible enough for her to take the risk of fostering affective connection. Inspired by María Lugones' method of identifying sites of colonial violence to discover where and in what ways people resist such violence– for, as she points out, where there is domination there is *always* resistance– I excavate Barry's novel of relentless institutionalized violence for its moments of earnest interpersonal tenderness to discover how and to what end the author imagines Roberta's resistance. Gloria Anzaldúa wrote that "[n]othing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads": the imagined realities of novels can serve not as imperatives for how readers should navigate their own lives but rather as sites of affective encounter that can help us more thoughtfully engage in questions of how we go about this life-long practice of being in relation to others, a project essential to the often difficult process of reproducing life under systems of domination (Anzaldúa 109).[29]

Cruddy **Studies**

Cruddy is less written about than Barry's work in comics and graphic novels, the genres in which she is most known, published, and lauded. While *Cruddy* is an illustrated novel– a map is the reader's first foray into Roberta's story, black and white ink illustrations are scattered throughout, and Barry subtitles it "an illustrated novel"– it is primarily told through text rather than giving equal space to image and text as in her comics and graphic novels (*Cruddy* iv).[30]

[29] Ahmed would call these characters and novels part of our feminist killjoy survival kits, or the treasury of pleasures, connections, permission slips, and practices feminists accrue to survive what bell hooks names as white supremacist capitalist imperialist patriarchy.

[30] Barry did, however, paint the entirety of the novel's text (rather than typing or writing by hand) when she drafted it.

Scholars have primarily focused their readings of *Cruddy* within literary legacies of girlhood and the grotesque. In her monograph on Barry's work, Susan E. Kirtley places *Cruddy* in the literary tradition of girlhood studies, citing Cruddy as "a monstrous reflection of girlhood as gothic nightmare" in which Roberta constructs a myriad of identities in order to cope with the cruel and dangerous "gaze of others" (Kirtley 77-78). Ellen Barry also considers *Cruddy* via girlhood studies in addition to the gothic novel, noting that "Roberta is an abject victim whose cruddy life offers not even a useful cautionary tale let alone a progressive or redemptive narrative of hope" (Barry 131). Roberta finds no real closure at the novel's end, does not bear any heroic traits other than the ability to survive and outwit the endless parade of violent adults she meets. Mary E. Papke writes of the novel's relationship to naturalism, the cruddy-ness of the physical spaces Roberta inhabits working to reflect and inform the brutality of the adults who have been entrusted with her care. She describes the novel's plot as a "story of lifelong abuse and [Roberta's] desire for affectional connection," noting the centrality of affect's circulations to processes of alienation as well connection (Papke 62). Until meeting Vicky, the affective exchanges between Roberta and her environment, including its inhabitants, had been oppositional and rooted in the need to survive rather than to connect, relate, or enjoy. In fact, up until meeting Vicky, Cookie the dog was one of the few other living beings with whom Roberta had any unconditionally loving, positive experience– and the mother later dumps Cookie over a bridge while Roberta is at school one day (*Cruddy* 215). My close readings in this chapter set out to fill in a gap in scholarship on *Cruddy*, which tends to (understandably) focus on its cruddiest moments: what intimate encounters keep Roberta, against all odds, alive and in pursuit of life, and how does Barry go about fashioning the quality of liveliness that makes Roberta such a compelling protagonist?

In *Cruddy* Barry inverts, adapts, and interweaves the literary traditions of bildungsroman, fairytale, and diary to create her account of how the world and its systems for reproducing life can wear down even its most lively inhabitants. That she uses the figure of an abused, suicidal teen girl is a departure from the conventions of the classical bildungsroman, which traditionally chronicles the path from character-building youth to "successful" adulthood such that the protagonist or author is understood to currently be in possession of said success, having sowed one's oats and settled down into a life well-lived enough that they can now extol the virtues of living life their way. Franco Moretti describes how "[t]he classical bildungsroman plot posits 'happiness' as the highest value, but only to the detriment and eventual annulment of 'freedom,'" wherein happiness is the proscribed outcome of undergoing the events recounted in the bildungsroman (Moretti 557-8). Achieving this state of happiness serves as a reminder that the freedom (to wander, to try new ways of life) that leads you there has a time and place that can only last so long and serve one purpose– that of leading one back into the fold of the family– of preserving the social order that made one's life story possible in the first place. This tension between this freedom to wander and the imperative to return "home" (to family, but also to cultural norms) is essential to the emergence of the bildungsroman as

> the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization…we realize that in our world socialization itself consists first of all in the interiorization of contradiction. The next being not to "solve" the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival. (Moretti 559)

The bildungsroman then acts as a tutorial for socialization despite the fact that solving the contradictions of modern life is, according to Moretti, impossible, for "freedom and happiness, identity and change, security and metamorphoses…are *all equally important* for modern Western

mentality" (Moretti 558, emphasis author). The bildungsroman gives writers and readers a narrative shape for working out the contradictory expectations and impulses that shape modern experience, though rarely in service of producing a person who continues to defy the norms that reproduce life– the form's goal is to maintain given systems for reproducing life. Beginning and ending with Roberta's decision to take her own life even after experiencing a period of freedom and loving intimacy, Barry's revision of the bildungsroman functions to critique rather than reinscribe scripts for happiness.

Barry also adapts elements of fairy tales, playing with their generic conventions to help illustrate Roberta's distance from the American happiness promise that might be summarized by the fairy tale's ending declaration of "happily ever after." The first invocation of the genre appears with Roberta's choice to begin her life story with "Once upon a cruddy time," the phrase that signals a tale likely to be both magical and didactic (*Cruddy* 3). Nikolajeva describes this stock fairytale phrase as "the spatiotemporal condition, or chronotope, of fairy tales," a way to signal entering a place abstracted from time and "summarized in the initial formulas such as 'once upon a time, not your time, and not my time'" (Nikolajeva 141). Not your time, not my time, but somehow a forever re-circulating time where ethics, ideals, group welfare– essentially, the mechanisms that in tandem produce the conditions of life lived in community with others– could be worked out through archetypal figures often named only by their familial role (mother, father, etc.). Barry adjusts the classic version of this opening salvo from "a time" to "a cruddy time," a gesture that ensures that *Cruddy*'s chronotope is marked not just by its fairy tale-like abstraction from the here-and-now or then-and-there but also, importantly, by its unhappiness. While what Roberta refers to as Cruddy City doesn't have a titular analog in the U.S., her neighborhood "on a cruddy street on the side of a cruddy hill in the cruddiest part of a crudded-

out town" is a stock portrait of the "wrong sick of the tracks" in any city in the country, where it is also always and forever cruddy because people with money do not want to– and so do not have to– live by the "illegal dumping ravine" (*Cruddy* 3, 5). The chronotope of the fairytale, where stories about how to behave and the consequences of not doing so are always happening in a place we can only access in our imaginations, is the chronotope of Cruddy City and Roberta's life there, suspended in a cruddy-ness that will likely last forever, for being part of the economic underclass in the U.S. is never not being relegated to the worst of whatever a city or town has to offer. Roberta, grounded for five years post-road trip and then quickly grounded yet again following her adventures with Vicky and co., is also suspended in time. With nowhere to go but school (violent, lonely) and home (violent, lonely), Roberta describes her and sister Julie as experts only in blowing smoke rings, "hav[ing] had a lot of time to practice" (*Cruddy* 110). Together they languish at home alone, creating shapes out of toxic smoke that appears only to dissipate, over and over again, a party trick with no parties at which to be performed. All of this careful layering of specificity– the facts and affects of Roberta's life– with generality (the bad part of town where bad things are always happening) brings readers just close and just far enough from the horror of a life like Roberta's to accept the terms Barry sets for what comprises this child's life: childhood as nightmare captivity. As Barry describes it, this chronotypical distancing allows the extreme violence in *Cruddy* to function much like that of fairy tales, for "[i]f the story of Hansel and Gretel were told on the news or in the newspaper, it would be horrifying. But in our minds, we can make a place for such stories" (*AV Club*). Also like the fairytale of Hansel and Gretel, Roberta uses the father's own methods for murder against him; Hansel and Gretel push the witch into her own oven, the thing she had been planning to use to kill them. *Cruddy* and the tale of Hansel and Gretel additionally share the motif of abandoned

children who use their wits to stay alive, though their endings teach very different lessons. Scholars have often focused on "domestic harmony and security" in their reading of Hansel and Gretel's social mores; Jack Zipes reads Grimm's final version as "celebrat[ing]…the symbolic order of the father," for Hansel and Gretel return to the father (stepmother dead by way of famine) with the witch's jewels to live forever in that infinite place signified by "happily ever after" (*Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* 273). Roberta also returns to the "symbolic order of the father," but only in the sense that she will die by her own hand, like her grandfather, and enter that infinite forever of death to which she had long ago sent the father.

In another explicit invocation of the fairy tale, Roberta is at one point suddenly struck by a vomitous "memory smell" of "tripe, fresh and unrinsed," a scent we eventually learn comes from some of Roberta's unhappy past meetings with dead flesh (*Cruddy* 57). Cued by this "memory smell," Roberta recounts a story about the father in which a fly is stuck in the car with them during the road trip. She observes that "[o]nly in a fairy tale could [the fly] ever go home again. In fairy tales it happened all the time. It was possible. I was thinking it was really possible" (*Cruddy* 58). Roberta knew there was no happy ending in a life like hers, outcomes likely ranging only from bad to worse. It would take the unreality, the magical thinking of a fairy tale to set right the imminent death currently awaiting this fly. Just as Roberta reaches the verge of hopefulness– "I was thinking it was really possible"– the father "snatched" the fly from the air and crushed it in his fist (*Cruddy* 58). A callback to Barry's early "Once upon…" invocation of fairy tales, this encounter of fly, Roberta, and the father further comments on the fixity of narrative promises. Roberta, ardent recorder of her own life and observer of others', is under no illusion that her life will one day become wonderful, or even merely better than it has been, for only in a fairy tale could she "ever go home again" to a reality untouched by her experiences at

the hands of the father. Yet Roberta was also young enough at the time of this event that despite knowing intellectually that the fly could only meet an untimely end, she finds herself briefly fantasizing, letting herself entertain the childish hope that maybe, just this one time, a life being lived in proximity to the father could escape his all-consuming violence.

Finally, when it comes to the novel taking the form of Roberta's recovered diary, Kirtley points out that "Barry's choice to emulate a diary through fiction links the text to a form often associated with women, particularly adolescent women" (*Contagious* 133). This adoption of the diary genre assists in raising the stakes of intimacy, peels a few layers of affective remove from the reader's sense of themselves as separate from the book, a receptor of the story rather than a part of it. Kirtley describes how this narrative gesture "blur[s] the lines of truth and fiction and add[s] a discernible tension to the text" (*Contagious* 136). This diaristic form turns *Cruddy* into an alchemical object that collapses the fictional world of the novel with the material world of the reader. An affective frame that also positions the reader as an essential, animating piece of the novel's narrative, the book's direct opening address– also the beginning of Roberta's suicide note– makes the reader the "anyone" of "Dear Anyone Who Finds This" (*Cruddy* viii). If we are reading the book, this address posits, then it is we who have found it; Roberta imagined us as her witnesses, and so we too must imagine our lives as lived on a shared plane of existence. Traveled from the world of fiction (in which Roberta, not Barry, writes *Cruddy*) to that of the reader's very real hands, *Cruddy* is Roberta Rohbeson's legacy, this record of her life taking the place of a life extinguished. This address by way of suicide note makes *Cruddy* an especially powerful site of encounter that reaches out and pulls us in, making readers accountable to Roberta's wish to be seen, heard, and understood. We are not just to read, but to witness, to consider why it is that "[i]f you are holding this book right now"– and we are– "it means everything came out just

the way [Roberta] wanted it to" (*Cruddy* ii). The difference between reading and witnessing: the reader is explicitly made a character in Roberta's story, not just implied as what sets a book's narrative in motion but necessary receptors of a desperate girl's last request: we become the someone who found this that Roberta has imagined, whose handling of the text confirms that Roberta got the ending she needed, and so we can't look away, must fulfill our obligation to be the intended someone who reads *Cruddy*.

"Something Alive"

Before delving into the encounters in which Roberta feels most alive it is useful to consider Barry's descriptions of her creative process for *Cruddy,* which was composed by painting the text on paper with ink and brush. Her discussions of this process help frame her conceptualization of "aliveness" as one of the primary affective atmospheres imbuing this text of death and decay. In fact, the kinds of questions Barry regularly asks about making art and telling stories– how to transmit certain affects to readers, what forms those successful transmissions take and why– are helpful guides for examining the literary tactics that allow *Cruddy* to flourish in its contradictions. In *Picture This* (2010), Barry writes of *Cruddy* that "[i]t turns out that writing [the novel] with a paintbrush was what finally brought the book *to life*" (*Picture* 205, emphasis mine). Barry prefaced this by describing years of unsuccessfully trying to write the book on a computer, remarking in an interview that "the problem was that dang delete button. You can get rid of something before you even know what it is" (*Vice*). After ten years of struggling with *Cruddy,* she finished it just nine months after switching to the paintbrush method. To imbue the text with a quality of liveliness– to tell the story of life and death and make it unmistakably lively for writer and reader– Barry discovered she was best served by a creative

practice that eliminated the ease of deletion, that let each word live long enough on the page to lead to the one that came after and so on and on. Deleting text before it had a chance to invoke the next word impeded the novel's existence, killed off that quality of "aliveness" that then emerged so easily once deletion was no longer possible. The switch from ever-deletable digital screen to ink on paper rendered the blank page "a *place* rather than a thing. A place where *something alive* can happen" (*Picture* 205, 223, emphasis mine). Adding words to the page, rather than erasing them from it, can make something come *alive*, some invisible complex arising out of narrative and feeling akin to life, intangible yet potent enough to be discernable, felt. This "something alive" Barry describes might be thought of as an affective atmosphere capable of transporting the reader to the book's world even as their body stayed anchored to the "real" world, a best-case scenario of the collaborative encounter that a meeting of text and reader facilitates. When reader meets text– as when any one thing meets another, according to Karen Barad's theory of "intra-action"– affects are what invariably emerge, even before we can form a thought about that thing; for Barry the feeling that emerged while creating *Cruddy* was of liveliness, a creative energy that made Roberta's life and world possible.[31] But in the end (or as is the case in *Cruddy*, the beginning) Roberta doesn't survive her own life. She can't, really, the weight of all those knives, suicides, murders, and abuse congealing so thickly as to cut off all avenues for life-making. As Roberta knows and is made to learn over and over again, even after the father's death, it is only in fairy tales that vulnerable children make it out alright in the end.

[31] Barad understands all matter in the universe– human, non-human, alive and not, i.e. plastic, paper, and other materials generally understood as "not alive" and therefore unable to act– as agential actors in "a dynamic intra-active becoming that never sits still—an ongoing reconfiguring that exceeds any linear conception of dynamics in which effect follows cause end-on-end" (Barad 170). As such, when beings, objects, atmospheres, and any other material which makes up the world in which we live meet, they do not simply interact but intra-act, "engaging in an ongoing reconfiguring of the world" in which "'environments' and 'bodies' are intra-actively co-constituted" (170).

Over time "happily ever after" comes to mean something different than life continuing on; for Roberta "happily ever after" becomes the promise of life *not* going on.

Before readers discover Roberta's suicide note they encounter an epigraph that cleverly foretells Roberta's fate and engages Barry's conception of the aliveness that Roberta encapsulates. A selection of verse from Francesco Redi reads:

> Such bright sun is a ray enkindled
>
> Of that sun, in heaven that shines
>
> And has been left behind entangled
>
> And caught in the net of many vines. (*Cruddy* vi)

Barry's use of Redi's verse as a prelude to Roberta's life story embeds the novel's themes in both the text of the epigraph and the biography of its author. Redi, a seventeenth century Italian poet and biologist, was the first to refute the notion of spontaneous generation, an early scientific theory stating that living matter could be generated from non-living matter; he challenged this with the discovery that maggots come from the eggs of flies, proving that something alive must come from the presence of something else alive (Bardell 237). Flies, those creatures that made possible Redi's discovery of how life is generated, are a kind of talisman for Roberta, who states that

> [f]lies have always been part of my life. In the days of Rohbeson's Slaughterhouse, flies were everywhere, crawling up the walls like living designs. I used to fall asleep looking at them. Thinking about their world. Their society. Did they have kings? Did they steal from each other? My light fixture was black-full with bodies of them. I used to think they had feelings about certain people. People who noticed them. Certain people. Me. (*Cruddy* 57-58)

Trapped in a life marked by literal and ethical decay, Roberta takes comfort in the company of flies, who animate her thoughts and allow her to consider other ways of living: do all creatures live in hierarchies? Do they too take from each other? Is being aware of someone's existence the initiating relation required to build a shared affective atmosphere? Flies, these lovers of decay, function via a reciprocal relation between life and death: flies are attracted to and lay eggs in material which will rot, in turn producing the maggots that will become more flies. Roberta's life story is one of "a ray enkindled / by that Sun," the liveliness at her core magically surviving the cruddiness of her home environment. But this bright liveliness is "[l]eft behind entangled" in the increasingly suffocating network of vines– family, school, police– dedicated to enforcing even the most unfit adults' total control over her life. The small ink portrait above Redi's epigraph illustrates Roberta's entrapment in those vines, featuring a frame of densely intertwining black, white, and gray ink squiggles which enclose a silhouette portrait of an androgynous person bent over a notebook, pen in hand. Barry shows us Roberta in the process of writing this book we now read, making something alive to leave behind after her death, thick tangle of vines closing in on her all the while. If Redi postulated the conditions necessary for generating life in his scientific work, he ruefully expands on this idea in his poetic verse, which notes that even the brightest light can only extend to its full capacity when there is not a knotted bundle of overgrown material there to cut that ray short, trap it into shadows where its brightness is snuffed out by the density of tangled foliage. Something alive can produce something alive, no matter how rotten, but when that something alive becomes trapped in a net of vines it stops short, losing the light that drove its aliveness.

The next two pages before Roberta officially beings to relay her tale give readers a final, essential bit of pre-narrative information that completes the book's frame: *Cruddy* is the story of

a life, but it is also an extended suicide note. The left side of the page features an illustration of a handprint rendered in ink, part of the pointer finger missing from when Roberta's father cut if off. On the facing page is a note signed "Sincerely Yours, / The Author," followed by cursive text that replicates a handwritten signature: "Roberta Rohbeson 1955-1971" (*Cruddy* viii). Above, the note's contents read as follows:

> Dear Anyone Who Finds This,
>
> Do Not blame the drugs. It was not the fault of the drugs. I planned this way before the drugs were ever in my life. And do not blame Vicky Talluso. It was my idea to kill myself. All she did was give me a little push. If you are holding this book right now it means that everything came out just the way I wanted it to. I got my happily ever after. (*Cruddy* viii)

Roberta won't, after all, survived the "net of many vines" invoked in the epigraph, but feels she must use this book, her final transmission to the world she leaves behind, to answer "the burning question of why she turned out the way she did and why she ended the way she ended," warning the reader that if you "[a]sk a burning question, [you] get a burning answer" (*Cruddy* 11). Roberta "very badly wants to get to the question of why"; well-aware that not all children's lives are like hers, she records her story in part to uncover exactly when this life-long accumulation of painful experience became unbearable to the point where ending her life was the only way to escape it, even after having worked so hard and for so long to survive it thus far (*Cruddy* 11). Yet against this bleak revelation of our protagonist's outcome Barry injects some humor, too, capturing the earnest voice of a teenager who demands that her choice to die be taken seriously despite the likelihood of adults reducing her decision to a temporary drug-fueled mania. Roberta's imploring demand that we "Do Not blame the drugs" is her attempt to communicate

that the bitter reality of her restricted life, not the temporary relief that drugs offered, caused her to abandon the ongoing project of reproducing life. Psychedelic drugs, which during this period in American history became a catch-all for what was wrong with this generation of anti-authoritarian youth, are, at least in Roberta's case, innocent bystanders. So please, whoever finds this: do NOT blame the drugs, which were emphatically not at fault. Roberta and Roberta alone made this decision, knew what she wanted and how to get it.

Meat People: The Father & Survival

To fully understand Roberta's aliveness is to first witness where and in what state of rot the egg of her life had been laid. Made aware of the cruel atmosphere of death and destruction that comprises her life, her aliveness, both literal and affective, is rendered all the more wondrous for being sustained in such an environment. The road trip that sets Roberta on her path to self-annihilation begins with a catastrophic forty-eight hours during which every one of the father's prospects for a happy life collapse in quick succession. The newspaper reporting on the father's road trip and the recovery of his daughter, Roberta notes, described the father as "unhinged by recent events in his life" and doing "what desperate men do in desperate situations": the demise of the family business, his father's suicide, and discovery of his wife's affair (at which point he learns that Julie, Roberta's younger sister, is not biologically his child) precipitate a grisly crime spree (*Cruddy* 23). During the road trip he relentlessly murders, maims, manipulates, lies to, and exploits every person he meets, including Roberta, who he forces to be his sidekick in all these undertakings after the mother hides her in the backseat of his car before he flees the family home (*Cruddy* 23). His road trip also unwittingly kicks off a series of events that led to his death at the hands of his daughter: the father spends much of the road trip

educating Roberta about how to outwit one's enemies and targets, even outfitting her with a knife for self-protection. What Roberta survives as a child, then, was a particularly grim dissolution of the American promise of happiness for the Rohbeson family, the failure not just to preserve the family unit but also of the way of life purported to be the exclusive formula for happiness and prosperity.

Barry paints a brutal picture of the white, heterosexual nuclear family's fading/failing promise of happiness during a period of immense social and economic change in the U.S. This historical shift from post-WWII hyper-normed boom in mass production and consumption to early '70s political burnout and mega-monopolies is mirrored in the Rohbeson family's decay, epitomized most potently in the figure of the father. As Roberta describes it, the father was "next in line…the only man in line. The last standing Rohbeson," the last vessel to which the Rohbeson prosperity and status gained in the first half of the twentieth century will be passed (*Cruddy* 25). But, the father complains, "[my father] sold it right out from under me," taking his own life immediately afterwards, perhaps in part due to the shame of not being able to maintain the means of accruing wealth that his family had worked so hard to build (*Cruddy* 25). Ahmed writes that "[t]o pin hopes on the future is to imagine happiness as what lies ahead of us"; the father no longer sees a happy future for himself, is unable to imagine that prosperity or pleasure could be in his future other than in temporary, disposable moments of sex or violence (*Promise* 160). When Roberta's grandfather killed himself, he effectively unpinned happiness from the Rohbesons' promised future, sullying the family reputation: if Rohbeson's Slaughter had failed to thrive under the meritocratic promises of the American Dream, they just must not have tried hard enough. The father bemoans these losses as well as the fading art of butchering, telling Roberta that "[y]ou know that half the cuts we do you can't even find anymore? A whole world

has just died and no one gives a damn about it" (*Cruddy* 25). He has lost not just a father and family business but a way of life, "a whole world" promised to white Americans with fixed rules about skill, quality, and success: do your work well, work hard, and you can't lose. Now those rules have irrevocably changed such that success isn't only being good at your craft and working hard but also consuming and destroying any business in competition with your own, accruing a monopoly so complete that no other business stands a chance against you. The father lambasts what the corporate meat industry has taken from him and his family, scoffingly proclaiming

> [t]hat shit what's coming out of Chicago now? Out of those big houses? That ain't meat…It's what you get when you pack half-dead cattle nose to asshole, scaring the living hell out of them with shock prods, blow their brains out with a bolt gun louder than a cannon and then hoist them up to hang 'em on a chain line. (*Cruddy* 25)

The lack of craft in corporate meat culture is so counter to quality that it renders its products not even meat, instead flesh rendered "shit" by a faceless, mechanical brutality that tortures sick animals before sending them to rough, careless deaths. The father's unraveling during the course of the road trip with Roberta portrays a man who, having completely lost the tether to a happy life as he has known it, wholly embraces the callow, careless violence of corporate values, slaying and flaying whoever gets in his way to secure whatever resources he feels are owed to him. This is the regrettable way of the world now, and he will follow it right to his very own death.

Yet even after his death Roberta can't help continuing to assess others through the eyes of the father, to look for their weaknesses, strengths, and proclivity for being "Navy all the way," the father's military-derived descriptor for survival comprised of being sneaky, adaptable, fearless, and calculating no matter the costs (*Cruddy* 17). Roberta continues to see herself as the

father's unfortunate double: bad, ugly, cruel, and descended from butchers, a blight on this earth and "hell with a knife" (*Cruddy* 17). Her survival thus far, as she sees it, is wedded to her status as one of the "meat people": survival is brutality, and brutality is her inheritance. The father's affective atmosphere is fittingly aestheticized by meat and knives, "exert[ing] a force on those that are surrounded by it": everywhere he goes dead bodies follow, everyone he encounters so much metaphorical meat sliced on the blade of his insatiable need to exploit (Anderson 78). During the road trip the father explained to Roberta that the Rohbesons

> came from meat people. Generations of them that could be traced all the way back to the time of the monkey. "The monkey with the most meat wins," said the father…[l]ook at their teeth. Fangs like that? If one bit you, you'd know it. Meat people run things, Clyde. Always have and always will." (*Cruddy* 16)

The father is not being entirely metaphorical here: The Rohbesons had a long run with their slaughterhouse, to which they have only recently lost ownership. "We are knife people and have always been knife people and people who use guns are pismires," explains the father (*Cruddy* 72). People who distance themselves from death like these new meat corporations, unlike the direct contact that use of a knife in hand requires, are mere ants in the father's view, smaller beings sure to be trampled by the true meat people willing to make fleshy contact with the lives they take.

Being a knife person is not the only inheritance from the father: Roberta notes that she doesn't resemble the mother, a "knock out," "stunner," and "drop dead beautiful," but is rather "what a person might call a dog. Very much a dog…My face cells divided into the shape of the father, who even for a man was on the homely side" (*Cruddy* 60). Look like the father, use knives like the father: Roberta is resigned to what she sees as her inescapable Rohbeson-ian

legacy, dictated by the fate of a shared bloodline and as unavoidable as one's reflection in a mirror. She has been profoundly affected by lessons in survival from the father, despite her gentleness, forcibly pulled into his cyclone and spit out the other side wearing meat-tinted glasses. Narrowly missing a knife thrown at her by sister Julie during an argument, Roberta notes that the father would have deemed Julie a "natural" and tossed her a whole pack of cigarettes as reward; later, watching her friend Vicky attempt to manipulate a conversation, Roberta feels "disappointed," noting that the father would have laughed at such artless attempts at procuring power (*Cruddy* 129, 42). While she doesn't aspire to be any more like the father than she already is, aware that he was a rotted person, she has internalized his "Navy" method of evaluating people and the world, a skill which had, after all, kept her alive during the road trip's constant threats to her life. As such, Roberta's lessons in survival from the father have come to make up much of her intuition, what Berlant describes as what emerges "in the middle of the reproduction of life [as] people make up modes of being and responding to the world" (Berlant 53). Thus far Roberta has survived her precarious life– and the machinations of the adults in charge of it– by paying exacting attention to other people's behaviors, the most enduringly useful (and, for that matter, least likely to cause harm) skill honed at the father's deranged school of meat-person expertise.

Affect transforms when it leaks from body to body through experience: the father's paranoid watchfulness becomes something else inside Roberta. Shifting into something more akin to acute curiosity, she uses her skills not to take from people what they might have to give but to observe and evaluate the capaciousness of human behavior when they interact with each other. The father wanted something from everyone he encountered, and his hypervigilance served him thus; Roberta wants something too, but what she wants is a new way of life, a way to

be in the world divorced from her suffocating memories of being at the mercy of deranged adults. To be a witness to others' lives, as she is for the flies she observes, and later, the crew of abused teens she meets, is to foster the possibility of being witnessed in return, to cultivate reciprocal affective circulations that help reinstate one's sense of their own humanity eroded by encounters cruelly lacking in reciprocal witnessing. She also wants exhilaration, which she extols as "[d]istraction. When a train is passing a few inches above your head you can't really think about anything else and there are times when a clear head is something I am most thankful for" (*Cruddy* 233). Extreme experiences are a salve and antidote to the relentless onslaught of life and its memories.

Plaintively, Roberta wonders if we might be capable of understanding or even accepting the affects that have congealed around and because of the father, if readers might recognize or empathize with the counterintuitive feelings coagulated at the intersections of violence, domination, and love that make up her memories of the father. Though the portrait of the father Roberta paints is plainly unforgiving, her ambivalence about her relation to him and his tutelage permeate the text and decisions she makes in search of new ways of life. Though Roberta asks readers if she had "mention[ed] I loved the father? At the beginning of the journey I loved him a lot," she also readily confesses that she "[does] not feel bad about killing him… It was a good idea and I'm glad I did it" (*Cruddy* 72, 11). Still, she wonders if

> [a]fter all the things that happened, described and undescribed, if I told you I still loved the father would you understand it? How there was a wire of love running inside of me that I could not find to pull? It was the side effect of being someone's child, anyone's child, whoever God tossed you to. (*Cruddy* 148)

Roberta is profoundly disenchanted with being someone's child, this form of intimate relation that hides within it a self-defeating "wire of love" as inescapable as her meat-personhood (*Cruddy* 148). Tossed to the mother and father randomly by an indifferent God, Roberta's affective orientation towards the father– no less potent for being a "side effect" of biology and human reproduction– remains intact despite having its roots in unimaginable horrors. Affective scripts, embedded in the capitalist patriarchal institution of family, have the power to unwillingly align vulnerable people with those who wish to dominate and harm them.

Roberta understands herself as made in the father's image, so, knowing she had to kill him to survive, it's unsurprising that suicide is a fantasy threaded throughout the novel, often signaled by reminders of the father. At one point Roberta is reunited with her beloved Little Debbie, the faithful knife (a gift from the father) that saved her life from a dangerous cop trying to molest and then commit her to an institute for disabled children during one stop of the father's road trip. Sewed into a sock monkey she made during her brief, silent post-road trip convalescence at an orphanage's where she was known only as the Mystery Child, a period extended by the mother's long consideration of whether she should bother claiming the "orphan" pictured in the newspaper as her own, it holds inside its soft body a wad of cash wrapped protectively around Little Debbie, which had been "wrapped [in] an oiled piece of cloth around her blade," one of the "steps every knife person knows about" to keep one's knife safe and ready for use (*Cruddy* 230). Roberta, laying eyes on the rust-less Little Debbie for the first time since hiding it there, remarks that the sight of it "[makes her] eyes wet… knife loving blood circulates within me" (230). Roberta's loving orientation towards knives, and this knife in particular, is carried in the blood, inherited from the father: her meat person legacy. But, as in her relationship with her father, Roberta's intra-active relation to Little Debbie is more complex than purely

unadulterated love, tied as it is to Roberta's memory of using it to turn the live body of the dangerous cop into so much rotting meat.[32] When Barry reunites Roberta with Little Debbie Roberta's death wish is reignited, revealed to be not only a wish for her own death but a wish for the annihilation of the entire Rohbeson family line. She describes where on the body "you should plunge the knife to stop the blood of time past from infecting the blood of time future… [i]t would be so easy" (*Cruddy* 230). Together Little Debbie and Roberta might become heroines, ending Roberta's life to ensure the dissolution of a line of meat people sure to only continue poisoning humanity with their existence. The only direct descendent of the father that she knows of (Julie being a half-sister with a different father), it is within Roberta's power to end the Rohbeson genetic line, to stop herself from becoming yet another knife-wielding adult.

The father teaches Roberta to manipulate the affective atmospheres that form during encounters with others by adapting her performance of identity to each situation, ideally such that this will open the possibility for exploitation of some sort. Roberta explains that the father "wanted a son to pass his wisdom to. Me being born a girl was just a technicality," reminding us that so much of her experience has been incidental to scripts written for her by cultural norms (*Cruddy* 16). Renamed Clyde or Ee-gore and introduced as his son for much of the road trip, the father makes use of Roberta's malleable, androgynous pre-adolescent gender to paint a utilitarian portrait of a father and disabled son down on their luck. But "there were times when it was handy for me to be a girl," Roberta recalls, the cloying duo of white daddy and darling daughter having

[32] Barad on her conception of "intra-active": "I needed to find some understanding of subjectivity, the social, and power…it was important to me to incorporate feminist and queer work on subjectivities and on power, because as every physicist worth her salt knows from the famous theorem of Emily Noether, symmetries do not just appear, rather they are indicative of underlying conservation laws and it is therefore crucial to examine the forces at work" (Juelskjær and Schwennesen 12). I choose to employ Barad's notion of the intra-active here both because it applies to Roberta's relationship with Little Debbie (she takes care of the knife, and it takes care of her) and because it's useful to track something like affect, which I argue accrues force, material and otherwise, on people's lives.

a particular resonance with authority figures such as the police (*Cruddy* 36). Roberta describes what it feels like to cocreate new identities crafted to produce specific affective atmospheres: "[t]he father's hand on my shoulder gave me a squeeze and our new identities rose on this command. It was a freakish sensation to feel them come to life so naturally, to witness the father drain away and the brokenhearted barber from bum-fuck take his place" (*Cruddy* 167). This "freakish sensation," to undergo a seamless, wholesale transformation from one identity to another in mere seconds so as to obtain what one needs from an encounter, is freakish to Roberta because it feels organic, so easy to become someone else with a mere squeeze of the shoulder. Roberta is awed witnessing the father's skill at adopting whatever persona suited the interaction, and a clearer sense of what he is to her arises: a creator of paths into the future when there appear to be none. The squeeze of Roberta's shoulder sets in motion a joint performance best suited to assisting the father in getting necessities like money, transportation, information, sex, or housing. Unbeknownst to the father, these lessons in becoming whatever best suits conditions for survival are being carefully pocketed away by Roberta, who becomes increasingly aware over the course of the trip that only she or the father will come out of it alive. While the father adopts these identities to ensure his survival and freedom, Roberta learns to simultaneously act with and against him, eventually using his own tactics to outwit and outlive him.

In *Cruddy* Barry shows time and again the stakes of what it means to be someone's child: Roberta's parents had complete dominion over the conditions of her life, a fact that normative familial happiness scripts would mark as ensuring her survival, but which in reality puts her constantly in varying states of danger. While the mother and Roberta have mutually explosive "mental problems with each other," it was the mother who had knives and "[w]ho screamed that she could cut my throat and Julie's throat and her own throat and who could stop

her from doing it? Who? Who in this world?" (*Cruddy* 52). Both parents have told her point blank that they could kill her, and so even after she murders the father (which she tells no one) Roberta must still contend with the mother's regular threats to her life as well, threats that Roberta believes are more likely real than not, especially if the mother "got in the right mood" (*Cruddy* 52). Being someone's child means being vulnerable to the people who have the most sanctioned access to you, and the mother dreams of annihilation too: her threat is not only to kill Roberta but to kill Julie and herself as well, to remove the whole family from the world in one fell swoop. No one could stop her from doing it, for the home in which she makes these threats is the family container, the mother's domain, and she had been granted by blood and state unrestricted power to do to her children what she would. Familial status– a mother and her child, tossed there by God– is all the mother needed to be endowed with total power to decide their fates.

Though Roberta has internalized the survivalist lessons and mantras of the father, she is decidedly unlike him in significant ways: lacking his self-aggrandizing narcissism and sociopathic use of violence to get what he wants, she craves real intimacy and care, is less interested in using the people she meets for some sort of gain than for the experiences they might make possible. Roberta faithfully follows the father's lesson to "[n]o matter what, expect the unexpected. And whenever possible BE the unexpected," advice that, applied to encounters with her outcast peers rather than adults trying to abuse or kill her, bring much needed exhilaration back into her life (*Cruddy* 14). This advice had, after all, saved her life, allowing her to craft a plan for survival that relied on the assumption of her ineptitude.

The aftermath of the road trip finds Roberta making only lateral moves, having now been relegated to surviving life under the thumb of her *other* violent, volatile parent. Killing her

abuser before he could kill her, Roberta is little safer after the father's death than before it. The mother's threats that no one could stop her from killing her children hold real weight for Roberta now that *she* has killed people without being caught. When Roberta begins her story, leading with her imminent death, she has realized that going to the trouble of surviving the father was not worth the alienated, highly restricted existence controlled by the sadistic mother. When Roberta meets Vicky Talluso, fully fed up with the meaninglessness of a life she had fought so hard to keep, readers are offered a chance to see what Roberta manages to make of life with the father's inherited tools for survival.

"Instantly Amazing": Vicky Talluso & Ditching School

Meritocratic American happiness scripts, codified by the circulation of popular novels, television shows, films, and self-help books, often maintain that working through or "defeating" one's demons is the necessarily difficult path to a better life. The implication is that doing the work to improve one's life by removing or changing unsavory elements is an always available and worthwhile endeavor, for in these scripts there is *always* a better kind of life waiting for those who put some hard work into eliminating barriers to it. Roberta has profoundly lost her tether to the happiness scripts she knows are supposed to accompany white American childhood in order to produce proficient adults; set adrift by her experiences otherwise, she is no longer certain that there is any meaning in having survived the violence that has permeated her life. It is into this existential cruddiness that Vicky Talluso arrives, seemingly out of nowhere. Vicky blasts her way into Roberta's life on an auspicious day: the fifth anniversary of the Lucky Chief Motel Massacre. Roberta is disappointed that the usual anniversary phone call from the Vegas newspaper that originally reported the story never came, leaving her with the "empty street"

feeling of "old faded trash swirling in devil-cones around me" (*Cruddy* 16). Barry uses an evocative image of a lonely, decrepit location to describe the uncanny complex of affects that constitute the afterlife of trauma, a pattern that further reinforces what Papke describes as the gothic naturalism of the novel. Once at least a person of public interest, Roberta was now just a hyper-alienated teen girl of no consequence whatsoever, permanently grounded with not so much as a phone call from a curious stranger to mark this radically life-altering event. Just prior to Vicky's stomping into her life, Roberta wonders, "If it could all end with such a nothing feeling...what was the point?" (*Cruddy* 16). That an event so momentous has resulted in a life so stilted and boring– and still marked by such regular violence from the mother and schoolmates– has stripped the veneer of a progressively improving future from Roberta's imagination. In the fairy tales and horror films Roberta references there is always a definitively fitting outcome: an important lesson is learned; a life is improved. Free-floating in the terrible realization that resistance to and survival of violence doesn't promise anything at all, much less a life worth living, Roberta is more than ready to return to the wisdom of the father and hop wholesale into Vicky's wild orbit.

Explicitly schooled by the father in recognizing, performing, and responding to dazzle camouflage– busy, unexpected facades meant to hide or obscure reality, "Navy" to the max– Roberta initially can't imagine "why a person like [Vicky] would be walking so rapidly toward a person like me" (*Cruddy* 17). In a riot of colors, smells, and inquiries, Vicky appears to be the polar opposite of the gray smudge that is Roberta's life. Training in the close observation of others from the father allows her to immediately read Vicky as a total freak performing unsuccessful normie-drag; despite Vicky's clear failure to mask her freakiness, she stomps along as if passing completely, as if her cruddy dazzle camouflage is affecting others exactly as she

intends it to (*Cruddy* 17). That Vicky is so convinced of her own cruddy dazzle camouflage delights and intrigues Roberta; after all, "[d]azzle camouflage is Navy" and "[t]he father was Navy too" (*Cruddy* 17). The last time Roberta had any sort of excitement in her life was during the road trip with the father; the appearance of Vicky's chaotic dazzle camouflage flips the switch of Roberta's brain into full Navy mode, ready to follow in the footsteps of whatever came her way. "And now," Roberta gushes, "a word from our sponsor," mimicking the language of radio and television ads to spotlight the thrill of welcoming someone of Vicky's type into one's life (*Cruddy* 15). That Vicky becomes the "sponsor" of the story Roberta is about to tell is apt: if not for Vicky, the series of events that lead Roberta to the realization that "Truth Plus Magical Love Equals Freedom" would never have been set into motion. Exaltingly, she goes on to advertise the benefits of meeting Vicky: "[I]f you are tired of your life, if you want your life to turn instantly amazing, you should KNOW Vicky Talluso. Things happen around Vicky Talluso. Incredible things. Meeting incredible people. Having revelations. Running from the cops" (*Cruddy* 15). If Roberta's life has been reduced to pure boredom interspersed with the mother's threats, it is the promise of unpredictable adventure, an antidote to her "restricted life," that draws her to Vicky. Barry shows how losing attachments to certain kinds of happiness scripts (becoming "tired of your life") is also a way of being directed towards something else previously unimaginable ("having revelations"). Appearing on a day when Roberta feels particularly disillusioned by the prospects of the life she fought so hard to keep, Vicky is the perfect distraction from the dread induced by the massacre's blasé anniversary.

Marching across the high school's athletic field towards Roberta in what she describes as "too much makeup and very bright clothes," Vicky smells of "burnt-rubber" poorly masked with

Chantilly perfume (*Cruddy* 17).[33] In the clashing fluorescent palette of early seventies hippie drag ("shocking-yellow crinkle-vinyl knee boots with super stacked heels and twisted purple stockings and a pink and orange psychedelic shirt dress with a lime green collar," plus a red velvet tam to top it all off) Vicky is neon confetti sprinkled over the existing color scheme of Roberta's life: mud, toxic chemicals, bruises, rotting flesh (17). Roberta is in awe of Vicky's visual distinctness, only made headier by the fact that this distinctness, meant to attract people, actually made others "[turn] away from her," unbearable to the senses of those untrained in seeing such "extravagant ways" (17). Perhaps the real gift of the knowledge the father imparted– other than how to stay alive during times of extreme duress– was a directive to be unfailingly curious about others, to take careful stock of a person's affective atmosphere and mirror it to see where it might take you. Accordingly, Roberta, despite not being a smoker, accepts a cigarette from Vicky, "taking it because the father said that when anyone offers you something, including a new identity, you should always take it and see what it leads you to" (*Cruddy* 20). Based on the conditions of the encounter so far, Vicky's crusty psychedelic bedlam promises to lead to, at the very least, somewhere Roberta hasn't been since the road trip, a promise of liveliness. With Vicky Roberta could be someone else, not cruddy Roberta Rohbeson but a bad girl smoker amenable to skipping school in order to do drugs in an abandoned warehouse.

Unexpected and out of place herself, Vicky becomes Roberta's portal to an unrestricted life. Vicky is decidedly not for everyone, but Vicky just might be perfect for Roberta: familiarly volatile, not unlike the father, exciting and a little frightening, unhinged and unpredictable– though decidedly less dangerous and quite a bit more ridiculous. When Roberta encounters

[33] A perfume launched in 1941 by Houbigant– a perfumier also named in the final pages of Larsen's *Quicksand*– and still available today, though produced by a different company. The top notes are lemon, bergamot, neroli, and general fruity notes; several reviewers at the online perfume community fragrantica.com describe it as a classic "old lady" smell.

Vicky she feels "a weird electrification": something alive is sparked, produced from the meeting of two teen girls with nothing left to lose (*Cruddy* 20). Sitting down "too close" to Roberta, Vicky greets her with a gruff "You. I got your message…I received your message this morning and the answer is yes…You're Roberta right?" (20). Confused, Roberta confirms her identity only to be told that she has ESP and

> you have contact with an Unfortunate Being, right?...You called me this morning on the Ouija board and said to meet you here because you have something you need to give me. Only you don't know what it is. You said you needed for me to come to you and tell you what it is you were supposed to give me. (*Cruddy* 20)

Roberta shakes her head "no," to which Vicky retorts "Liar. Not that it matters, but liar" (*Cruddy* 20). She doesn't know what Vicky is referring to but, having already tuned her antennae right into whatever weird channel Vicky is on, Roberta placidly responds "Okay," a way to, as the father would put it, "[s]ee what the person has in mind" (*Cruddy* 20-21). Unsure of Vicky's intentions, Roberta makes herself pliable to keep the interaction going, encouraging whatever mischief might be up Vicky's sleeve with such an outrageous claim. She wonders too if perhaps she really *did* somehow contact Vicky through the ether, for "[f]ive years is a long time to go around obeying and not talking and having a boring life"; maybe she had unwittingly conjured Vicky (*Cruddy* 21).

These five years between the end of the road trip and meeting Vicky take up no narrative space in Roberta's account of her life; lost years, they are the blank pages of a life lived only between school and home, her will diminished to nothingness. Considering the history of willful girls in literature, Ahmed writes that "[t]o be willing to obey is to be willing to recede" where receding "requires giving up a will other than the will of others" (*Living* 69). Roberta has spent a

very long time capitulating to first the father's and then the mother's will, receding, going nowhere and speaking to no one, enduring endless abuse and continued threats to her life. "Maybe," Roberta ventures, "it was time to finally tell the story and maybe Vicky Talluso was the perfect person to tell it to" (*Cruddy* 21). Unexpected and clearly alienated too, Vicky incites the beginning of a new kind of life for Roberta, one where she is unbound from loneliness of the secret she's been keeping all this time, no longer amenable to following the mother's demand that she only shuttle back and forth between school and home. Vicky doesn't just become Roberta's friend: she transforms the terms of her life, makes it "instantly amazing" amidst its all-consuming cruddiness (*Cruddy* 15). Life following Vicky's cues means learning about the world and oneself, meeting more freaks like them, fleeing cops, ditching school, doing drugs, kissing boys, and being subjected to ill-conceived makeovers in Vicky's likeness.

"I Think It's a Hippie": The Turtle & Creeper

Beginning with Vicky, each new teen Roberta meets leads her to another, eventually accruing a network of outcasts all in search of alternatives to the lives they've been forcibly allotted by adults. The Turtle, who Roberta and Vicky meet in a porn-scattered abandoned warehouse where they go to smoke pot after their first encounter, quickly becomes Roberta's crush and confidante. Recently escaped from the Barbara V. Hermann Home for Adolescent Rest, a local psychiatric facility, he speaks in riddles and partakes in a steady diet of marijuana, LSD, and a mysterious drug he calls Creeper. Unlike Vicky, who begins to lose some of her allure when Roberta notices that she "never asked a question without expecting a specific answer," the Turtle is as genuinely curious about Roberta as she is about him (*Cruddy* 79). If part of what her growing motley crew offers is a group of empathetic witnesses, the Turtle is the one

who consistently nudges Roberta to continue the story of the road trip after Vicky has interrupted or cops show up to scatter their group in different directions. “He was interested in my story,” Roberta observes, “[h]e asked me questions. That one question. ‘Are you wanted?’” (*Cruddy* 94). “Are you wanted?” was asked in response to Roberta revealing that she’d killed several people (which Vicky assumes is a joke, but the Turtle correctly receives as fact), but it resonates more deeply as well. If Roberta’s parents didn’t want her, if her sister didn’t want her, if boys didn’t want her and her peers at school didn’t want her, if even the journalists investigating the father’s disappearance didn’t want her: *was* she wanted? Who does she belong to? What is keeping her tethered to the world? The question echoes: Roberta has only ever been wanted by people she could help procure something, a deaf and mute son/accomplice for the father, a free week in Vegas and newspaper pictures for the mother, a tag-along girl to provide Vicky’s crush’s brother. But the Turtle only wants to hear her story, not just for its drama but for the intimacy it offers with Roberta. Vicky proved to be a less than attentive listener unless it directly concerned her, but the Turtle is a willing witness to Roberta’s account of her life, what lead her to seek comfort in the company of this tripped-out triad.

What impresses Roberta most about the Turtle is his beguiling status as completely “Navy,” his ability to deflect being truly known unless he wanted to be, using a chaotic range of drug-induced performances and behaviors as affective dazzle camouflage. Though he didn’t “give off normal vibrations and nothing about him was cute” Roberta notes with admiration his “extreme relaxation” and ability to “[change] his accent” every time he spoke, qualities that made her “more and more impressed with him” as their conversation continues (*Cruddy* 40, 42, 43). Like the father and Vicky, the Turtle profusely employs dazzle camouflage via a protectively disarming drugged-out atmosphere that prevents strangers from suspecting he is

capable of taking in what is being said or happening around him. But this loopy, druggy camouflage makes him a good listener and thoughtful conversationalist when it really matters; when he does engage forthrightly it is with genuine insight and a nuanced understanding of the social and material precarity they all share. When the three leave the warehouse to avoid being seen, the Turtle points out a hole beneath a fence where "he went in" (*Cruddy* 54). He relays that the corpse recently found floating in the town's water supply was a fellow Barbara V. Hermann teen, "a homo" who suffered what the Turtle describes as a "self-inflicted homicide" rather than suicide, drawing attention to the significant role of social conditions in his death (*Cruddy* 54). The Turtle displays an empathetic understanding of systems of domination and their life-giving and taking capacities: though suicide is a way to describe someone taking their own life, the Turtle devises alternative language that better clarifies the relationship between this teen's death and the forces which led him to initiate it. What made life untenable for this teen was living in a world in which being a "homo" was pathologized as a mental illness such that his parents could commit him to an institution that purported to help him make a life, not end it. Though Vicky retorts that *nobody* knew the identity of the dead man, the Turtle replies that "[t]he Great Wesley did" (*Cruddy* 54). Vicky led Roberta to the Turtle– if only accidentally– and now the Turtle would lead Vicky and Roberta to someone named the Great Wesley, who knew things that nobody else knew. Thanks to her encounter with Vicky, Roberta has begun to collect co-conspirators, each enlivened by the presence of the others' affective atmospheres which belie the difficulty of the lives they've led. These wayward teens, bound together by the affects of alienation, are tuned in to the secret histories of the discarded and depressed, making them inviting prospects to whom Roberta can divulge secrets. A kind of oracle jester, switching from sage to clown in an instant, the Turtle then invites Roberta and Vicky on a trip to New Orleans

that he's planning with the Great Wesley, asking if they have "heard of the place called Dorothy's Medallion where large women wear small golden bathing suits and squat for the audience?" (*Cruddy* 55). Teen burnout, private hospital escapee, and large women enthusiast, the Turtle has plans for the future that promise adventure in the form of a road trip, this time helmed not by a dangerous father but rebellious teens intent on doing, finally, what they wish rather than what their caretakers want. Before they set off the gather the rest of their crew, Roberta ingests some of the Turtle's ominous Creeper and declares that yes, she wants to go to New Orleans, for home is only a place "[t]he mother is waiting and she will kill me, I mean actually kill" (*Cruddy* 61). And so the three stoned teens set off, away from the homes that promise death and into an uncertain new life in which travel and adventure await.

"A Miracle Item": A Short Aside on Drugs (Do Not Blame Them!!!)

Intoxication from alcohol was familiar to Roberta from her road trip with the father, but due to her "restricted life" Roberta hasn't had access to the era's profusion of drugs like many of her peers (*Cruddy* 59). Now with Vicky and the Turtle, clearly practiced in getting high, drugs serve a purpose not dissimilar to the father's offered swigs of Old Skull Popper, his favorite liquor, on the road. Though "compared to what [she's] seen in [her] life Vicky Talluso's world was nothing," Roberta "was a little out of practice… and all I needed was a little oil" (*Cruddy* 32). The sensory stimulation of the marijuana and Creeper warm up Roberta's social muscles, awakening her five years dormant aptitude for successfully navigating even the most volatile of encounters. Though (happily) out of her element for the first time in years, there is a sense of Roberta returning to herself when she makes the split-second decision to ditch school with Vicky and follow her lead. Since returning from the father's road trip

> there has not been much opportunity for exhilaration. The mother has given me a type of exhilaration by throwing sharp things at me, screaming about the various ways she is going to kill me, but it's not the same thing at all. I never feel better afterwards. There is never any relief that comes from it except maybe to her. (*Cruddy* 77)

While fear has been plentiful, those experiences alone aren't enough to provide Roberta with the kind of affective experience she craves, exhilaration which makes her feel alive by obliterating the self through pure, overwhelming sensation, an all-consuming rush that exorcises the relentless reality of human consciousness and replaces it with pure affect. This need has driven Roberta to do things like "[lay] on my stomach flat and close to the [train] tracks to let the roaring pass over and shake my molecules hard" because "everything is always easier" afterwards (*Cruddy* 66). This kind of physical exhilaration– close encounters with death, so close that one's molecules are shaken– rearranges the body into a form made purely from life-invigorating affect, temporarily unburdening the self from memories, regrets, or worries, combining the threat of annihilation with the exuberance of only *just* avoiding it, a massive adrenaline cocktail. Roberta later confesses that "to me, even horrifying exhilaration is incredible," the wonder of momentarily dissolving into a space of pure feeling, simply being rather than thinking, riding the thin line between life and death so that life takes the form of a miracle, not a nightmare (*Cruddy* 217). The "horrifying exhilaration" of her time with the father was, at least, a time of feeling profoundly alive, of feeling her proximity to death such that it illuminated the miraculous fact of her liveness. The following five years of being grounded had sucked the life from her, not even the death threats of the mother potent enough to grant her exhilaration, pale imitations of the father's constant string of actual murders.

Drugs offers some of the same benefits of laying by the train tracks or surviving the father's volatile moods, turning everyday refuse into reminders that the world can be magnificent, shockingly so. Watching Vicky try to unwrap a pack of cigarettes after they had each ingested some of the Turtle's Creeper, Roberta notices that

> [Vicky] was having a hard time unwrapping the cellophane from her cig pack. She was doing it so slowly, concentrating on the red pull-strip and the glinty shine. And then I noticed we were all concentrating on it, leaning our heads over it and watching it intently. It seemed like a miracle item to me. Vicky held the end of the pull-strip and let the top piece of cellophane hang and flutter and we stood there amazed by it. And I was thinking how we are always surrounded by incredibly beautiful things but we don't know it, and that from now on I was going to know it. (*Cruddy* 70)

Drugs have the power to alter her perception of mundane reality, turn what ordinarily registers only as meaningless trash into "a miracle item," an "incredibly beautiful" object whose existence inspired amazement, wonder, and a profound realization that beauty was everywhere, always, and only needed a new way of seeing to become accessible. For those familiar with mind-altering substances, this realization reads as par for the course and, unfortunately, fleeting: the drugs wears off and the altered perceptions of the ordinary world with it, making the philosophical realizations so important hours before nothing more than embarrassing memories produced by an addled mind. But for Roberta, whose life has been sorely deprived of the exhilaration that gave respite from a numbing depression and anxiety, this introduction to drugs is a way to connect with the affective circulations that render life wonderful often enough to keep people in pursuit of living, solidifying one's desire to continue being a person in the world. What joy awaits you almost anywhere if only you can gain access to the affects that allow you to clock

the beauty in the banal! Drugs help Roberta orient herself toward the marvel of inhabiting a life even after a lifetime of being deeply entrenched in its cruelest ugliness. So, as Roberta requested in her last missive to the world of the living, "Do Not blame the drugs." They served only a perception-altering, life-affirming purpose in her tragically drab life, make way for a new kind of life where previously there was none.

"It Makes Me So Sad": The Stick & Intimate Encounters

While the Turtle proved to be just off his rocker enough to wear down Roberta's appreciation of him, Vicky's brother, nicknamed the Stick, was a true twin soul. Back at Vicky's house where she and Roberta set about reassembling themselves before they plan to leave town with the Turtle and the Great Wesley, Roberta follows the "super-fine" Stick out onto the roof of his house after he asks her if he can "talk to [her] about something," all the while "staring at [her] face with the usual curiosity" (*Cruddy* 203). Waiting downstairs is Vicky and the Stick's seriously ill caretaker, titled such only because he is the sole adult in the home: he is non-functional to the point that Vicky and her brother take care of him rather than the other way around. Referred to only as Susie Homemaker, a name he gave himself after watching an EZ Bake Oven commercial, he seems capable only of violently coughing and shouting "SHIT AND GODDAMN!" over and over (*Cruddy* 202-203). Like Roberta, Vicky and the Stick are fending for themselves and trying to reproduce life while protecting themselves from their parent, and Roberta witnesses what life under Susie's authority must feel like, for

> Horrible fumes came from him. He was a cigar person, a Swisher Sweets person. He was also a don't-touch-my-rotting-food person, and a pee-in-a-Gallo-wine-jug person with bad aim. He was a twenty-four-hour person in love with his swivel TV. And he wore

> women's clothes, and every time I asked either the Stick or Vicky if Susie was their father they told me to go fuck myself. (*Cruddy* 239)

Regardless of who Susie is to them– he may be their father, or another family member to whom they were assigned custody in place of negligent or absent parents– he is not helping them stay alive, nor is he cognizant of the filth in which they live. Being invited into the Talluso home invites further intimacy with Vicky and the Stick, with whom Roberta is only now realizing she has much more in common with beyond being social outcasts. Escaping Susie's relentless shouting while Vicky sets off to retrieve the stash of Creeper from the hiding place they secreted it in earlier, Roberta joins the Stick on the rooftop outside his bedroom window where the following exchange takes place:

> [Roberta] said, "How come you're talking to me?"
>
> [The Stick] said, "What do you mean?"
>
> [Roberta] stood up and walked the roof ridge with [her] arms out until [she] came to the very edge.
>
> [Roberta] looked up at the dead pinholes that barely glittered. [She] said, "You ever think about killing yourself?"
>
> He said, "All the time." (*Cruddy* 204)

Though the Stick doesn't yet know her story, he is already attuned to her affective atmosphere in which he recognized the shared impulse towards self-annihilation. Sat under the dim light of stars long dead, they share the secret that they both regularly fantasize their suicides. Both lacking care and weathering abuse from the adults they've been assigned to, dangerously untethered from any promises of future happiness, Roberta ironically finds life-affirming intimacy in their shared desire to die. The fact that the Stick is also a "super-fine" guy not only

adds a degree of pleasure to their connection but also infuses their meeting with dynamics typical of the happy teens represented in television and film, whose brushes with puppy love and finding someone you can really "be yourself" with indoctrinate them into the promise of happy heterosexual romance (*Cruddy* 201). A depressive inversion of mainstream first love lore, they trade theories about the best way to take their own lives: "I don't think jumping is the best way to do it," the Stick considers, adding after a moment that "[i]f you're serious you go headfirst. You dive" (*Cruddy* 215). This frank back and forth about the best strategies for ensuring death leads to more and more vulnerable revelations that allow Roberta to safely let her freak flag fly. Following the Stick to the attic after Roberta asks where his mother is, he shows her words penciled in a child's handwriting on the wall: "*I hope you die. I hope you rot. I hate you all. 16 September 1919*" (*Cruddy* 216). Eerily sans context, nonetheless this record of some child's resistance, vengeful affects and ill wishes dated like a diary entry, survives to be discovered over sixty years later by another child trapped in a dysfunctional family. The Stick vaguely informs Roberta that "[s]he was locked up here because of him"; when Roberta asks who this "she" is, he responds only "Who are you?" prompting Roberta to tell him everything, all the carefully guarded secrets that have made her into the person she now wishes to eliminate (*Cruddy* 216). He is the first to receive the entirety of her tale all at once, his own vulnerability, ambiguous but obviously corroded family history, and suicidal ideation close enough to Roberta's own that she entrusts him with her horrible story, the truth of her existence. She is no longer alone, finds someone whose affective atmosphere matches her own. Unburdened from being the sole receptacle of the horrors wrought by the father by sharing her tale with another ("very fine," to boot) person who struggles to stay tethered to life, Roberta finds her life expanding with every

new person she encounters during this rebellion against the mother's enforcement of a "restricted life" (*Cruddy* 59).

Taking some more Creeper when Vicky returns and stepping outside the house– the Stick's undertaking of both causing Vicky to panic with vague references to an unnamed medical condition– the Stick turns to look at Roberta. Gazing at her while she brazenly gazes right back, the Stick tells her that she "has such a fucked-up nose. And your teeth and your finger. All of you is so fucked up. I have never seen such a fucked-up person and it makes me so sad" (*Cruddy* 241). By now very high on Creeper, the Stick gives voice to what he has now witnessed of her life: knowing by what and whom she has been so fucked up, how her nose and teeth and finger are all results of abuse by the father and the mother, his evaluation of her is not a cruelty but an honest expression of their intimacy, every physical aberration Roberta wears given sad meaning by the violence that created it. Roberta has been fucked up by her life, fucked up beyond anything the Stick has known before (and he lives with Susie). And while her visible abjection has caused peers at school to use her as a punching bag and garnered a total lack of any notice at all by narcissistic, oblivious Vicky, the Stick is moved to sorrow by the thoroughness of Roberta's fucked-up-ness, a reflection of the fucked-up-ness of the world. His sadness is an affective offering, a confirmation of the profundity of her presence. She is not "about as detailed as a shadow" as she had previously claimed; she and all she has known grant her an affective power that registers forcefully, meaningfully with those tender enough to be attuned to it (*Cruddy* 17).

"They Won't Take Us Back Alive": The Great Wesley & Attempts at Freedom

As the saying goes, there is power in numbers. Not just physical power, though that too can be useful, but affective power: the more a lonely, alienated person meets other lonely, alienated people the more likely the prospect of a life worth living becomes. Though intimate connections and empathetic ears cannot solve systemic violence, it might at least partially insulate vulnerable people's experiences of the life-negating affects such as shame and self-loathing, both of which Roberta feels intensely. So it is a hopeful prospect that more teens looking to escape the deadening grasp of their caretakers await Roberta and Vicky, who head to Vicky's crush Dane's house sans the Stick. Surprise awaits them in the form of the Turtle, who answers the door as confusing and strung out as ever. The Great Wesley, that wise fellow escapee from the Barbara V. Hermann institute and, apparently, Dane's brother, is also in tow, playing piano in a "blue bathrobe" and bearing "a look of kindness" (*Cruddy* 243). Their fleeing from this residence, they inform Roberta and Vicky, must ensue immediately, for as Dane notes "[the Great Wesley's] parents got a reward out…[f]ive thousand bucks" for him to be safely returned to the psych hospital in which they had placed him (*Cruddy* 244). The Great Wesley is of a more affluent socioeconomic class than Roberta and Vicky, but his caretakers still wield power over his freedom in ways suitable to their standing; when Roberta enquires where exactly his parents are, he sighs that "[t]hey have gone the way of all parents, I'm afraid…Switzerland… [u]nfortunately news of my escape and unexpected homecoming has somehow reached them" (*Cruddy* 253). A vacation in Lausanne had seemed a suitable distraction during their child's confinement in the hospital, proof that even family money could not protect children from parents doing as they may with them, may in fact make it easier to remove the problem their child poses by outsourcing care to a facility in which that child would be held prisoner due to their status as a minor. Too they offer their money for his return to family and/or hospital, using

a monetary reward as if seeking a murderer or lost dog to entice others into helping them secure his captivity.

Determined to maintain their freedom from confinement by adults and medical practitioners, the Great Wesley dangles car keys in front of Roberta, having gathered from the Turtle that she knew how to drive. Together he, she, the Turtle, and Vicky set off on the road with their stash of Creeper– which, by the way, turns out to be a very strong psych med stolen in great quantities by the Turtle and the Great Wesley upon their escape from Barbara V. Hermann. A drug meant to be used only in confinement becomes a tool for escaping the reality of life lived under the thumb of adults; though the same chemical compound whether in or outside the hospital, rebranded as Creeper this drug facilitates these teens' wild freedom and escape rather than making them more pliable to cops and other authorities. Making a pit stop at Vicky's house on their way out of town– she *needed* her HeavenScent perfume– Roberta hopes to bring the Stick into the fold as well, being that he is just as in need of a new way of life as everyone else in the car (*Cruddy* 271). What Roberta didn't expect was a violent tussle with Susie, who, not recognizing her, attacked as Roberta entered the house; running to the rescue, the Stick bashes Susie in the head until he lays still on the ground, bleeding and unmoving.

Roberta, saddled with memories of her own self-defense killings, finds herself drawn back into their affects, for she has "noticed while watching Nightmare Theater that there is a strange sort of feeling that comes when a monster finally dies. Sometimes it is sadness. Sometimes it is vomiting" (*Cruddy* 273). Lost in her own media-mediated memories of the aftermaths of killing monsters, she hears the Stick's own contradictory feelings bubble to the surface: "I fucking killed him. I killed Susie. I can't fucking believe it. It's over. It's over. I'm free" (*Cruddy* 273). Now even more intimately connected to Roberta through the shared

experience of killing his abuser and experiencing the complex amalgamation of affects that follow, the Stick follows Roberta out the door and into the car of waiting outcasts. All members of her motley crew now collected, Roberta is ready to set off into the proverbial sunset, jettisoned by the Stick's new freedom, ready to welcome whatever life might offer as long as there were no parents, Susies, or Barbara V. Hermanns to trap them back into desaturated lives of lifelessness. In the car, climbing slowly into the mountains, Roberta shares with the entire group what the Stick already knew; while predictably self-centered Vicky "slept through most of it," the rest of the passengers "hung on [her] every word" (*Cruddy* 282). If Roberta had to carry her story alone for five long years, she now dispersed its weight amongst three enraptured listeners, each as desperate and on the run as Roberta had been and now was again. The only one aware of what had happened back at his house, she observes the Stick, witnessing him back; she notices that "his eyes were alive, taking in the openness, the pale colors, the immensity of the morning sky…taking the new world in" (*Cruddy* 290). In discussing the creation of *Cruddy* Barry described how blank paper became "a place where something alive could happen"; now living in a place free of Susie, the Stick can perceive a world where "something alive" is happening, something open and free and drenched in the ordinary beauty of a morning's soft hues. Like Creeper turning cellophane into a beauteous miracle, freeing oneself from those who make enduring life impossible opens the eyes to new ways of seeing, a way of life that saturates the world not with new images but with new ways of seeing familiar images. Roberta has released her story, the Stick has released himself from Susie: together with the rest of their gang of weirdos life was becoming a place where "something alive" could finally happen, and they had done it all themselves.

But just after Roberta finishes describing how she killed the father with a blade to the throat, a cop car pulls over just downhill from where the gang had stopped for a rest. Only fitting that this journey out of their old lives and into freedom should end right when her tale of the father's murder ends, Roberta first only laughs when she hears the cop call them "hippies," a supposed insult that didn't even begin to capture what they really were: desperate teens on the run, making last ditch efforts to have lives free from the abuse of institutions of such as police, family, and medical professionals, all conceptualized as places that protect children from the same violence they dole out in spades (*Cruddy* 299). From Roberta's laughter comes

> [s]o many thoughts…Ideas on what to do scattered in a thousand directions, what could I do to keep it rolling, keep the motion going. I thought of the Stick's question. "Do you think we have a chance?" And suddenly I thought, Yes! Yes! But the sound of the splash behind me changed everything. Wesley went over the canal edge, hit the rushing water, and was carried away so fast…the Turtle was screaming "Wait for me! My dear, dear Wesley! Wait! Wait!"…I saw him slip out of his shoes and jump in. (*Cruddy* 299-300)

A call back to the fly in the father's car, Roberta is inexplicably filled with hope that they can still, somehow, keep going, keep cruising toward these new lives on the horizon that promised "something alive." But the Great Wesley's suicidal jump into the rushing canal, followed closely by the Turtle's, extinguished in totality this brief flare of hope, of the radiance of possibility. Their suicides "changed everything," for it was then that Roberta was returned to facts of her life, of all their lives, of how beholden they remained to the sudden presence of authority figures who held the power to limit their lives to their smallest, most suffocatingly restricted facsimiles just because they were children. Being children meant being legally and socially deprived of the power to demand what they needed to keep reproducing life, reducing them to property of their

parents, their caretakers, doctors, cops, the state. Whatever freedom could be snatched within those bounds was a miracle of its own, pockets of "something alive" meant to sustain them until their eighteenth birthdays rendered them, if nothing else, free from being someone else's property. Dejectedly abandoning the site of her friends' final bid for freedom, Roberta wryly notes that "the cop hopped back in his car and took off. I was sure he was going for help but no one ever came. In a certain way it didn't surprise me. I knew things about cops. About fathers. About the world" (*Cruddy* 300). Authority figures were never going to help when you really needed it. When you really needed it, they would exercise their power to flee, to absolve themselves of responsibility and the violence their presence initiated.

The Great Wesley and the Turtle's bodies are never recovered. Roberta reflects that "[t]here is a part of me hoping that they finally made it. Made it wherever people like us go" (*Cruddy* 300). Freedom is, perhaps, the place Roberta hopes they made it to, that place where unwanted children go where they are no longer tethered to family, school, or hospitals, mothers, fathers, or cops. Somewhere where, despite being only habitable in death, "something alive" can remain of what wasn't possible in life, on earth, in America where systems of domination shut down every avenue to a life worth living if you were "people like us." Roberta finally found an "us" to belong to, only for that "us," all gathered together in pursuit of similar freedoms, to be torn apart by the mere threat of being dragged back into the lives they fled. Facing the imminent return of the Great Wesley's parents, the Turtle had declared that "They won't take us back alive, my Dear Wesley. This I swear," and on this promise he made good (*Cruddy* 253). Even better yet, they won't take them back dead either, their bodies lost forever to the rushing aliveness of the canal's water, not even their corpses returned to their families to be trapped into coffins, confined even in death.

"I Got My Happy Ending"

Roberta, Vicky, and the Stick make their way home, stunned, dejected. With nothing to remember him by except the shoes he removed before he jumped, Vicky pokes around in the Turtle's shoes only to find a stash of LSD hidden under the insole. High on three hits of acid, Roberta walks with the Stick's arm around her as he confides that

> "I'm a bleeder. Did Vicky tell you? I'm a bleeder." But [Roberta] didn't know it was a situation. A condition. I just thought it was a thing you say when you are very high, like I'm an eater or I'm a breather. And we were so very high. All the streetlights shot rays at us and the cars left trails for us. All the ugly things around us looked beautiful. I missed the Turtle and the Great Wesley very much right then. (*Cruddy* 302)

Comically unaware of what the Stick was telling her– that he was a hemophiliac– Roberta is blissfully returned to the world as transformed by LSD, one where "all the ugly things" became lovely through light-refracting, sparkling psychedelic magic. Witnessing all this mind-made beauty, created by chemically altering her perceptions of ordinary objects, makes her especially miss her recently lost compatriots, who had introduced to her and so enjoyed the impossible beauty that drugs made of the ugly world they lived in. Her time with these misfits, with this short-lived makeshift family of outcasts accrued by the ridiculous pied piper Vicky, had awakened "something alive" in her; creating memories she could access whenever she desired of being understood, cared for, listened to. If she had once wondered "what was the point" of surviving the father's road trip had been, she could now answer that question with some measure of positivity: the point was to find and foster relationships with others who could understand why she did what she did, who knew firsthand the desperate acts one commits to survive a life defined by confinement, violence, and loneliness, hoping desperately that somehow things will

change (*Cruddy* 16). Surviving the father and then the mother meant finally being able to live like a typical teen: having crushes, kissing these crushes, getting bad makeovers from a fair-weather friend, altering her consciousness with the infamous drugs that had ushered in the dwindling era of love, peace, and harmony. For a moment in time, despite the loss of two members of her chosen family, Roberta found herself part of a group whose exertions of agency over their restricted lives inspired her own willfulness. That she might have a life of her own making, that she might have a life at all.

Roberta returns to the Stick and Vicky's home with them, where they discover, to the Stick's relief and disappointment, that Susie is not in fact dead, somehow just back to his regularly scheduled program of "SHIT AND GODDAMN!"-ing (*Cruddy* 303). Retreating to the Stick's bedroom, he and Roberta continue to divulge secrets, peeling back ever more layers of shame and "having some revelations":

> He said, "I do still piss the bed."
>
> [Roberta] said, "I killed a lot of people."
>
> He ran his finger over the inside of my arm and said the words spelled in scars.
>
> *I'm sorry*…
>
> He ran his fingers over the raised letters again.
>
> "You did this."
>
> [Roberta] nodded.
>
> "*Are* you sorry?"
>
> "No." (*Cruddy* 303)

He wets the bed, she killed people to save her own life: the taboos that mark their alienation from the world of the well-adjusted traded back and forth like talismans, releasing some of the shame

these secrets had trapped inside them, maggots feeding on the flesh of their humiliation. Roberta's self-mutilation, she reveals to him, is a lie: she isn't sorry for what she had to do. It was them or her. Now he knows the truth; she had let the mother think these scars were a conciliatory message to her, a lie which "flattered" the mother (*Cruddy* 231).

Soft and gentle after her confessions, Roberta turns to gaze out the window in search of satellites in the sky. It is then that the Stick slit both his forearms down the middle, climbed out the window, and either jumped or fell. To Roberta it "seemed like he did neither…as if he took a calm step into thin air" (*Cruddy* 304). The Stick's suicide finally brought the melancholy but ever-so-slightly optimistic attempted road trip with her chosen family to an end, for with suicide comes ambulances, comes cops, comes parents, comes social serves. Enclosed by all the institutions whose functions were to severely limit the lives of "at risk" children in the name of supposedly saving their lives, Vicky and Roberta, still tripping, are taken to the hospital along with the Stick. The mother, predictably, shows up bearing not worry for Roberta and all she has been through but rather her usual murderous threats, "screaming with her neck cords sticking out shouting she would kill me she would kill me she was absolutely going to kill me" while Vicky bellowed from the next bed over "Don't Narc Me Out, Roberta! Don't! Don't! Don't!" (*Cruddy* 304). The twinned chaos of the scene draws together in anxious cacophony all the affects that had plagued Roberta before her meeting with Vicky: the mother's violent threats, questioning cops wanting every detail of the death of the one person who knew her down to the starkest truths, the supervised captivity that couldn't even begin to address all the traumas of Roberta's life without handing her over to yet another institution helmed by controlling adults. As suddenly as the Great Welsey and the Turtle had leapt to their deaths, as suddenly as the Stick's use of his bleeder status to ensure his window jump wouldn't fail to kill him, all of Roberta's recently built,

shaky attachments to the promise of a different kind of life are torn away. Vicky is the only one of her cohort left, but Vicky, though good at making things "instantly amazing," was no good for real intimacy or empathy. But there was one last thing Roberta knew she could count on Vicky for and of which Vicky would be more than capable.

Tenuous new connection to the promise of life snapped, burned, and dissolved to ash by the loss of her chosen family and re-confinement by the mother, Roberta is finally ready to procure the only form of freedom she is able to conceive. Re-grounded until her eighteenth birth severed the mother's legal control over her, Roberta receives an auspicious phone call from Vicky, who has just escaped her new placement in foster care after Susie was taken away for being an unfit caregiver in the wake of the Stick's suicide. Vicky, as always, has a plan– sneak out to be front row for Neil Young and his performance of "Cinnamon Girl," a song whose lyrics, like the Redi epigraph, secretly contain information about the new direction Roberta pursues for her life: "I can be happy the rest of my life / With a cinnamon girl." But Roberta's cinnamon girl, helping to free her from the pain her life has endlessly wrought, is Vicky, who "after the concert promised she will come with me to the train tracks. And she promised she would give me the little push I need unless something happens and she gets together with Neil Young" (*Cruddy* 304). Remarkably devoid of empathy, Roberta knows she can count on Vicky to help her do what she had failed to do during the father's road trip, for her "involuntary systems" prevented her from making that final leap in front of the train (*Cruddy* 181). The "happily ever after" Roberta alludes to at *Cruddy*'s opening suicide note is happy for her because she made a bid for freedom, finally, only to lose everything and everyone, to be confined yet again to being grounded, to shuttling between home where the mother threatened murder and school where "[p]eople need people to knock over or sock in the gut. I stand out to them for

some reason" (*Cruddy* 54). Gaining legal agency over her life in two years promised what: no shelter in the mother's home, no money to make her own way, her legacy as a meat person assured to wreak its havoc on the world just as the father had done. Her "self-inflicted homicide," as the Turtle had described suicide, was a surer path to eliminating the promise of an eternity of pain than any other available in "a cruddy state, country, world, solar system, universe" (*Cruddy* 54).

Roberta's final words in her text are "I dedicate this book to my sister, Julie," an interesting dedication in light of Julie's representation throughout the novel as the typically obnoxious, annoying little sister (*Cruddy* 305). Not one paragraph into Roberta's introductory "Once upon a cruddy time…" she interrupts herself to directly address her "cruddy sister WHO I WILL KILL IF YOU TOUCH THIS, JULIE, AND IF YOU DO I SWEAR TO GOD I WILL KILL YOU, NO MERCY" (*Cruddy* 3). Ostensibly a diary, Roberta already knows that snoopy Julie is the person most likely to find and read it. The end of the book reveals both that Roberta's paranoia was not misdirected and that she wanted her book to help Julie learn how to survive, for the very last words of the book are not Roberta's but Julie's, who has indeed found *Cruddy* and is very scared of what had become of her sister. Julie, using a font mimicking a child's wobbly handwriting right below Roberta's typed dedication, has written "<u>fuck</u> you roberta!!! I <u>hate</u> you roberta!!! <u>where</u> <u>are</u> <u>you</u>??" (*Barry* 305). The vitriol of Julie's "fuck you" and "I hate you" are nervously undercut by the desperate double-question-marked "where are you??," betraying Julie's fear, like the readers', that maybe Roberta really *is* gone. Roberta's promised death, inscribed at the beginning of the book, takes on a new reality in light of Julie's despairing, handwritten addition. Barry's choice to make Julie's note appear as handwriting rather than typed, as the rest of the novel is save Roberta's signature in her suicide note, strengthens the

book-as-found-object premise through which the reader has been drafted into the novel's cruddy universe.

As the father had passed on his knowledge to Roberta, Roberta passes her knowledge to Julie and to the reader, hoping that what she leaves behind is "something alive," something that will helps others stay alive where she could not. Roberta, tender as she was, has always been concerned with the vulnerability of children like herself. During her time at the Las Vegas Christian Homes, where she briefly lived as a fake amnesiac Mystery Child before the mother came to claim her post-road trip, Roberta stuffed the sock monkeys she made to send to disadvantaged children with twenty dollars each, money taken from the father's stash. Also folded into the sock monkeys with the money was a note inscribed with her best survival tip, gleaned from the father: "*Expect the Unexpected.* / *And when possible,* / *BE the Unexpected*" (*Cruddy* 142). But the words of wisdom Roberta imparts to readers in her life story are of her own creation, apprehended in the exhilaration of LSD taken on the heels of three of her friends' "self-inflicted homicides": "Truth plus Magical Love equals Freedom" (*Cruddy* 59, 4). The affects that have congealed to create this profound, life-altering realization are, in a perverse inversion of the hippie mantra that love can save us all, those of the contradictory enmeshment of life and death which had always saturated Roberta's life.

Despite the deaths of her friends, who knew as she did what havoc having a life could wreak on even a very young person, Roberta has finally released the truth of her cruddy life into the hearts and minds of people willing and able to receive that truth, not disgusted or horrified at its telling but appreciative that she found her way from all that to share some life with them. The magical love she has finally experienced, romantically with the Stick and platonically with the others, suffused her life with pleasureful identification and adventure just when she thought she

might live forever as a broken, cruddy person, rotting inside from the horror of her secrets until she too did what meat people have always done. Releasing the truth of her cruddy life to people she could honestly say she loved, despite their short time together and varying levels of lucidity, equaled freedom. As representative of the real world as the book's circumstances are, the character Roberta is not real; her self-chosen death– with an assist from Vicky– is a narrative tactic for releasing Roberta from the cruddy universe in which she was trapped without the intervention of a god-like savior or unlikely stroke of luck. Roberta retained her agency, at least, refusing to be returned to the mother's sorry excuse for care. Her time with Vicky, the Stick, the Turtle, and the Great Wesley gave her everything she had been denied and so desperately needed in life: what more could she ever hope for in this cruddy, cruddy world?

CHAPTER 4

"LET HER DISCOVER IT": INVERTED AFFECTS IN FRAN ROSS' *OREO*

Helga Crane is a character who suffers with and without the social context of her family: the limits of rigid race, gender, and class binaries bring unhappiness and dissatisfaction whichever way she turns. Roberta Rohbeson, too, suffers whether she is with family or not: life isn't possible *with* them, but it isn't much more possible without them, either. Neither are free to have lives that adds up to something lively: both protagonists are left at the precipice of death in the final pages of their stories, ushered to an early end by the negative affects (and consequent effects) that congeal around being vulnerable and (un)familied in all the wrong ways. Christine "Oreo" Clark, the Black Jewish teen protagonist of Fran Ross' 1974 novel *Oreo,* on the other hand, is only positively affected by her familial and community relations, carefully fostered by her math virtuoso mother, Helen, and master chef maternal grandmother, Louise. These elders set her up to thrive, to revel in and develop into an art her considerable intuitions, talents, whimsies, and willfulness such that no one who attempts harm against her shall succeed. Together Oreo and her kin comprise a tight knit, eccentric, and broadly genius family dedicated to taking good care of each other and themselves, pursuing lives in service of the development of their passions while skillfully managing the daily encounters and communal responsibilities that mark the reproduction of life in cartoonishly absurd versions of Philadelphia and New York City. If familial relations and the affective atmospheres they congeal significantly alter Helga and Roberta's ability to make lives worth living, those same relations not only make Oreo's

reproduction of life possible but explicitly contribute to her ever-increasing flourishing. These authors, despite the differences or similarities in their protagonists attempts at reproducing life, each drive home the essential nature that defiant communal relations play in long-term projects of revising the life-negating affects of shame, guilt, fear, and alienation inherited by people marginalized at the intersections of race, class, and gender systems.

Throughout the novel Ross steadily maintains the jubilant, fast-paced affective tones of wily satire without interruption, but also doesn't shy away from representing the gamut of racialized and gendered violence that ground Oreo's life experience in real world systems of domination. Ross' representation of these tense encounters as comedic, tonally on par with much sillier scenes, contribute to the portrayal of Oreo's nearly god-like combination of intelligence, physical strength, and confidence, which, by the time she reaches her teen years, protect her from harm to such a degree that it never once occurs to Oreo to be frightened of anything– other than just how badly she might have to hurt her opponents. Oreo can live her life free from harm and its negative affects not because Oreo doesn't experience violent encounters with others, but because Ross' attribution to Oreo of unlimited protection and autonomy is unmoored from the very real limitations of hierarchized human vulnerability. No person, no matter how smart, strong, or determined, is invulnerable to violence or misfortune; in particular, there is no woman, regardless of the interrelation of her gender, race, and class status, who is invulnerable to the rampant sexual harassment and brutality endemic to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Yet Ross uses the impressive array of mental and physical skills she has granted Oreo to futz with the meanings and affects associated with particular forms of social domination, a strategy that congeals a complex affective brew of its own: it feels wonderful to "see" Oreo slay her attackers at every turn, seeming merely annoyed and angry rather than sad, pained, or frightened, but it's

also devastating to know that such assured victories are only possible in the realm of fiction. Importantly, Ross explicitly foregrounds Helen and Louise's creation of a supportive matriarchal family unit, where an organic, unfettered modeling of autonomy, community, and the pursuit of unconventional education cohere to produce a teen girl incapable of questioning her ability to survive and thrive, because she always has, and always will. If abusive and rejecting familial structures reify the affects intrinsic to structural domination, modeling communal resistance through care within non-hierarchal kinship structures is a powerful path to forms of autonomy that remain accountable to community.

A comedic pastiche that defies genre convention at every turn, Ross builds the myth of the wonderous Clark family by freely intertwining elements of borscht belt comedy, blaxploitation films, the bildungsroman, second wave U.S. feminisms, Shakespearean comedies of error, Warner Brothers cartoons, and the Greek myth of Theseus to tell the tale of her heroine's search for her absent father, Samuel Schwartz, and the mysterious "secret of [her] birth" (Ross 79). But before Oreo can begin her quest to find her missing father, Ross takes the first of the book's two parts, titled "Troezen," to braid together the threads of Louise and Helen's life histories with Oreo's. This family history by way of accumulating anecdotes prepares readers for the triumphs of Oreo's adventures in the second and final section of the novel, titled "Meanderings," during which Oreo sets off on a series of encounters roughly based on the adventures of the mythological Theseus. As the first, stage-setting half of the novel (throughout the book, Ross takes every opportunity to split something in two or play with a binary), "Troezen" also instructs readers in the rules and ethos of Oreo's recognizable-but-bizarro version of American life in the 1970s: any encounter, no matter how horrid, can be wrangled into a joke, comic set piece, and opportunity for both author and protagonist to flex their considerable wit.

Taking ribald pleasure in interpreting, playing with, and re-making the terms of potentially violent interpersonal encounters becomes key to Ross' rendering of how a Black Jewish teen girl might not only survive white supremacist capitalist patriarchy but also thrive despite it. This is not, however, to claim that Ross advocates laughing off racism, sexism, and their interrelations as a path to freedom: on the contrary, the encounters through which she addresses these forms of social domination are ones in which, as Harryette Mullen notes, "stereotypes are often made more conspicuous" rather than ignored, denied, or muted (Mullen 108). Ross spotlights stereotypes that have been built and stoked on racialized and gendered systems of domination only to re-rout them into unlikely avenues for fostering social relations that ultimately amalgamate, rather than further separate, allegedly disparate cultural traditions, communities, and meanings. When this cannot be done– some relations, after all, are not worth preserving– these encounters become avenues for Oreo, Helen, and Louise to reinscribe their fiercely guarded autonomy to stop the flow of these negative affects into their lives, re-directing them back from whence they came. In this portrayal of autonomy fostered by unconventional community Ross imagines a version of the world in which a young Black girl can both *feel* free and actually *be* free, using the Greek myth of Theseus as the skeleton upon which to hang that imagining.[34] Instead of creating a utopia in which the world has changed to suit the needs of her protagonist, Ross has created a utopianly–powerful protagonist impermeable to the violence of the world in which she lives. A world wedded to structures of domination does not need to "catch up" to the radical revisioning of those in resistance to it when that resistance exerts force regardless of its so-called "impossible" goals. Ahmed gives the example of a crowd: when you

[34] Patricia Hill Collins: "On the one hand, democratic promises of individual freedom, equality under the law, and social justice are made to all American citizens. Yet on the other hand, the reality of differential group treatment based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status persists" (23).

are going in its direction there is an uninterrupted flow. It can be hard to break that flow, even painful, but in doing a space opens up, if ever so small, and in that space other might begin to stop that flow, too– one's resistance to it has opened up space for others to join" (*Living* 82-83).

By structuring the novel in two linked parts– the first a family history, the second a series of adventures in search of a family secret– Ross creates overt connections between Helen and Louise's incubation of Oreo's freedom to live, wander, and learn as she wishes by modeling their deft navigations of the social relations that attempt to impede or interrupt that freedom. In this exploration of the familial history of encounters that generate the affective atmospheres which make Oreo's agency possible, I draw Stewart's work on ordinary affects, or "public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation," into conversation with Mullen's foundational essay on the novel, "'Apple Pie with Oreo Crust,'" a version of which is included as an afterword in the 2015 reprint of the novel (Stewart 2). Describing agency, Stewart writes that it "can be strange, twisted, caught up in things…[n]ot usually a simple projection toward a future" (Stewart 86). Agency takes shape not as a linear project of going from the dependency of childhood to the autonomy of adulthood, but rather comes together and breaks apart, lives and dies and lives again, not unlike the Clark family as it joins with, separates from, and re-encounters the Schwartzes in a process of repetition and revision that nevertheless always delivers the Clark women back to themselves and each other. Stewart continues,

> Agency can be…lived through a series of dilemmas: that action is always a reaction; that the potential to act always includes the potential to be acted on, or to submit; that the move to gather a self to act is also a move to lose the self…that actions can have unintended and disastrous consequences; and that all agency is frustrated and unstable and attracted to the potential in things. (Stewart 86)

Helen and Louise model agency and autonomy for Oreo, and they do so by living and sharing stories of their experiences, both showing and telling how to have a life worth living by exploiting the potential of their life events to generate additional layers of agential power. They face dilemmas, they act and react, they gather themselves so that they might continue to live their lives as they wish despite the wrenches thrown into the works by antisemitic or absent husbands and fathers. For the Clark women, actions sometimes have unintended consequences but never disastrous ones; rather, it is those who try to cross them or plainly challenge the values that form their lives who face the "unintended and disastrous consequences" of their actions. If agency can congeal or fall apart in the course of making and having a life, the ordinary affects that accompany Helen and Louise's everyday lives incubate Oreo's agency, a warm egg protectively passed along and hatched when Oreo leaves the nest to discover the secret of her birth in New York City. The agency that Helen and Louise exhibit flouts the affects and outcomes often denoted by narratives of so-called "broken" families, follows a throughline only of their desire to continue caring for their loved ones and enjoying the practice of their prodigious talents.

Compellingly, Mullen describes Ross' project in *Oreo*'s as one that "explores the heterogeneity rather than the homogeneity of African Americans" through a "topsy-turvy treatment of racial and ethnic shibboleths" (Mullen 107-8). This "topsy-turvy" strategy for representing identity- and culture-making is central to Ross' comedic reconfiguration of the affects that accompany social relations under systems of domination and can be exemplified by Ross' ironic construction of Oreo's Jewishness. While her white father Samuel Schwartz is in fact Jewish (though non-practicing), the source of the Clark family's cultural Jewishness is Helen's Black, antisemitic father James, who became an expert in Jewish religious and cultural practices after opening a Jewish sundries mail order business designed to overcharge and exploit

its customer base. The reason behind James Clark's propulsive, lucrative antisemitism? In his youth he spent three years stopping at one Zipstein's Noshery every single day to ask for a sour pickle– only to receive a *half* sour instead (Ross 6).[35] With this anecdote about how a Black family from the South becomes bound to Jewish cultural and language traditions, Ross creates a new kind of affective math, maintained at varied tempos throughout the novel, which turns the deadly seriousness of racism and antisemitism's profoundly life-altering affects into a joke no less incisive for its absurdity. These jokes of social relations draw attention to everyday instances of social domination, the ordinary affects whose prodigious circulations congeal into atmospheres through the repetition of daily encounter. Ross reanimates the cruelty of Zipstein's refusal to give James what he had asked and paid for by showing the surprising long term effects of such ordinary cruelty; though the text doesn't explicitly say so, this passive aggressive refusal can be traced to a history of Jewish business owners and landlords in the U.S. price-gouging Black customers in their own neighborhoods.[36] This extended, silent battle, Clark v. Zipstein, goes on for years; as in Shakespeare's comedies of error or the modern television sitcom, neither party can outright communicate to the other what is actually happening between them– an ordinary, everyday (and no less vexing for it) performance of domination through the buying and selling of products– for that would kill the joke that allows the plot to develop. Ross illustrates just how linked social domination and cultural collaboration can be when communities encounter

[35] Ross never misses a chance to reference the affects that congeal around a binary: like James' refusal of a half-Jewish family, the half-sour pickle was the unfavorable, half-this-half-that pickle style he was forced to consume.

[36] James Baldwin, from "Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White": "When we were growing up in Harlem our demoralizing series of landlords were Jewish, and we hated them. We hated them because they were terrible landlords, and did not take care of the building… The butcher was a Jew and, yes, we certainly paid more for bad cuts of meat than other New York citizens, and we very often carried insults home, along with the meat… Not all of these white people were cruel– on the contrary, I remember some who were certainly as thoughtful as the bleak circumstances allowed– but all of them were exploiting us, and that was why we hated them."

one another again and again, congealing affects through cyclical exchanges: when what one hates becomes a point of obsession, its repetition might indeed worm its way into the blood in unanticipated ways.[37] Within one generation James has unwittingly transformed his family into a Jewish one, while the antisemitism that ignited this cross-cultural exchange ultimately renders him unable to give voice to his antisemitism, stuck in a miniscule time loop to the point of narrative paralysis (more on this later). Practicing Judaism and having one Jewish parent can't necessarily make you Jewish according to the Orthodox tradition, in which one's Jewishness is believed to be passed down through the mother– but, Ross satirically posits, antisemitism just might![38] As Stewart writes, "[f]or some, the everyday is a process of going on until something happens, and then back to going on"; something happened when James was denied his half-sour pickle time and time again, and when life got "back to going on" it went on changed, charged by the affects of these encounters (Stewart 10). The cultural product of antisemitism coagulated into a feeling (anger, resentment) which spurred the creation of a business through which James could take his revenge using the same economy that had so plagued him. This business supported the making of a family, whose passions (learning and cooking, for Helen and Louise respectively) were buoyed by the money earned from said vengeful buying and selling. Affect congeals, "spawns a series of little somethings dreamed up in the course of things," setting into

[37] During the writing of this dissertation in October 2022, Kanye West is all over the news for making virulently antisemitic remarks in several very public arenas, including Twitter. When a video of him claiming that he was wrongly diagnosed as bipolar by a Jewish doctor (which he takes pains to specify), the video clip is quote-retweeted with many Jewish Twitters users' commentary noting that Kanye's delivery is classic Jewish comedy in the vein of Larry David's *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Ex. "falling so far into your obsession with jews that you adopt larry david's speech patterns" (via user @onlinegirl69); "'It was a jewish doctor' kanye is literally larry david" (via user @kenvino_); "This is better Jewish humour than every improv guy from the local campus Hillel who tried to ride on the coattails of Larry David." (via user @BimboUbermensch).

[38] Though the two come from very different histories and are not analogous, it is worth noting that one's status as Black, as defined by *Partus sequitir ventrum*, is also framed as being passed down through the mother (Clytus 745).

motion the everyday circulations of power that, through layers of change and stagnation, produce lasting consequences for those caught even temporarily in its atmospheres (Stewart 9). James' antisemitism reproduced life for himself and his family– a pretty good life at that– but eventually induced his immobilization when a target of his hatred infiltrated the life he'd worked so hard to build. The affects of antisemitism could reproduce life's happiness promise for only so long before it took that life– and its economic benefits– away from him.

As Mullen writes, through such shrewd narrative jokes and re-presentations of the affects that can emerge out of social domination

> Ross shows how an impoverished code impairs our ability to articulate a more complex reality in which individuals and groups negotiate identity through everyday encounters…Ross demonstrates that communication and comprehension are deliberate acts of cognition and collaboration. (Mullen 125)

An "impoverished code" for understanding and engaging human difference is rooted in hierarchies and stereotypes that entomb race, class, gender, and culture into discrete, homogenous categories with accompanying discrete, homogenous affects: racism, antisemitism, misogyny, and other expressions of social domination are frequently framed by neoliberal politics as being a matter of either hates or love, the "like" or "dislike" of a particular social group solvable by a mere shift in affect.[39] Such logic structures affect as the starting and ending

[39] One of the most recent, widely circulated public campaigns to utilize the language of affect explicitly is the NOH8 campaign, which began in 2009 in response to the passage of Proposition 8 (not allowing gay marriage) in California in 2008 (Halterman). In this widely circulated set of images, celebrities posed with duct tape over their mouths, "NOH8" written in large letters on their cheek, an image that equated homophobia with the negative affect of hate and, inversely (though unspoken), the positive affect of love with support of LGBTQ+ human rights (which, by the campaign's implicit logic, was epitomized by the issue of gay marriage). Later, when gay marriage was passed as federal law, the widely used social media hashtag #loveislove once again reinforced the idea of hate and love as both problem and solution to social hierarchies in place of the knotty complex of race, class, and gender ideologies that produce these affective atmospheres and circulations.

point of social domination and systems of power, rather than accounting for the fact that negative affects congeal through the creation of dehumanized stereotypes that emerge out of ideologies of race, class, and gender. With her inverted, topsy-turvy portraits of the affects that congeal during and in the wake of racist, antisemitic, and misogynist encounters Ross eschews representing the fear and vulnerability that accompany such events in the majority of realist novels of social relations. This re-making and inversion is made possible by Oreo's specific blend of genetically-bestowed qualities, obtained from the women in her family of origin and bolstered by her observation of their strategies for problem solving and creating lives worth living. Oreo's encounters with social domination function less as a challenge to Oreo (she always comes out on top) than as a challenge to the reader, who must make sense of being denied the negative affects of fear, pain, and shame that often accompany such violence (particularly in overtly feminist texts) to make way for Oreo's resigned ennui, joy, and amusement that are adjuncts to her inherited and self-fashioned invincibility. Ross uses Oreo's inviolable powers of self-protection to disarm readers, forcing them to register that safety in the world as it stands is a privilege only accessible to Black girls through a set of skills and tools so impossible they may as well be taken from the myths of Greek gods.

What's Black and White and Read All Over

Though little read upon publication in 1974 and out of print for many years, *Oreo* has received a slew of critical attention and appreciation since being republished by New Directions in 2015.[40] Critics (re)discovering the novel have been particularly attuned to Ross' skill at deploying a wide range of cultural references, linguistic play, and comedic and literary modes in

[40] *Oreo* was originally published by Greyfalcon House, Ross' romantic and business partner Ann Grifalconi's independent press (Saul).

service of crafting a unique satire frequently described as "ahead of its time," or even, as Pinto describes it, "out of time" in its strategies for presenting multivalent, palimpsest constructions of American identity (Pinto 159). Significant to several of these contemporary assessments of *Oreo* have been considerations of the novel in its historical context, during which the Black Power movement emerged as a dominant mode of political expression for many Black artists. This moment ushered in a new "political mood," as Lisa Corrigan terms it, in which negatively coded affects such as "disillusionment and alienation" and positively coded affects such as "independence, pride, and self-respect" ran alongside and into each other to produce "a shift that was as tangible emotionally and physically as it was intellectually" (Corrigan xiv). The Black Panther Party highlighted "the pervasiveness of black vulnerability" alongside a call for the need to self-defend from a sociopolitical system that could not be trusted to protect Black citizens (Corrigan 126). But this vulnerability is present nowhere in Oreo's life, as she has been equipped by her family, and herself, with everything she needs to get by in a world not particularly friendly to her survival. As Pinto writes in her essay considering *Oreo* alongside Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1976) as post-civil rights era Black feminist texts, both works are "recognizable today in their simultaneous emergence with a wave of black feminist thought– and a black feminist aesthetic– in the post-civil rights era"

> whose cultural literacy emerged in various ways under the influence of the civil rights movement culture and Black Arts, Black Power, and Black Nationalism…pushing against the marginalization of women in the rhetoric and representations of these movements, as well as the invisibility of black women within the mainstream feminist movement. (Pinto 140)

Oreo's universe is guided by Black feminist principles: women are the epicenters of their own lives, living peacefully alongside men in their communities but never deferring to them or acting only service to their desires; women confer and collaborate with each other to get done what must be done. Extending this idea, Tru Leverette considers how *Oreo*' "invites questions of its representation of the 1960's Black Power, Civil Rights, and Feminist movements… [s]imultaneously, it forces questions regarding what makes a text a *representative* of each of these movements," which Ross does in part by, as Leverette describes it, "troubl[ing] visions of what we might think of as a usable past for African American authors" (Leverette 84). What has been cast as a limited usable past for Black authors in the U.S.– namely slavery and its post-emancipation legacy of segregation and socioeconomic struggle– is found only scantly in *Oreo*, and when it does appear (such as in James Clark's feud with Zipstein's Noshery and Oreo's paternal grandmother's racism) tends to be a vehicle for re-imagining the outcomes of these well-trod forms of relation. Ross' innovations are rooted in her ability to represent the new political mood in yet newer ways, the novel's antagonists' defeated time and time again by Oreo's easy, unquestioning enactment of the "independence, pride, and self-respect" instilled experientially– and never pedantically– by her mother and grandmother (Corrigan xiv).

Oreo has additionally been described by Leverette as a novel that "questions the significance of individual histories to collective understandings of race and gender" and by Pinto as "a radical reinterpretation of civil rights and Black Arts cultural and political legacies" (Leverette 81; Pinto 139). If the proposition is that *Oreo* is somehow unlike, or a pointed response to or revision of, other novels featuring Black girl protagonists in twentieth-century American novels (such as Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), Jessie Redmond Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1928), Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953), Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*

(1959), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), to name a few) it is not because her family history, in general strokes, is particularly unique. American life and literature are rife with interracial, interreligious, and/or intercultural unions, though such interrelations often promise unhappy or even tragic results. But Oreo's status as Black, white, and Jewish is presented as frictionless within her family and community, "taken for granted…not taboo, tragedy, or trophy," noticeably different from the trope of the tragic mulatta (Leverette 89). Her wide range of cultural knowledge serves her well when navigating the cultural mélange of New York City in the novel's second half, allowing her to move seamlessly between locations and milieus. All the family members whose racism or antisemitism might impede this cultivation of harmonious cultural mixing are killed off, disappeared, or stripped of their power (as in the case of James Clark) in the novel's very first pages. Ross does not attempt to tell a story writ large about African American and/or Jewish life in America, but rather about a specific girl's life that is emblematic only of just how rambunctious, funny, and generative cultural circulations can be in a country that insists on discrete, homogenous categorizations despite the lived reality of these categories' perpetual bleeding into one another. If *Oreo* can be said to be representative of any particular cultural legacy, it is that of the Black feminist theorization of the interrelation of race and gender articulated so clearly by Sojourner Truth and the Combahee River Collective, both of whom, in their "Ain't I a Woman?" speech and 1977 statement, respectively, make clear that the co-constitutive nature of race, gender, and class is essential to understanding how power structures people's lived experiences.

Ross' formal innovations are inseparable from the novel's social critiques, for it is Ross' disruptions of the affects produced by racism and sexism's interrelations– predicated on the discrete categorizations that structure modernity– that reduce it to so much clownery, a jumble of

stagnant historical artifacts made to bow down to Ross' (and, in turn, Oreo's) considerable wit and whimsy. Oreo, for example, gets her nickname not from the racial epithet used to denote "someone who is black on the outside and white on the inside," as Ross defines it in the novel's epigraph, but rather from a comical mishearing of a detail from one of Louise's dreams in which it was decreed that Oreo should be called "Oriole" (Ross vi, 39). Misunderstanding Louise's marble-mouthed speech, a running joke in the novel, neighbors note that in fact "that child does put me in the mind of an Oreo cookie– side view" (Ross 39). When Louise learns of the mistranslation, she shrugs and replies that she never did like birds– other than for eating– but *did* love Oreo cookies, making the mistranslation a welcome one (Ross 40). Racialized language and epithets, bound to white supremacy's need to assert the alleged differences between Black and white, are turned into a bit of matrilineal lore no less significant for their relative eccentricity and happenstance. This process of nicknaming is also a way to estrange language– in this case slang– and meaning from their roots, adapting language for practical use and happy associations in this highly particular instance. This section of the chapter, which proceeds under the heading "Louise's Dream," also introduces Louise's uncanny talent for predicting lottery numbers in her dreams, a talent that sometimes benefitted the whole neighborhood "if they could figure out what Louise was saying" (Ross 39). Shared wealth drops into the community from time to time, made possible by an interactive process of translation. In a family comprised of language makers-and-breakers, words and their associations become putty to construct a reality that both suits and speaks to the Clark family's needs, unproblematically able to hold their lived complexity. Through the family's use of language as a dexterous tool for self-actualization, expression, humor, identity-making, and political orientation, Ross disabuses readers of the notion that the cultural Jewishness of an unreligious Black family might involve any heavy affective lifting.

At the novel's end the genetic material of the father– the future of the patriarchal line– is left in Oreo's hands (literally) after Samuel's death. If there is a future in the Schwartz family's continued existence, it rests on Oreo's grandfather's decision to finally reject the ideologies of racism, for Oreo decides that she will destroy or not destroy her found cache of Samuel's sperm based on how her grandfather reacts to her reappearance in his life. Schwartz genetic material will live on through Oreo and brother Jimmie C. regardless– but, should Jacob continue to refuse Oreo as his *mishpocheh*, only as a minor element of Louise and Helen's more robust genetic material. Once again, racism is framed as an ideology whose affective force– it has divided, killed off, and immobilized various members of the family, leaving only those who reject it in communion with one another and thriving– makes reproducing life impossible– in this case, very literally.

"No, Not Like That, Like This": Strategies for Representing Affect

Affect in *Oreo* is represented and utilized quite differently than in Larsen's *Quicksand* and Barry's *Cruddy*, in which the respective authors explicitly describe the internal frets and cognitive dissonances of their protagonists, fleshing out their emotional vulnerabilities in careful detail. Helga and Roberta are both keenly aware of their alienation and, while Helga occasionally takes pleasure in the attention her alienation sometimes affords her, they mostly suffer for that knowledge, wish they were unmarked by the things that have separated them from the possibility of having the kind of lives they desire. Additionally, these novels both track the process of their protagonists feeling that their lives are, if often difficult, generally inhabitable, to being resigned to death in the face of the eventual uninhabitability of that same life. Explicitly describing the affective states of each character as they live their lives becomes a way to narrativize the

presence and dissipation of a will to continue (or not continue) living; one can sometimes feel bad and still want to live, or sometimes feel good and still want to die, but the accumulations and repetitions of encounter that incite these affective states eventually congeal into an atmosphere that makes life (im)possible. Oreo is at least as alienated from U.S. mass culture as Helga or Roberta but has the significant benefit of living in and having modeled for her communal social relations that easily accommodate unique, strange, and even taboo ways of being in the world– so long as fidelity to that way of being is maintained. The relationship between affect and reproducing a life worth living are not one-to-one per these texts– they lack a didacticism that would have an "X affect = life, Y affects = death" equation as a takeaway– but rather highlight the necessary cultivation of practices of care attentive to human dignity, autonomy, and mutual interdependence.

Revealing the textures of a character's emotional interiority, including narration of the life-constricting affects of domination vs. the life-affirming affects of autonomy and agency, has been a common strategy for authors attempting to represent marginalized people as complex human beings rather than empty signifiers or minor side characters. This strategy was explicitly utilized at the inception of African American literature and in the slave narrative in particular, "making a case for the humanity of people of African descent by setting forth a particular image of ex-slaves that emphasized commonly admired human traits and virtues," such as intelligence, love and care for one's family, and grief over loss and pain (Connor 36). Representing the affective lives of dehumanized subjects was aligned with the political project of proving that the subject at hand is indeed fully human, which, following Enlightenment principles of personhood, has been correlated with being deserving of resources, autonomy, and political enfranchisement (Lugones 743). On the other hand, displaying an excess of affects ("excess" being defined

primarily by normative white, male, colonialist models of masculinized rationality) like sadness or anger could result in negative associations with the wild, untamed, and feminized animal world. This double-bind leaves disenfranchised people with an extremely slim margin of error between being declared just human enough or less-than, and Black women in particular face a slew of stereotypes that dehumanize by identifying them "primarily in terms of a single characteristic that becomes their sole defining characteristic" (PEERS). In the widely circulated trope of the "angry black woman," as Terrion L. Williamson points out, "anger or one of its derivatives—sassiness, bitterness, meanness, bitchiness—underlies almost every popular narrative of black women, past and present," which he writes is "not so much as a misrepresentation of black women as a misappropriation of black women's anger" (Williamson 185). Anger is a meaningful and legitimate response to the pervasive violence of misogynoir, yet this stereotype exploits Black women's anger for comedic and belittling effect that obscures the racist and misogynist social conditions that maintain this stereotype's circulation as a cultural production.[41]

Ross describes the affective tones of Oreo's personality as both "touchy" and "salty," posited in direct contrast to her brother Jimmie C.'s sweetness (Ross 37). Of the synonyms Williams uses, "bitchiness" is perhaps the closest to Oreo's saltiness and touchiness, qualities which indicate both emotional sensitivity and a quick temper, easily pricked. If Oreo's prickliness is to be a feature of her personality, Ross always packages it alongside her other notable and positively coded qualities. Oreo is birthed bearing a caul (a rare, benign birth phenomenon in which the infant's head or face is covered by a thin membrane), a crowning metaphoric image to communicate her extraordinary intelligence. Precociously exhibiting "her

[41] Misogynoir, a term to denote the interrelation of anti-Black racism and misogyny, was coined by scholar Moya Bailey.

mother's love of words," this quality is helpfully contextualized by her response, as a young child, to the information that she would one day have to find her father to learn the elusive "secret of her birth" (Ross 37). "I am going to *find* that motherfucker," she replies, "motherfucker" merely "*le mot juste*" (the correct word) rather than crass punctuation for her feelings about the endeavor (Ross 37). Ross shapes and shades Oreo's saltiness by coupling it with this example of her witty precociousness as well as inserting an aside on her burgeoning beauty: "[t]wo years after this book ends, she would be the ideal beauty of legend and folklore– name the nationality, specify the ethnic group. Whatever your legends and folklore bring to mind for beauty of face and form, she would be *it*, honey" (Ross 37). If Oreo's sensitivity and touchiness are touchstones of her personality, it is far from all there is to her; in fact, being so attuned to the social relations and affective atmospheres around her is time and time again revealed to be a valuable protective skill that allows her to easily perceive– and therefore plan to defeat and thwart– threats. That Ross takes care to note that Oreo's soon-to-be-renowned beauty would develop only two years after the novel's end– when Oreo would be eighteen, the commonly accepted age of adulthood in the U.S.– protectively envelopes Oreo in the realm of a girlhood primarily marked (by herself, her family, and her community) by her wit and will rather than beauty. That this promised forthcoming beauty transcends all nationalities and ethnicities– a beauty universally acknowledged– implies that Oreo's social power would only increase with time, yet also allows her self-making and agency to be narratively coded as products of her internal, cerebral functions that originate from her rather than being a feature of externally endorsed characteristics associated with feminine value. This is in direct contrast to stereotype of the "Jezebel" and Black girl's and women's oversexualization in U.S. media, which seeks to

represent "Black women as sexually promiscuous, insatiable, and incapable of [being raped]…to justify the sexual exploitation of Black women" (French 36).

If Ross in part protects Oreo from being overidentified with beauty and therefore sexuality in her girlhood, it is also true that Oreo, Helen, and Louise's affective vulnerability is never narrativized through explorations of their sadness, fear, anxiety, or hopelessness. The affective textures of Louise, Helen, and Oreo's instead become most discernable through Ross' comedic anecdotes of their encounters with the world and each other. Stylistically this helps maintain the slightly flattened, 2D aesthetics of *Oreo*'s universe by imitating the physically flat dimensionality of the literature, film, and television that the novel so often references: text printed on a page, a pattern of images drawn or projected onto a flat background, with only the illusion of further dimensions like depth and texture.[42] Though the most significant difference between Oreo's representation of the world and our material world is best articulated when she is in the immediate danger, as will be discussed later in this chapter, Ross' focus on exterior inter/action doubly serves to form an affective distance while also contributing to the aesthetic and affective tones of the novel's cartoonishly absurd universe. Ross' consistent use of these jokes of social relations do the major work of weaving the idiosyncratic warp and weft of the project's comic gymnastics. The humor that Ross makes integral to this project of self-making blankets the novel with a general atmosphere of playfulness, an enticing and energetic affective atmosphere for fostering pleasurable exchange and interaction between text and reader that also is both unsettling and balancing alongside the Oreo's encounters with patriarchal violence.

[42] Some of these two-dimensional texts referenced include the Bible, Torah, and Talmud, *Tarzan* ("[t]he guys in the background saying 'Ooga-booga' were jazz musicians who didn't have a gig that week"), *Double Indemnity*, *Small Town Girl*, the tale of Chicken Little, *The New York Review of Books*, television commercials aimed at anxious housewives, Picasso's cubist paintings, *Wuthering Heights*, and Walter Cronkite (Ross 6, 26, 27, 32, 78, 92, 95, 193).

Despite all the jokes, to which no character or situation is immune, readers ultimately emerge from "Troezen" and enter "Meanderings" knowing that when problems or confusions arise, Oreo is unilaterally equipped to solve them, regardless of the problem's dimensions or structural complexities. Inasmuch as this becomes a novel about a problem in need of solving (that of trying to find one's *schmuck* of a father in a big, busy city) it is also easily as much a novel of Oreo's easy-breezy capacity to solve this problem and any others; ultimately the trouble of a missing father is only a problem of missing information, not the father himself, and in the end this too is less of a problem and more of an opportunity for Oreo to flex her power as a determiner of familial outcomes for generations to follow. Though Oreo concedes, in the wake of finally meeting her father, that his specific, easily recognizable brand of hucksterism indicated that "she had come by her line of bullshit honestly," the big secret of her birth is, in classic Ross style, a cosmic joke with lasting implications for the future (Ross 185). Samuel, who adds little to the text or Oreo's life other than an ambiguous set of instructions for finding him, a brief cameo, and genetic disposition for bullshittery, has to unceremoniously die for Oreo to make any practical use of the anticlimactic "secret of her birth" is an indictment of the patriarchal family norms whose enforcement wrought only death where resistant bestowed lush life.

Meet the Family

In *Oreo* family of origin can limit or expand each character's ability to thrive or be stifled, to live radiantly (safe from harm, cared for, and regularly partaking in healthy pleasures) in the absurdist world Ross has created for them– or not. Family "makes" people, not just through physical reproduction, marriage, and care networks but also through the cultural mélange produced by the joining of two (at least) family's ancestral histories and social and

religious associations. Ross tellingly begins the novel with the Hebrew word for family: "*Mishpocheh*," the title of the first chapter, relays first a short account of the Schwartzes, Oreo's father's family. As a literary method for introducing protagonists to their audience, beginning with several generations of family lore, as Ross does here, works on several levels: first, it establishes an ancestral lineage, a social and genealogical account of how the current generation of said family came to be through births, deaths, unions, and breakages. *Mispocheh* might also work as shorthand for describing how families are expanded and made anew through the alliances of two previously unrelated (or, in the case of James Clark's family, related) genealogical lines: here is an account of how the Schwartzes and the Clarks joined and multiplied to become the Clark-Schwartzes, then broke apart to become the Clarks and Schwartzes, separated again but forever united through the lives of Oreo and her younger brother, Jimmie C. Ross disrupts this *mishpocheh* before it can even really begin, for directly below the header of "*Mishpocheh*" is a caveat in subtitle: "First, the bad news," followed by "The bad news (*cont'd*)" (Ross 3). Though ultimately the family that Helen and Louise create might truly be called a happy one (as per Ahmed, this family can be genuinely happy because none of them are pressured to perform happiness for the benefit of the others– which keeps everyone happy), the histories of race, ethnicity, class, and religion cause splinters that scratch and bother to the point of breaking, striking some family members dead and sending others off on their own to flourish or flounder. The hopes and anxieties of bloodline, so intimately tied to the fiction of racial difference, converge at the site of marriage and sexual reproduction: the social unit of family.

Ross uses the history of the racialization of blood and bloodlines to mark the genesis of Oreo's family history, playing with the affects and meanings associated with human difference

that produced the desire for a "biological test to distinguish bloods from individuals of different races" in Western European and U.S. biological sciences (Lederer S120). "Troezen," the title of the novel's first half, is a reference to a city in Greek mythology ruled for a time by Theseus and originally created from the joining of two smaller Greek cities. As the novel begins with an account of the Schwartz and Clark family reactions to Helen and Samuel's union, "Troezen" is an apt signal for the concerns of this section, in which Ross relays anecdotes primarily about the Clark family both prior to and in the wake of the two different "cities" of Blackness sand Jewishness being joined together through their union with the Schwartzes. The first anecdote we receive about the making of this family concerns the death of Oreo's maternal grandmother, Frieda Schwartz (this last name a pun, as *schvartze*– a word Ross also uses in *Oreo*– is the Yiddish word for "black" and has been used derogatorily to refer to people racialized as Black), who died immediately upon receiving the news that her Jewish son would be both marrying a Black woman, Helen Clark, and dropping out of accounting school. Bad feelings about the future of her family induces this death, affect moving from the intangible realm of atmosphere to taint the tangible material of Frieda's blood so that it "soughed and staggered in all her conduits," resulting in death by "a racist/my-son-the-bum coronary" (Ross 3). In a novel that plays so much with genetic material– blood, semen, and skin color– it is significant that it is racism that turns the blood bad and forecloses the possibility of life. Such concerns reflect "the regulatory power of a racist state obsessed with blood, sex, and procreation," as Saidiya V. Hartman writes, while also subverting the unhappy outcomes that such obsessions often produce in narratives of interracial unions (Hartman 10). From the very first the affects of racism can convert healthy blood to unhealthy, to clog the arteries with bad feeling coagulated to the point of stopping the heart from doing its vital work to keep one alive.

The bad news doesn't stop there either: the next paragraph, with the header "The bad news (*cont'd*)," relays that it is not only the Schwartzes who objected to this marriage and suffered the consequences of blood but one of Helen's parents as well. James Clark, upon hearing that his daughter was "to wed a Jew-boy," "turned to stone," his body paralyzed into the shape of "a rigid half swastika" (Ross 3). Body bent– quite nearly– into the twentieth century's most potent visual symbol of antisemitism, James becomes immobilized and silent for most of the novel (though not, significantly, uncared for– Louise continues to tend to him and his grandchildren cheerfully play with his stiff body "as if he were a piece of eccentric cordwood") (Ross 41). The foundations laid at the start of Oreo's journey into the world funnel Ross' characters into (non)relations that reflect the fractures, alliances, and intimacies produced at the intersections of race, class, ethnicity, and gender. Later, readers learn that what was thought to be James' mysterious paralysis was actually "a broken blood vessel" in his brain which rendered him incapable of speech or movement because he could never remember what he was doing from one moment to the next (when trying to stand he would "forget what he was doing before he moved perceptibly") (Ross 16). This broken blood vessel renders James permanently stuck in the nowhere-land of the split second between thought and action, producing only an *appearance* of total paralysis. Like Frieda Schwartz, his refusal to accept the Troezen-ing of his family ends up being a loss for him, not the familial unit he objects to; while Ross permits James to live, his voice is taken away and his action limited to being an inanimate plaything for his grandchildren. Readers immediately see possibilities for life grow or wane depending on a characters' ability to adapt to the racial and cultural mélange that come to make up the social reality of their world, and bad feelings about cultural and racial collaboration take the form of blood-borne narrative incapacitation or removal. Writing about the history of blood type designations, Susan E. Lederer

describes how early blood transfusions between human subjects often encountered problems such as "clotting when blood was exposed to air"; given affect's association with atmospheres due to their shared status as intangible but highly present, one might imagine the affective atmospheres of racism permeating the skin barrier and penetrating veins, causing clots and congealing that interfere with the most basic functions of human life (Lederer S119). This association between racism and impaired (or even negated) functioning is yet another topsy-turvy reversal on the part of Ross; whereas white supremacist, colonialist, patriarchal logic framed "impure" (i.e. non-white) blood as poisoning the subject who inherits it, Ross makes clear that it is racism and ideologies of race that interfere with human survival and kin-making. Though neither Frieda Schwartz nor James Clark would acknowledge it, racial science sought to identify and isolate both Black and Jewish blood from white, *goy* blood as way to "purify" white bloodlines; different though their skin tones and histories with American racial politics may be, their arguments with each other were both undergirded by the same racial ideology that marked both families inferior and dehumanized in relation to whiteness.[43]

These two short, introductory sections of "bad news" depict the unhappiness in both Schwartz and Clark families over the joining of the two, immobilizing James so that his wife, Louise Butler Clark, takes center stage as the elder matriarch around which the family turns. Likewise, Frieda Schwartz dying in the novel's first paragraph (and Samuel, her son, skedaddling not long after Oreo's birth in deference to his racist father's money) better isolates Louise and Helen as the family's primary elders and grand dames, the arbiters of the familial

[43] "In 1907, German physician Carl Bruck…claimed that that he could distinguish the blood of a Caucasian from that of a Negro, a Malayan, a Chinese, and an Arab…Even though *Hygeia* (1926), a journal produced by the American Medical Association, sought to convince its intended lay readers that all human beings possessed the same four types of blood, the medical literature continued to foster enthusiasm that definitive racialized tests, including one to distinguish the blood of Gentiles from Jews, would one day be found" (Lederer S120).

culture. These opening scenes of the novel place family, blood, racism, and antisemitism as central to the world-making of *Oreo*, where misfits do best when they forgo stereotypes and stigma and align their interests with other misfits. The interrelations of racism, sexism, and antisemitism are capable of negating life or, at the very least, paralyzing it so as to render a character narratively absent; Jacob Schwartz, the only animate racist left in the family, is banished to the sidelines, given little voice and existing as a narrative reference more than an actual character. Social ills described, acknowledged, and cast aside make way for the creation of a family unit headed by Louise and Helen, so completely themselves, so uniquely cultivated and connected, that they read as if they belonging to a singular world of idiosyncratic mortal gods, reflecting the mythical Greek world around which the novel's plot turns. Unlike Freida and James, the Clark-Schwartz family who have seamlessly adapted to their ethnically mixed cultures and histories are alive and well, thriving in the both/and reality of their lived experiences. The bad news is only bad news for racist and antisemitic family members– Louise, Helen, Oreo, and Jimmie C. all do better than fine without them.

"Helenic This and That"

After Samuel takes off in search of his father's inheritance– which Jacob refused to pass on to his son while he was married to Helen– Helen accepts her husband's fleeing with an unconcerned "Later for you, *schmendrick*," leaving New York to return to her hometown of Philadelphia with Oreo and Jimmie C. to get on with the business of living (Ross 8). Faced with the problem of how she will support her family, her father being immobile and no longer able to run his mail order business, she makes a list of her talents as way to settle on the most economically feasible plan of action. "Mimicry" was ruled out, for "there was no great call for

black female impressionists" of James Cagney and Mae West, and "making head equations" was a no go because "she refused to commercialize" that passion, so playing piano it would be ("operating on [singing] and [piano playing] were all pluses and minuses of cliché, but she picked [piano playing]") (Ross 22). Though being a Black woman performing music had a distinct history of both benefits and drawbacks, playing piano was the only option that would allow her the time to do her head equations while she played. Creating an equation to finalize her decision, she measured the possibilities as follows:

> B = black keys (or Helen's folly), reminders
>
> W = white keys (or Samuel's head), poundings
>
> M = Money, dollars
>
> R = Road, years. (Ross 22)

The racial binary of Black/white is once again ripe comedic fodder for Ross, who references the binary throughout the novel as a central conceptual mode for categorizing the concerns of the Clarks' lives. Helen's brilliance is on display in the imaginative way she is able to ascertain the relationship between her experience, knowledge, and needs. She processes emotional and material information (money, work, time, romantic foolishness, and headaches figured through the systematic black and white layout of the piano's keyboard) and turns it into meaningful information through which she reproduces life for her and her family, traveling while making money to support her family with the added bonus of making time do the abstract math that brings her joy (Ross 22). The reproduction of life for both herself and the family depend on Helen's careful consideration of how generative affects were only wasted when tossed to the ether of a foolish man; affect is time and energy spent that need not be expended on someone with little interest in contributing to the resources needed to keep a family network going. While

Samuel's existence is an integral part of cohering *Oreo*'s plot (and creating Oreo), his presence is essentially a plot device: the vessel of the sperm needed to make Oreo, sperm which he is literally reduced to at the novel's close.

In a chapter titled "Helenic Letters" readers are made privy to excerpts from the frequent letters Helen writes to her children while on tour playing piano. Originally transmissions meant as sugary reminders of how loved and missed they are, one particular missive leads three-year-old Oreo to challenge Helen's communicates with her children, which has the distinct aftertaste of obligation based on conventional stereotypes about how mothers *should* feel (regretful, guilty) when temporarily separated from their children. After receiving a letter that reads "Mommy would give anything to just stay at home and take care of her precious babies," Oreo demands that her mother stop pretending to be someone she isn't and give her children an honest account of her experiences on the road. "[D]ear mom," she writes backwards, no less, pushing Helen to literally take a good hard look in the mirror in order to read it, "cut the crap" (Ross 24). Released from the expectation that she represent herself to her children foremost as a regretful mother ripped from the cocoon of home and domesticity, Oreo's short missive ushers in a new era of letters in which Helen mostly recounts stories of her own childhood to her children, giving Oreo and Jimmie C. access to her personhood beyond the realm of parenting. These stories come in the form of vivid, sensory-packed memories, polaroid snapshots of Helen's childhood in which smells, textures, sounds, and tastes mingle with recollections of Helen's experiences negotiating the world. Describing her time in kindergarten, Helen writes of "piss-warm milk" and "little noses twitching like rabbits'"; a first (circa fifth grade) boyfriend artfully conned into dating her ("'I don't see what you see in [another girl]…[w]hy don't you like me instead?'") is broken up with after their first date in which he dips his paltry peanut butter and jelly sandwich in Louise's

divine *coq au vin* sauce (Ross 24-25). These details about her life *do* "cut the crap" as Oreo had requested: through these letters Helen becomes not just a mother to her children but an autonomous person with experiences, memories, and desires that might function as blueprints for Oreo's own curious, adventuring, emerging self. Helen allows an ever-expanding series of stories about her childhood and pursuit of a life worth living to become her parenting in absentia, using autobiographical narrative to share both her humanity and her life knowledge with her children.

In another letter, readers learn that Helen likes to fuck with people not living authentically– specifically, a Jewish person trying to pass as a *goy* in the undoubtedly *goyish* town of Happiness, Montana. Writing to her children about this exploit, Helen describes hunting down the only Jewish people in Happiness by calling magazine publishers to see who in Happiness subscribed to publications such as *New York Review of Books*, *Partisan Review*, and *Commentary*, connecting the consumption of these cultural products to Jewishness. One Mel Blankenstein comes up– clear enough– but the only other name, Leonard Birdsong III, sets off Helen's bullshit alarm. "Leonard (surely Lenny) Birdsong (Feigelzinger, perhaps, or is the last name simply a flight of Wasp-inspired fantasy?)" Helen quips, "[a]nd III, of course just means third generation on Rivington Street" (Ross 35). Again and again Helen implicitly constructs Jewishness not as a matter of religion but as a matter of culture, place, and naming, perhaps modeling for her children a way to understand their own Jewishness outside of the context of whiteness or religion. Determined to pull Birdsong out of his *goy*-passing lie– or at least scare him with the threat of being outed– Helen composes a letter to him under the name of Blankenstein, a ploy to connect the town's only two Jewish people as well as a way to blow Birdsong's cover. "Dear Lenny," the letter reads,

> Can you come over Friday night? My wife will fix you a meal like in the olden days. A little *gefilte* fish, a little *chrain*, some nice hot soup, a nice chicken. Who knows? Maybe a *kugel* even…[i]t would be an *averah* if we Jews didn't stick together…I am so sick and tired of looking at *goyim* I could *plotz*!" (Ross 35)

Rolling out a veritable feast of traditional Jewish foods and Yiddish and Hebrew words, Helen's lesson to her children in relaying such a letter imparts to them that living inauthentically– purposefully hiding one's ancestry not for the purpose of maneuvering an isolated dangerous encounter but rather to conceal one's difference– is unacceptable. That Helen does her disrupting in a town called Happiness is telling: if achieving a home in the land of happiness means trying to pass as what one is not, you best expect that happiness will be a precarious perch always in danger of being disrupted by someone who can see right through your undignified protective veneer.

Everything is Everything

Ross skewers the ideology of race– which functions on the notion of discrete racial categories, separable through bloodline and genetics– by tangling everything Jewish up with everything Black to the point of categorical absurdity. A chart on the third page of the novel, for example, tracks the "[c]olors of black people" beginning with "white" (a 1, like Louise) and ending with "black" (a 10, like James) with gradations including a 2 "high yellow (pronounced YAL-la)," a skin tone so specific it must not only be described visually but also be pronounced in quite the right way to be properly communicated (Ross 5).[44] Oreo is a 7 ("dark brown-

[44] Ross' chart of the range of skin tones amongst Black people recalls Alice Walker's definition of womanism, in which she writes, "Traditionally a universalist, as in: 'Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins

skinned"), while her brother Jimmie C. is a 5 ("light brown-skinned"); despite these variations in tones, they all shared the social designation of "black" regardless (Ross 5, 37). Beneath this chart, a note on its range of colors:

> There is no "very black." Only white people use this term. To blacks, "black" is black enough (and in most cases too black, since the majority of black people are not nearly so black as your pocketbook). If a black person says, "John is very black," he is referring to John's politics, not his skin color. (Ross 5)

U.S. racial ideology, with its social and legal one-drop theory of race, insists that "Black" is a distinct racial category from "white," though even the very naming of these categories reveal otherwise: as Ross' skin tone chart suggests, one can be both Black and a "1" (white), and the hue black doesn't accurately describe the skin tone of people defaulted into the category "Black." To Black people, "'black' is black enough" because to be racialized as Black is to put one in a category of degraded sociopolitical status in the U.S., to join the ranks of those historically denied access to the resources needed to thrive regardless of one's actual skin tone. To be Black is not to have black or even a darker toned skin, but to have Black ancestry, to belong to a bloodline marked for discrimination. The ideology of race functions explicitly on this imaginary conception of human genetic material: that Black blood, that substance which holds genetic material, is fundamentally different *and* inferior to white blood. Leverette writes that "[m]ixed-race individuals and characters become increasingly visible in moments of racial crisis," noting how the African American literary tradition has long used the trope of the tragic mulatta to expose both the cruelty and absurdity of racial ideology as well as the tragic

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are white, beige and black?' Ans. 'Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.'"

consequences of trying to divide what bi- and multi-racial individuals existences prove cannot be divided (Leverette 82). Ross enters this conversation with a perspective that doesn't highlight the tensions assumed to be inherent to being biracial so much as turning that tension into a playground for Oreo's quick wit and considerable creativity; there is not a trace of the tragedy within the novel, and certainly not for the novel's two biracial characters, Oreo and her younger brother Jimmy. The affects white supremacy has embedded even within Black communities through colorism– that having lighter skin tones is "good" and darker skin tones "bad"– are put in a chart that makes a joke out of supposed differences assigned to different skin tones with its final note on Blackness, which acts as punchline denoting the logical fallacy of racial differentiation in a nation whose assignation of Blackness came from the "one drop" rule.

Ross also plays with assumptions about the phenotypic qualities attached to Black and Jewish racial and ethnic statuses, drawing attention to the how arbitrariness of such notions. While Louise, Helen, Jimmy, and Oreo speak with a linguistic palette replete with Yiddish and are representative of the wide range of skin tones that comprise Blackness, Oreo's father is described as having "curly, kinky hair…noble-savage nose and cheekbones…the smug, god-favored lips of a covenant David" (182). Though his ethnicity is presumptively Ashkenazi Jewish, his face is described as a mixture of features coded Black ("kinky hair") and Native American ("noble-savage nose"). Such a description secures Ross' portrait of how race and ethnicity, constructed in large part through the allocation of specific phenotypical features, are arbitrary categories, created by bunk racial "science" in service only of allocating social power and constructed by logic that falls apart at first touch. When these conceptions of race's meaning are mapped onto a world in which meaning is constantly being challenged and re-negotiated- by a family who well knows how wily the supposed limits of race, ethnicity, and culture can be–

their absurdity sharpens into a cutting joke. A Jewish character's physical description reads as ambiguously Black, a Black character's skin is white. Moreover, Ross utilizes the myth of racialized genetic material to make knowing jokes about the supposed efficacy of racial science, such as when Oreo is "comforted by the knowledge that the Jewish half of her had kept her from getting sickle-cell anemia and the black half had warded off Tay-Sachs disease" (Ross 121). In such an equation, one that takes pseudo-seriously the notion of not only racially distinct genetic material but also co-constitutive illnesses whose proliferation has also been attributed to race, Oreo being Jewish kept her safe from the sickle cell anemia (once positioned purely as a Black disease) and being Black kept Tay-Sachs (constructed as an Ashkenazi Jewish disease) at bay. Too, in this joke's equation for race two allegedly separable halves speak to each other from opposite sides of the bloodline, rather than synthesizing to make a new category that combines both. Ross writes jokes that draw the reader's attention to the schlock racial science that underpins these systems of power which, despite their patent bunk, still push and pull people's lives in one direction or another. She turns them into material only good for getting a laugh, something that can be turned into a pleasurable way for Black and biracial people to encounter a diminished, denuded version of the ideological absurdity that likely affected their lives in distinctly unfunny ways otherwise.

Similarly, Oreo is described as having inherited from the Jewish side of her family "kinky hair and dark, thin skin (she was about a 7 on the color scale and touchy)" and from the Black "sharp features, rhythm, and thin skin (she *was* touchy)" (37). Her darker skin tone is attributed to her Jewish genetics, despite the fact that in the U.S. Jewishness is almost entirely conflated with whiteness, while her "sharp features"– sharpness and angularity being frequent descriptors of phenotypically Western European faces– come from her Black family. Thin-

skinnedness, a metaphor for emotional sensitivity, is both the one shared trait gifted to Oreo by both sides of her bloodline as well as being the one trait she contains doubly (thin-skinned squared). Skin, one of the primary materials through which race is constituted, becomes a source of both emotion and material existence: Oreo's skin is both dark and delicate– the quality of thinness invoked through the sensory descriptor of color right before it– as well as a metaphor for representing her emotional sensitivity.

Oreo whistles "Hatikvah" and then switches to "Lift Every Voice and Sing," she "[buys] a zebra-print paper dress…a black headband and white headband…a black and white milkshake" (Ross 204, 168). Through her continual deployment of the black/white dichotomy– in outfits, food, and song– she self-consciously and playfully courts the alleged oppositeness of the black/white dichotomy so patently disproved by her existence. Ross could have coded the arbitrariness of these binaries in other ways: for example, she might have had Oreo seek out grey clothing, or cookies and cream ice cream blended into the grey of a milkshake, as a way to represent the organic inseparability of her biracial, multiethnic heritage. Instead she courts the contrasts of these two categorically distinct colors/races: puts them on and in her body, sings them into the open air one at a time, one after the other. Ross shows us just how easily Oreo joins these supposed opposites in public: she takes pride in her talent for switching modes seamlessly as each situation requires. Oreo's creative, joyful, symphonic way of performing the systems that have tried to proscribe her social location makes use of the color line as the center around which her intellect dances. Making a performance out of the allegedly contradictory, racialized aspects of her personhood brings her pleasure; fashion and even ice cream are made into props for a celebratory display of her cultural inheritances.

Ross delights in writing characters who act and look differently than they're expected to based on limits set by categorical distinctions like race, class, and gender. She uses these moments of difference encountered and expected to act in one way to contribute to Oreo's education in understanding of the meanings of such categories and performances. On her train ride into New York City Oreo meets a gay traveling executioner named Waverly who shares with her a picture of his lesbian friends Phyllis and Billie. Oreo assesses the picture, responding that "Phyllis looks like Ava Gardner," assuming that the woman with the more traditionally femininized name must be the femme in the photo (Ross 102). On the contrary, Waverly responds, for "Phyllis is the one who looks like a truck driver. But that just goes to show you looks are deceiving. Phyllis doesn't drive trucks. She fixes them" (Ross 102). About what, exactly, do these looks deceive? Not the gendering of names, as we might assume, but about vocation, or Phyllis's relationship to the trucks evoked by her self-presentation. Ross forces an expectation and then undoes that expectation just as quickly, creating a kind of staggered comedic whiplash that benefits from the palimpsest nature of the joke. An initial read of the line indicates that looks *are* deceiving: one might indeed assume a name for someone who looks a certain way. But with the last two statements– Phyllis is a mechanic, not a truck driver, despite her driver-chic look– the joke turns directions just quickly enough add yet another layer. To further complicate the joke– and further queer gender– Waverly explains that in temperament "Billie's the butch…she'd break your balls as soon as look at you" (Ross 103). Phyllis, with the femme-inized name, is a gentle butch mechanic, while Billie, the Gardner-look alike, is the tough. Functioning on an either/or binary that parallels that of black/white, Ross never misses an opportunity to remind that reader that assumptions of difference– and notions of the meaning of that difference– are rarely indicative of the lived experience of those marked with that difference.

Topsy-turvy barely begins to describe the layers of inversion and misdirection happening here. Ross works with crystallized American stereotypes and assumptions about race, gender, and class and makes them into so much putty in which one thing can always be (and usually is) another, and where no particular identity acts as it "should."

All this mixing up and together of racial, ethnic, and cultural codes creates what Pinto describes as "a literary double consciousness not as 'marker of racial inauthenticity' but as 'the very condition of possibility rather than a debilitating dilemma'" (Ross 143). Oreo is aware, as she makes clear from her deliberate display of the black/white color scheme incorporated into everyday activity, that cultural norms dictate confusion and pain as the inheritance of those whose status is constructed as biracial. The adornment she makes of this color scheme pokes fun at the idea that this one fact of her life should demand a tortured tale of life on the color line, while her lived experience is so firmly grounded in that "condition of possibility" wrought by the generative interplay of her family's cultures and lineages. Her own unambivalent acceptance and uses-of-convenience of her racial and ethnic status allow her to seamlessly incorporate shifts in her own perceptions of how people "should" look, act, and even be named based on their perceived race, class, and gender signifiers. Incorporating what she's learned of her own experience, as well as that of Helen's missives, allows Oreo to have a life rich with the pleasures of defying, embracing, and reconceptualizing dominant narratives about what pain is supposedly wrought by contradiction.

"A Quick *Shu-kik* to the Groin"

Oreo, like Ross, is well-aware of the blinders created by hardened beliefs about the meanings of race and gender. Time and time again, those in the novel whose sense of security

rely on such stereotypes end up only being made more vulnerable by that fidelity. Systems of power function in part through the fiction that stereotypes are protective for those granted social power by virtue of their race, class, and gender status. Buying into them becomes a way to predict the flow of power in any given encounter; If one understands themselves to have or not have power based on the systems we've been given to determine allocations of social power, life becomes more apprehensible, even if what you apprehend if that you have less power. But Ross subverts this fantasy, for those who wish to do harm to Oreo only secure their own downfall when they underestimate her ability to use such stereotypes to her own benefit. Oreo, meanwhile, takes great satisfaction in the intellectual exercise of figuring out how to best weaponize a predators' odious predilections and misbeliefs about the terms of their engagement against them. Interestingly, it is the scenes in which Oreo faces (and defeats) the threat of sexual violence that have produced the most critical tension around the novel's feminist consciousness. These tensions produce negative affects for some critics, most palpably that of disgust and disapproval. Such affects congeal around these scenes in part because said critics find jokes situated around sexual violence to be distasteful, but also because of the way Oreo's virginity is positioned in contrast to the overt, criminalized sexualities of other women characters present in those scenes. A reading of the text that accounts for how Ross constructs visions of community and collaboration, however, offers an alternate understanding of Oreo's relationships to these marginalized women characters who aid and abet her revenge against enemies.

That Oreo, so free to do as she pleases and succeeding in all endeavors, does not partake in sex or romance has lead some readers to conjecture that her freedom is at least in part predicated not on positive sexual freedom (the power to participate in sexual activity without negative consequences) but rather negative sexual freedom (she has the power to escape and/or

punish the threat of sexual violence when it appears). Leverette has taken Oreo's lack of sexuality as critiques of more nominal female characters' overt eroticization, reading these differences as moral judgments indicative of a break or tension within the novel's otherwise steadfast feminist politics. It is worth nothing, however, that Oreo spends several scenes fighting off unwanted sexual advances and assaults, a fact that complicates this idea that Oreo abstains from sexual encounters. A more complete picture of Oreo's relationship to her own sexuality in the text might look at how much sexual violence she has had to outwit in her young life; while outwitting these creeps is easy for Oreo, the constant need to protect herself from unwanted sexual attention undoubtedly affects her relationship to desire. For example, one scene describes her as being "inadvertently in the state of *hwip-as* when she was riding in her uncle's car," for a man the car passed by "had made sucking noises to denote his approval of her appearance" (Ross 55). Through this intrusion Oreo is thrust (pun intended) into a state of *hwip-as* so intense that she ends up ripping the door off her uncle's car, nowhere to put her anger but into brutalizing the vehicle that so blithely carried her past this site of lechery. So, perhaps akin to Ross' representation of the affects that accompany Oreo's defeat of her would-be perpetrators, it is not so much that Oreo *lacks* sexuality or sexual desire, but rather that the sexuality she encounters always appears as unwanted attention from adult men.

Because the rest of the novel seems to affect readers in much the way Ross intended– see Oreo's overwhelming critical reception as forward-thinking, funny, and astoundingly clever– further investigation of these scenes elucidates the terms upon which these critiques are made and assists in further exploring the fine line Ross sometimes rides (and fudges) between crass hilarity and repulsive taboo. If the affective atmosphere that most permeates the novel, for both

reader and protagonist, is joyful play, what can be made of scenes that expose the limits of some reader's willingness to accept Ross' idiosyncratic stylings?

Only one such scene takes place in the novel's first half, during a chapter titled "Pets, Playmates, and Pedagogues" in which Ross elucidates Helen's methods of curating a suitably engaging education for her uniquely genius daughter. On a break from her unconventional home schooling and in need of "something to do to occupy her fourteen-year-old mind," a bored Oreo places an ad in the "Situations Wanted" section of a local paper (Ross 56). When one Dr. Jafferts responds to her ad with a phone call purporting to be related to a research opportunity, Oreo detects something awry as soon as he lasciviously suggests that he could "give [her] the examination over the phone"– "Aha, thought Oreo," seeming to have been waiting for Jafferts to reveal himself (Ross 57). Throughout their following phone discussion Ross tracks Oreo's thought process before she answers each question, considering at each question "[w]hich answer is better for a *schmuck* like this?" (Ross 57). As far as Oreo is concerned, what makes an answer "better" is whether it will adequately titillate Jafferts, priming him for the hard lesson she will eventually deliver. When, after teasing, lying to, and manipulating him sufficiently– "Oreo said a lot of words that begin with *p* and *c* and *t* and *x*, that rhyme with *bunt* and *pooky* and *noontang*"– Jafferts pants that he'll be right over, Oreo gives him the address of her neighbor Betty Williams' house and heads over to let her in on the ruse (Ross 59).

Never for a minute does Oreo feel vulnerable or frightened; in fact, the main affects that congeal for her through this encounter are hilarity (she "covered her mouth to keep from giggling" when Jafferts asks her what color her underwear is) and joyful anticipation of the vengeance to come (she answers another of his questions with a "wicked smile") (Ross 57). She is able to feel such positively coded affects while being sexually harassed because of her

unwavering (and correct, in the context of the novel) belief that she cannot have her agency and power wrested from her. The slightly sideways, fantastical version of the world Ross has created for her to live in, partnered with Oreo's combination of intelligence, wit, confidence, and self-taught martial arts training– all direct products of her lineage and tutelage– render her impervious to the threats of patriarchy. Readers might be reminded of the childhood taunt "I'm rubber, you're glue, whatever you say bounces off me and sticks to you," for any violence directed at Oreo ends up boomeranging back to the perpetrator courtesy of their "victim." Whether psychological or physical, no threats stand a chance against Helen's daughter. The scene that follows, in which Betty acts as Oreo's proxy and receives Jafferts only to ready him for Oreo's battering of his groin and jaw (the two places from whence his violence came), is read by Leverette as one in conflict with the feminist consciousness of the novel. Leverette finds that the novel "falters when confronted with the reality of female sexual desire," in this case by treating Betty with "malice and contempt" (Leverette 86). She continues,

> [Betty] is depicted as a woman so sex-crazed that she feels slighted when she cannot fulfill her desires with the obscene caller. In fact, it is clear from her characterization that Betty shares none of Oreo's indignation with the man's attempt to molest women over the phone and in person; additionally, she is characterized singularly in terms of her body and her physical desires, a mindless entity, the "Half WIT" of the section's title. (Leverette 86)

Here Betty is read as nothing but a vessel that Oreo takes advantage of for her own purposes. Furthermore, Leverette proposes, Betty lacks Oreo's feminist ethos, for she doesn't take issue with the fact that this man is preying on young women, and in fact *enjoys* her raunchy parley with him. This interpretation takes two things for granted: first, that Ross' portrayal of Betty's

sexual appetites is an indictment of her sexuality wholesale and, secondly, that the title of this anecdote, "Half WIT," is an undisputed reference to Betty's lack of intelligence (in direct contrast to Oreo's smarts). In both assumptions Leverette reads Betty as a mirror that mostly functions to juxtapose Oreo's positively coded qualities through Betty's lack thereof, a structure that reduces Betty to little more than a foil for Oreo's limitless power, which then becomes located at least partly in her sexlessness.

There are other ways to read this scene, however, which might frame Oreo and Betty less as opposites and more as a) expressions of the range of qualities and behaviors accepted without judgment by Oreo and her community and b) a humorous, if "off color," example of the kind of collaborations made possible in a friendship where both parties are at least nominally invested in meeting each other's needs (regardless of how unsavory they may be). Significantly, this scene, like much of the rest of the novel, is a long joke leading to a punchline, meant to provide a combination of commentary and amusement; that a reader might find the joke not funny is, perhaps, a given, taking into account that the subject matters at hand are the rather serious issues of sexual harassment and incest. On the other hand, Ross is hardly representing the world as it is: the United States of *Oreo* is about as realistic as the fantastical world of Greek myths in the sense that teenage girls, particularly teen girls of color, are hardly invulnerable to the many forms of structural violence at the root of contemporary social relations. The U.S. of *Oreo* looks and moves much like the world readers live in, but the structures of power that govern this world are noticeably more vulnerable to Oreo's interventions in order to suit the tone and aims of the narrative. Betty, specifically identified as Oreo's friend, is a welcome and accepted fixture of her community. She is only too happy to help Oreo because luring a horny man into her orbit promises to bring her a bit of pleasure, too. Betty's infamy as a willing fucker of anyone or

anything (including a plunger, known colloquially as the "plumber's friend") has rendered her not an outsider or object of disgust in the neighborhood but rather a measure of one's insider or outsider status, for those "who thought that the shibboleth *friend* referred to a person [were] known to be an outsider and [were] therefore the object of xenophobic ridicule and scorn" (Ross 59). Oreo's tight-knit community accepts any and all, so long as their predilections are consensual and above-board– and so long as they are embedded enough in local lore to get the jokes that bind together their uber-tolerant social contract. After Oreo beats him up and extracts a promise that "[Jafferts] would never again annoy innocent young women by phone or in person with his snortings and slaverings," she sends the *schmuck* "shmegeggely fle[eing]," an end to the affair which finds "Betty saying plaintively, 'But what about me?'" (Ross 61). For all her willingness to help Oreo execute her revenge, Betty doesn't end up with any of the satisfaction that follows the close of this encounter for Oreo: she has gotten all worked up only to have her plaything taken away.

Ross takes the final paragraph of this encounter between Betty and Oreo to deliver the punchline to the long joke that comprises "Half WIT," a "*shu-kik*" (as Oreo describes one of her patented self-defense moves) of its own to propriety that also reveals the truly taboo-crushing boundlessness of Betty's sexual appetite. Overcome with sympathy for Betty, who "[she] realized had been very brave and self-sacrificing…to participate in this little hoax," Oreo is delighted to note the time. Turning to bereft Betty, she replies, "What about you? It's five-thirty. Your father will be home any minute now. Do what you usually do in these circumstances. Fuck *him*" (Ross 61). Leverette reads this reply as "scathing and at odds with [Oreo's] previous championing of women" that lead her to punish Jafferts in the first place (Leverette 86). But if taken at face value, contextualized by Ross' larger project of making meaning anew out of the

wasteland of American stereotypes, Oreo is anything *but* scathing: she recognizes, without a hint of sarcasm, that Betty has been both "brave and self-sacrificing" in her willingness to assist Oreo despite not getting to consummate her encounter with Jafferts. Oreo *knows* Betty– she is not one of the scorned outsiders misunderstanding the meaning of "plumber's friend"– because Betty is a part of the supportive network of neighbors who seem to agree to act in beneficence towards each other. Oreo knows what brings Betty joy and how such disappointments have been handled in the past ("[d]o what you usually do in these circumstances"), is only too happy to pass on the "good news" of her father's imminent arrival. There is nothing in the text to denote disgust on Oreo's part, only genuine delight at being able to tell Betty that her appetites can be assuaged ever so shortly by her father, with whom she apparently already has a publicly known incestuous relationship. Leverette's reading of the section's heading, "Half WIT," as a reference to Oreo's exploitation of Betty's intellectual shortcomings claims that "[s]he is depicted as a woman so sex-crazed that she feels slighted when she cannot fulfill her desires with the obscene caller" and "characterized singularly in terms of her body and her physical desires, a mindless entity" (Leverette 86). However, the acronym "WIT" is partially a reference to Oreo's "system of self-defense," which she has named the "Way of the Interstitial Thrust" and is "based on an Oriental dedication to attaching the body's soft, vulnerable spaces or, *au fond*, to making such spaces, or interstices, where previously none had existed" (Ross 55). This style of self-defense rendered an opponent of any size or stature mere meat for the thrashing, as it allows the relatively small Oreo to enter "a state of extreme concentration known as *hwip-as*" that, like all her self-defense and revenge strategies, ensured her victim's demise (Ross 55). While one could potentially read the full title "Half WIT" as a reference to Betty, it is Jafferts who has the wool pulled over his eyes, and Jafferts who buys hook, line, and sinker Oreo's pithy performance of acquiescence to his

artless come-ons. It is he who ends up being punished due to his own naivete about the power and cunning of fed-up young women. Because *he* is the one who ends up being tricked– not Betty, who Oreo only wishes to please after having received her selfless help– I am more inclined to read Jafferts at the "half-wit" of the section's title: he believes he is being clever with his ensnarement of Oreo, but his own capacity for trickery is paltry stuff when faced with Oreo's much more powerful skills, which take advantage of his assumption that he is the one taking advantage.

Of course, Ross inserting incest into the text, as a joke no less– and without judgment on Oreo's part, nor any other character's– is a risqué move, one which she would be aware of as possibly alienating some readers. However, Ross *is* writing an adaptation of a Greek myth, a great many of which are rife with incest, so it is perhaps not so surprising after all that it makes an appearance in this text. That incest is the subject of a joke is typical of Ross' humor as displayed in every inch of the text, which, as previously discussed, is often predicated on inverting the meanings and affects that have congealed around highly stigmatized social relations. Oreo and her community's apparent condoning of incest in Betty's case makes use of one inverted touchstone in Greek mythology (it is usually a male god who rapes a mortal woman) to further wedge a gap between the novel's world and reader's reality, turning one of the world's great taboos into fodder for laughter and an avenue for reciprocal communal relations between Oreo and Betty. Betty has helped Oreo when in need, and now Oreo can feel relief knowing that if Betty had been denied the plaything that was Jafferts she would at least have the consolation of her father's imminent return home. Oreo's neighborhood community might be louche, nosy, and not above violating major taboos, but they are always happy to claim and uplift each other regardless– a running joke that is palpably at play in Oreo's encounter with Betty,

who may not have any defining characters other than her sexuality who is also beloved by her community and happy to help a friend in need.

Another scene that puts Oreo in direct contact with highly sexualized, stigmatized women and gendered violence takes place in the novel's second half, where she is forced to confront the fabled monster of Theseus's tale– Ross-style. Sent to a nearby brothel in New York City, where she's been told she might find her father that evening, Oreo meets Parnell (not his real name– Oreo names him in lieu of actually learning his name, another act of wresting power from one who believes himself to be unquestionably powerful), the cruel pimp who she had previously met in her journey and injured. Re-meeting her, Parnell snarls that "[i]t gon be my pleasure to see her split wide open," a terrifying threat to a young girl (Ross 155). Oreo's first thought, however, is not of her own safety but rather that she "was getting a little worried now– she might actually have to hurt Parnell" (Ross 155). Once again, Oreo has no concern for being hurt– she is always already sure that she can overcome whatever is thrown her way. The only point of anxiety is that she might actually have to do grievous harm to the person trying to do *her* harm.

Parnell intends to have Oreo raped by Kirk, a "way-out instrument of torture" who appears to be "a man, virtually on all fours," kept by Parnell should he need to punish any of the women who work for him. Kirk is described as a kind of centaur: part-man, part-horse, he "canters over to Parnell," with "withers twitch[ing]" and a "dark forelock" (Ross 156). Most horrifyingly, after Kirk takes off his loincloth at Parnell's command, he reveals "equipment unfurled like a paper favor blown by Gabriel at the last party in the history of the world," so largely endowed that "he could have used a zeppelin for a condom" (Ross 156-57). Yet again, Oreo is not frightened or horrified but, assured of her imperviousness to his violence, "impressed," though "[m]ale genitals has always reminded her of oysters, gizzards, and turkey

wattles at best, a bunch of seedless grapes at worst" (Ross 157). This description, in addition to revealing Oreo's curious but staunchly unconcerned affect in a moment of abject horror, also offers some insight into her noted lack of heterosexual desire in the text: male genitals are described as slimy lumps, flopping organs, grapes whose reproductive capacity has been removed. Though penises have peaked Oreo's curiosity as "an inveterate crotch-watcher," that interest is purely scientific, in pursuit of knowledge about the range of sizes this body part could come in rather than erotic thrills.

Ross takes pleasure in the gross-out gags that suffuse this scene, which is ramped up considerably when one of the sex workers "pull[s] back Kirk's foreskin" at Parnell's demand to reveal that "Kirk had corned the market on smegma"; witnessing this exposure, Oreo exasperatedly responds, "You gotta be kidding me…[h]e could open a cheese store under there" (Ross 158). Not only has Parnell threatened to have this hideous part-human, part-animal creature rape Oreo, but the specific uncleanliness of Kirk's penis is put on full display. The scene is a full-on feast of disgust: the threat of sexual violence and accumulation of potent and pukey bodily excretions join in a scene that one reviewer describes as follows:

> Such a scene is as troubling as it sounds: a garishly rendered physical threat is punctuated and then displaced by slapstick, farce, and *Pulp Fiction*-esque stylization. But that scene, which left me feeling irritated and slightly priggish (I wondered how on earth I'd teach it), has stayed with me. If *Oreo* is timely for a culture where a high proportion of female characters are peripheral and often exist to be killed off, it's also timely for a culture that is very careful about what it laughs at. (McRae)

The affects this scene produces for McRae– she is troubled, "irritated and slightly priggish"– give way to a disclosure that the scene, disturbing and in bad taste, has stayed with her, its

resonance affectively potent beyond the moment of initial reading. Something sticks with McRae; what is it? Her question of "how on earth [she'd] teach it," gestures towards an answer: if rape is a form of gendered violence meant to exercise power over vulnerable people, how does one teach a text– a feminist one, no less– that turns a rape into a joke, a punchline– even if the protagonist manages to evade that rape? McRae is sensitive to the cultural context in which *Oreo* is now being read: "a culture that is very careful about what it laughs at" may not be one very friendly to such a grotesque and bawdy treatment of rape.

Yet Oreo, as invulnerable as always, is more than ready for this threat; in fact, to ready herself for battle with Kirk, she goes into the bathroom and "pulled out a protective device she carried with her at all times" and "wedged it into her wedge" (Ross 159). That Oreo carries such a device with her at all times speaks to how normalized the threat of sexual violence is, how ordinary it is to the extent that she is prepared to face it at any given moment. Put into a makeshift battleground with Kirk, Oreo is "unresisting" as Kirk mauls and knocks her to the floor, where she complacently "stretched her legs wide in the ready-set position of a nutcracker" (Ross 160). Ross' choice of "nutcracker" as a metaphor for Oreo's position is apt, because what the monster was to be met with was no less than a castration of his capacity for violence, yet another example of how those who try to do harm to Oreo only do harm to themselves. When "[Kirk] tried to jam his pole into her vault" he is "met with a barrier that propelled him backward and sent him bouncing off the nearest wall," shocking everyone in the room– except, of course, Oreo, who never would have laid herself bare to such an attack unless she knew beforehand that she was (literally) as impenetrable as ever. In place of fear, Oreo is filled with joy as Kirk goes flying off the surface of vaginal opening, "smil[ing] her cookie smile" at Kirk's confusion and pain (Ross 160).

Oreo has no reason to feel fear– she is prepared for any and every violence that might come her way. Joy is the name of her game, for the pleasure of outfoxing one's enemies is that which "would warm her heart's cockles for all the time she was alive, alive-o" (Ross 160). Ross' invocation of the duration of Oreo's life is significant here: this is a joy that won't be limited to this particular moment of triumph but will suffuse "all the time [Oreo] was alive," endlessly filling the cup of joy from which Oreo might drink for the rest of her years on earth (Ross 160). In a neat transformative trick, violence and hatred are lobbed at Oreo through the monstrous form of Kirk only to produce not the pain to her body and mind that Parnell had anticipated but instead a satisfaction that came from subverting that pain back from whence it came. Again one might be reminded of a noxious childhood taunt: Child A grabbing Child B's arm and manipulating it so that Child B is slapping their own head, Child A squawking like a deranged parrot "Why do you keep hitting yourself? Why do you keep hitting yourself?" A feminist trickster, Oreo can delight in seeing her opponents bested by that with which they attempt to best her. It is not only Oreo who delights in this tables-turned encounter: forced to watch by Parnell, "the nine prostitutes were having a finger-popping time, whooping and hollering with uncontrolled delight" as well (Ross 161). The women in the room are unified by the affective atmosphere of joy that emerges from watching Kirk bounce off of Oreo's protected orifice again and again; this same affective atmosphere is felt only as a horror by Parnell ("hoarse from screeching at [the sex workers] to quiet down") and Kirk ("back lacerated from racketing against walls and furniture…fann[ing] the head of his angry-red penis") (Ross 161). Eventually Oreo finds no more joy can be wrested from the encounter, feeling sorry for Kirk due to "the battering his quondam battering ram was taking" and proclaiming that "[h]e's exhausted, fagged out– *oysgamitched*!" and asking Parnell if he won't "send this gelding back where he came from?"

(Ross 161). Oreo has not only beaten Parnell at his own game but has also humiliated him by denying him her own fear and humiliation.

Affect becomes yet another weapon for Oreo to masterfully wield: not only has she evaded the rape that Parnell had taken such sick thrill in threatening, but she has weaponized his false perception of his immovable power by defanging it with her sympathy and the evocation of his cadre of sex workers' "uncontrolled delight," despite them supposedly being there only do his bidding and take note of what fate awaits them should they disobey him (Ross 161). If part of what Parnell hoped to receive by watching Oreo be raped by Kirk was the pleasure of seeing her feel pain that he had caused, he has been doubly denied: not only does she evade the rape and harm Kirk in the process, but her feelings turn out to be only happiness and patronizing sympathy for what a sad excuse for revenge had been attempted. Oreo's power then lays not only in her ability to protect herself physically but also in her ability to deny her attacker her emotional vulnerability, twisted and redirected to infuse Parnell with an inverted reflection of his symbolic castration. When she tells Parnell to call off the wounded Kirk– now gelded by Oreo's ingenious device– she "knew that her words would enrage Parnell" and anticipates his responding attack, which she meets with "the humiliation special" of "a quick *fo-han-blo,* a lightning *bak-han-blo,*" her WIT skills making mincemeat of yet another sad sack male enemy (Ross 162). When, still determined to beat her, Parnell responds that he's *really* "gon break [her] natural ass" now, Oreo quotes Louise ("Don't talk so much with your mouth") and wallops him yet again, hearing a sound "she at first feared was Parnell's mandible mealing" (Ross 162). Instead, the sound turns out to be one of her sandal straps breaking, which she is "even more horrified by"; this annoyance causes her to further brutalize Parnell with a few more WIT moves "out of frustration," for "[t]hey were her favorite sandals" (Ross 162). In the end, all Parnell

manages in the way of hurting Oreo was an inadvertent broken bit of shoe leather which results only in his "natural ass" being broken for causing such an inconvenience. Ultimately, Parnell and Kirk are of so little consequence, and are so obviously no match for Oreo's prowess, that they register harm only in the minor inconvenience of a broken shoe strap. Not only are they beaten to a pulp by the strategies for self-defense that Oreo had long ago implemented in her daily life, but they are also rendered little more than mildly bothersome gnats defeated on the road to Oreo's victory. Any sense of Parnell's power is diminished, defeated, reduced such that he and his proxy for violence, Kirk, becomes as small and defenseless as Parnell had claimed Oreo would be against his planned attack. Their humiliation is evermore expanded by Oreo's registration of their effect on her only by secondary means– Parnell wasn't even *trying* to break Oreo's sandal strap, yet that is the event what managed to incite her most visceral affective response to his scheme for revenge.

In another inversion of power that then coincides with the creation of bonds borne from shared needs, Oreo turns to Parnell's watching sex workers after "she had amused herself sufficiently" with beating him and asks who would like to take their turn (Ross 163). Five of the nine come forward and gleefully pummel the already wretched Parnell, whose "proud, swanlike carriage was gone," replaced with "a manifestly terminal droop" (Ross 163). Not only has his body taken an incapacitating beating, but his spirit has been bested as well, now a sad, limp version of its once strident self. Earlier in the text Ross similarly engaged the trio of rape, humiliation, and revenge through an inversion of normatively gendered representations of rape of women by men: while sleeping in Riverside Park on her first night in the city, Oreo overhears an infamous and "reputedly beauteous band of female rapists" threatening to cut off a male victim's genitals because "he was too afraid that he would not be able to get a hard-on to get a

hard-on" (Oreo 112). Oreo laughs overhearing such an attack, titillated rather than horrified, and when the victim begs for a rescheduling of the rape (to a better time for him, erection-wise) the band of female rapists declare that they are "not in this for pleasure," but rather to "teach you fathering mother-jumpers a lesson" (Ross 122). The victim is not harmed so much by their sexual violence as by the humiliation of not being able to get sufficiently erect enough for them; the female rapists denial of a change-of-date alongside the reminder that they aren't there for a good time drives home the centrality of affect as a tool for teaching hard lessons to those for whom words alone never quite do the trick. The use of "fathering" as an epithet is notable due to its relevance to Oreo's quest: that she should overhear such an encounter on the first night of her trip to find Samuel Schwartz portends the final outcome of her own adventure, in which she plans to teach the "fathering mother-jumper" that is Jacob Schwartz a lesson of his own.

"No Skin Off Her Skin"

After a series of further wayward events as twisty and ridiculous as the rest of the novel's previous adventures, Oreo finally finds herself running towards a mirror in which she sees her reflection running towards her as well. She spots her father in the window of an apartment above, who waves first at her reflection and then, turning at her. Oreo and her reflection stop just short of running into each other– or rather, of Oreo running into the mirror, which is being carried from a moving truck into the adjacent apartment building– only for Oreo arrive beneath her father's window just in time to witness "Samuel falling toward her"; after all she had been through to locate him, the only contact she ends up having with his mortal form is his "body brush[ing] her right hand" as he fell from his apartment to the concrete below, where he died

upon impact (Ross 192). The metaphor of the mirror is an apt one for Oreo's relationship with her father: running towards him is really running toward herself, for her search for him is not in service of wanting to include him in her life but rather to obtain information that will elucidate her own existence for herself. In *Oreo* the search for the father is the search for the self, the father merely a vessel for information rather than meaningful figure of identity. In a Ross-ian detail worthy of the novel that preceded this event, Samuel dies not from the fall, which, coming from only the second floor, could not alone have secured his death, but rather from his landing on the dog carrier Oreo held. Breaking the carrier upon landing, Samuel's head is punctured by the rhinestone collar of the dog within, leaving "an intaglio coronet on [his] brow" (Ross 193). Patsy patriarch long fallen (now literally) from his throne, Samuel's death via imprinted dog-collar wound crowns him a sad clown even in death, forced in his final act to wear the humiliating object of his demise on his forehead like a brand. Oreo, much as in her previous encounters with bodily harm which have historically been laden with negative affects, feels "more distressed over accident than essence– the flukiness, not the fact of Samuel's death" (Ross 193). What bothers her is how sudden, how random his death is, and how close she was to finding out the secret of her birth from the source himself, denied the information when only moments away from discovering it. She is "sad but not *too*," Ross likening the degree of Oreo's grief-lite to "if someone told her that Walter Cronkite had said his last 'Febewary' or that a fine old character actor she had thought for years was dead was dead" (Ross 193). Samuel had been but a myth and biological ingredient to her in life and so his passing left him much the same, the only insult being that the information he hoarded about the secret of her birth had been rendered permanently inaccessible. Referring once again to idols of two-dimensional arts, television and film, Ross defines Oreo's affective atmosphere by comparing it with those which might be felt

by any reader upon hearing that a someone familiar to them through media– but ultimately still a stranger– has passed away. Through layers of text, from screen-to-page-to-reader, Ross distances both protagonist and reader from the intensity of death's expected affective atmospheres, maintaining the level of cartoonish affective remove that has been developed through the bizarro universe that. Goodbye Samuel: it was nice not knowing you.

To Share the Sperm or not Share the Sperm, That is the Question

After following a series of convoluted clues to finally discover the secret of her birth after Samuel's untimely death– that she had been conceived by artificial insemination using stash Samuel's sperm–Oreo concocts a plan that will make meaning out of an otherwise relatively meaningless secret. With an award-winning performance as an employee of the Schwartz's, complete with a put-on accent borrowed from Louise ("Now, what Mr. Sam's las' name?") she procures the frozen store of Samuel's genetic material and puts together the story of her birth:

> [Helen and Samuel] determine to give the world human evidence of their endearment. Jacob would *shep* such *naches* from his first grandchild, he would forgive, forget, and make a new will…"Low sperm count," says the doctor…Samuel is desolate. Then he sees an ad for New York City's first research center for artificial insemination…Nine months later: "It's a girl!" But Jacob does not forgive, forget, or make a new will…Perhaps a boy?...Jimmie C. is born. But even before that Jacob has made clear: "Kosher *kinder* or you'll get *makkes.*" (Ross 204-205)

Samuel, though he had loved Helen for some time, mainly wanted offspring to access his inheritance from his father. When these offspring turned out not be "kosher" in Jacob's eyes, Samuel split in search of a womb who could give what Jacob demanded. Unable to make it

work, he had been holding on to his stash of frozen sperm in hopes of finding "the right oven" that would magically release Jacob's money into his long-waiting arms. Alas, death came for him and put a *kabosh* on his life's work of accessing the patriarch's instrument of power.

At *Oreo*'s end, discovering the secret of her birth endows Oreo with the sole remaining precious material that is her father's frozen sperm, that material required to reproduce the "kosher" Schwartz line Jacob so desperately wanted. Though she plans to give Jacob "a few days to mourn in peace," Oreo's plan is one of possible reconciliation– on her terms:

> Why not give Jacob an opportunity for what she was pleased to call a Judeo-Négro concordat? He was, after all, her paternal grandfather. They shared misfortune. Perhaps, in these circumstances, he would greet his granddaughter as a *zayde* should, with love and affection. If he did, she might give him the vials as a present…If, on the other hand, Jacob's greeting was not all that she felt a grandfather's should be, well, then…she [would pour] the last of his strain down the drain. It was all up to Jacob, of course…Yes, she would cut him some slack. But, for all that, she would not forget herself completely. (Ross 207)

If there was no love lost between Oreo and Jacob, there is at least "shared misfortune," the (mild) sadness of Samuel's loss a possible inroad to restoring relations between the two halves of her family separated by racism and antisemitism. Oreo sees the opportunity to cultivate the shared affective atmosphere of mourning into something more, but she is also unwilling to "forget herself completely"– as Helen taught her, remembering oneself and the inherent value in one's authentic personhood was essential to reproducing a bearable life. The final words of the novel, spoken by Oreo as she waits for a traffic light to change from red to green, is the Latin "*Nemo me impune lacessit*": no one attacks me with impunity. Being her *zayde* was a privilege, not a

right, and if Jacob wouldn't enter into a harmonious affective atmosphere with her she was prepared to pour all her goodwill– and Samuel's sperm– down the drain (Ross 207). To accept the offer of an affectively-mediated reconciliation would be Jacob's last chance at reproducing more Schwartz lives. "It was all up to Jacob, of course"– until it wasn't (Ross 207).

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