

THIS IS ME, THIS IS WHO YOU THINK I AM:
DISGUST AND THE LIMINAL AGENCY OF YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of liminal teen agency in Heather O'Neill's *Lullabies for Little Criminals* and Raziel Reid's *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*. By focusing on two teen characters from working class families, one female, one queer, I investigate how teens assert their autonomy while still living under the constraints of classism and (hetero)sexism. While these teens are able to retain some form of autonomy, I argue that their agency is often obscured or overwritten by the disgust reactions of other characters in each novel. Drawing on affect theory, particularly Sara Ahmed's body of work, Jonathan Dollimore, and Sianne Ngai, and drawing on Joan Sangster's work on the construction of female delinquency, I investigate the significance of the disgust reaction, and how the reaction is a means of reasserting power over the willful, resistant teen body. As the Canada Reads competition reveals, the middle class, cis-hetero readerly discomfort with these novels becomes an avenue through which this literature is deemed "unpalatable," providing a justification to doubt the testimony of narrators like Baby and Jude. This thesis is ultimately an intervention into doubted testimony, and demonstrates how affective disgust is the source of doubt. Since agency and testimony are tightly intertwined in each novel, doubting testimony becomes a violent form of denying these characters, and the authors, agency.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page.....	i
Descriptive Note.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
INTRODUCTION:	
How Could You Do That? Agency, Disgust, and Neoliberal Subjectivity.....	1
CHAPTER 1:	
“Lights, Camera, Attack”: Discomfort and Denied Testimony in Canada Reads.....	21
CHAPTER 2:	
Fictionalizing Reality: Oppression, Sex, and a Complicated Agency.....	46
CHAPTER 3:	
“Cute as a Button” and a “Hot Tamale” Too: The Disgust/Desire and Disgust/Fear Paradigms	74
CONCLUSION:	
Embodied Boundaries: Thinking Beyond Baby and Jude.....	115
WORKS CITED.....	121

INTRODUCTION:

How Could You Do That? Agency, Disgust, and Neoliberal Subjectivity

We need to ask how these analyses [of girlhood as an identity] mirror, rather than challenge, constructions of neo-liberal subjects. In short, reading agency off identity practices brings the danger of encouraging us to look for what we used to treat as social structures of race/class/gender *within* girls

– Dawn Currie, “From Girlhood, Girls, to Girls’
Studies: The Power of the Text” (29, emphasis in original)

Defined as a branch of feminist studies that focused specifically on young women from childhood to adolescents, girlhood studies was meant to resist the neoliberal tendencies inherent in early conceptions of young femininity, in which youth was only significant insofar as it impacted womanhood. However, as Dawn Currie’s argument about neoliberal subjectivity in girlhood studies demonstrates, the evolution of girlhood studies in the 1990s has allowed for the reproduction of neoliberalism in the field. Starting with Angela McRobbie in the 1970s, early girlhood scholars criticized the historic focus on “problem girls”: girls with significant struggles in mental health, eating disorders, addiction, or prostitution (Currie 29). McRobbie argued that this approach only served to “reinforce the stereotypical image of women with which we are now so familiar,” in which women are portrayed as irrational subjects (McRobbie 209). She is also credited with “put[ting] girls’ agency on the map in a practical way” by focusing on girls who participate in traditionally feminine hobbies such as engagement with the chick lit genre (Mitchell 91).

Early girlhood scholars in the 1990s drew upon McRobbie’s work, claiming that “girls’ culture might be organized around commercial texts (such as magazines for

girls),” and that female friendship could be a subversive tactic for resisting patriarchy at a young age (Bradford and Reimer 3). However, this approach assumes a bourgeois framework as McRobbie and others look at “adolescent girls and bedroom culture and the commoditized worlds of romance as consumed in magazines” (Mitchell 91). These approaches also focus on how young girls perform their girlhood identity, a methodology that Currie critiques for its focus on the individual. In this framework, larger social structures such as race, class, and sexuality, are ignored and instead the resulting analysis individualizes this violence within a subject. When social structures become internalized within a subject, they reproduce a neoliberal reading of the girl whereby her race/class/gender becomes an internalized “problem” that she faces in isolation from larger social structures. Thus, her behaviour, deemed ‘poor’ by [hetero]sexist, capitalist, patriarchal authorities, becomes imagined solely as a product of her own internalized failure and not evidence of these larger structural issues.

Inspired by Currie’s criticism of the tendency in girlhood studies to locate systemic violence within a subject, this thesis offers an exploration of pre-teen agency more broadly in contemporary literature. The two novels and protagonists I examine, Baby from Heather O’Neill’s *Lullabies for Little Criminals* (2006) and Jude Rothesay from Raziel Reid’s *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* (2014), were both featured on the CBC Canada Reads Competition.¹ The debates that occurred place a similar emphasis on the characters as individuals that Currie identifies and often prioritize the panelists’

¹ *Lullabies for Little Criminals* won the 2007 competition and *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* placed second in the 2015 competition.

comfort with sex and language. Consequently, the panelists, using their middle class, cis-hetero privilege, often experience a discomfort with Baby and Jude that denies these protagonists agency by putting their testimony into question. Under the guise of an entertaining program, the debates that occurred in the 2007 and 2015 competitions highlight how some readers of Reid's and O'Neill's novels are often uncomfortable with the approach each writer uses to address the hypersexualization and disgust for marginalized teenage subjectivity. Instead of working through feelings of discomfort, which, as I will use Sara Ahmed's theories to argue, are often rooted in how these characters disrupt hegemonic heteronormativity, these panelists remain uncritical of that disgust reaction. In explaining their discomfort, the Canada Reads panelists violently doubt the credibility of each narrative by focusing on details like explicitly sexual content and crude language instead of focusing on the classism, sexism, fetishization, and homophobia these novels address. As I will explore further, in questioning credibility the panelists both deny O'Neill's and Reid's agency, as the authors are framed as writing unbelievable testimonies, and Baby and Jude's agency, as the first person narrative structure acts as the foundation of their autonomy in each novel.

While this thesis will begin with a discussion of this violence in Canada Reads, I am ultimately interested in Baby and Jude's agency and the processes that obscure their agency in the novels. I argue that while Baby and Jude do assert their own autonomy, which is complicated by the oppression they face due to their class, gender (expression), and sexuality, it is the disgust reactions of other male characters that minimize this agency. These reactions highlight the supposed excessiveness of Baby's and Jude's

conduct, whether that be sexual or criminal excess, and the male characters then use this excessiveness to justify their abjection of Baby and Jude. As a result, I assert that the disgust reaction is foundational to the neoliberal reading of these characters, as it individualizes Baby and Jude's behaviour and rearticulates this behaviour not as a method of resisting the hegemonic structures under which they live, but as pathological, deviant acts.

In *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, Baby is the thirteen-year-old daughter of a single teen father, living in poverty in Montreal's Red Light District. Her class, gender, and age all mark her as a hypersexualized body, and patriarchal, classist moral judgements of her body are a result of these markers. For example, when Baby sees her classmate's father, she notes the repulsed look he gives her saying, "It didn't surprise me that Marcus's dad addressed me like that... Since I'd turned twelve, a lot of the adults I know had started to pretend that they didn't know me. They gave me disapproving looks" (167). These judgments are rooted in histories of moral surveillance of working class women, which feminist social historian Joan Sangster describes as follows: "Policing [women's supposed criminality] was conditioned by an ideology that saw certain neighbourhoods, family forms (single parents), and class backgrounds reproducing delinquency" (*Regulating Girls* 140). Thus, while class and gender complicate Baby's agency, her single parent household, poverty, and hypersexualized body are also systemic indicators of how the agency she does retain becomes obscured.

In *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*, Jude is also the child of a single, working-class parent, but his gender expression and sexuality are what complicate his

agency and garner disgust reactions from other characters. Ahmed explains the impact of heterosexuality on queer individuals, writing, “It is important to consider how compulsory heterosexuality – defined as the accumulative effect of the repetition of the narrative of heterosexuality as an ideal coupling – shapes what it is possible for bodies to do, even if it does not contain what it is possible to be” (*Cultural Politics* 145). My analysis will show that while Jude demonstrates an agency that resists compulsory heterosexuality, disgust compromises his autonomy and reaffirms compulsory heterosexuality. I include Jude in this project to highlight how Currie’s concerns about individualization and the reproduction of neoliberal subjectivity is a concern that extends beyond the realm of girlhood studies and can affect teens from various marginalized subjectivities.

To date, the academic literature on *Lullabies for Little Criminals* often focuses on the themes of addiction, prostitution, or the connection between the geography of Montreal and how Baby’s body is understood.² For example, Ummni Khan’s work engages with the systemic structures that create Baby’s situation, as she explains that the novel “provide[s] a context to explain how a pimp can inveigle a vulnerable girl into selling her body, and what conditions are necessary to escape,” ultimately arguing that, “*Lullabies* provides implicit social commentary on the systemic failures that compel the protagonist to participate in the sex trade” (302). While Khan begins to resist an individualistic reading of Baby’s character, as she considers the systemic issues that

² For example, Ummni Khan’s “Prostituted Girls and the Grown-Up Gaze” focuses on the theme of prostitution and how it is impacted by the gaze of other characters, and David Beneventi’s “Montreal Underground” is an exploration of Montreal’s Red Light District and the impact of this space on the bodies that occupy it.

create Baby's situation, the connection between systemic classism, systemic sexism, and prostitution removes potential nuance from an understanding of Baby and her agency. By focusing solely on prostitution, Khan reproduces a hypersexualized reading of Baby's body, where sex overwhelms other aspects of her character. This hypersexualization is often what creates the link between a female body and supposed criminality, thus making the female body an object of surveillance. Sangster comments on the historical significance of this connection: "Women's bodies, Foucault also emphasized, though culturally constructed, may become 'saturated with sex' and thus 'the objects of discipline,' an observation that applies strikingly to the legal handling of prostitutes and 'promiscuous' women" (*Regulating Girls* 9). While Khan's work does not objectify Baby, nor place her under moral scrutiny, her analysis still "saturates" Baby's body with sex and ignores other aspects of her character. When Baby is analyzed based on a singular identity like that of the sex worker, her agency cannot be fully understood because the discussion lacks a consideration of other significant aspects of her character. Thus, my thesis focuses specifically on expressions of autonomy that are unrelated to Baby's sex work. Instead, I focus on her survival instinct, performativity, and her relationship with other characters such as Jules, Alphonse, and Xavier. In doing so, I shift the focus from why Baby is disgusting to how this emotion impacts Baby. By critically examining disgust's impact, I emphasize the violence that this affect causes and how such violence is related to larger questions about the workings of sexism and classism.

Conversely, the academic literature concerning *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* focuses on the social controversies that surround the novel rather than providing a

close analysis of the novel's content. For example, Robert Bittner's article, "The Mainstreaming of Controversy," raises questions about the perceived audience of children's literature, the difficulty of assessing Young Adult literature, and how Reid's novel fits in these genres. Bittner concludes that "Reid's choices in language and imagery revel in the grotesque and skirt the boundaries of sexual acceptability, relying on near-cannibalistic imagery and the eroticization of a child's body," and that the novel "ends up reinforcing existing assumptions of teens as troubled, violent, and constantly engaging in diverse sexual practices" (173; 174). This focus on language and "social acceptability" obscures discussion of the novel's portrayal of violent homophobia, suggesting that the language devalues the novel. My thesis challenges Bittner's framing of the book's violence as gratuitous by engaging directly with larger questions about systemic homophobia. I assert that Jude demonstrates autonomy as he tries to reassert control over his body. I contrast complicated agency with the disgust and shame reactions of other characters, particularly Matt, Luke, and Ray, suggesting that these reactions serve to reassert heteronormative, hypermasculine power over Jude's resistant body. Additionally, I explore why criticisms of the novel, particularly those from the 2015 Canada Reads competition, are largely concerned with the explicit, sexual language. Drawing on Ahmed's concept of heteronormative comfort and discomfort, I frame the panelists' discomfort with the language as a form of disgust reaction that prompts them to doubt Jude's narrative testimony, an argument I also make about Baby's testimony during the 2007 competition. Since these protagonists' ability to narrate their stories is a form of

agency, I argue that when the panelists question the validity of Baby's and Jude's stories, they deny Baby and Jude's agency.

The focus on language and discomfort demonstrates how Canada Reads panelists use their power to assert that these books do not conform to their ideal of the palatable truth teller. As two subjects who are viewed as provocative because of their drug use, crass language, and pragmatic relationship to sex, panelists do not view Baby or Jude as ideal subjects, and their narrative voices do not conform to what Leigh Gilmore calls "dominant cultural notions of legitimacy" for teens (*Tainted Witness* 9). In her book *Tainted Witness*, Gilmore explains how the testimony of marginalized subjects is doubted:

When that narrative [the testimony] conforms to dominant cultural notions of legitimacy, the "I" who narrates it will accrue authority... A variety of subjects can claim the power of the form by telling the 'right' story, but telling a dissonant story, one that challenges tolerances around who may appear in public, will placed marginalized subject at greater risk of being doubted. (9)

Gilmore defines testimony as "event and practice," of "the story of my life, told by me" (3; 9). When she specifies that the "right" story will be accepted, Gilmore refers to a model minority figure who, while they experience trauma, conforms to cisheteronormative ideals and therefore presents their trauma in a way that is palatable. Conversely, the "dissonant" storyteller, the one who challenges these cisheteronormative ideals through their speech, appearance, and behaviour, is less likely to be believed because their body disrupts an entire cultural system (9). Furthermore, the movement of testimony through "testimonial networks... that connect the discourse and sites through

and across which persons and testimony flow” is limited by doubt (3). Since Baby, and especially Jude, do not conform to any sort of ideal, and are not model minorities, privileged readers like the Canada Reads panelists doubt their testimony and disrupt the movement of their testimony among marginalized readers who would read and believe their stories.³

Gilmore’s connection between narrative palpability and doubt reflects Currie’s critique of neoliberal subjectivity, especially in Gilmore’s discussion of the success of memoirs in the book market. Gilmore argues that the current increase in popularity of the neoconfessional memoir “represents a neoliberal formation in which the potency, and threat, of nonnormative witnesses and narratives that catalyzed this period of vitality in life writing were absorbed and neutralized by a newly ascendant redemption narrative” (*Tainted Witness* 86-7). The increase in sales of memoirs and life writing highlights the self-help and redemption narrative arcs, which focus on the neoliberal ideal of finding strength within the self to overcome problems that are also located within the self. This prioritization dismisses the dissonant narrator, who is “shamed, sidelined, and turned into examples of the excesses of identity politics,” and whose testimony is consequently “tagged as both lies and inconvenient truths” (88). For characters like Baby and Jude, the ability to deliver their narrative is a form of agency, as they create a space to recount their trauma. However, since neither story ends in conclusive redemption, Baby and Jude become dissonant storytellers whose inability to “overcome” their struggles becomes

³ Baby and Jude’s behaviour elicit a disgust reaction. As I will explore in later chapters, that their bodies are considered “excessive,” in Bullen’s words, demonstrates how they cannot control themselves enough to be model minorities (54).

proof that they are lying.⁴ As my use of Gilmore and Currie suggests, a neoliberal analysis of Baby and Jude's character, as it leads to doubt, denies these two protagonists the very foundation of their agency: their ability to tell their life stories.

To frame my understanding of agency, I look to Lois McNay's *Gender and Agency*. In her discussion of the relationship between gender identity and agency, she argues,

The performative construction of gender identity causes agency in that the identificatory processes, through which norms are materialized, permits the stabilization of a subject who is capable of resisting those norms. The process of resistance takes place primarily at the boundaries of the corporeal norm, in the domains of 'excluded and delegitimated' sex (34-35).

McNay's description of resistance reflects Judith Butler's notion of being "*in trouble*" (*Gender Trouble* vii, emphasis in original). Butler concludes, "trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it" (vii). To make trouble, for McNay, is to assert agency at the boundaries of hegemonic comfort. As Baby tries to articulate her own identity, whether by reference to her performed criminality or her desire to become older,⁵ she articulates a new identity for herself, one that resists infantilization and puts her at the boundaries of what is deemed 'acceptable' behaviour

⁴ *Movies* ends with Luke murdering Jude, thus silencing Jude. While Baby remains alive and seems to have quit using heroin by the end of *Lullabies*, her story does not end with conclusive proof that she has necessarily "overcome" her struggles. Instead, the narrative ambiguously ends with Baby leaving Montreal with no discussion of her life once she leaves.

⁵ Baby's desire to be older is often expressed through her hatred of her own clothing. For example, when Peaches makes a pass at her, she says, "I knew that he was coming on to me, although I couldn't figure out why. There were plenty of good-looking teenage girls around. I was sitting there wearing a long-sleeve shirt with dragons on it and a pair of green Adidas shorts. On my feet were a pair of brown wallabies. I dressed like people in Haiti who'd been sent cast-off clothes" (148). Baby's connection between clothing and desirability demonstrates how she views her clothes as identificatory markers that contrast her own self-identity. Thus, Baby's actions, especially her sexual decisions, become a means of resisting the identificatory markers on her body.

for a thirteen-year-old. Similarly, Jude's movie metaphor and clothing allow him to articulate a new identity for himself that might be capable of resisting compulsory heterosexuality. As I will explore further in Chapter Two, it is the relationship between Baby and Jude's worldviews, their expressions of (gender) identity through performativity, and their sexual decision making that allow them to resist the norms forced upon them.

Whereas an understanding of performativity and sex allows me to analyze Baby and Jude's agency, emotional disgust reactions allow me to explore how this agency is fraught because it is simultaneously compromised. Disgust is often framed in academic literature as creating distance between the individual experiencing disgust and the thing that is causing the disgusted reaction. Rooted in Freudian theory, which posits that disgust, particularly sexual disgust, is the result of repressed homosexuality, the emotion has become equated with repression. Expressed disgust overwrites other emotions one may be experiencing and therefore allows one to deny these other feelings or desires. This framework posits that disgust allows us to deny other emotions and keep unwanted feelings private. In her explication of the Freudian model, Claire Kahane notes that "If disgust is the embodiment of disavowal [or repression], it is an affect that pushes us away from what simultaneously exerts a powerful attraction on us" (422). Although, according to Freud, the thing that disgusts us is the same thing that we desire and are pulled towards, the visceral reaction that the emotion creates works as a stronger push away from the object of desire. Disgust and desire are therefore simultaneous emotions; our disgust is a result of the shame we feel from desire, but we only express our disgust.

Focusing on the simultaneous existence of disgust and desire, Ahmed expands on how the disgusted subject and the object of disgust are positioned as a result of these conflicting emotions:

The contradictory impulses of desire and disgust do not necessarily resolve themselves, and they do not take us to the same place. Disgust pulls us away from the object, a pulling that feels almost involuntary, as if our bodies were thinking for us, on behalf of us. In contrast, desire pulls us towards objects, and opens us up to the bodies of others. While the affect of being pulled may feel similar at one level, at another, the *direction* or *orientation* of the pull creates a very different affective relation between the subject and object. (*Cultural Politics* 84)

Like Kahane, Ahmed analyzes the emotion in terms of a push/pull dynamic, but Ahmed describes it as feeling *involuntary*, wherein the mind feels as though it has no control over the body. Although the mind has lost control, suggesting that the subject experiencing disgust loses their autonomy through this emotion, Ahmed still discerns a power relationship between the subject that feels disgust and the object that elicits disgust. The pull of the subject away from the object creates distance, which Ahmed elaborates on: “The relation between disgust and power is evident when we consider the spatiality of disgust reactions, and their role in the hierarchizing of spaces as well as bodies” (88). The distance between subject and object emphasizes a desire to get away from the object of disgust; the object is undesirable and thus the subject wishes to avoid contact and association with the object. The space between subject and object, and the size of said space, therefore demonstrate the subject’s power over the object. The subject’s desire to distance themselves from the object, whether uncontrolled or not, demonstrates the undesirability of the object, thus placing the object in a state of disenfranchisement.

While I have described disgust thus far as a repressive mode of protecting the subject's inner, hidden desire for the object, some scholars have opposed this position. In his book *Sex Literature and Censorship*, Jonathan Dollimore critiques the repression model of disgust. He argues that while the emotion can be repressive, it can also be expressive, in which the visceral feeling of disgust allows other emotions to surface as well. If disgust is seen as only ever repressive, Dollimore explains, then we "can't quite comprehend why we sometimes construe things as disgusting just because we *consciously* desire them, and for diverse reasons" (55, emphasis in original). In viewing disgust as something that can occur alongside *conscious* desire, the desire becomes known to the subject. If, to use Ahmed's framework, disgust pushes the subject away from the object of disgust, and desire pulls the subject towards the object, how can someone *knowingly* experience two paradoxical emotions simultaneously? For one emotion to not repress the other is to suggest that it is possible for disgust and desire to work together. Since disgust and desire appear to be opposite emotions, for one to recognize both and willingly experience both emotions would be to work through contradiction.

Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank have used the work of Silvan Tomkins to critique the repression approach as well. They argue that the repressive mode of understanding disgust and shame has dominated literature about affect, and that other readings need to be included to nuance our understanding of the two emotions. However, they also recognize a tendency to use both Freud and Tomkins as a means of identifying a "core self," or someone's 'true' persona that is obscured by repression and expressive behaviour (502). Instead, they use Tomkins's understanding of affect theory to

demonstrate that affect is distinguishable from the “drive system,” or our instinctual responses, because “any affect may have an ‘object.’ This is the basic source of complexity of human motivation and behaviour” (AIC, 1:347).” (503). To return to Ahmed, the push and pull of a disgust reaction can only occur *in relation* to another object. Therefore, as an affective response, disgust and shame do not reveal something inherent about the subject. Rather, the two emotions are only expressed in relation to others and are only expressive of the subject rather than constitutive of the subject. By using the relational framework, I resist the possibility of focusing on an individualized reading of disgusting bodies that would mirror a neoliberal reading of identity, to borrow Currie’s words. I emphasize the power dynamics in the representation of poor girls and queer youth as objects of disgust under neoliberalism because I examine how they are *made* disgusting through their relationships with others and explore what the impact of that reaction is, instead of framing these young people as already disgusting.

I use expressive disgust as my analytical framework because the emotion so often seems to overpower Baby and Jude’s bodies. As Ahmed explains, “When the body of another becomes an object of disgust, then the body *becomes* sticky. Such bodies become ‘blockages’ in the economy of disgust: they slow down or ‘clog up’ the movement between objects, as other objects and signs stick to them” (*Cultural Politics* 92). As I will explore, stickiness is key to understanding *how* disgust obscures agency. Gilmore invokes the language of stickiness when she discusses lying, writing, “An accusation of lying proves especially sticky judgement within a testimonial network. It not only taints specific witnesses but also spreads doubt and represents a form of destabilization to

which the testimonial “I” is especially vulnerable” (*Tainted* 81). When Baby and Jude’s bodies become sticky, other accusations of excessively sexual behaviour, criminality, morally deviant behaviour, lying, and powerlessness are more likely to attach themselves to their bodies and overshadow their own articulations of their identity and agency. Thus, the disgust reaction of other characters is an extension of systemic sexism, violent homophobia, and classism. In particular, Gilmore’s connection between lying and stickiness highlights how doubt spreads and denies a witness like Baby or Jude the ability to even give testimony, which is a key form of control. Focusing on this connection between expressive disgust and these various forms of systemic violence therefore allows me to analyze how these social structures affect agency without having to locate these social structures explicitly within Baby and Jude as individuals.

I also use the expressive mode of disgust to analyze these two novels because it best reflects the emotional reactions of other characters, particularly Johnny, Alphonse, Jules, Matt, Luke, and Ray. These characters vary in age from Jude’s young adolescent peers to older adults, and vary slightly in class.⁶ While there are female characters who react with some form of disgust to the two protagonists, Baby and Jude seldom mention these reactions and tend to focus on their relationships with the other male characters.⁷ My focus on the reactions of male characters in each novel not only reflects this narrative

⁶ As Baby’s father and Jude’s step-father, Jules and Ray are both lower class. Johnny comes from a single parent household where his mom works a steady job as a nurse. Matt and Luke’s class positions are less clear, but it is assumed that they come from slightly wealthier families than Jude based on Luke’s photos from family vacations.

⁷ For example in *Lullabies*, Isabelle, who is the caretaker of the foster home Baby is sent to at the beginning of the novel, tells a social worker, “God bless her, but the child [Baby] is wild... she’ll never be normal... You read the report, didn’t you... the child’s fingernails were long. Who ever heard of long fingernails on a twelve-year-old?” (O’Neill 45).

fixation in each novel but also reveals a key power imbalance between the masculine and feminine. While Jude uses he/him pronouns, his fondness for makeup and his mother's clothing resists hypermasculine gender expectations for cisgender men.⁸ Jude's classmates and step-father code Jude as feminine, with his classmates referring to him as "Judy" to portray him as female. This framework thus creates a forced binary between masculine and feminine in each novel, in which masculine disgust is an abjection of working-class femininity.

In O'Neill's novel, characters' emotional reactions to Baby are seldom suppressed. As I will examine, Johnny consistently accuses Baby of delinquent behaviour, Alphonse publicly pursues Baby, and when Jules suspects Baby of misbehavior, she always describes how he yells at her. We see that Baby's body and behaviour are simultaneously disgusting and desirable, infantilized and hypersexualized. Disgust is at the root of many of Johnny's, Alphonse's, and Jules's outbursts and it exacerbates and rationalizes the other emotions that characters express towards Baby. Infantilization serves a similar purpose of justifying other judgments. After all, Baby is "just a little kid," so she is too young to be using drugs or having sexual encounters, a fear that is at the core of her father's accusations about her supposed delinquency, but she is also young enough that her agency is not taken seriously, as seen in her relationship with Alphonse (O'Neill 284). Disgust therefore works as an affective mode through which Jules and Alphonse rationalize their actions and obscure Baby's own testimony and

⁸ While Jude does not explicitly discuss his gender in the novel, other than to say that he looks back with fondness on his infancy because nobody spent time questioning his gender (Reid 17), author Raziel Reid refers to Jude as a "gay boy" in his interviews and uses he/him pronouns when referring to Jude ("Raziel Reid: My Book is Not 'Porn'"). I therefore use he/him pronouns to align with the author's pronoun use.

agency. It allows these masculine characters, one of whom has fatherly authority over Baby, to justify their disassociation from Baby's undesirable character as a sex worker and drug user and justify their taking advantage of her because of her youth and her perceived lack of agency. While Baby does exercise agency, it is also complicated by the oppression she faces as a hypersexualized, infantilized, disgusting subject. Therefore, these characters can dismiss Baby's nuanced agency in favour of an either/or reading of autonomy through their disgust.

Similarly, in Reid's novel, Matt, Luke, and Ray often express their disgust for Jude's body and behaviour, whether through subtle body language or overt homophobic comments and violence. Unlike the disgust directed at Baby, however, their disgust for Jude's body is not accompanied by desire, but instead by either shame or fear.⁹ As an openly gay young boy who chooses to wear makeup and heels, Jude is not only hypervisible because of his clothing, but he also challenges heteronormativity. This difference creates a source of discomfort for the hypermasculine characters in the story – Luke, Matt, and Jude's stepfather Ray – since, as Ahmed points out, "Heteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. Those spaces are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in; the surfaces of social space are already impressed upon by the shape of such bodies" (*Cultural Politics* 148). These characters react in violence and disgust to the threat made to their comfort in order to maintain their heteronormative power over Jude.

⁹ As I will explore in Chapter Two, Abel provides a counter to this point, as he shares a more intimate relationship with Jude.

When Jude does try to defend himself, and is successful in some instances, other characters retaliate with extreme acts of homophobia and violence to overpower Jude's defiant behaviour. While the disgust reaction does not remove Jude's agency, it works to obscure that agency so that these characters can view his attempts at autonomy as unsuccessful, even though the readers bear witness to a more complicated struggle between agency and social denial.

This thesis will be composed of three chapters. In the first, I use the Canada Reads debates from 2007 and 2015 as examples of the types of discussions these novels prompt in contemporary social reading culture. Focusing on the privileged gaze of the middle class, cis-hetero reader that Canada Reads emphasizes, I demonstrate how readerly contempt for these novels often parallels the disgust reactions of the characters in the novels, with both reactions obscuring agency. I include this chapter to demonstrate how panelists' privilege can overshadow liminal agency through the denial of the protagonists' testimony, especially from a neoliberal, middle-class positioning. While there are surely other readers, especially young marginalized readers, who identify with and believe Baby and Jude's testimony, Canada Reads demonstrates how neoliberal middle-class values overshadow these readers' voices. The Canada Reads competition ultimately incurs a double violence in these two competitions: it denies Baby and Jude agency because it puts their reliability into question, and in doing so, the competition denies readers the opportunity to speak up in support of these stories because it frames the novels as distasteful literature. Thus, even though both novels ranked high in the competition, with

Lullabies being the winning title in 2007, the overwhelming disgust can overshadow success.

In Chapter Two, I begin my intervention in Canada Reads' framing of these novels by exploring Baby and Jude's complicated agency. Drawing upon McNay's work on the relationship between gender and agency, Butler's discussion of performativity, and José Esteban Muñoz's concept of queer futurity, I argue that Baby and Jude's ability to survive, while constrained because of their class, gender, and expressions of sexuality, ultimately demonstrates a liminal agency. In other words, when Baby and Jude assert their autonomy, they temporarily resist the confines of their class, gender, and sexuality. I specifically look at their fictionalized articulations of reality as a means of giving themselves power over their lives. Working within an altered reality, these two are able to perform identities that can potentially put them in tenuous control and allow them to survive. The impact of this control is best seen as they develop relationships with other characters such as Xavier and Alphonse in *Lullabies*, and Abel in *Movies*, which I examine to understand how their agency develops throughout each novel.

Once I have defined Baby and Jude's liminal agency, I then analyze, in Chapter Three, how the disgust reactions of other characters obscure this complicated agency. Specifically, I identify a disgust/desire paradigm in *Lullabies for Little Criminals* and a disgust/fear paradigm in *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*. These two paradigms function similarly in each novel: they position Baby and Jude as sticky subjects, in Ahmed's sense, believed by others to transfer their "deviance" onto others' bodies through association. I demonstrate how the disgust reaction in both novels functions as a

form of protection for other characters, specifically Johnny, Alphonse and Jules in *Lullabies* and Matt, Luke, and Ray in *Movies*. Through this emotion, these characters push Baby and Jude away, protecting themselves from contact with their sticky bodies. In this sense, hypermasculine characters like Johnny, Alphonse, Jules, Matt, Luke, and Ray reaffirm hegemonic masculinity by attempting to deny Baby's and Jude's personhood. However, the protagonists' testimonies are still effective despite this delegitimization.

CHAPTER ONE:

“Lights, Camera... Attack”: Discomfort and Denied Testimony in Canada Reads

As a government-sponsored national literary event, inspired by the popularity of *Survivor*-style competitions, Canada Reads significantly influences the sales of novels.

Many of the past winners and runners-up, such as Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* in 2002, saw a significant increase in sales across the country after the competition aired (Fuller, *Reading Beyond* 27). The competition also instigates widespread

discussions of the novels. Book clubs often read the novels and follow the competition, and, with the introduction of social media sites, discussions surrounding the shortlisted novels occur frequently as the competition airs (Fuller, *Reading Beyond* 6).¹⁰

Under the guise of an entertaining program, the debates that occurred in the 2007 and 2015 competitions highlight how the panelists are often uncomfortable with the way O’Neill and Reid address the hypersexualization and disgust for marginalized teenage subjectivity. Instead of working through feelings of discomfort, which, as I have used Sara Ahmed’s theories to argue, are often rooted in how these characters disrupt hegemonic heteronormativity, panelists often remain uncritical of that disgust reaction. In this chapter, I argue that panelists often minimize Baby and Jude’s agency, calling their testimony into question by focusing on issues like explicitly sexual content and crude language instead of focusing on the classism, sexism, fetishization, and homophobia these novels address.

¹⁰ Think, for example, about the large increase in discussions surrounding Thomas King’s *The Inconvenient Indian* that occurred after the book was eliminated in 2015. Craig Kielburger, who defended the book, even commented on Day Three that he had noticed the spike in conversation about the book after the events of Day Two (“Canada Reads 2015: Day Three”).

The panelists' judgments of *Lullabies* and *Movies* show Ahmed's concept of stickiness at work. As Leigh Gilmore argues, "Testimony moves, but judgment sticks" (*Tainted Witness* 5). Gilmore further elaborates on the potentially violent impact of personal judgment on testimony and believability as she explains,

How judgment is added to testimony takes a specific form within modernity; namely, that stigmatized aspects of identity will be added to witnesses as weight their words cannot bear. Race, gender, and sexuality align with citizenship to produce sinking doubt and to permit legitimate violence against persons whose identities can be freighted in these ways. (6)

While hegemonic doubt, a doubt that protects privilege, is itself a form of violence, as it denies the witness the autonomy of telling their truth, doubt also opens the possibility for further violence against marginalized subjects like Baby and Jude. Ignoring their testimonies perpetuates the violence that these two speak of in their narratives by questioning whether the violence is true. Moreover, I argue that questioning the validity of Baby and Jude's narratives is but one method the panelists use to deny these protagonists' agency. As I will explore in this chapter, panelist discomfort also denies both the authors, and Baby and Jude by extension, the autonomy to construct their own character and their ability to resist hegemonic cisheteronormative violence.

Canada Reads is a *Survivor*-style competition in which each of the shortlisted novels is defended by a well-known Canadian. The CBC Books page on Canada Reads elaborates on the decision to use well-known Canadians instead of literary critics, explaining, "The final ingredient was inviting celebrities who were avid readers but not the 'usual suspects' when it came to talking about books on the CBC. Athletes and musicians, humanitarians and comedians, a hip hop artist and an astronaut have defended

books in the Canada Reads no-holds-barred debates” (“About Canada Reads”). The concept of inviting non-experts to be participants on the show reflects attempts to increase the show’s appeal; the debates become seemingly intellectually accessible because the panelists have the same amount of experience discussing literature as the assumed ‘average Canadian reader.’

That being said, the use of the celebrity figure to “tap into the culture of spectacle” often garners criticism from academics (Fuller, “Reading Spectacle” 10). In Danielle Fuller’s and DeNel Rehberg Sedo’s work, *Reading Beyond the Book*, they claim that viewers of Canada Reads might question the “‘authority’ of the person [defending the book] or the ‘authenticity’ of his or her interpretation” (110). Ultimately, Fuller and Rehberg argue, “regardless of how much celebrity sparkle and multimedia interactivity the organizers can afford to produce, making shared reading fun and pleasurable is, it seems, ‘the key’” (24).

Emphasizing pleasure in the competition is a theme that Laura Moss also identifies and critiques. In her editorial, “Canada Reads,” Moss first describes how a “game” like Canada Reads has increased popular support for national literature, but that in highlighting entertainment, Canada Reads creates a

disjuncture between the program’s nation-building rhetoric and its depoliticization of the literary works. Part of it lies with the immense cultural responsibility placed on the celebrity panelists. Canada Reads has become a new instrument of culture formation. It is intent on drawing Canadians together by creating a shared cultural background. (7)

While Moss is right to highlight how Canada Reads is “a new instrument of cultural formation,” her suggestion that the only political potential of Canada Reads is its ability to depoliticize literature, and therefore maintain a hegemonic national narrative of Canada, does not leave room for the competition’s subversive political potential. Douglas Kellner’s *American Nightmare* provides a counter to this point as he explains, “In a global networked society, media spectacles proliferate instantaneously, become virtual and viral, and in some cases becomes tools of sociopolitical transformation, while other media spectacles become mere moments of media hype and tabloidized sensationalism” (3).¹¹ Throughout its 17-year run, Canada Reads has seen intensely political moments that reveal the show’s potential to either be a tool of “sociopolitical transformation,”¹² or tools of maintaining race relations, class structure, concepts of (dis)ability, and, in the moments I will look at specifically, cisheteronormativity.¹³

To nuance my analysis of the debates, I first want to consider how the subject position of John K. Samson and Lainey Lui – the two panelists who defended *Lullabies*

¹¹ For context, Kellner defines “media spectacles” as “media constructs that present events which disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information, and which become popular stories which capture the attention of the media and the public, and circulate through broadcasting networks, the Internet, social networking, smart phones, and other new media and communication technologies.” (3).

¹² For example, think of the final day of the 2018 competition when Jeanne Bekker continued to interrupt Jilly Black while Black was discussing colonial privilege and the lived experiences of marginalized folks. Bekker, refusing to acknowledge her privilege, accused Black of attacking her, to which Black replied, “Let me tell you what you just said: ‘I feel like.’ So, whatever you are feeling, take it to the altar, because I’m not the one responsible for your feelings.” (“Canada Reads 2018: Day Four”). This moment went viral in media, with journalists praising Black for validating black women’s experiences with white fragility, “because women of colour who speak up are perceived as being combative for the pure audacity of asserting ourselves. Because we [women of colour] are not entitled to have a voice” (Kaur).

¹³ In his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord expresses a similar sentiment writing, “The spectacle is the existing order’s uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue. It is the self-portrait of power in the epoch of its totalitarian management of the conditions of existence.” (Debord). Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer also elaborate on this idea arguing that as a form of spectacle, media events can provide distraction from an underlying, highly politicized, message within the spectacle that maintains cultural hegemony (Horkheimer and Adorno).

for Little Criminals and *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* respectively – influenced how each novel was discussed. According to Sharon Bala’s statistical analysis of Canada Reads, there have been 37 male-identified defenders and 43 female-identified defenders, with 13 male-identified winners and 3 female-identified winners (Bala).¹⁴ There have been 34 female authored books on the show and 46 male authored books on the show: 24 male panelists defended male authored books, of which 8 went on to win; 22 female panelists defended male authored books of which 3 won; 13 male panelists defended female authored books of which 5 won; and 21 female panelists defended female authored books and none have ever won (Bala). These statistics demonstrate that Lui, as a female panelist, was already at a disadvantage during the competition. This gender bias was particularly evident when Wab Kinew, the 2015 host and moderator, introduced Lainey during the first two days of competition. Unlike the other panelists, whose accomplishments he praised, he trivialized Lainey’s job as a gossip columnist, calling her “Canada’s biggest gossip” (“Canada Reads 2015: Day Two”). This introduction delegitimizes Lainey’s authority, as her work as a reporter and talk show host is reduced to petty gossip. Moreover, by praising the other panelists’ critical accomplishments, Kinew further exacerbated the supposed discrepancy between Lui’s ability to provide an articulate defense of Reid’s book and the other panelists’ debate skills. In doing so, the audience and other panelists go into the competition with a bias; Kinew’s introduction suggests that Lui will not provide a nuanced analysis of the book, and therefore any

¹⁴ Bala’s statistics are based on data from the Canada Reads competitions that occurred between 2002 and 2017.

arguments she makes about *Movies* will not be taken as seriously. Consequently, the novel is not only delegitimized by its genre and supposedly crude language but also delegitimized by the representation of the panelist defending it.¹⁵

Unlike Lui, who was new to the Canada Reads competition, John K. Samson had previously won Canada Reads in 2006 and was a returning panelist when he defended *Lullabies for Little Criminals* in the 2007 All-Star version of the competition. Although all other defendants that year were also previous Canada Reads winners, and therefore had the same authority as Samson, his legacy as a previous winner gave him credibility that Lui did not have in her competition. As a result, his arguments and comments about *Lullabies* would be taken more seriously than Lui's arguments about *Movies* because he had already established himself as a successful panelist.

Even though Samson had similar authority as his fellow panelists, he positioned himself as the weakest competitor. While Samson's self-criticism could suggest that he had the least authority as a panelist, his description of why he is the weakest panelist narrows the potential topics of conversation surrounding his novel. On the first day of the 2006 competition, Samson was asked how he felt about his opponents and about being a panelist on Canada Reads, to which Samson replied, "I'm terrified of my opponents, but I'll have to hide it somehow... I don't really have it in me to be especially political. I'll probably be one of those panelists that other people pick on" ("Canada Reads 2006: Day One"). When Samson explicitly states that he has no interest in being political, he

¹⁵ *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* is listed as a Young Adult novel. This genre, as Sean P. Connors explains, is often not taken as seriously because of the commonplace idea that Young Adult literature is a "low art" form (70).

frustrates any attempted political reading of his comments. He establishes the idea that his arguments will be ‘neutral,’ non-political comments about the books, reflecting a supposedly less biased panelist. Though this comment was said during the 2006 competition, this nonpolitical stance becomes part of Samson’s profile as a panelist, and this profile stays the same in 2007. By attempting to remove politics from his comments, Samson removes the opportunity to discuss the political implications of both his arguments and, by extension, the books he’s defending. Thus, the conversations surrounding *Lullabies for Little Criminals* are implied to be depoliticized, which in turn limits the ability of panelists to delve into the nuances of Baby’s agency in the novel because the issue of her agency is a necessarily political one.

In both the 2007 and 2015 competitions, the narrative voice of Baby and Jules are met with intense scrutiny as the defendants debated the ‘believability’ of the narrative voice and its effectiveness at drawing readers in. On the first day of the 2007 competition, Bill Richardson addressed the “voice of the child” in each of the five novels, asking the panelists how well each writer was able to write from a child’s perspective.¹⁶ The panelists almost unanimously agreed that the writing in *Lullabies* was unrealistic, with Steven Page saying “I don’t always believe that it’s a child’s voice that I’m hearing. There’s a sense of... this poetic dreaminess that I think children don’t necessarily have,” and Denise Bombardier claiming she can “see the adult, the writer, behind the child” (“Canada Reads 2007: Day One”). Both of these comments, alongside other comments made by the other panelists, raise questions about what we consider an “authentic” pre-

¹⁶ Richardson was the host and moderator of the 2007 competition.

teen or teenage voice. While authenticity is itself a loaded term, the idea that a singular, authentic teenage voice exists, and the idea that the adults evaluating the book will be able to effectively determine whether this book has an appropriate voice, reflect Ummni Khan's concept of the "grown-up gaze". In her work on *Lullabies*, she describes the grown-up gaze as "the authority to create knowledge, while the child is the object and bearer of that knowledge" (303). Using their authority as contenders on Canada Reads, the panelists assert their own definition of the authentic teenage voice. More specifically, Page's use of the term "poetic dreaminess" and Bombardier's assertion that there is a visible "writer behind the child" suggest that the novel is *too* articulate to be from a young person's perspective. Thus, Baby becomes the "bearer" of an inauthentic voice because of the panelists' arguments. Along with the persistent assertion throughout this debate that Baby is a *child* and not a preteen, teenager, or young adult, the defenders use their authority as adults and as panelists in a literary competition to minimize Baby's intellect and thus infantilize her. The panelists are, for the most part, uncritical of the upper class, cis-hetero, adult privilege they possess, privileges that violently disregard Baby's testimony.

In 2015, there was a similar focus on Jude's narrative voice; however, the concern was with Jude's morality and vulgarity. The continuous references to *National Post*-writer Barbara Kay's "scathing" article about *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*, and Craig Kielburger's first critiques of the novel on Day Two, drew out a conversation about Jude's authenticity and narrative voice ("Canada Reads 2015: Day Four"). In her review of the novel, Kay claims, "The message I drew – and think young people will too

– is that the ‘authentic’ narcissism of queer/transgender identity exempts one from the obligation to mature” (Kay). Although this part of Kay’s article was not featured on Canada Reads, frequent references to the article and the fact that Kinew read excerpts from the article during the fourth day of competition,¹⁷ make Kay’s arguments a central part of the debate surrounding *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*. The introduction of a right-wing perspective encourages a conservative, neo-liberal discussion of the novel; it prompts panelists to consider and respond to a debate that uses an individualistic reading of Jude’s character to make broader assumptions about queerness, rather than responding to a prompt about the impact of violent homophobia on Jude. As a result, Kielburger echoed similar sentiments to Kay in his extended critique of the novel. His critique focused specifically on how the graphic language in the novel makes the book “unreadable” for a large audience. He concludes, “I think this book is disrespectful to young people. I think it builds stereotypes instead of tearing them down on young people” (“Canada Reads 2015: Day Two”). Again, the question of authenticity arises as it did in 2007, with Kay using the term explicitly in describing what the narrative voice of *Movies* does. Kay’s connection between vulgarity and an attempt to excuse negative, ‘immature’ behaviour places emphasis on Jude’s general personality instead of the homophobic, unsupportive circumstances that influence Jude to behave in this manner. In comparison, Kielburger’s connection between vulgarity and negative stereotyping suggests that the author is to blame for the characters’ shallowness, and that it is the use of stereotypes that

¹⁷ Kinew read an excerpt from the latter half of the article where Kay writes, “As for moral growth, there is none. Jude begins and ends as a liar, a thief (steals from mom *and* the Salvation Army), a sex-teaser of strange men, a stalker, a masochist (he deliberately incites bullying episodes) and a narcissist” (Kay). This section parallels the section I quote above, as both are focused on maturity and character growth.

removes nuance from these characters and not the focus on vulgar language that removes nuance. Kielburger's comment places an emphasis on vulgarity while also obscuring any speculation about what that vulgarity might say about the characters and their perceived agency. In both cases, the disgust for the language in the book prevents the debate from delving into the content and context of the dialogue, thus ignoring any readings of agency we might find in an analysis of the dialogue.

By keeping such a focus on the appropriateness of language, and on the authenticity of the teenage voice, the panelists position Baby and Jude as unreliable narrators. When asked about the "redemptive power of storytelling" as it relates to Baby's narrative voice, Samson even admits "I don't think that Baby is necessarily reliable as a narrator," despite the fact that he had been arguing throughout the competition that we need to believe Baby's trauma ("Canada Reads 2015: Day Four"). This focus on reliability relates to Kerry Mallan's work on the prevalent theme of survival in Young Adult fiction in her article "On Secrets, Lies, and Fiction: Girls Learning the Art of Survival". She explains that, in fiction, the narrative voice of young girls is a testimonial to the trauma they endure. When discussing the focus on questioning whether the narrative voice is telling the truth, she asks, "Who is able to tell the truth? About what? With what consequences? With what relation to power?" (37). Despite Baby and Jude's attempts to tell the truth about their lives, their ability to tell the truth, the panelists minimize these characters' ability to tell the truth; just as the panelists are able to assert their "moral authority" over these two characters, they are also able to assert their claims about what a believable narrative would look like. Moreover, although both of these

novels are based on real events – for O’Neill, *Lullabies* is based on her experience growing up in downtown Montreal, *Movies* is based on the murder of teenager Larry Fobes King – they are barred from telling a truth and being believed. The focus on a connection between the characters’ language and their reliability reveals that Baby and Jude, and O’Neill and Reid by extension, do not have access to the same kind of power that these panelists do. Thus, when they tell the truth, they face the consequence of being silenced by similarly class-privileged readers.

The effect of Jude’s unlikeability on readers’ willingness to engage with the novel demonstrates how unlikeability leads to doubt. Kielburger even says about *Movies*, “We’re not trying to make a book about new uses of swear words, new uses of sexual graphic language. My fear is that we’re not going to get to the real issues that so desperately need to be covered of homophobia and bullying because Canada won’t go five pages into the book” (“Canada Reads 2015: Day Two”). Although Keilburger appears to be advocating for a better reading of Jude’s testimony, his own critique of the book focuses on its graphic language.¹⁸ As previously discussed, Keilburger’s comment about negative stereotypes suggests that he does not believe this book’s narrative because he has reduced it to its language. This treatment of Jude, and similar treatments of Baby,

¹⁸ It is important to note that not all panelists expressed similar sentiments as Kielburger. Panelist Kristin Kreuk even discussed how she tried to work through her feelings of discomfort saying, “I was very torn about the book. My initial reaction felt a lot like what Craig is talking about. And then I wrestled with myself.” (“Canada Reads 2015: Day Two”). On the following day, Kreuk discussed this further, explaining, “It was a visceral experience that brought me to, it brought me to a place of wanting to learn more, and wanting to understand more, and feeling like I am limited in my understanding, which was very important for me” (“Canada Reads 2015: Day Three”). Kreuk’s change in perspective about the book reveals that it is possible to resist a simplified, voyeuristic reading of Jude’s character, but that doing so requires one to work through their feelings of disgust and discomfort. Without this work, readers, like Kielburger and Bailey, reproduce similar understandings of Jude as the other characters in the novel.

demonstrate how Gilmore's discussion of the palatability of testimony is rooted in Sara Ahmed's notion of heteronormative comfort. As she explains, when a body challenges heteronormativity, it creates discomfort for people whose power is reliant on the heteronormative structures of society. Similarly, Jude's and Baby's testimony challenges certain heteronormative ideas concerning adolescence, abuse, and sexuality, which causes discomfort for some readers like Kielburger. Thus, reliability and believability become rooted in comfort, something that Jude and Baby cannot easily access because of the nature of their respective identities and lives.

When Baby and Jude's language is not the focus of debate, the panelists' analysis of these characters focuses on the substance and depth of their character, or lack thereof. In discussing Baby's drug use in the novel, Jim Cuddy commented, "Baby goes through this stuff that's horrific, unbelievably horrific, pretty much untainted... there's something 'ah whatever' about it" ("Canada Reads 2007: Day Three"). This comment sparked a discussion concerning accuracy similar to the discussion of language, in which Cuddy continued to describe why Baby's reactions to different traumas or even her own drug use are unrealistic: "If you try to judge her, the reality of her drug intake, it's not real. She does heroin for a while and is slightly hooked and then suddenly is not" ("Canada Reads 2007: Day Three"). The assertion that Baby's nonchalant descriptions of her life, and ability to quit heroin with ease,¹⁹ are reasons to criticize her or her believability draws attention away from a consideration of *why* Baby would speak in this manner, how she

¹⁹ In fact, Cuddy's assertion that Baby does not experience withdrawal is false. As Baby and Jules are leaving for Val-des-Loups, Baby says, "I realized as we got farther from the city that I was going to have to go through withdrawal. As soon as I thought of it, I started going through some of the symptoms" (322).

cope with trauma, or about the way she perceives her agency in the latter part of the novel. Instead of using these examples to create a nuanced understanding of her character, the discussion only ever centers around these moments to critique the writing. Cuddy and the other panelists reduce her character to her nonchalance and use that to make further claims about her unreliability.

While Jim Cuddy, Steven Page, and Denise Bombardier all expressed similar sentiments about the novel, it is important to note that panelist Donna Morrissey did not. Morrissey drew on her background in social work, arguing that even though there are *some* “structural weaknesses” in the novel, these are minimal and should not be the focus of criticism because “there’s flaws in every book” (“Canada Reads 2007: Day Five”). Morrissey’s ability to take Baby’s testimony seriously is rooted in her own experience, which is why she does not follow a similar pattern in argument as the other panelists. Therefore, Morrissey, like Kreuk, demonstrates that it is possible to not reproduce these critical questionings of Baby’s testimony and agency, but that often the ability to resist this reproduction often comes from lived experiences.

Cameron Bailey made similar remarks as Cuddy about *Movies*, focusing on what lies “beneath” Jude’s narcissistic exterior. In response to the criticisms about the vulgar nature of language in the novel, he replied

You know, I didn’t have any problem with the language at all, and I think that’s just a testament to the kinds of movies I watch. But what I wondered more about was, you know, this kind of ferocious, very witty, funny central character in the book, who does use the language and the profanity as a kind of, in a way, a kind of shield, and it works and it makes sense psychologically. But what’s *behind* that? And that really was my question. I was looking for maybe a little bit more depth, a little bit more substance. The fact that he’s in love with fame, that felt like

that could also be a mask. But when you strip that away, what's *there*? And I wasn't sure that I found what I was looking for behind all of that ("Canada Reads 2015: Day Three", emphasis in original).

As with the debate in 2007, even when the discussion of language is put aside, the question of depth and believability still come up. Rather than considering what the significance of Jude's characterization is, Bailey, like Cuddy, claims that Jude is a flat character. He does not consider why it might be significant that the reader does not get to see any characterization beyond the narcissism and movie fantasy,²⁰ nor does he try to find moments that show Jude's vulnerability.²¹ Instead, his analysis also lacks nuance and obscures Jude's agency, as his comments suggest that he views Jude as a caricature instead of a fully developed character. Additionally, Bailey's claim that "[he] did not find what [he] was looking for behind [the way Jude presents himself in the novel]" reveals how his analysis of the novel is rooted in his assumptions about what character depth should look like. To Bailey, all of Jude's character traits in the novel are an indication of the type of mask Jude wears. This mask and the character depth behind it are mutually exclusive; no aspects of the mask can be a part of his character depth. Thus, Jude's wit,

²⁰ For example, one might argue that since the novel is told in first person perspective, Jude might be "wearing his armour," to borrow Lui's description of Jude's narcissism, because the act of telling the story is still a performance. Therefore, he would not be vulnerable with the reader because he might consider them a voyeur/paparazzi figure much like he views the students at his school ("Canada Reads 2015: Day Two").

²¹ For example, when Jude "decide[s] not to be [himself] for the party at Luke's house," he feels so uncomfortable not dressing like himself, and so overwhelmed surrounded by the peers who regularly harass him, he quickly exclaims, "I had to get out of here, the set was haunted. The party was unbearable... It had been a mistake for me to come" (Reid, 75; 79). Without his regular attire, Jude feels vulnerable because he is unable to be himself. Although he claims to have dressed this way "to stay alive," dressing like this harms his mental health (75). That he would describe the party as "unbearable" demonstrates just how vulnerable he feels when he cannot express himself through both clothing and behaviour (Jude is also very quiet at this party and talks to nobody). He cannot even use his typical movie metaphors to cope here.

ferocity, and love of fame cannot be associated with character depth, from Bailey's perspective. This comment, therefore, creates a power dynamic in which Bailey has the power to claim what agency and quality characterization necessarily look like. Bailey's comment reduces Jude's character and agency to vulgarity because he does not try to unpack the significance of this characterization.

Both Cuddy and Bailey's analyses of Baby and Jude highlight a point Mallan makes when developing her argument about truth-telling in other books: that an in-depth analysis of a character does not necessarily rely on discovering a true "inner self," but rather depends on a consideration of why an author had a certain character present themselves in a specific manner:

If the nature of truth is concealment and beautification, it might be more significant to consider the ways that truth presents itself than to consider what lies beneath its adornment. In other words, do we gain better insight or knowledge not by removing the adornment, but by considering what the use of that adornment reveals about the character of what lies beneath it? (38).

Rather than focusing on what the narrative does not explore, considering why the narrative only explores specific aspects of a character's personality can be a means of understanding the character's testimony. Instead of determining if Baby is telling the truth when she uses poetic language, analyzing *why* she uses poetic language to describe her trauma helps readers to understand her character better. For example, when Baby describes her sexual encounter with Johnny as making her feel "as if I had peed a tiny butterfly," the poetic language reveals her naiveté, as she does not have the language to describe sexual arousal (76). This naiveté suggests that while Baby wants to be treated as older than she is, she is still uncomfortable with her sexuality. However, the panelists'

focus on what they dislike about Baby and Jude prevents this type of analysis from occurring during the debate. Instead of prioritizing the characters, it prioritizes the emotions of the readers and the discomfort they feel at reading about two characters who disrupt heteronormativity.

Despite panelists' attempts to reduce the conversations about *Lullabies* and *Movies* to discussions about language, sex and vulgarity, Samson and Lui both attempted to nuance these conversations. After a lengthy discussion of the way sex is portrayed in *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, in which some panelists expressed concerns about the portrayal of sex in the novel, Samson addressed these concerns, saying, "I think we just have a conflict about what fiction should do and I think there's nothing didactic or teacherly about this book. But it is set in a poverty-stricken neighbourhood and it shows us what poverty actually does to people, to human beings." ("Canada Reads 2007: Day Five"). Samson's point addressed concerns about the novel condoning a pragmatic view of sex and its efficacy in creating empathy in the reader. While Samson does not go into further detail about how class affects Baby, his assertion that the novel highlights the impact of poverty opens the possibility for a conversation about how Baby's conduct and perception of her own agency are influenced by her class. Samson's defense of the novel therefore creates the opportunity for the other panelists to discuss Baby's agency in more detail. That the other panelists do not take advantage of such an opportunity suggests that their discomfort overwhelms their ability to consider other readings of Baby's agency.

In comparison, Lui provided a more explicit, nuanced defense of Jude's character and agency. On the third day of competition, Lui responded to the ongoing concern that readers would feel uncomfortable reading Reid's novel because of the language:

I think that you're supposed to think about it. I think that you're supposed to be that uncomfortable... every time you read the f-word in this book, and every time you read a passage that is maybe gross, and, too vulgar, think of it not as something offensive, but take it internally and think of it as a wound. The wound of rejection. And then think of it as a scar, all over your body. Every time the f-word comes up, every time something like that comes up. ("Canada Reads 2015: Day Three").

Throughout the competition, Lui had been advocating for a more nuanced reading of Jude's character, referencing the scene where he explains to the reader that he "make[s] people hate [him], because that's actually the closest [he]'ll ever get to love" ("Canada Reads 2015: Day Four"). In this comment, her analysis of Jude's language reflects what Mallan advocates for; she looks at how Jude presents himself to the reader and considers the significance of this presentation, and what it says about Jude's self-perception. She works through the language in the novel to create this analysis. Despite this call for a deeper understanding of his character, and despite Lui actually providing such a reading for the other panelists, the other panelists' fixation on graphic language and how it hindered their understanding of Jude reveals how disgust still hinders their ability to give weight to such a reading. Even when the panelists do not have to put in the effort to work through their feelings of discomfort, they still resort to their initial readings, with Kielburger's final comment about the novel focusing on its "the extreme shock value" ("Canada Reads 2015: Day Four").

The second issue primarily discussed in both Canada Reads competitions is the portrayal of sex in each novel. These conversations often parallel the hypersexualized reading of *Baby and Jude* that I mentioned in the Introduction, and that I will explore in more detail in later chapters. Unlike the discussion of narrative voice, the panelists in 2007 brought up the topic of sex without Bill Richardson prompting them. The first mention of sex is not explicit; rather, it arises when Richardson asks the panelists to read their favourite passage from one of the novels they are not defending. Both Jim Cuddy and Donna Morrissey chose passages from *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, with Cuddy reading a passage in which Baby describes why she smokes marijuana and Morrissey choosing a passage about Baby's first sexual experience with Johnny. When Morrissey reads the line, "it was as if I had peed a tiny butterfly" (O'Neill 76), laughter erupts among the panelists ("Canada Reads 2007: Day Two"). Despite the clear lack of consent from Baby in this scene, the adults once again focus on the language in Baby's description of sexual arousal and ignore the underlying theme of assault present in the scene. The discussion does not progress further, as the panelists continue to focus on the humorous nature of Baby's language instead of the lack of consent. This may be attributable, in part, to Richardson's framing of that season's books; when asking the panelists about narrative voice, he had described the five books as "books about childhood," even though Baby is a young teenager ("Canada Reads 2007: Day One"). By framing Baby as a child, Richardson infantilized Baby just as characters like Johnny do in the novel. Just as Johnny uses this characterization to project his inappropriate desires onto Baby so he can maintain power over her, the panelists are informed by the notion

that Baby is a child and thus focus on the humour implicit in a childlike description such as “peeing butterflies.” However, in doing so, the panelists fail to consider the significance of this language: it reveals that because of her youth, Baby does not necessarily have the language to describe sexual feelings. Moreover, as an underage person, Baby cannot give consent to Johnny, who is over eighteen. In being caught up in their initial, humoured reaction to this passage, the panelists violently derail a potential conversation about sexual violence and exploitation.

When sex is discussed more explicitly, there is a focus among the panelists on rationalization and pragmatism. All of the panelists acknowledge Baby’s wish to be sexually desired, arguing that she does not feel taken advantage of when she has sex with Alphonse for the first time (“Canada Reads 2007: Day Five”). In particular, Denise Bombardier argues that the approach to sex reveals “[weakness] in the psychology of the... main character, Baby, because [*Lullabies*] is also a book about perversion. And we know that children who are sexually taken, abused sometimes, can rationalize in a way, and think they are superior to the other children because they have sex with adults. We know that” (“Canada Reads 2007: Day Five”). Unlike other panelists, who viewed Baby’s outlook on sex as a means she uses to gain back agency, Bombardier uses this outlook as proof that Baby is a weak character.²² This conflation of Baby’s age, her view on sex, and psychological weakness prevents any nuanced understanding of Baby’s agency.

²² In his response to the question of sex, Steven Page said, “it felt like a coming of age... in a most perverse sense because for Baby it was an opportunity to feel like an individual” (“Canada Reads 2007: Day Five”). This comment demonstrates Page’s ability to look beyond the perverse, disgusting nature of the relationship and consider how Baby’s complicated agency can be seen. While she is still visibly oppressed by her age, her gender, and her class, she tries to use sex and her consent as a means of feeling powerful because she

Bombardier's focus on psychological weakness relates back to the historical policing of female sexuality. As Joan Sangster explains in her book *Girl Trouble*, the policing of female sexuality has occurred alongside the conceptualization of the female "delinquent":

Although there are important differences in this long tradition of thinking about the construction of delinquency, one fundamental insight is repeatedly offered: definitions of youth misbehavior and the creation of a criminal category – the delinquent – were and are established within a web of power relations, reflecting the prevailing social definitions of what are perceived to be civilized, appropriate, moral standards of behaviour (13).

Throughout the 2007 competition, Bombardier repeatedly argued that *Lullabies for Little Criminals* is a "trash vision we have of our time," and that it is a "trendy book" which capitalizes on the popularity of the pimp narrative ("Canada Reads 2007: Day Five"; "Canada Reads 2007: Day Three"). In this sense, Bombardier used her power to determine a moralistic standard to which she would hold Baby and the entire novel. When she calls the novel "trash," she evokes the language of delinquency, which, as Sangster argues, is "a subjective and flexible concept, measured in ideological terms" (*Girl Trouble* 5). Just as Jules uses his authority over Baby to criminalize her without listening to her, Bombardier refuses to interrogate why Baby's feelings of superiority are significant to understanding how she perceives her abuse. Thus, she uses her authority as a critic to ignore Baby's agency with a narrative of delinquency.

believes she is making a choice here. Page's use of the term perverse, and his assertion that Baby is still being taken advantage of, shows that he acknowledges the nuances of agency here.

The focus on psychological weakness also reflects a narrative of reconstructing the moral compass of the female delinquent, a concept I discussed using Sangster's work in the Introduction.²³ When Bombardier refers explicitly to Baby's psychology, calling it weak, she suggests that Baby's entire person is flawed and inherently delinquent. By evoking psychology, Bombardier reduces Baby's entire character to her "weakness," as Bombardier believes it is at the core of who Baby is. Moreover, claiming that Baby is "weak" implies that Baby is vulnerable to Alphonse's sexual advances and does not have the moral 'strength' to resist him. Since Bombardier remains consistently focused throughout the competition on maintaining her position that the novel is "trash," she often closes down opportunities for a nuanced discussion of Baby's character by falling back upon her moralistic standards.

Comparatively, the discussions of language and sex in *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* are often interwoven, primarily because the language of Reid's novel is sexually explicit. As with O'Neill's novel, sex is still heavily policed in Canada Reads discussions of this novel. Kielburger argues that the graphic sexuality alienates readers and thus they will not read the novel. In her rebuttal, Lui asks, "Will Canada not go because the graphic language is about sex, or *gay* sex?... And that's the kind of sex, and that's the kind of barrier, that is the problem here" ("Canada Reads 2015: Day Two," emphasis in original). Although panelists denied the accusations, Lui's comment echoes a common sentiment among defenders of the novel, including Reid himself. In an interview

²³ In *Regulating Girls and Women*, Sangster writes, "In the case of delinquency, for example, emphasis was placed not on legal infractions as much as on the child's moral or psychological deviance and the need to reconstruct her conscience" (9).

with *CBC News: The National*, Reid responds to accusations of his novel being pornographic:

It's just teen sex. There's been sex in books since there has been books [The interviewer interjects and says "But we don't read descriptions like that"] We don't read *gay* descriptions of that... I think there's a long history of sex in young adult books. I don't think there's a long history of *gay* sex in young adult books ("Raziel Reid: My Book is Not 'Porn'," emphasis in original).

By addressing the discomfort felt when reading gay sex specifically, Lui not only replies to the criticisms of the novel, but also opens up a discussion about heteronormativity and the impact it has on teenage sexuality. She asks panelists to work through their discomfort so they can think about the larger implications of Jude's sexuality and sex life in the novel. This pushback against the novel for its descriptions of sex reveals how, as Brenda Cossman explains about the censorship of literature containing gay and lesbian sex, "Gay and lesbian sexual representations may have attained a degree of normativity, but to the extent that these representations challenge other boundaries between 'good' and 'bad' sex, they remain tainted" (60). Even though Kielburger objects to the accusation that his discomfort comes from Jude's sexuality, his assertion that the language is too graphic works as the type of policing that Cossman refers to here. He does not call for censorship because there is sex in the novel, but rather he displaces his discomfort onto others, claiming that "*Canada* won't go five pages into the novel" because of the language ("Canada Reads 2015: Day Two," emphasis mine). He frames the language in the novel as evidence that the novel portrays "'bad' sex," and uses that as grounds for claiming that Canada will not read the book. This claim not only projects his discomfort onto other readers, it also assumes all Canadian readers as white, middle class, cis-heteronormative

individuals. In other words, Kielburger uses his own discomfort to homogenize Canadians and then accuse them of turning away from Jude's testimony.

Kielburger's discomfort with supposedly excessive graphic sexual language relates back to Elizabeth Bullen's discussion of sexual excess: "The subject of the discourse of disgust is not the sexually active young working woman, but the sexually excessive adolescent girl, often from a working or underclass background, with the teenage mother figuring as the epitome of the failed sexual citizen" (54).²⁴ Though Bullen speaks specifically about young working class girls, the type of excess she discusses here can be applied to Jude, a line of inquiry I will explore further in later chapters. Just as Bullen argues that proof of sexual excess becomes evidence that the subject is a "failed sexual citizen," the other panelists' focus on the excess of vulgar language is used to suggest that *Movies* is a failed novel. By framing the novel as a failure, and alluding to the novel's unreadability, the panelists of Canada Reads fail to consider Jude's sexual agency, and how homophobia, extreme bullying, and his mother might influence his relationship to sex. Kielburger's emphasis on sexual excess minimizes any reading of agency that might be present.

In her response article to conservative pundit Barbara Kay's review of *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*, Emily Keeler, a journalist for the *National Post*, writes, "It's sickening to me that the moral panic surrounding the book regards teens reading about blow jobs and not its painfully, stylishly wrought portrayal of kids being bullied to

²⁴ Kielburger tried to stress just how pervasive the vulgar language in the novel is arguing, "Every single page has graphic, graphic sexual references, graphic, graphic language" ("Canada Reads 2015: Day Two"). The emphasis on the vulgarity appearing on *all* pages in the novel suggests a type of sexual excessiveness.

death, or growing up with fear because it's not safe for them to be who they are" (Keeler). The focus on language and sexuality demonstrates a type of moral panic wherein the comfort of the panelists is prioritized over a discussion about violent homophobia. The debates that occurred in the 2007 and 2015 Canada Reads Competitions, which featured *Lullabies for Little Criminals* and *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*, demonstrate how the disgust reaction gives primacy to the comfort of the reader. When panelists' discomfort and disgust with certain aspects of these novels, such as sex, language, and narrative voice, is central to discussions of the novels, they ultimately offer a reading of the novels that parallels the disgust reactions of characters like Jules, Alphonse, Johnny, Matt, and Ray that I will explore in my final chapter.

As I have demonstrated, when language and the narrator's reliability are the focus of debate, panelists judged the narrative voice based on their concept of an authentic teenage voice. When the narrative voice did not align with the panelists' assumptions about what a young narrator should sound like, they used these discrepancies as proof that the narrative voice is unreliable. In doing so, the panelists ignore the trauma in the two novels, and do not consider how this trauma might affect Baby and Jude's agency. While discussions of sex were handled differently in each competition, these discussions both focused on sexual excess. In 2007, Bombardier used sex to pathologize Baby, turning her into a delinquent and obscuring her agency. In 2015, disgust for the portrayal of teenage sex in *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* was displaced onto other Canadian readers. Through this displacement, Kielburger suggests that other readers will censor the novel.

However, this discussion halts any consideration of how readers might think about the violence of homophobia or Jude's agency.

When the disgust reaction becomes central to the discussion it prevents readers from analyzing the novels in a way that disrupts heteronormativity and therefore the discussion will not lead to "sociopolitical transformation" (Kellner 3). Instead, disgust leads to the violent doubting of Baby and Jude's testimony, as each becomes posited as either unreliable, or a liar. To borrow Horkheimer and Adorno's framework, the disgust reaction, and the discussion of the disgust reaction, become a spectacle for audiences that overshadows the political significance of this reaction. Since the disgust reaction, as Keeler argues, overshadows discussions about bullying, homophobia, sexism, or classism, it maintains heteronormativity and allows the readers of the novel to maintain heteronormative power over these characters. Thus, although the disgust reaction comes from a reader's understanding about "moral standards of behaviour" (*Girl Trouble* 13), it is not used "for reasons of morality, but for reasons of political struggle" (Gramsci 196). Disgust has the potential to create complacency among class and cis-hetero privileged readers with the current heteronormative hegemony.

CHAPTER TWO:

Fictionalizing Reality: Oppression, Sex, and a Complicated Agency

In her book *Gender and Agency*, Lois McNay critiques recent scholarship on agency by analyzing identity theory. She explains that current identity theory is rooted in “an essentially negative understanding of subject formation,” meaning that identity is analyzed in terms of subjection and constraint, and, as a result, the focus remains on constraint and not on any consideration of freedom (2). McNay then describes the shortcomings of such an approach: “the idea that the individual emerges from constraint does not offer a broad enough understanding of the dynamics of subjectification and, as a consequence, offers an etiolated understanding of agency” (3). Drawing on Foucault, McNay argues that freedom and constraint are dialectical forces that must be analyzed together. Thus, when constraint is analyzed without any consideration of freedom, agency is minimized or obscured because the individual’s personal freedom is not considered. While McNay advocates for “contextualizing agency within power relationships,” she asserts that doing so can help elucidate why certain acts “deemed as resistant may transcend their immediate sphere in order to transform collective behaviour and norms” (4). In other words, when constraint is considered alongside freedom, one can see how an act can be an expression of conditional autonomy.

To analyze how disgust obscures the agency of Heather O’Neill’s protagonist Baby from *Lullabies for Little Criminals* and Raziel Reid’s protagonist Jude from *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*, one must understand the agency the two characters do enact, and how their marginalized identities impact their assertions of autonomy. One

cannot read these characters as being without agency. Although the two characters are marginalized due to their gender expression, sexuality, and class, they still resist their oppressors and try to regain control. I am not suggesting that the marginalized aspects of Baby and Jude's identity do not affect their agency. Instead, I draw on McNay's assertion that both freedom and constraint must be analyzed together to fully understand autonomy. Thus, I look at Baby and Jude's agency as complex: both characters try to claim agency and protect themselves, but class, gender, and sexuality determine what this agency can look like.

Understanding the agency of Baby and Jude must come from an analysis of how each character tries to survive, as "literature for young people depicts survival as a complex activity that negotiates silence, subjugation, and subjectivity" (Mallan 36). In this framework, while focusing on mere survival suggests that the subject is living under constraint since their ability to stay alive is in jeopardy, surviving can be seen as an act of resistance. As I will explore in the next chapter, the disgust reactions of other characters in each novel can silence Baby and Jude, and jeopardize their ability to survive. Thus, survival can become a demonstration of agency because it reveals how Baby and Jude are able to work through the silence and subjugation they experience and retain some form of autonomy. This control does not necessarily involve isolation or standing alone; as I will demonstrate, it is often through relationships with other characters that Baby and Jude navigate their survival.

Key to both Baby and Jude's survival is their worldview; both characters employ a fictionalized framework, transforming themselves into performers. In this sense, both

Baby and Jude rely heavily on performativity as a means of survival. As Judith Butler argues, performativity, when understood as a repeated act in which the subject reiterates their own construction of their identity, can be liberating for a subject but also confining. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler raises the question, “If performativity is construed as that power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration, how are we to understand the limits of such production, the constraints under which such production occurs?” (20). While performativity can be a means for Baby and Jude to rearticulate their lives on their own terms, the very need for performativity reveals the constraints under which they are living.

This tension between freedom and constraint is especially evident in *Lullabies for Little Criminals* as performativity is explicitly linked to survival. Baby reflects on the people she has met throughout her life: “When I thought of my old friends Linus Lucas and Theo, I realized they were not really criminals either. They were like me. We were just acting out the strangest, tragic little roles, pretending to be criminals in order to get by. We gave very convincing performances” (266). That Baby specifically says her performance has been convincing thus far shows that she has been successful in surviving, and that she knows performativity is a useful strategy for survival. Since her father is often negligent, Baby’s survival is an act of autonomy. She maintains the little freedom she does have through survival. However, using criminality specifically as a means of surviving, especially when, as Baby explains, she’s not really a criminal, reveals the few options Baby has for survival. While she makes the decision to perform criminality, she is limited to this role by her need to survive. Moreover, Baby’s use of the

term “get by” suggests that she is barely surviving. The performance of criminality is therefore both a demonstration of Baby’s agency as she tries to survive, and an indication of the socioeconomic constraints informing Baby’s behaviour. The very focus on simply surviving demonstrates that Baby’s autonomy is constrained by a need to stay alive instead of an ability to freely choose how she expresses her agency.²⁵

For Baby, performing criminality is not only a means of survival but also a means of coping with her living situation as she moves between foster care and various apartments with her father. Early in the novel, Jules is hospitalized for pneumonia and, during this time, Baby is forced to stay in a group foster home run by a woman named Isabelle. Baby maintains a strong connection to her father and a strong desire to go home. Consequently, when Jules tells her he needs to stay in the hospital for longer than they had anticipated, Baby explains:

I started wearing a star sticker that I took off my math test and stuck on my forehead. I stole Isabelle’s eye shadow and mascara even though she’d told me not to. She said young girls looked prettier without makeup anyway. I started cursing more and throwing bottles against the train tracks. I did these things for no good reason. (28-9).

Baby’s behaviour varies in the degree of its violence. Some acts, like wearing the sticker, are harmless, whereas other acts, like throwing the bottles, are more explicitly violent. The behaviour also speaks to her liminal age, as she places stickers on her face, an act associated with young children, and puts on makeup, a mark of adolescence and

²⁵ This focus on survival parallels Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of a “bare life,” in which a subject does not experience full citizenship, but instead is stripped of identity within the nation-state because of their undesirability. Without citizenship, these individuals lose their human rights under the law and thus become vulnerable. For further discussion, see Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998).

adulthood. These performances all mark a decision Baby has made to change her appearance. In particular, her defiant decision to start wearing makeup against Isabelle's wishes not only becomes a means for Baby to articulate a new appearance for herself, but also marks her as someone who will think independently of adult advice. These acts become a way for Baby to take control of herself and therefore assert her agency over some aspect of her life while she loses control over other aspects, such as her living situation. As with her discussion of criminality and survival, these acts are still informed by the constraints under which she is living, but do allow Baby the freedom to articulate her identity in new ways, and not because Isabelle has told her how she should behave or dress.

This apparent self-determination becomes especially significant to Baby's agency later in the novel, as she tries to resist the pathologization she experiences when meeting with social workers. After returning from her time in a Youth Detention Center, Baby is assigned a new social worker to help her transition back into life outside the prison. While the social worker frames herself as a form of protection for Baby, Joan Sangster explains how "protection could also slide into judgmental surveillance, which slid into stigmatization, marginalization, and [further] incarceration" (*Girl Trouble* 3). Since Baby has already spent time in a Detention Centre, the social worker is already a form of "judgmental surveillance," as she has the authority to decide what Baby should be doing to 'successfully' transition back to her 'regular' life, and therefore to judge Baby for failing to meet these standards.

However, Baby resists the social worker's diagnosis through her self-enforced hatred of the woman. Baby explains, "It is important to hate the people who work in child welfare if you want to protect yourself from their prognosis. You have to think that they are idiots. Because when they say that you are troubled and a delinquent, you need to be able to laugh in their faces." (O'Neill 188). Despite Baby explaining that she pretends to be a criminal, she still resists other people's assertion of her criminality. She not only knows her criminality is a falsified act that she uses to survive, but also knows that her character extends beyond this façade. However, since she gives a "convincing performance," she must protect herself from the social worker's diagnosis so that she can prevent her performance from becoming her entire reality (266). In this sense, Baby's hatred of the social worker is her way of separating her performed criminality from who she believes she is. As seen in the change in her behaviour during her stay in the foster home, criminality is a performance Baby uses to regain control of her identity, and therefore regain agency. By framing the criminality as a fictional performance, and by asserting that the social workers are unintelligent and therefore cannot separate performance from reality, Baby is able to dissociate herself from delinquency and from the external pathologization of her psyche.

That Baby specifically uses the clinical term "prognosis" and claims that the social workers would call her a "delinquent" demonstrates her awareness that the social workers will manipulate any evidence of assumed criminality to pathologize her. Moreover, it suggests that Baby is aware of how such pathologization could minimize her agency. Reflecting on the history of the language of delinquency, Sangster writes, "In the

case of delinquency, for example, emphasis was placed not on legal infractions as much as on the child's moral or psychological deviance and the need to reconstruct her conscience" (*Regulating Girls* 9). Even though Baby's incarceration is used as the initial justification for assigning her a social worker, her focus, and her social worker's apparent focus, remains on her "troubling" and "delinquent" conscience. By portraying her supposedly faulty conscience as the reason for her misbehavior, the social worker would be able to reduce Baby's entire personality to that of a delinquent. Then, by asserting a "need to reconstruct her conscience," the social worker would prove that Baby is not capable of being autonomous because she is incapable of making "moral" decisions. As Baby has explained, her ability to perform criminality is necessary to her survival, and therefore any reconstruction of this behaviour would put her survival in jeopardy. Thus, it becomes imperative for Baby to "protect herself from [the social worker's] prognosis" so that she can continue to survive.

Similarly, Jude uses a Hollywood metaphor to reconstruct his reality in *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*. He explains to the reader:

My middle school was basically a movie set. No one was real. Especially me. We were all just playing our parts. You might be sort of real when you start school but you're quickly typecast and learn all your lines by rote – mostly because you've written them in detention so many times. Everyone fell into one of three categories: 1. The Crew: They make things happen... 2. The Extras: All the misfits, outcasts, and social rejects... 3. The Movie Stars: ...They're selfish, spoiled, and overly sexed... I didn't fit into any category. I definitely wasn't a part of the Crew; I wasn't about to be involved in anything unless it was court-appointed. I wasn't an Extra because the last thing I could ever be was anonymous. But I wasn't a Movie Star either because, even though everyone knew my name, I wasn't invited to the cool parties. So there was me, the flamer that lit the set on fire (Reid 21-2).

This worldview, shaped by the constant violent homophobia Jude has experienced, reframes Jude's existence outside his school's social circles. Rather than being in a marginalized position that determines his existence outside of social circles in his school, he explains why he *chooses* to not be a Crew member or an Extra, and therefore his position as an outcast becomes the key to "[lighting] the set on fire." Just like Baby, Jude makes an explicit reference to performativity, as he explains that his behaviour at school is not real and is indicative instead of the role he plays in the "movie." While this performativity appears to remove his agency, as it suggests that he is passively reading lines instead of actively making these decisions on his own, it allows him to actively complicate the agency of others, as they too are passively reading lines. Moreover, since he is the one who "[lights] the set on fire," he narratively tries to give himself more power because of the significant impact he is able to have on this fictitious reality from the periphery. He gives himself the ability to cause total destruction, an ability that allows him to alter the conditions of the set through chaos, even if it destroys him in the process.

Of course, like Baby's performed criminality, Jude's movie metaphor is created under certain constraints, in his case poverty and homophobia. Although the reader meets Jude when this metaphor has been fully developed, as Sara Ahmed explains, "You bring your past encounters with you when you arrive. In this sense an arrival has not simply happened; an arrival points toward a future that might or 'perhaps' will happen, given that we don't always know in advance 'what' we will come into contact with when we follow this or that line" (*Queer* 40). Based on his past experiences with violent homophobia,

when Jude ‘arrives’ at the beginning of the novel, he is already anticipating the future violence he will encounter, and thus creates the Hollywood metaphor as a form of protection.

Readers are then able to see how the metaphor both protects Jude and reframes violence in a way that gives him control. For example, Jude recalls his experiences with cyberbullying:

I had a new comment on one of my Facebook pictures, the one I took in Photo Booth where I’m posing like an underage girl doing a Terry Richardson shoot who actually thinks dreams come true. The comment was from Kenny Randal. He wrote ‘f*ggot!!!!’ with five exclamation marks... I almost deleted the comment but decided to keep it like another badge from the Pretty Boy Scouts (16)

By associating his personal photos on Facebook with the celebrity fashion photographer Terry Richardson, Jude frames his social media account in terms of the realm of celebrity. Thus, Jude can reframe Kenny’s comment as a reaction to a celebrity photoshoot instead of a homophobic reaction to Jude’s body. Specifically, Jude likens the comment to a “badge from the Pretty Boy Scouts,” transforming the comment into a symbol of honour through its association with the Boy Scouts. At the time Reid would have been writing *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*, the Boy Scouts had not yet lifted the ban on openly gay scout leaders,²⁶ and had only repealed the ban on openly gay young boys in 2013 (McCoy). That Jude renames the homophobic comment as a badge from a historically homophobic organization, even renaming the organization by adding the

²⁶ The ban on openly gay Scout leaders was lifted in 2015, one year after *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* was released (McCoy).

word “Pretty,” suggests that, while Jude tries to give himself power over Kenny’s comment by turning it into a symbol of pride, he is still affected by the explicit homophobia. Thus, while he maintains some power, he cannot fully ignore his marginalization.

Using a badge metaphor also suggests that the comment remains in contact with his body. This type of contact demonstrates the lasting impact homophobic comments have on Jude and, by extension, on his agency. As Ahmed explains, “Bodies are hence shaped by contact with objects and with others, with ‘what’ is near enough to be reached. Bodies may even take shape through such contact, or take the shape of that contact. What gets near is both shaped by what bodies do, which in turn affects what bodies can do” (*Queer* 54). Kenny’s homophobic comment not only affects how Jude’s body is shaped but also affects what Jude can do. Since the comment is fixed to his body as a badge, it is continuously making contact with Jude’s body and therefore it continues to harm Jude and minimize his agency.

This impact is indicative of Ahmed’s notion of “stickiness,” that I reference in my Introduction.²⁷ As a body that elicits disgust reactions, Jude’s body is sticky, and therefore comments like Kenny’s adhere to Jude’s body even when he tries to reimagine them. Once stuck to his body, the homophobia becomes inherent to Jude’s identity, and can then “slow down... the movement between [other] objects” and Jude’s body (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 92). Consequently, homophobia still impacts his autonomy, or “what [he] can do”. While Jude preserves some agency as he tries to gain power over the

²⁷ See *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (92).

homophobia, thus creating some freedom within its confines, homophobia still constrains the type of freedom he can strive for.

In addition to the Hollywood metaphor, which Jude maintains as his reality throughout the novel, Jude also tries to imagine a utopian future for himself to maintain hope and motivate himself to strive for autonomy. Jude explains how doing so is necessary for his survival:

I went down to my room and stared at Luke's grade one picture, which I'd tucked under the frame of my mirror... I thought how, if we had kids, I'd like them to look just like him. But then I realized how stupid that was, so I tried not to think it. Sometimes, though, I couldn't help myself; I thought about stupid things, crazy stupid things that I knew would actually never happen, but which I thought about anyway because they filled me with hope – or delusion. But is that so bad? Sometimes you just have to keep fooling yourself or you'll never survive (116).

Although Jude reprimands himself for imagining a seemingly impossible, “stupid” future, he concludes by understanding why such fantasies are important for him. Jude's initial inclination toward thinking of the fantasy as “stupid” or a “delusion” parallels the theoretical framing of desire as a lacking. When he acknowledges that his imagined future with Luke “would actually never happen” (116), his desire is framed as “the longing for an impossible object,” which Elspeth Probyn explains “is the condition of possibility for constructing desire as encapsulated within an object” (*Sexy Bodies* 8). When Jude questions whether his fantasy is “so bad,” he highlights Probyn's criticism of considering desire as lack and longing for the impossible: “Both [framing desire as a lacking or wish for the unattainable] seem to me to dead end: on the one hand, placing the origins of desire in lack implodes it as mere *errance*, and, on the other, placing it within an

impossible object removes it from the realm of real, actualized desire” (*Sexy Bodies* 8-9, emphasis in original). Despite Jude’s admission that he does not have feelings for Luke,²⁸ his fantasy about Luke demonstrates that his desire is not completely fictional: it is rooted in his very real desire for love and for family. His hope for such a future is what allows him to survive because the very possibility of a future where his desires have been actualized motivates him to continue to survive. In this sense, Jude’s agency is tied to the relational, as his fantasies highlight the importance of relationships to his sense of freedom.

Thus, Jude uses a form of queer futurity to maintain his agency and as motivation to continue surviving. José Esteban Muñoz explains the connection between futurity and desire: “Queer futurity does not underplay desire. In fact it is all about desire, desire for both larger semiabstractions such as a better world or freedom but also, more immediately, better relations within the social” (30). For Muñoz, queer futurity gives rise to a “field of utopian possibility” because it stresses “multiple forms of belonging in difference” (20). However, Muñoz observes that

Utopia can never be prescriptive and is always destined to fail. Despite this seeming negativity, a generative politics can be potentially distilled from the aesthetics of queer failure. Within failure we can locate a kernel of potentiality. I align queer failure with a certain mode of virtuosity that helps the spectator exit from the stale and static lifeworld dominated by the alienation, exploitation, and drudgery associated with capitalism or landlordism. (173)

²⁸ Earlier in the novel, Jude claims, “I didn’t even love Luke. I just wanted him to be in love with me, but I didn’t love him back” (Reid 41).

While a utopian future is unlikely to become reality, striving for it allows Jude to temporarily leave the everyday homophobia he endures and find refuge outside of his reality. That Jude creates this imaginary future for himself implies a form of agency beyond survival. He expresses his desires and then articulates how he would like these desires to be fulfilled. Although he claims to use these visions of the future for survival, which would suggest a minimal agency because his focus is still on survival, the very act of imagining these futures, which are impossibilities, demonstrates how Jude is able to think outside the constraints of hegemonic heteronormativity.

Baby's performativity shares the anticipatory structure of Jude's futuristic daydreams. By creating and then maintaining their performances, both Baby and Jude anticipate how others will react to their bodies and then use the performance to continue to survive and cope with those reactions. In this way, performativity allows them to express a form of agency that disrupts linear time. McNay describes this type of agency by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu:

Agency is an act of temporalization where the subject transcends the present through actions that have an inherently anticipatory structure. The practical activity of the agent transcends the immediacy of the present through the "mobilization of the past and practical anticipation of the future inscribed in the present in a state of objective potentiality" (Bourdieu 1992: 138). (46-7)

As I have discussed, both Baby and Jude create their performative identities by drawing on their past experiences with violence, such as when Baby is forced into various foster homes or into a Detention Centre and when Matt nearly beats Jude to death, using these experiences to anticipate how they must act to survive in the future. While this type of agency is informed by the constraints of sexism, homophobia, and violence, Baby and

Jude's strong will to survive, and their ability to create something that will help them to survive, demonstrate a form of liminal agency. As I argued in relation to Jude's daydreams about the future, performativity allows these two characters to temporarily free themselves from the confines of their present reality. In this sense, freedom and constraint simultaneously inform their agency.

Understanding Baby and Jude's agency must not only involve considering their performative frameworks, but also their actions and behaviour when they are operating within these frameworks. To elucidate the nuances in their behaviour, I look at their relationships with other characters, specifically Xavier, Alphonse, and Abel, focusing specifically on how these relationships affect their views on sex. By paying attention to their changing relationship to sex, I can demonstrate how Baby and Jude's views and decisions are influenced both by Xavier, Alphonse, and Abel, and by their own acts of resistance against other characters like Alphonse. Both Xavier and Abel are depicted as masculine, but not hypermasculine characters; as I examine, Xavier demonstrates a confidence in his naiveté and youth, and Abel is the sole student-aged male character who is not shown to make homophobic attacks against Jude. However, hypermasculine characters such as Alphonse pose a threat to the endurance of these relationships. That Baby and Jude's relationships with Xavier and Abel occur in private emphasizes how toxic masculinity not only threatens Baby and Jude individually, but also threatens the very relationships they need to survive.

While Baby is a heterosexual subject, and therefore does not experience the confines of homophobia that Jude does, "*as an institution, heterosexuality, while*

exclusionary, also governs the lives of those *included* within its boundaries in ways that cannot be explained by heterosexuality, alone” (Jackson 108, emphasis in original). Baby starts off as someone who fears sex and intimacy, likely due to her perception that she is a child, and yet she is the object of adult desire. Baby’s first encounter with the topic of sex occurs when Marika, her childhood acquaintance, admits to Baby that she has sex for money. Baby reacts,

I wasn’t sure whether or not she was joking, so I laughed loudly and briefly. My laugh sounded different than usual, as if I was laughing in a room with no furniture. I was still uncomfortable with the idea of sex. When I first heard of French kissing, I thought it was something that only mental patients and the kids who failed grade four would do when they grew up (16).

Baby turns sex into a pathological, delinquent act associated with disability as she explains what types of people she believes would engage in sexual activity. By making a connection between sex and mental delinquency, Baby reveals that she associates sex with criminality, or moral deviance, to borrow Sangster’s term. This association explains the cause of Baby’s discomfort with sex. She is so uncomfortable with the idea that she is unsure how to behave when sex is even mentioned. She reframes her discomfort with sex as discomfort with delinquency and disability, thus transferring her disempowerment onto others to regain power.

As Baby develops a desire to be perceived as older than she is, she still does not show any comfort with the idea of sex, but she does show a desire to catch the attention of men. When Jules asks Baby “What’s new with you,” she tells him and Oliver a story about scaring Mary, her temporary guardian, while sleepwalking one night (70).

Embarrassed by his lack of reaction to the story, Baby recalls, “I felt stupid for having

told them. What was I, two years old? I should be telling him fun stories that impress” (70). Baby’s self-infantilization demonstrates her desire to stop behaving in a manner she finds childish. Her fixation on wanting to impress older men, even her own father and his friend, not only causes this desire to grow up, but also reveals Baby’s transition into what Deborah Tolman calls “becoming feminine” (82). Tolman explains how “Becoming feminine requires that girls themselves learn to be ‘good’ sexual objects, which precludes having desire of their own, and that process is deeply informed by the imperative not to become a ‘bad’ girl, not only in the eyes of others but in the eyes of one’s own internalized male gaze” (82). While Baby does express desire, she is in the process of becoming a “good” sexual object as her desire is more concerned with the reaction of Jules and Oliver instead of fulfilling a need of her own. Here, she would be expressing characteristics of a “bad” girl if she is not able to fulfil those perceived desires of the men, which Baby feels she has. In this sense, her desire to impress men diminishes her agency, as it suggests that her survival may be entwined with pleasing men who have more power than she does to gain their protection.

When Baby does become sexually active, her descriptions of sex continue to demonstrate a fear of intimacy. She describes her first kiss with Alphonse by saying, “It felt as though I was suffocating, as if he were holding my head down in the bathtub under water” (182). Despite her discomfort, Baby claims “that kiss really was [her] first” (182). Then, when she makes love to him, she describes his room as being “dark like a grave,” and explains that when she closes her eyes, she forgets that he is in the room: “There was just a weight. I was making love to the Invisible Man” (209). Just as Tolman argues that

“when girls do tell sexual stories, their own desire is left out,” Baby’s reflections on these two moments do not include any mention of her desire (25). Instead, all of Baby’s descriptions evoke death, and being overwhelmed by a force, whether by suffocation or an unseen weight. These descriptions suggest that Baby feels as though she is losing power in these encounters with Alphonse. Part of Baby’s diminished consideration of her own desire is rooted in Alphonse’s ability to overwhelm her physically. As Alphonse continues to physically, emotionally, and mentally overwhelm Baby in further sexual encounters, her perception of her own agency continues to diminish as well. Although her relationship with Alphonse eventually becomes necessary to her survival,²⁹ it also has this continuing effect on her.

That Baby decides her kiss with Alphonse was her first “real” kiss, despite her having kissed other people before, reveals the significance of these encounters to her. Even though she still feels overwhelmed during sexual encounters, a feeling that echoes the discomfort she initially feels when Marika announces that she has sex for money, she has chosen to push through these emotions and become sexually active. Given her desire to mature and no longer be seen as a child,³⁰ becoming sexually active and ignoring her own discomfort allow her to see herself as more of an adult. Adulthood is key to Baby’s perception of her own agency, as she explains: “Even the stupidest adult was a better

²⁹ When Jules locks the door to their apartment, effectively making Baby homeless, she turns to Alphonse. She knows that because she is in a relationship with him, he will open his home to her, which prevents her from becoming homeless. Baby even notes that “[Alphonse] was the most dependable person in my life,” suggesting that she knows he will provide her with the most stability of anyone in her life (O’Neill 273). Since Baby continues her relationship with Alphonse as a survival tactic, it can be seen as a demonstration of her agency because she is using him to ensure her survival.

³⁰ Early in the novel, Baby explains that she “was looking forward to being a lady” (5).

debater than me” (263). Since Baby feels infantilized during most interactions with adults, she feels as though she is losing control. For Baby to feel as though she has control she needs to feel as though she is an adult. Therefore, while her sexual encounters with Alphonse diminish her sexual agency, as she ignores her own desires and discomfort for the sake of Alphonse’s desires, they allow her to feel a sense of agency, as sexual activity is a mark of adulthood.

Conversely, Baby’s growing relationship with Xavier, a boy in her school classes, allows her to gain agency while also allowing her to feel comfortable with her youth. When Baby first meets Xavier, she describes how “He was different from my friends. I liked that he was immature and that he seemed naïve, as if he was actually acting his age. He didn’t have a chip on his shoulder. We had caught each other’s attention” (232). Although Baby usually refers to her own youth with disgust, she seems to embrace Xavier’s youth, as his young innocence is what allows him to not be cynical. His youthful behaviour therefore catches her attention because it is filled with hope, which, as Jude explains in *Movies*, can be necessary for survival.

Xavier’s behaviour influences Baby, as she explains: “I’d become less tough since I had started hanging out with Xavier. I started doing weirder things, that was for sure” (243). Just as she does not speak negatively of Xavier’s youth, Baby does not speak of her increased “weirdness” with any negativity either. Her developing relationship with Xavier not only influences her perception of others but also influences her perception of her own

behaviour. In this sense, Xavier gives Baby the ability to ‘free’ herself³¹ from the idea that she will only have agency if she can act like an adult. Her relationship with Xavier thus gives her a space where she can explore her youth,³² which allows Baby to explore other aspects of her identity that are not the performed criminal or the adult.

Baby’s behaviour becomes even more defiant as she decides to keep her relationship with Xavier a secret from Alphonse. She justifies her decision, saying, “I lay there staring at [Alphonse], not knowing what to say about my love for Xavier. It was much too dear for me to explain... it would be like giving your pet mouse to a cat” (263). Baby even goes so far as to say, “When I hung out with Xavier, I didn’t want anything to do with Alphonse” (253). By using the cat and mouse metaphor, Baby reveals the extent of Alphonse’s control over her life. Alphonse would want to destroy Xavier because he gives Baby freedom. Therefore, keeping a secret from Alphonse is an act of rebellion for Baby. Moreover, her relationship with Xavier is so influential, it gives Baby the desire to leave Alphonse and regain some control over her sex life. While she is unable to leave him, as “Alphonse is the most dependable person in [her] life,” keeping Xavier a secret from Alphonse allows Baby to create a space for herself where she is free. The relational becomes tied to her agency (273).

³¹ While one could argue that Xavier frees Baby, instead of Baby freeing herself, I would argue that Baby must make the conscious choice to see Xavier as a positive influence. Given her strong desire to be seen as an adult, Baby could make the decision to ignore Xavier, or be embarrassed by his behaviour. Instead, Baby comes to view his youth as a positive force, she continues to spend time with him beyond the time necessary to complete their project, and changes her own behaviour.

³² Baby provides example of her “weirder” behaviour, explaining, “I went outside my building after supper to feed my leftovers to the pigeons. I could recognize some of the pigeons and I named them” (243). Earlier, Baby and Xavier name rocks and collect snails while working on their science project (234-5).

However, Baby expresses another concern about Xavier: “I was afraid that if I explained to [Alphonse] what I liked about Xavier, he would just say something to prove how idiotic I was” (263). Although Baby has become more comfortable with her youthfulness, she still anticipates and fears infantilization. She knows that Alphonse would obscure the agency she gains in this relationship with Xavier because he would reduce the relationship’s significance. She fears that she might be convinced to terminate the relationship as a result. Much like how Jude uses his daydreams in an attempt to anticipate a new, more hopeful future so that he can maintain his survival, Baby keeps her relationship with Xavier a secret, thus creating a similarly utopian space for herself in anticipation of Alphonse’s infantilization. Thus, the secret not only allows Baby to create a space where she has agency, which is an act of survival, but also allows the relationship to continue surviving because she does not feel pressure to end it.

Whereas Baby’s language and behaviour demonstrate a discomfort with sex, despite her continued sexual activity, Jude’s behaviour and language are sexually explicit, but he is sexually inactive. Throughout the novel, Jude makes sexually explicit jokes despite his sexual inactivity, such as when he licks a magazine and tells Angela “I have to make the Hemsworth brothers as wet as they make me” (Reid 8). When others comment on Jude’s virginity, he hides behind his narcissism, explaining, “I can’t help it. I’m far too in love with myself to love anyone else” (103). The disconnect between Jude’s language and action shows the separation between his public and private personae. Jude’s narcissistic language is a part of his public performance of movie star; as previously discussed, this performance allows him to articulate a version of himself that others

cannot hurt. This rearticulation of identity through narcissism parallels one of Foucault's technologies of the self, namely verbalization. In his lecture, "Technologies of the Self," Foucault describes how "The techniques of verbalization have been reinserted... in order to use them without renunciation of the self but to constitute, positively, a new self" (49). When Angela mentions Jude's virginity, she brings a part of his private persona into the public sphere. Consequently, Jude must justify this lack of experience in a way that aligns with his public performance. By emphasizing his performed narcissism, Jude does not have to deny, or renounce, his virginity, but instead can make it a part of a new, "positive" self.

This rearticulation of his virginity also reveals Jude's supposed inability to love anyone. When he makes a sexual advance on Abel, Angela's brother, Jude tells the reader in private, "I think [Abel] might've been in love with me, but I didn't love him back. I didn't even love Luke. I just wanted him to love me. I guess I wanted everyone to love me, but I don't think I loved anyone, really, except Keef [Jude's brother]. But that was different" (Reid 41). As the homophobic Facebook comment I reference earlier demonstrates, Jude experiences violent loathing from others, leaving him with a strong desire to be loved. When he says that he loves nobody but Keefer, it suggests that Jude might not even love himself. Thus, while Jude's narcissism is evidently a part of his performance, it also functions as a form of protection, as it allows him to show others that he is worthy of love despite their hatred of him.

Jude also reveals a core desire here: his desire to be loved by others, which suggests a desire to belong. Elspeth Probyn posits that desire is linked to belonging. To

build this argument, she explains “desire compels me to work along the lines set up between and among longing, leaving, being, bodies, images, movement; in short, it causes me to depart from any strict and stationary origin” (*Sexy Bodies* 5). The link between desire and movement, and the assertion that desire does not have a singular origin, are key to Probyn’s understanding of desire as belonging. She uses this framework to problematize belonging since “the problematic of belonging that I propose thus foregrounds the body as a place of passage, moved through by desire and being moved in return. Images of past and present belongings, of necessity, pass through and on” (6). The idea that belonging emphasizes the reciprocal impact that the body and desire have on one another echoes Ahmed’s assertion that when something makes contact with a body, it both shapes the body and affects what the body can do. Thus, when a desire for love, which is linked to belonging, comes in contact with Jude’s body, his body and the past experiences his body carries with him influence how that desire takes shape in his body. At the same time, the desire for love influences what his body can do. In other words, Jude’s past experiences with violent homophobia and widespread hatred transform his desire for love into a desire for *everyone* to love him. Simultaneously, the desire for love influences Jude’s behaviour, as he pursues Abel despite having no feelings for him. Moreover, desire impacts his performative identity, as he chooses to publicly show others that he is desirable and worthy of belonging. Since Jude’s desires are partially shaped by his past experiences with homophobia, his expression of desire, as a partial expression of autonomy, is likewise influenced by the constraints of homophobia.

This desire also highlights how Jude is “undone by others,” to borrow Butler’s words. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler explains,

We’re undone by each other... If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact... so when we speak about *my* sexuality or *my* gender, as we do (and as we must) we mean something complicated by it. Neither of these is precisely a possession, but both are to be understood as *modes of being dispossessed*, ways of being for another. (19, emphasis in original)

Butler uses this claim to argue that autonomy and agency is always relational, never isolated. While Jude uses his narcissism as a form of protection against being undone, he is still “undone” or “dispossessed” by desire. Thus, his relationship with Abel becomes particularly significant as it allows him to experience being desired by another person. It demonstrates how his autonomy is relational, as he navigates what it means to exist for another.

Despite being successful in his pursuit of Abel, Jude chooses to keep their relationship private. Jude describes the evolution of their relationship as follows:

The first time we met in the park, it was by chance. I walked past the entrance and saw his golden curls, the same colour as the dirty leaves stuck in the wet mud... I liked Abel because he was easy to talk to and to not talk to. Sometimes we’d sit on the bench and not say a word, but it was okay. I made it happen. Then, once it did, it was like there was no going back... As I undid his zipper, he slowly opened his eyes and said, “I’m not...” (50-1)

Given Abel’s persistent claim that he is not attracted to Jude, the relationship must stay private so that Abel can continue to deny his feelings. Jude explains that he continues to pursue the relationship because Abel “was easy to talk to and to not talk to,” suggesting that Jude feels comfortable in his presence, a feeling that he does not have in anyone

else's presence except Keefer's.³³ Therefore, Jude does have a significant connection to Abel, despite his denial. Jude's relationship with Abel thus emphasizes how his narcissistic assertion that he loves nobody is a form of protection. His performed narcissism allows him to deny Abel contact with his body, which in turn denies Abel the ability to influence both Jude's body and what Jude can do. Thus, while desire and belonging still influence his agency, as they are informed by homophobia, Jude's ability to decide what or who comes in contact with his body, and therefore what influences what his body can do, demonstrates an agency that works to be freed from the confines of homophobia.

Despite my extensive consideration of the confines within which Baby and Jude express their sexuality, thinking about Jude and Baby's sexuality solely in these terms limits how their agency can be understood. Butler problematizes this type of analysis in a similar manner to Lois McNay's argument about freedom that I referenced at the beginning of this chapter. Butler writes:

The pro-sexuality movement within feminist theory and practice has effectively argued that sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions... If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is 'before,' 'outside,' or 'beyond' power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself.

³³ In one scene, Jude recalls a time when Keefer asks Jude about his decision to wear makeup and feminine clothing. Rather than giving a sarcastic or narcissistic response, like he does with Angela, Jude patiently explains, "I kept my eyelashes in the curler as I said, 'You know on Halloween when you get to dress up?' He nodded. 'It makes you happy, right?' 'Yeah.' 'Well, dressing up makes me happy, too. But I just don't want to wait for Halloween.'" (155). Jude never demonstrates this type of patience and honesty, suggesting that he is comfortable enough with Keefer to behave this way.

This critical task presumes, of course, that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but is displacement. (*Gender Trouble* 30)

Through Baby's relationship with Xavier and her decision to keep a relationship with Alphonse for survival purposes, and through Jude's pursuit of Abel and his hypersexualized, narcissistic performance of identity, these two subvert the heterosexual discourse of power while still working "within the matrix" of heterosexuality.

While the implicit innocence of Baby's relationship with Xavier, combined with her focus on Alphonse's desire suggest that Baby is in fact conforming to a form of heterosexuality that necessitates that she become a "good" feminine subject, her ability to maintain these two relationships separately but simultaneously highlights Baby's ability to disrupt heteronormativity. Since both relationships are necessary for her survival, this maintenance demonstrates that she is really prioritizing her own survival over both Alphonse's desire, and the acceptable expression of sexuality in her relationship with Xavier. That she is able to keep these relationships separate allows her to continue benefitting from each relationship, and highlights her ability to effectively use these two for her own survival. Thus, Baby does not reproduce heterosexism, but instead replaces it with her own agency.

Similarly, although Jude's narcissism and hypersexualized persona are the results of extreme homophobia, and although the decision to keep any relationship with Abel private might imply that Jude is constrained by a heterosexist society that causes Abel to deny his feelings, Jude is still able to critically defy the expectations of a gay subject

living within the confines of homophobia. Even when parts of his private persona are brought into the public sphere, Jude effectively reframes the private so that it aligns with the public. His virginity therefore no longer becomes the sign of a failed heterosexual subject, but instead is the sign of his own ability to choose his sexual partners. This performed inability to love anyone can then protect his private persona. Anyone who comes into contact with Jude's body can impact what he is capable of doing, whether the impact is positive or negative. Thus, even though Abel might satisfy Jude's desire for love and belonging, Jude distances himself from Abel to prevent Abel from having any influence on him. Moreover, by keeping Abel confined to the private sphere, Jude protects himself from the further violent homophobia that a queer relationship could spark.³⁴ Jude's decisions allow him to continue to survive, which is a subversive act as a gay man living in the confines of heterosexual discourse and a material world that privileges upper class, heterosexual nuclear families.

Just as Baby and Jude's expressions of their sexuality should be read beyond a consideration of the confines of heterosexuality, a consideration of the agency derived from their worldviews and performativity should also be read without solely emphasizing constraint. Part of their agency is highlighted by the very fact that each novel is written in the first person and is therefore a self-articulated story of their experiences. However, these testimonies are heavily informed by the trauma of violent homophobia, classism, and sexism that Baby and Jude experience. Leigh Gilmore speaks to the impact of trauma,

³⁴ Even an assumed relationship with Luke sparks further violence against Jude. For example, see the violent homophobic attack against Jude on page 150.

arguing, “Crucial to the experience of trauma are the multiple difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it.” (*Limits* 6). Baby and Jude’s trauma is rooted in their experiences of classism, sexism, and homophobia at young ages. Their articulation of this trauma, which is a difficult task, is expressed in how they recreate a new worldview through performativity. Consequently, as Baby and Jude try to anticipate their futures through performativity, they are partly formed by the systems of oppression that confine them. Since this oppression is traumatic, it becomes difficult for them to express, as “there is, then, a politics of memory in the sense that a politics of persons and their actions is operating, as Foucault theorized, in a field of power” (*Limits* 24-5). Thus, since trauma is always inherently tied to power, one might assume that Baby and Jude’s performativity is solely an expression of their marginalization.

However, while this perspective is important to consider, it does not consider how performativity can be freeing. As McNay argues,

An ontological conception of narrative points towards the inherently symbolic nature of all action. Meaning is not inherent to action but is the product of interpretative strategies amongst which narrative is central. In other words, the concept of agency that emerges neither rests upon an idea of unmediated practice nor does it dismiss action as an illusion of free will (95).

If we can posit performativity as a form of narration, then Baby and Jude’s performativity can be considered an expression of agency that can free them while being influenced by factors such as homophobia, classism, and sexism.

What I find significant about Baby and Jude’s performative frameworks is how they become constrained by violent sexism and homophobia. Baby’s performed criminality and her use of sex work later on as a means of survival are both related to a

historical focus on female delinquency that “defined [female] criminality in strongly sexual terms and concluded that many of these youthful criminals were the products of broken homes” (Sangster, *Girl Trouble* 33). In this framework, Baby becomes a disgusting subject because her fake criminality saturates her body with sex. Thus, criminality simultaneously protects Baby and obscures her agency. While this obscured agency might be a strategy for survival, as it portrays Baby as non-threatening, it appears as though Baby is conforming to dominant expectations for disenfranchised youth.

Similarly, Jude’s movie metaphor places him at the core of celebrity culture, which is “at once a commodity system, an industry, a set of stories, and a participatory culture. The commodity at stake is embodied attention” (Gamson 1062). In using a framework that commoditizes his body, that necessitates that he become hypervisible, and then performing sexual provocativeness through his language, Jude highlights his own hypersexuality. As with Baby’s performance, Jude’s performance therefore saturates his body with sex because of its focus on his body. Again, the performance protects Jude because it fictionalizes his reality and makes Jude into the hypersexual subject that others use to obscure his agency. Agency itself is thus liminal. In the next chapter, I pick up on this theme of hypersexuality and use it to examine what warrants a disgust reaction from other characters, and how this disgust reaction then obscures Baby and Jude’s liminal agency.

CHAPTER THREE:

“Cute as a Button” and a “Hot Tamale” Too: The Disgust/Desire and Disgust/Fear Paradigms

At the end of the previous chapter, I looked at how Baby’s performed criminality and Jude’s performed fame saturate both of their bodies with sex. I argued that performativity both protects their bodies and creates the opportunity for others to hypersexualize their bodies, obscuring their liminal agency as a result. Hypersexualizing Baby and Jude’s bodies is one way that other characters react with disgust to them. For example, in *Lullabies*, Alphonse gives Baby a pair of white stockings to which she becomes attached. When Jules discovers the socks, he becomes enraged, yelling,

No fucking twelve-year-old gave you those socks. You’re a goddamn liar and you’re a wh*re. If you start with guys now, you’ll be all used up and no guy will ever want you. You’re going to be a pervert! No guy likes a pervert! You’ll know all these moves and shit that he won’t know. You’ll only be fit for drug addicts (O’Neill 156).

Jules creates an association between an article of clothing on Baby’s body and excessive sexuality. He assumes that these socks are an indication of Baby’s sexual activity, which he then uses to slut-shame her. By claiming that her hypersexuality means that she is a pervert, and that, consequently, the only romantic partners available to her are drug addicts, Jules creates a connection between hypersexuality and criminality. This connection to criminality is at the core of many disgust reactions throughout the novel, and its effect is to obscure Baby’s liminal agency.

Matt, Luke, and Ray’s disgust reactions toward Jude are similarly rooted in a description of his hypersexuality. Even when Jude does not say or do anything sexual,

characters remind Jude that he is not permitted to touch them sexually, such as when Matt says, “I know you’re used to being on your knees, Judy... But for the last time: no, you cannot suck my dick” (11). By calling Jude “Judy,” Matt makes an explicit connection between Jude’s gender subversive attire and hypersexuality. This hypersexualization of Jude’s body also demonstrates the supposedly inherent reason for disgust: Jude is an excessive body. His excess prompts a disgust reaction, which ultimately clouds the agency he does have.

Both Baby and Jude are posited as sexually excessive bodies, a type of body that Elizabeth Bullen describes as follows: “The subject of the discourse of disgust is not the sexually active young working woman, but the sexually excessive adolescent girl, often from a working or underclass background, with the teenage mother figuring as the epitome of the failed sexual citizen” (54). Though Jude does not identify as female, the above example demonstrates how he also becomes the sexually excessive subject, as others consistently harass him on the basis of sex and his sexuality. Drawing on Bullen’s discussion of sexual excess, and on the expressive mode of disgust that I outlined in my introduction, this chapter explores the disgust/desire paradigm present in *Lullabies for Little Criminals* and the disgust/shame paradigm present in *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*. My analysis focuses on the disgust reaction of other characters in each novel, particularly Johnny, Alphonse, Jules, Matt, Luke, and Ray, and seeks to understand what prompts this reaction from each character. I argue that these disgust reactions of male subjects elucidate how Baby and Jude’s agency becomes obscured. Since, to draw on Sara Ahmed, disgust makes their bodies “sticky,” the other characters’ accusations of

hypersexuality, criminality, and moral deviance stick to Baby and Jude's bodies, thus overshadowing their own articulations of autonomy and identity which I analyzed in the previous chapter. I argue that these characters rearticulate their power over Baby and Jude, as disgust reframes the protagonists as powerless. This dynamic reveals how disgust becomes a means of validating heteronormative discomfort with Baby and Jude, thus violently denying Baby and Jude personhood through the reassertion of hegemonic classism and heteronormativity.

Since these novels are both written in the first person, from the perspectives of Baby and Jude, my ability to speak about other characters' desires, fears, shame, and disgust is partially limited. For example, while Jude does not experience any encounters where either Matt or Luke express desire, it could be possible that these two do experience desire that Jude is unaware of, or express desire when he is not present. However, the lack of expressed desire by others in Jude's presence demonstrates how Jude's body can impact their ability to express particular emotions. Given the emphasis on the body in affect theories of disgust, and given my focus on *expressed* emotions, Jude and Baby's physical presence and the reactions they elicit are key to my understanding of how bodies impact the disgust/desire and disgust/fear paradigms. Speaking on the significance of physical bodies in affect theory, Ahmed writes,

Some bodies are presumed to be the origin of bad feeling insofar as they disturb the promise of happiness, which I would re-describe as the social pressure to maintain the signs of "getting along." Some bodies become blockage points, points where smooth communication stops. ("Happy Objects" 39)

Thus, I acknowledge that the narrative perspective will limit my ability to speak about other characters' emotional reactions. However, the impact of Baby and Jude's physical presence on what Johnny, Alphonse, Jules, Matt, Luke, and Ray express publicly demonstrates how Baby and Jude disrupt heteronormativity, and therefore prompts other characters to regain power over these two bodies to stop such a disruption.

As a poor, twelve- to thirteen-year-old female, Baby is perceived by most other characters both as a naïve child and as an autonomous adult. In their work on theories of tweenhood, Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh note that historically, "lower class girls [have] experienced the child/adult binary longer than upper class girls who were given a space to enter young womanhood" (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 12). There is no in-between space, and as such Baby is not given the opportunity to make a gradual transition into adulthood. This dichotomy leads to a simultaneous infantilization and hypersexualization of her body, which also affects characters' ability to recognize Baby's agency.

Baby's visibility due to her socioeconomic class makes her a particular target of disgust reactions. Claire Bradford and Mavis Reimer note that "As girls have become more publicly visible they have often become the locus of moral panics many of which centre upon their bodies and behaviours, and which are exemplified by debates over topics such as the sexualisation of young girls, obesity, eating disorders, and consumerism" (12). Throughout the novel, Baby spends much of her time out of her house. She is not confined to her home, but allowed to wander the streets, with Jules even sending her to the grocery store to get orange juice on her own at twelve. While Baby

does not invite increased surveillance by simply existing in the outside world, her presence in public spaces creates an opportunity for social encounters. Baby is aware of how hypervisibility incites moments of sexual harassment, as she explains, “The lowlifes said really dirty things to me after I turned thirteen” (O’Neill 214). That Baby specifically notices an increase in harassment once she becomes a teenager demonstrates how the transition into adolescence prompts hypersexualization over infantilization. Thus, Baby stands out in public because she is a young adolescent female, which increases the number of onlookers who will then police her body and behaviour.

The neighbourhood that Baby lives in further exacerbates her increased visibility and makes her a greater target for disgust and infantilizing reactions. Though she and her father move to several different apartments throughout the course of the novel, Baby lives within close proximity of Rue Sainte-Catherine and Boulevard Saint-Laurent – the Red-Light District of Montreal. David Beneventi describes how *Lullabies for Little Criminals* depicts a poverty-stricken and elitist society, arguing that “The novel painfully suggests that the abject poor do not occupy spaces in the same ways as the middle class do, for they must be ready to move along when interrogated or flee at a moment’s notice” (270). I would extend Beneventi’s notion to argue that the novel’s setting also affects how Baby’s body is read. The district’s reputation influences Baby’s own reputation. She does not have to perform a specific action to elicit a disgust reaction; she simply needs to exist publicly in a space of sexual disgust to be read as a disgusting subject.

In his work on the connected impact of sex work and public space, Phil Hubbard discusses how the space and the people who occupy the space shape and influence each

other. He writes that “the imaging (and imagining) of specific spaces associated with sex work is a crucial means by which the (contested) identity of the female street prostitute” and, I would add, the *assumed* sex worker “as Other is produced and maintained” (56). Baby’s association with the District influences her identity because of the assumed activities associated with the space. Since Jules and Alphonse both occupy that space, and partake in activities associated with the space’s negative reputation (Jules struggles with a heroin addiction and Alphonse is a pimp with multiple sex workers working for him), they have intimate knowledge of the types of activities Baby *could* partake in. For example, Baby explains that when she comes home late from buying orange juice, “Jules was still hysterical when I got home because I had been gone so long. He was positive that I had been sitting on a bench somewhere contemplating taking off with his grocery money. He demanded the change and bill immediately, saying he was going to make sure I hadn’t spent any of the money on drugs” (118). Even though Baby is late getting home because she is harassed by other children, Jules’s knowledge of drug use in the district prompts him to assume that Baby is searching for drugs. Thus, his assumptions about Baby are in part informed by the potential that the Red-Light district space creates.

Conversely, Jude does not reveal where he lives, telling the reader, “I’m not going to tell you what town I lived in because it was a dump, and it will just depress you. It had everything you needed if you didn’t need anything at all.” (18). While Jude does not give the reader a specific location, his description of this place demonstrates how he would be hypervisible in this space. Specifically, his use of the term “dump,” and his assertion that the place is suited to those who don’t “need anything at all,” suggests a dullness or

dreariness that makes it a relatively neutral backdrop. Consequently, Jude's bright pink lipstick, long hair, and fondness for feminine-coded clothing starkly contrast with this background. Jude explains, "When I was in the spotlight, they all stared. Matt asked, 'New lipstick, Judy?' Even though it was the same one I always wore" (22). Despite his lipstick being a consistent part of his appearance, it still sparks a lot of attention because it stands out against the "dump" Jude lives in. Therefore, Jude becomes even more ostracized than he might be because he disrupts the supposed neutrality of the space he occupies. Unlike Baby, whose association with Montreal's Red Light District begins to influence how others read her body, it is Jude's inability to fit in with the space that influences how others read excess on his body.

Moreover, Jude's mother influences how others read his agency. She works as a stripper, a highly sexualized profession, which, in turn, contributes to the hypersexualization of Jude's body. Jude describes his own mother's appearance through his description of her closet as follows: "My mother's closet was basically a sex shop. It was full of costumes and shoes, which she wore to work. That's 'work' in the original sense, although she werked for a living" (7). Jude's use of the word "werk," while a reference to his mother's job at a strip club, suggests sexual prowess. The term implies that she is not ashamed of her work and has control over her sexuality. However, that Jude makes no mention of non-sexualized attire illustrates how his mother is consistently sexualized, even outside of her work. Her work becomes her entire personality, which affects how Jude's autonomy is perceived. In the opening scene of the novel, Jude is wearing his mother's shoes. Matt notices the heels, commenting, "I've seen them before

you know. Your mom was wearing them when I tucked a dollar bill between her tits”

(11). By associating the shoes with a sexualized space, Matt creates a connection between sex, the shoes, Jude’s body, and Jude’s desires. Since it is his mother’s clothing he borrows, garments which Jude himself has already established belong in a sex shop, when Jude wears this clothing, he wears already sexualized clothing. While Jude’s body is already hypersexualized because he is gay, his mother’s profession further exacerbates the hypersexualization. Matt, Luke, and their friends read both Jude and his mother as abjectly feminine, using the shoes as evidence that both enact this femininity.

Like this scene between Matt and Jude, which reveals how Jude’s body becomes hypervisible and hypersexualized, early scenes in *Lullabies* establish how Baby is hypersexualized and infantilized. Baby’s name serves as an early site of a visceral reaction in the novel and reflects the simultaneous hypersexualization and infantilization she faces. Baby describes her love for her name, explaining,

I loved how people got confused when Jules and I had to explain how it wasn’t just a nickname. It was an ironic name. It didn’t mean you were innocent at all. It meant you were cool and gorgeous. I was only a kid, but I was looking forward to being a lady with that name. I had stringy blonde hair and was skinny as hell, but Jules’s friend Lester said I’d be a heartbreaker someday soon (4-5).

Baby frames her name as a desirable ideal to strive for. Her association of coolness, beauty, and womanhood with her name is rooted in Jules’s intentions when naming her. As she explains, it is Jules who justifies her name alongside her; she does not deliver this explanation on her own. In naming his own daughter Baby, and then explaining these intentions behind the name, Jules sexualizes her. Even though she is young, her name ties her to adulthood in his interpretation, which is then tied to Lester’s vision of Baby later in

the passage. Lester's use of the word "heartbreaker" suggests that he views Baby as a highly desired sexual object, and his claim that she will become such an individual "sometime soon" demonstrates that he frames her as almost an adult, which justifies, in his eyes, his sexualization of her body.

At the same time, Baby's name is associated with infancy, an association that Ummni Khan argues "casts [Baby] in discourses of childhood innocence, yet at the same time symbolically infantilizes her, thereby undercutting Baby's agency and perspectives" (308). In this way, Baby's name places her in a contradiction: she is simultaneously considered too young to be behaving as she does, thus evoking a reaction of disgust, but is old enough to be sexualized, thus evoking sexual desire. These parallels demonstrate that the simultaneous infantilization and sexualization of Baby elicits a disgust and desire reaction. Her perceived youth provokes disgust and her perceived maturity provokes desire.

The nicknames Jude acquires also serve as a sign of both disgust and dehumanization; however, whereas "Baby" is the character's birth name in *Lullabies*, other characters give Jude his nicknames. As a result, Jude's nicknames are another means for characters to express their disgust. Jude identifies two nicknames in the book: the nickname "Judy" and later the 'nickname' "it." Jude explains how one of his classmates altered his name on the attendance sheet, prompting his teacher to call out the name "Judy" instead of "Jude." Jude reflects on this moment, saying,

Poor Mrs. Kennedy. She was so clueless. She kept calling "Judy Rothesay?" and asking if we had a transfer student. It became my official stage name when the media picked up on it. Every time I walked down a hall/red carpet, the reporters

would call me ‘Judy’ to try to get my attention, but I’d refuse to comment. I’d turn their dirty looks into camera flashes and make them my paparazzi. They’d scream my name, and I’d let them take a little piece of my soul with each flash. Why not? They were going to take it anyway. (23)

Feminizing Jude’s name, and the underlying notion that doing so is a means of mocking him, demonstrate the disgust Jude’s peers have for his effeminate clothing. Jude not only defies gender stereotypes when he dresses in this manner, but also renounces hypermasculinity. Naming him “Judy” therefore reinstates a strict gender binary and serves as a reminder that by not conforming to the masculine ideal, and by rejecting this ideal, he is rejecting a system of heteronormativity that is predicated on the gender binary. By feminizing Jude with this nickname, the other students can also justify their lewd sexualization of Jude’s body, much as Lester uses Baby’s name. As a result, the nickname makes Jude vulnerable to further abuse and mistreatment. Naming becomes a form of violence.

Another nickname Jude mentions is the name “It.” Jude finds a note to Mr. Dawson on his desk that reads “*We have a student who has decided to express his sexuality by sometimes wearing makeup or girls’ clothing... Some students don’t seem bothered, while others have been more sensitive³⁵ to the issue. We ask that you communicate with your class: they don’t have to like it, but they have to respect the*

³⁵ The use of the word “sensitive” here also reveals how the administrators at Jude’s school try to minimize the harassment Jude faces. Although he faces daily harassment in the form of homophobic slurs, violent encounters, and cyberbullying, the letter roots the disgust of the other students in their “sensitivity” and not in their fear of this disruption to the heteronormative ideal, or in their disgust for anything and anyone who does not conform. Conversely, Jude is not given the opportunity to have feelings about the bullying; it is only acknowledged that he has rights. Thus, the letter prioritizes Jude’s feelings and denies Jude any right to have feelings.

student's rights" (24, emphasis in original). While the note indicates that the school will permit Jude to dress as he pleases, the need for a note in the first place demonstrates how Jude's attire makes him hypervisible in the school. His clothing visibly marks him as Other at the school, as someone who, because of his clothing, can be sexualized. Jude identifies the use of the term "it" in the sentence "they don't have to like it" as another nickname of his: "'It' was another one of my stage names. It was my JLo. People meant it to be insulting, but I found It empowering. I always thought they were referring to the Stephen King novel because of my ability to shape-shift into their greatest fear. It's amazing what a pair of heels can do" (24). Jude's comment suggests that, while the name "it" is never openly applied to him by another character in course of the novel, the nickname "It" has been used against him before. Jude's connection between the name and his appearance suggests that the name is part of the disgust reaction of others and works to obscure his agency. By objectifying and dehumanizing Jude with this nickname, Jude's peers reinstate their power over him, despite any attempts he may make to reinforce his own agency. Through these two nicknames, and the desire to always maintain their power over Jude, his peers reveal the source of their fear: in asserting his agency, Jude demonstrates his ability to disrupt the hegemonic heteronormative structure of their social lives, which, as Ahmed explains, creates discomfort as it takes away the power the other students gain from such a structure. What becomes apparent, in the process, is that disgust reactions highlight the other students' fear of the prospect of losing power.³⁶

³⁶ That Jude reframes these two nicknames as "empowering" and part of his celebrity persona reflects his use of the performative to claim agency in moments of violent homophobia that I discuss in the previous chapter.

The disgust/desire paradigm and the disgust/shame/fear paradigm develop throughout each novel, demonstrating how any character who partakes in a disgust reaction is capable of overshadowing, in some part, Baby's and Jude's agency. Baby's first experience of the disgust/desire paradigm occurs when she is living with Mary and Mary's two sons, Felix, who is Baby's age, and Johnny. At eighteen years old, Johnny often ignores Baby, save for moments where he accuses Baby of stalking him, raping him, and moments where he insults both Felix and Baby's intellectual capabilities and for being a "nerd and nerdette" (O'Neill 63). The dual focus on Baby's assumed sexual desire and her intelligence speaks to Johnny's voyeuristic position. All comments about her intelligence are meant to infantilize her and are always directed at both her *and* Felix; she is only viewed as a young subject to be infantilized when she is in a larger group. In comparison, all comments about sex and desire are directed solely at Baby. Without Felix there to serve as a reminder of her age, and therefore her naiveté, Baby becomes the sexualized subject. That Johnny speaks about *Baby's* desire and *Baby's* sexuality but not his own, shows the simultaneous work of disgust and desire. By speaking on behalf of Baby, and ascribing acts of sexual assault to her, Johnny can perform a disgust reaction. Johnny's reaction is also rooted in his view that Baby is the sexually excessive body that Elizabeth Bullen describes (54). This perspective informs Johnny's supposed disgust reaction because the language of "stalking" and "raping" not only describes sexual excess, but also a *violent* sexual excess. Even though his accusations are evidently false, Johnny's association of Baby with sexual disgust positions her, in his mind, within a discourse of disgust that he can then manipulate. Framing Baby as violently sexual also

gives Johnny a means of expressing his own desire. In placing Baby within a discourse of justifiable disgust, Johnny can project his own fantasies about Baby onto her body and speak these desires aloud without fear of them being ascribed to his own body. Disgust therefore becomes a mode of expressing desire and of hiding that inappropriate desire by ascribing it to the already disgusting body.

On a rare occasion when Johnny shows kindness, Baby decides to ask him for the magic mushrooms she's been seeking. Disgusted by her question, Johnny replies, "You're not old enough to be asking that question. You have to start dressing differently if you're going to use 'shrooms.' ... 'You know, you're not going to be bad looking. Of course, you might try behaving more like a girl. You can comb your hair, for instance'" (76). Though Baby notes that he speaks in "mock" disgust, Johnny's need to perform a disgusted reaction speaks to his view of Baby's youth (76). Since Baby is still only twelve, Johnny knows her question should be seen as inappropriate. However, he only suggests that she change her attire in order to be eligible to take drugs. This emphasis on a change in appearance and not a change in mentality, age, or maturity, not only demonstrates that Johnny's initial reaction is performative, but also demonstrates that he is not simply disgusted by Baby. That he follows this comment by focusing on Baby's attractiveness, telling her to behave more like a girl and change her appearance to become even more physically appealing, suggests that Johnny in fact desires her. Once again, disgust becomes a performative mode through which Johnny can express his desire. Whereas before, Johnny ascribed sexual excess to Baby so he could express his own attraction to Baby without revealing it, he can now claim desire as his own. While both are modes of

expression, the former situation projects the longing, thus partially obscuring his attraction while still naming it explicitly, and the latter is a claim to this desire, though it is less explicit.

Rather than creating false situations that would warrant a disgust reaction, Baby's question finally gives Johnny a specific act on which to focus his false disgust reactions. Since his unspoken desire has been channeled through imagined disgust, having a non-imaginary focus of disgust sparks Johnny to act on his imagined desire. Baby explains to the reader, "[Johnny] made his fingers like two little legs and walked them all the way up my leg. They pushed up my skirt as they walked along. When they touched the elastic of my underwear, it was as if I had peed a tiny butterfly. He leaned over and kissed me and his tongue opened up my mouth" (76). Johnny acts without Baby's consent, and then follows his actions by claiming, "Oh my God, the girl's in love with me!!!" (76). Johnny's exclamation is his justification for his actions. The theme of Baby's desire for him picks up from his accusations of stalking and assault from earlier, thus positioning Baby as the cause of this act. Baby is not given the opportunity to exercise her own autonomy over the situation. Instead, as previously mentioned, Johnny's feigned disgust allows him to frame his own desire as Baby's desire. Although Baby has made the decision on her own to seek out magic mushrooms, and has chosen to approach Johnny specifically, Johnny overshadows any agency she might have here.

Just as Johnny portrays Baby as a hypersexualized subject when performing disgust, Matt focuses on Jude's sexuality to demonstrate his contempt for Jude; however, Jude's attempts to defend himself exacerbate Matt's disgust reaction and cause further

violence. Matt approaches Jude with his friends, Colin, Kenny, and Luke in tow, stealing Jude's joint and then wiping off the traces of "the hiv" that Colin says might be on the joint since it has been in Jude's mouth (10). The immediate association between Jude and a sexually transmitted infection demonstrates the role of hypersexualization in the disgust reactions in this novel. By marking Jude as sexually excessive, they can make Jude into a failed citizen in the same way Bullen argues that working class girls are posited as failed citizens.³⁷ Moreover, the fear of even indirect contact with Jude through the joint, and the spreadable nature of the HIV virus, suggests a fear of 'contamination.' If Matt were to come into any sort of contact with Jude, he would be coming into contact with disgust, and therefore be viewed as a disgusting subject alongside Jude. Throughout the novel, it seems that in order to keep his power over Jude, Matt must be disgusted with the idea of being associated with Jude through any form of nonviolent contact.

Jude's self-defense starts off rather passive, as he tries to avoid violence. He replies to Colin's comment about HIV by saying, "Ew, that like doesn't even exist anymore... What decade are you from?" (10). Jude continues to defend himself as Matt taunts him because of his boots, and then his defense escalates to violence when Matt mentions going to see Jude's mother strip. Jude recalls, "I pushed him, harder than I thought I could without breaking a nail. He [Matt] seemed surprised when I knocked him to the ground" (11). That Jude is able to cause bodily harm to Matt despite Matt's feminization of Jude deeply threatens Matt's masculinity. This act demonstrates both

³⁷ Although Bullen's argument focuses on the sexually excessive teenage female body, the theory can be applied here. As someone who disrupts hegemonic gender norms, Jude's body is marked as sexually excessive because he is hypervisible. As such, his excessiveness can make him the "failed citizen" in the same way that sexual excessiveness can make the working-class girl a "failed citizen".

Jude's autonomy and his ability to effectively defend himself. Therefore, Jude's defense is also a defiance of the way his peers have used his sexuality and effeminate dress to obscure his agency. Consequently, Jude's self-defense escalates the violence, as Matt becomes further disgusted with Jude's ability to disrupt heteronormativity and must once again overpower Jude's agency with more disgust and more violence.

When Jude responds to Matt's punch by spitting in Matt's face, he makes contact with, and thus make an association between his body and Matt's body. As a bodily excretion, the spit also parallels Bullen's concept of bodily excess, as the spit can be related to sex and the body's 'disgusting' excretions. As a result, Matt's friends turn on him: "'Dude,' Kenny said to Matt, disgusted. 'You're totally going to get pink eye!' 'Yeah,' Colin laughed, 'pink triangle eye.'" (11). That these comments regarding disgust and contamination are directed at Matt now instead of Jude demonstrates the ability for the disgust reaction to move among bodies; as Ahmed notes, "Disgust binds objects together in the very moment that objects become attributed with bad feeling, as 'being' sickening." (Ahmed 88). To break the bind between himself and Jude, Matt responds with extreme violence, nearly killing Jude. Jude explains, "Matt's skateboard came for my head before I could duck. He kept hitting me even when I was down. Later, the doctors worried that he'd injured the ventromedial prefrontal cortex part of my brain... When I came to, the park was empty, and the blood was pooling in my nostrils" (11-12). By causing extreme injury to Jude, Matt shows his absolute disgust for Jude, and his disgust at the idea that he could possibly be associated with Jude. Moreover, the violence leaves Jude helpless, which suggests that he has no agency, even though he is narrating the story,

because he cannot defend himself at this point, nor can he even take care of his injuries on his own.

However, the beginning of *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* differs from the relationship between Baby and Johnny because Luke rescues Jude, an act which partially restores some of Jude's agency. Luke comes back for Jude after the beating, which Jude describes as follows: "'Shit,' is all he [Luke] said as he gave me his hand and helped me up... He let me lean on him as we walked out of the graveyard... He lit us a joint. It was like he didn't know what else to do. He tried to get me to take a puff, as if I'd be okay if I could at least take a puff... He helped me the rest of the way to the hospital" (12-13). Luke's capacity to make nonviolent physical contact with Jude without fear of "contamination" demonstrates that he might not agree with the notion that Jude is a hypersexualized, infectious being.

That being said, Luke's decision to wait until there is nobody around before helping Jude to the hospital reveals that although Luke does not perceive Jude in the same way as the others, he is ashamed of this viewpoint and fears being 'found out.' Silvan Tomkins describes shame as "the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation" (133). Elspeth Probyn elaborates upon this idea: "If 'shame has many motifs' (1993; 151), most crucially, it is located in, and in relation to the body" ("Sporting Bodies" 23). While Luke's shame for his lack of hatred for Jude does not prevent him from seeing Jude's agency, the embarrassment affects how he relates to Jude's body: Luke will touch Jude, but only when nobody is around; Luke will help Jude, even save Jude, but only if nobody finds out. Thus, this opening scene of Reid's novel reveals a new

paradigm: the disgust/shame paradigm. Luke's relationship with Jude and his ability to see Jude's agency are informed by the disgust reaction of others, and thus his ability to go unnoticed by the other characters is contingent on silence. Once he is made a visible support to Jude, Luke becomes hypervisible and his behaviour towards Jude changes from saving Jude and "tracing [Jude's] scar slowly, from top to bottom, then [looking] down at the makeup on his fingertip and smiling," to murdering Jude at the end of the novel (14). Consequently, tracing the influences of Luke's relationship to Jude allows us to understand how disgust functions alongside shame, and helps us to see how shame can transform into disgust.

Unlike Jude's relationships with Luke and Matt, Baby's time with Johnny and his family is short-lived, as she soon returns to living with her father. Therefore, to understand the lasting consequences of the disgust/desire paradigm and the power hierarchies embedded within the paradigm, it is important to look at other characters with whom Baby has extended relationships: Alphonse, and her father, Jules. By tracing these two relationships throughout the novel, it becomes clear that disgust and desire not only obscure their ability to see Baby's agency, but also mask Baby's ability to see her own agency. In limiting autonomy, Alphonse and Jules are able to cast doubt on Baby's testimony and frame her as an unreliable narrator. Thus, disgust allows the characters to release other emotions that then limit Baby's credibility in the eyes of others.

According to the narrative, it is Baby who first notices Alphonse and develops an attraction for him. She expresses disappointment in her inability to capture his attention, telling the reader, "Although Alphonse was terribly interested in women, he never seemed

to notice me. But that's because I wasn't really a woman" (149). Baby's use of the word "really" suggests that she is aware that her body is, in part, associated with womanhood. However, she sees womanhood as a false label for her body. If she were a "real" woman, she would be able to capture Alphonse's attention. Therefore, although Baby knows about Alphonse's reputation as a womanizer and a pimp, she sees his hypothetical desire for her as a validation of her womanhood.

Soon after this admission, Baby captures Alphonse's attention. While among friends, Baby hears music playing, and she starts dancing:

I stood right up and started dancing to [the music], rolling my hips around, spinning an invisible Hula-Hoop, just like a stripper... I noticed Alphonse standing across the street, checking out the interior of a car with some friends of his. Alphonse wasn't interested in the car, however. He was looking right at me. (154)

Baby's comparison of her dancing both to a Hula-Hooper and a stripper demonstrates her youth and her desire for womanhood. She is taking an object associated with play and childhood and using her knowledge of it to mimic a form of sexual adulthood. In this sense, Baby places herself in a liminal position between childhood and adulthood, where adulthood can only be understood through her personal experiences from her youth.

Alphonse is not privy to Baby's thought process as she creates her dance moves, however, and only sees the adult half manifested in the movement itself which, as Baby explains, is "like a stripper['s movements]" (154). Alphonse's intense focus on this movement, a focus so strong that he is not distracted by other activity, suggests that he only fixates on Baby when he is able to read her as a sexualized adult figure and not as a child. Thus, he now has a means to justify approaching her.

Initially, Alphonse does not directly approach Baby. Instead, he has his cousin, Peaches, approach her first with a message. Peaches brings a pair of white stockings to Baby and tells her “These are from my cousin Alphonse. He just wants you to know that you are a hot tamale” (155). The gift of lingerie and his compliment suggest that Alphonse is making his sexual desire for Baby open and known. However, using his cousin to deliver gifts and messages suggests that he still wants to maintain some distance between himself and Baby. When Peaches delivers the gifts, Alphonse can brandish his power by showing Baby what he can give her and can observe her reaction without making physical contact with her. The disconnection between words, gift, and physical presence, therefore reveals that Alphonse is aware there is something inappropriate about his desire for Baby. He needs her affirmation before he will choose to initiate physical contact.

When Alphonse does approach Baby, his words suggest both desire and infantilization. While Baby is sitting on a bench reading, Alphonse approaches her and says, “What are you reading? You’re a little thinker, huh? You look cute as a button when you sit there reading. I’ve seen you do it before. You’d look good with tiny glasses” (158). By mentioning that he has watched her before, Alphonse makes it known not only that he has an interest in Baby, but also that he has been interested in her for an extended period of time. He uses the terms “little thinker” and “cute as a button,” which carry infantilizing connotations, and then continues this infantilization by suggesting she wear “tiny” glasses. The delicacy associated with small accessories, along with his description of Baby as small, place Baby in the position of child. Although Alphonse’s

infantilization seems to contradict his hypersexualization of Baby, it provides Alphonse with different methods of reminding Baby of his power over her. She is therefore desirable to Alphonse because she is both child and adult, one who can be infantilized and hypersexualized at the same time.

Alphonse's ability to simultaneously make claims of hypersexualization and infantilization against Baby demonstrates his voyeuristic power over Baby. Ummni Khan describes Alphonse's and other characters' voyeurism as "the grown-up gaze." She explains, "Like the male gaze, the grown-up gaze projects a particular fantasy on its object which advances adult power and pleasure. In the story of girl prostitutes, the adult narrator is endowed with the authority to create knowledge, while the child is the object and bearer of that knowledge" (303). As a legal male adult entering into a relationship with a female minor, Alphonse has hegemonic power both because of his gender and age. By hypersexualizing Baby, and only taking notice of her when she can be read as an adult figure through her sexually provocative dancing, Alphonse is able to justify his attraction to Baby and frame it as a non-criminal desire. However, knowing that Baby is still a young adolescent allows him to view her as a subject with minimal agency whom he can overpower. Therefore, although he has framed her as an adult, he can project his fantasy of being with a child onto her and reconstitute her identity as adult-behaving-as-child, not child-behaving-as-adult. Alphonse frames Baby as an object of his fantasy, someone who cannot have agency because she is a mere child, rather than being her own person with

her own ability to make decisions. She becomes the “bearer” of Alphonse’s ‘expert’³⁸ knowledge of her body. As she internalizes Alphonse’s reading of her body, any agency she might still bear becomes obscured by his projections.

The result of Alphonse’s power over Baby becomes especially noticeable in Baby’s discussion of Alphonse’s supposed lack of jealousy. After engaging in sex work for an extended period of time while also carrying on a relationship with Xavier, Baby reflects on her decision to keep Xavier a secret from Alphonse. She first recounts, “Alphonse didn’t have any problem with me having sex for money. When you’re young, sex doesn’t mean as much, it isn’t sacred. Children make the best prostitutes because they’re the most perfunctory about the whole encounter. The whole act is like a dare, like kissing a frog or something” (253). Here, Alphonse’s ability to not feel jealousy is predicated on his ability to view Baby as a child. Although Baby has been told she’s a child by people other than Alphonse, it is Alphonse’s label specifically that affects this moment. Since she is in a relationship with Alphonse, it is his view of her relationships with others that matters. That she goes so far as to explain that “children make the *best* prostitutes” and describes her perspective as “perfunctory” reveals the pragmatic attitude she has developed towards the encounters (253, emphasis mine). Moreover, since sex work brings in income, Alphonse materially gains from maintaining this attitude and allowing Baby to develop a similar perspective.

³⁸ As a legal adult, Alphonse has a certain intellectual authority, and can therefore claim to have knowledge of Baby that even she herself does not have, hence my use of the term “expert.”

In comparison, Baby knows that her relationship with Xavier would make Alphonse jealous. She follows her comment about sex work by saying, “I knew, on the other hand, why Xavier would make him jealous. When I hung out with Xavier, I didn’t want anything to do with Alphonse” (253). As I have discussed, when she is with Xavier, Baby is not living under the grown-up gaze, and is therefore relieved from being the bearer of Alphonse’s fantasies. This feeling of freedom influences her to free herself completely from Alphonse’s gaze, which Alphonse knows is a possibility if Baby interacts with other people her own age like Xavier. As such, Alphonse becomes disgusted by the possible relationship between Baby and Xavier because it represents a potential threat to his power over her. Baby’s awareness of Alphonse’s feelings demonstrates that the jealousy and disgust make Alphonse’s insecurity visible. Disgust therefore makes Alphonse’s desire, both his sexual desire and his desire for power, visible to Baby.

Baby’s admission that she only desires freedom from Alphonse when she is with Xavier demonstrates how Alphonse’s disgust and desire have prevented Baby from seeing her own agency in certain situations. Although she might be able to have agency in her relationship with Alphonse, his ability to write his fantasies onto her body obscures her own agency from even herself. That being said, that she does have moments where she desires freedom, and does ultimately keep her relationship with Xavier a secret from Alphonse, reveals that Baby does still use her agency. Since she is unable to read these decisions as moments of agency, Baby’s testimony about her relationship with Alphonse is ultimately shaped by his depiction of her that she has internalized.

Similar to Alphonse's initial hesitation to approach Baby, Luke initially keeps his lack of hatred for Jude private, a decision motivated by shame, as previously discussed. However, unlike Alphonse, who makes his desire for Baby visible as he romantically pursues her, Luke continues to keep his lack of hatred private, and remains passive when his friends attack Jude. For example, Matt catches Jude watching Luke and Madison kiss and then starts teasing Luke about the situation:

Hey, Luke,' Matt said, as Alexis's camera phone flashed. "Looks like your other girlfriend is getting jealous." I was so absorbed in watching them that I forgot that I could be watched, too. "Why don't you give him a kiss?" Matt laughed, and my cheeks turned red, but not as red as Luke's. "Come on, man," Matt said. "Judy's already puckering up!" Luke looked at me, and the spotlight became so hot that I was on fire... "What's the matter?" Matt asked Luke. "He's practically a girl." (65)

As his face turns red, Luke's embarrassment, or shame, is revealed. As Silvan Tomkins writes, "the individual can now be shamed by what shames another" (156). In this scene, Luke's shame is in part informed by Matt's comments, and these comments imply that Matt would be ashamed if he were in Luke's situation. Thus, Luke's reaction indicates that he is embarrassed by the mere suggestion that he would associate with Jude, an association that would garner disgust. However, Luke does not verbally resist Matt's homophobia, demonstrating that while he does not agree with Matt, he will hide his views to protect himself from disgust. Consequently, the explicit disgust and homophobia in Matt's comments only affect Jude's agency, as Matt speaks on behalf of Jude's supposed desires, and not Luke's agency, as he is able to retain his contempt for Jude without consequence.

When Luke does participate in homophobic attacks against Jude, he does not participate wholly, and remains somewhat passive while still protecting his heterosexuality. When the hashtag “#WhyJudyShouldDie” becomes popular on social media, Luke participates, but only to say, “so that the school doesn’t have to make him his own bathroom” (27). While this reply still contains threads of homophobia, suggesting that the existence of gender nonconforming folks is a burden to accommodate for, this comment lacks the same hatred that other replies contain, such as Madison’s reply that “no one would miss him [Jude],” or Kenny’s reply, “so we can PARTY!!!!” (26). These comments demonstrate a lack of care for Jude and imply that Jude’s existence actually worsens people’s lives. While Luke will not actively try to change the structural heteronormativity that instigates the disgust reactions because of his shame, he will not actively participate in maintaining the extreme structural heteronormativity. Unlike the others, Luke refuses to say that his life would personally improve with Jude gone. In this way, Luke’s subtle homophobia reinforces his heterosexual privilege and allows him to keep his shame private.

This passive comment demonstrates that Luke does not necessarily accept Jude, but instead has contempt for him, as there is still an element of disgust in his Tweet.

Sianne Ngai explains the significance of contempt existing alongside disgust reactions:

Given our common understanding of disgust and contempt as cousins rather than antagonists, there is a sense in which disgust does the work of blocking both. For if benevolence or pity can be a way of managing aversion to an object perceived as socially inferior (in order to maintain what Miller calls its “disattendability”), disgust can be a prophylactic against the contempt that marks the negative limit of disattendability – one that already assumes its object to be relatively unthreatening, only mildly offensive at all. (345)

That Luke would tweet something that suggests Jude's existence is a burden demonstrates that he does not see the extent of Jude's vulnerability. His contempt only exists when a physical threat is made to Jude's life, because it is an obvious, visible sign of vulnerability. But his public disgust shows that Jude still poses a threat to Luke's own body. Luke's mild disdain for Jude in his tweet is part of an act to keep himself from becoming associated with Jude's disgusting body. This distance demonstrates that while this tweet is meant to show his dissociation from Jude, it demonstrates just how threatening Jude's body is to Luke. His desire to maintain his social power thus overshadows his ability to see the extent of Jude's vulnerability.

When Luke's contempt for Jude is made known to Matt, however, his shame quickly escalates and transforms into disgust. Jude reveals in the following passage that it was Luke who saved him after Matt beat him with a skateboard:

"'Luke' I said, swallowing the vomit caught in my throat. It went back down and made my eyes water. He looked at me and his face went hard. I could tell he was terrified. 'Luke,' I said again, even though he was already listening. Everyone was. 'What?' he asked, deadpan. 'Will you be my Valentine?' Matt started laughing and Madison said, 'Oh my God, you're joking, right?' 'You know you love me,' I said, my dying words. 'You're a f*ggot,' Luke sneered, already looking away. If he wasn't looking at me, was I there? 'Yeah? Well, so are you. Why don't you just admit it already?' 'What did you just say?' Madison laughed. 'What, didn't you tell them, Luke?' 'Tell us about what?' Matt asked. 'About how he came back.' 'Shut up,' Luke said, looking at me again. I was alive! 'He came back. Luke saved me that night. It was him.' 'You're fucking kidding me,' Matt said, turning to Luke for confirmation and finding it in his pupils, which dilated with fear, or maybe with regret for having a conscience. It's the only thing that can make your star fade. 'He was my hero,' I cried, and I knew this was the reel I'd send in for awards. 'Shut up,' Luke said through gritted teeth. He was so close. 'Don't be shy, Luke. We love each other. That's why you saved me. Because you

love me. And that's why every time you came to visit me at the hospital, I gave you the best- 'Shut the fuck up!' He screamed, lunging at me." (147)

By addressing Luke directly, Jude attempts to make a clear connection between himself and Luke, unlike Matt's previous comments, which have all offered hypothetical associations. Consequently, Luke feels the need to be explicitly homophobic, using a slur to maintain his dissociation from Jude by actively showing disgust for Jude. Then, when Luke's kindness is exposed, his eyes dilate "with fear, or maybe with regret for having a conscience." This description of fear emphasizes how shame works in this scene; while Luke has been able to keep his actions hidden from others, thus allowing him to avoid being shamed, his shame is now made public and he becomes hypervisible because of his association with Jude. Luke becomes an object of disgust through association. Just as Matt beats Jude to sever the connection made when Jude spit on him, Luke screams and lunges at Jude to show his disapproval and disgust at the idea that he could be involved with Jude. That being said, this act of violence is also a means for Luke to communicate his shame for his actions since, as Silvan Tomkins explains, "Shame is both an interruption and a further impediment to communication, which is itself communicated" (137). In place of verbal communication, the violence becomes an alternative form for Luke to communicate his shame at being publicly exposed.

This shame then transforms into disgust, as Luke does not permanently sever the connection between himself and Jude since he does no seemingly permanent damage to

Jude.³⁹ As a result, the hashtag “#LuJu” spreads across Twitter, and students begin to taunt Luke alongside Jude (148). To completely sever this connection, Luke must perform a disgust reaction as “Contempt-disgust [is] the negative affect linked with individuation and hate... contempt-disgust does [“renounce the object permanently”]” (Tomkins 139), unlike shame, which is not a permanent renouncement. To draw on Ngai’s work on disattendability once again, Luke must not only prove his complete revulsion for Jude but also disregard Jude’s vulnerability completely, thus using his revulsion as a “prophylactic against [his] contempt” (345). In other words, to retain his own agency, Luke must renounce Jude permanently. Thus, when Jude makes an appearance at the Valentine’s dance, Luke does not speak and Jude recalls, “Luke shot me twice in the head, point-blank.” (165). By killing Jude, Luke completes the task that Matt had attempted in the very first scene of the novel: he permanently renounces Jude and thus fully robs Jude of his agency. He does not engage in dialogue with Jude, which prevents Jude from defending himself and thus prevents him from demonstrating agency. In doing so, Luke performs the ultimate disgust reaction and asserts his complete power over both Jude and over others’ ability to perform a disgust reaction against himself. In this relationship between Jude and Luke, disgust obscures agency because of its ability to be transferred onto other subjects. As with Alphonse, and as we will later see with Jules, the reassertion of power through a disgust reaction not only works to minimize Baby’s and Jude’s ability

³⁹ Unlike Matt, whose beating was violent enough that he initially thought he might have killed Jude, Luke’s initial act of violence against Jude does minimal damage and does not cause any permanent scarring like Matt did (13). Even though Matt had contact with a part of Jude (through his spit), such aggressively violent behaviour demonstrates his vehement disgust for this association. Therefore, Luke does not fully renounce Jude because his reaction is not as extreme.

to effectively survive, but also reasserts the heteronormative power of the male characters who perform disgust.

Like Jude, who loses his ability to retain his agency as violent disgust reactions cause physical harm, Baby's ability to give testimony and have someone believe and bear witness to her testimony is ultimately limited by the disgust reactions of those around her. This dynamic is best seen in her evolving relationship with Jules, who believes Baby's claims less and less and accuses her of further criminal behaviour. Once reunited after Jules's stay in a drug rehabilitation center, Jules begins to accuse Baby of varying wrongdoings. The accusations initially involve seemingly harmless mistakes, and eventually escalate. One night, someone leaves the water running in the bathroom and the water quickly floods the entire apartment. Jules discovers the mess in the middle of the night and Baby recounts:

"I don't understand why you do all this hateful shit, man," [Jules] said to me, standing in a puddle on the kitchen floor. He had dragged me out of bed to check out the mess. "You used to be a sweet kid. I don't know where you got that mean streak. You must have picked it up from Mary or maybe those black kids at the foster home." (92)

Jules's connection between the flooding incident and Baby's behaviour parallels Bullen's comments about sexual excess. To blame a misdemeanor related to excess on Baby suggests that Jules is beginning to see her as sexually excessive. Although the flooding incident is rather minor, and not in fact Baby's fault, Jules goes so far as to call the act "hateful," demonstrating his disgust at Baby's behaviour. Additionally, he suggests that the incident is one example of a series of hateful acts that Baby has committed. While the hyperbolic nature of this comment could in part be due to his struggles with drug

withdrawal and sobriety, the fact that Baby becomes the target of Jules's aggression speaks to Jules's abuse of the power imbalance between father and daughter.⁴⁰ As the older male figure, whose position as parent grants him a sense of authority, Jules ascribes certain behaviours to Baby without her testimony. As Baby explains, "he [Jules] started blaming all kinds of things on me" (91). Though Baby tries to explain her innocence here, he refuses to listen and continues to assert his own claims. Moreover, that Jules locates the root of Baby's supposed misbehaviour in either Mary's home or among racialized children in a foster home further demonstrates the impact that place has had on Baby's testimony. By occupying the same space as folks who, in Jules's opinion, are implicitly associated with deviant behaviour, Baby becomes associated with the same behaviour.⁴¹ Due to the impact these spaces have supposedly had on Baby, Jules is able to permanently mark her as a persistently disobedient child, whose current behaviour might escalate. In doing so, Jules can blame her indiscretions on other people, and deny the influence his own behaviour might have had on her.

After establishing her supposedly inherent "mean streak," Jules is then able to accuse her of actual criminal activity. Baby explains that shortly after the flooding incident, "he [Jules] accused me of being on drugs. I'd never even tried drugs again since

⁴⁰ When Baby is reunited with Jules after his stay in rehab, she claims, "To tell you the truth, Jules looked five years older... He had lost a lot of weight and seemed sickly all over again" (91). These physical markers are all indicative of his struggle with sobriety.

⁴¹ While my argument is concerned with the space Baby occupies and not the people who also occupy this space, it is important to note that Jules specifically references the black children in the foster home, and not all of the children in the foster home. Therefore, Jules' perception of the space also carries a racial bias. Although there are also numerous white children who live in the foster home during Baby's stay, Jules's comment reveals that he associates criminality and "hateful" behaviour with the black body, and that it is the black body specifically that turns the space into a space of deviance. For work that takes up the topic of disgust and the white gaze, see George Yancy's *Black Bodies, White Gazes*.

the mushrooms. I had to sit there listening to his speech. I burst out crying from frustration. ‘Don’t lie to me. You’re sitting there stoned. Your eyes are popping out of your fucking head. I won’t have a drug addict in my house...’ “(92). The quick escalation from flooding the house to drug addiction demonstrates how Jules has internalized the idea that Baby is a criminal and has become a criminal on her own, away from his influence. Rather than admit that he has already introduced drugs into the home with his own addiction, Jules treats her supposed addiction as an abhorrent anomaly that needs to be purged from his home. Although Jules remains unaware of Baby’s experimentation with mushrooms, he is still able to accuse her of this activity because of the precedent for behaviour that he has set previously. Moreover, even though Baby does not verbalize her innocence, and only displays her frustration through an emotional outburst, Jules still reads the reaction as a lie and points to “evidence” of her drug usage on her body. In doing so, Jules suggests that Baby not only behaves like a criminal, but also *looks* like one too. Jules therefore creates an association between Baby’s body and criminality which he can then use to accuse her of other criminal activity. An incident like the flooding does not need to happen for Baby to be accused of misbehaviour. Baby’s testimony is worth even less because Jules can point to supposed evidence of deviancy on her body to counter her point.

This tension between Baby and Jules, rooted in Jules’s ironic revulsion for criminality, reveals the power dynamic between father and daughter. Michelle Meagher explains the importance of identifying these power hierarchies that are embedded in disgust reactions. She writes, “disgust reveals something about the way our social orders

are structured and how we variously inhabit those social orders. In short, disgust is a habituated emotion linked to and reflective of cultural paradigms. Disgust, however, has a firmer hold on us” (32). Like Ahmed, Meagher views disgust as an uncontrollable emotion, but one that is culturally conditioned. The subject feels disgust because they have been taught that it is an appropriate reaction to a particular object. A disgust reaction is therefore rooted in a strong desire not only to disassociate from something that we as subject find undesirable, but also to disassociate from an object that a neoliberal, middle class society deems undesirable. This conditioning is especially evident in Jules’s argument with Baby, as he finishes his accusation by saying “I won’t have a drug addict in my house” (92). As previously discussed, despite being a recovering drug addict himself, Jules still views Baby’s supposed drug use as disgusting. He knows that in his position as parent, he should feel a sense of responsibility for Baby’s drug use. Moreover, he knows that being a parent grants him power to express a disgust reaction, even if he is guilty of the same act. Since he is now supposed to be sober, Jules wishes to disassociate from the ‘disgusting’ behaviour to further prove that he no longer tolerates drug use. To prove his disgust for drugs, Jules must frame Baby as an adult who has made the decision to use drugs on her own; however, reading Baby as an adult minimizes the power Jules has over her as her parent. Thus, he threatens Baby as a means of reasserting his power as parent over her and as a means of conforming to social orders, which would mark him as a ‘good’ parent. However, this reaction also affects the way Baby’s body and agency are then read throughout the rest of the novel.

To understand the significance of reading Baby's body as disgusting, I return to Ahmed's comment about disgust as a binding agent. She discusses the impact of associating disgust with a body:

Disgust binds objects together in the very moment that objects become attributed with bad feeling, as 'being' sickening. The slide between disgust and other emotions is crucial to this binding: the subject may experience hate towards the object, as well as fear of the object, precisely as an affect of how the bad feeling 'had got in' (*Cultural Politics* 88).

Through his disgust reaction, Jules binds Baby's body to the space of the foster home, drug use, and criminality. The other emotions Jules expresses in these moments, namely disappointment, frustration, fear,⁴² and even supposed love,⁴³ further bind Baby to these other objects and act as justification for his disgust reaction. By expressing his disappointment, frustration, and fear, while also expressing his disgust, Jules explains "how the [disgust] 'had got in'," making the association between Baby and criminality even stronger (*Cultural Politics* 88).

Although Baby recognizes that her criminality is a performance, a topic discussed in the previous chapter, Jules's disgust transforms criminality from a performance to a supposed truth about Baby. With a seemingly justified association between Baby and criminality, Jules's accusations stick to Baby's body (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 92).

⁴² I read Jules' reaction to Baby's supposed drug use as fearful. He believes that her behaviour is tied to his ability to be a 'good' parent. If Baby is read as a drug user, Jules fears that he will either be read as a bad parent who gave her access to drugs, or as a bad parent who allows her behaviour to persist. As such, I read his comment, "I won't have a drug addict in my house," as an expression of this fear (O'Neill 92).

⁴³ I read love in this situation insofar as it is a part of a rhetoric of 'good parenting'. Since Jules is trying to prove his innocence in influencing Baby, and using the guise of a 'good parent' as a means of proving this, I argue that his threat to kick Baby out of the house for her drug use and prostitution is an act of tough love that is meant for Baby's 'own good'.

Although we have seen the ways in which Baby occupies a liminal position between childhood and adulthood, infantilization and hypersexualization, Jules's disgust reactions firmly place her in the position of the hypersexualized, deviant child, who is disgusting because she is a child behaving as a deviant adult. Jules's accusations of hatefulness, drug use, and general misbehaviour stick to Baby's body because she is framed as a disgusting subject who forces Jules to confront his own disgusting behaviour. Moreover, the authority he retains as Baby's father makes his claims stick easily to her body. As more and more accusations begin to stick to Baby's body, and as a larger variety of accusations stick to Baby's body, her testimony and even her ability to give testimony become further and further minimized.

Jules's accusations culminate in his accusations that Baby has become a sex worker. After being out late one evening, Baby comes back to her home to discover that she cannot get in:

I went home but the front door was locked... Sometimes when Jules was mad at me, he locked the second lock... If I was out past midnight, it meant that I was whoring around and I could do it on someone else's time. He said that if he locked me out, no one could accuse him of having made me a delinquent." (27).

As with Jules's accusations about Baby's drug use, Jules once again tries to disassociate himself from Baby's supposed criminality. First, by explaining that she could be sexually promiscuous "on someone else's time," Jules makes it clear that this type of behaviour is intolerable to him. Moreover, he views the act of locking the door as a public statement that he will not tolerate this behaviour, disassociating himself from Baby's supposed sexual promiscuity. The lock therefore is not a sign for Baby; it is meant to be a public

disavowal of her conduct. Since Baby's body has become sticky because of the disgust reaction, Jules fears that any association with Baby's criminal behaviour will force him to become stuck to her criminality; his position as her parent already creates a link between them and thus makes this association possible. That he will not allow her into his home also demonstrates the importance of space in creating disgust associations. For Baby, now read as the criminal deviant, to enter his space would be to taint it.

What makes this scene particularly important compared to other accusation scenes in *Lullabies* is the lack of opportunity for Baby to provide counter-testimony. To draw on Leigh Gilmore's discussion of the burden placed on narrators, Baby's gender and age are "stigmatized aspects of identity will be added to witnesses as weight their words cannot bear" (6). Thus, when Baby tries to defend herself by explaining why she is innocent, the weight of her gender and age diminish the efficacy of her claims in Jules's eye. In the first scene, where I discussed the bathroom flood, Baby speaks to her father and tries to explain to him that she is innocent. In the second, Baby's tears of frustration act as a form of non-verbal testimony; her frustration is an indicator of her innocence because she is appalled at the idea of being associated with an activity she did not partake in. Now, Jules is not there to listen to her testimony. He has preemptively decided that her testimony is not worth listening to. This escalation, from verbal to non-verbal testimony, and then to no opportunity for testimony, demonstrates how the disgust reaction has stuck to Baby's body and limited her opportunity to provide a testimony and be heard. The closer the association between Baby and criminality becomes, the less value is given to her

testimony. The previous disgust associations become precedent for Jules to justify his disassociation from Baby, and his decision to no longer listen to her testimony.

While the relationship between Jude and his stepfather, Ray, is not as developed as the relationship between Baby and Jules, there is a similar disgust and underlying fear present in both. Before the opening scene between Jude, Matt, and Luke, Jude describes his love of heels, saying, “I’d take a pair of shoes and wear them... Ray caught me once. It took me a while to notice him standing in the laundry room doorway... He didn’t say anything, just stared at me and then shook his head, turned off the light, and went back upstairs.” (7). When confronted with Jude’s love of heels and women’s fashion, Ray becomes so uncomfortable, and perhaps disgusted, that he cannot express these emotions verbally. Instead, he uses his body language to demonstrate his disapproval and minimizes the amount of time he spends with Jude to avoid creating a connection between Jude and himself. While not an explicit disgust reaction, this body language demonstrates a discomfort with Jude, and the refusal to interact with him suggests that Ray is trying, in Tomkins’s words, to renounce Jude.

Ray’s disgust becomes more explicit when he tries to separate Jude from Keefer. Jude explains that he used to share a room with Keefer; however, “Ray decided it wasn’t a good idea anymore. He wanted to protect his precious offspring from my glitter corruption. Ray brought down a rug and a dresser, and my grandma made me curtains, which I think were from one of her old tablecloths.” (45-6). Again, Ray uses nonverbal actions to indicate his disgust for Jude instead of confronting him directly. Moreover, he tries to create physical distance between his own son, Keefer, and Jude, suggesting, as

Jude says, that Ray fears that close proximity between Jude and Keefer will influence Keefer into becoming a disgusting subject. Since, to borrow José Esteban Muñoz's argument, "Heterosexual culture depends on the notion of the future," any impact Jude may have on Keefer would disrupt the "fantasy of heterosexual reproduction" (49). As Ray's biological child, Keefer's proximity to a disgusting subject becomes a reflection on Ray; just as Jules creates distance between himself and Baby to demonstrate that his own behaviour did not produce Baby's supposedly disgusting behaviour, Ray keeps Keefer away from Jude because Jude's influence on Keefer would not only make Keefer a target for disgust reactions but also make Ray a failure in maintaining the heteronormative family and a failure as a heteronormative, masculinized father. This fear reduces Jude from a complex individual to a corrupting influence. Thus, Ray's fear and disgust for Jude still work to subtly undermine him.

In moments where Ray does speak to Jude, his disgust for Jude becomes explicit, and these moments clearly highlight Ray's ability to undermine Jude's agency. When Jude returns from the party bruised, Ray notices the bruises, and questions, "What the hell happened?" 'Don't touch me,' [Jude] said, trying to pull away. 'Someone put you in your place?' [Ray] asked, laughing. 'I deserved it, huh?' 'Your words,' he said, stepping away from the door. 'Not mine.'" (86). Ray's laughter at this moment reveals his approval of the violence inflicted on Jude. Such approval proves that while he has never expressed explicit disgust for Jude, he is still disgusted by Jude's body. Ray's comment that Jude has been "put in his place" further emphasizes Ray's desire to maintain heteronormativity, as if Jude's beating is the consequence for defying it. Additionally,

Ray undermines Jude's agency by saying "Your words, not mine," as it suggests that Jude recognizes that his supposed misbehavior *warrants* this punishment, and that he has no control over the matter if he continues to dress in this manner. Thus, Ray reduces his own guilt in the situation by forcing Jude to speak those words, and therefore undermines Jude's ability to argue that he does not "deserve" any sort of treatment for the way he presents his gender. Ray's disgust and fear of Jude's gender defiance motivate him to consistently undermine Jude's agency. As Jude becomes less autonomous in Ray's eyes, it appears as though he is less of a threat to heteronormativity. If he cannot successfully defend himself from a surveillance culture that polices gender, then he cannot effectively threaten heteronormativity and thus Jude becomes a less threatening subject and does not need to be feared.

Since much of the disgust that Baby and Jude experience are not only related to their gender and sexuality but also to their class, I conclude by returning to a discussion of class and abjection. In her discussion of the chav, a British term referring to a hypersexualized, lower- class, sexually promiscuous woman, Imogen Tyler writes:

The build-up of negative emotional residue around the figure of the chav not only grants this figure a set of loaded meanings but is also more fundamentally constitutive of this figure. Negative emotions and associated moral judgements become harnessed to the figure of the chav and the disgusting qualities attributed to this figure slide into corporeal qualities so the figure of the chav becomes animated and takes on the appearance of having a life of its own. Disgust reactions are central to the ability of this figure to materialize, to 'body forth' and to become meaningful. (19)

As a lower class hypersexualized adolescent, Baby parallels the figure of the chav.

Through hypersexualization, Baby transforms into the sexually promiscuous woman and

judgements of her become based on ostensibly justified moral assessments of her character. In this chapter, I have argued that the disgust reaction is what allows characters to make their judgements appear as more than just their opinions about Baby; the disgust reaction allows these judgements of Baby to embody disgust. Before Baby's reunion with her father, she becomes an embodiment of corporeal disgust.

As a young girl who is often read as a woman, Baby experiences a particular form of disgust, namely the disgust/desire paradigm. We first see this paradigm in her encounters with Johnny. While in Mary's care, Johnny accuses Baby of rape, nerdiness, criminality, and of lusting after him. These accusations demonstrate how, as Jonathan Dollimore argues, disgust can be read as an expression of multiple emotions that are not repressed but known to the subject experiencing disgust. Through Jonathan, we see how disgust can specifically be a means of projecting these other emotions onto the object of disgust, thus obscuring the object of disgust's true emotions.

Then, in looking to Alphonse and Jules, Baby's sexualized, criminalized body forces both characters to confront a disgusting aspect of their own behaviour. Alphonse is ashamed to initially approach Baby because of the pedophilic connotations of doing so. Similarly, Jules's disgust with Baby's supposed criminal behaviour forces him to confront his own criminality and the influence it might have had on Baby. Both characters deflect their disgust as they continue to frame Baby as an adult. This framing is often related to Baby's sexual excess; the more provocative her dance moves, and the later she stays out, she becomes even more sexually excessive, allowing Alphonse and Jules to rationalize their concept of Baby as an adult. However, they still rely on Baby's childishness to

maintain their power over her. Thus, the type of disgust and the type of desire changes throughout the relationship. Originally, the two are disgusted with their own behaviour, and they desire Baby to be different, so they can justify this behaviour. Then, as the disgust is transferred onto Baby, they desire the power they initially had over her and use the disgust as a means of maintaining power. Thus, to push Dollimore's insight further, disgust and desire can not only occur simultaneously for a number of reasons, but also change reasons as a relationship between two subjects grows and develops. To draw on Ahmed, disgust and desire can change the direction of the push and the pull as the root causes change.

Similar to the disgust/desire paradigm in *Lullabies*, the disgust/fear paradigm in *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* works as a means of reshaping and minimizing the main character's agency. As a "sticky" subject, Jude has the capability of transferring his ability to disgust others from his own body to others who come into contact with him. The threat that disgust can move from Jude to other bodies instills fear in other characters, especially Ray, as it passes the risk of losing power from Jude onto others. As such, Ray uses the disgust reaction to protect himself and Keefer by reasserting his disapproval of Jude's behaviour through disgust. Consequently, it is the fear of Ahmed's notion of binding that motivates the disgust reaction and results in the disgusting body's stickiness. By removing agency through disgust, Jude's ability to transfer disgust reaction to other bodies is minimized.

Jude's relationship with Luke shows the potential ability of disgust transfer to further exacerbate and even escalate the extreme nature of the disgust reaction. Although

Luke is initially only ashamed by Jude, as he does not “permanently renounce” Jude, his feelings eventually turn into disgust as his body becomes associated with Jude’s. Through this association, which is heavily focused on the relationship and movement of the two bodies, Luke becomes the target of disgust reactions himself. Consequently, Luke’s agency also becomes reduced as he becomes more closely associated with Jude. He believes he can gain back his power and agency by murdering Jude, thus permanently severing the connection between the two bodies. This focus on embodied relationality also stresses a key theme across Ahmed, Kahane, Dollimore, and Tomkins’s work: the disgust reaction and the dynamics of agency are always rooted in an analysis of the body. When the body is the focus of analysis, the disgust reaction becomes a means of disregarding Baby and Jude, and thus ignoring their vulnerability as the two characters become objectified. Thus, through the abjection of Baby and Jude, Johnny, Alphonse, Jules, Matt, Luke, and Ray enter a state of disattendability.

CONCLUSION:

Embodied Boundaries: Thinking Beyond Baby and Jude

By paying heed to disgust as a gut reaction, an opportunity arises to interrogate the ethical implications of a cultural system that regularly establishes boundaries between different types of bodies: rendering some beautiful, some acceptable, and others simply disgusting

– Meagher, “Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust”
(25)

In this thesis, I have argued that while Baby and Jude demonstrate liminal agency, an agency complicated by hegemonic sexism, homophobia, and classism, it is the disgust reaction of other characters, particularly male characters like Johnny, Alphonse, Jules, Matt, Luke, and Ray, that overshadows this agency and locates “social structures of race/class/gender *within*” these two protagonists (Currie 29, emphasis in original). At the core of Baby’s and Jude’s liminal agency are their fictionalized realities: Baby admits to performing criminality because it is her only option for survival and Jude explains why his life is “basically a movie set,” maintaining the language of celebrity throughout his first-person account of violent homophobia. While these two frameworks make Baby and Jude’s bodies hypervisible, they ultimately give these two protagonists a means of survival, which is critical to their liminal agency. Survival is also linked to their sexuality. As Baby becomes more sexually active, which she does to appear older, her comfort with sex does not necessarily change; however, her growing relationship with Xavier allows her to embrace her youth and prompts her to try to distance herself from Alphonse.

Conversely, Jude’s language and performed behaviour suggest a higher comfort with sexuality, yet he remains sexually inactive throughout most of the novel. While he

claims that his virginity is an indication of his narcissism, I have argued that it is a form of protection, as it prevents anyone from coming in contact with his body and from influencing his behaviour. When Jude does enter a sexual relationship with Abel, Jude chooses to keep this relationship private. This decision further demonstrates how Jude works to protect himself, as he maintains an emotional distance from Abel so that Abel's contact with his body will have minimal influence.

Building on a discussion of sexuality and hypersexuality, I have then looked to other characters in each novel, specifically Johnny, Alphonse, and Jules in *Lullabies* and Matt, Luke, and Ray in *Movies*, to understand how agency becomes obscured. As two hypersexualized, hypervisible subjects, Baby and Jude's bodies are both read as disgusting bodies. Through the disgust/desire and disgust/fear paradigms, the other characters not only try to maintain their distance from Baby and Jude's bodies, but also are able to make claims that stick to these two bodies, thus minimizing their agency. This chapter highlighted the significance of the physical body in a discussion of agency: key to Alphonse, Jules, Luke, Matt, and Ray's claims about Baby and Jude is their ability to show that Baby and Jude *embody* disgust. By positing their bodies as inherently disgusting, these characters objectify Baby and Jude, thus removing their agency.

As I have demonstrated in Chapter One, the 2007 and 2015 Canada Reads competitions reveal a trend among middle class, cis-hetero readers to take up a similarly disgusted positioning as the male characters in the novels, one that also removes nuance from our understanding of Baby and Jude's agency and instead positions them as psychologically deviant. Their tendency towards an uncritical personal reflection on

personal discomfort shows that the boundaries of disgust are not only erected in each novel, but can also be reproduced in panelists' responses to these novels. The Canada Reads panelists read *Baby* and *Jude* as unlikable because *Baby* and *Jude*'s bodies are unacceptable; the consistent comparison of *Baby* and *Lullabies* to trash, and the consistent focus on *Jude*'s vulgarity create a focus on the palatability of their bodies. *Baby* and *Jude*'s unacceptability as "moral citizens" is then used to ignore the very real criticisms of systemic classism, sexism, and homophobia at the heart of each novel. By focusing on Canada Reads panelists' reaction to these novels, I reveal a larger consequence of the disgust reaction: it not only creates "boundaries between different types of bodies" as Michelle Meagher argues, it also creates boundaries between the realms of "acceptable" and unacceptable literature. As I have demonstrated, dismissing these works as unacceptable literature opens up a possible justification for doubting *Baby* and *Jude*'s testimony; as I have used Leigh Gilmore to argue, judgements about a narrator's palatability and dissonance leaves *Baby* and *Jude* vulnerable to doubt, which is a further form of violence. My thesis intervenes in such harsh claims about the novel to expose both the violence of positioning these novels as unacceptable literature, and the violent homophobia, classism, and sexism that each novel speaks to and is potentially subject to.

This discussion of disgust and the effects of the emotion on our ability to read and understand character agency also opens up questions about the connection between race, disgust, and agency. Both *Lullabies* and *Movies* focus on white characters. However, many other novels, particularly novels written by Indigenous women, have faced similar

violence during the Canada Reads competition. In 2016, Tracy Lindberg's novel *Birdie* was criticized by panelists for not talking "about all the positive things that happen in Aboriginal communities," a criticism that ignores the colonial violence that the titular character experiences ("Canada Reads 2016: Day One"). Similarly, despite its clear metaphor for the colonial extraction that Indigenous people continue to experience in settler-colonial Canada, Jeanne Beker criticized Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* for ignoring "real" atrocities, claiming, "If [Dimaline] had told a *real* story, I would have felt it with all my heart" ("Canada Reads 2018: Day Two," emphasis in original). This determined focus on accuracy and telling 'happy' stories reproduces a colonial violence that ignores the testimony given in these novels. Examining the Canada Reads competition with a focus on race and colonialism, and the way that race and colonialism intersect with class, gender, and sexuality, can reveal how testimony is doubted on these grounds too.

To broaden the analysis of the workings of disgust in literature that I have begun here, there are many texts that could benefit from an affective reading that focuses on disgust, and that could open up larger questions about affect, disgust, and race. For example, we see a denial of Indigenous agency in Beatrice Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree*. In the novel, Mrs. Semple, a social worker, warns April about the dangers of a fatalistic path she calls "native girl syndrome," which she describes as follows: "'It starts out with the fighting, the running away, the lies. Next come the accusations that everyone in the world is against you. There are the sullen, uncooperative silences, the feeling sorry for yourselves. And when you go on your own, you get pregnant right away or you can't

find or keep jobs” (Mosionier 62). The syndrome defines April and Cheryl as innately criminal because of their Indigenous ancestry, suggesting that they will necessarily follow this path because it lives within them. Further work on racialized disgust and its intersections with class, gender, and sexuality needs to be considered.

A discussion of internalized oppression could add nuance to this discussion, since it considers how characters are able to view their own agency given an internalized disgust of their own bodies. *In Search of April Raintree* again provides an example of this discussion, as April is explicitly ashamed of her Indigenous identity: “But I am ashamed. I can’t accept... I can’t accept being a Metis” (Mosionier 110). As Lisa Poupart explains, Indigenous folks often “internalize Western meanings of difference and abject Otherness, viewing ourselves within and through the constructs that defined us as racially and culturally subhuman, deficient and vile.” (87). Janice Acoose contextualizes this claim in *In Search of April Raintree*: “Because the narrator, April Raintree, is not exposed to the necessary influences for cultural transmission, she relies on discourse provided to her by white foster homes. This discourse ‘boxes’ her in because she is fed negative stereotypes” (Acoose 229). Acoose’s commentary reflects a similar effect of the foster home on April as what Baby experiences in *Lullabies*; Baby absorbs ideas about acceptable feminine sexuality during her time with Isabel and in her interactions with Johnny. April’s journey throughout the novel from shame to the beginning of acceptance, demonstrates one possible impact of internalized racism on her understanding of her own agency. Thus, these factors, of race and internalized oppression, must be considered to add further nuance to the discussion I have started in this thesis.

By focusing not only on how disgust operates within the novels but also on how disgust manifests itself in reader discomfort during the Canada Reads competition, I hope to provide a critically reflexive framework that demonstrates the significance of working through feelings of discomfort on both textual and extra-textual levels. Working through discomfort can highlight the biases and privileges that readers carry with them. It opens the possibility for more complex analyses of both literature and public reading projects focused on literary texts.

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