Title

Intersectional Empathy: An Exploration of Power, Privilege, and Relationality with Particular Emphasis on the Works of Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison

Permalink

Author

Pettersson Peeker, Aili

Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Intersectional Empathy:

An Exploration of Power, Privilege, and Relationality with Particular Emphasis on the

Works of Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

Aili Pettersson Peeker

Committee in charge:

Professor Sowon S Park, Chair

Professor Candace J. Waid

Professor H. Porter Abbott

Professor Kenneth S. Kosik

June 2024

The Dissertation of Aili Pettersson Peeker is approved.

_____

Candace J. Waid

_____

H. Porter Abbott

_____

Kenneth S. Kosik

_____

Sowon S Park, Committee Chair

June 2024

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

VITA OF AILI PETTERSSON PEEKER
June 2024

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy in English, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2024
> PhD Emphasis in Cognitive Science
> Committee: Professors Sowon S Park (chair, Department of English), Candace J. Waid (Department of English), H. Porter Abbott (Department of English), Kenneth S. Kosik (Department of Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology)

Master of Arts in English, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2023
Master of Arts in Literature – Culture – Media, Lund University, 2015
Bachelor of Arts in English, Lund University, 2013

PROFESSIONAL APPOINTMENTS

Teaching Associate, Department of English, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2019-2024
Teaching Associate, Writing Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2023
Teaching Assistant, Department of English, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2018-2023

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

"The Ethics of Representation: Woolf Writing Working Women." *Virginia Woolf and Ethics: Selected Papers from the 31st Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, edited by Amy C. Smith, Clemson University Press (forthcoming in 2024).

"Traveling Emotions: Intersectional Empathy in the Literary Classroom." *MLA Options for Teaching Emotions and Literature*, edited by Andreea Marculescu and Charles-Louis Morand-Métivier (volume currently under peer review).

"*Burning*: Silenced Rage in Lee and Faulkner." *Neohelicon*, Winter 2022.

"Seeing Memory: Using Digital Yoknapatawpha to Teach Cognitive Literary Studies," *Teaching Faulkner*, Fall 2019, issue 37, Center for Faulkner Studies, Southeast Missouri State University.

AWARDS

Graduate Division Dissertation Fellowship, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2023
Carol Genetti Graduate Mentoring Award, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2022
Mendell Graduate Fellowship in Cultural Literacy, Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion, and Public Life, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2022
Donald Pearce Dissertation Fellowship, English Department, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2022
Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award, English Department, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2021
Crossroads Fellow, Unconscious Memory and the Human Mind, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2019-202

ABSTRACT

Intersectional Empathy: An Exploration of Power, Privilege, and Relationality with

Particular Emphasis on the Works of Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison

by

Aili Pettersson Peeker

Intersectional Empathy investigates the role of empathy in academic and non-academic

discourses. Tracing the conceptualization of empathy as a form of mirroring throughout

Western philosophical, literary, and scientific discourses from the 18th century to the

present, I suggest that understanding empathy as mirroring obscures the power dynamics

that structure who recognizes similarity with whom. Coupled with the contemporary

Western belief that empathy has the potential to encourage readers to overcome differences

between themselves and others, an understanding of empathy built on mirroring makes

intersectional empathy—a sharing of feeling across divergent social identities that are

shaped by politically situated modes of privilege and oppression—difficult. Limiting the

range of experiences that fall under the umbrella category of "empathy" to a mirroring of

another's mental state encourages an often violent kind of identification and forecloses the

ability to understand the variety of complex processes that enable humans to feel for and

with each other.

Thinking with empathy critics from the field of feminist studies as well as cognitive

narratology, I propose that empathy needs to be situated in a broader context that

acknowledges the politics, power dynamics, and ethics of imagining another's experience. I

ask what would happen if we did not think of empathy as one person seeing their self

reflected in another or in a text, but rather as an act of responsiveness where two or more

individuals respond and adjust to each other. To rethink empathy in this way, I present the

alternative of *the dance of empathy*. The dance model complements the limitations of the

mirror model by emphasizing the dynamic, impermanent, and relational nature of feeling with others. To examine the possibilities embedded in the dance of empathy, I turn to two writers who have articulated the problems and potentials of empathy in their depictions of human minds relating to each other in social environments: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison. The aim of this project is to uncover a problem that has not yet been clearly defined (that certain forms of empathy both reinforce and are founded upon a narrowly insular and one-dimensional understanding of individuals) and to present a less atomized and more context-aware and fluid—multi-dimensional rather than one-dimensional— vocabulary of how humans relate to each other's emotions than the one we find in modern understandings of empathy built on the idea of mirroring.

This dissertation contributes to the field of cognitive literary studies and exists at the intersection of critical theory, cognitive neuroscience, and narrative theory. The introduction brings together the medical humanities with cognitive psychology and critical theory to present a historically informed portrait of contemporary approaches to the relationship between empathy and literature. Chapter I, "Other I's: Woolf Writing Working Women," parses the limitations of how writers imagine the experiences of others. Here, I examine Woolf's wary stance towards depicting the inner life of domestic workers to offer a concrete example of why the mirroring kind of empathy poses problems for writers. Chapter II, "Fluid I's: Changing Form in *Orlando* and *Jazz,*" places Woolf and Morrison in conversation with each other to trace a genealogy of the ways in which these writers experiment with literary forms of fellow-feeling. Exploring examples of characters changing fluidly from Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and Morrison's *Jazz* (1992), I suggest that these representations of responsive processes in motion can help us rethink empathy intersectionally. In Chapter III, "Misty I's: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison Feeling in Common," I explore how Woolf's and Morrison's depictions of connected and collective

forms of consciousness in *The Waves* (1931), *The Years* (1937), and *Sula* (1973) present expanded notions of individuals that are crucial for understanding the dance of empathy. In my conclusion, "Lily's Revenge, Intersectional Empathy, and the Importance of Being Thou," I sketch one answer to how we can realize a more nuanced understanding of the power dynamics that structure empathy through a reading Woolf and Morrison's visions of life extension through connections with others.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

I-I-I: The Problem with Big I's

> [H]e wanted to assert himself, and so it
> would always be with him till he got his
> Professorship or married his wife, and so need
> not always be saying, 'I-I-I.'
>
> —Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

> Empathy is the big 'I' that feels your pain.
>
> —Fritz Breithaupt, *Why Empathy is not
> the Best Basis for Humanitarianism*

> There is nothing now but kestrel.
>
> —Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of
> Good over Other Concepts"

In Virginia Woolf's 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*, there is a famous dinner scene. At this

famous dinner table, a young man named Charles Tansley—a visitor to the Ramsay family's

house with a habit of turning every conversation to the topic of himself—sits opposite Lily

Briscoe, the novel's artist figure. Observing Charles Tansley's physical discomfort when no

one asks his opinion, Lily sees "as in an X-ray photograph, the ribs and the thigh bones of

the young man's desire to impress himself" (91). Disregarding the "code of behaviour" that

states that "it behooves a woman, whatever her occupation may be, to go to the help of the

young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his

vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself," Lily sits silently smiling and enjoys observing

her dinner companion struggle for a moment (92). Before long, however, she is forced to

"renounce the experiment—what happens if one is not nice to that young man there—and be

nice" out of kindness to Mrs. Ramsay who wordlessly begs Lily to come to Charles Tansley's rescue (92). Mrs. Ramsay wants the dinner to proceed smoothly and—ever-perceptive angel in the house that she is—knows that this will not happen unless someone helps Tansley assert himself:

> She could see how it was from his manner—he wanted to assert himself, and so it would always be with him till he got his Professorship or married his wife, and so need not always be saying, 'I-I-I.' For that was that his criticism of poor Sir Walter, or perhaps it was Jane Austen, amounted to. 'I-I-I.' He was thinking of himself and the impression he was making, as she could tell by the sound of his voice, and his emphasis and his uneasiness. (106-107)

Seen through Lily's momentary defiance and through Mrs. Ramsay's diagnostic acumen, Charles Tansley's repeated attempts to assert himself and his view of the world—his I and his eye—are revealed as feeble attempts to mask a fundamental uncertainty about his social position.

I have chosen this stuttering self-assertion as an epigraph and a title for this introduction because of how Woolf describes Charles Tansley's insular self-centeredness as an *impairment* built on a fragile sense of individuality that is always dependent on the social support of others yet fails to recognize these necessary others. Charles Tansley's focus on asserting his own point of view hinders him from serious intellectual pursuits as we see in his practice of reading: his literary criticism of Sir Walter Scott or Jane Austen will never amount to more than a stuttering "I-I-I." As a reflection of himself, a mirror image of his fragile ego, and a self-obsessed manifestation of his own impression upon the world, Charles Tansley's literary interpretation always returns to his self. Ironically, his desperate desire to assert himself can only be remedied by institutional forces outside his self (through the university, through marriage, or through the social attention of Lily Briscoe). In showing her

2

readers an X-ray of Charles Tansley's "urgent desire to assert himself," Woolf exposes the fragility of a supposedly stable self that Charles Tansley so frantically tries to uphold for society to validate and reward.

I have also chosen this title-epigraph because we see echoes of Charles Tansley's triple assertion of an I in the modern preoccupation with relationship between empathy and literature where empathy often is understood as imagining yourself in the situation of a character. For example, in an online test developed in 2015 by the Harvard Moral Psychology Research Lab called "The Moral Sense Test," you are asked about your reading practices to determine how empathetic you are. The test asks you to rate how strongly you agree with statements such as "When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me," and "When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character" (moralsensetest.com). Here, empathizing means seeing yourself in the text: I imagine what *I* would feel like, and I put *myself* in the place of a main character. In other words, reading (or watching) to empathize is understood as hinging upon the ability to identify with characters in the narrative. As with Charles Tansley's interpretive habits, the *I* of the reader is repeated three times: "When *I* read a good story or novel, *I* imagine how *I* would feel if the events in the story were happening to me." In this view, empathy invited by literature is understood as readers placing themselves in the situation of the protagonist, imagining how they would feel if they lived through the events depicted.

Question from The Moral Sense Test questionnaire (moralsensetest.com).

This understanding of the empathy-literature relationship is often coupled with the contemporary Western belief that empathy has the potential to encourage readers to overcome differences. Through empathetic imagination, the argument goes, reading can make us recognize similarities in characters we initially thought of as very different from ourselves. In this view, empathy becomes a tool for overcoming differences, and similarity is assumed to be the foundation for our capacity of feeling for and with others. By imagining myself in the position of a character, I can minimize the gap between this character and myself and thus extend my emotions to another.

This emphasis on overcoming difference is particularly prevalent in interdisciplinary investigations of the social value and cultural power of literature. Cognitive psychologists David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano's 2013 study "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind" presents empirical evidence to show that reading "literary" fiction improves people's ability to deduce the emotions, beliefs, and desires of others.[1] Literary fiction, Kidd and Castano note, seems to "expand our knowledge of others' lives, helping us recognize our

---

[1] This kind of deduction is what is called "Theory of Mind," currently understood as a cognitive foundation for empathy.

similarity to them" (377). Recognizing yourself in another through literature, according to this line of reasoning, can help readers minimize the distance between themselves and others.

Kidd and Castano's study made waves: it was published in *Science* and written about in *The New York Times*, where readers were recommended "a little Chekhov" before a job interview or a date (Belluck np). Part of the reason for the rather unusual level of attention that this study garnered in mainstream media, it seems, is that it confirms the idea that reading literature fosters empathy, and that this is a good thing. The empirical evidence presented in the study quickly became a popular citation across disciplines as the waves spread into the fields of cognitive psychology, medical humanities, and—to a lesser degree— literary studies.

In the journal *Medical Humanities*, scholar and novelist Lise Saffran draws on Kidd and Castano in a 2014 article titled "'Only Connect:' The Case for Public Health Humanities." Here, Saffran proposes that literature is useful in a public health context because it can make readers see themselves in characters that initially appear different from the reader. "Exposure to fiction that makes demands on readers to think deeply about character," she writes, "appears to help us recognise our similarity with people who initially seem unlike ourselves" (107). Like Kidd and Castano, Saffran suggests that literature can help us recognize similarities with others. Again, like Kidd and Castano, she insinuates that this is automatically positive. For Saffran, this recognition of similarity with those that "initially seem unlike ourselves" has benefits in the field of public health. Because "[l]iterary fiction has been demonstrated to have an impact on skills related to empathy and social intelligence," she suggests, literature and literary skills, writ large, may help "public health students and professionals to develop a nuanced understanding of the influence of social context on health behaviour and to empathise with people in difficult circumstances" (105).

The belief here in literature's lofty potential is built on the idea that reading literature decreases the imaginative, emotional, and ethical distance between reader and, in this case, sufferer. If the goal is recognition of similarity, as Saffran proposes, the most salient part of the reading process becomes seeing yourself in the characters you are reading about. When we recognize similarity in others, we see ourselves—or at least part of ourselves—reflected in them. With this goal in mind, reading to find yourself mirrored in the text becomes an aim, and putting yourself in the place of a character becomes a useful tool for reaching this aim. Proponents of literature's power to encourage empathy often reveal this understanding of empathy, where the capacity to understand others is founded on an imaginative act of mirroring.

Another field where the function of literature has been geared towards promoting empathy is cognitive psychology. In the same vein as Kidd and Castano, cognitive psychologist (and, like Saffran, also novelist) Keith Oatley proposes that reading can improve social skills that rely on our ability to imagine the experience of others. For Oatley, empathy is dependent upon mirroring. "[R]ecognition of an emotion in someone else," he writes, "typically involves mirroring. Mirroring involves empathy. We can recognize emotion by activating our own comparable experience and expression of a similar emotion" (113). In other words, we empathize with others by relating their experience to something similar—or at least "comparable"—we have lived through ourselves: we imagine ourselves in something akin to the other's situation. In Oatley's investigation of the psychology of fiction, this is how the emotions of others affect us when we read and when we meet others outside the world of books. The key to empathetic mirroring through literature, he proposes, is identification (116). The kind of identification that Oatley writes about here, and that I discuss throughout this dissertation, is not the kind of identification where readers take on traits of characters or writerly personas (e.g. by mimicking sartorial styles, ways of speaking, and bodily

6

mannerisms) in an effort to "become" a fictional character. Rather, the kind of identification under scrutiny here is the kind of identification where readers project themselves onto and into a fictional character, placing themselves into the situation the character is going through.

Literary scholars influenced by cognitive research have developed psychological explanations for the ethical effects of reading that are built on the idea that empathy is a form of mirroring. In his *The Moral Laboratory* (2000), theorist Frank Hakemulder begins an exploration of what he terms "the enhancement of emotions" that literature can cause by discussing instances when there is "a perceived resemblance between story events and a reader's past" (18). For Hakemulder, empathy encouraged by literature is particularly powerful when a reader is able to take on a character's role. Stories "mirroring traumatic experiences" are especially efficient for enhancing emotion-sharing according to Hakemulder (18). These stories, he suggests, invite readers to imagine themselves in the narrative through "role taking" (62). Again, we see how literature is understood as an aesthetic tool that can help us imagine ourselves in another's situation. In this view, literature enables readers to find themselves in the mirror of the text and, through this imaginative act of taking (over) another's role, understand others better.

The mirror of empathy

Empathy is haunted by mirrors in the Western philosophical tradition. By 1739, David Hume in his work *A Treatise of Human Nature,* describes sympathy—the semantic precursor in an English language that did not yet have the word "empathy"—as a process in which "the minds of men are mirrors to one another" (365). Understood this way, the historical harbinger of empathy perpetually returns to the self through a mirroring act where

"men" see themselves reflected in other men. Hume's thinking is believed to have influenced Theodor Lipps, the German psychologist and aesthetic philosopher who introduced these conceptual frameworks. Lipps' term *Einfühlung* would be translated by Edward Tichener into English's "empathy" in 1909. Expanding the scope of *Einfühlung*—literally meaning "feeling into"—from a theory for how people experience inanimate objects and visual illusions, Lipps theorized this act as a foundation for how we understand the mental states of others. For Lipps, *Einfühlung* could be described as when "a person appreciates another person's reaction by a projection of the self into the other" (Britannica). According to his theory, aesthetic appreciation is dependent upon a similar self-projection, in this case into an object of art (*Ästhetik,* 2 vol. 1903–06). Lipps understood this as a fusion between the observer and what—or whom—they observe, made possible by an unconscious "inner imitation" (Montag et al. 1261). Through this unconscious process, the empathizing mind mirrors that which they imagine through an act of imitation.

With the discovery of mirror neurons by Vittorio Gallese and his colleagues in 1996, the mirror as the underlying metaphor for empathy has increased in popularity (Gallese et al., 594). First discovered in the brains of macaque monkeys who watched human researchers grasp food in front of them, these neurons were dubbed "mirror neurons." Often touted as the neurological basis for empathy, mirror neurons are cells in the brain that activate when you observe someone else performing an action in much the same way as the cortex would if you performed that action yourself.

While neuroscientists are wary of claiming that any one kind of neuron could be *the* basis for something as complex as empathy, mirror neurons have been called "[t]he most hyped concept in neuroscience;" the idea that these neurons provide the foundation for our ability to empathize has taken hold in both public and academic discourses (Jarrett np). On blogs and in news media, mirror neurons have been assigned the ability to bring justice

through empathy (Morgensen, "Empathy and Justice"); the power of changing our brains (Collins, "You, Me and Empathy"); and the capacity to read minds (Blakeslee, "Cells that Read Minds"). The faith in mirror neurons' miraculous capacities is popular in more rigorous domains as well. Here, writers try to attract audiences by appealing to the idea of mirroring in their titles. Neuroscientists immersed in the Zeitgeist publish books with titles like *The Empathic Brain: How the Discovery of Mirror Neurons Changed our Understanding of Human Nature* (2011) by Christian Keysers and *Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others* (2009) by Marco Iacobini. Humanists, too, have been enamored with the metaphor of mirroring, as evidenced in titles such as "Mirror Neurons and Literature: Empathy and the Sympathetic Imagination in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee" (Heister, 2015) and "Mirror Neurons, Subjectivity, and Social Cognition in *Don Quixote*" (Simerka, 2013).

The mirror returns as a foundational metaphor for understanding empathy with striking frequency in modern, Western philosophical as well as popular and scientific discourses. Illustrations like the one below—of a monkey staring into a mirror—are not uncommon in popular and educational material about the impact of mirror neurons. This particular image is taken from an entry about mirror neurons in a "Neuroscience Anthology" published by The Institute of Neuro Innovation. While the author of the entry cautions against advertising "mirror neurons as a comprehensive explanation of the mechanisms behind social behaviors," they nevertheless reference studies to suggest that mirror neurons "could be the neural basis of empathy" (Zhang np). The choice of illustrating an introduction to mirror neurons with a monkey staring at their own reflection is telling for the stronghold: the image of the mirror has become almost ubiquitous in modern discussions of empathy. As we will see, it is also telling that the background in this photo is blurred; everything around the mirror-duplicated animal is out of focus.

Illustration to "Mirror Neurons" in The Institute for Neuro Innovation' "Neuroscience Anthology."

The problem with mirrors

Six years before Edward Tichener introduced the word "empathy" to English dictionaries in 1909, the painter John William Waterhouse finished his famous portrayal of Ovid's story of Echo and Narcissus in Metamorphoses III ("Empathy, N"). In this rendition of the myth of the young man so in love with his self that he forgets to eat and sleep and so dies, alone, entranced by the fatal desire for his own reflection, Narcissus' absorption in his mirror image is depicted as an all-consuming focus on the self at the expense of his surroundings. In Waterhouse's painting, Narcissus does not notice anything around him. The stunning beauty of people and nature surrounding him has no effect on his existence. Narcissus is oblivious to the presence of Echo and he is oblivious to the natural beauty that surrounds them both. In Narcissus' world, he is the only thing of interest and of beauty. His face is

turned low, hovering dangerously close to the water's surface, hinting at the dangers of this type of self-absorption and making it impossible for him to notice—let alone respond to— anything beyond his reflected self. He does not respond to Echo's gaze; indeed, he seems oblivious of this gaze. He is both incapable of and uninterested in responding to Echo and to her emotions (and, ironically, to his own body as his sad ending brought about by the neglect of his bodily needs suggests).

Echo and Narcissus, John William Waterhouse, 1903.

The myth of Narcissus illustrates a pernicious but under-acknowledged problem with empathy understood as a form of mirroring: its self-absorbed tendencies eschew connection to deny the presence of others. In an ironic twist (often unacknowledged by those proposing that reading literature makes us more empathetic), the many examples of imagining the plights of others tend to make the empathizer feel more for themselves than the one empathized with. In her critical analysis of the relationship between entitlement and empathy in *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy* (2005), narrative theorist and folklore scholar Amy Shuman notes that "empathy is almost always open to critique as serving the interests of the empathizer rather than the empathized" (18). Or, as literary theorist and novelist Namwali Serpell in her 2019 essay "The Banality of

Empathy" featured in *New York Review of Books*, avers, "empathy is, in a word, selfish" (np).

Empathy's paradoxical selfishness has been critiqued by feminist and cognitive scholars in the past decades. Cognitive literary scholar Fritz Breithaupt spells out the problem at the core of this project in a 2015 paper where he concludes, "Empathy is the big 'I' that feels your pain" (14). As I argue throughout this dissertation, "the big I" of empathy that Breithaupt identifies tends to overshadow its surroundings. In a similar vein, scholars Maggie Caygill and Pavitra Sundar in their 2004 essay in the radical feminist journal *Rain and Thunder* question the usefulness of empathy for claiming identification while betraying a failure to acknowledge power structures. While they write about building and maintaining antiracist and feminist coalitions, Caygill and Sundar's indictment of empathy shares significant similarities with those made by literary scholars. Echoing Serpell, they call empathy out for being a selfish emotion. Caygill and Sundar not only question but *reject* empathy, and they do so on the grounds of how claims for empathy center and privilege the individual in power:

> What is most problematic about empathy is that it allows the person with power and privilege to compare her experience with that of the oppressed. Empathy does not just draw parallels; it equates two vastly different situations. In the process, the experience and feelings of the 'other' are diminished or erased (yet again). What remains in focus is the pain of the privileged individual. Empathy thus repeats those same colonizing and totalizing gestures that feminist politics seeks to disavow.
> ("Empathy and Antiracist Feminist Coalitional Politics" np)

In short, this kind of empathy often masquerades as other-centered when it is self-centered. As Caygill and Sundar continue, "On the face of it, the pain that one feels with empathy seems like someone, else's pain, when in fact it is one's own experience that is the center of

attention" (np). The very act of empathy understood this way obscures social contexts as it tends to usurp the one empathized with.

Literary scholar and historian Saidiya Hartman in her 1997 *Scenes of Subjection*: *Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* elucidates the consequences of obscuring these contexts in an exploration of how empathy can enforce violent social hierarchies because one person's suffering can—and often does—function as entertainment for the more powerful in. In this exploration of subjugation and selfhood in depictions of slavery, Hartman writes about how the white minister and abolitionist John Rankin imagines himself in the position of an enslaved Black person in one of many letters Rankin wrote with the intention of helping to abolish slavery in the antebellum United States. Dissecting Rankin's motives and methods for empathizing with enslaved individuals, Hartman points to what she calls the "difficulty and slipperiness of empathy" to conclude that empathy often "fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead" (18, 20). One reason why empathy "fails to expand the space of the other" in this and in similar cases, Hartman points out, is because Rankin makes the enslaved person's suffering his own. As he "empathizes" with this enslaved person, he imagines how *he* would feel if he and his family were enslaved, and so begins to feel more for his imagined self than for the one he presumably empathizes with. In this type of empathy, the empathizer attends more to themselves—how they would feel in a particular situation— than to the other. It is a self-centered, often pleasant, and relatively effortless form of empathy, in part because of the many obstacles—both biological and cultural—of paying attention to something other than our selves.

As Hartman notes, these dangers of empathy should not "suggest that empathy can be discarded" (20). Rather, it is a certain *kind* of empathy that is troubling because it reinforces a focus on the self. Hartman calls this kind of empathy a "too-easy intimacy," a

13

"consideration of the self that occurs at the *expense* of the slave's suffering" (20; emphasis added). This is a kind of empathy that erases another's subject position by placing the empathizing self in its stead. Hartman calls this out for what it is: a "violence of identification" (20). Such violence is particularly difficult to avoid if we continue to understand empathy as one person mirroring the emotions of another. As Hartman notes, there is a "repressive underside" to the "optics of morality that insists upon the other as a mirror of the self and that in order to recognize the suffering must substitute the self for the other" (20). If we can only recognize the suffering of another by replacing them with ourselves, the much-lauded powers of empathy appear both weak and bleak.

While Hartman focuses on historical suffering, and Black suffering in particular, my dissertation focuses on how understanding empathy as a form of mirroring circumscribes the relationship between literature and empathy by confining reading and writing to a process of seeking similarity through reflection. While critiques of empathy from several disciplinary perspectives exist at this point in history, many of these critiques still assume empathy to be operating as a form of mirroring. For instance, in the 2009 article "The Dangerous Practice of Empathy" published in the *Lancet* by the Director of the Centre for Medical Humanities at Durham University, Jane Machnaughton, we see a definition of empathy as "emotional identification" (1940). In this rare example of a critical approach to the power of empathy in a medical humanities context, Macnaughton notes that empathy is unlikely to be helpful in the medical context because "[a]ny mirroring of feeling will always differ quantitatively and qualitatively from that patient's experience" (1941). Hence, a doctor telling their patient that "I understand how you feel" is likely to be deceiving themselves as well as their patient. As Macnaughton points out, this act of self-deception is likely to promote—or provoke—resentment in the patient (1941). The experience of the doctor and the experience of the patient will always be separated by a gulf of differences shaped by

intersectional hierarchies of power. Saying "I understand how you feel" when that is most likely not the case conceals this gulf, obscuring differences in the pursuit of similarity. Here, Macnaughton acknowledges the difference between having an experience and imagining an experience, which is a crucial distinction for the theory of empathy that I examine in this dissertation and discuss most directly in Chapter I. Macnaugton also draws attention to empathy's tendency to obscure difference, which is a key issue of this project. While Macnaughton stays within an understanding of empathy as mirroring, my project explores the possibilities for an empathy rooted in difference. In order to save empathy from the discard pile that Saidiya Hartman recognizes it being close to in her revelation of the violence inherent in emotional mirroring, we need empathy rooted in difference. If we continue to understand empathy as an act enabling a sharing of emotions between people and characters who share similarities, there will not be much room for investigating the power dynamics that shape this kind of recognition, let alone to imagine different modes of feeling with others. To better understand how empathy can function through difference, I look for alternatives to the mirror as a model for empathy. My aim in doing so is to nuance contemporary understandings of human fellow-feeling and to seek alternatives to current limited and limiting view of empathy that insist on similarity.

Understood as mirroring, empathy will always run the risk of occurring at the expense of the one empathized with when the empathizer sees themselves in their situation. This kind of role-taking increases the risk of violent identification that Hartman exposes. When looking in a mirror, we see ourselves staring back, not someone else. Like the monkey holding the mirror against a blurred background and like Narcissus being consumed by his own reflection without noticing his surroundings, we are doomed to find little more than reflections of ourselves in narratives when we understand empathy as a mirroring kind of

identification. The mirror as a foundational metaphor for empathy traps the empathizer within their self.

I do not mean to suggest that reading to identify with literary characters is an inherently bad method of reading; seeing yourself reflected in a text has many benefits, and identifying with characters is a valuable act of interpretation. However, reading to identify is *one* of many ways of interacting with literature. As seen in the transdisciplinary proponents for literature as a tool that promotes empathy, reading to identify has been overemphasized in the Western philosophical tradition. This overemphasis comes with certain problems for understanding both empathy and literature. Most notably, an understanding of the relationship between empathy and literature as dependent upon identification reduces the reading process to the act of identifying with a main character and curtails empathy to the act of placing yourself in the situation of another. This reduction exemplifies how the humanities can be—and not seldom have been—instrumentalized in contemporary debates about empathy, turning literature into a tool for generating emotion through identification. This instrumentalization—a fulcrum to making "feeling in" measurable and thus more than a metaphor—is built on an unnecessarily narrow understanding of both empathy and literature.

In the mirroring frame of empathy, there is little room left for acknowledging the distance, much less intimacies, that remain between readers and characters in any act of reading. There is also little room left for acknowledging the power dynamics that structure who is positioned to recognize similarity with whom. This limits possibilities for acknowledging or even absorbing what we cannot recognize, or even to recognize that others may not want to be invaded by our imagination. Characters and their living revenants may resist being turned into tools that help readers recognize parts of themselves, as if staring into a revealing mirror. The problem with mirrors as the foundational metaphor for

16

understanding empathy is illustrated in the questions from the Harvard Moral Sense Test: "I can very easily put myself *in the place* of a leading character and "*I* imagine how *I* would feel if the events in the story were happening *to me*" (moralsensetest.com). The usurping language in these questions reveals how in this kind of empathy, the only thing in focus is the repeated *I* at the center of these questions. As in the photograph of the mirrored monkey, everything except the mirrored center of attention is blurred. Putting myself in the place of another requires replacing that other with myself, pushing the one I supposedly empathize with to the side so that I can feel their emotions. In the photograph of the monkey as well as in the Harvard Moral Sense Test, we see how empathy as mirroring tends to center the individual doing the empathizing.

*

With the mirror as the foundational metaphor for empathy comes reductive problems for understanding empathy in the field of science as well. In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry for "Empathy," philosopher Karsten Stueber notes that neuroscientists repeatedly point out how "we never fully 'mirror' another person's neural stimulation" (np). In the case of empathizing with another's pain, Stueber points out, "our neural resonance is also modulated by a variety of contextual factors, such as how close we feel to the observed subject, whether we regard the pain to be morally justified […] or whether we regard it as unavoidable and necessary" (np). In other words, even on the microscopic and neurological level, empathy is shaped by a complex context. This context— an environment that goes beyond background to a lifetime of memories—is too easily obscured if we understand empathy exclusively as mirroring.

In fact, the term "empathy" appears too broad a category to be useful in a scientific discourse because it conflates a range of different experiences into one. This is why cognitive psychologists distinguish between cognitive and affective empathy—the difference between thinking about someone else's thoughts and feelings and having an emotional response to these thoughts and feelings. As cognitive psychologists Jamil Zaki and Kevin Ochsner have proposed in theories spelled out in their contribution to the 2012 social psychology collection *Empathy: From Bench to Bedside*, these different kinds of empathy engage disparate but intricately connected circuits in human brains (208). Scientists as well as philosophers also distinguish between allocentric empathy—the experience of imagining someone else's experience from *their* point of view—and egocentric empathy—the experience of imagining someone else's experience from *my* point of view.[2] Building on the French *allo* meaning "other" or "different," which stems from the Greek *alios* roughly translatable to the same and from Latin's *alius* for "other," allocentric empathy is concerned with what is other and different from the empathizer ("Allo-"). It is, in many ways, the opposite of egocentric empathy. In this taxonomy, egocentric empathy is the type of empathy that feminist and cognitive scholars have critiqued for its *faux* other-centeredness, and it is the type of empathy that the mirroring metaphor invites. Remember the Harvard Moral Sense Test: "*I* imagine what *I* would feel like if the events in the story were happening to *me*" (np).

Empathy's paradoxical basis in self-reference was central to the oft-cited political economist Adam Smith who, two decades after Hume, famously tackled sympathy in relation to selfishness in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Like Hume, Smith views sympathy as operating through an act of mirroring in which a spectator imaginatively

---

[2] For a helpful analysis of the terminological difference between egocentric and allocentric empathy, see Robert Blanchet's 2019 article "Empathy as the Opposite of Egocentrism: Why the Simulation Theory and the Direct Perception Theory of Empathy Fail."

reconstructs the experience of the person they are watching. Unlike Hume, however, Smith acknowledges the fact that this kind of mirroring imposes limitations on the human ability to feel for each other. Here is Smith on the subject:

> As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is on the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination, we place ourselves in his situation. (3-4)

As in the Harvard Moral Sense Test, Smith's understanding of sympathy is built on imagining yourself in the place of another: "We place ourselves in his situation," and our imaginations "copy"—or imitate—the other through the self. Smith's notion of sympathy suggests a constant return to the imagining individual: I can only conceive what others may feel by imagining what *I* would feel in a similar situation. Because of the self-centered nature of human perception, Smith acknowledges, this act of imaginatively placing yourself in the situation of someone else has firm limits. In the lamenting words of Smith, "it is the impressions of our own senses *only*" (4; emphasis added). Sending signals to our brains about what is going on in the external world, our senses are inexorably bound to the individual body, making it impossible to ever fully conceive of someone else's experience.

Smith's understanding of the limits of sympathy is crucial for the crux of fellow-feeling that I investigate in this project. Throughout this dissertation, I acknowledge the deep-seated difficulty of other-centered emotions that Smith identifies, but I also seek to

find alternatives to his pessimistic approach to sharing emotions and experiences. For now, I want to emphasize that what we commonly refer to as "empathy" is an umbrella term for a range of experiences that are still not fully understood from either scientific or philosophical perspectives. Limiting this range of experiences to a mirroring of another's mental state that encourages a violent kind of identification forecloses the ability to understand the variety of complex processes that enable humans to feel for and with each other. If we understand empathy exclusively as an act of mirroring, empathy is doomed to be a *faux* egalitarian concept that reinforces hierarchies of feeling. Understood this way, empathy leads to little other than self-serving feelings for the empathizer through the consumption of others' emotions. Through this asymmetrical process, empathy reinforces asymmetrical power structures and perpetuates the profit, power, and pleasure of dominant groups over others. As Narcissus' self-absorption blinded him to his environment, the focus on the empathizing individual in mirroring empathy tends to be all-encompassing, obscuring the surroundings of the empathizer. In so doing, this understanding of empathy obscures the power dynamics that any act of empathy, real or imagined, is shaped by. Throughout this project, I ask whether we can find different and more expansive possibilities of understanding acts of feeling with others if we move away from thinking of empathy as mirroring. By nuancing our conceptual framework and crafting a new vocabulary of empathy, we may be able to escape— or at least find a brief respite from—Smith's solitary, perhaps even solipsistic, approach to the human ability to understand the experience of others.

<center>*</center>

Finding mirror images of one's self is far from the only way to engage with art or with others. To exemplify, let's consider the opposite: what happens when we completely *forget* about ourselves as we engage with art. British philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch calls this mode of interacting with the world "unselfing," and she places great faith in this fundamental forgetting. In an essay titled "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts" originally delivered as the 1967 Leslie Stephen Lecture at the University of Cambridge, Murdoch proposes that unselfing can be reached through encounters with two (for her intricately related) things: beauty and love. She exemplifies this practice of escaping self-centeredness through a description of an encounter with a bird:

> I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. (82)

A moment like this—a kestrel moment, if you will—is a moment when your attention is redirected from your self to your surroundings so that your self-centeredness is momentarily diminished. It is a moment when your self is reduced and the reality that always exists around it is revealed: "There is nothing now but kestrel." Paying attention to beauty in nature and in art through these types of kestrel moments, Murdoch proposes, can "clear our minds of selfish care" (82). Kestrel moments thus offer a unique opportunity to redirect attention from one's self to one's surroundings, whatever these environs may consist of. In this way, this outer fullness is the opposite of the mirroring model of empathy, where the act of imagination always returns us to the self. The kestrel moment is the opposite of the Narcissus moment: where kestrel observers forget about their selves, Narcissus is so concerned with his self that he does not recognize either his surroundings or that the

beloved image is himself. Like the person Murdoch describes in this scene, he is "oblivious of [his] surroundings." Would Narcissus have observed a hovering kestrel, had there been one floating mid-air in the painting's distance? Probably not.

Murdoch has issues with the kind of perpetual return to the self that we see in mirroring empathy. For her, the biggest problem for leading a moral life is, as she memorably dubs it, the "fat relentless ego" (82). In Murdoch's view, the self-centered vanity of our "fat relentless ego[s]" precludes us from seeing reality as it is rather than as we want it to be. In this context, kestrel moments serve to unveil (more of) reality by revealing the relations that have been obscured by a narrow focus on the self (Gordon 6-7). For Murdoch, kestrel moments bring us closer to how things *are* rather than to how things *seem* through our otherwise perpetually opaque lens of self-centered attention.

Getting closer to reality, for Murdoch, means nothing less than love. As she writes in "The Sublime and the Good," an essay about art and morality published in the *Chicago Review* in 1959, "[l]ove is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real" (51). Throughout this dissertation, I use Murdoch as a sounding board because of her insistence on the difficulty of the kind of love she describes here. This difficulty is obscured if we continue to understand empathy as a form of mirroring another's emotions. The mirroring kind of empathy has limited potential for understanding the reality of someone else because it insists on understanding others through their similarity with ourselves. Given the insurmountable difference that will always remain between individuals, no matter how similar they may be, mirroring empathy will not get us very far if our aim is to realize, to attend to, the reality of someone else in Murdochian fashion.

The kestrel moment, or Murdochian love, is not empathy. Murdoch's kestrel observer is not feeling anything for the kestrel as they gaze out the window, neither are they sharing the bird's emotions. What they *are* doing, however, is redistributing their attention from

22

their "fat relentless ego"—or their big I—to something else. This kind of redistribution of attention is necessary for the kind of intersectional empathy that I explore in this dissertation, and it is a form of other-centered attention that is remarkably difficult to either achieve or understand if we continue to think of empathy as mirroring. Murdoch's kestrel moment exists at the other end of the spectrum from the perpetually self-centered form of feeling that empathy often is if we understand it as mirroring. It articulates an extreme form of other-centered attention that, for most people, is only possible for mere moments. As such, the kestrel moment presents an alternative to being trapped within a self; it shows why the big I is a limited way of living and it opens up vistas for imagining other ways of feeling with and through others. By expanding attention to what exists around our selves—a reality that is easily obscured by the worries and demands of daily human life—the kestrel moment provides a momentary respite from a habitual and narrow focus on the self. In this way, the kestrel moment has the potential to liberate the self.

For Murdoch, beauty is a promising entry point to a reality that liberates the self. According to her philosophy, a work of beauty—whether natural or artistic—can afford a disinterested kind of contemplation rather than the possessive self-focus that is characteristic of narcissistic versions of empathy. The kestrel moment exemplifies this belief in the power of beauty as it both depends upon and opens up for an understanding of individuals that is fundamentally contrary to the view of individuals that underlies the mirroring kind of empathy. Because of her belief in beauty and because of her understanding of what an individual is, Murdoch returns as a source of inspiration throughout this dissertation.

Murdoch asserts that "[g]ood art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision" ("The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts" 84). Herein lies another difference between Murdoch's philosophy

and the kind of empathy that I explore in this project. I am not interested in objectivity *per se*, or in discussing the possibility of there ever being such a thing as an "objective perspective" as Murdoch idealistically suggests. I am, however, interested in how literature can show us how differently the world looks to *another subjective* vision and, along with Murdoch, in how difficult it is to see the world in this way. Examining the hard work that goes into seeing the world from multiple perspectives through the imaginative acts entailed in reading and writing, I am invested in something less extreme than what Murdoch is committed to.

The dance of empathy

The dynamics of the kestrel moment are central to what I suggest as the alternative to understanding empathy as an act of mirroring: the dance of empathy. This suggestion is built upon Toni Morrison's idea of "dancing minds." In a 1996 speech-turned-essay entitled "The Dancing Mind," Morrison describes the process of reading literature as "that intimate, sustained surrender to the company of my own mind while it touches another's" (190). This kind of reading, she suggests, makes "it possible for the entitled as well as the dispossessed to experience one's own mind dancing with another's" (190). Central to Morrison's conceptualization of what it means to read is the idea of touch; the reading mind "touches another's" so as to make the dance possible for "the entitled as well as the dispossessed." The meeting of minds enabled by reading literature, Morrison poetically proposes, allows for intimate connections where two minds move together as in a dance. Notably, these minds can be very different. As Morrison writes, reading enables "the entitled as well as the dispossessed" to respond to the text as in a dance. Mirrors are nowhere to be found in this essay.

In my dissertation, I extend Morrison's "dancing minds" by using dance not only as a model for reading, as Morrison uses it, but also a model for empathy. Understanding empathy as a dance rather than as an act of mirroring, I propose, opens up less solipsistic ways of understanding empathy as well as its relationship to the patterned, responsive emotions driving the beat of narrative. Where the mirroring of empathy risks solipsistic reinforcement through the act of reflection, the dance of empathy is by definition relational (it takes two to tango); where the mirroring of empathy allows for a disembodied imagination to seek static similarity, the dance of empathy centers the body through a dynamic and tactile experience (as Morrison reminds us, our minds are being *touched* in the ongoing reading process); and where the mirroring of empathy reinforces asymmetrical power structures where the light shines bright on the individual in power at the expense of the one whose feelings are imagined, the dance of empathy allows room for coordination, for a meeting of embodied minds that continuously adjust to each other and to the power dynamics that structure any act of feeling with others. In this way, the dance model complements the limitations of the mirror model by emphasizing the dynamic and impermanent nature of feeling with others. Where mirroring empathy privileges self-centered ways of interacting with literature, the metaphorical model of empathy as a kind of dance opens up for different modes of interaction. Shifting from the mirror to the dance, my aim is to create a new epistemological framework through a metaphor characterized by the dynamism and responsivity central to dancing. This shift, I suggest, provides a better opportunity for empathizers to understand others as *real,* in the Murdochian sense of the word, rather than as reductive projections based on similarity.

The world temporarily gleaned in a Murdochian kestrel moment opens up to imagining a world defined by relationality rather than by a narcissistically narrow focus on a solitary self. What I mean by this is that the shift of attention that we see in the kestrel

moment—from the big I to something else—is a shift of attention required to notice the relationality of human existence. This relationality is what mirroring modes of being and reading obscure and what kestrel moments expose. I call this kind of relationality "radical relationality," a phrase that I borrow from cognitive philosopher John Protevi (170). Drawing on the work of the neurologist Bruce Wexler, who specializes in how our environments shape our brains, Protevi writes that "being human is composed of relations; we do not 'have' relations, but we are relations all the way down" (174). This is a radical shift in understanding what constitutes an individual compared to the modern, Western understanding of human beings as essentially atomized: as autonomous, stable, and unified beings who are relatively impervious to outside influence. Radical relationality makes this kind of solipsistic, atomized understanding of an individual impossible because it sees relations—with others and with the world—as foundational for any individual's identity. Throughout this dissertation, I parse how a different understanding of empathy both requires and reveals an understanding of individuals that foregrounds human permeability and the composite acts of becoming in line with theories of radical relationality.

In contrast with Murdoch's kestrel moment, however, empathy understood as a form of dancing does not require that you deny or forget your self. Unselfing in the complete and rather extreme sense of forgetting one's self as described by Murdoch is rarely possible for more than brief moments, and while opportunities for other-centered attention afforded by literature are likewise ephemeral, they are also less extreme. I do not propose that complete unselfing as portrayed by Murdoch is necessary for the relationality of existence to be revealed. But while an understanding of empathy as primarily a form of mirroring is both built upon and reinforcing an understanding of empathy as a solitary act of projectile identification through reflection, the dance of empathy is specifically anti-mirroring. This

26

dance is *relational* rather than solitary. Like unselfing, understanding empathy as a kind of metaphoric dance reveals the fluidity and permeability of the individual.

This complementing model is useful because our insight into the reality of others is always dynamic and impermanent. While the mirroring model of empathy obscures these two aspects through its static framing and its emphasis on similarity, a dance is both dynamic and impermanent and can complement the limitations of the mirror model. Therefore, approaching empathy as dance can open up for fluid ways of feeling with others that are more difficult to both recognize and value if we continue to see empathy as a form of mirroring. In this dissertation, I explore how Woolf and Morrison present alternatives to the mirroring model of empathy and how these alternatives can help us see individuals and the feelings that flow between them in a more dynamic and nuanced manner. In this way, understanding empathy as a metaphoric form of dancing rather than mirroring can get us closer to Murdochian love by helping us understand others as "real impenetrable human person[s]" rather than as "bogus individual[s]" and "false whole[s]" (Murdoch, "Against Dryness" 20).

Empathy understood as a kind of metaphoric dance is defined by responsiveness. In other words, the dance of empathy is an act of responding to another, of relating to their emotions and their situation. This response does not require me to place myself in another's situation. Rather, it requires that I allow space for another and for their experience. This space is infringed upon if I begin to take over by putting myself in their place. Moreover, a response to the one empathized with is always guided by the surroundings—social, political, and cultural—that the act of empathizing takes place in. While the mirroring model zooms in on the empathizer at the expense of the environment, the dance of empathy brings our attention to the surroundings—to the kestrel outside our window—revealing how these

27

surroundings shape any act of feeling, similar to how the rhythm of music shapes any act of dancing.

The dance of empathy is not free from power imbalances, but it allows us to acknowledge power structures more readily than if we continue to view empathy as based on mirroring. This becomes clear if we think about the act of dancing. In partner dances, there is a clear structure of a lead and a follow, and in group dances such as round, square, and line dancing, there is often a "caller" or other form of leader who prompts the dancers to move in a specific way. Just as in dancing, power dynamics structure acts of feeling with others. While understanding empathy as a form of mirroring tends to obscure these power dynamics because of the narrow narcissism that underlies this reasoning, approaching empathy as a form of dance requires us to consider these power dynamics. Understood as dance, empathy becomes an interaction between (at least) two individuals, moving and changing together, sometimes following, sometimes leading, sometimes moving apart, sometimes drawing together. It is a dynamic act built on the idea of movement and responsiveness. Understanding empathy as a form of dance does not mean that empathy automatically becomes a benevolent social force. Instead, the dance of empathy exposes the dynamics of the interaction that is at the foundation of empathy, allowing us to scrutinize the power structures, desires, and even refusals that shape these dynamics more fully.

The dance of empathy does not run the risk of imposing the same kind of violence that empathy as a mirroring kind of identification enables. Whereas mirroring often erases the reality of another and places "the big I" in its stead, dancing requires coordination between (at least) two individuals. In this way, the dance of empathy is best understood similarly to the definition of empathy from medical humanities scholar Anne Whitehead, who locates empathy as something that "leads out to the other, rather than reverting back to the self" (9). Whitehead's definition of empathy, which draws on feminist affect theory and

phenomenological philosophy, "does not claim to know or to understand, but remains alert to her distance and her difference" (2). Allowing space for the distance that remains even in acts of empathizing is foundational for understanding the dance that empathy is, and for intersectional empathy to be realized.

By intersectional I mean the method, spearheaded by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s, of acknowledging and analyzing how different identity markers (e.g., race, class, gender, ability, sexuality) converge to create social identities that govern oppression and privilege in a system of power structured by social inequalities (Crenshaw). In the context of the empathy turn within literary studies, Suzanne Keen has described intersectionality as a framework that "enables discussion of the complex overlays of narrative form, contexts of creation and reception, and identity that work together to provoke diverse responses to narrative, among divergent readers of a wide variety of texts" (125). Understood this way, intersectionality in literary discussions emphasizes the lived experiences of real, diverse and divergent, human beings rather than the abstract phantom of "the reader" often found in literary criticism and classrooms. I use the framework of intersectionality in line with Sowon Park's discussion of the term in relation to literary studies in her 2023 "Whose Uncertainty? Addressing the Intersectional Reader through the Wound of Trauma." Here, Park asserts that the "intersectional matrix of social categories provides a finer grid with which to capture readers' identities, generating new opportunities to think about the kinds of arguments that have been routinely left out of the discussion" (193). With an intersectional lens always keenly aware of differences of and in social categories as they relate to power, I suggest, we can generate a more nuanced and precise vocabulary for how to understand different forms of empathy.

The dance of empathy, then, precludes big I's from taking over another's experience at the expense of the other. While dancers may touch, they never merge into each other, and

29

they never substitute their self for the other. Stepping into another's shoes does not make much sense in a dance. Rather, a dance requires coordination and synchronization, and it enables individuals to move together in a motion structured by things and forces outside the dancers' selves. This dance may be scripted, but in certain forms—most notably in jazz, which I will return to in Chapter II in my discussion of Toni Morrison's 1992 novel *Jazz*— there is room for improvisation and surprise. In the dance of empathy, there may very well be one leader—after all, the power dynamics of life still exist—but there is room for coordination, sometimes even synchronization, between more than one individual. As our eyes dance on a page in the book we are reading, our I's dance with the mind of another. In this kind of dance, the big I needs to make space for and adjust their pace to that of another in an intimate and dynamic connection. To understand the emotions that are created for, about, and with others in this process, I propose, we need a model that makes space for intimate joining rather than isolated mirroring. Understanding empathy as a form of dance allows for this, opening up for an intersubjective understanding that is more than mere projection. At the core of understanding the dance of empathy lies the fact that, in a dance, both dancers need to recognize both themselves and their partner(s) as existing, moving, and changing in relation to others.

The British statistician George Box is famous for having said "[a]ll models are wrong but some are useful" (2). This aphorism is true for *Intersectional Empathy*. Like all models, the mirror and the dance models that I explore in this dissertation are simplifications of reality. My aim in shifting from the mirror to the dance as the metaphorical model for understanding empathy is not to provide a comprehensive or final vision of how empathy should be understood. Rather, it is to uncover a problem that has not yet been clearly defined—that certain forms of empathy both reinforce and are founded upon a narrowly insular and one-dimensional understanding of individuals—and to suggest an alternative, if

by default also incomplete, model. It is my hope that the alternative model that I present in this dissertation can open new vistas for rethinking the relationship between empathy and literature by showing how the dance model can complement the limitations of the mirroring model. Through this exploration, my intention is to contribute to the growing interdisciplinary field of research that investigates the relationship between aesthetics and emotions by working towards an understanding of empathy with more granularity than is available today.

While I trouble binary distinctions throughout the project, the contrast between the mirror and the dance as metaphorical models for relating to others' emotions clarifies common but unnamed understandings of empathy as mirroring and elucidates how understanding empathy as a form of dance opens up for more relational models of fellow-feeling. These models, I propose, can help us rethink empathy invited by literature in less self-centered and consumptive ways than what is available if we continue to conceptualize empathy as an act of mirroring. Understanding empathy as a form of dance can help us understand empathy as a process of joining perspectives where the "I"—and the eye—that is observing or imagining never really can—and never really should—be forgotten.

Chapter outline

The remains of this "I" and eye is what I explore in Chapter I, where I investigate how Virginia Woolf attempted to imagine the minds of women employed as domestic workers. This chapter, titled **"Other I's: Woolf Writing Working Women"** offers a concrete example of why the mirroring kind of empathy poses problems for writers. Here, I turn to Woolf's depiction of domestic workers to parse the limitations of how writers imagine the experiences of others. While Woolf has often been critiqued for leaving working-class voices

out of her writing, I argue that her wariness of representing working-class interiorities because of her own socio-economically privileged status provides an ethically responsible approach to writing and, by extension, reading. This model of what I call "Woolfian empathy" critiques the idea that everyone is entitled to empathize with others indiscriminately and illustrates a crucial reason for why the mirroring model of empathy falls short.

In the following chapters, I ask what would happen if we did not think of empathy as one person seeing their self reflected in another or in a text, but rather as an act of responsiveness where two or more individuals respond and adjust to each other. Chapter II, **"Fluid I's: Changing Form in *Orlando* and *Jazz*,"** places Woolf and Morrison in conversation with each other to begin tracing a genealogy of the ways in which these writers understand forms of feeling. Here, I investigate how Woolf and Morrison critique the modern understanding of an individual as a stable unit and how this critique can help us understand empathy as a form of dance rather than an act of mirroring. Exploring examples of characters changing in a fluid fashion from Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and Morrison's *Jazz* (1992), I suggest that these representations of individuals as fluid, permeable, and ever-changing in close connection with their social environments exemplifies empathetic connections. These are responsive processes in motion rather than stable and static acts of mirroring. Chapter III, **"Misty I's: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison Feeling in Common,"** asks how Woolf's and Morrison's depictions of connected and collective forms of consciousness—what I call "blurred minds"—present expanded notions of individuals that are crucial for understanding the dance of empathy. In experiments with syntax, joint narration, and plot structure, Woolf and Morrison present characters that blur together in a process of joining where it often is unclear where one

character ends and another begins. Specific examples are drawn from Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) and *The Years* (1937) as well as Morrison's *Sula* (1973).

In my conclusion, **"Lily's Revenge, Intersectional Empathy, and the Importance of Being Thou,"** I return to the dinner scene from *To the Lighthouse* that began this dissertation. Turning to a moment in *The Years* where Woolf continues the experiment attempted when Lily Briscoe does not help Charles Tansley assert his big I, I conclude by exploring the alternative forms of fellow-feeling that a diagnosis and rejection of the I-I-I allows for. Tying together Woolf and Morrison's fictional and metacognitive visions of fellow-feeling as rich opportunities for extending life through others, I sketch one answer to how we can realize a more nuanced understanding of the power dynamics that structure how, when, where, and why we extend our emotions to others in literature and in life.

Chapter I

Other I's: Woolf Writing Working Women

> [D]enying the logic of increase
> means allowing the idea of limits.
>
> —Jenny Odell, *Saving Time*

In an episode of *The Argument*, a *New York Times* podcast, that aired in June 2022, authors Roxane Gay and Jay Caspian King discuss a question that haunts contemporary writers and readers alike as never before: Who can write about whom? The strong readerly reactions when writers "get it wrong"—they stray too far from their identities and imagine too much or too poorly about characters whose lives are too different from their own—raise questions about the ethics of writing across identities. As the podcast host Jane Coaston observes, we cannot seem to stop asking about identitarian stakes and what experiences can be owned as a culture ("Who Can Write about What?" 1:32).

While writers almost always imagine the lives and minds of those unlike themselves as they create their characters—some might even say that imagining other minds is the foundation of fiction—the ethics of representation raised by this discussion is a fraught topic. It is a topic that engages the contemporary U.S. literary landscape as we see in (often heated) discussions about who has the right to imagine across racial, often class-impacted, differences. But there is a precedent in one modernist writer a century ago and a continent away: Virginia Woolf. Woolf questioned who can and should imagine themselves in another's shoes in the act of writing throughout her career. Probing the ethics of representing other subjectivities—other I's and other eyes—Woolf was perpetually curious as well as skeptical of what happens when, as she puts it in a 1927 essay, she "leave[s] the

34

straight lines of personality" to venture into the minds of those different from herself in her writing ("Street Haunting" 187).

For Woolf, leaving "the straight lines of personality" proved most complicated when she tried to imagine the world from the perspective of her contemporary British working-class women. For this, Woolf has often been critiqued. For example, in a 1992 essay titled "*The Waves*: 'The Life of Anybody," Woolf authority Gillian Beer reads it as a "loss" that *The Waves* does not include interiorities of working-class characters since the novel was initially supposed to depict "the life of anybody" (90); Woolf biographer Hermione Lee writes that "It's unfortunate that Virginia Woolf is so distant from her working-class characters that she describes them as half-witted troglodytes, and can't even remember whether she has called her Swiss maid 'Marie' … or 'Marthe'" in her 1994 scholarly introduction to *To the Lighthouse* (171); and in her 2009 *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants*, a study of how Woolf's art depended on the unacknowledged labor of domestic workers, Alison Light posits that "the figure of the servant and the working woman haunts Woolf's experiments in literary modernism and sets a limit to what she can achieve" (xviii). Acknowledging the importance of these critiques, I want to linger on the moments that these critics denounce and focus on that limit that Light identifies. The limit is unquestionably there but, contrary to these critics, I propose that it is not a limit that should be lamented. Rather than seeing this limit as a sign of failure for Woolf as a writer, I suggest that we attend to the limit of her imagination at these junctures to ask what we can learn about the ethics of writing, reading, and feeling across identities that structure Woolf's ventures into the minds of working women.

Alison Light's incisive critique is pertinent to my exploration of Woolf's representational ethics for two reasons. First of all, Light connects Woolf's struggles to depict working women to the unequal power dynamics that structured Woolf's treatment of working women in her own life. As Light notes throughout *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants*,

Woolf had a complicated and—at best—fraught relationship with her live-in domestic

workers. This relationship was often characterized by the same kind of prejudice that she

would expose and critique in her fiction. Secondly, Light notes that Woolf's narrative

struggle to portray working women was intimately connected to a larger ethical struggle with

writing and authority. While it is commonplace to dismiss Woolf's portrayals of working

women as one-dimensional and lacking, Light takes it one step further and asks *why* Woolf

was so uncomfortable imagining the minds of working women. To exemplify: Where a

reviewer of Light's book describes Woolf as a writer "who attempted to put the hidden folds

of consciousness on to paper" but nevertheless "regarded her servants as functions relating

to herself," Light probes deeper (Jays np). Noting how "Virginia came to distrust the

ventriloquizing which other authors assume as their right," Light proposes that the act of

imagining others is connected to questions of entitlement for Woolf (110-111). Along with

Light, I suggest that we see Woolf's struggle with this question most clearly in her hesitation

to imagine working women's lives but that it is a struggle that stretches beyond this

particular issue. As Light poignantly asks, the question of working-class representation in

Woolf raises questions about whether it is possible to "be a writer and not dabble in the stuff

of other people's souls? An author without authority?" (112). I return to these two

questions—questions that serve as the starting point of my investigation of Woolf's

representation of working women—in the conclusion.

As Light's questions as well as Gay and King's discussion imply, there may be a limit

to what a writer can—and should—imagine. Acknowledging the limit of writerly imagination

brings me to the epigraph for this chapter. In her 2023 book *Saving Time: Discovering a*

Life Beyond the Clock, artist and author Jenny Odell proposes that "denying the logic of

increase means allowing the idea of limits" (256). Although Odell is writing about something

quite different from the ethics of representation and imagination—she is questioning the

techno-capitalist logic of life extension equaling a fuller life—the concept of Odell's short line

is crucial for my investigation of how Woolf writes working women. My goal with this chapter is to question the instinct to always increase as it relates to the act of imagining other minds. Entertaining the idea of a limit to what we can imagine about others as something that is not always bad—not always something that needs to be overcome—I aim to allow Woolf's limits by acknowledging them and studying them closely.

More concretely, in this chapter, I suggest that the difficulties Woolf had in imaginatively leaving her own upper-middle-class identity to write the lives of working-class women can help us rethink the relationship between empathy and literature. Placing Woolf's ideas about the ethics of representation in conversation with Woolf scholars as well as feminist and cognitive theorists of empathy, I develop a framework for what I call "Woolfian empathy:" a deeply embodied model for writing and reading that remains keenly aware of the unknowability of others.

In this chapter and in this dissertation, I use the term "embodied" in a neuro-phenomenological sense to approach acts of cognition (including empathy as well as reading and writing) as fundamentally embodied acts. I draw on the seminal work of the neuroscientist Francisco Varela and his colleagues Eleanor Rosch and Evan Thompson who established embodied approaches to cognitive science in a Western scientific discourse in their seminal *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and the Human Experience* (1992). In this study, the authors critique the fundamentally *dis*embodied foundations of cognitive science built on Cartesian dualism and a disregard of the body. Rather than seeing the body and the mind as separate (and the mind as more important than the body), they write that "cognition depends upon the kinds of experience that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities," asserting that "these individual sensorimotor capacities are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context" (173). This focus on how cognition is dependent upon a body which is situated in a social context is, as I will argue throughout this project, crucial for intersectional empathy.

An embodied approach to cognition allows for explorations of how our bodies shape our minds and our experiences of the world in a way that is needed to understand how we feel for and with different others in intricate ways. As Varela et al. emphasize, "sensory and motor processes, perception and action, are fundamentally inseparable in lived cognition" (173). If we approach "lived cognition" as intricately connected—indeed inseparable— processes of sensing, perceiving, and acting, it makes little sense to disregard the bodies that enable cognition. For Woolf, the embodied experience of writing was central to the conundrums she identified as she tried to imagine experiences outside the boundaries of her own body.

Rather than seeing the unknowability of others as a failure to be overcome, I suggest that it can present an opportunity for taking a respectful approach to the *limits* that structure any act of imagining other minds. In this chapter, I explore Woolf's imaginative limits through close readings of her reluctance to venture into the minds of working women. By "working women," I mean women employed as domestic workers, or what in Woolf's day and age would have been referred to as "servants."[3] Examining how Woolf attempts—or fails to attempt, or perhaps refuses to attempt—to depict the minds of working women, I analyze the representation of four domestic workers who are granted relatively substantial amounts of space in her later novels: Mrs. Moffat of *The Waves* (1931), Mrs. McNab of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Crosby in *The Years* (1937), and Mrs. Sands from *Between the Acts* (1941). While Woolf often and emphatically encouraged imagining what it is like to be another, she drew a line when she felt she was not entitled to such acts of imagination because of her unearned privilege. This, I contend, was an ethical choice, not an imaginative one. After exploring the narrative strategies that Woolf utilizes to circumvent the problem of

---

[3] This definition excludes characters from the broader categories of "women who work" and "working-class women" in Woolf such as Lucrezia Smith and Doris Kilman of *Mrs. Dalloway,* Mary Datchet in *Night and Day*, and the various suffragette figures in her novels. While of significant interest, these characters lie outside the scope of this chapter.

imagining minds she knew she was not entitled to imagine, I revisit Light's question about

the possibility of authors without authority to investigate what Woolf's approach to

imagining working women can tell us about the under-examined relationship between

entitlement and empathy.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Woolf writes about the relationship between ethics and imagination in her

introductory letter to *Life as We Have Known It*, a collection of life-writing edited by her

friend Margaret Llewelyn Davies and published through the Women's Co-Operative Guild in

1931. Here, Woolf details the reasons why she initially did not want to write the introduction

to the book. First of all, she does not like introductions, but she is also the wrong person to

write this piece, she feels, and she is the wrong person because of her class privilege.

Throughout the introductory letter, Woolf identifies herself as a "benevolent spectator" at

best and a hypocrite at worst (xix). She cannot identify with the women whose lives are

portrayed in the collection, or with their struggles, because "If every reform they demand

was granted this very instant it would not touch one hair of my comfortable capitalistic

head" (xix). Woolf is distant from these women, and she does not try to hide this distance.

This experiential distance limits her imagination. Woolf knows this, because, as she

continues, "after all the imagination is largely a child of the flesh" (*Life* xxi). Because

imagination is embodied, Woolf realizes that she cannot imagine herself in the position of

the women whose lives are depicted in the collection. As she writes:

> One could not be Mrs. Giles of Durham because one's body had never stood at the
>
> wash-tub; one's hands had never wrung and scrubbed and chopped up whatever the
>
> meat may be that makes a miner's supper. The picture therefore was always letting in
>
> irrelevancies. One sat in an armchair or read a book. One saw landscapes and

<p style="text-align:center">39</p>

seascapes, perhaps Greece or Italy, where Mrs. Giles or Mrs. Edwards must have seen slag heaps and rows upon rows of slate-roofed houses. Something was always creeping in from a world that was not their world and making the picture false and the game too much of a game to be worth playing. (*Life* xxi)

Here, as elsewhere, Woolf acknowledges the extent to which your, our, or my experience influences not only what you see in the world, but also what such a you may imagine. Your personal memories and fantasies, inevitably shaped by your identity, will always seep into and control—or contaminate—your imagination. If you happen to be Virginia Woolf or a similarly economically affluent and self-named "comfortable capitalistic" white upper-middle-class British woman living in the first half of the 20th century, the landscapes and seascapes of "perhaps Greece or Italy" seep in and make it not only difficult—the picture is "false"—but also ethically questionable to imagine a life spent by the wash-tub. Such a game of make-believe becomes "too much of a game to be worth playing." Or, as she writes in the lengthy footnote to *Flush* that sketches the life of Lily Wilson, a domestic worker employed by Mrs. Browning: "there can have been no lack of thought in Wilson's old head … But nothing can be more vain than to pretend that we can guess what they were, for she was typical of the great army of her kind—the inscrutable, the all-but-silent, the all-but-invisible servant maids of history" (182).

Attending to how Woolf navigates the dilemma presented in her speculation about Lily Wilson's thoughts, I ask how we are to imagine the minds of the, to Woolf and to many of her readers, "servant maids of history." How can we venture into imagined minds that seem drastically different without transgressing into the ethically dubious land of make-believe that only serves the already privileged? Throughout the introductory letter to Davies' collection as well as throughout her career, Woolf acknowledges the ethical issues that arise when the more powerful and the more comfortable imagine the plights of those less fortunate. Because of the deeply personal and embodied aspects of imagination—because it

is so difficult to escape our own perspective, even in imaginative deviations from those "straight lines of personality"—acts of imagining the lives of others are often far removed from the realities of those lives ("Street Haunting" 187).

*

The ethical problems that Woolf identifies in her self-criticism are echoed in contemporary critiques of the kind of imaginative identification that is often equated with empathy. In this type of empathy—a type of empathy that we see lurking in Woolf's anxieties about imaginative appropriation of the lives and minds of working women—the empathizer attends more to themselves than to the other. As discussed in my introduction, this type of empathy has been critiqued by feminist and cognitive scholars alike in the last decades. These critiques of empathy are particularly important to consider in an era when empathy is touted as a tool for prosocial action and when literature is seen as an instrument that can and should improve people's capacity for empathy.[4] This is also when and why Woolf's hesitant approach to imagining the minds of working women is crucial to reconsider. The kind of exploitative imaginative identification critiqued by feminist and cognitive scholars alike is precisely the kind of imaginative identification that Woolf is wary of in her attempts to "become" a working woman in her writing. The dangers of exploiting the other by taking their place in the act of imagination underlying replacement or displacement empathy are why Woolf is hesitant to write the introductory letter to *Life as We Have Known It*. Acknowledging the differences between herself and these working women and how these

---

[4] For recent examples of scholars from a range of fields proposing or insinuating that reading literature increases empathy, see e.g. Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*, 2011; Kidd and Castano, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," 2013; Saffran, "Only Connect: The Case for Public Health Humanities," 2014; and Graham et al. "Medical Humanities Coursework Is Associated with Greater Measured Empathy in Medical Students," 2016.

embodied differences thwart her attempts at imagining what another's life must be like, Woolf stops herself from imagining too far and too much in her ventures into the minds of working women.

The question of how a writer should acknowledge dissimilarity while still writing characters different from themselves often lay at the heart of Woolf's aesthetic quandaries. She discusses these questions throughout her diaries and essays. In her 1924 essay "Character in Fiction," Woolf critiques H. G. Wells' tendency to create characters that are "manly and magnificent, and rather like Mr. Wells himself" (428). Deploring (and ridiculing) how this self-centered form of writing robs characters different from their author of a convincing voice, Woolf suggests that a key criterion for what she terms "great novels" is that their authors manage to make their readers "see whatever they wish us to see through some character" (11). Failing to write characters unlike himself, Wells' characters strike Woolf as unreal. Moreover, because Wells' characters are so much like Wells himself, all he accomplishes—according to Woolf—is to impose his own way of seeing the world on his readers. All that has been expanded in this case is the subjectivity of H. G. Wells.

Contrary to this authorial expansion, what Woolf often sets out to do in her fiction is to invite her readers to see the world through characters *unlike* herself. Throughout her endeavors to represent working women, Woolf returns to depictions of how characters see the world, inviting readers—and herself—to try to see the world from the perspective of those "all-but-silent" servant maids of history. Her attempts to do this are doomed to fail, if by success we mean that Woolf escapes her own lived reality to the degree that she "becomes" a working woman through her writing. Her failures in this area can help us see the relationship between power's privilege and imagined acts of fellow-feeling more clearly.

Woolf's awareness of how fundamentally our embodied experiences shape our imaginations, discussed above and exemplified below, provides the foundation for "Woolfian

empathy." Woolfian empathy, I suggest, is a situated empathy radically different from the kind of empathy that Hartman and others critique. It is a type of empathy that always acknowledges differences between individuals, the unknowability of the other, and how an individual's environment shapes their mind. Woolfian empathy is a form of fellow-feeling always acutely aware of its own limitations. In this way, Woolfian empathy is similar to what Madelyn Detloff calls "epistemic humility" in a study of Woolf's and Iris Murdoch's connected and fraught struggles to leave their egos through writing (45). "[E]pistemic humility," Detloff explains, is an approach to writing and to being that requires one to resist "egocentric impulses in our practice of looking at the world" (45). While this may sound dangerously close to that dreaded view from nowhere that Woolf is so skeptical of, Detloff's "epistemic humility"—like Woolfian empathy—is characterized by an understanding of its own shortcomings. Acts of imagining others grounded in epistemic humility are bound to run into limits because "we are embodied, socially situated creatures who can only attempt to reason as if we were located 'nowhere' (Detloff 29). It is as important to acknowledge these limitations to our imaginations as it is to strive towards overcoming them. Exemplified by Woolf's open acknowledgment of the limitations of imagination that characterizes her hesitation to write interiorities into working women, Woolfian empathy can serve as a corrective against the hypocritically self-serving kind of empathy that places the self in the other's position and, in doing so, obscures the power dynamics that shape any act of feeling with others. In revealing these power dynamics, Woolfian empathy can get a glimpse of the densely complex reality that Iris Murdoch calls the "real world" ("Against Dryness" 19). As Murdoch explains, this is a reality "whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy" ("Against Dryness" 20). This temptation—to deform the reality of working women—is what Woolf struggles against in her depiction of working-class characters.

Mrs. Moffat

My investigation of how, exactly, Woolf writes working women begins with a return to Gillian Beer's critique of *The Waves*. Describing the lack of working-class speech in this novel as a "loss," Beer acknowledges that Woolf leaves out working-class voices because of her own privilege (90). "Indeed," Beer writes, "it was the area where Woolf most recognized her own limits, here, of class. Because of her uncertainty about the sounds of other kinds of voice and her fear of condescending, Woolf made her one major concession" to exclude working-class voices in the novel (90). While I agree that Woolf acknowledges her limits in this way—I dissect these limits and their ethical importance throughout the chapter—there is, in fact, a working-class presence in *The Waves*. Even though this novel does not include working-class voices, it does enable a critique of a social structure that exploits working-class people. To notice this critique, we must take a closer look at the one working-class character who is repeatedly invoked in *The Waves*: Mrs. Moffat.

Although largely invisible throughout the novel, Mrs. Moffat is, in certain ways, crucial to the identity of Bernard, her employer and the character of the novel whose voice we hear the most. As Michael Herbert and Susan Sellers have noted in their thorough historical annotations of *The Waves*, Bernard's housekeeper shares the surname of and "may therefore suggest a possible allusion to" the prominent radical Abe Moffat (Woolf et al. 301). Born in 1896, Abe Moffat was a communist trade unionist from Scotland who was blacklisted after the 1926 general strike. This was a strike to which Woolf paid close attention (Woolf et al. 302). The possible allusion to a historical character central to a major class conflict hints at Mrs. Moffat's larger significance in the novel. Woolf's inclusion of Mrs. Moffat, I argue, presents a realistic portrayal of the role of working women from the perspective of the privileged group of friends at the center of *The Waves* as well as the sophisticated Bloomsbury crowd of their author.

For Bernard, Mrs. Moffat is indispensable in both material and existential ways. The domestic worker is repeatedly invoked to come and "sweep up" not only the mess that Bernard has made but repetitive detritus of Bernard himself. Ruminating upon his own identity, Bernard makes a mess of ashes as he pokes around in the cinders that are keeping him comfortably warm. This ashy mess, he knows, need not bother him because "Mrs. Moffat will come and sweep it all up" (81). In fact, Bernard knows that he will be dependent upon Mrs. Moffat throughout his life: "I fancy I shall repeat to myself that phrase, as I rattle and bang through life, hitting first this side of the carriage then the other, 'Oh, yes, Mrs. Moffat will come and sweep it all up'" (81). For Bernard to "rattle and bang" his way through life in careless comfort, he needs a Mrs. Moffat to sweep up the mess he leaves behind, and he knows it.

Bernard invokes the apparition-like woman he employs later in the novel as well. Again, we watch and listen as Bernard broods on his own existence, here belaboring the point that his "being only glitters when all its facets are exposed to many people" (186). Without these people, Bernard knows, he is nothing but "burnt paper" (186). In other words, without these people around him, he is the ashes that it is Mrs. Moffat's job to sweep up: "Oh, Mrs. Moffat, Mrs. Moffat, I say, come and sweep it all up" Bernard cries again (186). Here, what Mrs. Moffat is asked to sweep up may refer not only to the mess Bernard has made by poking around in the fire but also to the ashes of his own burnt-up identity left in his cindery wake. In this way, Woolf exposes how not only Bernard's material well-being but also his metaphysical existence is dependent on domestic workers. The role of these domestic workers from the point of view of Bernard and his privileged friends is reflected in Mrs. Moffat's role in the novel: she is not allowed space on center stage, or even her own voice. Mrs. Moffat exists in the background of the narrative, just as she exists in the background of Bernard's life, underappreciated and taken for granted yet crucial for her employer's existence. Woolf's repeated exposition of how Mrs. Moffat is called upon to

sweep up the crumbs of Bernard's messy existence opens up for a critique of a social—and narrative—structure where lower-class people are doomed to the background. In this background, working women are expected to silently support the Bernards of the world, sweeping up their dirt and propping up their egos so that they can "glitter" on center stage.

This narrative structure exposes how domestic workers are required to maintain equilibrium for the existence of the bourgeois. Mrs. Moffat is not only needed to clean up after Bernard: she is needed to sweep up the scattered parts of his discarded identity, sweeping him up and putting him together as she serves as an audience for him to "glitter." This was true for Woolf herself as much as for her characters. As Alison Light notes, "without all the domestic care and hard work which servants provided there would have been no art, no writing, no 'Bloomsbury'" for Virginia Woolf" (xvii). Read with an eye to working women, this novel that is so often read as poetic rather than political (as if the two could ever be neatly separated) presents a critique of a social structure where the less privileged are relegated to a background where their thankless job is to prop up the more privileged. We see a similar exposition of social inequalities in Woolf's depiction of Mrs. McNab in *To the Lighthouse*.

Mrs. McNab

Like Mrs. Moffat, Mrs. McNab keeps life together for many of the characters in *To the Lighthouse*. The housekeeper shows up to ready the house for the Ramsays' return in "Time Passes" and, quite literally, keeps the book together in the novel's middle section. Critics have argued that Mrs. McNab is denied an interiority separate from that of her employers in this novel so full of interiorities. Monica J. Miller, for one, calls Woolf's portrait of Mrs. McNab "hazy" and argues that she can be read as "less a character than a force, whether of or against nature" (111). Similarly, in "Figures in the Dark: Working Class Women in *To the*

Lighthouse," Michael Tratner proposes that Woolf's struggle against her gendered and classed biases in *To the Lighthouse* ultimately fails. But is Woolf's failure to write working women from a vantage point other than her own then necessarily "a sham" (Tratner 4)? Tratner does not think so. Even though her portrayal of Mrs. McNab can be considered a failure, Woolf's revelation of how she, along with the Ramsays and along with the Bernards of the world, is dependent upon domestic workers reveals Woolf's "inability to overcome ideology" (4). This failure caused by an inability to overcome ideology is important because, as Tratner continues, it is "a way for Woolf to keep the struggle alive, to pass on the task to others" (4). In other words, Woolf's failure to imagine life from the point of view of Mrs. McNab calls attention to a limit of imagination that she cannot—and I suggest should not—overcome.

We are introduced to Mrs. McNab in "Time Passes" as she arrives at the Ramsay house to prepare the abandoned abode for the family's return: "Mrs. McNab, tearing the veil of silence with hands that had stood in the wash-tub, grinding it with boots that had crunched the shingle, came as directed to open all the windows, and dust the bedrooms" (130). The material grounding of this entrance—the hands that tear the silence are hands that have been submerged in the wash-tub and the boots are boots that have crushed shingle—portends Woolf's characterization of the working life she cannot ever imagine fully in *Life as We Have Known It*. In her introduction to that collection, published four years after *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf invokes the very same material reality to explain her difficulty in imagining life as working women know it: "One could not be Mrs. Giles of Durham because one's body had never stood at the wash-tub" (*Life* xxi). In other words, one's imagination is too far from the reality of working women because "One saw landscapes and seascapes, perhaps Greece or Italy, where Mrs. Giles or Mrs. Edwards must have seen slag heaps and rows upon rows of slate-roofed houses" (*Life* xxi). The recycling of the same material metaphors for working-class life—wash-tubs and shingle slate roofs—that

characterize Woolf's introduction of Mrs. McNab draws attention to these women's lived and embodied experiences. Theirs is a life of washing other people's soiled clothes and of crunching brittle, dusty shingle.

By drawing attention to this material reality, Woolf calls attention to how different this life is from the life of the Ramsays and their guests. Mrs. Ramsay's hands are not worn from a life at the wash-tub, to say nothing of Mr. Ramsay, whose clean, soft hands have been busy trying to "reach R" at his writing table (34). Recognizing the discrepancy between the hands of the Ramsays and the hands of Mrs. McNab is a prerequisite for noting the work that is required for Mr. Ramsay to spend all that time trying to "reach R." As feminist, queer, and race studies scholar Sara Ahmed notes in her queer phenomenology where she investigates Husserl's privileged attention to his writing table, "Being oriented toward the writing table not only relegates other rooms in the house to the background but also might depend *on the work done to keep his desk clear*, that is, the domestic work that might be necessary for Husserl to turn the table into a philosophical object" (547, emphasis original). Like Husserl, Mr. Ramsay attends closely to tables. His philosophical work about "subject and object and the nature of reality," Andrew Ramsay tells Lily Briscoe, can be understood if you "think of a kitchen table … when you're not there" (23). Like Husserl, Mr. Ramsay's attention to tables is dependent on the domestic work being done to keep his desk clear. Not having to clean his own table is a prerequisite for freeing up time; it is a prerequisite for keeping Mr. Ramsay's hands clean enough and his mind clear enough to think about his tables and "the nature of reality." Emphasizing the embodied experience of Mrs. McNab, Woolf draws our attention to the discrepancies in the lived experience of those who clean tables and those who eat and philosophize at these tables. As she shows in *To the Lighthouse* and elsewhere, something as simple as a table will look different depending on your relationship to it—depending on if you have spent a life cleaning it or philosophizing about

it. Woolf's repeated depiction of this difference can help us recognize how closely interconnected the experiences of our bodies are with our perceptions.

How is Mrs. McNab's embodied experience portrayed, and why are we only invited to witness it in "Time Passes," the part of the novel that Woolf strived to make void of human subjectivity? As she was working on the novel, Woolf wrote in her diary that the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* was "the most difficult abstract piece of writing" because, in it, she had to "give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless & featureless with nothing to cling to" (*Diary,* volume III, 18 April 1926, p. 76). This ambition is in line with how critics tend to read the book's middle section: as detached from human subjectivity, an "asubjective" part of the otherwise hyper-subjective novel. M. Ty, for example, reads the section as an experimental example of Woolf trying to write "in absentia," a narrative technique that Ty defines as approaching "asubjectivism without ascending to omniscience" (322). In agreement with Woolf's ideal of "eyeless" writing, such readings emphasize her narrative experiments in moving away from human subjectivity in this part of the novel.

However, reading "Time Passes" as completely void of human subjectivity perpetuates the occlusion of Mrs. McNab. While the middle section of the novel is *mostly* void of "people's characters" and the kind of depictions of human interiority that otherwise dominate the novel, it is not *completely* void of them. As Ty notes, "It is important to remember that the eradication of subjectivity is not total. Near the end of 'Time Passes,' Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast, who are not once named elsewhere, arrive to ready the house for the Ramsays' return" (333). It is to Woolf's depiction of Mrs. McNab's consciousness that I suggest we need to turn to better understand what narrative techniques she devised to depict working women's minds and what ethical stance we can glean from these depictions.

Ty argues that *To the Lighthouse* "is structured by the reciprocal inversion of free indirect discourse and writing in absentia, interiority and impersonality" with the middle

section being characterized by impersonality and an absence of free indirect discourse (339). While I acknowledge Ty's important contributions to this understudied section of the novel and agree with most of Ty's observations, I oppose the dichotomy between interiority and impersonality that is set up when we see the novel as structured through the reciprocal inversion of interiority and impersonality. This binary structure obscures the fact that there in fact *is* free indirect discourse in "Time Passes," and that Mrs. McNab's is the only interiority we are invited to imagine through this narrative technique in the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*.

The use of free indirect discourse to depict Mrs. McNab's mind is most prevalent in chapter VIII of "Time Passes." Opening with a description of Mrs. McNab stooping to pick some flowers to take home with her, Woolf turns to free indirect discourse already after the third sentence of the chapter: "She was fond of flowers. It was a pity to let them waste" (135). In these two sentences, it seems reasonable to suggest that the second one—"It was a pity to let them waste"—is a thought of Mrs. McNab's, unmarked by a speech tag in line with how Woolf often uses free indirect discourse to depict interiorities. The chapter then moves into a subtle depiction of Mrs. McNab's thoughts about the possibility of the old Ramsay house being sold, in which case "it would want seeing to—it would" (135). The repetition of "it would" here is difficult to make sense of unless we read it as a free indirect discourse description of the thoughts going through the old woman's mind as she apprises the decay that the Ramsays' absence has caused. Seeing to the house is, after all, Mrs. McNab's job.

In the same paragraph, as Mrs. McNab observes the decline of the grounds where rain pipes are blocked and plaster is falling, Woolf writes, "But people should have come themselves; they should have sent somebody down to see" (135). To whom does this "should" belong? It seems unlikely that the admonishing modal verb is an expression belonging to the near-absent narrator. Rather, this "should" appears to belong to the same character who sees the Ramsays as "they:" Mrs. McNab. Not included in the intimate

structure of the family that has failed in their duty to the house, Mrs. McNab's scornful feelings for the Ramsays' carefree existence shines through in moments like this. "[*T]hey* should have sent somebody down to see," and because *they* did not, the house is in a state of decay that it falls upon Mrs. McNab to fix. Together with how Woolf calls attention to the Ramsays' reality being dependent upon the invisibilized labor of domestic workers in both *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*, the moments when we are invited to Mrs. McNab's mind through free indirect discourse open up for a critique of the bourgeois household at the novel's center.

Most—if not all—of Mrs. McNab's thoughts and feelings that we are invited to glimpse through free indirect discourse center on the Ramsay house or its inhabitants. In particular, they focus on Mrs. Ramsay. Like all characters in the novel, Mrs. McNab displays an almost obsessive attention towards Mrs. Ramsay. The fixation on the Ramsays has been noted as a pointed critique of how Woolf depicts working women. For example, Miller writes that "When Mrs. McNab exercises what imagination she does possess, she can only clearly envision members of the Ramsay family" (111). The perimeter of Mrs. McNab's imagination is a clear limitation of Woolf's representation of this working woman's mind and we can ask ourselves how the exclusive focus on their relationship to the novel's main characters serves to minoritize working-class characters in all of Woolf's novels. This kind of investigation will give us a clearer picture of which of Woolf's working women—if any—are granted space on the page to have hopes and desires unconnected to their employers.

While this broader investigation lies outside the scope of this chapter, I would like to look closely at *how* Woolf depicts Mrs. McNab's exercises of her imagination, including how she imagines and remembers Mrs. Ramsay. Is it really the case that, as Miller puts it, "the hazy portrait of Mrs. McNab is, to an extent, the only type of portrait Woolf thought it possible to draw of a member of the lower class" (111)? After the initial slippage into Mrs. McNab's mind in the segment's first paragraph, Woolf continues to describe the old woman

as she readies the house for the (now reduced) Ramsay family's return. This activity quite naturally brings about memories of the house's inhabitants and of Mrs. Ramsay in particular. Noticing that the clothes the Ramsays have left behind—"What was she to do with them?"—are infested with moths, Mrs. McNab suddenly realizes that Mrs. Ramsay no longer is there to care what happens with the moth-infested pieces of garment: "Poor lady! She would never want *them* again. She was dead, they said; years ago, in London" (135, emphasis original). Filtering the view of the house through Mrs. McNab's eyes—a focalizing technique I will return to in my discussion of *Between the Acts'* Mrs. Sands below—Woolf moves into describing Mrs. McNab's memories rather than her actions at this point. As the domestic worker fingers Mrs. Ramsay's old gardening cloak, the narrative slips almost completely into Mrs. McNab's mind as she becomes immersed in her memories of Mrs. Ramsay:

> There was the old grey cloak she wore gardening (Mrs. McNab fingered it). She could see her, as she came up the drive with the washing, stooping over her flowers (the garden was a pitiful sight now, all run to riot, and rabbits scuttling at you out of the beds)—she could see her with one of the children by her in that grey cloak. There were boots and shoes; and a brush and comb left on the dressing-table, for all the world as if she expected to come back tomorrow. (She had died very sudden at the end, they said.) And once they had been coming, but had put off coming, what with the war, and travel being so difficult these days; they had never come all these years; just sent her money; but never wrote, never came, and expected to find things as they had left them, ah, dear! Why the dressing-table drawers were full of things (she pulled them open), handkerchiefs, bits of ribbon. Yes, she could see Mrs. Ramsay as she came up the drive with the washing. (135-136)

I am quoting this passage at length to highlight how, at this point in the chapter, the present, as well as the exterior, is completely relegated to parentheses: "(Mrs. McNab fingered it);" "(the garden was a pitiful sight now, all run to riot, and rabbits scuttling at you out of the

beds;)" (she pulled them open)." Grammatically speaking, then, the internal and the past are central to this scene. In other words, what dominates chapter VIII of "Time Passes" is Mrs. McNab's inner life through Woolf's imagination of what Mrs. McNab would imagine.

Hence, the dichotomy between subjective and asubjective that Ty identifies in their division of the novel as two sections dominated by free indirect discourse and a middle one void of it is not as neat as it seems at first. Interiority creeps into this section characterized by impersonality. Attending to these fissures complicates the view of Woolf as a writer hopelessly distant from her working-class characters, a writer who reserves her signature intimate style for upper-class minds. As Miller notes, "By displacing servants' inner lives almost entirely onto the objects they handle, Woolf sacrifices the intimacy between reader and character that the free indirect style establishes" (113). If free indirect discourse establishes intimacy, then we need to scrutinize the moments where Woolf uses free indirect discourse to portray working-class minds in order to understand her fraught but intimate relationship with working-class characters as well as people in her own lived life. Without nuanced and close attention to sections that are traditionally read as void of subjectivity in Woolf—like the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*—we run the risk of missing moments of interiority and perpetuating the view of Woolf as an apolitical writer willfully blind to the struggles of the working-class.

Perhaps the idea that Virginia Woolf "doesn't do" working-class characters has become a self-fulfilling prophecy where Woolf scholars see what Woolf scholars already believe: that Woolf does not grant her working women interiority. Miller, for example, argues that Mrs. McNab is the only character who can make an appearance in "Time Passes" without disturbing the decisively non-human stillness that characterizes the section because "she herself seems barely animate" (111). Mrs. McNab's mind, Miller proposes, is a "mystified interior" and her thoughts "remain largely inaccessible to her readers and even her creator" (111). Challenging this reading of Mrs. McNab, I propose that Woolf does depict

Mrs. McNab's interiority, demystifying it somewhat through her use of free indirect discourse. While I have no desire to save Woolf from the crucial critiques of the class-related blind spots characteristic of her "comfortable capitalistic head," we misread her oeuvre if we assume that she never grants interiority to her working-class characters (*Life* xix). It is only after acknowledging when Woolf does grant her working characters interiority that we can study and critique *how* she does so in a meaningful way. Moreover, I argue that the "inaccessible" barrier that stands between Woolf and Mrs. McNab is a barrier that it would be ethically suspect to cross. Acknowledging this barrier, to return to Odell, is necessary for "allowing the idea of limits" (*Saving Time* 256). The limits of Woolf's imagination circumscribe her portrayal of Mrs. McNab's mind. Denying this limit, or categorizing it as lamentable, risks erasing the very real differences in lived experience between someone like Virginia Woolf and someone like Mrs. McNab. What I mean by this is that Woolf's lived experience was privileged enough for her not to have had to clean tables or spend time at the wash-tub. While she shared homes with live-in domestic workers for large parts of her life, Woolf's was an existence very different from these workers' as she never had to perform the kind of domestic labor that constitutes much of Mrs. McNab's everyday life. Rather, Woolf— like Mr. Ramsay—was dependent on it. To return to Light's insight, "without all the domestic care and hard work which servants provided there would have been no art, no writing, no 'Bloomsbury'" for Virginia Woolf" (xvii).

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Similar to how critics have admonished the lack of free indirect discourse employed to portray working-class characters in *To the Lighthouse*, they also reprimand Woolf for the tentative language she often resorts to when depicting working women's minds. As Ty notes, "Many commentators understandably associate the impersonality of 'Time Passes' with an

omniscient viewpoint, which misses the tenor of hesitance that pervades this voice" (337). This "tenor of hesitance," Ty proposes, is demonstrated by phrases that signal tentative knowledge. "Everywhere [in 'Time Passes']," they write, "demonstrative language gives way to the incantatory 'as if,' a phrase that relentlessly casts uncertainty over what is posited by the narratorial presence," substituting certainty for what Ty terms "an aureole of approximation" (337). "Time Passes" and particularly the ventures into Mrs. McNab's mind are indeed full of language that signals tentative knowledge, with "as ifs" and "perhapses" strewn throughout the section.

But is this conjectural stance unique to "Time Passes," or to Woolf's struggles to imagine the lives of working women? If we take a closer look, this emphasis on the limitations of knowledge is not exclusive to the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*. In fact, it is not even most pronounced in this part of the novel. If we take a statistical approach to two phrases signaling speculation and tentative knowledge—"as if" and "seem"—we learn that the middle section in no way is extreme. The novel's first section, "The Window," contains 73 "as ifs," constituting 0.17% of the total word count of the section; the phrase appears 58 times in "The Lighthouse," making up 0.26% of the word count in the book's last section; and it makes up 0.23% of "Time Passes," where it appears 13 times. Similarly, different conjugations of the verb "seem" make up 0.17% of words in "The Window," 0.26% of "The Lighthouse," and 0.24% of "Time Passes." In other words, the middle section of the novel is also right in the middle when it comes to these conditional phrases. The tentative approach to knowledge of others' minds is not unique to, or even particularly pronounced in, the one part of the novel that includes a working woman's interiority.

There is, however, one significant difference in the use of language signaling tentative knowledge between the sections. This difference concerns the phrase "must have been." This particular phrase appears twice in "Time Passes," the same number of times as it

appears in the more than seven times longer "The Window" and just one time less than in

"The Lighthouse," which is almost four times the length of the middle section. What is more

intriguing than the raw number of times the phrase appears is *how* it appears in the

sections. In the first and last section of the novel, "must have been" is used in quoted

dialogue and when characters speculate about their own past. In a passage from "The

Lighthouse" where Lily remembers the now-dead Mrs. Ramsay, we are invited to share her

speculations about the woman who so inspires her: "There must have been people who

disliked her very much, Lily thought" (195). By contrast, in "Time Passes" the phrase is used

exclusively by the narrator and exclusively to express hesitance about knowing what goes on

in Mrs. McNab's mind. Following her pained movements as she dusts and scrubs and

polishes the house, the narrator speculates about what in a world that "was not easy or snug"

for the almost seventy-year-old Mrs. McNab brings her joy, hope, and energy as she toils:

> Visions of joy there *must have been* at the wash-tub, say with her children (yet two
>
> had been base-born and one had deserted her), at the public-house, drinking;
>
> turning over scraps in her drawers. Some cleavage of the dark there *must have been,*
>
> some channel in the depths of obscurity through which light enough issued to twist
>
> her face grinning in the glass and make her, turning to her job again, mumble out the
>
> old music hall song. (130, 131; emphasis added)

While not technically a conditional phrase, "must have been" nevertheless expresses

hesitance. This hesitance is important; it acknowledges that Mrs. McNab's mind is never

entirely accessible to the narrator, or to us as readers. We may venture to guess what brings

her enough energy to go about her cleaning with an air of joy as she hums the old tune, but

we can never know. "Must have been," in this sense, is the best that we can get.

In this way, I read Woolf's portrayal of Mrs. McNab's mind along and in addition to

Miller, who sees the working woman's "sidelong leer" (mentioned right before the

speculation about Mrs. McNab's "visions of joy") as an alternative mode of narration for

Woolf (131). Miller notes that while McNab's sidelong leer never overtakes free indirect

discourse as the novel's dominant style, it becomes an "alternative mode of observation" to

the deep depictions of subjectivity for which Woolf is well known (113). Rather than seeing

the sidelong leer and free indirect discourse as opposing modes of narration, I propose that

Woolf utilizes free indirect discourse *with a sidelong leer* in her depictions of Mrs. McNab's

mind. It is a conditional, tentative, and unassuming use of free indirect discourse. This

tentative approach does not mean that Woolf denies Mrs. McNab a mind of her own but, on

the contrary, that she acknowledges the opacity of this woman's reality. This opacity is

particularly thick because Woolf's body—unlike the body of Mrs. McNab—is not a body that

has stood at the wash-tub or crunched slate shingles with worn-out soles. Because of this

difference, Woolf cannot accurately or ethically imagine Mrs. McNab's visions of joy—she is

too far removed and to speculate here is, to return to her reluctantly offered introductory

letter, "too much of a game to be worth playing" (*Life* xxi). Rather than a capitulation

signaling that Mrs. McNab does not have an inner life, I read Woolf's hesitation as a moment

of Detloff's "epistemic humility" (45). In other words, I read the hesitation as an ethical

acknowledgment of the limits of Woolf's imagination. Implied in the acknowledgment of this

limit is the fact that Mrs. McNab's reality—her visions of joy at the wash-tub—is too

important for Woolf to clumsily fumble about in what can only ever be a circumscribed

attempt.

Woolf's approach to depicting Mrs. McNab's mind signals a hesitance toward

claiming knowledge of the innermost parts of a character's personality. What lodges in the

depth of their minds, what occupies their thoughts as they perform the labor required for

their employers to live their class-determined comfortable lives, is never ultimately known to

someone like Woolf. In short, their lived reality is not accessible to her. While not the only

reason for Woolf's limited depictions of domestic laborers (it is, for example, possible that

both resentment about other classes and fear of what it would reveal about Woolf herself and

her reliance on an exploitative and unjust social system as reasons for this imaginative hesitance), this unassuming approach to the unknowability of other minds is a defining characteristic of how Woolf writes working women into her pages. As Miller has noted in her discussion of Crosby in *The Years*—a character of interest to this analysis—while the distance that Woolf keeps to her working women may risk inviting her readers to dismiss these characters as "inscrutable," it also leaves these characters "the possibility of an inner life that transcends the limitations of the servant type" (127). Transcending stereotypes while acknowledging the unknowability of others and leaving space for what one does *not* know when speculating about characters' minds is characteristic of Woolfian empathy. Rather than transcending the limit, as Miller put it, however, I read the limit discussed here as a central tenet of Woolfian empathy. In fact, it is central to this careful and self-aware empathy that the limit is *not* transcended. I propose that we read the gap between the author and Mrs. McNab that defines this limit as a respectful acknowledgment of the difference between the life of an author whose "comfortable capitalistic head" has always been dependent upon but experientially distant from the reality of working women (*Life* xix).

There is an important difference between acknowledging that another's inner life is never fully accessible because of certain various and intersecting gulfs of difference and denying someone else an interiority or being uninterested in this interiority. This difference is crucial for Woolfian empathy. Woolf was famously, passionately, and persistently interested in the interiorities of others. As she argues in "Character in Fiction," this interest is what defines novelists. But while Woolf is clear about the importance of paying attention to the often-overlooked reality of the Mrs. Browns of the world, as she discusses in the essay, she is also aware of the fact that she will always, in some ways, fail to depict this reality. As she writes, while the goal of the novelist is to "catch the phantom" of another's experienced existence, "most have to be content with a scrap of her dress or a wisp of her hair" (421). In other words, the reality of Mrs. Brown does not lie within reach.

Woolf is also aware that one reason for why it is near-impossible to capture the existence of Mrs. Brown is because she looks so different depending on who is looking at her. As she notes, "old Mrs. Brown's character will strike you very differently according to the age and country in which you happen to be born" (425). For Woolf herself, the most striking aspect of herself that shapes how she sees others seems to have been that of class. She imagines what it is like to be a dog in *Flush*, but she hesitates to venture into the inner life of the domestic worker Lily Wilson in the same novel. This is not to suggest that Woolf felt closer to dogs than to domestic workers but to point out how this particular difference repeatedly forced her to acknowledge the opacity of others in the very act of imagining this other. By acknowledging the opacity of another's interiority, we can begin to see others as, in the words of Iris Murdoch, "benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy" ("Against Dryness" 20). Acknowledging the distance that remains between the one who experiences and the one who imaginatively feels is a way of fighting against the temptation that Murdoch identifies as a barrier to seeing reality. In Woolf's juxtaposition of how the sibling pair of Eleanor and Martin Pargiter relate to a working woman's emotions in *The Years*, we see the difference between varying ways of approaching another's reality dramatized.

Crosby

Annie Crosby of *The Years* is arguably the working woman to whom Woolf gives the most space in her novels. Crosby, as she is commonly known, gets a chapter of her own in the last novel published while Woolf was alive. As the live-in domestic worker of the Pargiter family at the novel's center, Crosby often remains in the background and her fraught position within the family is frequently noticed by critics. Again, Monica J. Miller observes the sparseness of interior monologue in the sections and chapters focalized through Crosby's consciousness, and Light calls Crosby "a figure of pathos" (17). Taking inspiration from Mrs.

McNab's "sidelong leer," I approach this "figure of pathos" sideways to explore how other characters relate to her in order both to identify her contours and to delineate the limits of Woolf's imagination. With Crosby, I am interested not so much in how Woolf imagines her mind *per se*, but in how she depicts how other characters are imagining—or not imagining— what life is like for Crosby. Through this comparison of approaches to Crosby's interiority, we can distinguish between different kinds of reluctances toward intruding upon another's mind. These distinctions are crucial for locating Woolfian empathy.

Crosby sees the world through the lens of labor. In line with this lens, the first thought of hers that we are invited to share is about domestic work. As Crosby enters the dining room of the Pargiter household, we learn that "The silver paid for polishing, she thought" (35). Here, we are introduced to the dining room as much as we are introduced to Crosby through Woolf's method of telling us about a character through what they see. By portraying what a place looks like to a certain character—what they notice and what they don't—Woolf often tells us much about that character. As Eleanor Pargiter notes later in the novel, Crosby knows everything in the Pargiter house "not from five or six feet distance as they had known it; but from her knees, as she scrubbed and polished" (216). Knowing a house from one's knees is a very different experience than knowing a house from a distance of six feet. From the perspective of your knees, a house will look different, just like a table will look different from the perspective of Mrs. McNab compared to that of Mr. Ramsay.

Woolf's emphasis on how her characters' embodied reality influences what they see and how they see it is the main reason for why there is a limit to what she as the writer can know about the experience of someone like Crosby. In other words, Woolf's class status shapes how she sees a room and sets a limit to how fully she can understand what the oxidizing and dust gathering world looks like from your knees. Virginia Woolf never knew a house from her knees; growing up, dining rooms and drawing-rooms were known from the personally uncomfortable but materially plush sofas where she resentfully entertained the

Stephens family's guests. However emotionally uncomfortable this was for someone like Woolf who abhorred the stuffy performativity of the Victorian lifestyle, her perch was a materially comfortable, soft, and cushioned experience. If the time in dining- and drawing rooms left Woolf's independence and personality bruised, it left her knees unscathed.

While Crosby's chapter in *The Years* is short—a mere two pages—she is not, I propose, reduced to her class status in it. While she may, at first sight, appear to be yet another example of a Woolfian working woman denied hopes and desires that are not connected to her role as a domestic worker, we see a different side of Crosby in her attachment to Rover, the Pargiter's dog whom Crosby insists on bringing with her when she leaves the household. When Rover gets sick and eventually dies, Crosby's world crumbles. The emotionally laden situation that unfolds in connection to Rover and Crosby's new life tells us more about the characters through whose eyes we see Crosby's grief than about Crosby herself.

Beginning with Martin, the bachelor son of the Pargiter family and Crosby's favorite, let's consider his approach to Crosby's inner life. Soon after Rover's death, Crosby pays Martin a visit at his home. This visit annoys Martin. It inconveniences him because it disrupts his reading of the newspaper: "he could never read while he was waiting," and he frets over what he is to talk about with this woman with whom he has shared a house for most of his life (220). As Crosby shows up, Martin makes "use of the usual formula" and attempts to keep the conversation light (220). This, however, fails. Crosby immediately remembers her dead dog and tears begin to form in her eyes. Moments after Crosby has told Martin about Rover's death, after the conversation has moved on as a result of Martin's quick change of topic after a brief and perfunctory show of sympathy, Martin notices Crosby's face drop. This expression of emotion upsets Martin: "She was thinking of Rover, he supposed. He must get her mind off that" (221). At this point, it is possible to read Martin's insistence on keeping Crosby's mind away from the sad fact of Rover's death as a

well-meant act of caring. It is still possible to give him the benefit of the doubt, to think that Martin wants to keep Crosby's mind off Rover in an effort to protect her. However, what comes next quickly makes this reading impossible. Martin "must get her mind off" Rover's death not because he cares about Crosby's well-being, but because "he could not bear tears" (221). Throughout their interaction in this scene, Martin shows a remarkable unwillingness to imagine Crosby's interiority because of how an acknowledgment of her feelings and thoughts would make *him* feel. Martin cannot grant Crosby the interiority of sadness here because he can't stand tears, hence the threat of Crosby's expressed emotion must be avoided. In Crosby's care for Rover, she has had a relationship that Martin has not been capable of having. Crosby's emotions require a relationship, something that Martin is uninterested in and perhaps incapable of. Nowhere in this chapter—or in any other chapter—does Martin express any kind of curiosity about Crosby's mind. Every time there is a possibility that she might express her thoughts and feelings—for example through tears— Martin quickly changes the subject. While this could be read as a fear of feeling, Woolf's exposure of Martin's motivations reveals something more. Exposing his reasons for changing the subject so quickly, Woolf asserts that Martin's unwillingness to imagine what life is like for Crosby is based not on an acknowledgment of the unknowability of others but on an unwillingness to perform the labor of imagining other minds (especially if the people with these minds inconvenience him as he tries to read the paper). Martin Pargiter, Woolf makes clear, does not want to be bothered with the reality of people like Crosby.

Martin is incapable of or uninterested—perhaps both— in seeing Crosby as an individual with a mind and a reality of her own. This becomes particularly clear as Woolf juxtaposes what Martin and Crosby remember about each other. While Crosby remembers details that characterize Martin as an individual—he "never could abide wool next to the skin, she remembered"—Martin's memories are structured by prejudice about what Crosby's mind is capable of: "one had to be very literal and use only the simplest language, he

remembered, when one talked to Crosby" (221). While Crosby remembers idiosyncrasies, Martin remembers (stereo)typicality. Moreover, while Crosby remembers a fact about Martin—he does not like wool against his skin—Martin's memory centers not on Crosby or her preferences, but on how *he* must act in relation to her. His thoughts during their interactions are entirely structured by reactions to Crosby not because of who she is as an individual, but because of how her role as a domestic worker demands a certain behavior from him. For Martin, an almost pathologically self-centered man who "hated talking to servants" because "it always made *him* feel insincere," Crosby is indeed little more than the "frightened little animal," small in mind as in stature and class, he sees her as when she walks away from his apartment carrying his dirty laundry (221, 223; emphasis added). Martin's unwillingness to, even for a second, grant interiority to a woman whom he has shared a house with for over forty years should tell us more about Martin Pargiter than about Annie Crosby, or about Virginia Woolf.

Martin's attitude towards Crosby's reality is sharply contrasted with how his sister Eleanor Pargiter interacts with her. In the same chapter as Martin is inconvenienced by Crosby's grief when she stops by to pick up his dirty laundry, we see Eleanor reacting to Crosby's grief. In this case, it is not the grief of a dog's death. Rather, this scene takes place before Rover has slowly faded into the afterlife with Crosby watching over him, feeding him by the teaspoon for three days and nights straight. As Eleanor sees the juncture, the grief that ails Crosby here is the grief of leaving the Pargiter family. As Eleanor and Crosby are both about to leave the Pargiter house for the last time, an emotional scene unfolds. In this moment when Crosby is severed from the Pargiters, much against her will, we find a crucial moment for understanding Woolfian empathy. As Crosby and Eleanor stand looking at the now empty house together, "Eleanor knew that she was going to cry. She did not want her to cry" (215). Like Martin, Eleanor does not want Crosby to cry. But unlike Martin, Eleanor is motivated by a concern seemingly for someone other than herself; Eleanor does not want

Crosby to cry because "She did not want to cry herself" (215). While this could be read as a selfish wish to protect her own feelings similar to Martin's concern with his own convenience, the way the scene unfolds negates this reading. While Martin wanted to keep Crosby from crying because it would place him in an awkward position and demand that he respond to another person's reality, Eleanor does not want Crosby to cry because her tears will hurt Eleanor too. As she turns around and sees Crosby crying, we read that "The mixture of emotions was positively painful; she was so glad to be quit of it all, but for Crosby it was the end of everything" (216). For Eleanor, leaving Abercorn Terrace is a great source of joy as it represents her newfound independence—she can finally begin to live a life of her own rather than a life of her family. For Crosby, however, leaving the house is different. For Crosby, saying goodbye to Abercorn Terrace represents not only a forced elimination of her services but also a forced eviction from her home for the past four decades. Even though the basement where Crosby has lived is dark and low enough for Eleanor to be ashamed—she has just realized the quarter's nature for the first time in her life—this place has been, as Crosby points out with tears running down her face, her home for forty years (216). The prospects for Crosby, she knows and we know, are few. After forty years of living if not together with then at least alongside the Pargiter family, Crosby is now "going off, alone, to a single room at Richmond" (216). While she may finally be getting a room of her own, it is not a room that Crosby wants. Eleanor acknowledges the discrepancy of their emotions here— "she was so glad to be quit of it all, but for Crosby it was the end of everything"—because she has the capacity and takes the time to imagine the situation from Crosby's perspective. Because Eleanor is adept enough at doing this, she realizes that what for her is a great and liberating moment of joy is a devastating occasion for Crosby.

As the two women say goodbye, despite Eleanor's attempts, she too starts to cry. Here, Eleanor's tears are a result of her understanding of the difference between herself and Crosby. As she watches Crosby "edge sideways down the slippery steps" with Rover on a

chain behind her, the moment, focalized through Eleanor, is described as "a dreadful moment; unhappy; muddled; altogether wrong" (217). The reason for this muddled wrongness, we are told, is that "Crosby was so miserable; she was so glad" (217). In other words, the discrepancy between their feelings and—importantly—Eleanor's recognition of Crosby's feelings cause a feeling of its own: the moment is "unhappy." This unhappiness cannot but affect Eleanor. Despite her personal happiness in this moment of liberation, tears stream down Eleanor's face as she holds the door open for Crosby. Could we—and should we—read the tears flecking Eleanor's cheeks here as Crosby's tears? Is this a moment when a character cries the tears of someone else, like the moment in *The Waves* when Bernard's "eyes fill with Susan's tears" (289)? If so, the moment should be read as something other than sentimentality. Crying the tears of someone else, and particularly doing so in the midst of one of your life's happiest and most liberating moments, suggests a sharing of emotion that goes beyond sentimentality. The emphasis on Crosby and Eleanor's different experiences shows us that this is not a moment in which Eleanor takes over Crosby's reality or erases her subjectivity. Eleanor recognizes her own emotions and how far they are from Crosby's; the simultaneous existence of these emotions is what causes Eleanor Pargiter pain here—it is what makes the moment "muddled."

Both Eleanor and Martin Pargiter, then, wish to shield themselves from Crosby's tears. They would prefer, Woolf lets us know, not to see Crosby cry as her tears inconvenience the upper-class siblings. However, Elanor and Martin's motivations for not wanting to witness Crosby crying are different, and this difference is crucial. In this difference, we see critical distinctions between seemingly similar acts of hesitating to imagine others' minds. Whereas Martin does not want to be inconvenienced by Crosby's existence—he cannot "bear" her tears and he hates talking to Crosby not because of who she is as an individual but because of her social role, her place, as a "servant." Eleanor, in contrast, does not want Crosby to cry because "She did not want to cry herself" (215).

Eleanor knows that she will cry Crosby's tears too and that the whole situation is "unhappy; muddled; altogether wrong" because Crosby is so miserable in and by the same moment that makes Eleanor so happy (217).

Because Eleanor is permeable to the emotions of others, she does finally—and importantly—cry with Crosby. Martin, on the contrary, lies about an appointment so that Crosby leaves, and he lies to himself that the "abominable system" of family life is to be blamed for his insincerity towards Crosby (222). While this system is certainly partly to blame for the insincere interactions between worker and employer, between lower-class and upper-class, a blanket accusation of the "abominable system" of family life obscures the gendered differences integral to this social structure.[5] Eleanor and Martin have been brought up in the very same "abominable system" of family life, yet they interact with Crosby in fundamentally opposing ways. The difference between their interactions with Crosby signifies the difference between being uninterested in performing the labor of imagining another's reality and being humbly interested in the unknowability of another. The contrast between the two Pargiter siblings in this novel calls attention to the difference between these approaches to the minds of others. While Woolfian empathy is built on a hesitation to imagine other minds, it is not the same kind of hesitation that motivates Martin Pargiter.

Mrs. Sands

The unassuming approach toward working women's minds continues in Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*. Here, we meet Trixie Sands—better known as Mrs. Sands, the cook at

---

[5] I want to note here that while there are significant gendered differences in how Martin and Eleanor Pargiter relate to Crosby's emotions, this point is somewhat complicated if we consider that part of the reason for why Woolf is so hesitant to venture into the minds of working women might well be because she, like Martin, prefers blaming a system that is beyond her control to accepting any kind of responsibility for this system which, after all, benefits her more than it does the Crosbys of the world. It does not seem far-fetched to suggest that Woolf's reluctance to imagine the world from the point of view of working women at least partially stemmed from an anxiety about what this worldview would reveal about herself as an employer and a member of the upper-middle-class.

Pointz Hall—another domestic worker lingering in the margins of consciousness for the novel's main characters. Rendering Mrs. Sands as she makes her way to the Pointz Hall barn during an interlude in the pageant that serves as the novel's entertaining epicenter, Woolf imagines this woman's mind in a dramatically paced paragraph that Monica J. Miller describes as a "stream of perceptions" (128):

> But Mrs. Sands was approaching. She was pushing her way through the crowd. She had turned the corner. She could see the great open door. But butterflies she never saw; mice were only black pellets in kitchen drawers; moths she bundled in her hands and put out the window. Bitches suggested only servant girls misbehaving. Had there been a cat she would have seen it—any cat, a starved cat with a patch of mange on its rump opened the flood gates of her childless heart. But there was no cat. The Barn was empty. (100-101)

Curiously, the barn is in fact far from empty here. Rather, as we learn in the preceding paragraph, the barn is populated by "A butterfly [that] sunned itself sensuously on a sunlit yellow plate," "Mice [that] slid in and out of holes or stood upright, nibbling," "Countless beetles and insects of various sorts [that] burrowed in the dry wood," and "A stray bitch [that] had made the dark corner where the sacks stood a lying-in ground for her puppies" (100). Mrs. Sands, however, does not see any of this. For her, mice and moths are only registered as work that must get done, dogs misogynistically signify impeding pregnancies—trouble—and butterflies are not even perceived: "But butterflies she never saw."

In the juxtaposition of these sharply contrasting paragraphs, Woolf depicts how aspects of a character's identity—in this case most notably class and gender—influence something as seemingly simple as what they see in a barn. Woolf's acknowledgment of how fundamentally a person's identity shapes acts of seeing and imagining in *Life as We Have Known It*, where the remembered landscapes of Greece and Italy constricted the upper-class imaginative enterprise into a life lived among "slag heaps and rows upon rows of slate-

roofed houses," here returns in the depiction of Mrs. Sands' perception of the barn (xxi). In this passage, we see how the concern about the ethics of imagination returns in a description of how fundamentally Mrs. Sands' identity, so far from Woolf's own in important ways, shapes her acts of seeing.

Woolf does not leave Mrs. Sands as a stereotype or a one-dimensional representation of her class and her gender, however. What Mrs. Sands sees in this barn may be deeply shaped by a life of cooking other people's meals but the domestic worker is not reduced to her class position. While Mrs. Sands may see work that needs to be done where upper-class characters would see beauty, we also learn that she would have seen a cat if there was one: "Had there been a cat she would have seen it—any cat, a starved cat with a patch of mange on its rump opened the flood gates of her childless heart" (101). This inclusion of Mrs. Sands' soft spot for cats gives readers a glimpse of her idiosyncratic identity beyond categories such as class and gender—she has no children, she loves cats (perhaps as a result of this childlessness), and she is quite soft-hearted. The striking detail of what at first seems like a sidenote—the detailed description of the imagined "any cat" whose disheveled appearance is imagined by Mrs. Sands as a sign of malnutrition—gives us a momentary impression of Mrs. Sands' own imagination. She does not merely think of cats in general here; she imagines a very specific cat, and it is, notably, a cat in need of care. Albeit brief, these details tell us something about who Mrs. Sands is that reaches beyond the schematic stereotypes of domestic workers that Woolf is often criticized for resorting to in her characterization of working women.

The detailed description of the cat is also significant because it is a moment when Woolf writes a working woman's thoughts and feelings about something other than her work. In other words, it is a moment when this minor character and working woman is depicted as existing outside her relation to the main characters of higher social status. This is important because it is a (rare) moment of Woolf describing a working woman as having

hopes and desires not connected to her employer, thus redistributing attention and power

on the page. It is worth noting that this happens in Woolf's last novel, and that she has

struggled to disconnect working women from their employers in previous novels. Mrs.

McNab's imagination is centered on Mrs. Ramsay, Mrs. Moffat's sole purpose in the novel is

to sweep up the crumbs of Bernard's fragile ego, and Crosby's mind is rarely allowed to stray

far from anything related to her previous or current employers. In other words, these

working women exist on the page primarily or sometimes purely in their roles as domestic

workers. In her depiction of Mrs. Sands, however, Woolf goes further. I am not pointing this

out to suggest that Woolf suddenly transcends the limit of her imagination in *Between the*

Acts or to applaud her for this brief imaginative achievement. Rather, I draw attention to

this moment to trace a trajectory of Woolf's struggle to imagine other minds that

characterizes her career and that can inform contemporary debates about who can imagine

whom.

The venture into Mrs. Sands' imagination invites Woolf's readers to imagine the

backstory of this cat-loving cook. Who is she, other than the cook at Pointz Hall, how did she

end up in this barn serving tea and cake to the guests at the pageant, and how does she feel

about it? These questions are invited but never answered, in characteristic Woolfian fashion.

Woolf knows that she cannot—and should not—venture too far into the inner life of Trixie

Sands. Because of her own socioeconomic privilege—because her imagination is situated in a

body that carries her "comfortable capitalistic head"—Woolf respectfully acknowledges her

limitations when it comes to imagining Mrs. Sands' interiority (*Life* xix). In this moment,

then, we can see how, as Alison Light noted, the servant figure does haunt Woolf's fiction

(xviii). Perhaps we should not strive to overcome this limit. Perhaps, instead, we should

listen to the narrator in *Flush* and accept, however hard it may be, that "nothing can be more

vain" than for Woolf to venture to guess what it might be like to be Mrs. Sands (182).

69

We can see Woolf's hesitation to depict Mrs. Sands' mind as connected to Lily Briscoe's famous wish to have "fifty pairs of eyes to see with" (*To the Lighthouse* 198). Like Lily Briscoe, Woolf knows that a true rendering of reality requires—at the very least—fifty pairs of eyes so that you can see the world from fifty different perspectives. To imagine what Mrs. Sands sees, she must have Mrs. Sands' eyes. This poses an ethical as well as epistemological and biological problem because our eyes are connected to our brains and therefore to our personal experiences. As Woolf writes in *Three Guineas,* "the eye is connected with the brain; the brain with the nervous system. That system sends its messages in a flash through every past memory and present feeling" (14). The desire to have fifty pairs of eyes poses serious problems for the possibility of seeing the world through someone else's eyes, let alone fifty pairs of them. Woolf knows how difficult it is to achieve the kind of artistic perception removed from "the straight lines of personality" that Lily Briscoe strives for because everything we see is filtered through our memories of the past and our present feelings which, of course, are also shaped by our embodied position in the world ("Street Haunting" 187). Woolf never tries to hide how difficult it is for her to see through Mrs. Sands' eyes and how what she calls the "impassable barrier" between her and someone like Mrs. Sands renders this woman ultimately unknowable to her as a person and a writer of considerable privilege (*Life* xxviii). As she puts it earlier in the novel, "what it meant to Mrs. Sands, when people missed their trains, and she, whatever she might want to do, must wait, by the oven, keeping meat hot, no one knew" (35).

Woolf's hesitation to tell her readers too much and too assertively about Mrs. Sands' life—to fill in the blanks too authoritatively—is a defining characteristic of Woolfian empathy. In an essay on Woolf, writer and historian Rebecca Solnit praises Woolf's reluctance to do exactly this: to fill in the blanks. "Filling in the blanks," Solnit writes, "replaces the truth that we don't entirely know with the false sense that we do. We know less when we erroneously think we know than when we recognize that we don't" (np). Woolf's

hesitation to assert facts about Mrs. Sands' mind, then, can be seen as a respectful

recognition of what Woolf does not and cannot know. As Solnit reminds us, recognizing the

unknowability of another requires language characterized by "nuance and ambiguity and

speculation"—language that "Woolf was unparalleled at" (np). In this way, Woolf's

acknowledgment that "no one knew" what it meant to Mrs. Sands when she must stay and

keep the meat hot can be read as another sign of Detloff's "epistemic humility" (45).

Characterized by ambiguity and nuance—by words that acknowledge ignorance and that

allow room for speculation rather than assertion—Woolf's language stops short of asserting

when it comes to Mrs. Sands, as it does with so many of her other working women.

The acknowledgment of the unknowability of Mrs. Sands to the upper-class people at

Pointz Hall, and to Woolf herself, characterizes Woolfian empathy. "[N]o one knew" can be

read as a lamenting critique of the inconsideration of the upper classes towards the so often

invisibilized people who make their comfortable lives possible. This, of course, is a critique

that Woolf herself in no ways is immune to, as Light and others have noted and as becomes

uncomfortably clear if we consider Woolf's many and often vile aspersions about domestic

workers in her letters and diaries. As such, it is a moment of Woolfian empathy that stops

short of intruding too far into the interiority of Mrs. Sands. Such careful and hesitant

empathy, I propose, can serve as an ethical corrective against what in recent years has been

critiqued as self-centered and exploitative empathy. It can also, and simultaneously, be read

as a respectful acknowledgment of difference and appreciation—even celebration—of what

we, as writers and as readers, can never know. In this way, Woolfian empathy can invite

what H. Porter Abbott in his narratological investigations throughout *Real Mysteries:*

Narrative and the Unknowable (2013) calls "a humbling experience" (9). While Abbott

writes about slightly different kinds of unknowabilities than the ones under the microscope

in this project, his assertion that certain kinds of literature "can lead us not simply to

acknowledge that we don't know but to feel the insistent presence of this condition" is

significant for Woolfian empathy too (9). Woolfian empathy never lets the "insistent presence" of the unknowability of others too far out of sight. While it might be a stretch to suggest that Woolf herself was humble in her approach to domestic workers, her repeated acknowledgments of the limits of her own insight invites readers to approach their own knowledge of others with a certain humility, especially when these others are intersectionally different. Read this way, Woolf's attempts to represent working women celebrate the unknowable remains that demarcate the difference between self and other that always remains in acts of empathy as in acts of reading. Such empathy can also bring a fresh perspective to current debates about who can write about whom.

Empathetic trespassing[6] into "the region of 'perhaps' and appears'

More than a marker of her writerly skills, Woolf's hesitation to intrude on the interiorities of those whose lives are very different from her own offers knowledge about the limits of human perception and imagination, and about how interconnected these aspects of our minds are. Grounded in this hesitation, Woolfian empathy presents a kind of empathy that is always suspicious of authority. Whenever Woolf ventures—or perhaps trespasses—into what she in *Orlando* calls "the region of 'perhaps' and 'appears,'" she does so with care and with caution (310). This region of "perhaps" and "appears" is a place of uncertainty. It is also a region in which Woolf is remarkably comfortable; it is a region in which she lingers, and to which she invites her readers to stay. By staying in this region, Woolf questions the default of finding certainty by drawing attention to what the neuroscientist Stuart Firestein has termed "the edge of the widening circle of ignorance" (*Ignorance* 175). In so doing, Woolf reminds her readers that what may *appear* certain often is founded upon a falsely confident and strikingly singular, solipsistic and mirror-bound, perspective.

---

[6] I would like to thank Candace Waid for this phrase, and for innumerable other poetic formulations that she has provided throughout the development of this project.

To return to Alison Light's questions quoted at the outset of this chapter, this is an empathy always haunted by whether it is possible to "be a writer and not dabble in the stuff of other people's souls? An author without authority?" (112). In line with Light, I suggest that we see Woolf's struggle with these questions most clearly in her hesitation to imagine working women's minds and lives. In this hesitation, we also find an alternative to the exploitative empathy that Hartman and others critique. The "difficulty and slipperiness of empathy" that Hartman identifies is acknowledged and allowed space on the page when we, as writers and as readers, hesitate to imagine the mind of another (18). Through this hesitation, we can allow space for the other to expand. This hesitation might in fact be necessary to allow space for the other and for other sensibilities. Without this hesitant pause where I recognize the limits of my imagination, I always run the risk of imagining what *I* would feel like if I were Mrs. Sands, Crosby, Mrs. McNab, or Mrs. Moffat, even though I have never worked domestically for another family, observing their world from my knees and keeping their meat hot as they make their way home, oblivious to my reality. This kind of imaginative identification would expand the space of my subjectivity while usurping the reality of the one I supposedly empathize with; I would take over the reality of these working women with my imagination. In other words, this kind of empathy obscures difference and serves to affirm my place at and as the center—"the big 'I' that feels your pain" as Breithaupt put it (14).

Returning our attention to the fundamentally embodied nature of empathy and perception, Woolfian empathy asks us to think twice before stepping into somebody else's shoes. These shoes might not fit, and the act itself might leave the other without footwear. As a writing and reading strategy, Woolfian empathy is hesitant to imagine across difference and presents an approach to literature and to other minds that always acknowledges differences, individual as well as structural.

Woolfian empathy, then, rests on a questioning of the assumption that everyone is entitled to empathize with others indiscriminately. It is a modest, anti-authoritarian, and perhaps anxious kind of empathy that asks us, again and again, to question who has the right and the ability to imagine whom. Denying the "logic of increase," as Odell put it, Woolfian empathy asks us to recognize and respect the limit of our imaginations and to question the instinct that tells us that it is our birthright as educated readers to venture into the minds of everyone else (*Saving Time* 256). Resisting the urge to break limits is particularly important, I suggest, in a time characterized by a desire to always move farther ahead into the unknown—whether that unknown is a terrestrial territory or the inner life of another being.

Chapter II

Fluid I's: Changing Form in *Orlando* and *Jazz*

[W]hy not simply become fluid in their lives, if
my own is dim?
—Virginia Woolf, Diary vol. IV

When we take an instrumental or even
algorithmic view of friendship and recognition,
or fortify *the imagined bastion of self against
change*, or even just fail to see that we affect
and are affected by others (even and especially
those we do not see)—then we unnaturally
corral our attention to others and the places we
inhabit together."
—Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing*

[A] self that goes on changing is a self that goes
on living
—Virginia Woolf, "The Humane Art"

Thinking with Jenny Odell who identifies "the imagined bastion of self against change" as a

modern and Western myth, this chapter turns to characters who change drastically to

explore how these characters reveal how the bastion that Odell articulates is an *imagined*

entity (*How to Do Nothing* 154). Focusing on characters changing in fluid fashion in Woolf's

Orlando: A Biography (1928) and Morrison's *Jazz* (1992), I examine how imagined

individuals are represented as fluid, permeable, and ever-changing in close connection with

their social environment. In *Orlando,* we meet a main character who changes gender

midway through their more than three-hundred-year-long life, and in *Jazz*, Morrison presents us with characters who change not once or twice but seven times throughout the novel. These changes emphasize that individuals are relational in that they change fluidly and dynamically, often in close connection with their environments. In this chapter, I parse the consequences that an acknowledgment of our selves as fundamentally fluid has for our understanding of empathy. After tracing examples of Woolf's and Morrison's characters who change drastically over time, I conclude by asking how this fluid understanding of individuals can help us re-imagine empathy as a dance rather than an act of mirroring.

*

The fictive Orlando that we meet in Woolf's mock biography is a fantastically fluid character. Growing up as a nobleman in the England of Elizabeth I, Orlando wakes up one day as a woman. Initially, there seems to be little difference in the changed Orlando. People around her note that there was "no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman" (187). Her clothes, however, trouble this alleged stability. Wearing skirts instead of breeches, Orlando is not only treated differently, but begins to treat others differently; Suddenly, we see Orlando curtseying, flattering, and complying with the demands of men around her (187). In other words, the gender norms dictating Orlando's dress slowly but surely begin to dictate her behavior.

Also slowly but surely, Orlando's change in dress leads to—or reveals—a change in being. As her biographer describes:

> Certain susceptibilities were asserting themselves, and others were diminishing. The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as

they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us

warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us. (187)

Here, we begin to see how a change of clothing runs deeper than mere appearances. More

than "vain trifles," Orlando's outfits fundamentally change how she perceives the world.

While a man, the biographer tells us, "looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for

his uses and fashioned to his liking," a woman, on the other hand, "takes a sidelong glance at

it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion" (188). This alternative to, perhaps even the opposite of,

looking the world straight in the face opens up for more multitudinous ways of experiencing

the world as the I is not big, not narrow, and not fettered to a singular, stable point of view

from which to stare the world straight in its face. While not quite the "sidelong leer" of Mrs.

McNab in *To the Lighthouse*, this sidelong *glance* allows for a mode of engaging with the

world that troubles the idea that there is a stable self at the automatic center of every

encounter with the world (131). The sidelong glance—characteristic of characters, like

Orlando, who are often relegated to the margins of history—allows for a fluidity of being, a

mode of existence where changing perspectives is the norm and where a stable sense of self

is an anomaly. This fluidity of being can pave the way for reaching the goal that Lily Briscoe

knows is necessary for any artistic achievement: to have "fifty pairs of eyes to see with" (*To

the Lighthouse* 198). In order to look at the world from fifty perspectives, your point of view

cannot be fixed. A changing eye—in terms of changing from what perspective we look at the

world—also entails a changing I. This fluidity of being is spelled out throughout Woolf's

playful novel.

The connection between Orlando's sartorial and behavioral changes is so substantial

that they lead the biographer to note that "there is much to support the view that it is clothes

that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they

mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking" (188). Orlando's change of dress

and change of being are inextricably linked. Pushing against the idea that there would ever be such a thing as a stable self, Orlando's changes puncture essentialist views of human beings. If we change swiftly and so fundamentally just depending on what we wear, how could there ever be such a thing as a stable self, a self impervious to change that upholds the "imagined bastion of self against change" (*How to Do Nothing* 154)? And if a simple change of clothing leads to a change of being, how much do we change depending on our environment? To return to Odell, the emphasis on Orlando's change through the clothes she wears exposes that it is *unnatural* to view the self as unchanging (*How to Do Nothing* 154). Understanding an individual as a stable bastion that remains the same throughout life is only possible if we do not notice our frequent changes and how these changes are propelled by forces, things, and beings outside of the boundaries of what we like to think of as a self. As Odell reminds us, failing to acknowledge these changes and their deep connection to our environment "unnaturally" hinders us from seeing the world as it really is (*How to Do Nothing* 154).

While perhaps striking, the changes that Orlando goes through are not unique. It is repeatedly pointed out that while Orlando's change may be an extreme case, the difference between Orlando and others is in degree, not in kind. "Different though the sexes are, they intermix," the biographer tells us before continuing:

> In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. (189)

Hence, Orlando's gender fluidity is perhaps more of an everyday phenomenon than her fantastical life makes out. Read along Woolf's continued explorations of the fluidity of existence, Orlando's fluid self-expression gives a glimpse into the fluidity of being that Woolf presents as a core characteristic of any individual. (The vacillation between male and female

in Orlando's case is but one example of how our selves are not the stable entities we sometimes are led to believe that they are.) Thus, Orlando's changes undermine the very idea that any self is a "bastion" impervious to change by presenting a drastic case of the opposite (*How to Do Nothing* 154).

In *Orlando*, change is closely connected to time. Towards the end of the novel, when Orlando has lived for almost four hundred years, her rich past has created such an intricate tapestry of memories that, as the biographer points out, "it is an open question in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment" (307). At this point, Orlando is very close to being "a person entirely disassembled" because of the multiplicity of times that exist within her (307). The elongated timespan of Orlando's life allows for a particularly vivid exposure of how human beings change as we move through time; Although Orlando's situation may be on the far end of a spectrum given that she has lived such a long and varied life, just as with the gender fluidity, this experience of many times co-existing within one body is not unique to Orlando. In a passage that portrays how Orlando's rich memories jeopardize her existence in the present, we learn this:

> For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not—Heaven help us—all having lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit? Some say two thousand and fifty-two. (308)

This humorous passage reveals connections between a fluid self and an expansive self that are central to Woolf's thinking about living with and as a human self. To change selves in this way, the biographer notes, is "the most usual thing in the world;" it is not something unique to Orlando but a condition of "the human spirit" (308). Pointing out the mundane nature of this type of fluidity, *Orlando*—as a character and as a novel—reveals how commonplace a fluid sense of self is. Through repetitions of this sentiment, the novel makes

it seem ludicrous that anyone would be born with a stable sense of self that stays the same throughout life. This understanding of an individual as fundamentally fluid is not possible if we continue to think of the self as a bastion impervious to change. In this way, Orlando's constantly and continuously changing self questions the idea that a self ever is or ever could be a stable entity to be reflected in isolation.

The changes that Orlando undergoes are almost always highly dependent upon her environment. As the biographer notes, the different selves lodged within Orlando "as plates are piled up on a waiter's hand" only show up at certain times (308). What this means, in practice, is that "one will only come if it is raining, another in a room with green curtains, another when Mrs. Jones is not there, another if you can promise it a glass of wine—and so on" (308). Today, almost a century after *Orlando*'s publication, the close connections between—indeed interdependence of—a self and their environment that Woolf emphasizes in passages like this have been corroborated by the cognitive sciences. In the words of cultural neurologist Bruce Wexler, "individuals often have an exaggerated sense of the independence of their thought processes from environmental input" (39). This exaggerated sense of independence is precisely what Orlando's existence exposes. Orlando's many different selves which Woolf poetically describes as "plates [...] piled on a waiter's hand" would, in Wexler's scientific terminology, be called "experiential antecedents to our present selves" (40). While there is a clear difference in style between the two descriptions, the phenomenon that they articulate is strikingly similar.

Wexler and Woolf both emphasize that what we might be tempted to think of as an inner self impervious to outside influences is nothing but a myth, thus underscoring how self-sufficiency and self-reliance are impossible on a fundamental, biological level. As Wexler elucidates, our bodies—including our brains—exist in a constant process of exchange with the environment as our organs turn gas, fluid, nutrients, and sensory information into

80

energy and impulses (39). It is thus not only our thoughts that are highly influenced by our environment but our biological beings. Wexler articulates this interdependency in a way that underscores the radical sense of relationality that defines human life: "the relationship between the individual and the environment is so extensive that it almost overstates the distinction between the two to speak of a relation at all" (39). To understand how and why certain selves only emerge in certain environments—only when a glass of wine is promised, for example—we need to acknowledge how fundamentally our environment influences us. This awareness of fluidity is not possible if we think of our selves as unchanging bastions, as stagnated selves that have stopped changing and, therefore—if we agree with Woolf— stopped living since "a self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living" (Woolf, "The Humane Art" 227).

For Woolf, an intricate interchange with other people was deeply felt in her personal life as well as in her writing. As she reflects in her diary when the contemporary writer Stella Benson dies, the death of this fellow creator changes—diminishes—her own writing:

A curious feeling: when a writer like S.B. dies, that one's response is diminished. Here & Now [one of many tentative titles for the novel that would end up becoming *The Years*] wont be lit up by her: its life lessened. My effusion—what I send out—less porous and radiant—as if the thinking stuff were a web that were fertilized only by other peoples (her that is) thinking it too: now lacks life. (*Diary vol. IV: 1931-1935*, Thursday 7 December 1933, p. 193)

Here, we see a writer's approach to Wexler's point about human life being a process of constant exchange between the environment and the individual. Conceptualizing her existence as an effusion, meaning (among other things) "the escape of a fluid from anatomical vessels by rupture or exudation," Woolf emphasizes how fundamentally dependent her own mind is on things that exist outside and around it ("Effusion"). If even

81

one fellow human being whose ideas she would have engaged with—and who, in turn, would have engaged with Woolf's ideas—passes away, Woolf knows that her own work will be fundamentally changed. Given the constant fluctuation of beings we all exist in the midst of, conceiving both writing and being in this fluid way really leaves no room for the fantasy of an I being stable. As we exist in deep interconnection, in environs made of other humans and of the more-than-human around us, we also exist in a fundamental state of fluidity as we change through other's deaths, births, and changes. It is crucial to note here that Stella Benson was not a close friend of Woolf's; in other words, it is not merely those close to us who affect our beings. Approached this way, an individual life becomes something much less stable but also much vaster and richer than if we refuse to acknowledge the effusive state of our existence. In this way, it is possible, as Woolf wished in her diary, to become fluid in other people's lives when our own is "dim."

In *Orlando*, we see an emphasis on change that reveals the expansive and fluid possibilities of living by being more extreme than what is possible in life outside the fantastical mock biography. In the fantastical aspect of the narrative and character lies a crucial difference between both Orlando and other characters and people that is important to keep in mind. While Orlando *almost* always changes in connection with their environment throughout the novel, the most striking change—the gender switch—appears out of the blue. In this change disconnected from the environment, we see how Orlando, albeit unexpecting, is granted a freedom and independent autonomy that is denied both other characters and mere mortals. To change as freely as Orlando does requires a certain social position within one's environment—their changes require a social position that is situated above the social constraints of ordinary people. In other words, Orlando's changes are in some ways a result of extraordinary privilege. As I discuss below in the section about

unwanted changes propelled by an individual's environment in Morrison's *Jazz*, this privilege is only afforded for a select few.

<div align="center">*</div>

To return to the connection between change and time in *Orlando*, it is important to note that the multiplicity of being that both Woolf and Wexler articulate can be a dangerous, or at least troublesome, fact of living. As already noted, Orlando's rich past makes her perilously close to being "a person entirely disassembled" (307). At this point, Orlando has gone "a little too far from the present moment," which is presented as a hindrance to living in the present (304). Wandering too far from the present, we learn, is perilous partly because the present "*assault[s]*" a character who has disappeared into the depths of past and future times (306; emphasis added). Living too much in the past distracts from the present in a hazardous way, turning any reminder of the present—such as a clock striking eleven—into a violent assault on the too-fragmented self.

What saves Orlando from becoming "a person entirely disassembled" is her ability to *synchronize* the different selves that are lodged within her (307). "[I]t cannot be denied," we learn:

> that the most successful practitioners of the art of life, often unknown people by the way, somehow contrive to synchronise the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system so that when eleven strikes, all the rest chime in unison, and the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past. (305)

Here, synchronization is presented as the solution to a sort of fragmentation that precludes an existence in the present. Rather than that kind of complete transportation to the past, *synchronization* of all those times lodged within ourselves is required for "successful" execution of the art of living.

Synchronization is a telling word choice in this passage because the act of synchronizing requires more than one participant and because it is a process dependent upon motion. In other words, synchronization is an act characterized by dynamic movement. Stemming from the Greek *syn,* meaning "together with, jointly," the etymological root of *synchronize* underscores how the act of synchronization is not an act that can be accomplished alone. Intimate to dancing, synchronization requires movement together with others; it requires—and is—a deeply relational mode of existence. Acted out together, jointly with others, synchronization reveals the fellowship of living. For Orlando, the synchronization happens between her present self and those two thousand and fifty-two other selves lodged within her in this case, but her synchronization is also highly influenced by the environment (remember, certain selves only show up in certain environments). The environment is particularly important because of how change through synchronization is anchored in and aided by people around us.[7] Similar to how the "sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system" according to Orlando's biographer, synchronization with others often has the power to change the beat in our beings (305).

Notably, synchronization does *not* mean turning two dissimilar things into the same. As a verb, to synchronize means "[t]o combine or co-ordinate" ("Synchronize"). Synchronization, then, is a form of coming together by adjusting to and with another (this

---

[7] I look at how individuals synchronize with each other both through shared pasts created by friendship and through the shared imagination made possible in the reading act in Chapter III.

"another" can be either a person or a thing, as in the case of synchronizing to a musical rhythm). The act of synchronizing is not dependent upon mirroring; it is not characterized by a pursuit of similarity—to combine or coordinate something does not require similarity. In this way, synchronization opens the way for maintaining the difference that mirroring risks obscuring. Synchronization does not require a taking over of someone else's perspective or a stepping into someone else's shoes. Coming together in synchronization means adjusting the pace to and with another; it is often a compromise, meaning all parties involved adjust their pace to some degree.

This is not to say that synchronization is an act that somehow exists outside of power hierarchies. The less dominant often change (or dance) to the tune and will of the dominant. The benefit of thinking about the fluidity of fellow-feeling as a form of synchronization lies in the fact that synchronization does not hide the power dynamics that shape acts of fellow-feeling. In stark excluding contrast, the mirroring model denies acknowledgment of these power dynamics through its emphasis on sameness. There is value in this revelation. By making power dynamics visible, synchronization allows us to acknowledge, study, and understand how these dynamics shape acts of feelings for and with others in ways that mirroring does not. Because synchronization requires fluidity—we need to be fluid to adjust to another—the fluid sense of self that we see realized in *Orlando* facilitates this alternative to the mirroring model of empathy.

The fact that synchronization is a process dependent upon the more-than-one is central to recognizing the possibilities of fellow-feeling understood as a dance rather than a form of mirroring. If we see others as mirrors to ourselves, these others are doomed to stability (it is difficult to see two thousand and fifty-two rapidly changing selves in one mirror). And while you can see a body moving in a mirror, it only captures the surface. The mirror image fixes the one we are looking at; it only allows them to be a flat, one-

85

dimensional entity resistant to change. It is difficult to see those "sixty or seventy times different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system" at any given moment in a mirror, just as it is hard to glimpse those two thousand and fifty-two selves that make up one individual in one reflection. That kind of depth is not afforded by the mirror. To return to the epigraph—"[A] self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living"—the mirror only allows a dead self (Woolf, "The Humane Art" 227). In contrast with the one-dimensional, static existence enabled by the mirror image, synchronization through the movement of minds and bodies allows for and is dependent upon a fluidity that is crucial to intersectional fellow-feeling.

*

The theme of synchronization is both continued and developed in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. There is, of course, the synchronization indicated by the title of the novel, which is so much more than a title. The structure, vibe, and mode of jazz as a form of improvisation and exploration synchronized through rhythm shapes the novel on several levels.[8] The fluidity of jazz is connected both to the form of the novel and the form of its characters. As Carolyn Jones has argued, Morrison "uses the improvisational quality of music to deconstruct the form of tragedy, allowing a reconstruction of identity to emerge that is not determined, but fluid and improvisational" (481). Morrison's novel is characterized by a type of fluidity created by the many, interchanging, and complexly related perspectives it presents. This, too, is connected to jazz as a form. As Jones reminds, "[j]azz [...] *is* this taking of another

---

[8] See Bhave, Anushka et al., "Comparing Synchronicity in Body Movement among Jazz Musicians with Their Emotions." *Sensors (Basel, Switzerland)* vol. 23,15 6789. 29 Jul. 2023, doi:10.3390/s23156789 for a recent cognitive perspective on jazz, synchronization, and emotion.

perspective" (487). While Jones is talking about the music genre in this case, the fluidity required to take another perspective is central to *Jazz* as a novel as well.

We see the fluidity of *Jazz* in how the characters change. Beginning with Joe Trace, the husband of Violet and the lover of Dorcas is described as "double-eyed" throughout the novel (106). This description has multiple layers of meaning for understanding Joe as a character. On the level of visual appearance, Joe's eyes are two different colors (206). This is the kind of double-ness you would be able to notice in a mirror. But the double-ness of his eyes of course indicates a form of duplicity too: Joe lives a double life with Dorcas, which is the second level of symbolic meaning carried by his "double-eyed" character. But there is a third meaning to Joe's double-eyed—or perhaps double-I'd—personality as well, and this third aspect allows him to change in remarkably fluid ways throughout his life.

Throughout the novel, we see how Joe's I and his eyes—his self and his vision—change over time. Meeting Dorcas and beginning his most obvious double life is a significant change for Joe, but it is by no means the first time he has changed drastically and dramatically in his life. "With her I was fresh, new again," Joe tells us right before disclosing that even "[b]efore I met her I'd changed into new seven times" (123). Joe's many and significant transformations are described in a mere six pages of the novel. Most of these changes are intimately connected with—perhaps even caused by—changes in his social, political, and natural environment.

Joe's first change is a result of the fact that he is not automatically granted a self by the world around him: the first time he changes is when he gives himself a self through the act of naming. This initial change takes place, Joe discloses, "when I named my own self, since nobody did it for me, since nobody knew what it could or should have been" (123). Before starting school, there had been no need for Joe to be anything other than Joe—there had been no need for more than one name. "The first day I got to school," however, this

changes: "I had to have two names," Joe continues (124). Becoming part of an educational

institution requires a certain double-ness from Joe as it requires both a first and a last name.

The requirement of two names poses a practical problem for Joe, but perhaps this early

exposure to the ease of changing one's self also paves the way for his fluid, double-eyed life.

The last name he ends up presenting his teacher with is Trace, based on the only answer he

has ever received when he asks where his biological parents went: "they disappeared without

a trace" (124). Believing *Trace* to refer to himself, Joe decides to call himself Joe Trace. This

surprises his adoptive brother, Victory Williams. Turning "his *whole self* around in the seat,"

Victory surprisedly asks Joe why he gave the teacher this name rather than the last name of

Victory's family in which Joe has been raised (124; emphasis added). Juxtaposing the young

Victory's *whole self* with Joe's newfound and markedly made-up identity, Morrison exposes

how a whole self is a privilege that is not yet, and perhaps never will be, granted to Joe. Born

into a more stable family than Joe, Victory assumes a unified self that can turn around, a

"whole self" with a complete double name, in his seat. This unified movement based on an

assumption is not afforded to Joe, whose parents left without a trace and without their son.

Through this juxtaposition, Morrison reveals the inequality of who can uphold the illusion of

a whole self and who cannot, showing us that neither whole selves nor last names are not

distributed equally.

In the following six pages, Joe's changes are cataloged quickly. The second time he

changes is when a man in his childhood town picks Joe and Victory to be his protegees and

teaches them how to hunt in the woods. For Joe, this education is experienced as a

transformative time when he "was picked out and trained to be a man" (125). Being "a man"

here, Joe elaborates, means being able to "live independent and feed myself no matter what"

(125). Selfhood, masculinity, and independence are thus intimately intertwined in the world

that Joe lives in. As one or another of these three pillars of his identity is challenged throughout his life, Joe keeps on changing.

As the world changes around him, Joe changes in and with the world. As with Orlando, these changes are always closely linked to what exists around Joe: to the environment he exists in. When his independence is threatened as his hometown burns down in 1893, Joe changes for the third time when he is forced to relocate, on foot, to a town fifteen miles away (126). After this change, Joe is so "used to changing" that he is both bolder and less resistant to the fluidity that characterizes his existence. Like his next change—initiated by his move, together with Violet, to New York City—this change is driven by the need for independence (126-127). Because there is a decreasing number of jobs for Joe in the segregated and deeply racist South, he, like many other Black folks at the time, moves north with the hope of a change that will allow financial independence. Underscoring the connections between place and identity—between environment and self—Joe's changes connected to his geographical movements will continue to signify his fluidity.

The move to New York is just the beginning of a series of changes catalyzed by Joe's existence together with Violet in the city. As they move within the city—as they leave "the stink of Mulberry Street and Little Africa, then the flesh-eating rats on West Fifty-third" and move uptown—Joe believes he has found his "permanent self" (127). This, of course, turns out to be an illusion (no surprise given that the self can only ever be an "*imagined* bastion" against change as Odell reminds us (*How to Do Nothing* 154)). Settling into this illusory permanent self, Joe is forced to change by the violence of history. This is how he characterizes his next change: "Then long came a summer in 1917 and after those whitemen took that pipe from around my head, I was brand new for sure because they almost killed me. Along with many a more" (128). The event that Joe refers to here is what is known as the first mass demonstration by African Americans: the Silent Parade on July 28, 1917, when ten

89

thousand people marched down the streets of New York City to protest the white mobs terrorizing Black residents of East St. Louis. This terror left at least 40 Black Americans dead and destroyed countless others' homes as well as lives, including, in the world of the novel, the lives of Dorcas' parents (Britannica). The change spurred by the racist violence is different in kind, and perhaps also in degree, from Joe's earlier changes because. It is also a change that very clearly is propelled by forces outside his self. Illustrating how closely connected our lives are with the—often violent— historical, political, and environmental contexts we happen to be born into, this change emphasizes how many of our internal changes are propelled by external forces over which we have little or no control. In other words, it illustrates our deep enmeshment with the world in which we exist. To return to Wexler, "the relationship between the individual and the environment is so extensive that it almost overstates the distinction between the two to speak of a relation at all" (39)

The fact that Joe survives these riots encourages him to participate in the next historical event that will change him: the victory parade of the African-American 369th Infantry Regiment—also known as the "three six nine," or the "Harlem Hellfighters"— returning home from World War I. During this historical event, thousands of people came out to support the troops as they marched in a parade animated by the (short-lived) hope that inclusion in the brutalities of war overseas would mean an end to the brutalities of segregation at home. Joe proudly declares that we walked "all the way, every goddamn step of the way, with the three six nine" (129). This walk will come to signify yet another instance when Joe thinks he has changed for the last time: "I thought that change was the last, and it sure was the best because the War had come and gone and the colored troops of the three six nine that fought it made me so proud it split my heart in two" (129). Like the crowds hoping for political change, Joe is wrong; he is about to meet Dorcas who, we know, will change him again because "[w]ith her I was fresh, new again" (123).

It is important to note that Joe's changes are not voluntary. As we see with his change that results from racist violence, Joe's fluidity is intimately connected with his racial identity. Because he lives in a segregated America structured by white supremacy, this means that his changes are often imposed upon him. In contrast with Orlando, Joe's several selves are not freely chosen. Joe himself points out the connections between his frequent changes and his racial identity. "I talk about being new seven times before I met you," Joe addresses the now-dead Dorcas and the reader, "but back then, back there, if you was or claimed to be colored, you had to be new and stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped" (135). Perhaps nodding to Du Bois' conceptualization of a "double consciousness," characterized by "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," Joe, once again, points out how the chimera of a stable and unified self is not something that is granted to him as a Black man in the early 20th century's United States (5). Joe's changes, then, are not a result of self-actualization or of some grand plan about how to develop as an individual to reach his full potential or become his "best self." His changes are not part of a progressive narrative in which Joe can somehow pick a satisfying self out of a line-up of available identities. Quite contrary, the environment he finds himself in—an environment structured by white supremacist ideals and deep-seated racism—*demands* that he change yet remains the same. As Joe reminds us in this passage and as the violent abuse he suffers in peaceful protests and the discrimination he faces on the train north where he and Violet must move "five times in four different cars to abide by the Jim Crow law," makes perfectly clear, the changing demands imposed upon Black people in this time and place is more than a philosophical question (127). Constantly needing to split his mind into two to predict how white people around him will see and interpret him, Joe is doomed to double-ness.

The involuntary nature of Joe's changes is important to note to avoid romanticizing the fluidity of selfhood. While it is certainly the case that the "bastion of self against change" is imagined—our selves keep changing, whether we like it or not—the changes our fluid selves go through are not necessarily either good or welcome (*How to Do Nothing* 154). My aim in dissecting the double-eyed Joe's multiple selves and inspecting his many changes is not to present an ideal or to suggest that all of Joe's changes are positive or desirable. Rather, my intention is to reveal how the idea and ideal of a stable self is a fantasy available only to a subset of the population. Everybody changes, but for some—such as double-eyed Joe Trace—the changes are harder to deny than for those who are perceived as whole individuals by others and themselves.

*

Violet, too, is characterized by a distinct fluidity. While Joe's changes are clear-cut—at least in his recollection of them—Violet's changes are constantly vacillating. We see this vacillation in the different names she is called by her community—Violet and *Violent*, a nickname she earns after attacking Dorcas in her coffin—and her habit of referring to herself as "*that* Violet" (95, emphasis original). For Violet, the internal changes connected to these different names are intricately connected to her bodily changes. As she ages, she attempts to change her body back to what it once was through the consumption of malted milkshakes spiked with something called Dr. Dee's Nerve and Flesh Builder (93). Try as she might to get her hips back—to regain the illusion of a stable self—Violet is doomed to a body that changes in unwanted ways as "the milkshakes alone didn't seem to be doing any good" (93).

Lamenting her lost hips, Violet—through the narrator's free indirect discourse—speculates that perhaps "*that* Violet, the one who knew where the butcher knife was and was strong enough to use it, had the hips she had lost" (94, emphasis original). In this emphasis on "*that* Violet" as being distinct from another assumed, present, Violet, we see what could be read as a dissociation but, if we resist the urge to diagnose, we can also discern a connection to Orlando's many selves stacked up like plates on a waiter's hand. For Violet, the distinction between "*that* Violet" and this (present) Violet is at first an important way for her to grapple with guilt and shame. Separating herself from *that* Violet who took a butcher's knife to a dead girl's face gives Violet a coping strategy. "Whenever she thought about *that* Violet, and what *that* Violet saw through her own eyes," we read, "she knew there was no shame there, no disgust. That was hers alone" (94, emphasis original). Here, we see a separation into several different, fluctuating selves. Distancing her present self from *"that* Violet" who attacked the dead Dorcas becomes a coping mechanism for Violet, a way for her to come to terms with her actions.

Soon, however, the two Violets lose their distinctiveness and begin to blur together. The neat division between *this*—present and non-violent—Violet and *that*—past and violent—Violet (or Violent) crumbles as Violet's changes become more fluid. As a result of this fluidity, Violet is reconciled with the fact that it is not, after all, another Violet who has assaulted a dead teenage girl at her funeral. Her realization that *that* Violet and *this* Violet are the same comes halfway through a passage that can best be described as a stream-of-consciousness section where the narrator slips into Violet's mind after a page and a half of free indirect discourse. The change from free indirect discourse to narration of Violet's interiority is marked by a switch from the third-person to the first-person (95). Here, Violet, now articulated in the first-person, suddenly realizes that there is no distinction between the Violets:

> NO! *that* Violet is not somebody walking round town, up and down the streets
> wearing my skin and using my eyes shit no *that* Violet is me! The me that hauled hay
> in Virginia and handled a four-mule team in the brace. (95-96, emphasis original).

Here, we see the temporally different Violets coming together: the Violet that assaulted Dorcas, the Violet walking the streets of New York, and the Violet that labored in Virginia are all joined in a moment of epiphany ("shit no *that* Violet is me"). If "the most successful practitioners of the art of life" manage to synchronize their several selves in the present moment, as Orlando's biographer asserted, this would be a moment in which Violet successfully practices the art of life (*Orlando* 305). Here, then, Violet goes from being "a person entirely disassembled" to a person in which several selves may very well exist, but not in fragmentation (*Orlando* 307).

Violet's fluidity extends to Joe in significant ways. Reminiscing about the times when she first met Joe, Violet suddenly realizes what Dorcas might have seen in this man who is, as we are repeatedly told, old enough to be her father:

> Maybe that is what she saw. Not the fifty-year-old man toting a sample case, but my
> Joe Trace, my Virginia Joe Trace who carried a light inside him, whose shoulders
> were razor sharp and who looked at me with two-color eyes and never saw nobody
> else. Could she have looked at him and seen that? (96)

Violet's realization reveals a connection between the fluidity of our beings and how we are being perceived. Joe's fluid doubleness is not only felt by him but also perceived by others. Distinguishing between "the fifty-year-old man toting a sample case" and not only Joe but "my *Virginia* Joe Trace," Violet reveals how Joe is doubly determined through the double determiners "my" and "Virginia" (96; emphasis added). The recognition of what Dorcas might have seen in her husband illustrates how recognizing a fluidity of being works both

94

ways. Just as Joe is a malleable, fluid, character in his own experiences, who Joe is changes depending on who sees him as well as when and where. The temporal and geographical specificity of his fluidity is emphasized through Violet's remarks about Joe's age (he is either seen as a "fifty-year-old man" or as the Joe that Violet got to know when they were young) as well as his location ("my *Virginia* Joe Trace"). Illustrating how Joe is never just one thing but rather changes in a fluid relationship with his environment, Violet's realization chips away at "the imagined bastion of self against change" (Odell, *How to Do Nothing* 154).

Practicing the art of looking at people from more than one perspective, Violet finally realizes what young Dorcas might have seen in her husband. Through this realization, Violet achieves a version of Lily Briscoe's desire to see Mr. Ramsay through Mrs. Ramsay's eyes. As Lily knows, this visual fluidity—the ability to see the world through other people's eyes—is necessary for her to see the *real* Mr. Ramsay; it is necessary for her to not be biased by her dislike of the patriarch if she wants to understand his reality. To do this, Lily must first acknowledge that "[h]alf one's notions of other people were, after all, grotesque" in their simplifications (197). After accepting this, "[i]f she wanted to be serious" about seeing the real Mr. Ramsay, she needs to "help herself to Mrs. Ramsay's sayings, to look at him through her eyes" (197). For Lily, the biggest challenge is to see this man whom she so dislikes through the eyes of someone who loves him dearly. Not incidentally, Woolf herself struggled to see the real-life inspiration to Mr. Ramsay, her own father Sir Leslie Stephen, from more than one perspective. She struggles with this her whole life but finally, at the age of 58, she manages to see her father from at least two perspectives. As she writes in her diary, "I see father from the 2 angles. As a child condemning; as a woman of 58 understanding—I shd say tolerating. Both views true?" (Thursday 25 April, 1940, *Diary vol. V*, p. 281).

The real Mr. Ramsay, Lily knows, exists somewhere between fifty different ways of seeing him, or perhaps he is an amalgamation of these manifold perspectives. Seeing only

one Mr. Ramsay solidifies his being into a stable character that, Lily recognizes, is false in its shallow and static one-dimensionality. Seeing the world in a fixed way precludes access to reality; seeing the world in a fluid way is a necessity for artistic achievement and access to reality. In this way, Violet's capacity for fluidity, her recognition that the self is not a bastion against change, coupled with her significant, sustained, and rather surprising interest in understanding who Dorcas *was* grants her the qualities of a Woolfian artist. It also grants her the ability to empathize intersectionally. Being able to move between ways of seeing others—being able to change one's perspective fluidly—is at the core of intersectional empathizing. For Violet, this skill allows her to see Dorcas as more than just a one-dimensional rival and her husband as more than a cheating, middle-aged man—it allows her to see her as what Iris Murdoch termed "real, impenetrable human person[s]" ("Against Dryness" 20).

Moving "inward toward the other"

At the very end of *Jazz*, we see another kind of synchronization. While the novel, like *Orlando*, has been full of changes taking place *within* characters, the ending presents us with a depiction of synchronization occurring *between* characters. On the penultimate page, we read:

> It's nice when grown people whisper to each other under the covers. Their ecstasy is more leaf-sigh than bray and the body is the vehicle, not the point. They reach, grown people, for something beyond, way beyond and way, way down underneath tissue. They are remembering while they whisper the carnival dolls they won and the Baltimore boats they had never sailed on. The pears they let hang on the limb because if they plucked them, they would be gone from there and who else would see

the ripeness if they took it away for themselves? How could anybody passing by see

them and imagine for themselves what the flavor would be like? Breathing and

murmuring under covers both of them have washed and hung out on the line, in a

bed they chose together and kept together nevermind one leg was propped on a 1916

dictionary, and the mattress, curved like a preacher's palm asking for witnesses in

His name's sake, enclosed them each and every night and muffled their whispering,

old-time love. They are under the covers because they don't have to look at

themselves anymore; there is no stud's eye, no chippie glance to undo them. They are

inward toward the other, bound and joined by carnival dolls and the steamers that

sailed from ports they never saw. That is what is beneath their undercover whispers.

(228)

I quote this passage at length for several reasons. Apart from the stunning beauty and

musicality of Morrison's language (which always makes it difficult to quote her at anything

resembling a reasonable length), this passage presents a powerful alternative to the limiting

idea of a static and stable self. Here, the two unnamed lovers may look inward but they do

not do so in a solipsistic or even isolated way. Rather, they are "inward *toward the other*;*"

they are inward in a relational way (228; emphasis added). This inwardness toward another

is a form of synchronization that both requires and inspires fluidity.

The grown lovers in this section are both "bound" and "joined" by a shared past. This

shared past was not necessarily experienced—the steamboats are imagined rather than

experienced and the ports are never seen—but it is, in fact, remembered together. The lovers,

then, synchronize through the act of remembering events they did not experience together

(some of them, like sailing on Baltimore boats, neither of them has experienced). Sharing

these memories, it becomes insignificant who has lived through the experience, or even if

either of them has. Such intimacy through a shared past blurs the distinction between the

97

grown lovers in the present and "bound[s] and join[s]" them; It is a shared-imagined past that lies "beneath their undercover whispers." In other words, the unnamed lovers' I's and inward eyes are joined by a past experienced by one (or none) but remembered together.

The type of intimacy afforded by reaching inward toward another blurs the boundaries between these two characters. In this way, the paragraph is a depiction of an embodied moment where we can see how, to return to the idea of radical relationality, "being human is composed of relations" (Protevi 174). In this depiction of the grown lovers sharing a moment and a past, it becomes clear that "we do not 'have' relations, but we are relations all the way down" (Protevi 174). In this moment, the two lovers exist in and through their relationship with each other. They exist through their shared labor ("breathing and murmuring under covers both of them have washed and hung out on the line") that has created a shared past but also through years of shared stories that make it insignificant who experienced what. This shared remembering[9] carries more meaning than the specifics of who won the carnival doll, and it is made possible through the bodily intimacy of whispering under covers for countless nights, in a sagging bed propped up on a dictionary and made comfortable by joint labor. In its insistence on intimacy, the paragraph is a depiction of radical relationality in its most poetically mundane form. Here, then, we see a bodily communication between two characters that opens up for fluid I's to join together.

It is significant that the two lovers don't look at each other ("they don't have to look at themselves anymore") but *touch* as they reach "inward toward the other" (228). Rather than vision, touch is the primary sensory modality here; the lovers touch without looking because the body, Morrison tells us, is "the vehicle, not the point" (228). "The point" in this case is not the adoration of a beautiful body, always verging on the kind of obsession that

---

[9] This kind of shared remembering is similar to what Morrison calls "rememory" in *Beloved* (36).

killed Narcissus, neither is it to be visually admired. The point is to reach "inward toward the other," and for this, the body is an excellent vehicle. In this way, the moment with the grown lovers illustrates the centrality of touch for what Odell describes as living a full life. Critiquing the modern tendency to think of a full life as a long or materially wealthy life, Odell presents an alternative. "Maybe 'the point' isn't to live more, in the literal sense of a longer or more productive life," she writes, "but rather, to be *more alive* in any given moment—a movement outward and across, rather than shooting forward on a narrow, lonely track" (*Saving Time* 238, emphasis original). This movement "outward and across" is the very same movement we see in Morrison's grown lovers reaching "inward toward the other." In this movement, they extend life by joining another. In this process, they also become fluid as the boundaries between one and the other blur through their intimately shared, touching, past. Their fluidity of being, then, allows them to become more alive by living with and, to some degree, through others.

Extending life by living through others is precisely what Virginia Woolf is probing in the quote that serves as this chapter's first epigraph: "why not simply become fluid in their lives, if my own is dim?" (*Diary vol. IV*, Saturday December 31 1932, p.135). Momentarily bored by her own life, Woolf realizes that she may extend her life by engaging, in this case, with the lives of her young nephew Julian Bell and his friend Lettice Ramsey whom she had seen the night before. As she notes, this type of life extension requires and enables fluidity: Woolf is to become *fluid* in the lives of the younger generation. For Woolf, extending life through others in this way is not reserved for the living. Visiting the National Gallery in September 1938 while distracted by the threat of an impending Second World War, for example, Woolf writes in her diary that she "tried to see through Roger's eyes" as she looks at paintings by Renoir and Cezanne (*Diary vol. V*, Wednesday 28 September, p. 174). Referring to her friend the painter and critic Roger Fry who had died five years prior and

whose biography she was currently working on, Woolf enlists the perspectives of others to enrich her own experience. Here, then, we see an example of Woolf practicing the kind of perspectival fluidity that she realizes can extend life in her daily life as well as in her writing.

Many of Woolf's characters are strikingly skilled at this kind of life fluidity. Lily Briscoe's wish to see the world with fifty pairs of eyes could, in a way, be understood as a wish to live life through fifty different people. The strongest case for the *value* of extending life through intimate fluidity with others is articulated by Mrs. Dalloway, however. Walking by herself in the park, Clarissa Dalloway is suddenly visited by the perspective of her old friend Peter Walsh:

> For they might be parted for hundreds of years, she and Peter; she never wrote a letter and his were dry sticks; but suddenly it would come over her. If he were with me now what would he say? — some days, some sights bringing him back to her calmly, without the old bitterness; which perhaps was the reward of having cared for people; they came back in the middle of St. James's Park on a fine morning — indeed they did. (3)

In this moment when Peter—or at least the thought of Peter—visits Clarissa in the park, we see the pay-off of caring for others in this way: it opens up for perceiving the world through the lens of someone else, thus enabling an escape from the one perspective of our embodied selves. Like Woolf herself trying to see Cezanne and Renoir through her painter friend's eyes, Clarissa tries to see the park through the eyes of Peter Walsh. While it is possible and perhaps even likely that Clarissa is imagining Peter's point of view incorrectly here, she at least exhibits an openness: she asks what Peter might say, were he present. This openness gives way to a certain kind of fluidity of life, allowing Clarissa Dalloway to extend her life indefinitely.

Perhaps Clarissa walks alone here, but she is not unaccompanied. Because Clarissa Dalloway has cared deeply for Peter Walsh—because she has known him and how he sees the world and because she is curious about his perspective—his approach will always be available to her and will surface at times. This "reward for having cared for people" provides an antidote to the loneliness that comes with insular ways of being. Walking beside Clarissa in St. James's Park on that fine morning, the perspective of Peter Walsh ensures that she is not lonely. Having the ability to and having put in the effort to attend to how someone else sees the world provides Clarissa with a rich, multi-dimensional experience of the world. She no longer sees the park solely as she sees it; she sees it through the eyes of Peter Walsh too. Visited by Peter Walsh's view of the world, Clarissa is momentarily liberated from the default self-centeredness with which we so often experience the world. Those for whom we have cared deeply in life, whether fictional or not, as Woolf reminds us in *Mrs. Dalloway*, can come back one fine morning in St. James's Park, keeping us company as we stroll through life.

*

Morrison probes the values of similar fluid relationalities of being in *Jazz*. In the foreword to the 2004 Vintage edition of the novel, she writes that *Jazz* is an examination of "couple-love," which she describes as "the reconfiguration of the 'self' in such relationships; the negotiation between individuality and commitment to another" (xviii). This negotiation presents an alternative to Murdoch's ideal of unselfing. Where Murdoch's philosophy of unselfing proposes a complete and idealistic way for an individual to forget about their "fat relentless ego" through the love of beauty, art, and—if the conditions are completely right—

interpersonal love, Morrison is more moderate ("The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts" 82). She allows for a negotiation rather than an erasure of the "fat relentless ego," or the big I. For Morrison, it is not that the individual I is forgotten or erased in "couple-love." Rather, the I is *reconfigured*, in negotiated synchrony with another; much like in a dance. In Morrison's couple-love, individuality is negotiated and synchronized with another, not erased or forgotten, in a kind of dance to a jazz tune characterized by improvisation and fluidity.

The fluid relationality afforded by the intimacy experienced by the grown lovers at Morrison's novel's close and articulated by Mrs. Dalloway is central to the narration of *Jazz*. The narrator of *Jazz*, which is often referred to as Morrison's most "challenging" novel as well as her own favorite, is famously unstable as a narratological category (Parker np). For Morrison, the instability—or fluidity—of the narrator was the solution to a prolonged struggle to write *Jazz*. After years of accumulating knowledge concerning the time and place about which she wanted to write, Morrison found herself unable to find the right narrative voice for the novel. "My effort to enter that world," she writes in the foreword, "was constantly being frustrated. I couldn't locate the voice, or position the eye" (xviii). Even though she knows her characters intimately at this point in the writing process, she could not seem to find the right perspective, the right tone. The solution to this dilemma was to craft a fundamentally fluid narrator, which, Morrison explains, she could only do if she quit worrying about from what point of view the story should be told. Describing her process of writing the novel's first sentence—"Sth, I know that woman"—out of frustration, Morrison reveals (3):

> So that's what I wrote, effortlessly without pause, playing, just playing along with the
> voice, not even considering who the 'I' was until it seemed natural, inevitable, that

the narrator could—would—parallel and launch the process of invention, of

improvisation, of change. Commenting, judging, risking, and learning. (xix)

Like the characters change in fluid fashion in *Jazz*, so does the narrator. Or, to put it another

way, the fluidity illustrated by the characters in the scene with the grown lovers is a fluidity

characteristic of the narrator too. At times, it seems like the narrator is speaking for and as

the city, at times she[10] appears to be a member of the gossiping neighborhood, and at times

she is intimately aligned with one of the characters. She is, in other words, a narrator with

what the poet, novelist, and essayist Morgan Parker calls a "shifty, subjective omniscience"

(np). She is a relational narrator in the context of riffing and hearing. Her fluid, always

changing, subjectivity allows the narrator to almost imperceptibly slip into Violet's mind as

she imagines what Dorcas could and would have seen in her husband. The fact that the

narrator fluidly moves through so many different perspectives—the many characters'

interiorities', the "mind" of the urban landscape that is Harlem of the 1920s, and her own

changing beliefs and opinions—illustrates her flexibility but also her aliveness. As the

narrator is allowed to learn and to change—to change through learning—she comes alive on

the page. Sticking with Woolf's assertation that "a self [or an I] that goes on changing is a self

that goes on living," this narrator is very much alive ("The Humane Art" 227).

The fact that this is a narrator who changes through learning means that it is a

narrator who acknowledges her own ignorance. In fact, the narrator in *Jazz* is, in many

ways, defined by her ignorance. This ignorance exposes the limitations of narratorial

knowledge. As Morrison notes in a public reading in 2001, the narrator of *Jazz* "learns what

the limits of the imagination are and then realizes how wrong she has been about the

---

[10] I refer to the narrator with she/her pronouns in line with the language Morrison uses to describe
this textual function (see e.g. *Toni Morrison Reads from Her Novel "Jazz"*). This pronoun usage
should not, however, be read as suggesting that the narrator "is" or is very similar to Morrison's own
voice.

characters" (1:04-1:10 *Toni Morrison Reads*). This epiphany of ignorance appears at the end of the novel, right before the closing passage that I quote at length, when the narrator describes a drastic shift in how she views the characters whose lives she is chronicling. "When I see them now," she tells us, "they are not sepia, still, losing their edges to the light of a future afternoon. Caught midway between was and must be. For me they are real" (226). Here, real is placed in contrast with the monochrome, melting from black and white to the yellowing brownness of age known as "sepia," and with stillness. To be real means to be the opposite: multicolored—and multidimensional—rather than monochrome; fluid and moving rather than stable and static. Troubling the very idea of omniscience, the narrator's constant change exposes her ignorance in a process where we, as readers, get to see how the knowledge she acquires makes her fundamentally reconsider the characters whose lives she is imagining. Exposing the ignorance of the narrator by portraying her journey to this epiphany of ignorance, Morrison creates a narrator who learns along with the reader. In this process, Morrison reminds readers of how we all misread characters as well as people when we fail to see them as real. Given that the narrator's epiphany comes after two hundred and twenty-two pages of speculating about these characters, she also reminds us of how difficult it is to realize our own ignorance, and of the hard work involved in regarding others as real. She reminds us about the perpetual labor required to see another as, in the words of Iris Murdoch, a "real impenetrable human person" rather than a "bogus individual" or a "false whole" ("Against Dryness" 20).

In certain ways, the narrator's journey toward knowledge of her ignorance echoes Morrison's own journey to write *Jazz*. The novel is a product of someone changing and learning through the process of remembering the memories of someone else, (similarly to the two grown lovers remembering the memories of the other). In that already mentioned foreword to the novel, Morrison elucidates her creative process of writing *Jazz*. Initially

inspired by James Van Der Zee's photograph of a young girl in a coffin—turned into Dorcas through Morrison's critical imagination—the writing of the novel was preceded by years of historical research. Wanting to write a vision of a time and place before she was born, Morrison spent three years reading "every 'Colored' newspaper" she could find from the year 1926 and scrutinizing all "the articles, the advertisements, the columns, the employment ads" as well as the "Sunday School programs, graduation ceremony programs, minutes of women's club meetings, journals of poetry, essays" while listening to the music of the time (xvii). Only after this kind of embodied archival research was she able to write; or, as she puts it, only then was she able to *remember* (xvii). The memories that she commits to the page are not Morrison's own—she is not born yet for another five years. Rather, they are the memories of her parents. It is their lives and their world and their reality—not in a biographical but an atmospheric way—that Morrison intends to capture in *Jazz*.

I suggest that we read the narrator's acknowledgment of her ignorance as connected to Morrison's approach to creative writing and as akin to Woolfian empathy as discussed in Chapter I. The narratorial acknowledgment of having been wrong is similar to Woolf's repeated acknowledgment of what she does *not* know in her depictions of working women. What Morrison is doing in *Jazz* is to make the characters come alive—to allow them to *not* be monochrome or still; to *not* be imprisoned in one static image—by allowing them to be seen as real: as fluidly multi-dimensional. To reveal their reality, she has to go through a journey of discovering her own ignorance. To be able to imagine the reality of the Jazz Age in Harlem that her parents lived through, Morrison must first toil through years of historical research. This research as well as the exposure of her and the narrator's ignorance can be seen as sustained exercises in Murdochian love, memorably articulated by her as "the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real" ("The Sublime and the Good" 51). By revealing the narrator's ignorance, Morrison takes seriously and exposes

the extreme difficulty in allowing her characters to become real as others to be known outside the mirror's cutting frame.

Morrison's own body, in a sense, is what finally enables her to imagine the reality of someone else. Like Woolfian empathy, the movement inward toward the other is a movement anchored in the body. As Parker has noted, "it was her body that started the book … the first lines, like so much of the best music, were born of a physical expression of frustration" (np). This physical frustration is translated into the three letters of the novel's first word: "Sth" (3). As Parker continues, this short word articulates Morrison's personal and physical frustration with being unable to find the right voice to tell the story she wants to remember while also establishing the imagined body of the narrator. "*Sth,*" Parker writes, "is the Black Head Nod, the soft smirk from the other Black girl at the party, the raised eyebrow and pursed lips of a knowing friend. Sth is 'You already know' or 'I see you, Sis' (np, emphasis original). "Sth," then, is an articulation that carries weight and meaning because of its connection to the body of the speaker, and to their embodied reality. "Sth" is a word symbolizing—voicing— an intimate sort of bodily communication. It is also a word that depends on an audience: the "Black Head Nod" or the raised eyebrow is an act of communication that does not make sense in isolation—someone else always has to be there to decode the embodied message. While this can be said to be true of all spoken words in some sense given that they are dependent on the body of the speaker for their articulation and on the body of the listener for interpretation, the cultural weight and body-centered connotations that "Sth" carries in its vowelless call to look places the oft-forgotten body front and center.

Since the book opens with a sound so deeply anchored in and aspirant from the body, it is only fitting that it ends with a return to the body. At this point, however, it is the reader's

106

body that is implicated. After the depiction of the lovers reaching "inward toward the other" under their covers, the narrator suddenly shifts to addressing a "you:"

> *I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer— that's the kick.* (228-229, emphasis original)

While it is at first not clear whom the narrator is addressing through this "you" (and perhaps it is never really clear), the next, and final, paragraph gives us a clue. The last two sentences of the novel read: "Look where your hands are. Now" (229). If you are reading a physical copy of *Jazz* (and if you are doing as the narrator tells you), you are, at this point, looking down at your own hands holding a book written by Toni Morrison and narrated by her fluid narrator. If the book was "born of a physical expression of frustration," as Morgan Parker proposed, it ends with an emphasis on the physicality of the reader, a nudge to recognize our own embodied existence and our body's centrality to the reading process (np). In so doing, the narrator emphasizes the intimacy that can exist between narrator and reader, between teller and listener ("*I love … how close you let me be to you*"). As with the grown lovers, this intimacy is dependent on and enabled by bodies. If the beginning of *Jazz* reminds us that writing is an embodied act, the ending does not let us forget that *reading* is a somatic event always dependent on the body.

The centrality of the reader's body in the novel's ending makes the book come full circle by emphasizing what I would like to call embodied relationality. The narrator states that what gives her the greatest satisfaction—what defines "*the kick*"—is the fact that she is both *"[t]alking to you and hearing you answer"* (229). In other words, the talking that goes on in *Jazz* is not a one-way street; It is relational. Here, the narrator is talking to *you*, the reader, which is perhaps how we are used to experiencing and theorizing reading when there

is a clearly characterized narrator, but this particular narrator is also "*hearing you answer*." This emphasis on the reader's answer means that the reading process envisioned here is a dialogue rather than a monologue, always dependent on two embodied minds. Reading as articulated here is an embodied act that allows for a conversation where the answer of the reader—what the reader brings to the table—is crucial to the pleasure and potential of the text (again, "*the kick*"). What Morrison leaves us with as the book closes, then, is an image of the joint intimacy of reading; of the fact that it is never an act to be accomplished in isolation. Rather, it is an act of love (in the Murdochian sense of acknowledging the reality of another) that is dependent upon the embodied existence of the more-than-one.

In this meta-fictional ending, Morrison, through her narrator, depicts reading as a responsive process in motion rather than a stable act of mirroring. The reading process we see here is not a process of finding oneself—or a reflection of oneself—in the text; it is a process of communicating with *someone else* in and through the text. In this way, the ending of *Jazz* can be read as an invitation to imagine, fully and with Murdochian love, the lives of others through a conversation with the narrator. This invitation to us, as readers, is predicated upon us acknowledging our own fluidity. The embodiment of reading as envisioned here makes it an act that can allow our embodied minds to synchronize to the beat of another. This intimate phenomenon is our destination in the chapter that awaits.

Chapter III

Misty I's: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison Feeling in Common

> We are edged with mist.
> —Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

> My eyes fill with Susan's tears.
> —Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

> [W]e were two throats and one eye
> —Toni Morrison, *Sula*

At the very end of Virginia Woolf's poetic seventh novel *The Waves*, Bernard—one of the six friends that constitute the novel's collective of main characters—declares, "My eyes fill with Susan's tears" (289). This short statement is the inspiration for this chapter. Bernard claiming to cry the tears of his long-time friend Susan awakens a range of questions. Can we cry someone else's tears? If so, what is involved in this act? Is it an act of fellow-feeling or an act of appropriation—an act of taking over someone else's emotions and, vicariously, their experience? Where is the line between fellow-feeling and appropriation? While Woolf did not answer these questions in *The Waves* (or elsewhere), she does raise the right questions for exploring issues at the heart of this study.

In this chapter, I read Bernard's crying of Susan's tears alongside his earlier description of him and his friends as being "edged with mist" (16). Read with an understanding that as individuals, we are not stable and unified but rather blurred at the edges, misty creatures seeping into and out of each other's lives in a fluid fashion, the idea of

crying the tears of someone else hints at expansive modes of being. These expansive modes of being are similar to the fluid states of existence exhibited by characters in *Orlando* and *Jazz* and valued by Woolf and Morrison in their lives as well as in their writing. Throughout this chapter, I ask how Woolf and Morrison's depictions of connected forms of consciousness—what we can call "blurred minds," or "misty I's"—present expanded notions of individuals that are crucial for understanding empathy-as-dance. Focusing on their experiments with syntax, joint narration, and plot structure in *The Waves*, *The Years*, and *Sula*, I explore how Woolf and Morrison write characters that blur together in a process of joining where it often is unclear where one character ends and another begins. This blurred way of understanding individuals and the feelings that flow between them is not possible to see clearly if we continue to think of empathy as a form of mirroring. The misty I's we meet in Woolf and Morrison—their depictions of characters thinking and feeling in common—can help us rethink empathy as a dance in a way that allows room for intersectional acknowledgment rather than confining fellow-feeling to an act of appropriation.

*

The fluidity of being just discussed in Chapter II extends into the very form of *The Waves*. While often described as a novel written in a stream-of-consciousness style, this term does not quite capture the particular kind of fluidity that Woolf experiments with here. As Kate Flint argues, *waves* are in fact much more apt a form to describe Woolf's stylistic experiments than the more common *streams* because "the image of waves, with their incessant, recurrent dips and crests, provides a far more helpful means of understanding Woolf's representation of consciousness as something which is certainly fluid, but cyclical

and repetitive, rather than linear" (221). Rather than a *stream* of consciousness, Flint

suggests, Woolf's novel is better described as written in a *flow* of consciousness because of

how the form of the novel mimics waves flowing into each other with what at first appears

like a seamless continuity in one endless wave. This fluid, flowing form of writing suggests a

fluid and flowing form of being where it is rarely clear where one character ends and another

begins. The fluid sense of selfhood depicted in this novel can help us understand the flow of

feelings that move between characters, people, and texts in a way that does not reinforce the

centrality of big I's who find themselves mirrored in others. In other words, the

experimentation with forms of writing that illustrate forms of being present alternatives to

the myth of the independent, stable I.

Woolf famously critiqued James Joyce's stream-of-consciousness writing for being

too "centered in a self which, in spite of its tremor of susceptibility, never embraces or

creates what is outside itself or beyond" ("Modern Fiction" 156). In contrast with this insular

modernism, Woolf's way of writing her character's interiorities is surprisingly focused on

what happens *outside* of their minds. In this way, Woolf depicts how individual minds are

heavily, perpetually, and fundamentally influenced by others.

We see how deeply the characters in *The Waves* influence each other—how closely

they are linked—in how they adopt each other's language as the novel progresses. In the

book's middle, as the six friends are about to part after dinner, we see an example of

language bleeding over between Louis and Jinny. In this moment of the two characters

thinking and feeling in common, Louis notes, "Something is made" (145). This "something"

is significant. As Louis continues, "Yes, as we rise and fidget, a little nervously, we pray,

holding in our hands this common feeling, 'Do not move, do not let the swing-door cut to

pieces the thing that we have made, that *globes* itself here" (145; emphasis added). "[T]his

common feeling" that is made is fragile and fleeting; it can be cut to pieces by the simple

movement of a swing-door and, perhaps more sinisterly, by the relentless movement of time.

Fragile or not, "this common feeling" is felt not only by Louis. The feeling is shared among the six friends, as we see when Jinny picks up where Louis' monologue left off:

Let us hold it for a moment ... love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this *globe* whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty, and something so deep sunk within us that we shall perhaps never make this moment out of one man again" (145; emphasis added).

Here, the globe that signified the "thing that we have made" for Louis returns in the mind of Jinny. The metaphor, in other words, bleeds over from one character to another. This metaphorical bleeding is more than a mere acknowledgment of the social structure of communication and the impossibility of a private language. It is not just the case that Jinny is adopting Louis' language here. Rather, as Flint suggests, it is a moment in which we see how "since language is a shared medium, the novel dramatizes how identities themselves do not stand, ultimately, clear and distinct, but flow and merge into each other" (221). The way in which Jinny describes what the globe is made of gives us a clue about the deeper meanings of this intimately shared medium of language. The globe, Jinny says, has walls that are made of Percival—of that shared friend whose early death after a fall from his horse in India shakes the whole friend group at their core—and of "youth and beauty." In other words, the globe that travels between the minds of the friends is made up of a shared past. The foundation for the shared language is shared losses and shared joys. In short, it is shared experiences. The globe that travels between the minds of Jinny and Louis, without them speaking to each other in the novel, can be seen as the linguistic marker of this sense of shared reality in some ways similar to Morrison's grown lovers' shared past at the end of *Jazz.*

This shared reality is not predicated on sameness or even similarity. Louis points this out in the very same passage where the globe with walls of Percival, youth, and beauty is introduced. "[A]s we are about to part," he notes, "having paid our bill, the circle in our

blood, broken so often, so sharply, *for we are so different*, closes in a ring" (145; emphasis added). The closeness that the group feels here is not stable—the circle in their blood is broken both often and abruptly—and their difference is underscored. Yet, despite—or because of—this difference, they hold in their hands, as Louis describes, "this common feeling" (145). This "common feeling" that the six friends share, built upon and symbolized by the globe does not require them to see themselves in each other, or to experience any kind of mirroring. In fact, a mirroring would foreclose the kind of shared experience that is the foundation for the friends' relationality because it would reinforce a focus on the solitary individual. In other words, it is not that Louis and Jinny are the same here. Louis does not see himself in Jinny, and neither does Jinny necessarily recognize herself in Louis. Rather, they have created something *together*, an act which is predicated on there being more than one of them.

The globe returns throughout *The Waves* as the metaphor initiated in the corresponding minds of Louis and Jinny reappears in Bernard's monologues. Towards the end of the novel, when the sphere has made its way to Bernard, the "globe" has come to symbolize nothing less than "the meaning of [his] life" (238). Trying—and failing—to communicate this life to someone else, Bernard visualizes what seems to him to be his life as something that "has roundness, weight, depth" and that is "completed" (238). What Bernard wants to achieve in his storytelling, in his life-telling, is to hand this *thing* with "roundness, weight, [and] depth" to someone else and hope that they recognize his life in it. This cannot happen. The attempt is doomed to fail, and Bernard knows it. "But unfortunately," he laments, "what I see (this *globe*, full of figures) you do not see" (238; emphasis added). With walls made of Percival—of that death that carried so much significance for Bernard and for the others—and by youth and beauty, by a shared past—this globe, to Bernard the storyteller, signifies who he is. The irony of storytelling, and Bernard's big struggle, is of course that language always fails in communicating this complete, weighty, and round thing that, to

113

him, is his life. Where Bernard sees this globe, he knows, "You see me, sitting at a table opposite you, a rather heavy, elderly man, grey at the temples" (238). The fullness of Bernard—a character made up of shared experiences, joys, and sorrows as well as by a multitude of past selves—is here reduced to a one-dimensional surface: to a "rather heavy, elderly man, grey at the temples."

What did Bernard feel for the plumber?

Throughout *The Waves*, Bernard is almost obsessed with the idea of both experiencing and articulating a connected, joint, identity with his friends. He constantly seeks to reach a state of being where his I is edged with mist and, as he puts it, "there is no division between me and them" (288). For Bernard, individual identity—"this difference we make so much of"—is something to be "overcome" (289). Similarly, Bernard deplores that the connections between people must be broken by the mundane reality of everyday life. "Some miserable affair of keeping an appointment," he bemoans, "severs these beautiful human beings once so connected" (113). Severing these ties does violence to the human beings that were once intimately joined, and the reality of keeping appointments in our individual, daily, and often petty lives is "a miserable affair" to Bernard. The goal is intimate connection, and everything that stands in its way is a blamable shame.

Ideal as it may sound, Bernard's insistence on overcoming individual identity in the pursuit of an intimate togetherness—like Woolf's own attempts in this area—is often troublesome. It is particularly troublesome because his route to achieve his goal often goes through erasing difference. As the character with the by far most lines in the novel and as the character who most explicitly explores his own identity, Bernard claims space. Significantly, he is capable of using this space to take over other people's experiences. A self-declared "sensitive, percipient" soul, Bernard not only cries Susan's tears; he also carries the blow

114

that Percival received when he fell to his death from his horse on his brow; he feels the kiss that young Jinny gave Louis on his neck; and he even "feel[s] the rush of the wind of [Rhoda's] flight when she leapt," presumably to her death (289). Is Bernard really doing all these things? Is he, can he, and *should* he be feeling the sensations Rhoda felt as she leapt to her death? And should we take his word for it? In these moments, Bernard's claiming of others' experiences raises ethical questions.

Meanwhile, Bernard's usurpation of others usually happens in his efforts to write. Lamenting Bernard's almost obsessive tendency to "make phrases," Neville notes that Bernard does not seem to care that much about the people that he turns into characters in his writing. Observing Bernard talking to a plumber at a train station, Neville notices the plumber's devotion to Bernard—he is charmed by Bernard—but also that the plumber's feeling is not reciprocated. "But what did Bernard feel for the plumber?" Neville asks (69). This poignant rhetorical question could be answered with a simple "nothing," or at least "nothing real, nothing lasting." To Bernard, the plumber is a vehicle—a tool—facilitating his life-long quest of storytelling. "Did he not only wish to continue the sequence of the story which he never stops telling himself?" Neville asks (69). Bernard's propensity for storytelling started when he was a child and made-up stories about little pellets he had made out of his bread. Innocent as this juvenile pastime may have been, Bernard's storytelling tendency has more serious, less edible, consequences as he grows older. As Neville poignantly points out, "[w]e are all pellets … [w]e are all phrases in Bernard's story" (70). In other words, Neville experiences Bernard's habit of turning his other people's lives into stories—pellet-like phrases—as being pulled out of a larger context and rolled into a neat little ball. Bernard's phrase-making, it seems, turns complex others into small and separate things to be used and then discarded.

115

Bernard is not a bad storyteller, though. He tells the stories of his friends "with extraordinary understanding" according to Neville (70). There is just one problem: Bernard tells the stories of his friends with "extraordinary understanding, *except of what we most feel*" (70; emphasis added). What the friends most feel—what is most important to them—escapes Bernard; this information is not accessible to him as a storyteller. Perhaps it is not even of interest to Bernard. As Neville complains, Bernard "does not need us. He is never at our mercy" (70). There is, in other words, a power imbalance between storyteller and character, between Bernard and his friends, just as there was between Bernard and the plumber. This power imbalance impacts the possibilities of fellow-feeling in and through storytelling. As Neville reminds, Bernard quickly forgets about the people he turns into pellet-like characters, and this forgetfulness perhaps indicates that he is using them for his own pleasure (and perhaps profit) rather than because of a desire to understand others. In other words, these people become tools for Bernard's storytelling as he turns them into characters, oblivious to what is most important to them. Well-meaning as they may be, Bernard's ventures into the imagined interiorities of others do not align with the lived reality of those whose lives he turns into pellet-like phrases.

Bernard himself does not notice the problematic aspects of his imaginary intrusions into others' interiorities. To him, his imagined transportation into the minds of others in his phrase-making is complete. Moments before his eyes fill with Susan's tears, Bernard ponders the distinction—or lack thereof—between him and his friend and concludes: "[a]s I talked I felt, I am you" (288-89). This statement can be read as a tell-tale sign of Bernard venturing into the dangerous territory of what Saidiya Hartman would call the "violence of identification" (20). The repetition of the (big) I three times in one sentence—"as *I* talked *I* felt, *I* am you"—should give us pause given Woolf's habit of exposing fragile, often

masculine, egos that stutter their I three times.[11] In Woolf's world, a character repeating

their I three times is also a repetition of an eye—a repetitive, insistent assertion of an

individual's ways of viewing the world. This assertion almost always results in a dominant,

self-centered erasure of other viewpoints. An I-I-I that repeats a regimented, cemented,

and—most importantly—singular view of the world is not capable of (or interested in)

reaching towards those fifty pairs of eyes that Lily Briscoe wished for. As Lily knew, it is

necessary to have access to (at least) fifty pairs of eyes to see the world as it really is, rather

than as it appears to our individual and necessarily narrow point of view. In the solitary

mantra of the I-I-I, there is no room for other eyes.

Being certain that "I am you," as Bernard is, may not be the best route to

understanding the experience of someone else when that someone else is different from you.

After all, they always will be, even though there are degrees of difference. Bernard's repeated

insistence on his own viewpoint—his I and his eye—warns us of the dangers of asserting that

we know what, in the end, we can never know: the experience of someone else. Asserting "I

am you" erases difference and denies distance, two central tenets for intersectional empathy.

Inserting himself into the other's position, there is little room left for a "you" when Bernard

imagines himself as blurring into another. It is not a coincidence that while there are three

"I's," there is only one "you" here ("[a]s I talked I felt, I am you"). Read along Neville's

resistance to being reduced in and by Bernard's storytelling, this insistence on an I hints at

the problems of identification that always lurk in the shadows when Bernard engages in

storytelling. As such, it points to the lurking dangers of imagining yourself in the position of

---

[11] In addition to the examples already discussed, see Septimus Warren Smith who pathologically
stammers his I in *Mrs. Dalloway* (51) and Giles Oliver who gets stuck on the I three times as he
remembers a tune in *Between the Acts* (85). Bernard himself is guilty of stuttering his I in this way
twice in the novel (253, 296).

another: if you do not leave room for a "you," you may end up usurping the other's reality by imposing your own I on their view of the world.

Bernard's occasional ventures into the land of usurpation in his attempts to articulate the lives of others points to the fine balance between imaginative fellow-feeling animated by a genuine interest in others and the violence of usurping appropriation. Illustrating the ever-present dangers of erasing both difference and someone else's reality when we imagine their lives through writing, Bernard's imaginative failures emphasize how the intricately linked acts of imagining, writing, and empathizing sometimes can—albeit imperceptibly—turn into a self-oriented form of dominance.[12] Despite his many and hard attempts, Bernard's attempts to reach something more than self-projection through his writing of other people's lives remains a self-oriented form of dominance masquerading as interest in another. While it can certainly be said that Woolf herself sometimes ventured into the land of self-oriented dominance through writing too, she was acutely aware of it in a way in which Bernard—and many writers with him—are not.

*

There is hope for Woolf's Bernard. He is not always a self-centered, dominating, and usurping intruder upon other people's lives. The strongest glimpse of hope for Bernard feeling with others without taking over their experience with his big I appears when he attempts to perceive together with others. Seeking inspiration for a love letter he is struggling to write, Bernard turns to the famed lover Byron. After a page of frustrated

---

[12] I would like to thank Porter Abbott for the phrasing of the term "self-oriented form of dominance."

reading, he finally gets, as he calls it, "the hang of it" (79). Reading on, Bernard

enthusiastically notes that "[n]ow I am getting his beat into my brain (the rhythm is the

main thing in writing)" (79). Immersed in Byron's rhythm to the degree of thinking to his

beat, Bernard in a certain sense thinks with Byron here. This meeting of minds through a

reading experience gives us a brief insight into a kind of fellow-feeling that is not predicated

upon an erasure of difference, or upon someone taking over the imagined perspective of

someone else. There is no taking over of perspectives, just as there is no complete melting of

one character into another. Rather, there is a thinking *with* another; an inching towards

another's way of thinking through branching out and away from one's engrained patterns of

thought which can be momentarily shifted by the rhythm of another. Getting the beat of

Byron into his brain, Bernard starts to think in and with the rhythm of Byron's writing. Like

the metaphors that spilled over between the minds of Louis and Jinny, this kind of thinking

together with another—thinking in common—allows for a way of thinking (and feeling) with

others that respects difference and distance.

 Getting the beat of someone else into our brains is an act of synchronization, not

mirroring. Through synchronization, getting the beat of someone else in our brains reveals a

power of literature that, in a way, is more astonishing than any model based on mirroring

can be. Like the habit of adopting our friends' metaphors for understanding abstract

concepts such as love and friendship, thinking in the rhythm of someone else illustrates that

thinking is not such a narrowly individual activity as we are sometimes led to believe it is. If

we can be influenced to think in the rhythm of someone else through the act of reading and if

we conceive of abstract concepts in similar ways as our long-time friends because of our

shared pasts and shared language, it seems inconceivable that the self is an isolated bastion.

 A couple of pages later, Bernard continues his joint perception. This time, he both

thinks and sees together with another. Following a passage in which Neville muses upon the

119

curious yet painful experience of being changed "by the addition, even at a distance, of a friend," Bernard looks at a tree with Neville and notices something odd:

> 'How strange,' said Bernard, 'the willow looks seen together. I was Byron,
>
> and the tree was Byron's tree, lachrymose, down-showering, lamenting. Now that we
>
> look at the tree together, it has a combed look, each branch distinct[.] (83)

Seen together with Neville, the willow has changed from the Byron-esque lachrymose—a result of Byron's beat lingering in Bernard's brain—to a combed, clear, and neat tree. This moment exposes, once again, how reality changes when looked at with another; the world looks different depending upon not only from where we are looking but with whom we are seeing.

It is not only reality that changes as Bernard looks at the willow first with Byron from the page, then with Neville by his side; something about Bernard himself changes too. As Bernard realizes, after seeing the willow with Neville "I become, *with you*, an untidy, an impulsive human being whose bandanna handkerchief is for ever stained with the grease of crumpets" (84; emphasis added). Here, Bernard does not *become* Neville and he does not take over someone else's experience by placing his own self front and center. Rather, he changes in coordination with another being, becoming something new and different in the process; He becomes *with* Neville. If the world is changed as we see it with others, then so are we. Perceiving the world together in this way destabilizes the individual who is doing the perceiving task. In this way, perceiving together with another is one way in which the fluidity of an I is exposed, and also one way in which this fluidity can be maintained.

For Woolf, this kind of dynamic fluidity was essential for writing as well as for living. As she notes in her essay on Horace Walpole, "[a] self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living" ("The Humane Art" 227). One way to change is to look at the world with others, to be influenced by how they perceive it, and, through this influence, get their beat into your brain. By examining episodes in Woolf's novels where selves change through joint

perception with others, we can begin to understand how this seemingly mysterious and potentially profound change is possible. *The Waves* is particularly well-suited for explorations of this mystery because it is a novel concerned not "with the single life but with lives together" as Woolf writes in an early draft of the novel (quoted in Beer, "Virginia Woolf and Prehistory" 10). As Black feminist scholar Barbara Christian writes, Woolf's monologues in *The Waves* are "carefully crafted to reveal not only the quality of that particular character's mind but also his or her ways of perceiving the world." (493). Depicting Bernard perceiving the world not alone, but with Neville and with Byron, Woolf's *flow* of consciousness reveals a fundamentally connected, rather than insular, form of writing and of being where characters flow in and out of each other through their shared language and their shared perceptions.

*

If a "self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living," a self that has stopped changing—a stagnated self—is a self that has stopped living (Woolf, "The Humane Art" 227). There are plenty of those dead selves to be found in Woolf's novels. A particularly prominent one is Patrick, Delia Pargiter's husband in *The Years*. Like many men in Woolf's novels, Patrick does not appear capable of being interested in other people. During a conversation (which really has been more of a monologue), Patrick's dominant talking is momentarily interrupted by another character contributing. As this other person talks, Patrick's focus starts to wander. "[H]e was not interested in what other people were saying," we learn (403). While this could have been a mere descriptive statement, Woolf goes on to further diagnose this disinterest. "His mind could no longer stretch beyond its beat," she writes, concluding that while Patrick's body is still "beautifully proportioned; it was his mind that was old"

(403). This stagnated mind is not capable of doing what Bernard does as he reads Byron: it is not capable of changing its beat of thinking to the rhythm of someone else. The echo of Bernard getting the beat of Byron into his brain here adds a level to the value of being able to stretch your mind. Being unable to stretch your mind is described as stagnation, decay, and a sign of old age, but it is also intimately connected with being uninterested in others. Again, Patrick "was not interested in what other people were saying," and as soon as someone else speaks, he zones out. Read along Woolf's claim that "a self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living," we can see how this kind of disinterest in others is old *in extremis*; dead to life ("The Humane Art" 227).[13]

At the other end of the spectrum from Patrick in *The Years*, we find Eleanor Pargiter. The oldest of the Pargiter siblings, Eleanor has near-superpower qualities when it comes to imagining the experiences of others. Throughout the novel, she repeatedly imagines other people's lives to the degree that her own life fades away. For example, reading a letter from her brother Martin about his time in a jungle in India as she rides through the streets of London in a hansom, Eleanor gradually gets transported to the world her brother describes. As she starts reading the letter, she alternately imagines her brother's face and his characteristic expression—in this case, a "pugnacious" expression that seems to signal a propensity for getting into trouble—and glances out the window at the passing street life (107). Pretty soon, however, the streets of London disappear: "The street before her lost its detail," and, eventually, "the road *was* a jungle" (108; emphasis added). Here, Eleanor's

---

[13] It is certainly possible to see Woolf's portrayal of Patrick and her often brutal critique of what she saw as male egotism as a result of her own imaginative blind spots; perhaps she cannot—or will not—imagine the interiority of someone like Patrick or Martin Pargiter. While I do think there is truth to the scathing critique of men like this as debilitatingly uncaring about others, there is of course more to the story than the rather one-dimensional sketch that Woolf provides us with lets on. Since Woolf's reluctance to imagine the actual experience of either Patrick or Martin Pargiter is shaped by very different power dynamics compared to her hesitance to venture into the minds of working women—in relation to both these characters, Woolf as well as Eleanor Pargiter are, as women, part of the subordinate group—it is slightly outside the scope of this dissertation.

immersion is so complete that her own physical reality fades away as it gives way to the imagined jungle described by her brother. Notably, Eleanor has never seen a jungle in her own life. As we are told, "[a] jungle was a very thick wood, she supposed; made of stunted little trees; dark green in colour" (107). Her lack of real-life experiences does not constitute an obstacle to her imagination; Eleanor is transported to a jungle she has never seen. Throughout this transportation, however, she never takes over Martin's experience. Not once in this passage is Eleanor described as imagining *herself* in the Indian jungle. It is Martin who strikes his last match to light a fire, and "*he* stood in the midst of little trees alone" (107; emphasis added). In other words, there is no big I at the center of Eleanor Pargiter's remarkably lively imagination. She does not see herself reflected in Martin's letter, and she certainly does not feel mirrored—the experience of being alone in a jungle is as foreign to Eleanor's urban reality as can be. Here, Eleanor models a way of reading where the big I does not take over. This model, I suggest, can complement the method of reading to find yourself reflected in a text. As becomes clear when we look at Eleanor's reading process, hers is a model that allows space for the reality of others.

Eleanor's outstanding capability to imagine the reality of others appears more sharply in contrast with the fact that other characters in *The Years* so often cannot—or will not—imagine *her* reality. Repeatedly disregarded as a spinster or an "old maid," childless and of little interest, Eleanor's is an interiority routinely disregarded by those around her. As Sowon Park argues in the 2005 article "Suffrage and Virginia Woolf: 'The Mass Behind the Single Voice,'" Woolf exposes how faulty our readings of others often are when shaped by stereotypical expectations about social categories through contrasting how strangers misperceive Eleanor Pargiter with "extensive description of Eleanor's full and hectic inner life" (133). Misperceiving Eleanor because of an assumption that her inner life is barren is a habit not only of strangers, but also of her family members. On a visit to her brother Morris's house in 1911, we see a telling example of this disregard, and of how Eleanor herself is aware

of it. Returning to her room to fetch a pair of glasses (a tool she requires to see the world around her better) so that she can look at an owl outside the window, Eleanor catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror. In this mirror, she sees what her family sees when they look at her: "An old maid who washes and watches birds" (203). Eleanor herself of course knows that she is much more than this. As she interjects in her own imagination of other people's view of her, "But I'm not—I'm not in the least like that" (302). Eleanor is aware that behind a pair of eyes that "still seemed to her rather bright, in spite of the lines round them" lies a multi-dimensional and complex life, and that these very eyes are the same ones once flirtatiously praised by Sir William Whatney, the other visitor to Morris's house at the time (203). She is also aware that her family members will fail to notice this thick reality of hers. As she soberly states, "now I'm labelled," before repeating her label: "an old maid who washes and watches birds" (203). In this scene, we see how the mirror flattens characters as well as people, denying them the kind of rich reality that every human carries within. For Eleanor, seeing herself through the eyes of her family is similar to seeing herself in the flat and flattening mirror in front of her. Seen through this mirror, Eleanor is reduced to "an old maid who washes and watches birds."

While Eleanor habitually imagines the lives of others, she never intrudes; she respects the limits of her imagination and preserves the integrity of others. As she walks the dark and dreary London streets to her sister Delia's apartment, Eleanor looks up at the windows she is passing and "guessed at the life that went on behind those thick yellow curtains" (115). Significantly, her imagination stops here; Eleanor does not claim to *know* what goes on behind those closed curtains, neither does she imagine herself living a life behind them. Rather, she *guesses* as she acknowledges that these lives accompany the life of her sister. "This was the purlieus in which her sister lived," Eleanor thinks and notes that "she must often come back this way at night, alone" (115). Here, Eleanor acknowledges the reality of others—her sister's as well as those living in her neighborhood—but stops short of

124

intruding, or of inviting herself into a place where she might not be welcome. Delia's door, after all, is locked, barring Eleanor from entering her apartment, just like the curtains are drawn for the windows, barring Eleanor's imagination from venturing into the apartments they hide.

Here, then, is an example of Eleanor Pargiter acknowledging the limits of her imagination much like Woolf herself acknowledged the limits of her embodied imagination when she wrote the lives of working women (see Chapter I). In other words, it is an example of one of Woolf's characters exhibiting "Woolfian empathy." In fact, because of her skills at imagining the reality of others coupled with her repeated acknowledgments of what she cannot know, Eleanor Pargiter might be the best example of a Woolfian empathizer in all her maker's novels. She is the character in Woolf's oeuvre who gets closest to a Murdochian kestrel moment through her imagining of other people's lives, particularly because she so rarely places herself front and center.

Eleanor's habit of imagining the lives of others sometimes makes her feel that she does not have a life of her own. As she realizes towards the end of the novel, "[m]y life's been other people's lives" (367). To repeat, Eleanor seldom thinks of herself or her own life but whenever she does, she is both surprised and perplexed. While this can be read as Eleanor Pargiter sacrificing her own life and interests for the sake of serving others and while this is indeed true (for example, her demanding father relies on his daughter for much emotional and material labor and often requires Eleanor to read his mind so that she can do whatever he does not want to do), it is also possible to read Eleanor's habituated other-centeredness another way. While I do not wish to minimize the quiet violence that the self-effacing norms of femininity exert on Eleanor in a patriarchal culture where women often are expected to sacrifice their selves, I would like to take a moment to attend to the positive results of Eleanor Pargiter's long and assiduous training in attending to other people's lives. Right after Eleanor notices that her life has been other people's lives, she is carried away

remembering a time when she was dining with her friend Nicholas. As disparate details of this memory take over her mind—there was "a parrot with a pink feather in a cage on the counter" and Nicholas "wouldn't let me pay for the wine ... though it was I who ordered it" (367)—Nicholas suddenly appears by her side in the present moment. As she recognizes her old friend, "it was like a part of her, a sunk part of her, coming up to the surface" (368). This is but one example of how the people in Eleanor's life are, in a fundamental way, "part of her." Nicholas is not just her friend, and her siblings whose lives she is imagining in letters and behind curtains are not just her family. Because of her imaginative attunement to others and because of her interest in others that is unshadowed by a lurking self-centeredness, these other people are a part of Eleanor herself. Eleanor's being is, at its very core, relational; she consists of the relations she has in a radical way.

Eleanor's habitual attunement to others influences how she perceives herself on a fundamental level. On the same occasion where Nicholas appears as a part of Eleanor, she muses upon the assortment of memories that make up her life. This fact—that her memories mean that she has something called "a life"—befuddles Eleanor. How do all the atoms that make up her memories "compose what people called a life," Eleanor wonders (367). This confusion leads to an even more existential inquiry about who or what really is at the center of all the memories that flood her mind. "Perhaps there's 'I' at the middle of it," Eleanor thinks, perhaps there is "a knot; a centre" (367). To have an I that is central to one's experience is by no means a given for Eleanor; "*Perhaps* there's 'I' at the middle of it." In what follows, Eleanor imagines herself as a form, and the form is very telling about her existence. As she continues her musings upon the possibility of a center of experience, Eleanor recalls another memory. This time, she sees "herself sitting at her table drawing on the blotting-paper, digging little holes from which spokes radiated. Out and out they went; thing followed thing; scene obliterated scene" (367). This image of a little hole from which spokes radiate can be seen as a visualization of Eleanor Pargiter's relational being. There

might be an "I" at the center, but this I is an axel or a star. In contrast with the isolated "big I that feels your pain" that Breithaupt and others describe self-centered empathy as, Eleanor Pargiter is connected to and connects others, to spokes that radiate out from a relatively small center. Considering this shape, it is notable that the spokes take up more place than the little hole from which they radiate. The spokes are fundamentally connected to the dot in the middle; or, rather, the little dot in the middle is fundamentally connected to the spokes.

Eleanor Pargiter's relational existence as a small dot connected to spokes that radiate from her being illustrates a diametrically different way to live compared to Patrick's stagnated inability to take an interest in others. While Patrick's life is doomed to a narrow singularity that always teeters on the brink of insularity, Eleanor has not only lived her own life (which I do think that she has) but also joined the lives of those close to her. She has, in other words, lived a multitudinous, ever-changing, and ever-expanding kind of life.

Just as Eleanor feels intimately linked to others, other characters experience a striking closeness with Eleanor Pargiter. Sitting in a cab with her aunt, Peggy Pargiter asks herself, "Where does she begin, and where do I end?" (334). In this moment of I's blurring together, perhaps being edged by mist, as Bernard has it, we see an example of what it looks like when characters exist in radical openness to each other; it becomes difficult to distinguish where, exactly, one character ends and another begins. Where, precisely, does the dot end and the spoke begin?

Being "two throats and one eye"

The radical potential of interconnected forms is crucial to experiencing Toni Morrison's *Sula*. Like with Eleanor and Peggy Pargiter, it is not always clear where the boundary between Sula and Nel—the two main characters in Morrison's second novel—lies. Sula and Nel's ways of perceiving and of being—their eyes and their I's— often blur together as the

two characters perceive, think, and feel in common throughout the novel. As Nel puts it, Sula is someone "whose past she had lived through and with whom the present was a constant sharing of perceptions" (95). Having grown up together, Nel and Sula have shared youth and memories, much like the six friends in *The Waves* share a "common feeling" with walls "made of Percival, of youth and beauty" (145). For Nel, this shared past results in the feeling that "[t]alking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself" (95). For Nel, in other words, there is not always a distinction between herself and her best friend as they often perceive the world through a shared subjectivity. For the two friends, this closeness means that they have "difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's" (83). In fact, Sula and Nel don't really experience the world as neatly isolated individuals, but as if they were "two throats and one eye" (147). Experiencing the world as one eye—or one I—Sula and Nel's individuality is expanded by each other. They not only feel for each other but feel *with* each other, illustrating a relationality that takes the misty jointness explored in this chapter to the next level.

For Sula and Nel, this closeness is intimately related to—indeed perhaps even predicated upon—their identities. As the narrator tells us, describing Sula and Nel's friendship:

Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. … [T]hey found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (52)

Here, we learn that *because* of their race, their gender, and their social status, Sula and Nel create alternative ways of being where their selves are radically co-constructed and dependent on each other. The limitations that come with a society steeped in racism,

128

misogyny, and heteronormativity that they both live in are depicted as limiting—"freedom and triumph was forbidden to them"—but also enabling different ways of being. Social categories that in many ways create obstacles for the two girls also create something enabling rather than constricting: a possibility for a more expansive self. Like Eleanor Pargiter whose stereotypically feminine habit of sacrificing her own interest for the sake of others enabled a more fluid and dynamic life—a richer life—the friendship between Sula and Nel locates and reveals subversive possibilities that the experience of structural injustice creates. Through the depiction of a friendship so intricately linked that it questions the boundaries of the individuals in it, Morrison exposes how this kind of friendship can lead to a more expansive understanding of individuality.

It is not only the friends themselves that notice their closeness. Whereas in *The Waves* the intimacy that the six friends experience only appears to be perceived by the friends themselves, people around Sula and Nel remark on how indistinguishable the two are. Most notably, Sula's grandmother Eva confuses the two characters at the very end of the novel when Nel visits her at the nursing home where she spends the end of her life. Here, Eva accuses Nel of being responsible for the death of Chicken Little, the young boy whose accidental death Sula and Nel witnessed and perhaps hands-on caused when they were young girls themselves. Claiming that she did not let the little boy go in the water—according to her, Sula did—Nel is taken aback when Eva replies, "You. Sula. What's the difference?" (168). Moments later, Eva concludes that there "[n]ever was no difference between you" (168-169). While the lack of distinction between Sula and Nel here could be disregarded as an old woman's confusion (this is how Nel tries to brush it off), there is more to this conflation of the two friends. Pointing to the joint culpability of the death of a young boy, Eva's insistence on the inseparableness of Sula and Nel shows that it is not only the two friends themselves who experience this closeness. Just as Sula and Nel "had difficulty

distinguishing one's thought from the other's," so do others have trouble differentiating between the two (83).

The potential of Sula and Nel's closeness appears in sharper distinction if we contrast their relationship with that of Nel and her husband, Jude. Sula and Nel experience a closeness that means that "a compliment to one was a compliment to the other, and cruelty to one was a challenge to the other," changing both characters as they understand themselves and their emotions and reactions more expansively and Jude, too, is changed by his relationship with Nel (83-84). The closeness of husband and wife, however, is of a different kind. Without a wife, Jude knows, he is just "a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman" but with Nel, he will be "head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity" (83). While Jude does experience a change because of a relationship—one way in which we can see how people *are* relations rather than just having relationships, to return to radical relationality—what is changed here is not so much Jude, but the image of Jude as he presents himself to and for the unjust world in which he exists. Like Woolf's Charles Tansley, Jude needs Nel and what she represents—the institution of marriage, a family life that comes with duties, and respect—to feel complete; "The two of them together," he knows, "would make one Jude" (83). Jude, we are told, is looking for "someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up" (83). Nel will serve as the one "shor[ing] him up;" she will serve as what Morrison in her last novel will call an "ego prop" for Jude (*God Help the Child* 37). In this blurring of characters where two become one and Nel is used to complete Jude, there is no thinking or feeling in common. Rather, Nel is sought as an alternative hierarchy that echoes dreams of patriarchal dominion.

Jude, then, uses Nel to create a vision of and for himself. In this process, he uses Nel as a mirror. Jude, we learn, "could see himself taking shape in [Nel's] eyes" (83). Looking into his wife's eyes, Jude sees a version of himself that he likes. What he does not see,

however, is his wife. Focusing on the reflection of himself, Nel's eyes—for Jude—become like the water for Narcissus: a reflective surface in which he can see and admire himself. Turning Nel into a tool for reflection forecloses the possibility for the kind of fluid individuality inspired by the intimacy of a close relationship of the kind that Nel has with Sula. In this marital dynamic, there is no room for two to tango; Nel's reality is pushed to the side as she becomes a tool for Jude's reflection. There may be both closeness and intimacy in this kind of instrumental and transactional relationship in which Jude provides Nel with shelter, love, money, and time but there is little room left for Nel.

While much more reciprocal than Nel and Jude's relationship, the intimate friendship of Nel and Sula is not without its problems. In fact, the very closeness between them is what destroys their friendship. More specifically, it is Sula's changing, fluid, and fundamentally relational self—in part a result of her closeness with Nel—that is described as the reason for their breakup. Throughout the novel, Sula is portrayed as remarkably selfless. She is described as having "no ego" and "no compulsion to … be consistent with herself" (119). Free from the constraints of a narrow individuality, Sula's behavior is often judged as selfish by those around her. As Paula Moya writes, "[i]ronicallly, Sula's lack of consistent self encourages her to behave in ways that are distinctly selfish according to the mores of the community in which she lives" (66). Nowhere is Sula's selfish behavior and its links to her fundamentally relational character more apparent than in the reason why her friendship with Nel falls apart: her sleeping with Jude. Because of the closeness between her and Nel, Sula must learn that "she and Nel were not the same thing" (119). This realization occurs brutally with Nel's reaction to finding out about Sula and Jude. For Sula, there is nothing strange—and certainly nothing wrong—with her having sex with her best friend's husband. Why would there be when the two are so close that it's difficult to distinguish between them? Since they are so close as to be indistinguishable, and since she grew up in a household full of women "who thought all men available," Sula "had no thought at all of causing Nel pain

when she bedded down with Jude" (119). Needless to say, the situation is experienced differently by Nel.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Fitting for a novel that, in the words of Morrison herself, is about "a friendship between women unmediated by men," *Sula* ends with Nel realizing that she has mistakenly grieved the loss of Jude in the place of the loss of Sula (foreword xiii). In the final scene of the novel, Morrison describes how Nel finally but belatedly realizes how fundamentally her relationship with Sula defined her. In this realization, we see a blending of two characters that reconsiders individuality and has the potential to shift how we think about empathy. In the novel's penultimate paragraph, after Nel acknowledges that she has missed Sula rather than her husband (who left Nel shortly after sleeping with Sula), she cries out "O Lord, Sula. … girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (174). This literal blending of words as well as characters that Morrison leaves her readers with carries significance. If we read the first "girl" in this sentence as standing for Nel and the second for Sula, Morrison leaves us with a blending of the two friends that adds up to more than its parts. Girl + girl does not equal two separate girls here, but one "girlgirlgirl." Two girls together do not even equal one girl-girl, but a more intimately joined "girlgirlgirl." This "girlgirlgirl" can be read as representing an intimately connected form of being, a fluid and misty sense of individuality where the borders between self and other are blurred, leading to words and girls melting into each other. In other words, Morrison leaves her readers with a fluid model of individuals where there is no clear boundary between one girl and the next, just like there is no boundary between the words in this final "girlgirlgirl."

In this passage, as in the novel as a whole, Morrison presents us with a poetic envisioning of radical relationality: We do not understand Sula or Nel very well as separate girls but understand them better as one girlgirlgirl. These characters do not "have" a relationship with each other; their relationship fundamentally defines who they are. The sense of self—the I—that emerges from this envisioning is a fundamentally different form of self from the stuttering I-I-I that we find in Woolf's narrowly self-asserting men, or in the fragile image of Jude propped up by Nel. In the case of Charles Tansley and the other stuttering men in Woolf's oeuvre, the I that they stutter may not be unified, but it's nevertheless one I—one individual. The fragments of Charles Tansley and the other I's are divided by hyphens: "I-I-I." These hyphens, although they may seem minor, are significant. Compared with the "girlgirlgirl" of *Sula*, the I's in a stuttering I-I-I are separate, distinct, and divided, rather than collective, fluid, and misty.

My point is that the joint form of being that emerges at the end of Morrison's novel is more than mere linguistic play. Nel and Sula both think and perceive and remember together throughout the novel and the connectedness of the two characters is reflected in the form of the novel. The alternative, relational view of what it means to be and have a self is, in other words, reflected in the form of the narrative. Nel's cry at the end, we learn, "was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (174). Pushing against linearity (a narrative strategy Morrison would use for the first time in *Song of Solomon,* which she felt required "a straightforward chronology" rather than "the kind of play with sequence and time" she used in her two previous novels because *Song of Solomon* is a "stereotypically male narrative"), Morrison shows how these alternative forms of being come with alternative forms of storytelling: with "circles and circles" rather than hierarchical structures with tops and bottoms, or beginnings and endings (*Song of Solomon* xii).

The relational form is also seen in how the novel refutes the narrative traditions of individual main characters. As Paula Moya has argued, *Sula* is, in many ways, an "anti-Bildungsroman" (62). Defying readers' expectations of a novel named after a character, Sula is in fact not introduced until the third chapter and, even then, she is denied narrating or even focalizing privileges. Instead, Nel is the only character granted the privilege of focalizing and narrating (Moya 62). We thus learn about Sula through the characters around her—we see her through other eyes and other I's—in many ways similar to how we learn about Jacob of Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922). Woolf's Jacob, like Morrison's Sula, emerges not through his narrated interiority, but through other characters and the imprint he leaves on their lives. This method of relaying a character through those existing around them is a relational play with narrative expectations about a novel—especially a novel named after a character—as a genre centered on a main character who is clearly, stably, and robustly unified and singular. This is not the way in which Sula exists. Thinking, perceiving, remembering, and existing in a fundamentally relational way—in a state of togetherness— Sula as a character makes no sense if we expect her to be a clearly defined and singular main character. As a novel, *Sula* opens up for expansive ways of understanding fellow-feeling in and through literature.

Feeling together

The intimate togetherness of Sula as a character and a novel is echoed in Morrison's 1993 Nobel Lecture. As she ends the speech and the story that runs through this lecture, Morrison concludes with the following sentences: "Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done – together" (np). I would like to hone in on that very last word—"together"—and think about how this word signifies what Morrison's body of work can tell us about the power and potential of literature. Ending a speech about literature with the word "together" points to

her recognition of the relational quality of telling and reading stories. Through this word choice, Morrison reminds us that telling, hearing, and reading stories are not activities we do alone; it is something we do *together*. This fact is easily forgotten if we continue to understand the act of fellow-feeling enabled by literature as an act of mirroring, which always returns us to ourselves rather than opening up for a realization of what exists beyond ourselves: an acknowledgment of how we are changed through together-ness. Mirroring often forecloses the ability to see what we do together, making it all too easy to slip into the mode of thinking where reading as well as feeling *with others* is imagined as individual and isolated acts of interpretation (of others' emotions or of others' words).

That final word of Morrison's speech carries weight on a philological level too. Stemming from the Proto-Germanic word *gaduri*, meaning "in a body," and the Proto-Indo-European *ghedh*, meaning "to unite, join, fit" the roots of the word clue us into this other meaning of the speech, the word, and Morrison's work ("Together"). To be together is, in essence, to be united, or joined, and it is also to be in a body. This reminds us of the embodied nature of reading and relating to others—another aspect too easily forgotten in the isolate and isolating hall of mirrors that comes about if we understand empathy and reading as acts of mirroring. If we forget the fact that reading is embodied, it is easy to also forget the power dynamics that shape how bodies relate to each other. The etymology of Morrison's word choice reminds us of the importance of approaching empathy and reading through an intersectional lens, paying close attention to how different bodies are shaped by and shape the structures of power and discrimination. To be together is to exist in a body, in unity or jointness—in connection. Woolf and Morrison envision intimately joined forms of being together through their depictions of misty I's that blur into each other through acts of perceiving, feeling, and thinking with others. Through these depictions, they also invite embodied readers—you and I—to think, feel, and perceive with the characters created by their phrases; to melt into each other through words, and to get others' beats into our brains.

Conclusion

Lily's Revenge, Intersectional Empathy, and the Importance of Being Thou

> For what do I care about his 'I-I-I'? …
> He can't be 'you'—he must be 'I.'
>
> —Virginia Woolf, *The Years*

Ten years after Lily suffered through Charles Tansley's I-I-I in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf finally grants her revenge. In the last novel published when she was still alive, Woolf rewrites the ending of the dinner scene in which Lily was silently urged to aid Charles Tansley's fragile ego in his desire to assert himself; she finally lets a woman complete "the experiment—what happens if one is not nice to that young man there" (*To the Lighthouse* 92). In *The Years*, Woolf lets the experiment run its course. Here, it is Peggy Pargiter, the niece of the habitually other-centered Eleanor Pargiter, who has to talk to an insular, self-centered young man at a party:

> Her attention wandered. She had heard it all before. I-I-I—he went on. It was like a vulture's beak pecking, or a vacuum-cleaner sucking, or a telephone bell ringing. I-I-I. But he couldn't help it, not with that nerve-drawn egotist's face, she thought, glancing at him. He could not free himself; could not detach himself. He was bound on the wheel with tight iron hoops. He had to expose, had to exhibit. But why let him? she thought, as he went on talking. For what do I care about his 'I-I-I'? Or his poetry? Let me shake him off then, she said to herself, feeling like a person whose blood has been sucked, leaving all the nerve-centres pale. She paused. He noted her lack of sympathy. He thought her stupid, she supposed.
>
> 'I'm tired,' she apologized. 'I've been up all night,' she explained. 'I'm a doctor.'

The fire went out of his face when she said 'I.' That's done it—now he'll go, she thought. He can't be 'you'—he must be 'I.' She smiled. For up he got and off he went. (361)

Where Lily had to cave in and "be nice" to Charles Tansley, Peggy Pargiter is allowed to do what she desires: to disregard the young man's need to assert his I. Peggy does not have to aid the young man in his fragile self-assertion and she does not have to care that he may defensively classify her lack of sympathy as stupidity. Redirecting attention from the poet's I-I-I by inserting details about her own reality into the conversation—she is tired because she is a doctor who has spent all night helping a patient—Peggy is allowed to claim space for her own reality. Such space Lily Briscoe had to give up at the Ramsay's dinner table.

 In this long-awaited revenge focalized through an impatient Peggy Pargiter, we see self-centeredness scorned. The young man who, like Charles Tansley, stutters his I three times is exposed to a biting critique: his big I is like an annoying sound, or like a sharp object that unpleasantly demands your attention, and his narcissism sucks the energy out of his surroundings in vampirical fashion. Like Charles Tansley, the young man requires constant attention from women around him to uphold his façade of self-importance yet provides nothing in return. He is, in short, the worst guest imaginable, and there is no Mrs. Ramsay running to the table to save him.

This is not all Peggy sees, however. She does not stop at a one-sided, or one-dimensional, understanding of the young man. Like Woolf herself who at the age of 58 was able to finally see her self-centered and dominating father from two angles—simultaneously "condemning" him as she did when she was a child and "understanding" or at least "tolerating" him as an older woman—Peggy sees the poet from more than one perspective (*Diary* vol. IV, Thursday 25 April, 1940, 281). He is dreadfully tiring, but he is also stuck. This young man *can't* be you. His insistence on and repetition of his big I is a compulsion.

Peggy's realization of the man's inability to escape his insular perspective can help us understand how limiting it is to live as a big I. As we see in this scene, this approach to the world is pitied for its lack of freedom. The young man talking about his poetry is not free—he "could not free himself"—he *has to* expose and exhibit as he is stuck in the "tight iron hoops" of a tortuous wheel of self-centeredness that he is unable to break. The language of freedom and bondage is crucial here, pointing to how Woolf's experiments with more expansive models of selves can help free an individual from the kind of self-centered prison that this particular young poet is stuck in. Like the other characters inflicted with this particular brand of egotism in Woolf, this man must stutter his I and when this fails —when he realizes that he is relegated to the position of "you"—the fire within him dies. Threatened by a woman with a profession, the young man has nothing more to gain from the conversation and self-centeredness once again appears as a debilitating deficiency. An individual who must assert his dominant I and his eye—his vision—in this manner does not leave room for other I's or eyes. Indeed, as soon as Peggy Pargiter's first-person pronoun enters the stage, the young man flees: "off he went."

What we see here is Peggy Pargiter diagnosing a condition: The young man "can't be 'you'—he must be 'I' (361). Being unable to be *you* because of a need to always be *I* is repeatedly depicted as a lamentable condition in Woolf's writing because of how this inability obstructs the possibility of understanding someone else's experience. Being unable to be you severely limits your ability to take an interest in anything other than your own big I—it leaves you trapped in your own necessarily narrow perspective on the world and does not allow room for the type of flowing into other people's lives that Woolf as well as Morrison value as a potent expansion of individual life.

There are many things you cannot do when you "can't be 'you.'" For one, the kind of perspectival shift that allows Peggy Pargiter to simultaneously abhor and pity the young

man—the same flexibility that enables Woolf to condemn and tolerate her father and that lets Lily Briscoe see the world with if not fifty sets of eyes so then at least more than one—is out of bounds. This kind of perspectival shift is not available when you assert your I like Charles Tansley and the unnamed young poet in *The Years*: these men cannot see the world from more than one perspective because they are stuck in their narrow self-centeredness, mired by desperate attempts to assert their big I's.

*

The passage with Peggy and the young poet connects to what the existentialist philosopher Martin Buber calls the difference between an I-It and an I-Thou way of seeing the world. For Buber, the I-It way is characterized by utility. When we see the world through the lens of I-It, we see others (things as well as persons) as objects that can be used by us. As Buber writes in his widely quoted *I and Thou* (1923), when a person seeing the world through the I-It lens says "You," he really means "You, my ability to use!" (109). This worldview leaves little room for the reality of others. It is, presumably, the only kind of "You" that Charles Tansley and the young poet in *The Years* can conceive of. For these solipsistic and thereby imprisoned men, the I-It mode is the only available way of interacting with the world. As we witness, the young poet *can't* be you. Likewise, there is no room for a "you" in the mirroring kind of empathy where the big I feels your pain.

In contrast with I-It, the I-Thou approach to the world allows—insists on—room for the other to exist in their own right. Buber exemplifies the I-Thou mode by describing different ways of looking at a tree. If I consider a tree through the I-Thou lens, he writes, "I

139

am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It" (58). In the I-Thou mode, then, relationality is emphasized: "I am drawn into *a relation*." In this mode, the *I* is no longer alone; it exists in an intricately connected relationship with Thou. In the I-Thou mode, the mind is not an isolated entity. Because of this, the I-Thou relationship can liberate the self, letting it escape—if momentarily—from the hermitage of self.[14] At the far end of this liberation of and from the self, we find the kestrel moment. In the kestrel moment, the I disappears through intensely disinterested contemplation of something other than one's self. In the kestrel moment, you are not even *you*—you as well as I have disappeared as "There is nothing now but kestrel" (Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good" 82).

Like the kestrel moment, perceiving the world in the I-Thou way requires work. As Jenny Odell writes, the I-Thou mode of existing "demands constant and unmixed attention, an ongoing state of encounter" (*How to Do Nothing* 107). This ongoing encounter is what *The Years'* Eleanor Pargiter consistently works toward when she imagines the realities of others, and what Woolf and Morrison aim for in their imaginative encounters with others as they relate to others in their writing. The ongoing encounter, never claiming to know another but always attempting to understand, is also what their books can invite readers to do. While Buber's philosophy is concerned with how we perceive others (as "It" or as "Thou"), Woolf's depiction of characters stuck as *I* reveal the value of *being thou*; of being able to acknowledge the relationality of our existence. Being unable to be thou, Woolf shows us, confines a person to a narrow way of living. *Being thou,* on the other hand, is highly valorized by Woolf and, in different ways, by Morrison. Both writers depict characters through an I-Thou lens and invite their readers to engage with their work as *thou* (remember, for example, the ending of *Jazz* where the narrator addresses readers as *you*,

---

[14] I would like to thank Sowon Park for the phrase "the hermitage of self," which is one of innumerable phrases that conversations with her have lent me.

inviting them into an intimate relationship). As such, their stories invite readers to be *thou* and provide us with an opportunity to practice this mode of being that requires a flexibility of the mind.

The ability to be *thou* is a necessary ability in any form of partner or group dance. In these dances, you need to recognize yourself as existing in relation to another and as something other than an isolated big I. If we understand dance as a form of synchronized relationality where multiple individuals move together, we can acknowledge the dynamic movements that make up a dance. This dynamic movement—between imagined perspectives or between positions on a dance floor—is by definition impermanent. In contrast with the static mirror image which fixes whom you are looking at within a frame like a photograph that cut off more than it includes, the dance is both dynamic and impermanent. Being *thou* is, by definition, an impermanent state, which the dance as a metaphorical model for the feelings evoked by reading can help us notice. By asking in what ways empathy functions as a dance, we can expose—and then scrutinize—the dynamics and dynamism of empathy.

The ability to be *thou* is also a necessity for intersectional empathy to exist. Like the perspectival shifts required to be *thou* and like the dance, intersectional empathy is always impermanent. In addition to impermanence, intersectional empathy is characterized by two things: difference and distance. Like Eleanor Pargiter who cries because of the difference between herself and Crosby when they are both leaving Abercorn Terrace, as discussed in Chapter I, intersectional empathy is anchored in a realization of difference. It is a form of fellow-feeling that centers, honors, and maintains difference rather than obscuring it. Woolf and Morrison respect and foreground this difference throughout their novels. Rather than seeing the unknowability of others that often stems from this difference as a failure to be overcome, they present difference as valuable and they repeatedly acknowledge the limits that structure any act of imagining other minds through narrators who articulate their

ignorance, through characters who sustain a state of wonder rather than intruding upon others' minds, and through vocalized and ventriloquized recognitions of their own imaginative limitations. This valorization of limits is crucial for intersectional empathy. Only by being aware of difference can the minds of the entitled as well as the dispossessed dance together as Morrison envisions in "The Dancing Mind." This dance attenuates the risk for committing the "violence of identification" that Saidiya Hartman warned us about (20).

The distance maintained in and by intersectional empathy is crucial. If we go along with today's mainstream definitions and take empathy to mean the "ability to imagine and understand the thoughts, perspective, and emotions of another person," intersectional empathy, by contrast, is the ability to know that this very condition includes what you *don't* know about your ability to imagine and understand the thoughts, perspectives, and emotions of another person[15] ("empathy"). This acknowledgment of the epistemic gap between the one who experiences and the one who feels is an acknowledgment of distance. While such an acknowledgment may at first seem at odds with empathy, I suggest that is crucial for the experience of intersectional empathy. It is an acknowledgment of ignorance, which requires what Detloff called "epistemic humility" (45). This type of humility animates Woof's struggles to depict the lives of working women and leads her to assert that "One could not be Mrs. Giles of Durham because one's body had never stood at the wash-tub" (*Life* xxi). Shifting the focus from trying to overcome the limitations of our embodied imaginations to honoring these limitations, Woolfian empathy and the other forms of fellow-feeling excavated in this project do not try to minimize distance. In keeping their distance and honoring difference, these ways of feeling with fellows allow room for the reality of others.

---

[15] This is a conceptualization and a phrasing that I would like to thank Julie Carlson for helping me formulate.

Practicing intersectional empathy, then, means practicing the art of attempting to understand others from more than one perspective and with epistemic humility.

This art is one way in which we can see others as "real impenetrable human person[s]" rather than as "bogus individual[s]" and "false whole[s]" as Iris Murdoch invites us to do ("Against Dryness" 20). To see others as real and impenetrable human beings, we need to be able to move between being I and being you; we need to be aware of our I and our eye so that we do not commit the kind of empathetic trespassing that Woolf was worried about in her portrayal of working women, but we also need to be free enough from our I and fluid enough in our eye so that we can temporarily inch toward a different subject position. By becoming *you* in this way, we can engage in the work of seeing others as real impenetrable human beings who are fundamentally related to others.

*

Intersectional empathy also requires renewed attention to the embodied reality of the reader. In the foreword to the 2004 Vintage edition of *Sula*, Toni Morrison asks, "How does a reader of any race situate herself or himself in order to approach the world of a black writer? Won't there always be apprehension about what may be revealed, exposed, about the reader?" (xii). Her query places the focus on the reader—rather than on the writer or the text—in a way that is helpful for understanding how literature may invite intersectional empathy. More precisely, it shifts attention to the *relationship* between reader and text as well as the writer; the key question that Morrison poses is how the reader *situates* herself in relation to the world of the text, created by the writer. To situate—"to place in a site, situation, context, or category"—draws our attention to the context that reading takes place in and requires careful

attention to specifics of the reading process ("Situate"). Who is reading, what are they reading, where and when are they reading, and by whom is the text written? These are but some of the questions that need to be answered if we want to explore how readers are *situated* in their engagement with literature. As Morrison knows, the reader's reaction to a text will depend on the specifics of this situated relationship: the reader she is talking about is approaching, specifically, "the world of a *black* writer," an acknowledgment that hints at how readerly reactions always depend on the relationship between a specific reader and specific writer, in a specific context. The reader's situatedness—their positionality—will change what is revealed through the interaction with the text. Like the ending of *Jazz* where Morrison's narrator breaks the fourth wall to emphasize the embodied and relational reading process ("Look where your hands are. Now."), this conceptualization of literature never loses sight of the reality of the reader (229).

Intersectional Empathy: Forms of Fellow-Feeling in Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison explores how the relationality of reading that Morrison draws attention to in the foreword to *Sula* can shift how we think of empathy invited by literature more broadly. Rather than a mirror for the reader, I suggest that we consider empathy as a form of synchronized dance. To begin to understand this synchronization and the many forms it can take, we need to consider readers' varied identities and embodied realities in studies on the relationship between empathy and literature. The specificity of the relationship between reader and writer is often neglected, and more often disfigured, in contemporary research on the relationship between empathy and literature. Seeing empathy as a form of mirroring, the context evoked by the word *situate* is easily obscured as a shallow and one-dimensional understanding of the reader's identity becomes the sole focus. For example, if we return to the popular study providing empirical evidence that reading literary fiction improves Theory of Mind, the authors of this study—Kidd and Castano—do consider the gender, education, age, and ethnicity of their participating readers. This schematic information is, however, not

fine-grained enough for us to begin to understand how the reader is situated in relation to the text. Since there is no discussion about how these identity categories relate to the authors or characters in the texts that the participants are reading, there is little possibility of exploring how the readers are situated. This means that the power dynamics that shape any act of feeling for and with another—be it a literary character or a flesh-and-blood person—cannot be examined. In other words, what the text *reveals* about readers through its evocation of emotion is not engaged and cannot be understood.

I am not pointing this inadequacy out for the pleasure of picking apart another's argument, or to catalog the shortcomings of empirical studies of literature. Rather, I point this out to propose that we need a vocabulary of empathy with more granularity in future interdisciplinary explorations of the relationship between empathy and literature. If, as Kidd and Castano and many with them claim, "[u]nderstanding others' mental states is a crucial skill that enables the complex social relationships that characterize human societies," the processes involved in this understanding are important to understand (377). Kidd and Castano's preliminary findings propose that "by prompting readers to take an active writerly role to form representations of characters' subjective states, literary fiction recruits [Theory of Mind]" (380). What *Intersectional Empathy* proposes is that we need a more fine-grained understanding of empathy to understand how this representation happens and what factors influence it. Empathy as well as its underlying processes such as Theory of Mind has many channels, and we need to see them in order to understand how they are tuned by different factors and forces in the reading process. We need, in other words, a multi-dimensional rather than one-dimensional understanding of fellow-feeling. If we approach the processes underlying empathy through the lens of mirroring—if we understand the work involved in understanding the mental states of others as a question of placing our big I's in their shoes— we will not get very far in our investigations. We might understand ourselves better when we read to see ourselves reflected, but if the goal is to gain a fuller understanding of *someone*

else's experience—to understand another as a "real impenetrable human person"—the mirror always risks obscuring the reality we aim to understand ("Against Dryness" 20).

In reducing literature to a conduit for Theory of Mind, we simplify both empathy and literature by making the perspectival sharing that can be encouraged by engagement with literature seem much easier than it *de facto* is. Kidd and Castano assert that "perceiving the world simultaneously from different viewpoints" is a feature of Theory of Mind and that this kind of perspectival shift is prompted by reading literary fiction (378). I agree about the value of perspectival shifting but as I have shown throughout *Intersectional Empathy* and as Woolf and Morrison continuously remind us, this shifting subjectivity requires hard work. It is a form of fluidity that you cannot achieve if you, like Charles Tansley or the nameless young poet in *The Years,* have a compulsive tendency to assert your big I. The well-educated Charles Tansley is reading what Kidd and Castano surely would call "literary fiction" without, we can assume, engaging his Theory of Mind because his perspective is so firmly mired in his self: "For that was that his criticism of poor Sir Walter, or perhaps it was Jane Austen, amounted to. 'I-I-I'" (106). You cannot engage in multiple perspectives if you're stuck in the I-I-I. If you are not able to be "you" in the reading process, there is little possibility of actual fellow-feeling.

Woolf and Morrison's novels reveal the labor required for the kind of shifting perspectives that Kidd and Castano take for granted as well as the power dynamics that shape who performs this labor. What the novels discussed in this dissertation never let us forget is how social power dynamics shape who can, and sometimes who must, imagine the perspective of someone else. In relationships structured by an unequal distribution of power, subordinate group members have a much better understanding of dominant group members and their culture than the other way around. This perspectival fluidity is often a condition for survival. As we see in the instructive dynamics structuring the interaction between Lily Briscoe and Charles Tansley at the dinner table, Lily can decipher Charles' fears, desires, and

motivations while he is oblivious of Lily's experience. This awareness of how power structures knowledge and blindness shapes Woolf's acknowledgement that her understanding of domestic workers is limited.

Similar power dynamics influence crucial differences between Woolf and Morrison as writers, particularly regarding the limits of their imaginations. If we attend to their writerly limits, we see intersectional power dynamics at play. For Woolf, as discussed in Chapter I, the biggest obstacle for her imagination was that of class. She repeatedly refrains from imagining the inner life of characters from a lower social class than herself because she knows that the differences between her life and that of domestic workers bars her from their realities. If we take a moment to consider how Morrison approaches depicting the minds of domestic workers, significant differences as well as similarities appear. Morrison is famous for providing American literary history with what Black feminist theorist Barbara Christian calls "possibly the first evocation of a black domestic's inner voice" (494). This voice is heard in Mrs. Breedlove's soliloquy in Morrison's 1970 debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (494). Although admittedly closer to Mrs. Breedlove's lived experience than Woolf was to, for example, Mrs. McNab's, there are still important differences between Morrison and Mrs. Breedlove. While Morrison grew up working-class in the same racist society as Mrs. Breedlove, she was never a domestic worker and she earned a master's degree from Cornell, an almost unimaginable achievement for anyone in the Breedlove family. Like most literature that is not strictly autobiographical then, crucial differences remain and, in line with these intersectional differences, crucial distance is maintained. Morrison marks the distance between her narrator and Mrs. Breedlove on the page, setting her interiority apart from the voice of the narrator through the use of italics, quotation marks, and physical distance:
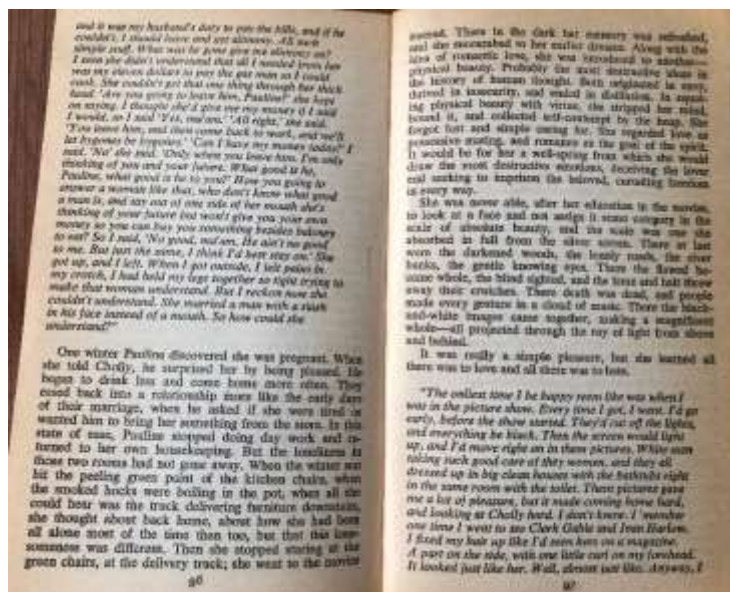
Part of Pauline Breedlove's soliloquy in *The Bluest Eye* (1970).

Through that blank space on the page, a gap between narrator and character is maintained.
The distance maintained in and marked by this gap is at the center of intersectional
empathy. In the italicized passages set apart by quotation marks and separated by physical
space, Morrison marks these passages as different from the narrator's to let Mrs. Breedlove
narrate her past and her mind in her own voice. While Woolf used grammar to maintain a
distance in her imagination of Mrs. McNab, admitting that the best she can do is to speculate
about what "must have been," Morrison experiments with physical, typographical distance
on the page. And although Morrison can go farther in her imaginative ventures because of
her shared embodied reality with someone like Mrs. Breedlove, she still acknowledges—and
respects—limits by drawing attention to the gap that always remains between her as a writer,
her narrator, and a character when the relationship is structures by uneven power relations.
It is worth emphasizing here that this is the only chapter in which Morrison sets a
character's interiority apart from the narrator in this way in a novel that in a mere 160 pages
manages to imagine the perspective, thoughts, and emotions of—to empathize with, if you
will—at least seven very different characters.

148

Through their illustrations of how socially situated power dynamics both enable and restrict the labor of imagining someone else's perspective, Woolf and Morrison present a dense view of the complexity of life. This complexity is not easily discerned in an fMRI machine or in psychological surveys since laboratories are sealed off from the outside world in which reading, writing, and feeling all take place. By realizing the power dynamics that we all exist in, literature can provide one site in which we can study how these dynamics shape how we feel for, with, and along others. Woolf and Morrison make these dynamics visible on two levels. On the mimetic level, they depict the processes that characters with varying abilities to understand others go through to engage with the feelings of their fellows. On the "real world" level, they invite readers to reflect on what their texts reveal about their own emotional tendencies and reactions.

Through this double exposure, Woolf and Morrison reveal a potential of literature that is simultaneously more modest and more powerful than the idea that reading fiction makes us better at empathizing: these authors offer readers opportunities to think and perceive together with another. By reading the interiorities of the characters crafted by Woolf and Morrison, we—as embodied, different, and distant readers—are invited to, for a moment, get a glimpse of what it is like to perceive the world as someone else. In his aptly titled book *Ignorance,* the neuroscientist Stuart Firestein suggests that a glimpse is "the subtlest kind of experiment one can design" (98). Offering glimpses into the experiences of others, Woolf and Morrison's novels can be understood as subtly situated experiments in empathy.

This glimpse is, of course, never complete. I am not suggesting that I somehow leave my body and see the world as, for example, inhabiting Bernard when I am reading *The Waves*. I do propose that a novel like *The Waves* can invite me to momentarily look at the world *with* another. Like Bernard, I might realize that a tree looks different if I look at it with a close friend next to me or with Lord Byron's beat in my brain. I might even have a

realization similar to Bernard, who realizes that "I was Byron, and the tree was Byron's tree, lachrymose, down-showering, lamenting. Now that we look at the tree together, it has a combed look, each branch distinct" (83). Like Bernard, I might note the strangeness of the world seen with another—"How strange … the willow looks seen together" (83). Depicting Bernard perceiving the world not alone, but with Neville and with Byron, Woolf's flow of consciousness reveals a fundamentally connected, rather than an insular, form of writing and of being. In this mode of being, characters flow in and out of each other through shared language and shared perceptions. Like Morrison's portrayal of Sula and Nel's deep-seated intimacy that allows them to experience the world together, depictions like these offer glimpses into the experience of someone else as well as blueprints for what it may look and feel like to experience the world together.

The kind of perspectival shifting depicted by Woolf and Morrison and invited by their novels is neither stable nor long-lasting. Rather, it is momentary, fragmentary, and fleeting, and it is also changing and fluid, like a dance. The shared perspective, the perceiving *together*, is flexible and often fleeting, but it nevertheless offers a way to perceive the world that is not fixed or insulated. Structured by a multitude of contextual aspects around me and through the rhythm of writing transferred to the rhythm of reading, literature can offer a glimpse of another perspective. To recognize this glimpse involves attentive work, but it also offers considerable rewards. If we recognize this glimpse, in retrospect or as it is happening, we can gain access to a multitude of perspectives—prospects—that allow us and teach us to feel *with* others.

Works Cited

Abbott, H. Porter. *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable*. Ohio State University
Press, 2013.

Ahmed, Sara. "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology." GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian
and Gay Studies, vol. 12, no. 4, Jan. 2006, pp. 543–74. DOI.org (Crossref),
https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2006-002.

"Allo-, Comb. form, Sense 1." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, July 2023,
https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3938706864.

Beer, Gillian. *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground: Essays by Gillian Beer*. University of
Michigan Press, 1996.

Belluck, Pam. "For Better Social Skills, Scientists Recommend a Little Chekhov," October 3,
2013, https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/03/i-know-how-youre-feeling-i-
read-chekhov/. Accessed 17 October, 2023.

Bhave, Anushka, et al. "Comparing Synchronicity in Body Movement among Jazz Musicians
with Their Emotions." *Sensors (Basel, Switzerland)*, vol. 23, no. 15, 2023, pp. 6789-,
https://doi.org/10.3390/s23156789.

Blanchet, Robert. "Empathy as the Opposite of Egocentrism: Why the Simulation Theory
and the Direct Perception Theory of Empathy Fail." *Topoi* 39.4 (2020): 751–759.

Box, G. E. P. *Robustness in the Strategy of Scientific Model Building*. 1979.

Breithaupt, Fritz. *Why Empathy is not the Best Basis for Humanitarianism* (Global
Cooperation Research Papers 9). Duisburg: Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for
Global Cooperation Research (KHK/GCR21). doi: 10.14282/2198-0411-GCRP-9.
License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY-ND 4.0, 2015.

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "East Saint Louis Race Riot of

1917". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 Feb.

2024, https://www.britannica.com/event/East-Saint-Louis-Race-Riot-of-

1917. Accessed 11 April 2024.

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Theodor Lipps". Encyclopedia Britannica, 13

Oct. 2023, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodor-Lipps. Accessed 19

October 2023.

Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Touchstone, 1996 [1923].

Caygill, Maggie and Pavitra Sundar. "Empathy and Antiracist Feminist Coalitional Politics."

Rain and Thunder, Issue 23, 2004, n.p.

Christian, Barbara T. "Layered Rhythms: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison." *Modern*

Fiction Studies vol. 39, no 3/4, 1993, pp. 483–500,

https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.0515.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist

Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."

University of Chicago Legal Forum, vol. 1, 1989, pp. 139-67.

Davies, Margaret Llewelyn, and Virginia Woolf. *Life as We Have Known It*. Edited by

Margaret Llewelyn Davies, Hogarth Press, 1931.

Detloff, Madelyn. *The Value of Virginia Woolf*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt). *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1st Vintage

books/Library of America ed., Vintage Books/Library of America, 1990.

"Effusion." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-

webster.com/dictionary/effusion. Accessed 11 Apr. 2024.

"Empathy." Oxford Reference. Date of access 4 Jan. 2024,

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.2011080309575010

2>

"Empathy, *N*." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, July

2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4513297911.

Firestein, Stuart. *Ignorance : How It Drives Science*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Flint, Kate. "*The Waves:* Introduction." *Virginia Woolf: Introduction to the Major Works,*
edited by Julia Briggs, Virago Press Ltd., 1994, pp. 219-247.

Gallese, Vittorio. "The Roots of Empathy: The Shared Manifold Hypothesis and the Neural
Basis of Intersubjectivity," *Psychopathology*, 36: 171–180, 2003.

Gallese, Vittorio et al. "Action recognition in the premotor cortex." Brain: a journal of
neurology vol. 119 (Pt 2) (1996): 593-609. doi:10.1093/brain/119.2.593

Gordon, David J. *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing*. Columbia: University of Missouri
Press, 1995.

Graham, Jeremy, et al. "Medical Humanities Coursework Is Associated with Greater
Measured Empathy in Medical Students." *The American Journal of Medicine*, vol.
129, no. 12, Dec. 2016, pp. 1334–37. *DOI.org (Crossref)*,
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2016.08.005.

Hakemulder, Jèmeljan. *The Moral Laboratory: Experiments Examining the Effects of
Reading Literature on Social Perception and Moral Self-Concept*. Amsterdam;: J.
Benjamins Pub., 2000.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-
Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

Heister, Hilmar. "Mirror Neurons and Literature: Empathy and the Sympathetic
Imagination in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee." *MediaTropes eJournal* Vil IV, no. 2
(2014): 98-113.

Henry, Morgan et al. "The Moral Sense Test." Created and published by the Moral
Psychology Lab at Harvard University, 2015, https://www.moralsensetest.com/.
Accessed 19 October 2023.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by David Fate Norton, Reprint with

corrections, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Iacoboni, Marco. *Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others*. Picador ed, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.

Jarrett, Christian. "Mirror Neurons: The Most Hyped Concept in Neuroscience?" *Psychology Today*, December 10, 2012. https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/brain-myths/201212/mirror-neurons-the-most-hyped-concept-in-neuroscience. Accessed 17 October, 2023.

Jays, David. "Staff? Just can't get 'em" Review of *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants* by Alison Light. *The Guardian*, 5 August 2007, np.

Keysers, Christian. *The Empathic Brain: How the Discovery of Mirror Neurons Changed our Understanding of Human Nature*. Social Brain Press, 2011.

Keen, Suzanne. "Intersectional Narratology in the Study of Narrative Empathy." *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions,* edited by Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser, Ohio State University Press, 2015, pp. 123–46.

Kidd, David Comer, and Emanuele Castano. "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind." *Science*, vol. 342, no. 6156, Oct. 2013, pp. 377–80. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1239918.

Lee, Hermione. "*To the Lighthouse*." *Virginia Woolf: Introduction to the Major Works*, edited by Julia Briggs. Virago Press, 1994, pp. 157-86.

Light, Alison. *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants*. Penguin/Fig Tree, 2007.

Lipps, Theodor. *Ästhetik: Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst: Grundlegung der Ästhetik, Erster Teil*. Hamburg, Germany, L Voss, 1903.

Macnaughton, Jane. "The dangerous practice of empathy." *Lancet (London, England)* vol. 373, 9679 (2009): 1940-1. doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(09)61055-2

Miller, Monica J. "Odds, Ends, and Others: Objects and the Narration of Woolf's Servant Characters." *Woolf Studies Annual*, vol. 16, 2010, pp. 111–31.

Montag, Christiane, Jürgen Gallinat, and Andreas Heinz. "Theodor Lipps and the Concept of Empathy: 1851-1914." *The American journal of psychiatry* 165.10 (2008): 1261–1261.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Plume Books, 1998.

---. *God Help the Child*. First edition, Alfred A. Knopf, 2015.

---. *Jazz*. 1st Vintage International ed, Vintage International, 2004.

---. "Nobel Lecture." NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2024. Thu. 11 Apr 2024. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/

---. *Song of Solomon*. 1st Vintage International ed, Vintage International, 2004.

---. *Sula*. 1st Vintage International ed, Vintage International, 2004.

---. "The Dancing Mind" in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, University Press of Mississippi, 2008, pp. 187-190.

Moya, Paula M. L. *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Stanford University Press, 2016.

Murdoch, Iris. Murdoch, Iris. "Against Dryness." *Encounter* (London. 1953), vol. 16, no. 1, 1961, pp. 16-20.

---. *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970).

---. "The Sublime and the Good." *Chicago Review*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1959, pp. 42–55. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/25293537. Accessed 12 Apr. 2024.

Odell, Jenny. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Melville House, 2019.

Odell, Jenny. *Saving Time: Discovering a Life beyond the Clock*. First edition., Random House, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2023.

Oatley, Keith. *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Park, Sowon S.. "Whose uncertainty? Addressing the intersectional reader through the wound of trauma." *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2023, pp. 190-207. https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2023-2014.

Parker, Morgan. "How Toni Morrison Wrote Her most Challenging Novel: T Book

>Club." *New York Times (Online)*New York Times Company, 2022. *ProQuest*,

>https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/how-toni-morrison-wrote-her-

>most-challenging/docview/2726245729/se-2.

Protevi, John. "Deleuze and Wexler: Thinking brain, body and affect in social context" in

>*Cognitive Architecture: from Bio-Politics to Noo-Politics ; Architecture & Mind in*

>*the Age of Communication and Information*, edited by Hauptmann, Deborah.,

>Warren. Neidich, and Andreas Angelidakis. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2010, pp.

>168-183.

Saffran, Lise. "'Only Connect': The Case for Public Health Humanities." *Medical*

>*Humanities*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2014, pp. 105–10, https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-

>2014-010502.

Serpell, Namwali. "The Banality of Empathy." *The New York Review of Books*¸ March 2,

>2019.

Shuman, Amy. *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy*.

>University of Illinois Press, 2005.

Simerka, Barbara. "Mirror Neurons, Subjectivity, and Social Cognition in *Don Quixote*" in

>*Don Quixote: Interdisciplinary Connections,* edited by Matthew D. Warshawsky

>and James A. Parr. Juan de la Cuesta, 2013.

"Situate." Merriam-Webster.com *Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster,

>https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/situate. Accessed 11 Apr. 2024.

Smith, Adam, and Knud Haakonssen. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Cambridge

>University Press, 2002.

Solnit, Rebecca. "Woolf's Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable." *Men Explain Things to*

>*Me*. Haymarket Books, 2014, pp. 79-99.

Stueber, Karsten, "Empathy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition),

Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL =

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/empathy/>.

"Synchronize, V., Sense 3." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, September 2023,

https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1343405697.

Titchener, Edward Bradford. *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Processes*. MacMillan Co, 1909. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1037/10877-000.

"Together, *Adv.*, *Prep.*, *N.*, *Adj.*, Etymology." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, March 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7027511364.

Toni Morrison Reads from Her Novel "Jazz." www.youtube.com,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WalpqW351Es. Accessed 11 Apr. 2024.

Tratner, Michael. "Figures in the Dark: Working-Class Women in *To the Lighthouse*." *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, vol. 40, 1993, pp. 3–4.

Ty, M. "Writing in Absentia: Woolf and the Language of Things." *Narrative*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2022, pp. 322–43, https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2022.0050.

Varela, Francisco J., et al. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Revised edition., The MIT Press, 2017,

https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9739.001.0001.

Waterhouse, John William. *Echo and Narcissus*. 1903, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

Wexler, Bruce E. *Brain and Culture : Neurobiology, Ideology, and Social Change*. MIT Press, 2006.

"Who Can Write about What? A Conversation with Roxane Gay and Jay Caspian King." *The Argument* published by *The New York Times*, June 15 2022,

https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/15/opinion/who-can-write-about-what.html

Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts*. 1941. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1969.

---. "Character in Fiction" 1924. In McNeille, Andrew, Ed. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*.

Volume 3: 1919 to 1924. The Hogarth Press, 1984, pp. 420-438.

---. "Modern Fiction." In McNeille, Andrew, Ed. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 4. Ed. Andrew McNeillie. The Hogarth Press, 1988, pp. 157–165.

---. *Mrs Dalloway*. Benediction Books, 2017

---. *Orlando: A Biography*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973.

---. "Street Haunting: A London Adventure." 1927. *Selected Essays*¸ edited by David Bradshaw. Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 177-87.

---. "The Humane Art." *Collected Essays*. First American edition., Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967.

---. *The Waves*. First edition., Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931.

---. *The Years* [1st American ed.], Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937.

---. *Three Guineas*. 1938. First edition, Harcourt, Inc., 2006.

---. *To the Lighthouse*. 1927. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

Woolf, Virginia, and Vanessa Bell. *Flush: a Biography*. Illustrated by Vanessa Bell, First edition., Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933.

Woolf, Virginia, et al. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1977.

Woolf, Virginia, et al. *The Waves*. Edited by Michael Herbert and Susan Sellers, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Zaki, Jamil and Kevin Ochsner. "The Cognitive Neuroscience of Sharing and Understanding Others' Emotions," in *Empathy: From Bench to Bedside*, Jean Decety (editor), pp. 207–226. MIT Press, 2012.

Zhang, Lily. "Mirror Neurons. "Neuroscience Anthology," *Institute of Neuro Innovation*. https://inifoundation.org/neuroscience-anthology-1/2016/12/1/mirror-neurons. Accessed 17 October 2023.