VOICELESS BODIES:  
FEMINISM, DISABILITY, POSTHUMANISM 

by 
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INTRODUCTION

This project is concerned with voice and voicelessness, with the ways that literature and narrative make bodies “known” and “seen,” and with the criteria and conditions by which we value difference. It is concerned with the connections, and disconnects, between the female and disabled body. And it is first and foremost concerned with the project of speaking for those who can’t speak for themselves. In the pages that follow I speak about and for many other bodies: some are literary creations, some are historical actors, some are public figures. I understand that I am accountable for this speech, and so in this introduction I give a (partial) account of myself.

In 1984, in “Notes towards a Politics of Location,” Adrienne Rich argued that feminists must include an accounting of and accountability for their locations, not as part of some monolith “women,” but within the fields of sexual orientation, race, class and nation. A significant portion of this essay is dedicated to making visible the politics of other-ing at work within white Western feminism, both in the particular historical moment when Rich was writing and historically. Despite the critiques leveled against it, both at the time and since its original publication, the politics of location continues to found feminist theory and practice. Its articulation marks a shift in the feminist movement, from belief in and strategic invocation of solidarity amongst women, to the recognition of difference between, amongst, and within women, and the political, material, and personal consequences of those differences.

In her essay Rich says to begin “not with a continent or a country or a house, but
with the geography closest in— the body” (212). For many of us, the geography of our bodies – our understanding of ourselves as bodies in the world – begins in the space of our childhood home. This familial space is not simply a place within a larger space, or, as Rich seems to imply in the childhood game that she recounts in “The Politics of Location,” as the heart within a nesting set of locations which move from outer space, to continent, to nation, to state, to city, to house address, to surname to given name:

Adrienne Rich
14 Edgevale Road
Baltimore, Maryland
The United States of America
The Continent of North America
The Western Hemisphere
The Earth
The Solar System
The Universe (211-12)

Rather, the childhood familial space is one that seeps into all other locations. Uma Narayan’s notion of the “politics of home” is concerned with this space; she connects “the cultural dynamics of the family life that surrounded [her] as a child” to her “eventual feminist contestations of [her] culture” (7). Narayan’s focus is on the mother-daughter relationship within the home, but there are other important relationships and dynamics that inhabit the familial space. My political, ethical and intellectual concerns are directly connected to my childhood family life, and to my relationships with my brothers and sisters.
Between the years 1975 and 1988 my parents adopted seven children and produced four biological children; I was one of the four. My seven adopted siblings came from a variety of state and charity institutions, and all of them had some form of disability, ranging from cognitive to physical to terminal illness. As one of eleven children, it was my position in relation to my siblings, rather than as a geographic dot on the earth, that located me. My own, alternative version of Rich’s childhood game might look something like this:

The Clark Family
Four biological, seven adopted
Eight living, two dying, one dead
Nine white, two black (one bi-racial, one not[?])
Nine living at home, two existing elsewhere
Three mentally and physically-abled, eight mentally and/or physically-disabled
Nine moving with legs, two moving with wheelchairs
Five girls, six boys
Eleven American
Eleven straight(?)
Eleven Catholic(!)
Eleven lower middle-class

My location within each of these categories was determined both by my position in many of the conventionally “positive” of each of the poles: I was a biological child, white, abled, living at home, alive. But my location was also determined by relation, and by
double “negatives.” For example, my understanding of myself was not simply as “abled” but more so as not disabled. I was supremely aware of the fact that I could walk, that I could communicate and be understood, that I was healthy, that I was white, that I lived at home. What stood out to me most was often that which appeared in relief.

In my family space, categories of being that are often assumed to be self-evident were often not, and either/or binary distinctions were insufficient. Life itself, which rarely enters equations of the politics of location, was not a self-evident position. My sister Melissa had died from congenital kidney failure just after I was born, my brother Mark would die in 1986 (unexpectedly) due to heart failure caused by his Multiple Sclerosis, my brother Matt soon after (less unexpectedly, but still much sooner than any of us had imagined) as a result of Cystic Fibrosis. Does terminal illness disrupt the binary of alive/dead? In the list I combine “mentally and/or physically disabled” into one category, but this too deserves more specificity (Down’s Syndrome, Autism, cognitive delay, unspecified cognitive disability). Then there’s the specificity of adoption: it is not the same experience to be adopted at birth, at age two, or like my sister Lori, at nine and after spending years in and out of foster homes.

For my family, the politics of race, sex, gender, disability, genetics, illness, proximity, and death (and life) combined in both intimate and institutional spaces: at our four bedroom home on Lauderdale Avenue, but also in the school classroom, in the church, in the hospital, in the juvenile court room, in the social worker’s waiting room, in the grocery store parking lot, and on and on. My location was determined by my family space, but was also utterly mobile, for one, because we traveled as a pack for the most part. But there were also very few spaces where I could go, even by myself, where my
family did not accompany me by association. My family was, like it or not, highly visible in our community and as such, I was located as part of it, even when none of the rest of my family was with me. I understood myself to be recognized as a part of this family and I recognized myself as “part” of it. I was whole in the sense that my body was complete, but I was also partial, one part of the family body. My sense of myself and my location within my family was constituted by bodies of intense difference, but also by a body of sameness – my family. Like part and whole, “I” and “we” were difficult to separate.

In “Locating the Subject” Mary Eagleton discusses the politics of “we.” She argues that “we” can be a placeholder that implies great intimacy but that also marks false unity. The “we” of my family was a “we” that was simultaneously intimate and
disunified. “We” were for the most part utterly disunified amongst ourselves – we were not like each other – but this was an intimate disunity, and it immediately became unity when “we” were juxtaposed against the outside world. “We” were not like any other family. And “we” were not like each other. But we also were like each other. Some of “us” were like some of each other. Sometimes. Alliances and affinities depended and shifted not only because of sexual or genetic or racial markers but because of someone’s mood; because of a perceived slight; because of a shared interest; because of a shared resentment. There were many versions of “we,” some of which we chose, some of which chose us, and almost all of which were marked by feelings of ambivalence. I was part of the “we” that was the children, versus the “them” of my parents. But when my mother called upon me to be in charge in her absence, that “we” changed. The privileged “we” that included me and my mother engendered a “we” that was composed of my resentful siblings, or my trusting siblings. The “we” that was defined by the eldest children (my brother Matt and I) that got to boss around the “we” that was the younger ones became a different “we” when Matt was sick or in the hospital, became a different “we” when my older sister Lori came home from juvenile detention for visits. Anyone could, at any time, identify with or against anyone else in my family space.

This experience of shifting identification and the simultaneous relevance/irrelevance of origins that came with our mixed and often unclear genetic, racial and ethnic genealogies (although only unclear for some of “us”) made “us” the penultimate postmodern subjects. In her discussion of the politics of postmodern subjectifiivity, Eagleton argues that “Whether you see yourself as ‘multiple’ or ‘fragmented’ indicates radically different positions. The former is more positive,
suggesting diversity, variety, flexibility; the latter is negative, suggesting a loss of selfhood, a breakdown into atomized parts” (200). The deconstruction of the subject and postmodern body politics are critical issues in much current feminist theory, and certainly in the politics of location. These epistemological and theoretical approaches to the incoherence of the subject are/were ontological realities for me long before I ever knew the notion of “the subject” or understood myself as a political figure. My affinity for feminist approaches that invoke the multiple, fragmented, ambivalent, ironic, without-origins subject connects back to this familial space. I have never felt my experience to be unified or universal, because I was surrounded by others whose embodiment varied so profoundly from mine. There was no grand narrative to transpose onto my family space; the grand narrative that I observed outside of this space, that of the prototypical nuclear family, was unavailable to me and also seemed fantastic and unreal.

The experience of not fitting into grand narratives is one that many women and “others” are familiar with, and it is not necessarily a negative location. And so it is within the embodied family space of my childhood, one which fits no “grand narrative” that I know of, that I can in many ways locate my eventual feminist consciousness, which drives my research. This feminist consciousness is founded on an affirmative and critical recognition of difference. In my familial space, the markers of difference were multiple, shifting and difficult to pin down. Difference could never be isolated to an either/or proposition, or to a comparison of two people, or to a di- or tri- relationship (i.e., mother-daughter, or mother-father-child). Location was exponential rather than multiple. Within this space of exponential difference but also partial solidarity and temporary “we” relationships, theories of disunity and fragmentation make more sense than notions of a
coherent or universal subject. My research has been and continues to be about validating this difference/incoherence, and also about revaluing it, both of which require feminist tools. This revaluation depends upon an attention to embodied subjects, on the attempt to see from multiple perspectives, and on an engagement with both the potential and the politics of language and writing. These elements find their nexus in the body – that first, and most close, location.

**The Body and the View from the Body**

In my childhood, in my home, I was surrounded by many bodies: bodies that looked different, that moved differently, that spoke differently, that responded to food differently, that were in pain, that were oblivious to pain, that knew where they came from, that desperately wanted to know where they came from, that didn’t know there was a “came from.” That knew they would die. That knew another would die. That didn’t understand the word “die,” only that a body had suddenly disappeared from the family space.

Ongoing academic interest in the body often works to situate it within larger poststructuralist and postmodern contexts. Within these contexts, bodies are simultaneously the sites of exploitation and control, but also of resistance and unsettling. Working alongside these poststructuralist and postmodern approaches, but going beyond simply exposing the work that is done on the body or by the body, Donna Haraway argues that “feminist embodiment resists fixation and is insatiably curious about the webs of differential positioning” (196). Feminists study the body but also use the body, including their own, as a tool for any number of intellectual and political projects – the
body is no simple object to be analyzed but is a means of connection with the world and with others. To Haraway’s “curiosity” about “differential positionings” I would add a few more motives that underlie the terrain of feminist approaches to embodiment and the study of the body: fear, desire for recuperation, escapism, guilt, understanding. These affects arise, I think, from an awareness of what it is to be looked at, as a body, and what it is to look at other bodies.

The politics of seeing and seeing as inherently assume difference, and these politics are themselves different depending on one’s location; for me, seeing from the embodied familial space is different from seeing as a feminist researcher. For feminists, to want to or imagine one’s self to be able to see from the position of another, which is in many ways at the heart of the politics of location, is inherently troubled. Haraway writes that “one cannot relocate in any possible vantage point without being accountable for that movement. Vision is always a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?” (192). To look on/as is to locate oneself through the location of another. In my familial space, I understood myself and my location largely through double-negatives, through what and where I was not. I knew that I could never see as the other bodies in my family did, but I also saw those bodies from a closeness and with a repetition that made the distinction between looking “as” and looking “at” or “on” difficult to tease out. For example, I did not have Cystic Fibrosis like my brother did, but in our 1800 square foot home, I was viscerally aware of its effects on his body, and I was psychically, intellectually and emotionally aware of its effects on his happiness, his worldview, his hopes and plans and despairs. My ability to see Matt depended on our close physical proximity, but it also
depended on his communication and self-exposure; he enabled my view of him, through proximity but also through language. This was not the case with all of my siblings; some were unable to expose themselves or communicate openly because of lack of speech or because of mental impairment. My sister Amy’s Down Syndrome makes her speech difficult to make out. She has many things to say, but it’s not always clear what she is saying, and she struggles to make her words understood. My brother Peter, who has autism, prefers not to speak; when addressed, he echoes what’s just been said and usually seems hopeful that repeating the words will be enough to make the conversation end. My sister Lori, who could communicate easily and intelligently, chose not to most of the time out of anger, or what seemed to be a desire for self-protection. So, my vision of my siblings, how I saw them, both literally and figuratively, depended on their bodies and their desires, and also on language, as well my own desire to see and know them, which was not the same in all cases and at all times.

I also spent a lot of time looking at others look away from my family and its many parts. This “looking away” is, I think, intimately connected to many feminist projects; feminist researchers desire to look squarely at that which is avoided, and, through their research, to make this spectre appear or reappear to others as well. Teresa de Lauretis argued in 1986 that feminist research was aimed towards the “telling of new stories so as to inscribe into the picture of reality characters and events and resolutions that were previously invisible, untold, unspoken (and so unthinkable, unimaginable, ‘impossible’)” (Feminist 11). To see someone perform the act of looking away is to see the visible become invisible; it is to see reality immaterialized. From within my familial space, I watched others look at and then away from my family, and people in my family. This
position of “watcher” might seem to be of a no-man’s land; in fact, I often felt myself to be invisible but not quite, neither looked at nor looked away from. But it also formed my vision such that I see things that other people don’t, or won’t, and I am aware that there is much that I don’t, or won’t, see.

**Writing the Body: Privilege and Possibility**

The politics of location depends upon language; the act of locating one’s self requires a communication of that location. In “Notes towards a Politics of Location” Rich describes her project as being “To reconnect our thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual, a woman. Begin, we said, with the material, with matter” (213). In her discussion of the politics of location, Rosi Braidotti declares that its practice is “to be as aware as possible of the place from which one is speaking” and goes on to argue that “Attention to the situated as opposed to the universalistic nature of statements is the key idea” (*Nomadic* 163). The politics of location requires a *speaking* body and attention to the situatedness and specificity of that body and its speech acts. There are two streams that I would like to pursue in situating myself in relation to speech: 1) the privilege of language, both in my familial space and in the politics of location, and 2) the potential of language in its spoken and especially written forms. These two strands, and the connections between them, hinge upon the body.

Thinking, speaking and writing are necessarily of the body; they come from the body, and they are expressed by the body: *I think the words, I say the words, I write the words*. Thinking, speaking and writing are also bound up with difference. What one
person thinks/says/writes will in most cases be different from what someone else
thinks/says/writes, hence the need for the politics of location, so that these differences
can be productively acknowledged rather than elided or abused. But beyond difference in
content there are also different ways of thinking, speaking, writing. Like vision, language
is directly connected to embodiment: many of us think in language and express the
experience of our bodies to ourselves through internal (and external) conversation.
Different bodies have different things to say about themselves, and about other bodies,
and also have different ways of saying them.

Speech and writing were significant components of my familial space. Some of
my siblings spoke, some didn’t. Some talked a lot; some spoke very little. Some spoke in
ways that “we” could only rarely understand; some “we” spoke through, or for. A
different way of categorizing the bodies from my earlier list might be as follows:

Bodies with language (specifically English), and without language (mute,
unintelligible).

Bodies with “correct” language (grammatically-correct, understandable,
“appropriate”), and with “incorrect” language (cursing, screaming,
“sloppy” grammar).

Bodies that communicate verbally; bodies that communicate non-verbally.

Literate bodies; barely literate bodies; illiterate bodies.

Bodies that chose to read, and those that chose not to read.

Speech and writing are generally privileged forms of communication; they are
understood to be a translation of thought. To speak or to write is to prove that one thinks
and also to communicate those thoughts to another; to speak or to write “well” is to prove
that one thinks “well.” My interest in written words – both reading them and writing them – was one mark of difference that distinguished me from the rest of my family. I always felt special in this difference, and from my current location I see that this difference is a mark of privilege.

Is the politics of location bound to speech? Can one locate oneself if one cannot “speak” or must one be located by another who can speak? These questions are similar to those Haraway poses about vision: what does it mean to try to see as, or look upon, another? In what ways/under what circumstances/via which bodies is this vision about connection and when/where/why is it about violence? The different bodies that comprised my familial space raise questions for me that go beyond the politics of sex, race, class and national differences and include the very practice of locating one’s self. Which bodies are excluded from the politics of location, a politics that was imagined and brought to fruition by an extraordinarily literate poet and writer? And how is this exclusion addressed by feminists? Is it fixable, by the mechanism of speaking for? Can we train ourselves to listen to statements that are other than speech acts, just as we look at that which many others avoid seeing? These questions have obvious overlap with those posed by feminists and others, who raise important ethical and epistemological issues regarding the act of speaking, speaking as, speaking for, and speaking to – but also of listening, with “fresh ears.”

The politics of language, like the politics of location, like the modern subject, are multidimensional, contradictory, partial and promising. My concern for the ways in which different bodies are excluded from or may intervene upon the politics of location is one of the effects of my embodied familial space; my desire to engage with literary
representations of different bodies is another of its effects. Literary representations are capable of imagining bodies and difference in ways that resignify the meaning of difference, of the physical body, of the bonds of family, parents, and children, of the human. The ways in which we read these representations (or re-read them), and how we speak about these re-visioned, has the potential to not only to make visible the invisible, but to disrupt the very field of vision, language and human subjectivity, productively and affirmatively.

Rosi Braidotti declares that “the personal is not only the political, it is also the basis for the theoretical” (Patterns 147). In the above discussion I have tried to signal the political and ethical concerns and theoretical work of this project through the personal space of my childhood home; the latter most certainly inform and inspire the former. I will admit that I find many of the personal narratives that inaugurate academic scholarship to be unproductive, and at times narcissistic, and I have similar concerns about my own narrative. But I include it here despite those reservations for two reasons: first, this is a project that is centrally concerned with disability. I am not disabled. That is a fact that requires stating, certainly at this historical moment, as do my motivations for working on disability issues. I do not believe one needs to be disabled, or female, in order to be concerned with disability and feminist issues. Embodied experience, rather than identity politics or neo-essentialism, is what matters to critical disability studies approaches, or a feminist approaches, or even a critical animal studies approaches. Second, in many ways the heart of this project is the question of how to speak for others, ethically, in a way that is generative rather than appropriative. To speak for others and not about myself would be to replicate the position of the author character Foe in J.M.
Coetzee’s novel of the same name. Foe’s own silences are allowed to stand, even as he demands the story of the woman, Susan Barton, and the mute slave, Friday. I am no Foe.

**Voiceless Bodies**

“Voiceless Bodies” considers the task of speaking for bodies that can’t speak for themselves, focusing on the tension between representing self and representing other, and the significance of embodied difference within such a project. Voicelessness is overwhelmingly conceptualized as a problem to be overcome, both in literature and in theory; much of feminist and disability scholarship and activism is concerned with “giving voice” to the voiceless. While this is certainly important work, there are bodies who will never speak, or at least, will never speak in recognizable human language. “Voiceless Bodies” focuses on those bodies, not to make them speak but to consider how they are spoken for, and what “voicelessness” has to teach us about representation, narrative, and our assumptions about what it means to be human.

This study examines literature written in the 1980s, a time period when some populations historically excluded from representational systems (both political and literary) were moving towards the center, while other populations continued to be marginalized, or made invisible. The writers here featured – Doris Lessing, Todd Haynes, and J.M. Coetzee – vary by nation, political/ethical concerns, and gender and sexuality, but each one’s writing during this time period takes up the problem of speaking for those who can not speak for themselves, and the strategic and complicated status of women within that project. Lessing’s novel *The Fifth Child*, Haynes’s film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, and Coetzee’s novels *Foe* and *Elizabeth Costello* are each organized
around a voiceless body, the majority of whom can be characterized through some form of disability, whether explicitly in the text or through my retrospective analysis; each of these bodies is attended by a female author figure. In juxtaposing these voiced and voiceless bodies, Lessing, Haynes, and Coetzee juxtapose themes of women’s self-representation and authorship with an emerging but nascent disability consciousness. Each text brings together female and disability figures in order to consider the stakes of representing one’s self and another when both exist in critical proximity to systems of representation, literary and otherwise. In so doing, they also provide a critical grounding for thinking through the relation between the female body and the disabled body, the problem of voicelessness, and more generally, the relationship between embodiment, language, and literary representation.

Writ large, representation and the ability to speak for one’s self and others have been and continue to be understood as political goods and indeed necessities. To be unheard or unrepresented is to be absent from political discourse and therefore vulnerable to abuse. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) Gayatri Spivak famously illuminated the representational conflation of “speaking for” and “portraying,” showing how the aesthetic sphere infiltrates and informs the political. In even earlier work, Simone Weil posited the relation between those who most often have evil done to them and those who are “least trained in the art of speech” (53) and wrote that political parties hear the cries of those untrained as “noise”; indeed, we can connect the idea of this linguistic noise with the noise of those bodies without human language, be they animal or other. The continuum of voiceless bodies ranges across those with linguistic skills but “least trained in the art of speech,” to those linguistically-compromised, to those nonhuman animal others who are
understood as lacking language entirely, and all exist within a political context in which 
this problematic relation to language and speech, both artistic and political, has profound 
material consequences.

To be excluded from literary representation engenders its own consequences, both 
psychic and material, as Virginia Woolf famously essayed in *A Room of One’s Own.* 
Absence of voice is a problem that haunts feminism; the feminist concern with self-
representation and female authorship that finds its height in feminist literary theories of 
the 1980s¹ is the product of a long history of the suppression of the female voice, 
women’s overwhelming and disproportionate representation by men, and their exclusion 
and marginalization from the literary canon. As women made gains in each of these areas 
throughout the 20th century and particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, feminists 
simultaneously critiqued the systems of representation already in place, with narrative 
becoming a focal point of analysis. However, while asserting their own voices and 
critiquing extant discursive systems, many feminists were at the same time frequently 
ignoring and excluding other voices, most famously those articulating the concerns and

¹ See Adrienne Rich’s “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1972); Laura Mulvey’s 
“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975); Marianne Hirsch’s *The Mother/Daughter Plot: 
Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989); Teresa de Lauretis’s *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, 
Semiotics, Cinema* (1984); Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative 
Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (1985); Claire Kahane’s *The (M)other Tongue: 
Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (1985); Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern 
Speak?” (1985); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman 
Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979); Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* 
(1984); Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987); Margaret 
Homans’s *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s 
Writing* (1989); Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975); Luce Irigaray’s “The Power 
of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine” (1985).
experiences of race, class, sexuality, and national difference, exclusions for which they were increasingly called to task from both outside and within mainstream feminism.²

Even as the 1980s saw feminism being criticized for, and responding to, charges of racism, homophobia, classism, and ethnocentrism, disability remained at the margins of feminist consciousness. The 1980s are a key historical moment, situated post-second wave feminism and the gains of the 1970s, yet still prior to but on the cusp of the disability awareness and activism epitomized by the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. While feminist theoretical texts written during this time were largely silent on the topic of disability, this study argues that literary texts were explicitly taking up and working through questions of disability and representation, and disability’s relation to feminism, questions that are still now being nascently conceptualized in feminist theory, and which ground the emerging field of feminist disability studies.

“Voiceless Bodies” argues that each of these literary texts reveals the complex ways that sexual and corporeal difference are intimately bound up with each other even, as they are frequently pitched or pitted against each other. Female author figures in each text seek to distinguish themselves as voiced, as representers, and therefore against, or at times through the sacrifice of, voiceless figures who can’t represent. But at the same time, these female figures are or become aware of the ways in which their self-representation is bound up with the silence of another, and how their sexual difference is intricately and irrevocably tied up with corporeal difference. The revelation of this

² See Caren Kaplan’s “The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Critical Practice” (1994) for a discussion of this moment within feminist history, and for her own critique of Western feminism. See also Linda Alcoff’s important and foundational essay “The Problem of Speaking for Others” (1991-92), in which she identifies many of the dangers of “speaking for” focusing specifically on feminists (and in particular “academic” feminists) speaking for oppressed or marginal others.
connection is important on a number of levels beyond just the literary, and it is also important for feminism, which has repeatedly been called to account for its own silence regarding disability.

The majority of disability theories identify display of the disabled body as an integral component of the social field. My study seeks to contribute to this work, by examining the ways in which tropes of the visual and spectacular function within literary representations of disability, and in particular, in representations of voiceless bodies. In so doing, “Voiceless Bodies” finds that disability functions not only as a narrative prosthesis, as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have compellingly argued, inaugurating or constituting the terms of each narrative, but also as a focal point of narrative desire, a desire which is fulfilled by narrative display, or revelation. This revelation happens, or more frequently in the texts I analyze, strategically fails to happen, on two levels: that of the story, and that of the body. Each chapter tracks and characterizes these dual registers, understanding them alternately in terms of revelation/denuding, objectification/consumption, and intercourse/obscenity. These key terms operate in my analysis simultaneously on a rhetorical level and an embodied level and function to articulate not just the relationship between but an overlaying of the body and representation, such that desire for display is directed simultaneously towards the

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3 Lennard J. Davis argues that “Disability is a specular moment. The power of the gaze to control, limit, and patrol the disabled person is brought to the fore” (Enforcing 12). In a productive extension of Davis’s analysis, and simultaneous challenge to theorization of the male gaze, Rosemarie Garland Thomson convincingy argues that disabled women are asexualized and the “gaze” trained upon them is a stare, or a looking away (Extraordinary 25-26), and cannot easily be defined as voyeurism. Interestingly, in Narrative Prosthesis, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that the prevalence of disabled figures in literary texts is a product of readers’/viewers’ desire to look; in real life, they feel they must look away but in narrative life, they can “stare” as long as they want.
revelation of story but also the revelation of body. Significantly, each text thematizes and
rhetoricizes these processes while formally refusing and subverting them: the narratives
offer up the display of their own narrativity, rather than of the disabled body. In so doing,
they challenge the imperatives and possibilities of voice, but also the very terms of
narrative.

Finally, I argue that Lessing, Haynes, and Coetzee’s attention to voicelessness
exposes the generally assumed but unspoken connection between literary representation
and the human, such that to be human is to participate in representation, both through
self-representation, and by understanding and employing narrative. Roland Barthes’s
assertion that narrative “is simply there, like life itself” (“An Introduction” 237), and
Carol Adams’s statement that “We are the species who tell stories” (Sexual 92) beg the
question: are those who do not self-represent, then, or use narrative, somehow not fully
human? Do those who don’t self-represent or use narrative deserve ethical treatment and
respect? Lessing, Haynes, and Coetzee’s work addresses both of these questions. This
last component of my analysis moves the significance of this study from the domain of
literary studies and feminism/disability studies to the concerns of posthumanism. This
move may seem detached from the main concerns of my project but the question of
human status is one that has shadowed both women and people with disabilities for
centuries. To be excluded from or on the margins of representational systems is to be
excluded from/marginal to the human community as well. Further, recent work in the
field of posthumanism/animal studies has called into question the equation of voice and
self-representation with ethical status. A critical stance towards representation cannot, I
believe, proceed without taking a similar stance towards the human. This last point
provides the rationale for my inclusion of one post-1980s text, Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), as a pair to my discussion of *Foe*.

The authors and filmmaker whose work I here analyze were selected not for their national or geographic affinities, although each one is part of the contemporary Anglo-American literary scene. Rather, they were chosen for the following: first, each one’s ongoing and canon-wide concern with issues of women’s voice and the psychic and social forces that both produce and frequently constrain that voice; second, their specific concern with voicelessness in each of the texts here included, and the range of figures of voicelessness they offer as a collective. Lessing, Haynes, and Coetzee work through these concerns both thematically and formally to various degrees, and by employing strategies of genre, narrative, and authorial disruption and instability. While Lessing’s texts are perhaps the most traditional, her writing consistently disrupts and confounds generic conventions. Haynes’s filmography is known for a kind of hyperbolic deconstruction of film forms, including genre, narrative, and character. Coetzee has long been concerned with the power of narration and representation – who gets to speak? who is silenced? who is compelled to speak? – and he pursues these questions in narrative forms that often defy not only the very terms of genre but also narrative itself. By troubling generic conventions and boundaries, explicitly calling attention to and exposing the working of narrative and authorship, and, in the case of Coetzee and Haynes, undermining narrative itself, I argue that these authors expose the desire for the display of the voiceless body, refuse to provide the spectacle of that body, and instead offer up the spectacle of their own narratives.
Each text, with the exception of *Elizabeth Costello*, was published in the latter half of the 1980s. This time period is significant for the reasons I have described above, and I argue that these literary texts offer insight into a proto-feminist disability theory, anticipating and contributing to the concerns of recent feminist disability theory. They also contribute to emerging critical conversations in disability studies and posthumanism/critical animal studies, conversations which question the imperatives of voice and self-representation as precursors to ethical status. On its most local level, “Voiceless Bodies” attempts to highlight and understand the relation between the female body and the disabled body in the difficult project of speaking for those who can’t speak for themselves. On its most expansive level, it engages with questions about “speaking for” in larger political terms, such as those now being applied to nonhuman animals, and in larger literary terms, those that might be applied to biography as a genre. Somewhere in between these two registers it addresses questions about the relation between feminist and disability studies, analyzes the ways in which narrative and discourse construct bodies, but are also dependent upon and constructed by their desire for bodies, and critiques the assumption that to be human is to necessarily self-represent and employ narrative.

**Overview**

The following four chapters are each concerned with voice and voicelessness, the female body and the disabled body, and representation and the human. Each chapter is oriented towards theoretical, historical, aesthetic, and philosophical concerns, respectively. Each chapter is centered on a distinct form of voicelessness, including
voiceless human bodies, voiceless animal bodies, and the voicelessness of the dead, but also on a distinct form of voice which attempts to “speak for,” including the maternal voice, the singing voice, the biographical voice, and the female authorial voice. In this way, I hope to show that this project’s specific concerns, while focused on voicelessness, cross conceptual and generic boundaries; they also cross historical and national boundaries. My project shows these concerns being worked out across national borders: Doris Lessing is a British/South African writer whose novel is set in London; Todd Haynes is an American filmmaker primarily working in the U.S., and J.M. Coetzee is a South African who now lives in Australia, and whose novels are set in England and America, respectively. Throughout this dissertation I draw on a transnational theoretical and literary archive that is centered in the 1980s but which anticipates current theoretical directions in the fields of gender studies, disability studies, posthumanism, and contemporary literature.

Chapter One begins by asserting this project’s driving questions – what if the goal were not to give voice, but to allow voicelessness? to think through voicelessness? to imagine what literary representation and narrative might look like that allows for voicelessness? – and provides an overview of the theoretical debates that inform my response to these questions, and which my analysis attempts to contribute to, and at times, challenge. Beginning with current debates in feminist theory, I argue for a critical attention to representation that considers how material bodies interact with literary representation, acting upon it as well as being acted upon, such that voicelessness might be conceptualized not simply as a lack, but as a force of its own, one that shapes literary forms and narrative. I then consider how disability theory and feminist disability theory
in particular have already and might further contribute to such a turn, and make my own contribution to such a project by theorizing the processes of desire and display that voiceless bodies elucidate in each narrative. Finally, I consider how some recent posthumanist theory challenges deeply entrenched ideas about voice and voicelessness, and along with this, our ideas about both the literary, and the human, and how these ideas provide a framework for reconceptualizing the ethics of form and in particular, forms that attempt to represent and “speak for” voiceless bodies.

Chapter Two offers a pedagogical example of the difficulties of ethically speaking for voiceless others, as is demonstrated in my re-reading of Lessing’s popular novel *The Fifth Child* (1988). I argue that the novel is an example of a disability story being misread as a horror story, a misreading that I directly connect to disability awareness in 1980s Anglo-America. My analysis of the novel shows the titular child antagonist failing at two critical markers of the human: appropriate affective responses to others (and in particular to the mother) and the ability to understand and employ narrative. These corporeal differences, which are typical features of autism, result in the fifth child being read as inhuman by characters within the novel, as well as by most literary critics. At the same time, my analysis argues that this is a mother story, one which is troubled by the disabled body of the child. Lessing’s novel raises questions about the mother’s ability to ethically represent her child’s difference at the same time that she represents herself; the novel shows this maternal and female self-representation to ultimately require the denuding and revelation of the disabled body. Throughout this chapter I focus on various narratives being articulated in the 1980s, including feminist theory’s silence on disability, and larger social discussions that attempted to pit mothers against their disabled children.
In Chapter Three I focus on the pathologized female voice, and the biographical voice, as they appear in Haynes’s controversial film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987). Karen Carpenter functions here simultaneously as a figure of voice and voicelessness. The film depicts Carpenter’s struggle to assert own voice, and the ways in which her disabled (anorexic) body became strategic to that struggle. I argue that Haynes is concerned with representing the speaking body as opposed to the speaking subject, and that he challenges the project of speaking for as it is epitomized in biography, through formal strategies that juxtapose and overlay competing and often unreliable voices in telling Carpenter’s story, and through a concatenation of filmic and generic conventions that deprioritize language and the human form. Most significantly, the film challenges representational approaches to the human body by using objects – dolls – to represent Carpenter. Rather than offering her up as a spectatorial subject for consumption, Haynes’s film “speaks for” Carpenter in such a way that paradoxically challenges and undermines the very terms of biography, while simultaneously allowing other forms of speech to emerge.

Chapter Four juxtaposes Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) to explicitly consider the significance of Coetzee’s female author figures in the project of speaking for both human and nonhuman others. Much of this chapter is concerned with the ethical demands and difficulties of speaking for others and the material and psychic consequences of such speech. Both texts feature a female author figure attempting to speak for voiceless human and nonhuman others. Both situate language capacity, literary representation and political representation within larger systems of power that are premised on a subjectification of “difference”: racial, corporeal, nonhuman, and sexual.
Both texts challenge narrative and generic conventions, and instead offer alternatives to laudatory and humanistic conceptions of the power of language and self-representation, a thematic which is reflected in the form of the texts themselves, their narrative and authorial instability, and their lack of resolution.

Each of these texts offer a range of strategies for “speaking for” or representing voiceless bodies, to varying degrees of success, and with significant implications for issues of genre, authorship, and narrative. The texts show how the desire to speak for one’s self often depends on telling another’s story; frequently this is the story of someone whose embodiment is critical to their (in)ability or (un)willingness to speak for themselves. Along with corporeal difference, sexual difference is key throughout my analysis: female author figures struggle to speak for and represent voiceless others in ways that do not simply assume the dictum “we are their voice” or attempt to incorporate them into the Wordsworthian “household of man.” Instead, the texts show female figures struggling to find ethical strategies for speaking for others, often in the face of external censors and at the cost of their own psychic coherence. The texts also enact a number of formal strategies at the levels of genre, authorship, and narrative that resist assuming the voice of the liberal humanist subject to speak for those who can’t or won’t speak for themselves. As such, the texts trouble literary representation in their status as texts at the same time as they trouble the project of “speaking for” and the imperative to voice.
CHAPTER ONE

Voiceless Bodies

Voicelessness is generally understood as a condition to be overcome, with voice prioritized, and it is largely neglected in both feminist and disability theories. What if the goal were not to give voice, but to allow voicelessness? To think through voicelessness? To imagine what literary representation and narrative might look like that allows for voicelessness? These are questions that are deeply informed by current critical theoretical contexts and particularly posthumanism, which is wrestling with the ethical status of bodies that will never speak in a human voice or normative human language. They are questions whose answers have seemed largely foreclosed in most fields because of course the goal is voice. In fact the tradition of juxtaposing political subjectivity against the non-verbal is deeply entrenched in feminist as well as other discourses. In her discussion of Coetzee’s figures of silence, including Friday in *Foe*, Benita Parry argues that “the potential critique of political oppression is diverted by the conjuring and endorsing of a non-verbal signifying system” (153). This opposition depends upon the notion that a certain kind of language is necessarily productive, a notion that is being critiqued in some recent disability and animal studies scholarship, some avenues of feminist theory, and

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4 Voice implies a number of material and immaterial meanings simultaneously: it is literally the sound that emanates from the body via vocal chords, and it is the words/phrases sentences those sounds make. On a more figurative level, one’s “voice” is understood as an expression of the self. It is the individual and unique tone that comes across in one’s writing. And it is to have a say – in government, in the public sphere, in one’s own life. “Voice” is a conflation of the body and language; it is the coming together of the individual and the social realm, the personal and the political. To be voiceless is to be mute, literally, but it is also “without power to express one’s feelings or opinions; silent” (*OED*). In relief, this definition of voicelessness reveals that voice is associated with power, with thought, and that silence is in essence understood as powerlessness.
certainly in each of the texts I analyze.

While Audre Lorde declared in 1984 that women’s speaking is a political necessity, by 1990 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that silence itself functions as an important speech act. Kari Weil has written recently on the limits of language and considers what may be lost in our dedication to it. Still others such as Joan Retallack argue that there are both linguistic and nonlinguistic speech acts that we fail to hear or make sense of, and that reception or our ability to hear is what deserves further attention, rather than the act of articulation. Similarly, disability scholar Lennard J. Davis argues that the assumption that communication necessarily depends upon speech and writing is ableist, effectively masquerading as innately human abilities (*Enforcing* 15). These feminist and disability theorists’ concern with the power of representation, and cultural demands for a certain kind of language and speech, have direct resonance to critical animal studies and approaches to animal others, and vice versa. Speech in the sense of brute language capacity has long been understood and used as a tool to mark the human and what lies outside the human, particularly regarding nonhuman animals, and therefore has been a major focus in critical approaches to animal studies as is documented in Weil’s recent article “A Report on the Animal Turn” (2010). But animal studies scholars such as Weil and Cary Wolfe have both turned to disability studies to argue that an extreme focus on linguistic capabilities occludes the ways in which the preeminence of voiced language can be conceptually limiting.²

Such an approach, which considers the potential limitations of voice, and the possibilities of voicelessness, informs this project. In order to pursue the questions I began with, this study examines the appearance and representation of voiceless bodies in literary representation. These bodies include an autistic child in *The Fifth Child*, a dead, anorexic singer in *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, and a mute slave and nonhuman animals in *Foe* and *Elizabeth Costello*. All of these bodies are, to various degrees, both literally and figuratively voiceless. Of course there are contexts outside of the literary and languaged in which such bodies might “speak” or self-represent in non-normative ways. I do not deny those possibilities, but I am concerned here with literary representation and more specifically narrative forms, and how literature deals with voicelessness, with bodies that do not speak.

Towards that end, neither the texts I have selected, nor my analysis of them, prioritizes voice over voicelessness. Instead, I argue that voicelessness is a force in and over texts. Voiced characters within each text, often functioning as a proxy for readers, want to know the voiceless body’s story, a story which is understood as absolutely necessary to the narrative. In *Foe*, the protagonist Susan Barton declares: “To tell my story and be silent on Friday’s tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty” (67). The voiced character here, Barton, understands that both her story and “story” itself are unacceptable, untenable, without giving voice to, or forcing voice upon, the voiceless Friday. Although Coetzee’s text articulates this demand, it does not accede to it. I argue that voicelessness that is *not* made to speak is a problem for representation, and for narrative, a problem that these texts expose and integrate into their own form.
Although this project is framed in many ways by a disability perspective, and very invested in analyzing literal voicelessness, I also hope to show how concerns or conditions that may be narrowly ascribed to “disability,” or ignored because they are associated with disability, in fact cut across wide swaths of bodies, human and otherwise. Even within disability communities, voicelessness is not monolithic: the voicelessness of a person with severe cognitive disability is different from that of a person with autism, which is different from someone who is mute, who is deaf, who stutters, and on and on. Throughout this project, I try to balance a specific attention to disability experience and representation with a synthetic attention to the ways that schemes of normativity and intelligibility have consequences across bodies, both abled and disabled, female and male, alive and dead, biological and textual.

Towards these ends, “Voiceless Bodies” argues for a renewed attention to the interaction between representation and embodiment, from a literary perspective. Feminist theories of the 1980s are extremely productive tools in such a project, but their scope is limited – as I argue in the next chapter, feminist attention to embodied difference and the literary during this time period overwhelmingly fails to recognize or address the difference of disability in its focus on asserting women’s voices and stories. The notion of this interaction is something that is largely missing in body theories of the 1990s, or so unevenly weighted as to be almost negligible.⁶ Although much of this 1990s body theory is taken up with the body and representation, the body is primarily understood to be a

⁶ Elizabeth Grosz’s work is a notable exception, beginning with *Volatile Bodies* and her work is regularly cited by disability theorists.
signifying text (which can be “read” and which “performs”). Discursive systems, including literary representation, are understood as that which constructs bodies. In these formulations, the body is understood as a “thing” which either evokes, or is evoked by, “words.” Butler and Spivak’s seminal texts *Bodies That Matter* and “Can the Subaltern Speak?” are particular examples of this. In the former, discursive practices and regimes are understood as “materializing” matter in processes that seem almost completely one-directional. In the latter, the possibility for an “other” to speak for herself is depressingly foreclosed.

“Voiceless Bodies” does not deny the power of discourse and representational systems to construct and silence bodies, but it does argue that the relation between bodies and representation is more complex, and reciprocal. This complexity is being pursued by recent work in disability studies by scholars such as H-Dirksen L. Bauman, who cites *l’écriture féminine* when he argues that “the project of recognizing Deaf identity bears similarities to the feminist project of re-gaining a ‘body of one’s own’ through linguistic and literary practice” (359). Tobin Siebers openly questions social constructionist models of disability and proposes that “Different bodies require and create new modes of representation” (173). In order to examine and elucidate this complexity, I analyze literary texts that are explicitly concerned with the interaction between bodies and representation, texts which engage this concern both thematically, by juxtaposing figures of voice and voicelessness, and formally, by creating modes of literary representation and narrative that do not reiterate the supremacy of voice and the power of discourse. Rather

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7 Conboy, Medina and Stanbury’s edited collection *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (1997) provides prescient excerpts from a number of prominent body theorists (i.e., Braidotti, Bordo, Butler) that illustrate this claim.
than arguing that discursive systems function to speak through, or silence, bodies, I argue that these texts show voicelessness holding a power over representation, one which emerges and shapes the form and “speaking voice” of these texts themselves.

My (re)turn throughout this study to not just literary texts but also theories of the 1980s is strategic and intentional. The 1980s produced a wealth of feminist theory concerned with the relation between language and the body, between the symbolic and the material. Feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich, Gayatri Spivak, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and others raised important ethical and epistemological questions regarding representation and the acts of speaking, speaking as, speaking for, and speaking to, and their connection to the body. These conceptual concerns are a product of the historical problem of women’s access to both political and literary representation; women’s disenfranchisement based upon their sexual difference created the conditions for heightened awareness of the politics and power of representation.

I understand that returning to or re-reading earlier feminist texts is provocative: evolutionary and progressivist narratives have in many ways defined feminism as both a discipline and mode of being. Inter-generational disputes and the rhetoricization of increasing “waves” of feminisms frequently function to pit feminist against feminist and most frequently to denigrate earlier feminist theories. Karen Barad’s polemical declaration in 2003 that “Language has been granted too much power” (801) continues to function as a rhetorical flashpoint in current feminist conversations, supposedly demarcating the line between the new materialist feminists (also associated with posthumanism) who are concerned with actual matter, and those feminists associated with the linguistic turn and with theorizing the construction of bodies through discourse.
In a recent essay, Jasbir Puar helpfully identifies these camps as the representationalists and non-representationalists, Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak appearing for the former, and Donna Haraway, Elizabeth Grosz and Karen Barad for the latter. The heart of the issue between the two camps is how much matter actually matters in feminist theories of the post-linguistic turn.

Of course, stark dividing lines are themselves more frequently polemical than explanatory. Barad’s statement, while appearing to dismiss language, in fact does no such thing. Instead of doing away with representationalism or diminishing it, she argues against the usefulness of theories that focus on a relational distinction between “words” and “things.” Instead, Barad proposes a theory of posthumanist performativity that attempts to theorize what she describes as the intra-action of the material and discursive, to understand the ways in which the world is constituted through material-discursive practices. “Intra-action” (Barad’s term) signifies the co-emergence of the material and immaterial through these practices, rather than the acting of one on the other, so as to shape or determine some pre-existing agent. This theorization is in many ways reminiscent of the corpus of body theory that emerged in the early 1990s, which was generally taken up with theorizing the interaction between material, symbolic and social

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8 Iris van der Tuin’s (2008) analysis of Sarah Ahmed’s response to Karen Barad’s work tracks the alternatingly inflationary and deflationary rhetoric that is used to typify various feminist fields (here, feminist science studies and new materialism). She argues that both moves ignore or smooth over the complexity of the other. In fact, van der Tuin identifies the new materialism, like feminist science studies before it, simultaneously concerned with the material and the discursive, and with the interaction between the two.
spheres. There are at least two key distinctions, however, between this earlier body theory and the new materialist theory as typified by Barad’s work: Barad’s theory focuses on the intra-action between, rather than the effect upon, the material and the immaterial; as such it understands the relation between the material and discursive as two-way and non-hierarchical. Second, new materialists are also very concerned with nonhuman matter and nonhuman bodies. Both of these concerns inform this project, and are being pursued in the fields of feminist disability studies and posthumanism.

**Feminist Disability Theory**

The current field of feminist disability studies maintains a simultaneous attention to gender and disability; it also for the most part maintains a simultaneous commitment to analyzing the body and representation, although representation is largely theorized in terms of its relationship to identity. My project takes these same commitments but with a specific attention to literary representation and narrative. My analysis centers texts that themselves center the abject body, the degraded and dying body, the wounded body, the animal body. But these texts also center representation and narrative: each one refuses generic and narrative conventions. Each one calls attention to its own textuality in various ways. Each one undermines the possibilities of authorship and authority. And each one challenges the necessary “good” or even capacities of representation, particularly as it seems to demand display of either the disabled or female body.

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9 See Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1989) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993); Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight* (1993); Moira Gatens’s *Imaginary Bodies* (1995); Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* (1994); and Rosi Braidotti’s *Nomadic Subjects* (1994).
My analysis of Lessing, Haynes, and Coetzee’s texts is less concerned with identity and whether the representations are good or bad, right or wrong, empowering or reductive, and how/if they “construct” or “produce” either a disability or “normate” identity. This is not to say these are not important concerns, but to suggest that feminist disability studies might pay more sustained attention to how narrative and the literary work rather than what they produce, and also to how bodies “work” on texts. As such, “Voiceless Bodies” is concerned with what Lessing, Haynes and Coetzee’s simultaneous attention to voice and voicelessness exposes about literary representation as a system, the working of that system, and the significance of embodied difference within that system. It is also to suggest a more complicated critical attention to voicelessness, one which does not understand it simply as a way station on the path to voice, for it is certainly not for all bodies, and one which acknowledges the price that is paid for coming into voice, not only the benefits that supposedly accrue.

If one objective of this project is to further analyze the relation between representation and embodiment, by specifically attending to the condition of voicelessness and the problems of voice, another, connected goal is to analyze the relation between the female body and the disabled body, and further, between feminist theory and disability studies. It is well recognized that much feminist theory has largely avoided or ignored disability for decades, despite the many points of convergence between the two fields. Feminist disability scholars such as Susan Wendell cite connections between the two disciplines, including cultural attitudes about the body, questions of sameness and difference, dependence and independence, and integration versus separatism. Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues that “feminist issues that are
intextricably entangled with disability” include “reproductive technology, the place of
d bodily differences, the particularities of oppression, the ethics of care, the construction of
the subject” (“Integrating” 257). Yet despite these many points of convergence, disability
analysis is still marginal within much feminist theory. Feminist theorists who do work
from a disability perspective continue to introduce their work with rationales for said
work, in what appears to be an ongoing campaign to convince other feminists to take
disability seriously.

A number of explanations have been advanced for feminist theory’s historical
silence on disability. First and perhaps most basic is the fact that disability continues to
be stigmatized, and feared, both as an identity and embodiment. Feminist theorists are
certainly not immune to the overwhelming cultural forces that contribute to this
stigmatization and fear, and further, the female body has historically been stigmatized as
“pathological”; distancing themselves from disability is a way for feminists to distance
themselves from this association. Another explanation has to do with women’s own
historically marginal status; discussing the complicated position of cognitive disability
within disability studies, Michael Bérubé argues that “self-representation depends on
one’s capacity to distinguish oneself from those incapable of self-representation” (576).
One could certainly imagine feminists’ urge to distinguish themselves from those who
cannot self-represent, similar to the disability activists’ and scholars’ urge to distinguish
themselves from those with cognitive disabilities. Another explanation has been
articulated by a number of disability theorists, including Lennard J. Davis, who critiques
the postmodern theory that undergirds much feminist work, and more recently, Ellen
Samuels, who asks if there is “a fundamental dissonance between postmodern feminist
body theory, as exemplified by Butler, and the existence/analysis of the disabled body?” (“Critical” 50). Yet another explanation, proposed by Garland Thomson, is that feminism assumes disability issues are narrow (“Integrating” 258).

“Voiceless Bodies” explores each of these explanations in explicit and implicit points of analysis. My analysis of Lessing, Haynes, and Coetzee’s texts analyzes in detail the connections, and tensions, between female and disability embodiment. Similarly, it shows female characters’ urge to distinguish themselves from voicelessness, to represent themselves as author figures, and how their varying (and generally limited success) in doing so precedes or occurs in tandem with their understanding of themselves as problematically “voiced.” While much of my analysis is focused on figures with disabilities, I extend my analysis to other forms of voicelessness, including nonhuman animals, and postmortem biography. In this way, I hope to show that what may be considered primarily disability issues are in fact exemplary of some of our most pressing, and enduring, intellectual and ethical questions. Finally, I hope to present this project itself as an example of postmodern body theory that analyzes the disabled body.

By focusing on literary representation, such that literary representation is not only conceptualized as producing effects on bodies, but as a process that is itself troubled by disability and voicelessness specifically, my project also attempts to contribute to disability studies in the humanities, and feminist disability literary theory in particular. Disability scholars across the board identify passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 as a key moment in the history of disability activism and awareness.10 It

10 While the ADA is a specifically American legislative act, it is representative of Western nations’ recent disability policy and awareness. In his chapter on “Universal Design: The Work of
concretized disability activists’ public policy concerns and demands, many of which had been in the works in various forms since the 1960s; it also functioned as a highly public, visible political and social moment. Writing in 1995, Paul K. Longmore identified the ensuing 1990s as the “second phase” of the disability movement in America, one which transitioned from a primary focus on rights, to the creation of disability culture (Why 215). This attention to culture is reflected in disability studies’ move into the humanities in the 1990s, where cultural representations and identity construction became the focal points of critical analysis. Such a humanities-based approach is epitomized by Davis’s 1997 collection, *The Disability Studies Reader*. The 2000s have seen a flourishing of disability studies edited collections, monographs, conferences, special *PMLA* issues, and the like, including a body of theory that builds upon the work of race, sexuality, postcolonial, and feminist scholars, while complicating and at times challenging this work.

Disability theory has made profound use of some feminist theory, particularly social constructionism and its important insight that embodied difference is made, not inherent, but the limitations of a social constructionist model have been articulated by a growing number of disability theorists.  

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder begin *Narrative Prosthesis* by joining these disability theorists (as well as many feminist theorists) in questioning social constructivist, discursive approaches to the body. They argue that disability troubles these approaches to bodily difference because it cannot be

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wholly theorized away, stating that “No purely constructivist reading can adequately traverse this political and experiential divide” (3). In *Autism and Representation* Mark Osteen enumerates a number of problems born of the reign of social constructionism in disability studies, including its inability to theorize pain, the lack of agency seemingly available to subjects being constructed by discourse, the wide disparity amongst forms of embodiment that are grouped together, its focus on visual and physical disability, and finally and most importantly for this project, its unwillingness or inability to account for forms of disability that affect cognitive and intellectual skills (3). Osteen raises an important and difficult question related to this last point, using the example of high versus low-functioning people with autism. He argues that “because autism self-advocacy is dominated by those who can communicate well, those who can’t speak or write, or who are severely antisocial or intellectually impaired, are often left out in the cold” (7).

Osteen’s point here has direct relevance to feminist disability studies, a field that is largely founded on the retrieval of “dismissed voices and misrepresented experiences” according to Garland Thomson. In her comprehensive review of feminist disability studies in a 2005 issue of *Signs*, Garland Thomson consolidates the connections between feminism and disability studies into three issues: identity, intersectionality, and embodiment. Later in this essay she adds “representation” as a fourth item on the list, and argues that “Feminist disability studies thus reveals both the cultural work and the limits of language” (1558). While this statement on its face seems to imply a critique of language, in fact she is referring to the limits of vocabulary as opposed to language itself. Her argument is not that language should be critiqued, but that language choices are what is at issue. This stance, as well as the “addition” of representation mid-article, replicates
representation’s somewhat anemic stance within the field of feminist disability studies writ large. The majority of the studies she cites are sociological, historical, and medical analyses. And although cultural and literary representations are certainly recurring points of analysis in these studies and in humanities-based research, they are generally folded into arguments about identity construction.¹²

Garland Thomson’s own book *Extraordinary Bodies* is in some ways the preeminent example of feminist disability scholarship that is specifically focused on representation, yet discussion of it and other entries in the field of disability literary criticism/theory are somewhat curiously left out of her own survey. She writes:

Feminist disability studies politicizes and historicizes textual representations of disability. Indeed, this explicit connection between word and world animates all feminist scholarship. Just as critics have come to recognize that the blackness of an Othello or the madness of an Ophelia, for example, goes beyond metaphor to do the cultural work of racism and sexism, so feminist disability studies understands that textual figures of disability both register and materialize social patterns of bias and exclusion based on ability norms that operate similarly to gender and racial systems. (“Feminist” 1564-65)

¹² Garland Thomson cites a number of studies of disability figures in literature by female disability scholars, and a number of memoirs, autobiographies and personal essays by women with disabilities, but these approaches to do not center representation. This is not to downplay the significance of people with disabilities and especially women with disabilities telling their own stories and asserting their voices. However, this kind of life-writing has limited theoretical capacity and solely focusing on it does not help us understand a) the condition of literal voicelessness, and b) the ethical demands of literature that attempts to represent voiceless others.
In this formulation, literary representations reflect and inform social attitudes about bodies, and these representations are either oppressive, empowering, or somewhere in between. In her own work, Garland Thomson does go a step further than simply lauding or decrying individual representations, arguing that representation itself “simultaneously buttresses an embodied version of normative identity and shapes a narrative of corporeal difference that excludes those whose bodies or behaviors do not conform” (Extraordinary 7) but her analysis is primarily taken up with how representation produces identity and ideas about embodied difference. Again, representation and analysis of it is understood to inform and serve the larger/more important issue of identity. The body is evoked through representation; it has no force on representation itself.

Garland Thomson’s survey was published in 2005, and it draws from an archive of scholarship that extends far back from that point. Two more recent edited collections – Kim Q. Hall’s Feminist Disability Studies (2011) and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Jen Celio’s Disability and Mothering (2011) – provide critical insights into the relation between the female and disabled body. In both collections there is a sustained attention to the way disability and the body are figured in writing, the material body in the world, and a concern that the latter not be subsumed by the former. This concern translates to not just the content of the collections but in the case of some of the articles, the form as well. A significant number of essays in Disability and Mothering, for instance, are directed towards examining “Narrativity and Meaning-Making” which includes critical approaches to the ways in which disability narratives are constructed, not only by women with disabilities (and mothers in particular, as this is the focus of the collection), but by women representing or speaking for people with disabilities. In these essays, the issue is
not about exposing and critiquing some uninformed or voyeuristic/vampiristic outsider misrepresenting disability experience. Rather, it is about those closest to disability and actual disabled bodies critically examining their own speech, and how the acts of speaking and speaking for are fraught regardless of the intentions or capacities of the speaker.  

The question of who speaks for those who literally cannot speak for themselves, or who are “unwilling to communicate through orthodox modes” (Osteen 7) and how such speech should proceed is addressed in Lewiecki-Wilson’s idea of “mediated rhetoricity” (qtd in Osteen 8), which is closely aligned with Osteen’s concept of “empathetic scholarship” (Osteen 8). Both approaches hinge on a speaking with as opposed to for, which requires an attention to the ways in which the body speaks in nonverbal, nonlinguistic language. This kind of “speaking with” is apparent in Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello and Haynes’s film Superstar. In the former, the author figure protagonist attempts to speak for nonhuman animals, in part by exhibiting herself as a “wounded animal” as well. In the latter, Haynes focuses on the ways in which Karen Carpenter’s body “spoke” in non-linguistic, and often contradictory, ways, and his film evokes a similar kind of speech. Both texts refuse to offer up a coherent “speaking for” and instead evoke the difficulties of such a project, and propose a kind of discourse of voicelessness that does not depend on linguistic representation, but rather on speaking bodies.  

13 Linnea E. Franits’s “Mothers as Storytellers” and Rachel Robertson’s “Sharing Stories” are particularly evocative examples of this. See also James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson’s Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture (2001).
Along with advocating a kind of “speaking with,” Osteen’s discussion of cognitive disability illustrates the ethical dangers and indeed potential for misrepresentation that are engendered by an intellectual and activist ethos that requires self-representation and the assertion of one’s voice/story. For example, most representations of autism, including those done by people with autism, “often misleadingly impl[y] that most autistic people are savants while also suggesting that autistic people are worthy only if they overcome their disorder” (Osteen 8-9). Similarly, it is not only those who are unable to speak but those who are unwilling to speak who should be respected. Ellen Samuels’ recent article, “Examining Millie and Christine McKoy: Where Enslavement and Enfreakment Meet” argues that critics’ prioritizing of voice, and their enthusiasm in recognizing the McKoy sisters’ autobiographical voice and therefore their agency and self-assertion, in fact obscures the material conditions of the twins’ lives, and ignores the problematic history of this supposed “autobiography.” By prioritizing voice, scholars and historians have ignored non-linguistic acts which may be more useful for assessing the twins’ agency.

Clearly it is extremely important for many people with disabilities to self-represent and to assert their voices and experiences when they can and desire to do so. It is also clear that gender is not a neutral identity category within such a project; as Mintz writes in the collection Feminist Disability Studies:

For a woman with some form of disability, the act of writing herself into a textual identity entails combating a triple erasure—from the long history of autobiography in the West, which has typically excluded women’s experience from the kinds of life stories deemed worthy of recording, as
well as from able-bodied culture and feminist theory, in which disability has tended to be stigmatized as a sign of failure and inadequacy, or ignored altogether as a meaningful component of identity. It is from a position of cultural invisibility, then, that the female writer of disability narrative struggles toward a “performative utterance” that will announce the authority of her multiply unspeakable self. (69)

“Voiceless Bodies” attempts to tease out the terms of such a “multiply unspeakable self.” Each of the texts I analyze includes a female author figure who is absolutely concerned with speaking herself and authoring her own story. Each text is also concerned with exploring disability, not as a signifier of failure or inadequacy, but for its force on the world and in particular, on the narrative at hand. And each text elucidates the difficulties, but also the costs, of asserting a “performative utterance” and considers the implications, or potentialities, of not speaking. Such a critical and somewhat open-ended stance towards language and the assertion of voice, like Osteen and Samuels’ work, deserves more sustained attention in both disability studies in general and feminist disability studies in particular.

**Visuality and Disability Literary Criticism**

One of my ongoing concerns throughout this study is to examine the ways in which voice is connected with visuality in literature, to further elucidate the narrative desire to simultaneously “know” and “see.” By theorizing the visual in narrative forms I hope to expose and challenge the revelatory capacity of voice. Towards these ends, I offer a brief survey of some of the key texts in what is emerging as the field of disability
literary criticism. These are foundational monographs, written by scholars working specifically in the field of literature. One of the goals of such a survey is to delineate the critical archive from which I am drawing in terms of disability studies; another is to articulate the ways in which feminist, disability, and posthumanist theory productively complicate each other. While there are many registers through which to explore these complications, here I focus on each work’s theorization of the visual – both the act of looking, and the concept of “spectacle” – both because this is a key element of each of these theoretical texts, but also because it sets up my following discussion of narrative display.¹⁴

The role of vision and the gaze are central points of analysis in Lennard J. Davis’s work, and have direct resonance to feminist theories of the gaze as well as phenomenological accounts of embodiment. In *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (1995), Davis argues that “The missing limb, blind gaze, use of sign language, wheelchair or prosthesis is seen by the ‘normal’ observer. Disability is a specular moment. The power of the gaze to control, limit, and patrol the disabled person is brought to the fore. Accompanying the gaze are a welter of powerful emotional responses” (*Enforcing* 12). *Enforcing Normalcy* is a seminal text in the field of disability studies and an inaugural text in humanities-based approaches to theorizing disability.

Davis’s move to consider disability from a cultural studies/critical-theoretical perspective

¹⁴ Ato Quayson’s *Aesthetic Nervousness* (2007) should certainly be included within the field of disability literary criticism; his book makes ample use of this archive of literary disability scholarship, and continues Mitchell and Snyder’s work on the interrelation between disability and narrative form. The degree to which he studiously avoids discussion/analysis of the visual makes his work less foundationally useful to my own project, however. In general, he tends towards interpretive schemes that prioritize the conceptual and epistemological as opposed to the materiality of the body.
opposed the predominantly medical and social science approaches that have historically dominated the field and that have focused on a social rights discourse rather than questions of subjectivity. The point of his study is to culturally and historically analyze the notion of disability, and specifically the constructions of the norm against which disabled individuals are defined, and in so doing, to challenge the notion that disability is a “biological fact” (Enforcing 2-3). In this respect, Davis’s study parallels (and is strategically unified with) many feminist, as well as critical race, approaches which identify specific bodily markers that are prioritized in distinguishing and hierarchizing certain bodies over others. Ultimately Davis’s project is to inspire inquiry into the construction of a naturalized, biologized “normal” and “pathological” binary that operates in relation to abled and disabled, in order to show how these categories are constructed and in fact contingent on context, and also how our affective responses to disabled bodies can be better understood from a variety of critical theoretical frameworks (including both phenomenology and Lacanian psychoanalysis).

Over the course of his analysis, Davis argues that ideas about independent functionality as well as visual order are critical to the designation/definition of disability; bodies that appear to be dysfunctional and that interrupt the field of vision are usually deemed disabled. Western, patriarchal myths of autonomy and self-sufficiency buttress these evaluations in terms of functionality. He also argues that the “powerful emotional responses” that the vision of disability produces in the abled are a product of the viewer’s feeling of vulnerability upon being confronted by the sight of the disabled body. This feeling of vulnerability may be explained by a number of concepts: first is the communicability of disability itself. Not only are most disabilities acquired rather than
congenital, meaning that anyone is “vulnerable” to becoming disabled, but aging is itself a process of dis-abling particularly in youth-oriented cultures such as that which exists in the United States, which reward youth-attributed functionality and visual aesthetics. Davis also argues that the abled viewer becomes “disabled” him or herself upon encountering the disabled; this vision reminds the viewer of his/her own fragile wholeness (Enforcing 132) and, in a world in which the binary categories of whole and partial, normal and abnormal, functional and dysfunctional must be maintained, a viewer perceives of him/herself as belonging in one category and being vulnerable to sliding into the other.

Throughout Enforcing Normalcy Davis reveals a multiplicity of ways in which disability is contingent, and can be elided by certain factors, at certain times and in certain spaces. Disabled individuals are understood by the abled as being in the world in a way that is fundamentally different from their own experience of being. But the abled also know that the boundary between abled and disabled is the most porous of all identity distinctions: the boundary between abled and disabled is simultaneously absolute and absolutely contingent. Not only can anyone become disabled, but some disabled individuals can be “abled” as well. In an application of this point, Davis provides as examples a number of authors who had “disabilities” but who were not identified as disabled, including John Milton, Alexander Pope, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and argues that their writerliness trumped their bodily disruptions, and in fact immaterialized those disabilities (to their audiences and critics, if not themselves). This “abling” can be explained in part by the preeminence attributed to speech and writing; communication is frequently identified as a core “human” capacity and for those individuals who are more
adept at communicating in socially acknowledged languages, this extrahumanness makes up for the inhumanness of their disabilities. In their work on *Posthuman Bodies*, Halberstam and Livingston note the role of the poetic as cohort in the notion of the human (alongside science), but they identify its function as being exclusionary. In the examples above, the poetic/literary actually functions to incorporate what might otherwise be seen as provisionally human bodies into the fully human family of authorship. This poetic power is revealed here as ambivalent: poetry and language’s ability to incorporate the different body into the canon of the human may be seen as instances of disruption and overcoming, as well as those of convention and repetition; considerations of disability alongside humanism’s “poetic sidekick” complicate easy assessments of either.

Like Davis, Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s work focuses on the visual aspect of disability and specular relations between abled and disabled figures. Following the publication of *Enforcing Normalcy* by two years, Garland Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) focuses on 19th and 20th century American representations of disability. Like Davis, she is concerned with the lack of non-scientific disability scholarship. As such, her project is to place disability studies in a humanities context, and specifically within the fields of literary criticism and cultural studies. To these ends, Garland Thomson engages with a number of critical theoretical works from fields such as the history of science/medicine, philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis and literary studies as a means of grounding her cultural-historical analysis, but also as a way of showing disability’s relevance to those fields. In Garland Thomson’s theorization, the visual spectacle of disability cannot be easily reduced to a sense of aggression or fear
evoked by the abled/disabled encounter, as Davis argues. Similarly, Garland Thomson’s cultural history is not a simple mapping of victimization and deviance but carefully and thoughtfully attends to the ambivalence that imbues disabled bodies, in their definition, reception and agency.

In her influential chapter “Theorizing Disability: Feminist Theory, the Body, and the Disabled Figure” Garland Thomson points out the many parallels between such “corporeal others” as the female and the disabled body and calls for a more explicit connection between feminist and disability theory, pointing to a number of overlapping concerns including sexuality, reproduction, motherhood and abortion. Some of the most interesting points that Garland Thomson’s analysis raises show the ways in which issues fundamental to feminist theory are themselves contingent and change meaning when considered from the field of disability. One point of disjunction between feminist theory and disability is the sexualizing of women, and their status as objects of the gaze. In a productive extension of Davis’s analysis, Garland Thomson convincingly argues that disabled women are asexualized and the “gaze” trained upon them is a stare, or a looking away (*Extraordinary* 25-26), and cannot easily be defined as voyeurism.

Feminist disability theorists’ complication of the notion of vision and the gaze is extremely rich. While Garland Thomson details the desexualized “stare” in *Extraordinary Bodies* and in her more recent *Staring: How We Look* (2009), Alison Kafer (2004) has written about her experience with the amputee-devotee community, which is composed of men who find women amputees particularly appealing and seek them out. Samuels (“My Body”) explores the politics of vision as it relates to invisible disability and connects it with the politics (and policing) of female appearance. In Garland
Thomson, Kafer, and Samuels’s work, the function of the visual, erotics, and the female disabled body are deeply complicated and not easily classifiable along the lines of the sexualized female body or the asexualized disabled body. Both Garland Thomson and Kafer (along with other feminist theorists) also note the parallels between notions of femininity taken to the extreme, and bodily dysfunction. The boundary between the feminized, female body and the disabled body is deeply porous, and disrupts binary oppositions between abled and disabled, but also between eroticized and desexualized.

In these examples we see women’s bodies shifting across categories, revealing the contingency of notions of the erotic and the disabled when combined with the male, or abled, gaze. Garland Thomson’s work shows how feminist and disability theory productively complicate one other. It is not enough to theorize the abled-disabled encounter without considering the force of sexual difference, just as it is not enough to assume the eroticization (or de-eroticization) of the female body without considering different embodiments. Throughout her analysis, Garland Thomson constantly reveals the multivalence of representation of disability: it includes not only a looking away, but a stare; not only repulsion but wonder and fascination.

In words that evoke Laura Mulvey’s famous statement that “Sadism demands a story,” David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder declare, “Difference demands display. Display demands difference. The arrival of narrative must be attended by the ‘unsightly’ eruption of the anomalous (often physical in nature) within the social field of vision” (Narrative 55). Narrative and prosthesis, as their title indicates, are the two main trajectories of Mitchell and Snyder’s very influential Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse (2001). Firmly situated within the humanities and especially
literary criticism and critical theory, the authors identify the frequency and multiple
functions of literary representations of disability through their analyses of such specific
textual examples as Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Melville’s Moby-Dick,
Shakespeare’s Richard III, and Katherine Dunn’s more recent novel Geek Love. Using
these examples and others, the authors argue that disability functions within narrative as a
prosthetic. Prosthesis is defined here as a device (technological or textual) that completes
or normatizes an incomplete/aberrant body. The conjunction of disability, narrative and
prosthesis results in Mitchell and Snyder’s notion of “narrative prosthesis” which
includes a number of functions; first, that “Disability lends a distinctive idiosyncrasy to
any character that differentiates the character from the anonymous background of the
‘norm’” (Narrative 47). The prosthetic function of disabled characters in narrative is also
to “normatize” the other characters. Additionally, the prosthesis turns on readers’
affective responses by presenting them with disabled characters.

Beyond contributing to characterization and readers’ affective responses, Mitchell
and Snyder argue that figures of embodied difference are absolutely necessary to
narrative, that it depends upon them. Mitchell and Snyder’s work points out that the
textual representation of disability is powerful in a number of ways, including its capacity
to represent the “unrepresentable” and its (re)presentation of the disabled character for
the reader’s viewing pleasure; they argue that “To represent disability is to engage
oneself in an encounter with that which is believed to be off the map of ‘recognizable’
human experiences. Making comprehensible that which appears to be inherently
unknowable situates narrative in the powerful position of mediator between two separate
worlds” (Narrative 5-6). The ends to which authors use this power varies across texts and
across history, as Mitchell and Snyder consistently show. Interestingly, their revelation of
the abundance of disabled figures in narrative (as well as disabled authors) both
undermines and reinforces the invisibility of disability. It is everywhere and yet
seemingly nowhere.

Much of Robert McRuer’s analysis in *Crip Theory* (2006) is focused on visual
representations of disability, including film, documentary and television, and how they do
(or in some cases do not) produce the “flexible” body. McRuer understands this flexible
body as inherently heterosexual and able bodied, but with the tolerance and ability to
accommodate and assimilate “other” increasing visible bodies such that the television
show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* can be embraced by the mainstream (McRuer’s
example) or the film *Transamerica* can garner critical and commercial success (my
example). The success of these “flexible” bodies (straight, abled, male), interestingly,
depends in part upon their own visibility and their “spectacular tolerance” of other
bodies. McRuer’s queer analysis of the “political economy of visibility” (2) complicates
static theorizations of the gaze or spectacle in connection with disability, sexuality, and
gender.

Situated within the fields of cultural studies and queer theory, *Crip Theory* is one
of the more recent additions to disability theory. Like many of the works discussed
above, McRuer’s inquiry into disability seeks to replace naturalized and embedded
notions of disability in order to show the ways in which both disabled and abled bodies
are constructed. Drawing attention to the abled end of the continuum, McRuer argues that
ablebodiedness, like heterosexuality (and like whiteness), has historically functioned as
an invisible and unremarkable naturalized norm that has passed as “universal” and indeed
“coextensive . . . with humanity itself” (1). McRuer’s study is particularly significant for his attention to the interrelation between not only queer bodies and disabled bodies, but straight bodies and abled bodies; he argues that “despite the fact that homosexuality and disability clearly share a pathologized past, and despite a growing awareness of the intersection between queer theory and disability studies, little notice has been taken of the connection between heterosexuality and able-bodied identity” (1). Throughout *Crip Theory* McRuer’s connections to both feminist and queer theory are explicit and productive. Extending Butler’s theory of gender performance, for example, McRuer sets the necessary repetition of heterosexuality (which is based on idealizations that produce failure, and therefore repetition) alongside able-bodiedness, which he argues is also built upon repetition and built-in failure.

His theory of “compulsory able-bodiedness” upon which *Crip Theory* is founded is intimately connected to Adrienne Rich’s notion of compulsory heterosexuality, and is premised on the “covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice” (8). In McRuer’s discussion, the non-choice is both heterosexuality and ablebodiedness. We might also consider the desire for self-representation and “voice” as a similar “non-choice,” one which has hardly been imagined as having an alternative.

In an article published the same year as *Crip Theory*, Kari Weil analyzes the interrelation between linguistic disability and animal ethics. She argues that one approach to according nonhuman animals ethical status is to “prove” linguistic ability; however, another is concerned with thinking about subjectivity that is not premised on language (“Killing”), as is evidenced in some kinds of cognitive disability. Like Osteen, Weil considers what might be lost in the compulsion to “speak.”
Exposing Narrative

Building upon the preceding archive of literary disability theory, and contributing to it, in this section I propose Lessing, Haynes, and Coetzee’s texts as examples of narratives which, rather than offering up the visual display of body, or “revealing” of story, instead thematize and formally disrupt the desire for such a narrative display, refusing, frustrating, or perverting it. In place of the display of the disabled body, these texts instead offer up the spectacle of themselves and their own non-normative narrativity, which includes both anemic and hyperbolic revelations of both the body and the story. This begs the question: are these narratives? If narrative requires revelation and revelation is denied or frustrated, what exactly are these texts? I argue that Lessing, Haynes, and Coetzee’s texts do offer up a narrative display, or revelation, but instead of exposing the voiceless bodies they expose the working of their own narrativity and offer up the spectacle of themselves. The texts expose themselves as narrative spectacles of frustrated or perverted narrative desire and narrative display. The significance of this strategy, beyond what might be dismissed as a kind of aesthetic curiosity or narrative exceptionalism/radicalism, is its implications for our understanding of and engagement with voicelessness, as well as our understanding of the goals, and requirements, of narrative.

The convergence of narrative theory and psychoanalytic theory in the early 1980s spawned a rich field of scholarship that attempted to theorize the relation between narrative and the body. In much of this work, desire appears fundamental to narrative, whether that desire is directed towards the ending as in Peter Brooks’ Reading for the
Plot, towards knowledge, towards display of the “different” body, or all of the above. Feminist and disability theorists’ careful and central attention to the specificity of that desire, and its consequences in the world, is important. In her rich essay, “Desire in Narrative,” de Lauretis, citing Freud, argues that narrative is generated by a desire to know. She delineates this desire through the parallel scenes of questioning that occur in Oedipus’s encounter with the Sphinx, and Freud’s question to himself: “What does a woman want?” and argues that narrative sets up the journey or passage of the hero figure (subject) through and towards an object, which fulfills this desire for knowledge while simultaneously mapping sexual difference into both the textual and cultural universe. More recently, Mitchell and Snyder argue that “all narratives operate out of a desire to compensate for a limitation or to reign in an excess” (Narrative 53) and go on to examine the ways that narrative itself is intimately bound up with disability, as narrative is created through the pointing out of difference, and the call to resolve it in some way.

Revelation is understood as central and perhaps necessary to narrative, across genre and form. Discussing the horror genre, Noël Carroll explains that its subject matter is “wedded to narrative structures that enact and expatiate upon the discovery of the unknown” and that the “point of the horror genre . . . is to exhibit, disclose, and manifest that which is, putatively in principle, unknown and unknowable.” He goes on to argue that “Rendering the unknown known is, in fact, the point of such plots, as well as the source of their seductiveness” (127). Carroll’s “seductiveness” becomes spectatorial pleasure in de Lauretis’s discussion of narrative desire, a pleasure which is achieved

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15 For a compelling overview of narrative desire in the work of Brooks, Bersani, and de Lauretis, and the ways in which de Lauretis’s historical and embodied specificity sets her work apart from that of the other two, see Jay Clayton’s “Narrative and Theories of Desire” (1989).
when the simultaneous desire to know, to see is fulfilled (136). And finally, employing the language of “hunger,” Mitchell and Snyder claim that “Literary narratives support our appetites for the exotic by posing disability as an ‘alien’ terrain that promises the revelation of a previously uncomprehended experience” (Narrative 55). Revelation is making known the known; it is the disclosure of knowledge. It is also narrative desire’s object and indeed as has been argued, the very point of narrative, and literal meaning of the word.¹⁶

The objectification of difference seems necessary to “knowing” and understanding it, and visuality operates as a strategic and powerful tool in this process. De Lauretis and Mulvey’s work is foundational to a rich archive of feminist theory that takes on both vision/display and representational and narrative forms, critiquing and politicizing them. The majority of this work shows how cinematic representation functions to objectify bodily difference and specifically sexual difference: “The representation of woman as spectacle—body to be looked at, place of sexuality, and object of desire—so pervasive in our culture, finds in narrative cinema its most complex expression and widest circulation” (de Lauretis 4). In feminist theorizations, this objectification is largely understood as sexual and is premised on pleasure through visual consumption. In disability theorizations, this objectification premised on looking is usually understood as asexual and is oriented towards re-establishing order, such that the disabled body is contained. Garland Thomson, for instance, argues that “If the male gaze makes the normative female a sexual spectacle, then the stare sculpts the disabled subject

¹⁶ H. Porter Abbott points to Hayden White’s translation of the word “narrative” as being from the Latin roots “gnarus” and “narro” which refer to “knowing” and “telling” (11).
into a grotesque spectacle” (26). Much disability theory is focused on visual representational forms: exhibits, freak shows, photography, film. In both feminist and disability theorizations, it is the turning of bodies into “spectacles” that enables their objectification.

This spectacle-making happens not only in visual spaces and forms, but also in literary representation. Mitchell and Snyder ask, without quite answering, “Why does the ‘visual’ spectacle of so many disabilities become a predominating trope in the nonvisual textual mediums of literary narratives?” (Narrative 53). Throughout her book The Sexual Politics of Meat Carol Adams advances a literary theory that is premised on the objectifications of bodies that happen through metaphor. She argues that the desire for and consumption of bodies (either animal or female) is produced by processes of figural objectification which happens when “a subject is first viewed, or objectified, through metaphor. Through fragmentation the object is severed from its ontological meaning. Finally, consumed, it exists only through what it represents” (Adams 47, my emphasis). Adams’s description of objectification through metaphor correlates to Garland Thomson’s description of the discussion of “enfreakment” in which “the body envelops and obliterates the freak’s potential humanity. When the body becomes pure text, a freak has been produced from a physically disabled human being” (Extraordinary 59). Along with reducing the body to “pure text” Garland Thomson explains that freak shows exhibited both the body, and the body’s story, through narrative pamphlets, which “almost always accompanied the actual exhibit, authenticating the freak with a ‘true life story’ and medical testimonies” (Extraordinary 61). In both Adams and Garland
Thomson’s formulations, the marked body – woman, animal, disabled – is objectified through the collusion of language (metaphor as well as narrative) and visual display.

Both disability and feminist scholars have been and continue to be concerned with exposing these oppressive capacities of narrative and literary forms, but both are loathe to entirely cede a claim to the potential and possibilities of narrative and the literary. This is the difficult position of those who have been the objects of, and objectified by, narrative and literary representation but who still desire to self-represent in literary and narrative forms. In her review of the feminist and poststructuralist debates over narrative that took place in the 1980s, Susan Stanford Friedman identifies an oppositional “craving for narrative” (230) within minority populations, and describes narrative as “food for the hungry” particularly for those cultures rooted in oral traditions, as well as those in “highly literate domains where the oral tradition is but a trace of a memory” (229). Friedman argues that “None of these [feminist] poststructuralists imagines doing away with narrative; rather, the point is that for many, a revolutionary poetic involves a transgressive disruption of narrative. Narrative may be necessary, inevitable, but its mode of discourse is to be resisted” (229). This sentiment is articulated in a somewhat different register by de Lauretis, one such feminist poststructuralist, who at the end of her critique of narrative, argues that the most exciting work in feminism is not anti-narrative but narrative with a vengeance (157).

Such attempts at resistance, I want to argue, are evidenced in narratives that call attention to themselves as such and which hyperbolically (with a vengeance) thematize and interrupt their own oppressive tendencies, or “dependencies” as Mitchell and Snyder might term them. One of the key strategies such texts use is the representation of
voicelessness, voicelessness that is never made to speak. This includes a dialogic voicelessness, but also a perspectival voicelessness; characters do not speak within the narrative, and their unvoiced thoughts and feelings are not voiced via first or third person perspectives. To illustrate in reverse: in Keri Hulme’s *the bone people* (1986) the mute character Simon is central to the story, but the text repeatedly switches to his first person perspective. In this sense, while he is voiceless within the diegesis, he has voice in the larger discourse. In the novel, it is these moments of voice that function to “humanize” a character who is largely described in alien and animalistic terms, and whose body is repeatedly displayed in scenes of brutal abuse. Significantly, the pivotal and most harrowing scene of violence upon Simon’s body is double narrated, first, by Simon, from a first-person point of view perspective that takes place entirely inside his head, and second, by a third person narrator. The perspectives and narrative voice flow in and out of each other:

The world is full of dazzlement, jewel beams, first of crystal splendour.

I am on fire.

He is aching, he is breaking apart with pain.

The agony is everywhere, hands, body, legs, head.

(308)

In this textual moment, display of the voiceless body and of the voiceless body’s story come together and are fully and disturbingly realized.

The significance of each of the texts I analyze is that, unlike *the bone people*, they refuse to provide this revelation, to varying degrees, exposing the demand while frustrating the desire. Because of this frustrated desire, and spectacular failure, or refusal,
I argue that Lessing, Haynes, and Coetzee’s texts complicate the categories of disability representations that have been identified by literary critics such as Garland Thomson, and Mitchell and Snyder. On one end of the spectrum, Garland Thomson argues that, “From folktales and classical myths to modern and postmodern ‘grotesques,’ the disabled body is almost always a freakish spectacle presented by the mediating narrative voice” (Extraordinary 10). She goes on to posit that “literary narratives of disability usually depend on the objectification of the spectacle that representation has created” (Extraordinary 12) and that “disabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability’s cultural resonance” (Extraordinary 9). Lessing, Haynes, and Coetzee’s voiceless figures are central, not marginal, to their narratives. The texts are also largely absent of a “mediating narrative voice”; rather, the narrative voice is clearly and explicitly untrustworthy and undermines its own author/ity.

Most significantly, the texts also refuse to provide the spectacle of the disabled body, or alternately, provide it in such a way that disrupts the conventions of visual display. Lessing’s text pivots on the literal display – denuding – of the disabled body, a display that grossly literalizes the demand for revelation of the story by revealing the body. In Haynes’s film, Karen Carpenter’s female and disabled body is literally objectified through filmic strategies and formal choices that ultimately make her body and the revelation of her story unconsumable. Coetzee’s texts offer alternately a complete absence of display and refusal of either linguistic or sexual intercourse with the disabled body in Foe, in which Friday’s story and the revelation of his missing tongue are
demanded repeatedly, to no avail. In *Elizabeth Costello*, rhetoric of obscenity predominates as Coetzee’s protagonist repeatedly uses philosophical argumentation and a kind of testimony to expose both herself and her lecture subjects (nonhuman animals) as “wounded animals,” an exposure that her audiences desperately do not want to witness.

On the other end of the spectrum from Garland Thomson’s characterization, Mitchell and Snyder’s own analysis is focused on transgressive texts that use disability to challenge normative ideals about the body. But even in these “open” texts, they identify an eventual “closing down of narrative” (*Narrative* 50). So, while “Disability recurs in these works as a potent force that challenges cultural ideals of the ‘normal’ or ‘whole’ body . . . *At the same time, disability also operates as the textual obstacle that causes the literary operation of open-endedness to close down or stumble*” (*Narrative* 50). To be clear, Mitchell and Snyder are arguing that even those texts that start out as inquiries into cultural ideals about the body end up falling back on flat characterizations of disabled characters. This is not the case in the texts I analyze. While my reading of Lessing’s text is definitely ambivalent in terms of its disability consciousness and progressiveness, each of the texts I analyze refuses to objectify the disabled body by offering it up as (or only as) a spectacle of embodied difference. Each also refuses to fulfill the narrative imperative to know, to see. Rather than “closing down” at the end, the texts end in various degrees of not-knowing: revelations are refused, narrative desire remains unfulfilled. As such, these texts frustrate the narrative desire to see, to know, desires which are premised on the sense of familiarity, control and pleasure that “knowing” facilitates. This refusal to reveal and make known through visual spectacle or the
articulation of voice has implications for and beyond the literary, as I will discuss in the following section.

**Representation and the Human**

Voicelessness is a pressing theoretical, ethical, and political concern across the fields of feminism, disability studies, and posthumanism, each of which are concerned in their own way with what Kari Weil describes as questions of “how to understand and give voice to others or to experiences that seem impervious to our means of understanding; how to attend to difference without appropriating or distorting it; how to hear and acknowledge what it may not be possible to say” (“Report” 4). Significantly, Weil’s observation appears in her “Report on the Animal Turn,” a survey and historicization of the emerging field of animal studies. Animal studies and the larger field of posthumanism within which it is situated are also concerned with the epistemological limits and political implications of human language as the arbiter of “the human.”

Throughout “Voiceless Bodies” I take a posthumanist critical approach to the equation of not just language and the human, but the literary and the human. I argue that the ability and desire to self-represent and employ narrative have emerged as supposedly ontological features of the human, along with language capacity, and that Lessing, Haynes and Coetzee’s texts expose this assumption – indeed, this demand – and resist it, at the level of both story and form.

One of the aims of this study is to use posthumanist theory to further analysis of the disabled body, and to use disability theory to complicate posthumanist theory. This goal is in many ways a response to much current posthumanist theory, which fails to consider
disability experience. While some strands of posthumanism are certainly unconcerned
with and potentially abusive of disability experience, as I will discuss below,
posthumanist animal studies scholars have drawn important connections between
disability experience, nonhuman animals and ethics. A second, and more important aim
of this study is to use this posthumanist animal studies work to further my analysis of
voicelessness and literary representation. Such work has important and direct relevance to
both a critical and ethical engagement with voicelessness. It considers the value of
subjectivity that is not premised on language, and critiques how those with voice use
language to talk about voiceless bodies, analyzing the implications of not only what is
said, but how it is said.

Questions of the human are, of course, far from new but their recent codification
within academia and circulation within both intellectual and larger cultural spaces are
noteworthy. The field of posthumanism or “the posthuman” has explicitly emerged over
the last two decades, although, as Cary Wolfe points out in What is Posthumanism?
critical consensus on its definition (both what it is and what it should do) is tenuous,
while its roots can be traced back to a number of post-WWII intellectual contexts,

17 In her article “Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology” (2006)
Braidotti describes the posthuman (or more specifically “high posthumanism”) as being multiply
concerned with the poststructuralist dismantling of humanism, and with “postanthropocentrism” –
these two strands call into question the assumed coherence and supremacy of the
“human/humanist” subject particularly within the context of the philosophical and technological
conditions and questions of late postmodernity. Significantly, Braidotti’s articulation of the
posthuman arrives as part of a collection of essays that consider Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto”
twenty years after its original publication in 1985. Arguably, it was Haraway’s essay that brought
into being current notions of the posthuman. In it, Haraway argues for critical, political and
morphological approaches to subjectivity that find perverse and strategic alliances between the
biological and the technological, the sciences and the humanities, fantasy and reality. Twenty
years later, Haraway’s cyborg is frequently invoked as the embodiment of both posthumanism
and postanthropomorphism.
including philosophy but also medicine and cybernetics. The posthuman as it is currently understood within the fields of literature and critical theory generally marries a poststructuralist critique of humanism, and revisionist approaches to such “nonhuman” entities as animals, technology, and the environment.

In posthuman theory to date, it has been more appealing to consider the ways in which non-human others may now be reassessed – clones, animals, environment, data, genes – rather than considering the posthumanity of the historically less-than-human. One body that rarely appears within formulations of the posthuman is the disabled body. This disinterest in the disabled as posthuman may be understood as a product of science and medicine’s perception of disability as “unsolvable” problems: “people with disabilities are said to be fated or unsalvageable and, thus, somehow stubbornly inhuman” (Mitchell and Snyder, *The Body* 4). The goal of technology at the turn of the millennium has increasingly been to eradicate the disabled body through prenatal testing, selective abortion, and genetic mapping, rather than to affirm its difference. This move to “eradicate” the disabled body is indicative of a larger posthumanist turn to detach from the body writ large. Such a move towards a posthumanism that is specifically unencumbered by the material body is being critiqued by feminist posthumanist theorists, as in N. Katherine Hayles’s observations in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) that “Although in many ways the posthuman deconstructs the liberal humanist subject, it thus shares with its predecessor an emphasis on cognition rather than embodiment” (5). It is the disappearance of the fleshly body in emerging narratives of the posthuman, rather than heightened attention to information and prosthetics, that concerns Hayles and indeed many critics of posthuman theory.
An early, critical engagement with the convergence of the posthuman and not just the body but the disabled body appears in Vivian Sobchak’s article “Beating the Meat/Surviving the Text, or How to Get Out of This Century Alive” (1995) in which she critiques high theoretical tendencies to cannibalize the cyborg/disabled body in the service of romanticized and eroticized notions of postmodern subjectivity. In these theorizations, as in Hayles’s analysis of the disembodied informatics posthuman, embodiment is elided. The disabled body, the cyborg body, the prosthetized and fragmentary body become raw materials for the constructions of postmodern subjectivities, which one might read as more superhuman than differently human. In her critique of Baudrillard’s pornographic reading of Crash bodies, Sobchak writes that “Baudrillard’s body is thought always as an object and never lived as a subject. And thought rather than lived, it can bear all sorts of symbolic abuse with indiscriminate and undifferentiated pleasure” (206). This “undifferentiated pleasure” absorbs difference into romanticized theoretical narratives of the postmodern. Sobchak’s response presents her very differentiated experience of being an embodied cyborg (as a female amputee with a prosthetic leg) within a world of high theory that ignores the materiality and technological/affective specificity and limitations of that status.

Sobchak’s work stands as a rich and necessary corrective to postmodern, posthuman theories that sacrifice careful attention to difference for the sake of undifferentiated postmodern pleasure. “Beating the Meat” is just one entry in the field of disability studies that has, since the mid 1990s, inserted itself into critical theoretical discourses and questioned the ways in which disability is alternately ignored or
appropriated in service of those discourses.\textsuperscript{18} Although Sobchak makes rather explicit connections between the disabled body and the cyborg, she is the exception – the posthuman and disability rarely appear in the same sentence. Tobin Siebers takes particular issue with Haraway’s cyborg, in fact, arguing that:

Haraway is so preoccupied with power and ability that she forgets what disability is. Prostheses always increase the cyborg’s abilities; they are a source only of new powers, never of problems. The cyborg is always more than human—and never risks to be seen as subhuman. To put it simply, the cyborg is not disabled. (“Disability” 178)

While some strands of posthumanism are certainly unconcerned with and potentially abusive of disability experience, posthumanist animal studies scholars have drawn important connections between disability experience, nonhuman animals and ethics.\textsuperscript{19} Significantly, much of this work comes from literary theorists who combine poststructuralist approaches to language with recent disability and animal studies scholarship on cognition and language use. Kari Weil points out that animal studies follows different tracks regarding language capacity; one is to “prove” linguistic ability of nonhuman animals, another is concerned with thinking about subjectivity that is not premised on language. This distinction aligns with approaches that attempt to give voice

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\textsuperscript{18} Peter Singer’s argument in \textit{Animal Liberation} is one such example; see Harriet McBryde Johnson’s “Unspeakable Conversations” (2003) for an excellent discussion of Singer’s work from a disability perspective.

\textsuperscript{19} Although some critical animal theorists are productively engaging with disability scholarship and drawing important connections between the two fields, the reverse is not yet true. In “Unspeakable Conversations” McBryde Johnson makes clear that she and many other disability scholars are uninterested in animal studies and in fact largely suspicious of its connection to disability scholarship, and dismissive of its ethical imperatives.
to voiceless others, versus those that try to think about the problems but also potentials of voicelessness itself. In her discussion of Temple Grandin’s autism memoir, *Thinking in Pictures*, Weil points out ways in which typically voiced humans may be “visually impaired” because they screen out much of what they see (“Killing” 88). In his own discussion of Grandin’s work and the autism experience she articulates, Wolfe argues that “what we traditionally think of as disability can be a powerful and unique form of abledness” (136).

These revaluations of disability experience, and language capacity in particular, are one important contribution of posthumanist approaches. Another is its critique of not just how we think about language, but how we use it, particularly when using it to speak about bodies that can’t speak for themselves. Wolfe asks: “When contemporary artists take nonhuman animals as their subject—our treatment of them, how we relate to them, and so on—what difference does it make that those artists choose a particular representational strategy” (145). He asks this question at the beginning of his discussion of contemporary art’s engagement with “the animal question,” using it to assess the ethical force of specific formal strategies. Ultimately Wolfe argues that an ethical engagement with nonhuman animals is one that does not expose the animal such that it is seen and known by the (human) viewer. Rather, he argues here and throughout his work that posthumanist representation that is actually committed to posthumanism (as opposed to a new brand of humanism) requires a certain unknowability in the formal features of the text itself. The viewer (or reader) cannot see/understand some things and is made to see/know that by the text.
Wolfe’s strategic slippage between seeing and knowing connects to de Lauretis’s discussion of the desire to know and see that narrative inaugurates and (usually) fulfills. As I will show in the ensuing chapters, Lessing, Haynes, and Coetzee’s texts are in line with Wolfe’s description of posthumanist texts. They expose and challenge the imperative to know and see by showing voiceless bodies without making them speak, and without exposing/denuding them; they do so both thematically and formally. Certainly this is not an easy project, nor one that each text accomplishes completely, nor without its own ethical questions and problems. But it is in line with recent posthumanist work that explicitly challenges the equation of language and the human, and considers the ethical consequences of that equation. That these 1980s texts challenge this equation is noteworthy, in that the late 20th century has emerged, post-linguistic turn, to the point that “where there is reason, there is a subject” has been replaced by “where there is language, there is a subject” (Wolfe 129). In fact, this equation now extends to narrative itself; recent work in both narrative studies and cognitive science argue that narrative is an innate human capacity, “a universal human trait” (Keen 5), and “the fundamental instrument of thought” (Turner 4).

Rather than being an ontological condition of “the human,” language in the form of representation, including literary representation specifically and evocatively, is a mechanism that has the capacity to humanize as well as to dehumanize. Judith Butler’s canon of work is founded upon Hegelian “recognition” which is the premise that we both need and desire recognition from an Other in order to be constituted – to be intelligible --

20 See Matthew K. Belmonte’s article “Human, but More So: What the Autistic Brain Tells Us about the Process of Narrative” (2008) for a critical response to this work.
and that this reciprocal exchange and intelligibility happens through language. Her more recent work has been particularly concerned with exposing the construction of the human and more specifically, the processes of dehumanization that seem so necessary to it. In *Precarious Life*, Butler’s analysis of the United States’ rhetorical approach to political enemies focuses on the ways in which a refusal of language, or the imposition of silence, are critical strategies in dehumanizing state enemies; she writes that “There is less a dehumanizing discourse at work here than a refusal that produces dehumanization as a result” (36). She goes on to state that: “When we consider the ordinary ways that we think about humanization and dehumanization, we find the assumption that those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all” (141). So, for Butler, and in this context, it is silence and a refusal of language that strategically articulates the nonhuman. Human bodies that have language are made nonhuman by the refusal to allow such language to emerge.

The flip side to this strategy of dehumanizing the ostensibly human by denying representation is humanizing the ostensibly less-than-human, through representation. Humanization via self-representation is a strategy that has been employed by any number of populations historically considered marginal to the fully human community. In her discussion of Michael Bérubé’s work, Mintz writes:

Making a link between slave narrative and the life writing of people with cognitive disabilities, Bérubé argues that self-representation serves the radical and political function of declaring a self worthy to be named—
asserting, in effect, that it does matter who speaks and that the speaker is a legitimate self—which in turn disrupts the kinds of dehumanizing ideologies that equate difference with unworthiness, inferiority, and lack.

(69)

While this recuperatory project is certainly laudable on a certain level, it fails to critique and challenge the assumptions that undergird the equation between representation and the human. This is a problem for those who can or will never self-represent. It also fails to critique the desire for revelation, revelation which is understood as necessary to ethical status.

I argue that it is not simply the “assertion” of self that makes that self “legitimate” and “worthy”; rather, it is the “making known” of the self that leads to ethical status, and that this is a problem. In her discussion of Wide Sargasso Sea, a novel which “gives voice to the previously silent madwoman,” Donaldson points out that, “By stressing the causal factors that contribute to Antoinette’s mental state, Rhys also makes it easier for readers to understand and identify with the originally enigmatic and inarticulate character” (91-92, emphasis mine). By providing knowledge to the reader, through narration that makes “comprehensible that which appears to be inherently unknowable” (Narrative Prosthesis 5), literary narratives “humanize” tenuously human bodies. What I have argued throughout this chapter, and will go on to show in the chapters that follow, is that this project is as much about, if not more, the readers’s or viewer’s desire for revelation – for knowledge – as it is about the act of conferring human status on an already human body.

What I am arguing here is that literary representation and narrative are essential to the construction of the human in their capacity to make the different, the unknown,
known. This certainly can be a productive strategy towards humanizing the already human. However, there are also a number of problems with it: first is that such an imperative fails to account for bodies that can’t speak for themselves; these bodies must then remain silent, or be spoken for, both of which put them in a precarious position in the “human” community. Second, this strategy requires revelation; it requires that bodies of difference make themselves “known.” Why must a body expose itself in order to be valued? Or, why must certain bodies expose themselves towards such ends?

Finally, a project that construes ethical status through one’s knowability is premised on the value of sameness rather than difference. To return briefly to Donaldson’s discussion of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Donaldson states that “Rhys also makes it easier for readers to understand and identify with the originally enigmatic and inarticulate character” (92, emphasis mine). This assessment exposes the choice (which is really a non-choice) readers have: to value the understandable, that which we can identify with, or to value the “enigmatic and inarticulate.” In the logic of an ethics of sameness, the latter must be traded in for the former, must be sacrificed for the former. At what cost?

In order to address that question, I want to quote at length an excerpt from Wolfe’s discussion of the convergence of animal studies and disability studies, and the liberal humanism which undergirds much of the work in both fields. This kind of humanism values self-representation and the assertion of voice as a means towards improving the ethical status of bodies of difference:

But a fundamental problem with the liberal humanist model is not so much what it wants as the price it pays for what it wants: that in its attempt to recognize the uniqueness of the other, it reinstates the normative model of
subjectivity that it insists is the problem in the first place. I am not suggesting that working to liberalize the interpretation by the courts of the Americans with Disabilities Act is a waste of time, or that lobbying to upgrade animal cruelty prosecutions from misdemeanor to felony status is a bad thing. What I am suggesting is that these pragmatic pursuits are forced to work within the purview of a liberal humanism in philosophy, politics, and law that is bound by a historically and ideologically specific set of coordinates that, because of that very boundedness, allow one to achieve certain pragmatic gains in the short run, but at the price of a radical foreshortening of a more ambitious and more profound ethical project: a new and more inclusive form of ethical pluralism that it is our charge, now, to frame. (137)

How might such an ethical pluralism proceed, and specifically, how might it proceed in the domain of literary representation? Writing in 1984, also trying to imagine an ethics which values difference, de Lauretis proposed that “the present task of women’s cinema may be not the destruction of narrative and visual pleasure, but rather the construction of another frame of reference, one in which the measure of desire is no longer just the male subject. For what is finally at stake is not so much how ‘to make visible the invisible’ as how to produce the conditions of visibility for a different social subject” (8-9). “Voiceless Bodies” argues that Lessing, Haynes, and Coetzee’s texts take up this very task, perversely “producing the conditions of visibility” for bodies that are not revealed, objectified, consumed. Rather, their texts offer up bodies which do not speak in normative language, or at all; bodies which are not revealed, neither “seen” or “known,”
neither by characters in the text, nor by readers/viewers. Bodies which remain, importantly, productively, ethically, voiceless.
CHAPTER TWO

Re-Reading Horror Stories:

Maternity, Disability, and Narrative in Doris Lessing’s *The Fifth Child*

On the doctor’s face she saw what she expected: a dark fixed stare that reflected what the woman was feeling, which was horror at the alien, rejection by the normal for what was outside the human limit. Horror of Harriet, who had given birth to Ben. (Lessing 106)

Doris Lessing’s short novel *The Fifth Child* (1988) has largely been read as a horror story and is described as such by its author (Kakutani, Lessing qtd in Rothstein). Its narrative of a young English couple, Harriet and David Lovatt, who decide to have a large family, turns from romanticized ideal into an alarming cautionary tale with the conception and birth of their fifth child, Ben. Described throughout the novel by a range of nonhuman terms – animal, alien, some kind of evolutionary throwback, and by one critic as “unmediated evil” (Yelin) – Ben’s destructive force upon the family is seemingly relentless; the novel ends with the formerly happy couple and family scattered across England, its members having been both physically and emotionally traumatized by life with Ben. Yet, if *The Fifth Child* is a horror story, it is also a mother story, a story both about and primarily told by Ben’s mother Harriet. Published in 1988, *The Fifth Child* appeared on the literary scene just one year after the publication of Marianne Hirsch’s book *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1987). In her book, Hirsch calls for more maternal stories and voices, as opposed to the stories of
wives and lovers, which she deems as preempting and indeed silencing maternal voices. The character of Harriet in *The Fifth Child* is arguably an example of the maternal voice and story that Hirsch demanded, in that Harriet’s maternity dominates the story, more so than her role as wife.  

In the 1980s, feminist theorists were actively calling for literature and critical approaches to literature that foregrounded sexual difference and women’s stories, and voices. In her treatise “Desire in Narrative,” Teresa de Lauretis re-reads the story of Oedipus, calling her reader’s attention to Medusa and the Sphinx. In her analysis, the gendering of these monsters as women and their power to disable Oedipus by their very “to-be-looked-at-ness” are signals of women’s narrative status as obstacles to be overcome and threats to the bodily integrity of men. De Lauretis proffers an alternative approach to reading the Oedipus story by asking, “what became of the Sphinx after the encounter with Oedipus on his way to Thebes? Or, how did Medusa feel seeing herself in Perseus’ mirror just before being slain?” (109). Re-reading Oedipus in this way essentially re-writes the story from multiple different perspectives – from the perspective of the “other” – the other within the text (Medusa or the Sphinx), but also the other of the feminist reader, the reader attuned to the workings of power and hegemony within and around the text.

Building upon de Lauretis’s work, Hirsch proposes another way of reading Oedipus, moving beyond an attention to the larger category of women, and asks “What earns the Sphinx, the non-maternal woman, privilege over Jocasta, the mother? Why do

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21 Although Hirsch’s project is ostensibly concerned with mothers and daughters, she argues for attention to these figures independently, as well as in connection to each other.
even feminist analyses fail to grant Jocasta as mother a voice and a plot?” (3). Hirsch convincingly argues that mother stories, even more so than women’s stories, have been both silenced and ignored and that this silencing extends from writer to reader, including feminist readers such as Helene Cixous or even Teresa de Lauretis. Writing in the 1980s, Hirsch and de Lauretis along with other feminist theorists turned their attention to women’s stories with the intention of denaturalizing and indeed politicizing narrative, sexual difference, maternity and the family from multiple and different perspectives. Hirsch points out in her analysis of de Lauretis that feminists reading simply as or for “women” may not be attuned to the voices of the “other” within women – for Hirsch, this other is the mother. For other feminists, the other has been marked by race, sexuality, nationality, class, etc. and their readings have centered on telling these stories.

If de Lauretis argues for attention to the female monsters in the story of Oedipus – Medusa and the Sphinx, those non-maternal women who are capable of disabling – and Hirsch argues for attention to the maternal – Jocasta, mother of the disabled child Oedipus – then the story I would like to both read and tell is about the mother and the monster: maternity and disability, mother and child. In this chapter I use Lessing’s novel The Fifth Child to consider the convergence of maternity, disability and narrative, both in this text and in the social-historical context from which it emerged. My analysis considers the convergence of bodies of difference – sexual difference and corporeal difference – but also the convergence of the literary and the social-historical. In what ways does this text think through the project of representing one’s self, versus representing another? Whose story is not being told, or read? And finally, how does this literary narrative codify existing social narratives? How does it resist them?
With this chapter, then, I begin my larger analysis of voiceless bodies and the convergence of feminism, disability, and posthumanism with a disability re-reading of the popular novel *The Fifth Child*. Throughout my analysis, I argue that the novel co-implicates corporeal difference and sexual difference, connecting the “horror” of disability with the “horror” of maternity. At the same time, Lessing reveals the ways in which the mother’s story is both made possible and authorized by the disabled body of her child, and by his inability to tell his own story. As such the novel functions as a pedagogical example of the problems and indeed dangers of ethically speaking for voiceless others by presenting the project of self-representation and particularly of representing sexual difference (here: maternity) as being strategically dependent on a specularization and objectification of other forms of difference. Harriet’s authority, which is suspect throughout the majority of the novel, is finally authorized in a pivotal scene that reveals Ben’s body. This revelation is simultaneously literal – he is denuded – and narrative.

Along with analyzing the strategic function of revelation within this literary narrative and as a constituent element of it, my analysis also considers the mutual implication of various forms of narrative. In this fictional story as well as in the social-historical narrative circulating at the time of its publication in the late 1980s, both child and mother are indicted in their otherness, and it is ultimately impossible to separate one from the other. This convergence of literary narrative and socio-historical narrative returns us to the questions posed by de Lauretis, Hirsch and other feminist theorists about the political and ideological motivations and effects of narrative, but builds upon their
calls to foreground sexual difference and maternity in critical approaches to narrative by incorporating corporeal difference and questions of the human.

Finally, my disability reading of this novel foregrounds the titular child antagonist’s failure at two of the markers of the human – appropriate affective behavior, and the ability to understand and employ narrative – and argues that these corporeal differences, which are recognized characteristics of autism, result in his designation as something not-quite-human by both the characters in the novel and in particular his mother, as well as most readers. As such, Lessing exposes the ways in which disability and especially cognitive forms of disability are “read” as a mark of the inhuman. Whether this exposure is intentional or a manifestation (and perhaps critique) of the collective unconscious operating in the 1980s is unclear. Regardless, critics’ enthusiastic and overwhelming reading of this novel as a horror rather than a disability story effectively relegates Ben’s corporeal difference to the status of pure literary device, ahistoricizing the text and failing to consider what his characterization has to tell us about our understanding of the human, or about the way corporeal difference functions within literary representation. My reading attempts to redress those omissions and occlusions.

The Mother Story

Never uncomplicated nor unproblematic, Harriet’s story is of her desire to be a mother, and a mother on her own terms. She refuses the social and class conventions that dictate small families, as well as refusing medical technologies and interventions during conception and at birth: “It goes without saying that the doctor had wanted Harriet in hospital. She had been adament; was disapproved of—by him” (17). Harriet’s resistance
cannot easily be identified as simple individualism and independence, however, for part of it is a very specific return to the conventional values and beliefs of a time before women’s liberation movements, before birth control and legalized abortion, before sexual liberation. When Harriet decides to go on the Pill after Ben’s birth, for both she and her husband David “it was a bleak moment, because of everything they had been, had stood for, in the past, which had made it impossible for her to be on the Pill. They had felt it deeply wrong so to tamper with the processes of Nature!” (92). Along with this belief in “nature” Harriet’s choices are also tied to a rejection of the sixties and of the social changes that this decade inaugurated, specifically as related to the family, heterosexuality and maternity. Indeed, she and David are themselves a kind of “throwback.”

Reading with attention to the mother story, as opposed to the horror story (or alongside it), it may be argued that one of Lessing’s projects in The Fifth Child is to question and reconsider the notion of the family from the maternal perspective and within the context of a post-1960s social scene. The text does this both implicitly and explicitly. The novel begins in the height of the 1960’s sexual revolution and immediately distinguishes Harriet and David as anachronistic. David’s previous girlfriend tells him “I do believe you imagine you are going to put the clock back, starting with me!” (5). Harriet is a virgin who is working as a graphic designer because it seemed “an agreeable way of spending her time until she married” (7). Harriet’s desire for a large family is based on her belief in the family itself, a belief that she perceives as being threatened by social changes; she declares: “This is what everyone wants, really, but we’ve been brainwashed out of it. People want to live like this, really” (27). Yet Harriet’s faith in the
family is challenged, both by characters within the novel, including Harriet’s own mother, and by the third-person narrator.

These perspectives converge when the narrator declares that Harriet’s mother “knew the cost, in every way, of a family, even a small one” (11) a remark which is immediately followed by a scene in which the mother confronts Harriet and David about their plans for a large family. *The Fifth Child’s* narrator is omniscient, but selective, and intermittently asserts opinionated statements of its own which cannot be clearly identified as sincere or sarcastic. When Harriet and David abandon their plans to wait till David has worked a few years before getting pregnant, Harriet asks him “And how are we going to pay for it all if I am pregnant?” At this point the narrator breaks into the narration:

Quite so: how were they? Harriet indeed became pregnant on that rainy evening in their bedroom. They had many bad moments, thinking of the slenderness of their resources, and of their own frailty. For at such times, when material support is not enough, it is as if *we* are being judged. (11, emphasis mine)

In this short passage, the narrator aligns itself simultaneously against (“they”) and with (“we”) Harriet, a shifting perspective that makes it difficult to assess the narrator’s stance towards Harriet, as well as Harriet (and David’s) own motivations. Indeed, Harriet’s desire to be a mother is suspect on multiple levels, a suspicion that continues throughout the text.

Recent critical attention to *The Fifth Child* has made sense of the novel’s presentation of maternity and the family by reading it as necessary to a larger critique of and challenge to the idealized family model (Rubenstein) and further, as a “corrective
vision that modifies the cultural ideal” of “the mother/child story” (Robbins 95). Other critics writing on *The Fifth Child* have also noted its engagement with ideas about maternity and the family, although often this analysis has been subtended to more substantive discussions of the novel’s socio-historical engagements and their connection to the “horror” of Ben. Louise Yelin, Susan Watkins, and Richard Brock, for instance, have all read *The Fifth Child* within the political-historical context of 1980s Thatcherism and its conservative and reactionary stance to perceived threats to the nation, both from abroad and at home. Each of them addresses maternity and/or the family in their analyses, but only insomuch as the maternal or the familial strategically functions as part of a larger critique of the nation or its liberal values.

Readers vary in their assessment of Lessing’s articulation of nationalistic rhetoric versus her resistance to it, variation that is made possible by the instability of the narrator’s perspective. However, a significant point of convergence comes with critical interpretations of the character of Ben. Ben is understood as an “absolute” or “ineffable other” (Brock 10; Yelin 104), a character who “occupies the figurative borderlands between the real and the fantastic” (Rubenstein 62) and whose primary narrative function is to personify various racial, social or national others perceived as invading the English national-as-familial space in the latter decades of the 20th century. In these readings, the “horror” of Ben is fundamentally tied to specific racial and national horror stories being articulated in England in the 1980s. Regardless of whether and to what degree critics read the novel as being aligned with, exposing, or critiquing such nationalistic ideologies, all of them understand Ben’s character in two important ways: first, as a fantastical incursion into what is otherwise largely a realistic novel, and second, as thoroughly objectified, a
character whose difference functions solely to service the novel’s various pedagogical objectives. Similarly, in readings that foreground maternity, Ben is always-already understood as an object: a character who sits necessarily outside the “real”; a fantastical character whose function is to “interrogate the real” (Rubenstein 62) and “break the frame” of the cultural ideal of motherhood and the family, and going along with this, of genre itself (Robbins 95).

The question of genre (is this a horror story? a mother story? realism? Gothic?) is important to consider here for a number of reasons, not the least of which being that genre is an ongoing concern in the corpus of Lessing scholarship. Indeed, Lessing’s uneasy relation to realism and critics’ inability to clearly classify her work has frequently been the focus of critical attention, as a recent essay collection titled *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings* (2009) addresses and alludes to in its very title. While many scholars understand *The Fifth Child* to be largely realistic with intermittent elements of the fantastical functioning to serve the text’s larger socio-political allegorical purposes (those elements all centering on Ben), some recent work (Watkins, Gamallo) has considered the “problem” of genre in this text as indicative of and strategic to Lessing’s ongoing concern with the “problem” of maternity, and have connected it with the Gothic genre.

Feminist theorizations of the Gothic genre have, of course, showed the strategic interrelation between monstrosity and the maternal, and more specifically the horror of the maternal body. Writing at roughly the same time as de Lauretis and Hirsch, Claire Kahane’s essay “The Gothic Mirror” (1985) is itself a re-reading of Gothic from the perspective of the maternal (as opposed to the perspective of the daughter, or the Oedipal infraction) and in particular “dead or displaced mothers” which, Kahane argues, have
largely been ignored in theorizations of the Gothic. Rather than the Oedipal plot, Kahane declares “what I see repeatedly locked into the forbidden center of the Gothic which draws me inward is the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront” (336). She goes on to describe more recent Gothic works in which “the problematics of femininity is thus reduced to the problematics of the female body, perceived as antagonistic to the sense of self, as therefore freakish” and further that pregnancy and childbirth are “primary Gothic metaphors” (343, 345). Like the dead or evil mother of earlier Gothic texts who is frequently associated with a younger female’s imprisonment in a literal house, in more recent texts the woman’s own body, via childbirth and then maternity, becomes the house of imprisonment.

Reading The Fifth Child as a kind of neogothic text does seem to make sense and productively aligns the horror story and the mother story. Yet, while there is indeed an increasing level of discomfort and exhaustion that pervades the Lovatt home with each of Harriet’s pregnancies and births, these are largely understood by Harriet and David to be the fault of social and economic constraints (income, childcare, time) rather than the family or more specifically the maternal, or the female body. Significantly, it is only with the fifth child that Harriet’s pregnant body seems to violently turn against her and indeed, it is not her body which imprisons her so much as the body within, and a very specific body at that. Harriet distinguishes Ben from the other children repeatedly, “muttering that this new foetus was poisoning her,” this “new being, unlike anything she had known before” (32, 36). In this way, The Fifth Child fails to easily fit into a Gothic framework. Kahane argues that in traditional Gothic, the action is constituted by the child’s struggle
to separate from the maternal, or, more recently, the woman’s struggle to separate from her own maternity. Neither of these are the case in this novel; rather than child rejecting mother, or woman rejecting maternity, it is the child who is explicitly presented as the villain or antagonist; it is the child who must be escaped from; and in this novel, it is not just any child, for there are four preceding Lovatt children who are presented as neither villainous nor “other.” Maternity writ large is not the “problem” or horror here; rather, it is the horror of mothering one very specific (kind of) child.

Rather than simply accepting the “horror” of maternal bodies and assigning them to a fantastical space that has no bearing on the real, feminist theorists take seriously the tropes of woman as space to be escaped from, the maternal as silenced voice, and the horror of maternity. Kahane, de Lauretis, Hirsch, and other feminist theorists have re-read representations of the female body in order to consider how those representations inform and are informed by cultural ideas about sexual difference and how the work of narrative and genre is neither objective nor ahistorical, but grounded in the specificity of the female body. So, too, The Fifth Child demands re-reading, and a re-reading that takes the horror of the fifth child’s body seriously, rather than accepting him and it as simply unexplainable, fantastical, representative of the ”absolute other.” He may well function within the novel as an allegorical tool, fantastical incursion, or metaphorical means to an end, but his characterization also explicitly draws from a 1980s social-historical context that included an emerging but still nascent disability consciousness.

People with disabilities have often been at the center of narrative, yet for the most part somewhat invisibly, as their representations have largely been ignored by readers and critics. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder show that narrative has historically
included a “plethora of representations” of people with disabilities and a “perpetual circulation of their images” (Narrative Prosthesis 6). Yet this overabundance of literary representation has not produced an equivalent critical or social attention to disability; rather, such representations are largely understood as producing “uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability’s cultural resonance” (Extraordinary 9). Analyzing the story of Oedipus from a disability perspective, Mitchell and Snyder argue that “while disability often marks a protagonist’s difference and is the impetus to narrate a story in the first place, a complex disability subjectivity is not developed in the ensuing narrative” (Narrative 10). Disability strategically functions to make stories happen; it is not the subject of the story, nor of most critical approaches.

De Lauretis makes a similar observation in her answer to the questions: “what became of the Sphinx after the encounter with Oedipus on his way to Thebes? Or, how did Medusa feel seeing herself in Perseus’ mirror just before being slain?” She writes:

> but the point is, no one knows offhand and, what is more, it seldom occurs to anyone to ask . . . Medusa and the Sphinx, like the other ancient monsters, have survived inscribed in hero narratives, in someone else’s story, not their own; so they are figures or markers of positions—places and topoi—through which the hero and his story move to their destination and to accomplish meaning. (109)

Feminist theorists’ project, then, has been to show how Medusa and the Sphinx as specifically female monsters function to make the story happen; within the narrative, their
stories are neither told, nor sought after. They are objects within the narrative, not subjects of their own. In de Lauretis’s reading it is the feminine that is objectified and made monstrous. She, like other feminist theorists, reads Medusa’s and the Sphinx’s monstrosity as a stand-in for sexual difference.

The growing field of disability scholarship both builds upon and complicates feminist scholarship, using it as a critical foundation, as in Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s assertion that “Feminism’s insistence that standpoint shapes politics; that identity, subjectivity, and the body are cultural constructs to be questioned; and that all representation is political comprise the theoretical milieu in which I want to examine disability” (Extraordinary 21). At the same time, disability scholars have called feminism to account for its own silencings. Mitchell and Snyder convincingly argue that “While disabled populations are firmly entrenched on the outer margins of social power and cultural value, the disabled body also serves as the raw material out of which other socially disempowered communities make themselves visible” (Body and Physical Difference 6). While this “making visible” is a function that has historically been born by the feminine and maternal body, it has also been made visible by various other bodies marked as “other” including disabled bodies. The Fifth Child is certainly implicated in this narrative pattern, for if The Fifth Child makes the maternal body visible, it is a visibility that depends on the raw material of Ben. Although ostensibly a mother story, much of the story that is told in the novel is about Ben, but it is told by Harriet, and is concerned with mapping and fixing Ben’s difference as it operates as a force upon the
family and upon Harriet. His difference functions to make her story happen; it is not the subject of the story in its own right.\textsuperscript{22}

**The Other Story**

Ben is different: this difference defines him as a character, and is constitutive to the larger narrative. From the moment Harriet’s pregnancy with Ben begins, the narrative shifts from a concern with Harriet and David’s desire for and struggles with “traditional” family life in what is by now 1970s England, to a struggle between mother, child, and the rest of the world. Harriet begins the narrative as an authority figure and indeed, kind of antagonist, one who is intent on forcing her personal desires on her extended family and society writ large, despite the burdens and costs such desires engender. She is also intent on authoring her own narrative of herself, one in which maternity features prominently. Following Ben’s birth and throughout the majority of the remaining narrative, Harriet struggles with both that narrative and her authorship of it. Her life no longer fits the script she desires, that being the good mother of a large, happy family. But she also loses her status as an authoritative (maternal) voice: family, friends, and doctors do not believe, or do not want to listen to, her story, a story which now depends on her narration of Ben’s difference.

\textsuperscript{22} *Ben in the World* (2004) is the sequel to *The Fifth Child*, published 12 years later. In it, Ben narrates the majority of the story. Frequently compared to *Frankenstein* by reviewers, the novel shows Ben moving throughout the world of humans, alternately attempting to fit in with them and being rejected by them for his animality. One of the narrative threads involves Ben being picked up by a documentary crew, who want to use him to make a film about evolutionary throwbacks. While issues of representation, self-representation and the human clearly continue to be prescient in this later text, because Harriet appears only in brief flashback, with Ben primarily and internally narrating his experiences, the novel is outside the bounds of this chapter.
Harriet describes Ben as being “of a different substance” (50) from her other children. It is this “difference” that prompts his definition as “alien” (50) “troll,” “goblin” (56) and the multiple other inhuman descriptors leveled at him by his parents and particularly Harriet. These descriptions begin from the moment he is born:

He opened his eyes and looked straight up into his mother’s face. They were focused greeny-yellow eyes, like lumps of soapstone. [Harriet] had been waiting to exchange looks with the creature who, she has been sure, had been trying to hurt her, but there was no recognition there. And her heart contracted with pity for him: poor little beast, his mother disliking him so much . . . But she heard herself say nervously, though she tried to laugh, “He’s like a troll, or goblin or something.” And she cuddled him, to make up. But he was stiff and heavy. (49)

Harriet’s inability to convincingly or credibly explain Ben’s difference makes her unreliable, to other characters in the text as well as to readers, who get no help from the narrator in adjudicating Ben’s difference, or Harriet’s narration of it. A voice that may be Harriet’s but also may be the narrator’s asks: “But did he know himself afflicted? Was he, in fact? What was he?” (67). Yelin declares that “the only credible interpretation of Ben is that he cannot be explained at all or that he is an eruption of unmediated evil or ineffable otherness” (104). This extreme otherness certainly explains The Fifth Child’s categorization as a horror story. In The Philosophy of Horror, Noël Carroll theorizes the horror genre, explaining that it depends upon a monster: “[Monsters] are un-natural relative to a culture’s conceptual scheme of nature. They do not fit the scheme; they violate it. Thus, monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively
threatening. They are threats to common knowledge” (34). Given this definition, readings of *The Fifth Child* as a horror story make sense; Ben is a threat to common knowledge within the text. He can not be explained by characters’ nor by readers. But I would argue that Ben’s difference *can* be explained, and interpreted as something other than the fantastical or horrible; his difference can be read as what Garland Thomson calls “corporeal difference” – the difference of disability (7).

Many of the behaviors that Ben exhibits are identified characteristics of autism, a cognitive disability that has been increasingly identified and studied in the last few decades. That Ben is understood by his family, his author and most of his readers as an example of “horror” rather than of disability is not inconsistent with the social and representational history of autism. Indeed, the 1989 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines autism as “a condition in which a person is morbidly self-absorbed and out of contact with reality.” By 2006, this definition had been amended to “impaired communication and social interaction and restricted activities and interests.” The evolution of this definition from moralistic indictment to somewhat more neutral and descriptive terminology reflects ongoing advances in societal attention to and acceptance of people with disabilities, and autism specifically, as does the recent publication and critical attention to texts such as Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), a novel which is narrated by its autistic protagonist.

In *Autism and Representation* (2008), Mark Osteen lists the three generally agreed upon areas of impairment: “social interaction, language acquisition and use, [and] ‘imaginative’ interests and behaviors” (9). Children with autism usually do not communicate normally, ranging from a complete lack of language, to limited language
interaction that is characterized by echolalia (autisticsociety.org). Ben is a late talker, and when he does begin to talk, he echoes his brothers and sisters’ statements. “Hello, Ben” one would say. ‘Hello,’ Ben replied, carefully handing back exactly what he had been given. ‘How are you, Ben?’ Helen asked. ‘How are you?’ he replied. ‘No’ said Helen, now you must say, ‘I’m very well, thank you’ or, ‘I’m fine.’ Ben stared while he worked it out” (68). Ben also does not understand social interactions and expectations, failing to understand or exhibit what is understood to be appropriate behavior. He watches the other children watch TV, gauging them for their reactions, “for he needed to know what reactions were appropriate. If they laughed, then, a moment later, he contributed a loud, hard, unnatural-sounding laugh” (68-69). Beyond this inability to summon the correct social reactions, Ben is uninterested in personal connection with his siblings and parents.

Ben’s failure to exhibit appropriate affective behavior and in particular to show affection for and desire affection from his family, and Harriet especially, mark him as completely other. He ignores Harriet and refuses to show affection towards her: “Never, not once, did he subside into a loving moment” (56). He also does not seem to desire affection from her: “The day he stood alone, by himself, without holding on, he roared out his triumph. All the other children had laughed, chuckled, and wanted to be loved, admired, praised, on reaching this moment of achievement. This one did not” (9). In fact, in these differences he is different not only from the other “normal” children in the novel but also from the other disabled character in the novel, his cousin Amy, who is described as “this other afflicted one” (67). Although Amy is also physically different, her affective behaviors and participation in the family in some ways mitigate her corporeal difference, and she is valued above Ben: “Her head was too big, her body too squat, but she was full
of love and kisses and everyone adored her” (66). Harriet’s sister declares, “I’d rather have poor Amy any day” (56). Interestingly, by frequently setting up comparisons and particularly contrasts between Ben and his cousin Amy, whom the reader is told has Down’s Syndrome, the novel both explicitly and indirectly raises the question that Ben might be disabled, even as it repeatedly refuses that characterization.

Ian Hacking narrates many of these differences (and draws on the same comparison between autism and Down’s Syndrome, and between autism and alienism) in a recent book review, and while he claims to be describing the autistic child, indeed, he could be describing Ben:

Very often physically healthy (though there is a high incidence of other problems) he – and it is usually he – just does not respond. It is not merely that he does not learn to speak until years after his peers, and then inadequately. He has no affect; he never snuggles. He is obsessed with things and order, but does not play with toys in any recognisable way, and certainly does not play with other children. He mercilessly repeats a few things you say. With no comprehension. He has violent tantrums, not the usual sort of thing, but screaming, hitting, biting, smashing. This alternates with a placid gentleness, maybe even a smile – but not really for you.

Serious Down’s syndrome is pretty bad too, but despite all the difficulties, physical and mental, there is a loving little child there. That is what is so dreadful about core autism: your child is an alien. (“What is Tom”)

Hacking’s assertion “your child is an alien” is echoed in David’s description of Ben:

“He’s probably just dropped in from Mars. He’s going to report on what he’s found down
here” (74). The word and terms for “alien” appear over and over in the novel, and also in current cultural discourses over autism. Hacking foregrounds the comparison between autism and aliens and considers its functions as a rhetorical strategy in his recent article “Humans, Aliens & Autism” (2009). The overall aim of this work is to pursue the following question: “What does the metaphor of the alien, insofar as it’s connected to autism, show about humanity?” (45). His discussion considers a number of memoirs and self-representations in which people with autism describe themselves as feeling like aliens, or where family members describe their autistic child or sibling as alien-like. These texts span the 1990s and 2000s and overwhelmingly employ the alien metaphor as a descriptive rather than pejorative association; this is, as Hacking notes, a relatively recent development that is in line with an increase in visibility and accordant social acceptance over the past twenty years: “Hardly anyone had heard of autism before 1988 . . . today every reader knows about autism” (“Humans” 46). Significantly, in this novel published in 1988, Ben is always described as “alien”; he does not speak for or about himself, and his characterization as an alien is made hysterically by Harriet when speaking with the doctor, and hostilely by David, whose characterization of Ben as a Martian reporting back on their behavior is illustrative of his understanding of the relationship between Ben and his parents: “It’s either him or us” (74).

A third difference is Ben’s inability to understand or employ narrative in order to “make believe.” Narrative impairment is one of the three main “symptoms” of autism. Matthew Belmonte goes so far as to argue that autistics’ communication and social impairments are “consequences of disrupted narrative” (168). Narrative impairment in this context is essentially “a weak tendency to bind local details into global precepts”
(Belmonte 169). Translated to the world of the novel, Ben does not understand stories, only events. For instance, after watching a television program, Harriet asks him:

“What was the story of that film, Ben?”

“Story.” He tried the word, his thick clumsy voice tentative. And his eyes were on her face, to discover what she wanted.

“What happened in that film, the one you’ve just seen?”


He cannot “read” fictional stories, just as he cannot read social situations and expectations.

The connection between being human and being able to tell and interpret stories is one that has been asserted time and again; Ben cannot understand stories and cannot tell them; this, along with his affective differences, challenges his human status. Perhaps even more significant than Ben’s inability to understand or tell stories writ large are the implications of this failure in terms of self-representation; Judith Butler argues that “those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all” (Precarious 141). Ben’s inability to understand or tell stories, including his own, makes him vulnerable to being treated as “less than human” and indeed described as something other than human throughout the text. It also appears to require Harriet tell his story.

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23 See H. Porter Abbott’s The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative (2002); Hayden White’s Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect (1999); and Matthew K. Belmonte’s recent article on the connection between narrative, the human, and autism.
Yet the story that Harriet tells about Ben’s difference is not a foregone conclusion. From the very beginning of Ben’s life and throughout, Harriet’s narration of his difference to doctors, teachers, neighbors, and her own family is met with suspicion. Harriet’s narration of Ben alternates depending on her audience; to the family doctor, she desperately describes Ben’s difference, literally questioning whether he is human in one encounter (105), and is disbelieved. Her goal in this scene is to get Ben medicated so that she can successfully mother him as well as the rest of the family. To family members and friends, she claims he is normal, and again, is disbelieved. At one point a cousin asks:

“What is wrong with him? Is he a mongol?”

“Down’s syndrome,” said Harriet. “No one calls it mongol now. But no, he’s not.”

“What’s wrong with him, then?”

“Nothing at all,” said Harriet airily. “As you can see for yourself.” (61)

To admit that there is something wrong with Ben is to admit that she is not in control of her life, not authoring her own story. When Amy’s mother Sarah says “My God, Harriet, we’ve been dealt a bad hand, haven’t we?” Harried replies “‘I suppose so’ . . . but she was rejecting this submission to being a victim of fate. Sarah, yes; with her marital problems and her mongol child—yes. But she, Harriet, in the same boat?” (66). Harriet’s narration of Ben’s difference – what it is, what it isn’t, and to whom – is informed by her desire to narrate her own story, and specifically, that of her motherhood. To admit that Ben is disabled is to admit that she is a victim and not the author of her story. It is also to admit that Harriet’s own “story” about maternity and traditional family is open to revision.
Where or how might Lessing’s novel be situated within the historical trajectory of narrative representations of disability? This is a question that is perhaps inappropriate to ask of a novel that has primarily been read as a horror story, with disability situated on the margins, as in the character of Amy, or in explicit absentia, as in Harriet’s repeated assertions that Ben is not disabled. However, disability is rarely a central and explicit concern of any fictional narrative and the project of disability theorists has largely been one of exposing the unremitting yet unremarked upon presence of disabled figures upon which plots and characters are built. A canonical example from feminist literary criticism is instructive here: The image of Bertha Mason in her attic prison provides a model for ways of re-reading characters that were originally characterized as mad, monstrous or horrific, and is echoed in The Fifth Child, in a scene in which Ben is kept in his upstairs room while guests and visitors congregate on the first floor. Their socializing is occasionally interrupted by the sound of his yelling from above.

In his discussion of “Disability and Narrative,” Michale Bérubé argues that:

In one world, cognitive disability remains irreducibly alien, and self-representation depends on one’s capacity to distinguish oneself from those incapable of self-representation; in another world, cognitive disability is part of a larger narrative that includes an indeterminable number of characters, only some of whom have the capacity to narrate but all of whom shed light on the mechanics of narrative and narration. (576)

Indeed, in the world of this text we see, going along with Bérubé’s first point, a literal association between disability and the alien, with self-representation largely being a
project of defining one’s self in relation to an other – here, a mother representing herself by the process of representing her child.

Significantly, her narrative of his difference is frequently understood by other characters to be indicative of Harriet’s difference rather than Ben’s. One psychiatrist tells her, “The problem is not with Ben, but with you. You don’t like him very much” (103). Alternately described as “hyperactive” and “funny,” other characters’ readings of Ben are often at odds with Harriet’s reading of him, and indeed, at times the reader herself wonders whether Harriet’s observations about Ben are symptoms of an extreme postpartum depression or mental disorder. When Harriet leaves the psychiatrist’s office after questioning whether Ben is indeed human, she looks back: “On the doctor’s face she saw what she expected: a dark fixed stare that reflected what the woman was feeling, which was horror at the alien, rejection by the normal for what was outside the human limit. Horror of Harriet, who had given birth to Ben” (106). Harriet understands this look of horror to be connected to the horror of Ben. It could also be read as the doctor’s horror at being confronted by a woman who is convinced her child is a “throwback” to another kind of species. Neither the novel nor narrator confirm either reading.

This narrative instability is heightened by the novel’s point-of-view, which enters into the minds of each of the main characters at various points throughout the novel but remains resolutely outside the minds of characters like the doctor, and, most significantly, outside the mind of Ben. As such, readers must rely on characters’ reactions to Ben’s behavior, and Harriet’s thoughts and statements about him. This narrative instability reinforces Harriet’s status as a suspect narrator, a suspectness which is based in large part on her association with Ben, but which began in the first half of the novel, and was
premised on Harriet’s ideas about maternity and women. This narrative instability also reinforces the reader’s desire for a revelation, a revelation that is long withheld but ultimately supplied in a pivotal scene where Ben’s difference is finally confirmed and hyperbolically displayed.

It is not until the novel’s epiphanic scene at the institution to which Ben has been committed that Harriet’s narrative is finally confirmed, and this confirmation comes with a visual display of the pathologized “other.” A guilt-ridden Harriet goes to retrieve him after David and their parents have arranged for Ben’s institutionalization, an institutionalization which consists of solitary confinement, physical restraints and extreme medication that will most certainly result in Ben’s death.24 This institution houses human children who have essentially been identified as somehow not-quite-human and therefore disposable. Such “disposability” illustrates the speciesism, and implications of that speciesism for some humans, that Cary Wolfe identifies as underlying Western subjectivity and sociality. He writes: “the full transcendence of the ‘human’ requires the sacrifice of the ‘animal’ and the animalistic, which in turn makes possible a symbolic economy in which we can engage in what Derrida will call a ‘noncriminal putting to death’ of other humans as well by marking them as animal” (6).

Ben’s failure to fully embody “the human” threatens the human community in which he lives – doctors, teachers and neighbors are unsettled and disturbed by his differences. But it also threatens his specific human family; their full transcendence, their capacity to be

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happy and successful within what Butler describes as “normative schemes of intelligibility” is disrupted by his presence. The idealized Lovatt family cannot exist with Ben in it; therefore, Ben must sacrificed.

Butler explains that “normative schemes of intelligibility establish what will and will not be human, what will be a livable life, what will be a grievable death” (Precarious 146) and indeed it is the metaphorization of Ben’s corporeal difference as “alien” and therefore not human which authorizes his “noncriminal putting to death” and not only his death, but the deaths of a whole host of children marked as other. Historian Janice Brockley’s research into the murder of two adolescent boys in New York City in 1939 provides a “real” rather than fictional example: Raymond Rapouille and Jerome Greenfield both had cognitive disabilities. Both boys were killed by their fathers, neither of whom served any jail time for their actions. The men justified the killings, and were absolved by the larger society, because the boys’ lives were understood as “not worth living” (Brockley 301) and their deaths described as mercy killings. As Brockley points out, this depends on “a set of assumptions about what constituted an acceptable life” (301). Importantly, it is not only assumptions about what constitutes an acceptable life for the individual (here, the boys) but also about what constitutes an acceptable life for the family. In the Raymond Repouille case, both the father and city social workers tried to have Raymond institutionalized, which his mother resisted. She was then denounced by the social worker and the judge adjudicating the case for neglecting her other children by continuing to care for Raymond. An “acceptable life” for the Repouille family appeared to require Raymond’s removal from it. Harriet’s parents and David use a similar logic when they argue to convince Harriet that Ben must be institutionalized; her mother tells
her “The other children . . . they’re suffering. You’re so involved with it, girl, that you don’t see it” (73). It is this evocation of the children’s suffering, and David’s “pleading, suffering” look that convinces Harriet.

The rhetoric of seeing and not-seeing, and suffering in particular, imbues the novel’s pivotal scene at the institution. As Harriet passes through the ward “she was able to see that every bed or cot held an infant or small child in whom the human template had been wrenched out of pattern, sometimes horribly, sometimes slightly” (81). A voyeuristic and detailed description of these “inhuman” infants and children follows; their failure to fit into the “human template” makes their lives unlivable and their deaths ungrievable. And yet the mother here does grieve. As she stares at Ben’s unconscious body, “Her heart was hurting as it would for one of her own, real children, for Ben looked more ordinary than she had ever seen him, with those hard cold alien eyes of his closed” (83). In this moment, Harriet is able to imagine Ben as “ordinary,” not alien, and as if he were “one of her own, real children.” Significantly, it is this moment of imaginative identification of Ben as being like her other children that turns on Harriet’s maternal feelings for Ben, along with his momentary vulnerability: “Pathetic: she had never seen him as pathetic before” (83). At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, this scene also provides confirmation of Ben’s otherness, his extreme otherness – “None of us have ever seen anything like it” (83) the staff tells her – such that Harriet’s narrative is finally authorized both within and outside of the text. The scene serves as a visual spectacle that de Lauretis, citing Barthes, describes in her discussion as “an Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end)” (de Lauretis 107). The scene provides simultaneously a revelation of Ben’s vulnerable, naked body and also “the revelation” of
Harriet’s narrative of Ben. The revelation and visualization of Ben’s naked body – his “denuding” – makes him “knowable” to Harriet, and “knowable” to the reader, such that Harriet’s author/ity is confirmed.

Significantly, here, it is not the female body that is revealed or undressed but the disabled body. Whereas Laura Mulvey famously theorized the male gaze in her essay on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), a gaze which de Lauretis cites in her discussion of the Sphinx and Medusa, Garland Thomson has theorized the “stare” that is leveled at disabled bodies. Narrative provides the stage for both of these spectatorial looks, both kinds of revealing. And although it is Ben’s body that is literally revealed, both he and Harriet are rhetoricized as visual spectacles throughout the text. Upon the birth of Ben, Harriet asks herself “I wonder what the mother would look like, the one who would welcome this—alien” (50, my emphasis). It is both child and mother who are indicted in this otherness and in its specularization; it is impossible to separate one from the other. While Harriet does much of the looking and seeing she is also a visual object; in the institution scene, Lessing writes, “The girl was looking curiously at Harriet, as if she were part of the phenomenon that was Ben, of the same nature” (83). Both child and mother are gazed upon in this critical scene at the institution. Indeed, the novel’s co-implication of sexual difference and corporeal difference, of maternity and monstrosity, of mother and child, reinforces the connection between the female body and the disabled body. Arguing for the symbiosis of disability and feminist theory, Garland Thomson points out that “both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority”
The Fifth Child is exemplary of the ways in which narrative depends upon the display of bodies of difference, and how these bodies can not be easily disassociated from each other: the feminine body, the disabled body, the maternal body, the child’s body.

**Narrative and the Social-Historical**

The co-implication of bodies of difference within narratives such as The Fifth Child is echoed in the co-implication of social history and narrative. This co-implication is obvious in the evolution of disability stories as well as mother stories, and, significantly, in critical approaches to them. Hirsch’s work on 19th century novels and Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s on 20th century women writers shows narrative bearing the weight of but also talking back to history and social forces. Women writers in the latter decades of the 20th century have consistently used narrative to critique heterosexual and other imperatives, often in tandem with ongoing and emerging social and political conversations. Writing in the 1970s and 1980s, African-American women’s fiction such as that of Toni Morrison built upon contemporary political and intellectual movements for women’s and racial minorities’ empowerment, as well as evolving understandings within feminism of the interrelated nature of social difference. Her novels reflect this in, among other things, their approach to disability, which appears both as a marker of power and as a physical manifestation of historical forces of power and oppression.

In Writing Beyond the Ending, DuPlessis identifies Lessing as a writer who “use[s] narrative to make critical statements about the psychosexual and sociocultural
construction of women” (4) particularly in Lessing’s consistent critique of the romance plot and in some of her more speculative fiction. Indeed, in *The Fifth Child* the mother story ultimately disrupts the heterosexual union; Harriet’s decision to mother Ben and retrieve him from the institution drives Harriet and David apart. It also disrupts idealized notions of maternity or the maternal instinct; Harriet is not drawn to her child and in fact desires escape from him. Her choice to continue mothering him is presented as exactly that: choice, not instinct. In this way Harriet herself undermines her earlier pronouncements about the naturalness of families and maternity itself; she also undermines her own maternal status, first by rejecting her child, then by accepting and rescuing what is understood to be not only damaged but in fact dangerous goods.

The novel is also useful as an indicator of contemporary concerns about women’s sexual freedom, maternity, and the demands of children. De Lauretis explains that within narrative, plots do not directly reflect a given social order, but rather emerge out of the conflicts and contradictions of different social orders as they succeed or replace one another; she explains that “the difficult coexistence of the different orders of historical reality in the long period of transition from one to the other is precisely what is manifested in the tensions of plots and in the transformations or dispersions of motifs and plot types” (113). Here, the plot of mother-child conflict, of a mother who regrets having her child and of a child who is a destructive force on the heteronormative family as well as society at large, may be read into the Anglo-American social context of the 1980s backlash against Second Wave feminism, fears over women’s access to birth control and abortion, and growing concerns over identifying and aborting disabled fetuses.
The steady progress of women’s access to reproductive self-determination and of advances in reproductive medical technology, which began with the legalization of birth control and abortion in the 1960s and 1970s, has been attended by increased surveillance of and suspicion about maternal bodies. This suspicion and surveillance has often been justified by appeals to fetal health and safety and a growing fetal rights rhetoric which emerged in the 1980s. In *The Fifth Child* Lessing writes: “the eighties, the barbarous eighties were getting into their stride” (107) and indeed, in 1987, Emily Martin’s study *The Woman in the Body* identified an emerging American medical discourse that pitted maternal and fetal bodies against each other, envisioning pregnant bodies and vaginal canals as threats and presenting the obstetrician as the fetus’s “ally” and protector against its mother (Martin 64). Published in 1988, Lessing’s novel presents its reader with a mother who believes that the fetus she carries is poisoning her; her concerns are dismissed by her obstetrician, however, who worries instead about the effect of the mother’s behavior on the fetus’s health. Twenty years after *The Woman in the Body* and *The Fifth Child*’s publication, pregnant women and their fetuses are still frequently conceptualized as distinct bodies whose interests are at odds.

Fetal rights rely upon a belief that women and fetuses have separate interests and that fetuses deserve protection from maternal interests that might butt up against their own. Much feminist work has been devoted to “reading” this social-political discussion with attention to the mother story, to show how women and particularly pregnant women are characterized as always-already suspicious, dangerous, and perhaps even
“monstrous.” But recent work by a range of feminist scholars reveals that it is no longer only maternal bodies that are suspect – fetal bodies are now also suspicious and in some cases threatening. Often the “threat” posed by fetuses is understood to be the result of maternal misbehavior, but in the case of hereditary or indeterminate defect or disability, the fetuses are envisioned as being inherently threatening; in these instances, mothers are called upon to protect themselves, their families and, accordingly, society from their fetuses.

In *The Fifth Child* we see each of these social fears at work: Harriet is suspect to some degree, if not always by her reader then certainly within the world of the novel. She is suspicious because she does not “like” her child. But she is also suspicious because she chooses to keep Ben, to the detriment of herself, her marriage, and her other “normal” children. Her decision to save Ben from the institution where he was destined to die functions as a parallel to a woman’s choice not to abort a fetus that has been diagnosed as disabled, a choice that is deemed irresponsible. That judgment is premised on the interests of the rest of the family – the husband and children who are not disabled – and in the novel, Harriet argues that she has been judged a criminal because she refused those interests: “Around and around and around: if I had let him die, then all of us, so many

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people, would have been happy, but I could not do it, and therefore…” (131). Harriet’s criminality is indeed trifold: she does not want or feel for her child the way a mother should; she does not refuse her child for the sake of her other children and marriage the way a mother should; and finally, she is ultimately held responsible for Ben’s existence and indeed is categorized as “other” and “less than human” by literal association: “On the doctor’s face she saw what she expected: a dark fixed stare that reflected what the woman was feeling, which was horror at the alien, rejection by the normal for what was outside the human limit. Horror of Harriet, who had given birth to Ben” (106). If *The Fifth Child* is a horror story that uses the disabled child’s body as its ground, it is also about the horror of maternity, in its conception and attendant choices.

Reading *The Fifth Child* as simultaneously a mother story and a disability story, with attention to both mother and child exposes how the mother’s story in this text is made possible by the body of the disabled child: it provides the conditions for the mother’s imperative to “tell.” But this maternal story and voice can not be accepted uncritically; in her critique of feminist theorists of the 1970s and 1980s, Hirsch calls them to account for their “silencing of the maternal” so as to “inscrib[e] the female into the male plot” (4). Here we can see the mother’s voice assuming and subsuming the child’s – the conditions for her story are found in his inability to tell his own. The mother’s story is not immediately authorized, however, and certainly the instability and uncertainty that attends it are what drives much of the narrative. Yet in the end her author/ity is confirmed, and this confirmation is absolutely dependent upon a specularization of the disabled body.
This specular moment draws on at two elements of narrative revelation. While Harriet’s story is suspect for large parts of the novel within its fictional world, as readers we are directed and able to identify with her maternal voice because we, like she, want to know the unknowable. The power of our and her desire to know, and the power of Lessing’s narrative to show, are the pivot points of this mother story. But reading with attention to the unknowable, that which is displayed for us, put on display, raises discomforting questions about the conditions or environment upon which the mother story depends. It would certainly be possible to read *The Fifth Child* as two separate stories and to juxtapose maternity and disability, mother and child, as separate and antagonistic narratives. This is an issue that extends beyond this novel and into the fields of feminist and disability theory. Yet, in this story as well as in the social and narrative history of maternity and disability, both child and mother, voiceless and voiced, are indicted in their otherness and it is impossible to separate one from the other.

Of the texts “Voiceless Bodies” analyzes, *The Fifth Child* is the least explicitly concerned with its own representational ethics. A reading such as the one I have just outlined, one which foregrounds Ben and understands him as “different” as opposed to monstrous, is in many ways a reading that goes against the grain of the novel’s own self-presentation. In the chapters that follow, I discuss texts that are explicitly engaged with their own representational stance, and clearly uncomfortable with the project of “speaking for” even as they attempt to do so. Lessing’s text is certainly less discomfitted by such a project. As I suggest in Chapter One, this novel functions as a kind of pedagogical example of the difficulties of speaking for voiceless others, difficulties which obtain *within the story*, as Harriet struggles to speak and speak for, but also at the
level of story, such that Lessing’s own acts of speaking for are called into question. I do not think it is fair to take these difficulties lightly, and I have tried to contextualize the time period in which Lessing was writing as one which was itself highly ambivalent on the issue of disability. Regardless of this ambivalence, and perhaps in association with it, *The Fifth Child* is illustrative of the ways in which the female voice and voiceless bodies are simultaneously intimately connected, and potentially opposed. The novel also dramatizes the revelation of the “different” or “unknown,” the “voiceless body” to a literal and hyperbolic degree and as such serves as a touchstone for the following chapters analyses of narrative revelation.
CHAPTER THREE
Consuming Karen Carpenter

I inhabit the wax image of myself, a doll’s body. Sickness begins here.

Sylvia Plath, “Witch Burning” (135)

In the decades since Karen Carpenter’s death, at the age of 32, she has become so closely associated with the condition anorexia nervosa that her name is effectively a metonym for “the anorexic woman,” much like Sylvia Plath’s name is a rhetorical stand-in for “the suicidal female poet.” Carpenter’s death in 1983 was one of the first high-profile deaths attributed to the disease. Her celebrity and visibility as lead singer of the very successful band The Carpenters resulted in a kind of public document of the disease’s progression on her body, and made her in many ways the national face of anorexia in the 1980s. Todd Haynes’s 1987 film Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story is one of a number of filmic biographies of Carpenter’s life and death.

Biography is most baldly speaking for someone else, frequently, someone who is no longer alive to speak for themselves. Haynes’s work since the 1980s has largely been concerned with depicting those who live on the margins, or whose voices are silenced, or not heard. The issue of who can or will speak, and how, is central to both the content and form of his films, albeit in oblique rather than explicitly narratorial ways. In this chapter, I argue that Karen Carpenter functions in Haynes’s film simultaneously as a figure of voice and voicelessness, one who is silenced and comes to “speak” in non-normative
ways. Thematically, the film depicts Carpenter’s struggle to assert her own (female) voice, and the ways in which her (disabled) body becomes strategic and necessary to that struggle. As such, the film depicts Carpenter’s anorexia not only as pathology, but as a form of non-linguistic speech.

The film’s ongoing concern with the thematic of food extends from anorexia to the power and politics of consumption, and elucidates the ways in which Karen’s body was consumed by so many others, exposing the ways in which Carpenter was herself a consumable commodity: for her family, for her record company, and for the nation. This commodification was absolutely connected to her struggles with voice and voicelessness, and the eventual emergence of her (anorexic) speaking body. Haynes’s film exposes these operations of speaking and silencing, connects them to larger issues (as opposed to locating them within some individual context or pathology), and draws attention to alternative forms of speech or expression being articulated by those who can’t or are not allowed to speak for themselves, or, who aren’t listened to.

Along with Carpenter’s voice and voicelessness, Haynes is clearly concerned with his own act of “speaking for.” He refuses to offer Carpenter up as a biographical or spectatorial subject for consumption, one whose “pathological” story can be known and understood, and one whose “pathological” body is displayed. He manages this through formal techniques that undermine the film’s own authorial and narrative coherence, along with filmic techniques that deprioritize both language and the human form, relying instead on the sound of Carpenter’s singing voice, and Barbie-like dolls instead of human actors. These formal and film techniques resist the narrative and biographical imperative to “know” and “see” and instead offer up an enigmatic and schematic biographical
subject, and film form. As such, Haynes’s film “speaks for” Carpenter in such a way that paradoxically challenges and undermines the very terms of biography (and Haynes’s own authorship), while simultaneously enabling other forms of speech to emerge: film speech, but also Carpenter’s speech.

**Todd Haynes, Pathography, Biography**

Writing in 1988 at roughly the same time as the release of Haynes’s film, Joyce Carol Oates describes the 1980s as “an era of magisterial biographies” but that “it has also evolved a new subspecies of the genre to which the name ‘pathography’ might usefully be given: hagiography’s diminished and often prurient twin.” Describing traditional biography as that which takes up a “substantial subject” of “cultural significance,” Oates pitches pathography against such substance and significance: “Pathography typically focuses upon a far smaller canvas, sets its standards much lower. Its motifs are dysfunction and disaster, illnesses and pratfalls, failed marriages and failed careers, alcoholism and breakdown and outrageous conduct.” Setting aside Oates’s lofty prioritization of biography and her dismissive and diminishing tone in describing pathography, the definition she provides of the latter is a generally apt description of *Superstar*, which tracks the rise of Karen Carpenter’s singing career alongside the emergence of her eating disorder.

In fact much of Haynes’s work, and the film *Superstar* in particular, fits into Oates’s descriptions of pathography; pathography reorients life stories such that the pathological is central, rather than marginal; this reorientation is crucial to Haynes’s
work, as is “reorientation” in general. Discussing the prevalence of both pathology and pathos in Haynes’s films, Mary Ann Doane argues:

The pathological does not necessarily evoke pathos, but both deal with marginality, that which is on the edge. For Haynes, this site is either the woman—the figure who becomes the placeholder of the most intense social contradictions, the marker of the paralysis of convention—or the queer—incarnating aberration, exemplary of the impossibility of “being oneself.” (17)

Doane’s discussion of pathology and pathos in Haynes’s work depends upon revaluations of the notion of the pathological; rather than individual aberration, the pathological is the site where the social and the self break down. Examining and advocating for this breakdown and considering its larger implications is what drives Haynes’s work. In this way, his work is largely concerned with speaking for (albeit in non-normative ways) those subjects whose social marginalization is a form of silencing. Not only does he reorient the marginal such that it is central, but he also reorients notions of the pathological, particularly as they are attached to specific bodies; these bodies are overwhelmingly female, or queer.

The association between women (or queer) and pathology is complicated and illustrative of recent developments in disability studies which have re-oriented understandings of embodiment and pathology, moving away from notions of inherently defective bodies and towards social constructionist models that posit an interrelation between bodies and culture. Generally disability scholars argue that societies’ definitions of what is disability are historically and culturally contingent and frequently determined
by a culture’s values, rather than the nature of any impairment itself. Along with this move to reorient definitions of disability, scholars and activists are also revaluing disability and experiences of disembodiment associated with it, critiquing ideas of normal and pathological that align with ideas of “good” and “bad” and attempting to replace them with an affirmation of embodied difference.

Similar although not identical conversations are of course apparent throughout feminist theory in work which examines the strategic connections between women’s bodies and pathology. In their seminal text *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar cite feminist works that “have begun to study the ways in which patriarchal socialization literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally” and argue that diseases traditionally associated with women (hysteria, agoraphobia, anorexia) are “caused by patriarchal socialization in several ways. Most obviously, of course, any young girl, but especially a lively or imaginative one, is likely to experience her education in docility, submissiveness, selflessness as in some sense sickening” (54). Similarly, Susan Bordo argues that eating disorders are not indicative of an underlying pathology but are the (hyperbolic) extension of a response to and interaction with cultural demands that bodies appear a certain way and that women behave and think a certain way with relation to food, exercise, etc. These feminist readings do not deny the presence of illness or sickness, which is somewhat different from some disability scholars’ understanding of disability as difference, and difference that is effectively “made” pathological by social ideas about what the body should and should not do, and social environments which either facilitate or obstruct the functioning of such bodies. However,

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like disability theorists, feminist theorists argue that locating pathology within the individual (either through recourse to biology, psychology, or the particular family) effectively obscures the cultural demands and contexts that frequently inaugurate and maintain such pathologies.

By focusing on the pathological, pathography as generic form certainly has the potential to mimic triumphalist biographical conventions by presenting the subject who manages to overcome his/her pathology through hard work and bootstrap pulling, or, alternately, whose failure to do so functions as a cautionary tale. Pathography as it is functioning in *Superstar*, however, is in line with feminist and other work which takes pathology and in particular those bodies typically identified as or “made” pathological by the larger culture as their focal point, not to cure the pathological body, or protect against pathology by investigating it. Rather, this work, including Haynes’s, contextualizes and politicizes pathology; it also considers the ways in which pathology can both inhibit and enable various subjects. Such an approach means that pathography, at least as Haynes practices it, is something quite other than the “diminished twin” of biography.

If we are to understand pathography as a genre that reorients biography’s attention to life stories such that the pathological is central, then Haynes’s film reorients biography’s formal conventions as well, such that the film form is itself “pathological,” refusing to present a coherent narrative of a life from an objective authorial stance. This reorientation depends upon an understanding of identity – both personal, and national – as unstable, an understanding which informs Haynes’s corpus of work, and which is formally produced and reproduced by narrative and genre instability. Haynes’s work resists the narrative imperative to know and show on both thematic and formal levels, and
as such consistently calls into question the individual subject and the filmmaker who presents that subject. Essentially, Haynes refuses to produce a palatable spectatorial subject, and in *Superstar*, this extends to the biographical subject. These refusals call into question the biographical project and its drive to make a life “known” through narrative strategies of unity and coherence, and through the biographer’s/filmmaker’s own presentation of self as objective and authoritative. Ultimately Haynes complicates and undermines biographical conventions, and, as I will go on to argue, produces a very different kind of “speaking for.”

Haynes’s films writ large use narrative and formal experimentation to critique both individual identity and national memory; his work since the 1980s as a writer, director, and producer of films has been consistent in this approach. The overarching narrative of *Superstar* is of Carpenter’s life from the moment when her parents and brother Richard decided that she should become the lead singer for The Carpenters (and the related onset of her anorexia), to her death. Haynes uses Barbie-like dolls to represent the members of the Carpenter family and their acquaintances, and the dolls perform on miniature sets constructed by Haynes. There are also live action shots intercut throughout the film, often of news footage from the 1970s, as well as scripted interviews with (staged) talking heads and women-on-the-street. Textual overlays of news headlines and large block quotes appear at intervals, some of which are difficult to read. Aurally, the film displays similar strategies. The sounds of voiceovers, interviewees speaking, and the actors voicing the dolls alternate throughout the film and are frequently mixed in with
The Carpenters’ song recordings. Each of his films revisits a specific historical decade and frequently takes as its focus either an artistic subject, or a woman, or both (as in Superstar). In Safe (1995) he examines the condition of 1990s upper-middle class suburbia through the figure of a mysteriously ill housewife; Velvet Goldmine (1998) is a figurative and literal investigation into the 1970s glamrock scene and the sexual and gender experimentation and fluidity that defined it. In Far From Heaven (2002), Haynes again focuses on the American family and particularly the 1950s housewife. I’m Not There (2007), his most recent, Academy Award winning film, is another “biography” of an artist, in this case 1960s musician Bob Dylan, who is famously played in the film by actress Cate Blanchett (along with five other actors of various ages and races representing Dylan at various moments in his life).

Many of his films (as in Velvet Goldmine, I’m Not There, and his first full length film Poison) document the ways in which identity is a construct, one which can be manipulated as such, taken on and thrown off; these films are anchored by queer male figures. The rest of Haynes’s films are concerned with the consequences of highly rigid, solidified images and structures as they inform female identity; these films (Superstar, Safe, Far from Heaven) consider the ways in which women’s lives, bodies, and senses of

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28 Haynes made the film with Cynthia Schneider while a graduate student at Brown University. It was generally shown in film festivals. Mattel briefly attempted a cease and desist order based on Haynes use of “Barbies” but ultimately dropped it. In 1989 The Carpenter’s publishers and estate filed a much more aggressive and ultimately successful cease and desist order, arguing that Haynes’s use of The Carpenter’s songs and logo was copyright infringement. Haynes attempted to come to a compromise whereby the film would only be shown educationally, but the Carpenter estate refused. All copies were recalled, although bootleg copies had already been made, and circulated in a kind of underground network throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In the summer of 2009 I did an internet search and easily discovered a digital copy of the film online (on video.google.com). It continues to be available on that website to this day, which leads me to believe the Carpenter estate is no longer pursuing prosecution of the cease and desist order.
self are concretized by social and cultural expectations and representations, such that they function as a kind of prison house for the woman. By tethering each of his films to a specific historical and national context, particularly in the case of the women-centered texts, Haynes makes connections between women’s personal and individual lives, which are often primarily rooted in and defined by the home and the family, and larger social-historical-cultural forces. These connections expose the ways in which women’s social and personal roles, and gendered expectations of them, come to infect personal identity, prompting often unexplainable illnesses in the women. Ultimately the films exemplify the maxim “the personal is political.” His work is generally understood to be undergirded by a queer theoretical social-constructionist understanding of both identity and history (Desjardins 23).

Haynes’s formal choices are deeply intertwined with his thematic ones. Mary Desjardins notes that “Haynes’s authorship is constituted in the repetition of his particular citations of past forms. The ironic recontextualizations of these forms evidence a social constructionist historiography and assert Haynes’s directorial agency as resistant to the norms of conventional cinematic representation and spectatorial identification” (23). Haynes revisits and recontextualizes the past – both teleologically and formally – towards specific political and aesthetic ends. Discussing Safe, and the romantic melodrama genre that it “tests and transforms,” Susan Potter argues:

As in his earlier films, Safe redirects a conservative genre and presses it into the service of nonnormative aims and outcomes . . . . Haynes’s reworking of genre suggests an alternative view of identity and desire, one recognizing that the attempt to secure certain knowledges about our
bodies, our selves, and others arises out of a need for narrative and
meaning that deliberately (that is to say, romantically) fails to recognize its
own epistemological limitations. (126-27)

Such an understanding of identity, and of the epistemological limits to knowing and
narrativizing it, has provocative implications for the biography genre, as well as for the
project of “speaking for” others. If Safe uses the romantic melodrama to critique and
undermine heterosexual romance, Superstar concatenates a variety of forms that purport
to represent knowledge and particularly knowledge of a life: documentary; exposé; after-
school-special; the star biopic. Whereas Lucas Hilderbrand argues that Haynes does so
“not to critique these modes but to use them strategically to present allegorical
narratives—functioning as shorthand for expressing the characters’ emotional states and
for producing audience affect” (59), I argue that Haynes is not only using these generic
forms as strategic tools, but explicitly revising/reimagining the very terms and
possibilities of biography as an aesthetic and formal project, as well as notions of “the
subject” which anchors it.

Haynes’s work has consistently been concerned with deconstructing the (artistic)
subject and refusing origin stories; in his films, there is no successful “tracing back” of a
subject to some constitutive or fundamental event by which that subject can be
interpreted, understood, and “known.” His characters are enigmatic and schematic (the
fact that they are also generally highly sympathetic and produce both affect and
identification in viewers is something I will discuss later in this chapter). This approach is
not particularly noteworthy given the context of late 20th-century postmodernism and
poststructuralist critiques of the subject and epistemology, and their articulation in
contemporary literary forms. What is noteworthy is biography’s location within these larger discourses and the ways in which it has generally been exempt or isolated itself from such moves.

In his discussion of American biography, Rob Wilson argues, citing James Clifford, that Western biography is a project of coherent selfhood and that “the ‘hyper politicization’ and deconstruction of form now called for in the 1980s and 1990s can fail to occur in American biographies, then, which more or less subtly enact a liberal rhetoric of Puritan/democratic idealism and contract to produce self-made, profoundly American selves” (174). Wilson goes on to note that problems of person and history are smoothed over in biographers’ affirmation of liberalism and consensus, and he calls for biographers to instead “insinuate counterlanguages and counterforms more critical of inherited subjects and narrative modes” (183). Haynes’s films and in particular Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story as his most explicitly biographical text, certainly respond to this call.

If Superstar is indeed a biography, it is one whose task is to call biographical representation into question by refusing to perpetuate biography as a “project of coherent selfhood” and instead focusing on the multiplicities and disjunctures of self, particularly as that self is understood and represented by others. The film also undermines biography’s claims to objectivity and documentation by including multiple, contradictory and at times suspect interpretations of the biographical subject. In the Oxford English Dictionary, biography is defined alternately as a “description” of a life, an “account” of a life, and more recently (and accurately) as “a themed narrative history” of a life. The conventions of biography as a literary genre are more specified and generally require the
appearance of objectivity, chronological and narrative order, supporting evidence (“facticity”), and comprehensiveness. Biography, like and as narrative form, is about the movement of a subject; de Lauretis describes narrative movement as “that of a passage, a transformation predicated on the figure of a hero, a mythical subject” (113). Similarly Wilson describes the task of the biographer as being to “deliver the individual as a tormented journey toward coherent unity, striking personality, and expressive selfhood” (167). Haynes resists and transforms the majority of these seeming biographical imperatives.

Karen Carpenter as portrayed in Haynes’s film is a subject who does not live up to the assumed requirements of the noteworthy, coherent, and transcendent biographical subject. The individual, or mythical subject, instead appears to degrade and dissimulate, rather than moving towards coherence. Karen’s first appearance in the film is in her childhood bedroom, singing to herself happily, as the camera pans in on her through her bedroom window. Her final appearance in the film is a scene comprised of Karen’s point-of-view shots which are jerkily and disorientingly intercut with both black and white and color images of a doll being spanked, ipecac bottles, human hands, a body falling into a grave, and Karen’s own point-of-view perspective as she falls into her closet. Similarly the sound in this final scene, unlike the smooth and coherent lyrics that Karen sings to herself in the first scene, are a mash up of both music and sound – a ringing phone, Karen talking, wailing strings reminiscent of the shower scene music from Psycho, and distorted playback of The Carpenter’s own song “We’ve Only Just Begun.” The doll Haynes uses

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29 When referring to the film’s version of Karen Carpenter, I will cite “Karen.” When discussing elements of her life that informed the film, or that are not addressed in the film, I will say “Karen Carpenter” to avoid confusion with other members of the Carpenter family.
as a stand-in for Karen, iconically Barbie-like in the first scene, has been damaged and degraded over the course of the film to evoke the effects of anorexia on Karen’s body, and by the movie’s end, its appearance is more cadaver-like than Barbie-like.

The transition here is from coherence and both bodily and representational unity, to degradation and dissemblance, not only in the figure of Karen but in the film’s formal strategies as well. The camera’s zoom in through Karen’s bedroom window in the first scene implies a revelation of Karen’s personal space, and unobserved documentation of her when she is most “herself” – ostensibly alone and unobserved, except by the invisible camera. The film’s final shot of Karen is a dramatic shift from this initial perspective of the camera looking in on Karen’s complete and coherent body and voice, to that of Karen looking out at a jarring and fragmented world.

Multiple other biographical conventions are also refused or perverted throughout the film; the notion of objectivity and a kind of representational transparence – that the biographer is documenting what is already there rather than composing or creating – is undermined in a variety of ways. Certain images appear and reappear throughout the film, such as a black and white shot of a body falling into a grave, and a hand spanking; these images are never explained and do not appear to have any direct relevance to Karen’s story/life. The film is also difficult to “read” and not just in terms of the content, but visually as well. Fuzzy textual graphics are frequently overlaid onto screen images such that the words are literally difficult to make out. Often these textual blocks are documenting a significant period of time in Karen’s life, as in her brief marriage, or, alternately, are providing information on the nature of anorexia. The film’s viewers
wonder if they have missed something important when they are unable to fully consume these textual moments.

Along with lacking unity and coherence, the film calls into question its own biographical author/ity. Talking head and woman-on-the-street interviews, both of which have obviously been pre-scripted, and are usually delivered in hyperbolic tones (i.e. overly feigned ignorance, smug condescension, etc.), provide insight into Karen’s career and the condition of anorexia, but it’s unclear whose voice to trust. At times the film seems to be satirizing its subject and her condition; at times it seems genuinely sincere and serious about Karen as an artist and a sufferer of anorexia. The formal strategy that has received the most attention is Haynes’s use of Barbie-like dolls to portray the Carpenter family and their acquaintances. I will discuss this formal choice in detail later in this chapter, but for now it is sufficient to note that most casual observers would understand using dolls to portray a subject as a literal and figurative diminution of that subject, and also perhaps as a way for Haynes to produce shock-value at the expense of his subject. It is also a formal choice that calls attention to the filmmaker-biographer as a manipulator, one who moves the dolls around and positions them, as opposed to the potential for more “realistic” formal choices to encourage viewers to forget that they are watching a constructed film.

Occurring in tandem with this deconstruction of biography and its capacities is the film’s critique of our national memory of the 1970s. The film makes both explicit and implicit connections between The Carpenters and the image of 1970s America as a kind of reprieve from the political and social tumult of the 1960s. Karen is explicitly stated by the opening narration as the “smooth-voiced girl . . . who led a raucous nation smoothly
into the 70s.” A later voiceover intones: “The year is 1970 and suddenly the nation finds itself asking the question: what if? Instead of the riots and assassinations, the protests and the drugs, instead of the angry words and hard rock sounds, we were to hear something soft and smooth and see something of wholesomeness and easy-handed faith.” This “sound” and “sight” is The Carpenters. At the same time, Haynes exposes what lies beneath the smooth images of both The Carpenters and the nation in the 1970s, what is hidden by them. At one point in the film Karen asks Richard, sarcastically, “Do the Carpenters have something to hide?” and indeed they did.

The dysfunctional and unhealthy bodies and relationships that The Carpenter’s image and music glossed over is mirrored by dysfunctional and unhealthy national bodies, which are also covered over by The Carpenters. The two come together in footage from The Carpenter’s visit to the Nixon White House. As Nixon plays the piano, Karen sings. Haynes juxtaposes images of The Carpenter’s album covers and headlines about their record sales, overlaid over sunny blue skies, with black and white images of bombs falling in Vietnam, Americans protesting those bombings, and Richard Nixon’s “I am not a crook” television announcement. Rather than masterfully representing Karen Carpenter as “the individual [who] can rise above his/her time and society” (Wilson 168), Haynes contextualizes her story to show how fully embedded and implicated she was in her time and society, even as she was purported to be a kind of Moses-like figure, leading the nation into a peaceful docility.

**Anorexia and the Expressive Body**
“Voiceless Bodies” is largely concerned with the relationship between the female body and the disabled body; anorexia is an explicit convergence and conflation of those bodies. It is also significant in that it raises questions about the non-choice of ablebodiedness; perversely, anorectics appear to choose disability, to desire a non-normative body. In this section, I consider the ways in which Haynes contextualizes and politicizes anorexia, not simply understanding it as pathology, but also as potentially productive, and located in specific political, historical, and ideological contexts. The film contextualizes and reorients anorexia as it functioned in Karen’s life, showing how it inhibited her on many levels and was a response to cultural ideals and demands, but also how it enabled other forms of speech to emerge from her body, in distinction to her silenced voice. The film also takes Karen’s choice not to consume seriously, and replicates it in its own formal strategies, such that the film refuses to offer Karen up as a biographical or filmic subject for consumption. Ultimately the film offers a critique of consumption, which is itself another supposed non-choice, ontologized as necessary to both organic life and narrative form; here, it is instead presented as a choice which can in fact be opted out of, and which is informed by and implicated in larger systems of power.

Competing medical models understand anorexia alternately as a disorder rooted in the individual, and/or as a response by some individuals to cultural demands and ideals. It is characterized by a number of contradictions, including extreme self-control, but self-control which is ultimately outside the control of the individual. In voiceover, Superstar (directly citing Susie Orbach’s Hunger Strike) describes anorexia as a “fascism over the body in which the sufferer plays the parts of both dictator and the emaciated victim.” Anorectics also seem to perform a kind of perverse conformity to cultural ideals about
women’s bodies, slenderness, and more fundamentally, lack of desire (in this case, for food). At the same time, this hyperbolic conformity to ideas about women’s bodies and the feminine involves a resistance to authority; anorectics refuse to comply with the demands of parents and doctors. What supposedly begins as a campaign to fit prescriptions about women’s attractiveness eventually becomes a kind of repudiation of the feminine, as weight loss results in the loss of typically feminine characteristics (breasts, hips, menstruation). Eventually the anorectic embodies an androgynous state, and answers to no one, perhaps not even herself. The workings of power and resistance here become confused, intertwined, and difficult to distinguish.

In the film, Haynes presents Karen’s anorexia as a response to various situations. It is initially understood to be the extension of dieting that is a response to her increased visibility on stage and in the media. Certainly Karen’s movement from sitting behind the drums to being front and center on stage seems to have inaugurated or at least exacerbated her concern with her appearance. In one scene, Karen’s mother literally measures Karen’s body for tight fitting clothes, clothes which Karen tries unsuccessfully to refuse. In this same scene, the two women talk about a recent magazine article about the band that described Karen as chubby. Cultural ideas about women’s bodies and display of those bodies combine here and become of heightened significance, as the film depicts Karen’s becoming a public rather than private figure. The public display and consumption of Karen’s body, and her anxiety over cultural ideals about the female body, is perhaps the most obvious interpretation of Karen’s anorexia, one which easily aligns with both medical and theoretical explanations.
However, anorexia is also frequently associated with highly controlling family environments. Karen Carpenter’s mother and brother clearly maintained rigid control over her, both personally and professionally, as Haynes evokes repeatedly throughout the film. Disentangling the personal from the professional is difficult here, for The Carpenters are literally the Carpenters – the family name is the band name is the family name – and along with Richard and Karen Carpenter’s constitution of the band, the rest of the Carpenter family is a constant presence in and around it, controlling Karen’s public image and private life (where she will live, what she should do with her money, etc.). Many of the decisions about the band are shown being made in the living room of the Carpenter family home, or during family meals. Karen’s status as a performer, and her success as such, are completely bound up with her status as a daughter, and success as such. If the Carpenter family asserts itself into the business of The Carpenters, the actual business side of the band, as exemplified in the figure of Jack, the record executive at A&M Records who works with Karen and Richard, asserts itself as a family. He literally says at their first meeting, “we’re a real family here at A&M”; he calls them “kids” just like the mother does, and the actor voicing the Carpenter father is the same actor voicing Jack. Haynes obviously was not actually present for family dinners and meetings with Jack; his conflation of the family and the business strategically highlights Karen’s position as a subordinate, as someone being told what to do – both in her family and in the studio.

Throughout Superstar in both the family home and in the studio, control over Karen includes a silencing of her voice and any attempts at dissent, or self-assertion. She is repeatedly told not to talk back, or to talk at all. Richard snaps, “just do what I tell you”
as they record in the studio; Karen’s mother ends their conversation about Karen’s self-consciousness about her weight and public display of her body with “now that’s all I want to hear.” This extreme exertion of control over Karen’s performing body and familial body, and refusal to let her speak about her desires, or to accede to those desires, can be connected to Karen’s anorexia, which functions as both direct resistance/refusal of her family’s demands, and as an indirect strategy for achieving her desires. Directly, Karen’s family members repeatedly tell her to stop worrying about her weight, and then later, to eat. She refuses to do what they say. Indirectly, Karen repeatedly articulates that she does not like being so visible, does not like traveling so much, and that she wants to be at home; no one listens to her. Her refusal to eat repeatedly interrupts her ability to perform and forces the band to return home. In these ways, Karen’s anorexia functions simultaneously to resist her family’s control and also to resist her role as a performer.

Karen’s excessive expression of voice and sound in her professional role as a singer has an inverse relation to her lack of self-expression in her professional and personal life; the film depicts that stifled self-expression moving to the domain of the body. Feminist theorists and historians have repeatedly connected issues of control, appetite and expression. Joan Brumberg identifies “appetite as a form of expression” and “control of appetite, food, and the body” as being part of a “symbolic language” (5). Bordo argues that anorexia is a woman’s attempt “to create a body that will speak for the self in a meaningful and powerful way” (67). Orbach locates anorexia along a continuum with hysteria, in which the body becomes a means of self-expression, arguing that “the anorectic refusal of food is only the latest in a series of woman’s attempts at self-assertion which at some point have descended directly upon her body” (xvii). This
feminist work is directly reflected in and extended by feminist analyses of Haynes’s films. In *Safe* for instance, Laura Christian identifies the main character’s mysterious illness “as an instance of the body speaking when Carol cannot, much like in the case of the nineteenth-century hysteric. The body performs an act of articulation that the enunciating subject herself cannot execute” (53). Throughout *Superstar*, Haynes juxtaposes the excess of sound and voice produced by Karen’s body in her role as a singer and performer, with the anemia of actual voice she has in her professional and especially personal life. Her singing voice and anorexic body emerge mutually and co-dependently.

Ultimately we can understand Haynes’s film as being concerned with the discourse of speaking bodies, as opposed to speaking subjects; while there is obviously linguistic speech in the film, it is not prioritized. Viewers are trained to distrust such speech, and also to see who is barred from such speech. Such an approach has implications for the project of speaking for: to accept the body, either human, or filmic, as speaking in a non-linguistic language is to also accept the impossibility of clear or exact reception or interpretation of meaning. And to accept that the language of the body, like verbal language, is culturally determined, even if it is individually practiced. Bordo points out that:

the vocabulary and the syntax of the body, like those of all languages, are culturally given. The anorectic cannot simply decide to make slenderness mean whatever she wishes it to. This is not to say, however, that the meaning of slenderness is univocal or fixed or clear . . . in our culture slenderness is, rather, *overdetermined*, freighted with multiple
significances. As such, it is capable of being used as a vehicle for the expression of a range of (sometimes contradictory) anxieties, aspirations, dilemmas. (67)

The film’s language is also unclear and difficult to interpret. In essence the film attempts to speak the same (or a similar) language as the anorectic body; it speaks with Karen’s body rather than about it or for it. Although the film does contain within it voices that speak about both Karen and anorexia, those voices express a range of positions and are often contradictory. They are also subsumed within the larger filmic body, such that no individual act of articulation can overwhelm or determine the whole.

Along with speaking with Karen’s body, as opposed to for it, Haynes’s film locates and politicizes consumption. Karen’s refusal to consume food is a very specific choice/strategy; it is certainly not the only way one might “speak” through their body. Haynes’s film presents this as both a personal and political act, and addresses the questions: What exactly is refused when food is refused? When one refuses to consume, to be a consumer? And, specifically, when a woman refuses to consume food? Answers to these questions depend on our understanding of what exactly food means, and how gender connects to that meaning. Orbach argues that women’s often “obsessive involvement with food flows out of a cultural insistence that what they eat, how much they eat, and how they cook for others, is their especial domain. Food is the medium through which women are addressed; in turn food has become the language of women’s response” (3). Of course food operates on a number of levels other than “sustenance” which are not specifically tied to gender. Many of these operations are depicted in the film. Family meals are the site of many of the important conversations about Karen and
Richard’s career, and personal lives. Food is also a significant element of their professional lives – meetings with the record executives frequently happen at restaurants, and the status of those restaurants (expense, reputation) increases as the status of the band increases. Food then is both the marker of success and value, and also offered as a kind of reward for work well done; as the band The Carpenters becomes a more highly valued commodity, they are themselves provided with more highly valued food.

The idea of food as commodity whose meaning is informed by historical and social contexts is directly presented in a section of the film that combines what appears to be documentary footage with a woman’s voiceover. Over images of food production, including factories as well as supermarket aisles, the voice explains that in post-WWII America, consumption became a defining feature of America and the home, with its locus being the kitchen: “home life connoted the cozy kitchen, food preparation, and meal time.” Triangulating with these images and the woman’s voiceover are textual overlays, which explain the psychology of anorexia. Implied by this triangulation, then, is that when anorectics refuse food they are also refusing national and cultural imperatives. The anti-American resonance is underpinned by one textual overlay’s explanation of anorexia as a kind of “fascism over the body.”

Directly following this scene, which elaborates the ways in which food and its consumption inform ideas about gender and nation, is a scene in which Karen’s anorexia is dramatized as not only a refusal of food but as a refusal of her career. Richard comes to find Karen before a show and discovers her passed out next to a box of laxatives; he yells at her “What are you trying to do, ruin both our careers!” Richard’s reaction to Karen’s refusal to eat, and Karen’s mother’s reaction to Karen’s insistence that she is fat
following a magazine article that calls her chubby -- “You have just been so fanatical about your weight. I mean that thing really went to your head” -- understand Karen’s anorexia as an ego-centered attack on The Carpenters as both a band and a family. Indeed her behavior can be understood as resistance to both The Carpenters and the Carpenters. Her status as a commodity within both contexts, and the conflation of the personal and professional, is apparent in her family’s response to her illness. No one in the film asks Karen why she is doing this, they just repeatedly tell her to stop.

In one of the film’s sequences, which again draws directly from Orbach’s research, a woman’s voiceover informs the audience that treatment of anorectics focuses on getting the woman to the target weight as opposed to dealing with the problem that is causing the behavior. The voiceover also informs us that doctors find it “annoying” when the anorectic refuses to comply. Rather than attending to the woman’s physical and mental health, the focus is on getting her body to look right and work right. To work right (as opposed to wrong), the woman must listen to reason and respond appropriately to authority. But “working right” also means the ability to work, which is especially relevant to Karen’s situation. Her family wants her to be able to sing, to perform: to work. When she can’t or won’t, they are upset that she won’t do what she’s told, that she won’t behave. She is simultaneously a bad daughter/sister and bad band member. Essentially the problem is that Karen herself is a commodity, and by refusing to eat she is unable to function as commodity, becoming unpalatable for others. Her refusal to consume makes her unconsumable.

Karen’s body, in its duel capacities as a singer for her record company, and a daughter in the Carpenter family, functions as a product, a commodity, one which must
work appropriately in order to be consumed by and palatable to the larger public. In this sense Karen is functioning in the film on (at least) three distinct but related levels: as an individual and particular commodity for her family; as one of the category of “women” who not only function as consumable commodities for the nation, “feeding” it in a variety of ways, but who are also closely associated with food itself; and finally, as a narrative subject, whose life is vulnerable to consumption. The film shows Karen as such, but also shows her opting out of the system to a certain extent through her food refusals. The issue then is whether Haynes’s film offers Karen’s body up as food, as a filmic subject to be consumed by the audience. Certainly he refuses to make her a palatable biographical subject, but he also refuses to offer her as a spectatorial subject via techniques of visual display which prompt conventional cinematic identification. He does this, perversely, by objectifying her.

**Objectification**

Haynes’s decision to use Barbie-like dolls to represent Karen, her family, and various other persons within the film is undeniably its most infamous feature and raises the issue of objectification, literally. This literal objectification is connected to the film’s larger representational project, that is, the problem of speaking for someone who is not there to speak for herself. As I will go on the argue, the dolls function as strategic stand-ins for the human form which serve a number of ethical functions in terms of representing Karen’s body. They also disrupt the narrative process and film conventions that rely on the human form and face in particular as a means of conveying information to the audience. Relatedly, the dolls and the literal objectification they produce are part of
and necessary to Haynes’s overall representational stance, which is largely concerned with calling attention to its own representationalism, and refusing biographical and filmic imperatives to produce a spectatorial subject and the revelation of that subject’s life.

Objectification is the process whereby a person is equated with an object; throughout “Voiceless Bodies” I have theorized it in primarily negative terms, terms that align with Susan Wendell’s description: “To objectify another person’s body is to ignore (at least temporarily) the consciousness that is embodied there and to fail to concern oneself with his/her subjective bodily experience” (86). Writ large, the objectification of bodies is a strategy aimed towards oppression and the justification of violence. Bodies become instruments, objects rather than subjects, to be used and abused. This can and does happen in visual as well as linguistic registers. Carol Adams argues that the use of metaphors and particularly the substitution of the living and animate (nonhuman animals; women) with the nonliving and inanimate (meat; meat) is central to the process of oppression, a process which depends on objectifying that which is different (44). She goes so far as to speculate whether metaphor itself underpins oppression (46), and in essence her argument opposes representing the human with the nonhuman, the animate with the inanimate, the living with the not-living. Of course, this understanding of objectification depends upon a stance towards objects themselves in which they are merely instrumental and/or commodities to be consumed.

More recently, in Persons and Things Barbara Johnson proceeds from a position that is not immediately foreclosed to considering the “thingness” of persons, but that does acknowledge the overwhelmingly negative associations of such: “Whereas treating a thing like a man locates it in a human world, treating a man like a thing locates human
beings in the realm of the inhuman. There could be something sobering and lucid about this realm, but it is never welcomed, never consciously fantasized as an object of desire” (21). Posthumanist theory does not automatically accept that formulation, and opens up new ways of understanding objectification, ways which I want to argue can help us understand Haynes’s use of dolls to represent humans in *Superstar*.

Posthumanist perspectives attempt to elucidate the ways in which the human and nonhuman are embedded and connected, as opposed to a primarily hierarchical, post-Enlightenment understanding which posits humans as masters over the inanimate world, which then functions as so much raw material for human consumption. Beatriz Preciado’s genealogy of 20th century body technologies shows instead the co-evolution and co-emergence of human and nonhuman bodies, as in for instance the Eames’s work with the US army to manufacture splints for wounded soldiers, which would later be the material they used in their iconic American furniture (106). Karen Barad’s theorization of posthumanist performativity argues for the materialization of the world not through human language and discourse, but through the inter- and intra-actions of both human and nonhuman bodies. Rather than asserting the agency of the human body and the instrumentality of the nonhuman body, she instead theorizes “phenomena” which she defines as “dynamic reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations” (818). Matter and discourse, humans and nonhumans, produce and materialize the world through their phenomenal intra-action. On a less abstract level, Vivian Sobchack’s account of the transformation of her body that occurred when she was fitted with a prosthetic leg shows the many ways that Sobchack uses her leg(s), but also how the leg transforms her, both physically and psychically; she argues for synechdochic (integrated)
understandings and figurations of prosthesis (215). What each of these feminist theorists stress is the messy interrelation of objects and humans, rather than the prioritization or mastery of one over the other.

Haynes’s use of Barbie-like dolls to represent human bodies certainly can be read in a number of registers, posthumanist and otherwise. I am not going to spend much time on an analysis which takes Barbie as representative of the (problematic) objectification of women and which understands Haynes’s use of Barbie-like dolls as exposing and satirizing that objectification. Johnson’s description of Barbie as a doll who “perniciously keeps the dream of idealized and inert femininity alive in the United States” (165) is indeed apt, and Mattel’s response to Haynes’s film, in which they “expressed concern about associations between their products and death, fearing that portraying a Barbie doll as anorexic would mar her happy, healthy image” (Hilderbrand 66) is understandable and also laughably ironic, given that Barbie has long been charged with representing idealized and in fact unattainable female body proportions, and instilling such unhealthy images in young girls’ psyches. While this approach is undeniably legitimate, it is well worn. My concern is with the ways the dolls in this film disrupt traditional filmic representational strategies and how their capacity (or incapacity) to evoke and provoke identification in the audience is connected to the film’s larger representational project, that is, speaking for someone who is not there to speak for themselves.

In *Superstar*, the dolls operate as strategic stand-ins for the human form, stand-ins which have a number of ethical functions and which have implications for our understanding of the processes of objectification and identification. On a most basic level, attempting a realistic portrayal of an anorectic would not only be practically
difficult, and potentially voyeuristic, it would also be difficult for viewers to take in. I have watched many videos of Karen Carpenter, including interviews conducted with her approximately a year and a half before her death, when she and Richard Carpenter were promoting their final album “Made in America.” It is very difficult to look at her face and body in these videos, which is painfully thin and skeletal. It is also difficult to listen to her response when interviewers ask why the band took a three-year break, and about the rumors of her eating disorder, which both she and Richard cover over with half-truths and lies. I do not want to look at that frail body which is so obviously close to death, and I do not want to participate in her questioning, nor in the lie of her answers; to do so seems to involve a kind of complicity in her illness and death. I want to look away.

Dominick LaCapra theorizes this reaction when he argues that interviews with trauma victims can have an “overwhelming” effect on viewers, an effect which may function to completely shut down their engagement with the subject because of the anxiety it produces (92). He writes: “Viewing these videos has effects on people. The sound of the voices, the often agonized looks on the faces have a powerful, at times overwhelming, effect” (92). Simone Weil discusses this process as well, in a different register:

To listen to someone is to put oneself in his place while he is speaking. To put oneself in the place of someone whose soul is corroded by affliction, or in near danger of it, is to annihilate oneself. It is more difficult than suicide would be for a happy child. Therefore the afflicted are not listened to. They are like someone whose tongue has been cut out and who occasionally forgets the fact. When they move their lips no ear perceives
any sound. And they themselves soon sink into impotence in the use of language, because of the certainty of not being heard. (71)

In these cases, exposure to the vulnerable body initiates an affective response in viewers, a response set off by the affect expressed in victims’ faces and voices. This affective response is painful and precipitates a shutting down, a refusal to engage with the other. Alternately, LaCapra warns that “unproblematic identification . . . furthers victimization, including at times the constitution of the self as surrogate victim” (219). In these formulations, and speaking in filmic terms, the viewer sees the film object as a surrogate for themselves, indeed, as a kind of metaphor of the self. Their identification with the other requires the flattening out of difference, and indeed, the assignation of the other as a figure of the self and not a self on its own terms raises a number of ethical concerns. The danger of identification, or at least identification which operates as such, is that the other/object is only valued for its instrumentality.

The competing dangers of forms of representation that produce overidentification, in which the subject is consumed by the audience, and those which are overwhelming to the audience, causing a kind of shut down closing off, both have their origins in realistic representation that focus on the human face and form. Film is largely premised on the visual display and consumption of the human form and face as a technique for producing identification in the film audience. Laura Mulvey30 declares:

30 Mulvey’s theorization of the male gaze has been a point of great contention since the publication of her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in 1975. In his own discussion of Mulvey’s work, which is both a critique and defense, David Rodowick argues: “But what was offered as a polemic and a stepping stone to further analysis has instead too often been treated as axiomatic” (185). For some examples of scholarship that productively extends/complicates Mulvey’s theory, see Rodowick’s “The Difficulty of Difference” (1995); Edward Snow’s
The conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form. Scale, space, stories are all anthropomorphic. Here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world. (38)

Haynes’s films frequently resist, or remake, the “conventions of mainstream film” and in particular their engagement with the human body. In *Safe*, for example, the majority of the camera work is longshots, from a distance. There are very few close-ups of the main character’s face; rather, the camera frequently situates her as one of many objects filling the screen, including other people, furniture, expanses of wall and carpet, etc. By decentering the human form and especially face, Haynes frustrates the viewer’s capacity and indeed desire to identify with the protagonist. Carol is closed off to the audience throughout the film, both in this visual disruption of scale and space but also in terms of character. She does not articulate any motivations for her behavior, illness and otherwise, and Haynes provides few if any narrative cues that the viewer can read into. The film ends with Carol literally closed up in a sterile pod, isolated, speaking the same words (“I love you. I love you”) to herself in a mirror, words which she has been directed to say. The film produces an absence of identification.

*Superstar* is quite different formally, and provokes very different responses from its viewers while still resisting mainstream film conventions. On the visual level, rather than attending to the human form and face, Haynes employs formal strategies which

depend on inhuman elements (lighting, doll bodies) to provide information to viewers, which can then be interpreted or read. There are many shots of Karen’s (doll) body, and in particular close ups of her face. In his seminal text on *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, Silvan Tomkins identifies the face as both the primary site of affect, and expression of that affect, and declares that “the young human” is eventually able to “interpret an extraordinary amount of information from momentary, slight facial responses. He learns the language of the face” (214, 216). Whatever “language of the face” is operating in this film, it is not the one described by Tomkins. There are no “slight facial responses” to interpret because the dolls’ faces do not move at all. Haynes does manipulate the doll bodies and faces to evoke the progression of anorexia and its effects on Karen’s body. He essentially whittled various dolls down to different sizes, and clearly manipulated the face of the Karen dolls such that they become more and more skeletal and eventually cadaverous as the film progresses. But this is a gross rather than finely tuned language, one which calls attention to itself.

By employing dolls, Haynes refuses any pretense of realism or documentation; the story being told here is clearly artificial, something made. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra writes that “one may maintain that there is something inappropriate about modes of representation which in their very style or manner of address tend to overly objectify, smooth over, or obliterate the nature and impact of the events they treat”

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31 Haynes also manipulates lighting, such that Karen alone is frequently shown in full lighting and in scenes of her performing, meeting with her record label or interacting with other members of the Carpenter family, the lighting is shadowy and dark. The association between Karen and light, and the other parts of her life and dark begins with that first shot of Karen singing in her room; the room is filled with sunlight and yellow walls, while just one room over in the living room where Karen’s parents and Richard are discussing the future of the band, the lighting is shadowed. Karen moves from the lightness of her room to the darkness of the living room when they call her over to announce she will now be lead singer.
(103). He goes on to identify representational practices in art, literature, and film that employ a “markedly performative kind of writing” (writing here referring to symbolic composition writ large) which is an “experimental, gripping, and risky symbolic emulation of trauma” (105). We can understand Superstar in these terms: rather than smooth, it is jarring; rather than feigning realism, it is overtly performative. There is no “harmonizing narrative” (LaCapra 103); instead, the film articulates a number of narratives using visual, textual, and aural elements, each of which is highly contradictory and fraught with paradox and gaps in information and understanding. In these ways, Haynes’s film appears concerned with the ethics of its own representational stance and in particular that it not participate in a project of “smoothing over” (a project that it repeatedly exposes vis-à-vis The Carpenters and the nation). The dolls participate in and contribute to this refusal by calling attention to the film’s representationalism.

**Conclusion**

Postmortem biography is particularly ethically weighted. When the subject of a life story is not there to give consent, or to respond to their representation, what ethical duty does an author or filmmaker have to acknowledge that they are speaking for someone who can no longer speak for themselves, and how might that duty inform the formal features of the text? Carol Adams declares that “meat eaters bury animals in their own bodies” (Donovan and Adams 25). This kind of “burial” leaves no trace; there is no monument or memorial, indeed no mourning. Postmortem biographies which offer the biographical subject up as food for the reading or viewing audience by making their subjects smoothly and unproblematically known and seen enacts such a non-burial.
While *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* begins by posing the prototypical biographical question and announces itself explicitly as being the “story” of Carpenter, its relation to biography is complicated and more critical of the genre than demonstrative of it. In assuming such a stance, Haynes calls into question the capacity of biography from within the generic outlines of biography. He also critiques the systems of consumption that posit certain bodies, or subjects, as food for various organisms, to be consumed through processes of visual and narrative display. Haynes disrupts these processes throughout the film, and by employing a variety of non-traditional (and nonhuman) formal devices. Karen Carpenter’s refusal to consume, then, can be understood as a rejection of that system and its logic, as can Haynes’s refusal to offer her up as a biographical or cinematic subject for consumption.

Besides the dolls, Haynes’s use of Karen Carpenter’s actual recordings is the other most infamous element of the film, mainly due to the legal issues that ensued. Critics largely agree that the pathos evoked by this film is connected to Carpenter’s singing voice. Indeed, Desjardins argues that despite its postmodern elements, Haynes’s film actually affirms the possibility of capturing the plenitude of the biographical subject, which is asserted here through Carpenter’s voice (24). Another critic argues that “Karen Carpenter’s authentic singing voice imbues the dolls with their much-acclaimed subjectivity” (Hilderbrand 60). The film’s “surprisingly compassionate look at the life of death of singer Karen Carpenter” (Schaefer qtd in Haynes interview) cannot be attributed to the visual elements, or at least the visual elements in isolation. In this way, Haynes...

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32 For discussion of another film that prioritizes sound over voice, and focuses on the disabled female body, see Cary Wolfe’s “When You Can’t Believe Your Eyes (or Voice)” in *What Is Posthumanism?*
flips film theory on its head, theory which generally asserts the primacy of the visual and narrative elements, with “sound becoming a necessary third register in those films which intentionally use sound as an anti-narrative or de-narrativizing element” (de Lauretis 141). Here, sound, and sound in distinction from voice, is the primary register.

Why does Haynes do this? Why prioritize sound over the visual or narrative? Both LaCapra and Simone Weil identify sound as an element of identification; in LaCapra’s discussion, sound combined with the look of the face can produce overwhelming effects/affects. In Weil’s formulation, sound is associated with language, language that can be overwhelming/annihilating to the listener and as such, effectively silences that sound. Haynes’s use of sound and dolls in Superstar manages to mediate these two kinds of response. There are no agonized human faces which would, combined with sound, overwhelm. There is also a deprioritization of language, both because of the disrupted and jarring narrative elements and his evocation of the scarcity of Karen’s speaking voice in professional and familial environments, but also because Karen’s singing voice, which is the predominant aural element of the film, is distinct from a speaking voice. Of course she does sing in language, but the sound of her voice overwhelms the words being spoken. The affective expressiveness of Karen’s singing voice facilitates an affective engagement in the audience, who is protected from the sight of the anorexic body and face and/or the language of the afflicted. At the same time, Karen is protected from the voyeuristic display of her body and the feigning of her voice. The voice that predominates in the film is Carpenter’s own recorded voice; this is the voice that “speaks” to the audience, and to which the audience responds.
CHAPTER FOUR

J.M. Coetzee’s Female Authors and the Ethics of Speaking For

In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story.

J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (141)

It is a terrible story.

J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (23)

In *Foe* (1986), J.M. Coetzee takes up the story of Robinson Crusoe but with some major revisions: there is now a woman on the island, Susan Barton, when there were only Crusoe and Friday in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Friday is mute in Coetzee’s version, and it is his speechlessness that is “the heart of the story.” Here, Cruso (the spelling of his name is another revision) does not keep a journal, nor does he survive the return to England. And while the first half of *Foe* is set on the island, the remainder of it is comprised of Susan and Friday’s existence back in England and her attempts to chase down the author Foe whom she wishes to write her story. As the novel progresses, her attempt to represent herself becomes inextricably bound to the problem of Friday’s
Elizabeth Costello (2003) is an extended revision of one of Coetzee’s earlier texts, *The Lives of Animals* (1999), which is itself based on his Tanner Lectures at Princeton University. In both versions, Costello is a well-known, aging author who is frequently invited to lecture at universities and colleges. *The Lives of Animals* is a seminal text in critical animal theory; along with Cary Wolfe, the philosophers Jacques Derrida and Cora Diamond have written on it, and it was published with a critical addendum comprised of four response essays by prominent intellectuals including Peter Singer, Marjorie Garber, Barbara Smuts and Wendy Doniger. Whereas *The Lives of Animals* is comprised entirely of two lectures on our treatment of nonhuman animals, and her audience’s response to those lectures, *Elizabeth Costello* includes eight “lessons” (chapters) and a postscript; the extra chapters most frequently center upon Costello’s additional lecture trips and provide information on her ideas about literature as well as background on her relationships with fellow writers, family members and sexual partners. She travels from her home in Australia to locales across the globe to give these lectures, and while she is well-respected for her authorship, her speeches are met with confusion at best and distaste or hostility at worst.

In this chapter I consider Coetzee’s *Foe* and *Elizabeth Costello* in order to explore the particular significance of the female authorial voice within the project of “speaking for,” of representing, voiceless others. In *Foe* and *Elizabeth Costello*, female authorship and authority are central thematics and the female voice that “speaks for” is explicitly authorial, as opposed to the maternal voice attempting to represent self and child in *The Fifth Child* or the stifled daughterly voice which expresses itself through the language of silence.
the body in Superstar. In Foe, Coetzee conceptualizes both authorship and representation of self and other by connecting language, power, and desire; the text is largely preoccupied with language’s power to subject in its multiple valences, and its relation to desire. Through the mute character of Friday, and Friday’s lack of intercourse with the female author figure Susan Barton, Coetzee challenges the ontological status of desire on both a sexual and linguistic level. Friday appears not to desire intercourse on any level, and in fact the text makes unclear whether his muteness is elective; we do not know whether he can not speak or does not desire to speak. This lack of desire has consequences for Barton’s own belief in and drive towards authorship, as does her increasing realization of language as a force. As such the novel questions the imperative to voice and considers the possibilities of voicelessness, and in particular, its consequences for “story.”

In Elizabeth Costello, speech, representation and questions of voicelessness are extended to “the animal.” Here, I argue that representation and the project of “speaking for” are framed as existentially impossible ethical acts and characterized through rhetoric of obscenity. Whereas in Foe there is a paucity of exposure, of either the body or the story, in Elizabeth Costello there is an overexposure and this exposure is associated with wounding: a wounding of both she who “speaks for” but also her audience. Indeed it is a writer of literature and a woman who speaks for animals who declares: “she no longer believes that storytelling is good in itself . . . If she, as she is nowadays, had to choose between telling a story and doing good, she would rather, she thinks, do good” (167). In both texts, the female author figure protagonists exist in a critical proximity to speech, representation and authorship. Each one inhabits an insider/outsider position and exhibits
a kind of double consciousness; neither assumes the necessary or inherent “good” of representation but instead understand it as a function of power with various possibilities and consequences. And both consistently critique their own acts of “speaking for.”

Along with analyzing female authority and the conditions of “voice,” and in connection with that analysis, I argue that Coetzee’s texts propose voicelessness as a force that operates across bodies and texts, and imagine it not only as a disability, or a human condition, but through simultaneously “minoritizing” and “universalizing” perspectives (Sedgwick 1). As such, the texts focus on the specific problems of speech, representation, and authorship, for a white female, an African slave, and nonhuman animals, but also the possibilities that exist outside of or adjacent to them; these possibilities reconceptualize or at the very least call into question the condition of voicelessness writ large. Coetzee’s texts refuse to proceed along some language/languageless, abled/disabled, human/nonhuman binary, where voicelessness is a lack, a problem to be solved, or a silence made to speak. Taken in concert, these two novels show language and representation functioning as a form of power – power over that which is represented, as well as empowering that which is represented – yet the texts simultaneously undermine or unsettle this supposed dichotomy and consistently reveal the failures of language and representation. In so doing, they help us to think through the problems with and our accountability in the project of representation and specifically

33 There is a long-standing debate within Coetzee scholarship concerning his literature’s engagement (or perceived lack thereof) with the political sphere; this debate has been usefully characterized by Macaskill as an opposition between poststructuralists/postmodernists and new historicists, and in a more holistic sense by Attridge as a question over the very capacities of realism as a form. A majority of the scholarship understands Coetzee’s work as a kind of “success in failure” (Chesney); one critic declares that his work “does not lead to quietism but simply to a more considered view of what it means to ‘press on’ into the uncharted future and back to an apparently mapped out past” (Bongie 263).
speaking for differently-speaking others.

Female Author/ity Figures

*Elizabeth Costello* and *Foe* rely upon not only female but specifically female author-protagonists as the voices that attempt to speak for human and nonhuman others. These protagonists’ attempts to represent voiceless others as well as themselves are necessarily bound up with their contentious relations to authority and authorship, and are shown within both texts to be political projects with material consequences as well as personal projects with ethical complications. While Elizabeth Costello speaks for that which is animal, and Susan Barton for disability, in both cases the female author is the join. What inaugurates these speech acts is necessarily related to this female authorship and it is through authorship that each woman understands her precarious position in relation to power and political life. It is this very precariousness, what I will go on to describe as a kind of uninhabitability, that prompts her speech but also necessarily hinders it – an ethically necessary duality. Their acts of “speaking for” are prompted by this uninhabitability but also, importantly, constrained by it, such that the ethical problems of such a project remain foregrounded and are not effaced.

A similar duality, or problematic, is apparent in Coetzee’s own acts of speaking for, or as, female author figures. Duncan McColl Chesney points out that “[i]t is well known that one of Coetzee’s main predilections is a concern with textuality, especially as it relates to authority. Who has the right to speak for whom, and what are the representational, political, and ethical limits of such speaking?” (314). Coetzee of course is not exempt from these questions. In her article “Speech and Silence in the Fictions of
J.M. Coetzee” Benita Parry questions Coetzee’s figures of silence and what she describes as his “feigning” of the female voice. Parry asks: “Is Coetzee’s fiction free from the exercise of that discursive aggression it so ironically displays, since it repeatedly and in different registers feigns women’s writing?” (158). The answer, I think, is “no,” but also that Coetzee’s texts never offer themselves as such. In fact I would argue that the ethical stance is one that attempts to speak for others while acknowledging the difficulties and perhaps impossibility of such a project, rather than a retreat into what Linda Alcoff describes in “The Problem of Speaking for Others” as the “illusion” of “an individualist realm” (21).

While Parry’s concern over Coetzee’s endorsement of a non-verbal signifying systems and his feigning of the female voice are certainly issues to consider, the explicitness with which these particular novels engage with the issue of “speaking for” seems significant for evaluating their rhetorical effect and ethical stance. Discussing Susan Barton specifically, Gayatri Spivak writes “Coetzee has trouble negotiating a gendered position; he and the text strain to make the trouble noticeable. This text will not defend itself against the undecidability and discomfort of imagining a woman” (“Theory” 8). Why then, given this discomfort, does Coetzee so frequently invoke the female voice and in particular female author figures? Because indeed, the female voice and particularly the female author figure is a recurring theme in Coetzee’s work. As I will go on to argue, the female voice is strategically necessary to Coetzee’s critique of representation, because of women’s problematic and critical relationship to authorship and representational systems. But it is also necessary and strategic in relation to Spivak’s point; Coetzee calls attention to his own “speaking for” by invoking female protagonists, figures that raise the
question of his own speech acts, and figures which he fails to seamlessly “negotiate” (“Theory” 8).

The representational instability that imbues many of Coetzee’s texts is founded upon authorial uncertainty, which is embodied and reiterated here via specifically female protagonists. Susan Barton and Elizabeth Costello are not only protagonists, however, they are also author-figures, a formal choice which blurs the line between character and author, represent-er and represent-ed, s/he who speaks and s/he who is spoken. Both Barton and Costello speak, literally, throughout the text (Barton in diary entries and letters, Costello in uninterrupted lectures) but we always know that they are being spoken as well, by Coetzee. Additionally, they are both unsympathetic and unreliable figures. They contradict themselves and their words are frequently met with suspicion by other characters as well as the reader. Indeed, Costello explicitly undermines her own authority when she, a writer of literature and a woman who speaks publicly for animals, declares: “she no longer believes that storytelling is good in itself . . . If she, as she is nowadays, had to choose between telling a story and doing good, she would rather, she thinks, do

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34 In both Foe and Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee uses a number of formal strategies in order to question and critique the possibilities and prohibitions of representation and “speaking for.” One of the key strategies Coetzee employs is his texts’ perpetual calls to their own textuality, through both content and form. In Foe, this commentary occurs in Susan Barton’s repeated requests, “let me tell you my story.” Additionally, the novel’s status as a supposed precursor to the novel Robinson Crusoe, as well as its initial diary form, which then turns into letters (letters which are never read by their intended), both point out its own representationalism as well as its failures as such. Similarly, Elizabeth Costello both comments upon and resists its own status as a recognizable, coherent representation from its very first pages. Indeed, the text begins with a constant reiteration of its own skips and gaps which come in the repeated articulation of this sentiment: “There is a scene in the restaurant, mainly dialogue, which we will skip” (7). The untraditional form of the novel, that of a collection of lectures in The Lives of Animals, and then a collection of lessons (including lectures) in Elizabeth Costello, is significant as well and has frequently been commented upon by reviewers; Marjorie Garber asks “What does the form have to do with the content?” (74) and ultimately answers that the text’s genre, which she describes as an “academic novel,” results in a failure of authorship and authority such that “We don’t know whose voice to believe” (79).
good” (167). Both Barton and Costello seem to be aware of these contradictions and failures at times, but also, at very critical times, seemingly unaware of them.

This failure of author/ity is also evident in Barton and Costello’s erasure. This erasure takes place within the texts, and in some cases in reader-responses to them, and shows at least one of the implications of attempts to speak for voiceless others. In Foe, Susan is ultimately erased from the story of Robinson Crusoe. Foe is, most baldly, the story of this erasure. As the narrative progresses, Susan trades in her desire for self-representation – “let me tell you my story” she demands, over and over – in exchange for a story that will “please its readers,” (63) one which will satisfy their desire, not hers. Simultaneously, she trades in her truck with the project of representation, and her ongoing distrust of it both in its capacity to successfully represent reality, and in its capacity to enslave (more on this below), in the end succumbing to Foe’s authorship and the imposition of his author/ity, the story he wants to tell. The sacrifice of her authorial self is necessary to canonical creation and we, as readers, are witness to this sacrifice. The only other witnesses are Foe and mute Friday, neither of whom are willing or able to tell Susan’s story. It is only Coetzee who will tell Susan’s story, and we might understand this tradeoff as its own kind of ethical exchange: she tells Coetzee’s story, and he tells hers.

In Elizabeth Costello, Costello’s “erasure” from the story occurs most explicitly at the novel’s end, as some other Elizabeth C.’s voice takes over the text in a postscript which is comprised of a letter to Francis Bacon signed by “Your obedient servant Elizabeth C” and dated September 11, 1603 (230). But there is another kind of erasure operating as well, one that takes place in large part outside of the text, or perhaps more
accurately, prior to the text. Readers of *The Lives of Animals* frequently understand Costello as being a stand in for the “real” author, Coetzee, indeed, a mouthpiece through which Coetzee speaks for animals. Writing about the comments that appear in the published edition of *The Lives of Animals*, Diamond criticizes these readings for effectively erasing Costello because they require that “the wounded woman, the woman with the haunted mind and the raw nerves, has no significance except as a device for putting forward (in an imaginatively stirring way) ideas about the resolution of a range of ethical issues, ideas which can be extracted and examined” (48-49). In these readings, Costello herself disappears and becomes a puppet standing upon a lecture stage, ventriloquized by Coetzee.35

Costello’s marginalization by readers and Susan Barton’s marginalization by Foe, their displacement to the margins of the story, reinforces the connection between these female protagonists and the voiceless others for whom they speak. Yet if both characters are marginalized, they are not only that; while their relation to author/ity is tenuous, it is existent, and in this way they are fundamentally different from those for whom they speak. They are speaking subjects even if their speech is suspect. And it is the differences-yet-similarities that point to the strategic significance of a speaking for that takes place in the female voice.

In *Philosophy and Animal Life*, Stanley Cavell wonders if Coetzee by employing the female voice is suggesting that “there is something specifically wounded in the

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35 I understand Coetzee’s revisions in *Elizabeth Costello* as a corrective to this readerly urge; his additions to the latter text provide Costello with a personal history, recount her embodied experiences of sexuality, violence, and aging, and are narrated in large portions via Costello’s own internal monologue.
normal female body” (111), a wounding that somehow enables or inaugurates speech. We might also understand this “wounding” as a condition shared by those bodies considered to be lacking full subjecthood; Rosemarie Garland Thomson points out in her work on disability that “Many parallels exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies. Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority” (19). The registers of this connect between female bodies and other non-normative bodies are complicated. Costello goes so far as to declare: “I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak” (70-1). One way to understand this connection between female and non-normative bodies is through the idea of stigma. In *Stigma* (1963), Erving Goffman describes the condition of being both discredited, and disqualified from full social acceptance, and further, that the stigmatized are understood as “not quite human” (5). Stigma is literally a mark on the body: a brand, a wound.

Thinking about Elizabeth Costello through stigma helps to explain her urge to speak for non/human others and her proclivity to imagine herself as one of them. Certainly both texts repeatedly draw comparisons between their female protagonist and the voiceless other they attempt to represent. Susan and Friday are associated with each other from the very first pages of *Foe*, both in their simultaneous appearance at the moment of Susan’s arrival on the island and in the novel’s characterizations of them through animal imagery. Similarly, Costello frequently characterizes herself as a
performing animal (and is characterized by her son as a “trained seal”).

Affinity between those who have been historically marginalized and stigmatized is one way to understand the presence of the female voice in this text; women’s assumed responsibility to be moral agents or more accurately perhaps moral consciences in the political sphere is another valence that is certainly raised in Derrida’s discussion of the “problem of the animal”:

[V]oices are raised—minority, weak, marginal voices, little assured of their discourse, of their right to discourse and of the enactment of their discourse within the law, as a declaration of rights—in order to protest, in order to appeal . . . in order to awaken us to our responsibilities and our obligations with respect to the living in general. (395)

While the urge and sense of obligation to speak for others that Costello displays may be understood as bound up with her shared affinity to marginalized others – an affinity that extends from corporeal difference to exclusion from representational and political discourses – and a sense of obligation to marginalized others, there is another strategic connect at play, one which is absolutely critical to these texts and their larger ethical project, and which can be understood through the idea of uninhabitability.

Uninhabitability connotes that which is “unfit for habitation” or “unsafe,” “unstable”; all of these meanings co-exist in the varying positions taken up by Barton and Costello. They are unfit, unsafe, unstable; unfit in that they are always already suspect as female authors – “author,” the root of which is “to father” not “to mother.” In Precarious Life, Judith Butler argues that political “[d]issent is quelled, in part, through threatening the speaking subject with uninhabitable identification” (xix). Butler makes this point in
passing in a rather general discussion of those who would publicly criticize state policy, but it is an idea that infuses much of her work, particularly regarding examples of those subjects who speak regardless of prohibition (i.e. Antigone in *Antigone’s Claim*), or who refuse to speak, again, regardless of prohibition (i.e. John/Joan in *Undoing Gender*). In *Foe* and *Elizabeth Costello*, this idea appears in a strategically different register. While frequently the threat of “uninhabitable identification” functions to quell speech, or is a risk that is born by those who choose to speak, I propose that it is this very uninhabitability that enables and produces the speaking subjects in these texts, while at the same time, it is the price that is paid for their speaking. They already inhabit uninhabitable positions in their roles as female author figures and are therefore in a position to “dissent” against authorship and representation itself, and to attempt to “speak for” from a position that does not impose voice or assume the necessary good of representation, but that instead acknowledges and embodies the difficulties of such.

**Foe: Power, Silence, Intercourse**

Both *Foe* and *Elizabeth Costello* are explicitly concerned with the problems of representation and speaking for, and these concerns are articulated via the female voice. *Foe* is more bracingly concerned with the power of representation and self-representation, and the material conflicts and conditions that both produce and constrain it, as opposed to exploring the relation between speech and a kind of existential wounding and impossibility. As a female protagonist, Susan Barton also occupies a significantly different position from Elizabeth Costello; the latter is an established author, and she is consistently invited to speak. Costello receives generous material rewards for
her speech, as opposed to Barton’s desperate material conditions, the poverty of which is
directly connected to her desire for both material and representational autonomy,
independence, and ownership – a story which is “yours alone” (18) or, later, one which
will “please its readers” (63).

Susan’s desire to have her story written and published is juxtaposed throughout
the novel to her profound distrust of representation itself and its ability to reflect
“reality”; in fact it is this distrust, which I would argue is in significant part a product of
women’s exclusion from representational systems, which fuels Susan’s desire to have her
story represented and represented accurately, by her. Costello, on the other hand, takes on
realism from the very start of *Elizabeth Costello*; indeed it is the title of the first lesson,
and her speech is authoritative. While Susan distrusts representation’s capacity to reflect
reality, and struggles with this perceived disconnect, Costello lectures on our communal
loss of faith in representation’s capacity to represent, declaring that “the word-mirror is
broken, irreparably, it seems” (19). We can understand Costello as the end point, or near
end point, of a continuum of thought nascently and insecurely expressed by Susan. For
Susan, the connect between representation and reality is a struggle; for Costello, it is a
battle long over.

Susan’s approach is much more mainstream (despite being voiced by a character
who ostensibly exists in the 17th century) and aligns with long-standing ideas about
representation as power, and conversely the assumption that those who are excluded from
representation, those whose stories are not told or remembered, suffer various
consequences. Erasure is one of these consequences; material hardship is another. Indeed,
a central concern throughout the latter half of the novel is Susan and Friday’s survival in
England, a survival that she understands as being premised on her story being told and told in such a way that it sells: she tells Foe, “More is at stake in the history you write, I will admit, for it must not only tell the truth about us but please its readers too” (63). Why is Susan explaining to Foe how the story needs to be told? Why doesn’t she just write it herself? Because she is consistently, unremittingly, excluded from the conditions that would allow her to author her own story. Not only are women not allowed to be writers in this text in terms of the publishing industry, but Susan’s material conditions disable her ability to write; she herself understands that writing requires a Woolfian “Room of One’s Own”: “quiet, and a comfortable chair away from all distraction, and a window to stare through” (*Foe* 51), comforts which are not available to her.

Susan’s ability to tell her story, to represent herself, is untenable, as is her (and Friday’s) survival in England without income. She therefore depends upon Foe and his representation of her story. The consequences of this dependence are manifold; we know that she will be erased from the story, in the end; Foe’s “speaking for” is necessary to the story’s very existence and yet results in a marked silence. But there is another kind of “speaking for” that is essential to this story being told. It is this “speaking for” that raises the question of not only the power of representation – the power to show, and the power to silence – but also the ethics of representation and speaking for. For if the viability and “pleasure” of this story depends on Susan’s erasure from it, it is equally if not more dependant on Friday’s display within it. Foe tells Susan “we must make Friday’s silence speak” (142) and in this demand there is a double imposition of authority: Foe forces Susan to teach Friday to write, Susan forces Friday to write.

Friday’s lack of speech exposes, in relief, the power of language and speech in a
number of different registers. Giving voice to the voiceless is conceptualized not only as empowering, but as a power over – an imposition of voice. In a welcome extension of Derrida’s work on animals and his relatively uncritical description of the “weak, marginalized” voices that are raised in their behalf, Kari Weil points out the power dynamics thatattend even marginalized voices:

Insofar as animals bring us to think, or to unthink, they can have an immensely powerful effect; but the ethical demands produced by this encounter with animals may be equally unfathomable, if necessarily contradictory. On the one hand, such nonlinguistic thought acts as a call to what Cary Wolfe has called an ethical pluralism: a deep sense of responsibility for and affinity with those who may be different from us; on the other, such a call begs ‘us’ (we who have language) to speak for those who do not (‘we are their voices’ an ASPCA campaign suggests) and thus risks having us reassert our sovereignty over them. (“Killing” 95-6)

Coetzee’s engagement with the ethics of representation including self-representation and speaking for are, in Foe, (dis)articulated via the character of Friday and his relation to Susan and Foe and their attempts at sovereignty over him (or more specifically, his voicelessness).

On a most material, literal level, his voicelessness appears to keep him enslaved to Cruso during their time on the island. Cruso refuses to teach Friday any form of language because he says Friday has no need of it. This is a power that Cruso holds over Friday: it allows him to tell Friday’s story, and it keeps Friday from telling his own story. Susan understands this dynamic as a way that Cruso ruled Friday, and after they have left
the island and Cruso’s authority, she herself attempts to teach him. She thinks, “It is enough to hope that if I make the air around him thick with words, memories will be reborn in him which died under Cruso’s rule, and with them the recognition that to live in silence is to live like the whales” (59). Her understanding of the project of language here is that of an assumed desire to be part of the family of man – to speak and engage with other humans rather than living in silence like the whales.

Yet the text complicates this project in a number of ways. Even as she understands that to teach Friday language is to empower him, and indeed to humanize him, Susan also wonders about her own power over Friday and whether language and words are a way of subjecting others to our will, as a kind of slavery: “I tell myself that I talk to Friday to educate him out of darkness and silence. But is that the truth? There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will. At such times I understand why Cruso preferred not to disturb his muteness. I understand, that is to say, why a man will choose to be a slaveowner” (60-61). This dual capacity of language to enslave and subject another, not only through withholding it but also through imposing it, complicates our ideas about language as a mechanism of self-empowerment and human subjectivity. Susan recognizes this dual capacity and questions her own motives in teaching Friday to speak.

Susan’s capacity to see these valences is unique; neither Cruso nor Foe is able, or perhaps interested, in examining his own relation to power and language. Cruso withholds language from Friday, and Foe attempts to impose it on Friday and Susan; both projects, despite their seeming polarity, rest on the capacity of language to subject. Both Cruso and Foe assume this power as a given, unexaminedly. Susan exists in a very
ambivalent, inbetween position – she is profoundly invested in language and written representation, for herself as well as Friday, despite her profound mistrust of it, and this dual-perspective is produced by her critical proximity to representation. She is aware of what it means to be misrepresented, or left out, and through this distance she is able to see the operation of its power.

Whereas the coercive power of language is acted out by Cruso, and recognized by Susan, it is most forcefully articulated through the author character Foe. Foe’s ideas about stories and language are different from Susan’s, whose understanding of the function of representation is heavily weighted towards accuracy and truth, avoiding misrepresentation, and telling one’s own story, that which is “yours alone.” Foe’s ideas are very much about power as opposed to truth, and the imposition of his author/ity. His priority is what will make a good story, a story that sells, rather than what is accurate or even reflective of how one wants to be represented. But it is even more than the material which concerns Foe; he tells Susan, “In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story” (141). Foe’s investment in languageing Friday extends from material concerns to a desire to thoroughly “reveal” Friday: to both “denude” him and to know him fully, grossly.

Foe’s desire to know and reveal the silences in Friday’s story (as well as Susan’s) stands in sharp contrast to the silences that are left to stand regarding his own story. He is absent and missing for large chunks of the text, and Susan frequently wonders where he is, what he is doing and thinking. These silences are never addressed; instead, Foe exerts force over both Susan and Friday and demands to know their stories. When he finally
does enter the text in the third and final section of the novel, his voice immediately begins to overpower Susan’s. He asks her questions about her time in Brazil before she arrived on the island and says “These are questions that are asked, which we must answer” (116, emphasis mine). The “we” here signifies his voice merging with hers; her story will be told by them, not her, and he requires that the silences of her story be spoken. As Foe and Susan debate her story and who has power over it, her position moves from author to character; from she-who-represents to she-who-is-represented, even as she tells him: “I am not a story, Mr. Foe” (131). Through her interactions with Foe, Susan moves from dubiously equating stories with self and truth to realizing that authorship is about power; she declares in the final section of the novel that “the moral is that he has the last word who disposes over the greatest force” (124). In the end, force, storytelling, and language itself – “the last word” – merge into one another.

Of course it is not incidental that Friday is black and African, a literal slave as well as enslaved through language. Coetzee is clearly connecting the power of language with the power of some humans over others, power dynamics that are embedded in historical, geographic, and political systems. Making another fully visible via representation is a strategic mechanism of control and domination, of dehumanization. Significantly, and in a provocative qualification to the assumption that representation humanizes in its presence and dehumanizes in its absence, Butler argues that it is both absence and a kind of gross presence that denies the human: “For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must show its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give” (Precarious 144). She goes on to
describe the human as “that which limits the success of any representational practice. The face is not ‘effaced’ in this failure of representation, but is constituted in that very possibility” (144). Butler’s point here is an important qualification to the assumption of representation as inherently good or “humanizing”: to be able to fully represent is to somehow master that which is being represented to an inhuman degree. Something “unrepresentable” must therefore remain in the representation. To fully represent is to implicitly argue that the subject is completely known and available to both author and audience; this is a process of objectification rather than subjectivity. Defoe’s representation of Friday in the original Robinson Crusoe, for instance, claims to reveal Friday as an other who is fully knowable, and fully subjected, to his master and his author. Coetzee’s representation of Friday in Foe, alternatively, refuses any claim to knowledge of or authority over him.

Friday’s voicelessness in many ways founds this text and demonstrates the interrelation between representation and the human, including the more specific valences of narrative and disability. Mitchell and Snyder have outlined the ways in which narrative is itself intimately bound up with disability and the fixing of “difference”: they argue that narrative is created through pointing out difference and the call to resolve it in some way, and that frequently this “difference” is corporeal difference. Certainly this is shown to be operating within Foe, as both Susan and Foe struggle to “fix” Friday’s difference, which means not only making his silence speak in the sense of making him speak, but also in the sense of revealing his past and most particularly, revealing the story of his silencing. Significantly, it is Susan and Foe who show the operation of narrative; it is author characters, rather than the text’s author (Coetzee) who struggle to fix his difference. This
desire to fix corporeal difference and to know the conditions that prompted it is indicative of a more general association between narrative and desire, one which has been exposed by a number of feminist theorists. In her analysis of the story of Oedipus, one of the original disability narratives (swollen-footed infant; self-blinded man), Teresa de Lauretis explains narrative as leading towards a revelation: to know and to see. Narrative, then, both produces and satisfies our desire to know and see, and disability is a hyperbolic enabler of this relation; it encourages our desire to know what happened, to make sense of it, and to see its fixing, its resolution. Significantly, in *Foe* this narrative desire is inaugurated yet never fulfilled.

Not only does Friday refuse to reveal himself to either Susan or Foe (and by association, the reader), he himself appears to lack desire completely. Narrative desire, sexual desire, and linguistic desire concatenate in *Foe* at the site of Susan’s repeated attempts at “intercourse” with Friday and his refusal to “answer” her, as well as his seemingly complete absence of desire. Susan cries tears as she realizes that Friday has “a disdain for intercourse with me” (98), and her rhetorical question “Without desire how is it possible to make a story?” (88) simultaneously invokes and challenges the necessary connection between desire and narrative. Friday’s consistent lack of desire for intercourse – linguistic as well as sexual – explicitly exposes narrative’s dependence on desire and these two kinds of desire in particular.

The text complicates the idea of language as a necessary good, or as a means to self-empowerment in its reiteration and refusal of Foe and Susan’s demand and desire for Friday’s story; at the same time, it exposes their dependence upon it. The motives behind Susan’s investment in Friday’s speech and in finding out the “truth” of his story are
manifold: one reason certainly relates to her belief in self-representation – that if Friday speaks, it will somehow connect him back to his past and make him independent. This independence will also allow her to free herself of him; it will correct his dependence on her. But another reason is that Susan understands her own story as very much depending on filling in the absence that is Friday’s story. She says: “Then there is the matter of Friday’s tongue. On the island I accepted that I should never learn how Friday lost his tongue. . . . But what we can accept in life we cannot accept in history. To tell my story and be silent on Friday’s tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty” (67). Susan understands that the success of her story and her (desperate) attempts to have it published are premised on knowing Friday’s story, as does Foe.

Indeed Foe declares that the story of the island without Friday’s story is not sufficient on its own, and he argues that one of the silences of Susan’s story (the time before she came to the island) must fill the lack. Susan’s desire to have the silences of her own story remain silent drives her attempts to make Friday speak; she argues “if the story seems stupid, that is only because it so doggedly holds its silence. The shadow whose lack you feel is there; it is the loss of Friday’s tongue” (117). Her investment in “giving” language to Friday, then, is in many ways always already a project of representing herself, both in having the story told in such a way that it will sell, but also in telling it such that it is a project of self-representation, of telling the story that she “desires to be known by.” Significantly, then, both her and Foe’s story depends upon Friday’s story; their power to represent is limited by his silence. The project of languaging Friday, then, is one of subjectionhood in both its valences: Friday will supposedly come into more full
subjectivity through his acquisition of language; yet this language is also a way of
subjecting him to Foe (and Susan’s) author/ity. His story will become the subject of theirs
– not his own.

Yet Friday never does speak. His story remains silent. Coetzee consistently
exposes and somehow simultaneously resists language’s capacity to subject, to colonize,
and he does this by keeping Friday silent; by failing to satisfy Susan’s, Foe’s and our
desire to know what happened to him; by refusing to dress his wound. Coetzee’s refusal
to make Friday speak is a critical part of his intervention into the ethics of representation,
an intervention which requires him not to sacrifice Friday for the good of the story:
neither Susan’s story, nor Foe’s story, nor Coetzee’s story. Coetzee’s book, too, then, is
one “with pages in it quietly left empty” and these pages remain empty despite Susan and
Foe’s best efforts. Yet the meaning of the “emptiness” or silence of these pages is not a
foregone conclusion; indeed, Coetzee’s text reimagines silence as something quite other
than a lack or absence.

_Elizabeth Costello: Wounding, Obscenity, Unintelligibility_

If the uninhabitability of female author/ity creates the grounds for “speaking for”
in both _Elizabeth Costello_ and _Foe_, the consequences of that speech are dissimilar
because each protagonist’s relation to her own author/ity is different. In _Elizabeth
Costello_, Costello is a novelist who is most famous for her fictional revision of James
Joyce’s _Ulysses_ from Molly Bloom’s perspective. She is a confirmed author, one who has
successfully revised the male canon, one who is invited to speak. Susan Barton, if we
assume Defoe’s _Robinson Crusoe_ as paratext to Coetzee’s novel, is not successful,
neither in her attempt to have her story told (she does not appear in Defoe’s version), nor in her attempt to author it herself.

Costello certainly occupies a more entrenched position within the power structure. She uses her author/ity as a vehicle for the ethical project of speaking for animals. Because she is in a speaking position – literally dramatized by the novel’s narrative structure, which is comprised for the most part of Costello’s invited public lectures to university audiences – her choice of what to speak about is what invokes consequences, rather than her ability to speak at all. And what Costello chooses to speak about is the treatment of nonhuman animals.

It is significant both outside of and within the text that Costello’s concern is not with representing herself; this is a sign of her power and authorship but also of women’s access to literary representation in the late 20th century as opposed Susan Barton’s 17th century. Yet Costello’s disinterest in and unwillingness to self-represent is not merely or only a sign of progress or women’s enfranchisement; it also functions as a form of resistance within the text, one which places her (or through which she places herself) outside of or perhaps more accurately adjacent to power. In fact she explicitly refuses to self-represent despite the fact that this is what is expected of her and what she is being paid to do: “she has responded by electing to speak, not about herself and her fiction as her sponsors would no doubt like, but about a hobbyhorse of hers, animals” (60). Not only does she refuse to speak about herself in her own remarks – both “electing” to speak on that which she desires to speak on, and refusing the dictates of her “sponsors” – but she also refuses to respond to questions about her literary work. Costello will only speak on the problems of our relations to animals, and only to the extent she chooses.
These refusals have very different implications. For one, they show Costello using her position of literary author/ity as a vehicle for speaking for: not for self, or for/on literature, but for “voiceless” animals. And it is not only her sponsors who are discomfitted by this refusal, but her audiences as well. Following the first of her lectures, Costello refuses a question from a woman in the audience, which her son remarks upon: “What was she going to ask? Whispering, people huddle together. They seem to have a shrewd idea. He has a shrewd idea too. Something to do with what Elizabeth Costello the famous writer might have been expected to say on an occasion like this, and did not say” (21). There are two kinds of silence articulated in this textual moment, Costello’s and the woman’s. Costello’s refusals here function simultaneously as both a resistance to authority – she will not speak what is expected of her – and an absolute imposition of authority – she will not let others speak – and it is in this simultaneity that Coetzee invokes, in a different register, the strategic insider-outsider status of the female voice.

In many ways Costello’s speech acts are offensive to her audiences; they are, indeed, a kind of “public grieving” that incites profound discomfort; describing an American newspaper’s refusal to print the obituaries of Palestinians killed by Israeli troops, Butler writes, “We have to wonder under what conditions public grieving constitutes an ‘offense’ against the public itself, constituting an intolerable eruption within the terms of what is speakable in public?” (Precarious 35). The offensiveness of Costello’s speech is that it enacts a kind of wounding that her audiences find deeply uncomfortable, first by acknowledging animal lives as deaths worth grieving but further, by exposing her own grief. Diamond describes Costello’s lectures “as presenting a kind of woundedness or hauntedness, a terrible rawness of nerves. What wounds this woman,
what haunts her mind, is what we do to animals” (47). Costello’s public grieving exposes her own wounding, and vulnerability, to her audiences. The affective responses produced by reminders of the body’s vulnerability have been theorized by thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Mary Douglas, and Julia Kristeva, who argues that the corpse reminds the subject of its own vulnerability to death. Kristeva’s work has been provocatively extended by disability theorists such as Lennard J. Davis; more than simply reminding us of our own vulnerability, Davis claims that encountering the disabled body in fact disables the viewer by producing a “welter of emotional responses” (12). Costello’s wound, one which is not visible but which she affectively “touch[es] on in every word” that she speaks, similarly wounds and disables her audiences in an affective and embodied way. Diamond’s work points to how we attempt to avoid this disabling by “deflecting” our knowledge of our own vulnerability and finitude through philosophical argumentation and rights discourse. Much of Elizabeth Costello and Elizabeth Costello’s project, then, is to refuse this deflection, to critique philosophical language and reason, and instead to show audiences her wound and by extension, wound them. Costello intentionally wounds her audience through her speech, and this capacity to wound is both a product of her authorial power and her own woundedness; it requires both.

If Costello offends her audiences by exposing her own wound and therefore wounding them, she also “offends” them in the sense of indecency, that which should not be spoken not because it is an offense to the person, but because it is an offense to taste. Tropes of indecency and obscenity occur throughout Elizabeth Costello, frequently as descriptors which are applied to Costello’s speech but which she applies to others’ speech as well. In the text’s very first pages, Costello’s son declares that “she writes with an
insight that shakes him. It is positively indecent” (5); this indecency has multiple valences, and a significant one is that which is offensive to good taste. And indeed, the question of “taste” and offenses of it are ripe throughout the novel and bring together Costello’s acts of speaking for animals – speech acts which are frequently understood as offending the taste of her audiences – and the literal sense of taste, that sense of the mouth, and the materiality of animal bodies/meat that lie there. Coetzee’s invocation of the materiality of the mouth and its dual function as both a bodied chewing machine and a metaphysical speech machine is made directly and explicitly in that Costello offends both the taste and the taste of her audiences, consistently, through her speech and through her vegetarianism; indeed, the two are strategically connected as most of her public lectures are followed by dinner or lunch scenes, scenes in which the problem of what to serve to eat are repeatedly remarked upon.

In the juxtaposition of these scenes, a juxtaposition which extends the discomfort she invokes in her public audiences to the discomfort she produces in her son’s home, over both the practice of her vegetarianism and her animal advocacy, Coetzee reveals the consequences of Costello’s speech acts. The primary consequence is Costello’s profound isolation from both the “human” community but also from her family, and this isolation is psychic as well as physical. Others feel discomfited and exposed by her “indecency,” while she feels she is being made mad by theirs:

. . . I no longer know who I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see
the evidences . . . Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain
out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why
can’t you? Why can’t you? (114-15)

Along with questions about her sanity and intelligence, Costello’s own ethical status is
repeatedly called out, both explicitly and implicitly. Towards the beginning of the text
her son questions her speech acts and argues: “There is a difference between cleaning up
after animals and watching them while they do their business. . . . Don’t animals deserve
a private life as much as we do?” (33). The question of privacy and its relation to the
ethical is a second significant component of the novel’s attention to indecency, or, as is
repeatedly invoked as the novel progresses, obscenity. Indeed, Costello herself echoes her
son’s concern after reading a book about the Holocaust by a fellow author, Paul West, a
book which she calls “obscene”: “Obscene because such things ought not to take place,
and then obscene again because having taken place they ought not to be brought into the
light but covered up and hidden for ever in the bowels of the earth, like what goes on in
the slaughterhouses of the world, if one wishes to save one’s sanity” (159). The problems
of having this author, Elizabeth Costello, argue that the author Paul West’s representation
of the Holocaust should not be spoken, and further, that his speech is obscene, like
bringing into light “what goes on in the slaughterhouses of the world,” are manifold. The
irony, or hypocrisy, of her desire for silence on the topic of evil and her claim about its
consequences calls into question her own speech, which is itself concerned with bringing
into light what goes on in the slaughterhouses of the world, and very frequently by
invoking the Holocaust as a metaphor for such practices.

Researching the etymology of the word “obscene” for her lecture attacking
West’s text, Costello “chooses to believe that* obscene* means *off-stage.* To save our humanity, certain things that we may want to see (*may want to see because we are human!* ) must remain off-stage” (168-69). The relation between that which we want to see, because we are human, and that which we must not see, in order to save our humanity, pivots on West’s act of *speaking for* dead humans. “See” in this context is a placeholder for speech and representation, both in the sense of the images written representations convey, as well as the “seeing” of narrative. By displaying humans obscenely, their human vulnerability made visible, public, NOT left off-stage, Costello argues that West’s representation negates not just the humanity of his subjects, but also her (and his, and other readers’) own humanity. This kind of gross display is something that Costello claims she used to do, but does no longer. Yet she is unreliable; much of what has come before this point in the novel undermines her claims here, or shows her guilty of the same acts she denounces West for committing.

Significantly, Costello’s concern over the human and “saving our humanity” is absent from her own speech regarding the treatment of animals. For Costello, some amorphous boundary line exists between her own oral and written speech concerning the horrors of animal cruelty and West’s representation of the horrors of the Holocaust. This line is particularly unclear in that she uses the Holocaust as an interpretive (narrative) device in her own speech acts, frequently aligning factory farming practices with those of concentration camps. What are we to make of this? Costello advocates for those who can not speak, yet denounces West for it. She understands representation of those who cannot speak, of those who are the objects of cruelty and horror, as both necessary and dangerous to the human and “humanity.” Her speech attempts to dissolve the line
between the human and animal – by comparing factory farms to concentration camps; by describing herself as a testifying animal; by declaring that she can think her way into animal being – yet at the same time reinstates that line by attacking West’s project without considering the similarity of her own. Why is she justified in identifying with and speaking for silent animals, but he is not to speak of and identify with silent humans?

We can understand these extreme contradictions through the idea of uninhabitability. Throughout *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello’s contradictory relation to author/ity consistently materializes in her simultaneous demands upon speech and representation, authors and audiences, as well as her implication and complicity within these frameworks. She refuses to submit to author/ity, yet silences others through her own. She speaks for the silent, yet criticizes another author for doing similarly, desiring his silence. She rails against representations of “obscenity” yet her own speech is consistently characterized as “indecent.” In these juxtapositions and ironies, Costello can be understood as exhibiting a double-consciousness, an insider-outsider status, as well as a kind of cognitive-disconnect, and in fact, we can understand her vacillation between these opposing states of being as a kind of uninhabitable identification in the sense not just of instability and unsafeness, but impossibility. The uninhabitability of Costello’s position both gives rise to and suppresses the act of speaking for, but it also makes Costello’s character existentially impossible. There is no rational way to make sense of her and yet she speaks. 

**The Middle Voice**

In the olden days the voice of man, raised in reason, was confronted by the
roar of the lion, the bellow of the bull. Man went to war with the lion and the bull, and after many generations won that war definitively. Today these creatures have no more power. Animals have only their silence left with which to confront us. Generation after generation, heroically, our captives refuse to speak to us. All save Red Peter, all save the great apes.

(Elizabeth Costello 70)

Coetzee’s texts strategically engage the female voice and women’s problematic proximity to representation and author/ity in order to show human language as a force, power, indeed a kind of colonization, one which is pitched in opposition to other kinds of language (nonhuman, nonlinguistic), as well as silence, and one which depends on the prioritization of human language over other languages. Having first arrived on the island Susan declares, “But who, accustomed to the fullness of human speech, can be content with caws and chirps and screeches, and the barking of seals, and the moan of the wind?” (8). And one which depends on the flattening out of difference within language; Costello’s son argues, “But you must surely concede that at a certain level we speak, and therefore write, like everyone else. Otherwise we would all be speaking and writing private languages. It is not absurd – is it? – to concern oneself with what people have in common rather than with what sets them apart” (8). While the text begins by articulating these ideas about language, however, it does not end with them.

In the final sections of both Foe and Elizabeth Costello, it becomes profoundly and constitutively unclear who is speaking, when, and to whom – the text unravels before our very eyes. Indeed, each text ends in a hyperbolic, or gross, presence and absence of
language. While *Elizabeth Costello* ends in pure language, in the form of disembodied letters: “Not Latin, says my Philip – I copied the words – *not Latin nor English nor Spanish nor Italian will bear the words of my revelation*” (230), *Foe* ends in an absence of language as an unknown narrator surveys silent bodies underwater: “But this is not a place of words . . . . This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday” (157). In this utter presence and utter absence of language, the text’s endings call to account language’s capacity to represent, and imagine language as incapable of bearing the weight of both revelation and bodies. These are texts with pages left empty: where desire remains unsatisfied, or is absent; where there is no narratorial denuding or “knowing.”

In each of these texts, the problems and in fact dangers of speaking for voiceless others are shown, without being reasoned away by logical proof, nor effaced through coherent representation and revelatory narrative. Barton and Costello’s speech acts in effect unspeak them; neither protagonist can fully inhabit the author/ial position. Like Red Peter, Barton and Costello occupy a middle position; neither the “voice of man” nor silent animal, each one attempts to speak for those who can or will not. Like the feminist theoretical tension between the desire and demand to speak and the move towards frameworks that are uneasy with speech and unconvinced of its absolute political necessity, Coetzee’s texts consider the problem of voicelessness, and an ethical engagement with representation of such.

The form of these texts has significant implications for current discourses on the human and nonhuman, and representation’s implication within their construction. In his ongoing concern with connection between “representationalism and speciesism” or
representation and the human more generally, Cary Wolfe considers representational engagements with the human/nonhuman that are not merely “thematic” but also “operational” (xx-xxi). He compares approaches to art in which writing is understood “as the direct communication of a semantic and as it were external content, of which the artwork is a faithful (or perhaps ‘dramatic’) enough representation to didactically incite ethical action and change on the part of the viewer” against writings “understood as representation divided against itself” (151-2). Clearly Coetzee’s texts are representations divided against themselves; the problem of speaking for voiceless others is at once their “thematic” but also their “operation.” Thematically, the texts approach the problem of speaking for others by showing the difficulties and dangers of such a project but through a constant reiteration of attempts to do so. Operationally, the texts repeatedly and strategically fail in their attempts to represent: stories remain silent, ethical questions unresolved. They are representations, but failed ones. They are about the attempt to speak for voiceless others, and the uninhabitability of such a position.

While Coetzee’s work certainly is concerned with addressing the absence of representation which is so frequently employed in the project of dehumanization – of other humans, and of nonhuman animals – rather than recuperating the human or animal other back into the family of man, Coetzee exposes the codependence of representation and the human. For if we agree that there is indeed a connection between representationalism and speciesism – that our understanding of what it means to be human not only desires and demands a specific kind of languaged representation and revelation, but depends upon them – then these texts’ repetitive and constitutive failures of representation – their failure to “speak for,” successfully, but a failure which the text
narrates for us, which we witness ourselves – challenges not just the ethics of representation and speaking for, but necessarily the notions of the human and nonhuman as well.
CONCLUSION

There would seem little need for proceeding further in this history. Imagination will readily supply the meager recital of poor Bartleby’s interment. But ere parting with the reader, let me say, that if this little narrative has sufficiently interested him, to awaken curiosity as to who Bartleby was, and what manner of life he led prior to the present narrator’s making his acquaintance, I can only reply, that in such curiosity I fully share, but am wholly unable to gratify it.

Herman Melville, “Bartleby the Scrivener” (2388)

Like Karen Carpenter, Bartleby the Scrivener starved himself to death. Carpenter is of course famous for it; Bartleby is quite less known for his food refusal, but it is very clear in the short story bearing his name that the revision of Bartleby’s infamous statement “I would prefer not to” to “I prefer not to dine to-day” results in his death in the prison yard. Whether we should describe Bartleby, like Carpenter, as suffering from anorexia or instead as performing a hunger strike is unclear and is informed by gendered associations with food refusal that rely upon long-entrenched associations between the masculine as active, political, voiced, and the feminine as passive, pathological, silent. However we characterize it, Bartleby’s food refusal literally and

36 Susie Orbach’s seminal text on anorexia, *Hunger Strike* (1986), alludes to this very indeterminacy in its title.
figuratively ends life, while simultaneously generating a kind of life: that of narrative. Ostensibly occurring at the “end” of the story, Bartleby’s death is in fact the germinal seed that inaugurates Herman Melville’s 1851 short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street.”

Like Superstar, Melville’s story raises the question of narrating a life postmortem – in generic terms, a question of biography, of telling the story of a life. It also raises the question of speaking for or representing someone who is literally not there to speak for himself, and in Bartleby’s case, of someone who in fact repeatedly refuses to speak for himself. Food is not the only thing refused in each of these stories; the imperative to voice and self-representation is refused, and, accordingly biography is refused, or at least, biography understood as the knowledge of and narrative revelation of a life. Postmortem biography immediately raises the question of who is allowed, or authorized, to tell someone else’s story, particularly when that story is of their life, our lives being what is, as Susan Barton declares, most “ours” of all our possessions. Further, how should such a representation proceed, and why it should happen at all. To what ends?

In Melville’s short story, Bartleby’s employer declares: “While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature” (2363). Implied by this statement is that the story of a life, and therefore the life itself, should be subsumed within and contribute to “literature.” The lawyer’s answer to the “why” and “to what ends” questions would be that life stories are assumed and necessary parts of the literary whole, that the failure or refusal to produce such a life story, a biography, is an “irreparable loss.” Essentially, the lawyer understands
the end goal of a life story (of a life) is its value as a “story” and further that a life story that is incomplete or unavailable is even more valuable, because its absence functions as a danger to the whole.

Melville offers for critique, via the lawyer, a utilitarian and consumerist logic that posits individual life as meaningful in its consumption by the system, literary or capitalistic, a consumption that depends upon the acquiescence of that life to making itself known. Through the lawyer character and his desire for Bartleby’s story, Melville challenges the knowability of others by proposing that there are others we can not know, who prefer not to be known; instead, he reorients literary attention towards our desire to know them, and our frustration when we can’t. Like Friday in Foe, Bartleby refuses intercourse with his handlers, refusing to speak for or about himself and in effect throwing a wrench into the system that requires his life be known and narrated. Bartleby, like Friday, is blank pages and Melville, like Coetzee, shows this silence rather than making it speak.

Bartleby the scrivener, like Karen Carpenter the dead singer, like Foe the mute slave, like Elizabeth Costello’s nonhuman animals, and like Ben the autistic child, challenges the imperative of voice, and in its place makes a space for voicelessness. I began this project by asserting that voicelessness is generally understood as a condition to be overcome, with voice prioritized, and it is largely neglected in both feminist and disability theories. I asked: what if the goal was not to give voice, but to allow voicelessness? To think through voicelessness? To imagine what literary representation and narrative might look like that allows for voicelessness? I conclude this project by asserting that voicelessness has its own ethical and literary force: it is not simply a
problem to be overcome, a way station on the path to subjectivity, a silenced story that begins for revelation. Voicelessness is a form of embodiment that both requires and deserves critical examination, on its own terms, in both life and in literature.

This project begins the work of taking voicelessness seriously by examining contemporary literary texts that themselves center voicelessness, voicelessness that is not made to speak, and by considering the following questions: first, what does female embodiment have to do with voicelessness, and why do each of these texts pair female voiced characters with voiceless figures? Women’s critical proximity to voice and representation informs their engagement with voicelessness and the project of speaking for others, such that they inhabit an insider/outsider status, one which allows the operations of speaking and silencing to show. In each of these texts, voiced female characters come to understand how their own self-representation often depends upon exposing another or making another speak. At the same time they show that the assertion of voice and self-representation are not only emancipatory projects, but are bound up with forces of desire and demand.

Next, what does voicelessness have to do with literature and in particular what does it have to do with narrative? Narrative both desires and demands revelation, revelation of both story and body, and this revelation is usually understood as a coming into subjectivity and the successful realization of the choice (which is really a non-choice) of being known and understood, as opposed to mysterious and enigmatic. Paying attention to voicelessness exposes this desire and demand, and each of these texts thematizes this desire and demand while formally refusing, subverting, and perverting it through strategies of underexposure and overexposure. Each text refuses to provide
satisfactory, consumable narrative revelations and in the process chooses voicelessness.

Finally, what are the larger implications of thinking through voicelessness? Why does voicelessness matter? On a more obvious level, thinking about voicelessness requires us to think about how we tell someone else’s story, and how we advocate for those who cannot speak, be they human or animal. But it also challenges us to rethink disability and in particular how some disability issues which have historically been narrowly defined, are in fact not narrow but have relevance across populations. Thinking through voicelessness also challenges us to rethink what has been ontologized and offered as a non-choice: that voice is good and necessary, and relatedly, that being recognized as worthy of ethical status requires self-representation and knowability.

To begin the work of theorizing voicelessness, I have drawn from an archive of feminist, disability, and posthumanist theory. These fields are particularly engaged with questions of voice and voicelessness, and have in recent decades considered not only their theoretical and intellectual problems, but the material consequences of our ideas about such. Feminism has long been concerned with the power of voice and the psychic, political, and material effects of silence. Feminist theorists’ rich corpus of work on the ethics of representation, of speaking for one’s self versus being spoken for or about, and in particular, the significance of the female voice and female authorship, serves as a theoretical bedrock, but one which I challenge by juxtaposing it with disability and posthumanist theory. Like feminism, both disability studies and posthumanism take a critical stance towards representation and voice, but they go further by not just challenging literary and political systems that bar some bodies from representation, but by challenging the “good” of representation itself.
Disability studies has produced a rich field of scholarship that considers the social and political problems of voice and of being represented by others; recent disability studies within the humanities has added analyses of the politics of literary representations of disability to this scholarship. But along with advocating for self-representation, some disability theory also challenges the notion of voice and argues that we must rethink what counts as voice, and how much voice counts. Some forms of disability must or should revise our ideas about voice and communication; others defy these very terms and expose the implied equation of voice, subjectivity, and the notion of a life worth living, or further, life itself. What about those humans who will never come into voice, or expose their stories? If they can’t? If they don’t want to?

These are questions that posthumanist theory, and critical animal studies in particular, has been grappling with in a growing corpus of work that examines the equation of human language and ethical status. Such work lays bare what is alternately implied or avoided in most feminist and disability theory: that our valuation of other bodies depends upon a languaged revelation of self that asserts (exposes) a certain kind of subjectivity, and that this revelation is not simply a privilege but a demand, one with consequences for what we consider to be life at all. Exposing and challenging this equation and demand exposes and challenges the ways in which we assign value to life, and what counts as life, across all different forms of embodiment.

These three fields – feminism, disability, posthumanism – are necessary and productive tools for theorizing voicelessness. They also have much to offer each other. For too long, the condition of being voiceless, like the condition of being woman, or disabled, or animal, has been something to be avoided, or overcome, or resolved in some
way. “Voiceless Bodies” asks that we begin to think otherwise.


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