

AFTER BERSANI: ON THE SCANDAL OF MOTHERS WITHOUT MATERNITY

Ph.D. Thesis – R. Shields; McMaster University – English & Cultural Studies

AFTER BERSANI: ON THE SCANDAL OF MOTHERS WITHOUT MATERNITY

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A Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfilment of the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Ph.D. Thesis – R. Shields; McMaster University – English & Cultural Studies

McMaster University DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (2025) Hamilton, Ontario (English  
& Cultural Studies)

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NUMBER OF PAGES: ix, 339

## LAY ABSTRACT

In contemporary Western culture, motherhood names an identity and a relationality that are heavily normative and that uphold a disciplined and disciplining concept of “maternal love”. This thesis argues that the standard of “maternal love”, which imagines the mother-child relation as intensely singular and passionately invested in the unique personality of the child, is a primary means by which the value of individualism is reproduced. In order to critique this model of motherhood and the version of selfhood that it supports, I draw primarily upon the work of Leo Bersani, a queer theorist and critic who sought across his works to de-emphasize the “sanctity of the self” and thereby de-emphasize the violence of the individual self who will go to great lengths to protect its borders and the “seriousness of its statements”. Specifically, in this thesis I examine fictional representations of the mother-child relation and explore how they help us imagine an alternative to the violence of individualism. By putting Bersanian theory in conversation with motherhood, a category that has largely been undertheorized in Bersani’s oeuvre, I suggest that there are ways to think about motherhood that delink it from its role in reproducing individualism and that make possible new relational modes rooted in “antisocial” concepts such as indifference, impersonality, and the inhuman.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis theorizes new meanings of “motherhood” in a series of fictional texts that exemplify a mother-child relationality rooted in concepts typically seen as inimical to “good” mothering: indifference, impersonality, and inhumanity. To do so, I draw primarily upon the work of the queer theorist and critic Leo Bersani, who has sought across his oeuvre to develop a mobile and wide-ranging vocabulary to describe ways of being in the world that eschew our most fundamental belief in ourselves as the possessors of unique identities. For Bersani, this belief in the “sanctity of the self” (*The Culture of Redemption* 4) is the purest expression of a relationality that is rooted in possession, of both self and other; it therefore makes violence, broadly conceived as acts of appropriation, the primary means by which we approach the world. The self who is self-possessed and who grasps at the world is driven by the desire for knowledge, and Bersani names the implacable desire for knowledge—for the possession of the other’s difference through the process of coming to know—*epistemophilia*. In this thesis, I critically examine a series of fictional representations of the mother-child relation in order to critique the ways in which motherhood is implicated, in the first instance, in the reproduction of this kind of possessive, epistemophilic, and inherently violent selfhood. I argue that our deeply held belief in the necessity of “maternal love”, the mother’s recognition of the precious singularity of the child and her pledge to protect and nurture it, is in fact an expression of epistemophilia and, hence, constitutes a fundamental violence. I also suggest that there are aspects of motherhood that make a radically new relationality possible; a motherhood without maternity names the scandalous possibility

of a mother who fails to see the “sanctity” of her child’s, and her own, selfhood. This “failed” motherhood is the prism through which the following literary analyses take speculative form. Ultimately, this thesis pursues new ways of thinking about motherhood that both delink it from its conservative reproductive role and unfold new relational potentialities within it. The illumination of these non-normative, non-pathological potentialities—of indifference, impersonality, and inhumanity—represents an important contribution to that vein of critical theory that seeks to valorize the antisocial as a means of pursuing new and nonviolent ways of being.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

There are several people whose support has made it possible for me to write this dissertation. My supervisor, Dr. David L. Clark, encouraged me to re-enroll in my program after a lengthy parental leave and break, at a time when I was uncertain what my future would hold. He then tirelessly and generously supported my work and has always had wonderful insights and feedback that have pushed me to think in new ways. I can never thank him enough for believing in me and for all the many ways he has helped me to believe in myself. I would also like to thank my committee members, Drs. Dana Hollander and Susan Giroux, for their support and encouragement throughout this process, and my external examiner, Dr. John Paul Ricco, for his extremely thoughtful comments on and questions about the thesis. My parents, Bill and Roberta Shields, who committed to helping me with childcare, deserve many thanks. Without their efforts to be available as much as they could, and their unflagging willingness to look after three young children, I would simply not have been able to write this thesis. I thank them with all my heart, along with my husband, Vincent Hervet, who is the most patient person I know. And finally, I thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Ontario Graduate Scholarship program, the Harry Lyman Hooker Fellowship program, and the Department of English & Cultural Studies for their financial support.

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### **Declaration of Academic Achievement**

The author of this thesis is the sole contributor.

## Introduction

This project is an effort to critique the apparent naturalness of the connection between motherhood and the heterosexual family, and to explore the relational possibilities of an alternative motherhood. Despite the many criticisms that have been levelled at both the institution of motherhood and heteronormativity, their ongoing union within the family—the actual family “body” as well as the “field” of power relations that “family” names (Bourdieu 68)—continues to render the family the primary instrument through which the modern individual, with its presumed coherence, autonomy, and self-possession, is reproduced. The Family<sup>1</sup>, in so-called “liberal” media and politics, has indeed opened itself up to “diversity” and “inclusion”; it is now common to see representations of interracial families, queer families, families with disabilities, families with one parent, multi-generational families, etc. Yet, this extension of the meaning of “family” to include a greater cast of characters and arrangements—arrangements which have, of course, always existed but which have not always been represented in mainstream cultural artifacts—has done little to unsettle the hegemony of, nor even to hint at the existence of a viable alternative to, the unquestioned value of individual selfhood that continues to form the matrix for the institutional violences of racism, sexism, nationalism, and

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<sup>1</sup> My use of the capitalized term “Family” is meant to emphasize the structural and ideological dimension of the heterosexual family unit. I am drawing, here, from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s description of “Family” as an “institutional pseudonym” for heterosexuality (*Tendencies* 10). “Family” both implies heterosexuality as well as names the site of an affective allegiance that comes to assume the banner of “love”.

homophobia (amongst others); as the critic Leo Bersani<sup>2</sup>, whose work is of central importance to this dissertation, has described it, the “sacrosanct value of selfhood” is a “sanction for violence” because it demands the defense of borders, the clear demarcation of the self from the other against which it is defined (*The Culture of Redemption* 4).

Reproduction, the defining feature of heterosexuality, is thus implicated in the reproduction of a particular version of selfhood and, hence, of a particular, inherently violent mode of relationality.

Although my project is devoted to maternity, it is as much an exploration of Bersani’s critical project as it is of what the scandal of “mothers without maternity” is and means. Bersani’s influential work, which spans decades and covers an extremely wide range of topics, is notoriously difficult because it is so consistently counterintuitive, whether the subject at hand was subjectivity, knowledge, aesthetics, or the specificity of gay male sexuality to all three of these things (amongst many others). But in that difficulty lies enormous critical potential. He seems always to have been a thinker opening doors for others to travel through, and in this dissertation, I consider myself one of these travellers. On the topic of criticism, Bersani has written that the critic “leans on”, “borrows from”, and “plays” with the ideas and images they find in literature or art—that the artwork, whatever the form, “seduces” the critic and allows them to indulge the ludic

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<sup>2</sup> Bersani was an American critic and theorist. He held his longest position at the University of California, Berkeley, in the French Department, and was a major contributor to the study of French literature and film as well as to queer theory, aesthetics, and psychoanalysis. A prolific and diverse writer, his first book, *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and Art*, was published in 1965, and his final book, *Receptive Bodies*, was published in 2018, four years prior to his death at the age of 90.

pleasure of thinking through and with it (*The Culture of Redemption* 311-2). This is how I, too, characterize my critical leaning on Bersani as I engage the topic of maternity and wonder how the texts that comprise my archive might describe an alternative to the violent, appropriative self that Bersani so perceptively identified. It is also, in part, what I mean by titling this dissertation “After Bersani”; I am following Bersani—borrowing from and playing with his ideas—and am therefore coming “after” him. But I am also troubling, along the way, the very meaning of coming “after” as I examine the potentialities of the mother-child relation and the specific, heterosexual narratives that are both imposed upon and disturbed by it.

Much of what we now call queer theory has aimed its criticism at the institution of the heterosexual family and its conservative (and aggressive) orientation. What I would like to ask in this dissertation is how a theory of motherhood, derived from a literary and filmic archive that I will describe shortly, might be delinked from its role in producing the “sacrosanct value of selfhood” (*The Culture of Redemption* 4). For the mother, the “matrix” of the family unit in which these systematic violences find not only their expression but also their logic for reproducing themselves, remains firmly implicated in the family, even when she has successfully advocated for her own inclusion within non-domestic realms and despite the astounding proliferation of discourse on motherhood as an ethical project, the project of raising “good” or “better” human beings—a project at which, as Jacqueline Rose so straightforwardly puts it, “mothers always fail”:

[B]ecause mothers are seen as our point of entry into the world, there is nothing easier than to make social deterioration look like something that it is the sacred duty of mothers to prevent – a type of socially upgraded version of the tendency in modern families to blame mothers for everything. This neatly makes mothers

guilty, not just for the ills of the world, but also for the rage that the unavoidable disappointments of an individual life cannot help but provoke. (27)

In other words, mothers take the fall for everything from the unhappiness of the individual to the broader social “ills”—however they are defined—that seem to plague the modern world. Rose, echoing the work of the psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott, whose theory of the “good enough mother” allowed that “failure” is, in fact, a necessity of mothering, suggests that if mothers “always fail”, then we, as a society and as individuals with our own family histories, are wrong to expect impossible things of them. In this dissertation, however, I want to go a step further and ask, what if we could conceive a motherhood that did not reproduce the kind of “individual life” that turns, in its recourse against disappointment (or frustration, or suffering, or any number of personal hardships), to what Rose here calls *rage*, but which could also be called *violence*? Taking my cue from Michel Foucault’s generative claim that “sexuality” names a particular and productive network of normative and disciplinary discourses around sex, I use the term “maternity” to describe something similar about the ways in which motherhood has become unquestionably linked with the valorization of the preciousness of the individual self who inevitably *rages* against the disappointments of its life. A motherhood *without* maternity, then, would describe a mother-child relation that produces, if only partially, something other than this individual self who, in its madness to defend its own borders, perceives others and the world in general as intractably, threateningly different from itself. In other words, rather than work toward alleviating the oppressive pressure on mothers to be “perfect”—a worthy project that has, as I explore briefly below, been taken up by many feminists—I aim to theorize instances of

motherhood in which the precious selfhood of the child is *not* the primary concern or outcome of mothering.

### Maternal Romance

It will be important, then, to understand how the institution of the family, and maternity in particular, are, in fact, linked to the unquestioned value of the individual self—the “dear self”, as Immanuel Kant has put it, or that utterly self-interested aspect of selfhood that can and will prevail, even amidst the most seemingly virtuous (ie. selfless) of actions (23). The very notion of the family, whether ostensibly “straight” or “queer”, continues to serve as the foundational logic for a liberal conception of selfhood that sees the *self*—and the self’s investment in and protection of its own identity—as the principle means by which we relate to others and to the world. Rose has suggested that this relationality serves as a link between the “overweening egoism of the bourgeois family”, or the family’s belief in its own naturalized goodness, and the “autocracy of statehood” (79)—meaning that the family can be seen as a kind of microcosm of the power structures that uphold the state, with each repeating and fortifying the other. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in a more nuanced register, describes the family as a cultural institution so deeply, so seemingly *naturally*, entrenched in our lives that it has served as the unquestioned foundation of life in general. The family, we believe, is the ideal mechanism for the production of individuals who work, love, participate politically, consume, and believe in particular ways, ways that all “line up” with each other to engender a monolithic vision of good (heterosexual) citizenship (*Tendencies* 6). For Sedgwick, the family names the site

of a heterosexual hegemony so powerful and far-reaching that it has come to stand for “History itself—when it has not presented itself as the totality of Romance” (ibid.). In other words, the relationality that the Family engenders is the predicate for the violences that contemporary Western culture both permits and enacts, even when we understand it as a “romantic” narrative about the redemptive and connective power of love. Out of this relational nexus emerges a selfhood rooted in a heterosexuality that both projects “dangerous difference” into the world and promises the overcoming of that difference through love (Bersani, *Thoughts and Things* 114); in other words, the self perceives, in its belief in the difference of the other, both a threat (to the presumed separation between self and other as well as to the presumed uprightness of the self) and a source of erotic fascination, a fascination that renders “love” a strategy for the annihilation of the threat of difference. I am interested here in motherhood in particular because, though both the family and the heterosexual couple have been subject to productive political critique, there continues to be one romantic relation that goes mostly unquestioned and often under-theorized: the mother’s (personal and personalizing) love for her child. My dissertation considers the possibility that motherly love can be denaturalized and delinked from the structure of the heteronormative family by delinking it from the production of a selfhood rooted in difference. This wager has implications not only for the ways in which mothers, in our Western context, experience motherhood—which continues to operate as one of the principle disciplinary sites in which women are made responsible for “loving without reserve”, for producing a “hate-free world” (Rose 97, 113)—but also for a philosophical critique of the sanctity of selfhood in general. Motherhood without

maternity, then, names my belief in the existence of maternal relations that are not bound to the Family and its function as a mechanism for the production of individuals that protect themselves with the same ferocity that we imagine the mother ought to protect her child. If we allow that urge to *protect* to lapse—if we allow, in other words, the mother to stand for something other than unassailable guardianship of the precious individuality of the child—then we might, I argue, discover a new relationality that is less personal, less invested in identity, and hence, less *violent* than our current cultural milieu allows us to be.

In many ways, then, this project marks a contribution to what Andrea O'Reilly has, in 2006, termed “motherhood studies”, a distinct field of women-led scholarship approaching the tension that Adrienne Rich, many years earlier, identified as existing between the patriarchal institution of motherhood—the ideologies, beliefs, cultural narratives, and political practices—that come to bear upon mothers and how we understand them, and the act of *mothering*, or the actual, lived experience of mothers who participate in the care of children. The central tenet of this loosely united field of inquiry is that the empowerment of mothers, which includes, in one form or another, critiques of the institution of motherhood alongside the opening up of space for practices of mothering that are not held to impossibly high, patriarchal standards, leads to improvements in the lives of mothers, their children, and society in general. Importantly, there has been a turn in motherhood studies toward an understanding of mothering itself as an activist practice (Garbes; Hill Collins; hooks; O'Reilly; Ruddick), as an act that possesses unique power to interrupt the reproduction of patriarchal, racist, and classist

structures of domination by interrupting the conventional operation of the family at its most basic level: the level of physically producing and caring for infants and children. For Sara Ruddick, “maternal power” names the specific site of the mother-child relation, a site which, in her view, inherently privileges the position of the mother; when social forces intervene to limit the power of mothers—forces such as poverty, limited access to birth control and childcare support, the existence of war or other forms of physical violence, and the barriers to women’s social and political participation that emerge out of the confluence of all of these things—they appear powerless to themselves and to their children; moreover, this socially contrived powerlessness is what produces, in Ruddick’s view, a “matrophobia” that is characteristic of Western culture. This term, matrophobia, is taken from Rich, who utilized it to describe an ambivalent tension between, primarily, mothers and their daughters. In a society that devalues mothering, she argues, daughters are torn between desiring intimacy with their mothers and wishing to violently reject them in order to establish themselves as different from—more powerful than—the women they see as “unfree” (Rich 236). But it also extends beyond the mother-daughter relation and into the realm of theory, where we have, historically speaking, struggled to articulate viable accounts of maternity that separate it from its conservative role in reproducing the family and all its attendant institutions and social forces. Motherhood studies seeks to remedy this by bringing to light the many and varied ways in which mothers have mothered on their own terms, in non-normative ways, and in ways that emphasize, or effect, increased autonomy, freedom, and self-definition for both mothers and their children: “empowered daughters” and “empathetic sons” has become the shared

goal of “activist mothering”, and in this way motherhood studies aligns itself with broader projects of social justice and nonviolence (Arcana; O’Reilly). These projects range from the very practical, where the focus is on specific ways of improving the conditions under which mothers—especially racialized, queer, or migrant mothers—labour to care for children (see, for example, the work of Mothers of the Movement, a group of Black mothers whose children have been killed by police or other forms of gun violence; or the Mothers of Plaza de Maya in Argentina, who protested against the disappearances of their children and grandchildren during the Dirty War and who continue today to demand political reform), to the abstract, as, for example, is the case in Adriana Cavarero’s philosophical inquiry into the “geometry” of the mother-child relation—which finds the expression of its form in the figure of the Madonna bending over the infant—as a critique of patriarchal “rectitude”, an insistence on the straight uprightness of the “I” who is in full self-possession, who is autonomous and independent and not “inclined” toward the other.

My project is interwoven with all these attempts to account, in one way or another, for the fact of mothering and what it means not only for mothers and their children but also for the ways in which we think about and understand the world. Where the idea of “Mothers without Maternity” diverges from the umbrella of motherhood studies is in its attempt to critique some of the unquestioned values and beliefs that continue to form the foundation of the ways that we think about mothers, beliefs that bolster our investment in the figure of the “good mother” who, in protecting and nurturing her children the right way, raises “good children” who pave the way for a

“better future”. This is not, of course, to say that the aim of correcting social injustice is not an admirable and a useful one; rather, I see my project as operating just to the side of these other projects by continually questioning assumptions about the value of selfhood and its attendant investment in notions of freedom and autonomy; and about the narrative teleology of “good motherhood” and the ways in which it participates, despite changes that have been made to it over the last several decades, in ideological structures that are inextricably tied to the kinds of violence that motherhood studies, as a field, wishes to bring to an end. Across this dissertation, I will read a variety of literary and filmic texts on motherhood against the grain of the discourse of “good motherhood”, including in this introduction, in which I will discuss the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (dirs. Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert) and a canonical novel on motherhood by Elena Ferrante, *Troubling Love*, in order to draw from them the resources with which to frame the questions that guide this dissertation. Namely, I aim to question the prevailing assumptions about maternal love and the singularity of the child. To that end, I ask: how can a motherhood be described that is, in contrast to the dominant account of mothering in which motherly love always recognizes the precious uniqueness of the child, indifferent to the child? A motherhood that is impersonal and that fails to participate in the child’s individualization? And how can such a motherhood become part of a broader philosophical critique of violence—systemic exclusions, marginalizations, and injustices that often erupt into violence both physical and psychical—that is rooted in a particular version of selfhood, a selfhood that is passionately invested in the difference between self and other, and in its own identity as the expression of this difference? A theorization of

the indifference (or impersonality, or, as I will suggest in Chapter 3, inhumanity) that inheres in motherhood, or that makes itself legible in particular texts about motherhood, offers, I wager, a means to leverage a critique of our passion for the self, a passion that justifies our willingness to defend, at all costs, both the self and the various categories of identification—national, religious, ethnic, sexual, moral—to which it is tied. In short, this project seeks to undo some of our most persistent sentimental beliefs about both the possibility and the desirability of both “good mothering” and the self it nurtures. As I will explore below, it is the figure of the specifically narcissistic mother, that fiendish wrecker of childhood trauma, that presents a semantic node around which motherhood itself can be theorized as something other than the enactment of love of and care for the child and, by extension, the very concept of the self.

I will explore this idea of a non-pathological maternal narcissism—and its ties to Bersani’s revisionist reading of Freudian narcissism—in more depth below, but first I want to discuss a film that both highlights our investment in maternal love as the ultimate ethical act and points to the possibility of a maternal indifference. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is a drama about a mother and daughter that exemplifies the double movement of maternity in which the mother is responsible for both inflicting upon her child the psychic and emotional wounds that threaten its burgeoning identity, as well as repairing those wounds through understanding and the offer of her unconditional love; it gives us, in other words, a specific language with which to articulate the problem of maternity and, as we will see, sets the viewer up to consider the scandalous possibility of an indifferent mother. The film revolves around Evelyn (Michelle Yeoh), mother to Joy

(Stephanie Hsu) and owner of a laundromat, who is caught up in the mundanity of a tax audit when her husband, Waymond (Ke Huy Quan), is suddenly possessed by an alternate personality from the “alphaverse”. Having “jumped” from the alphaverse into Evelyn’s universe, alpha-Waymond explains to Evelyn that she alone is the key to a multi-universal war being waged against an amoral force of chaos and destruction known as Jobu Tupaki. But first, Evelyn must understand where this nihilistic force came from; it was *alpha*-Evelyn, she learns, who both developed the “jumping” technology *and* unintentionally created Jobu Tupaki, who is nothing other than a corrupted, fragmented version of her own daughter, Joy. By encouraging alpha-Joy to “jump” into other universes numerous times, alpha-Evelyn caused alpha-Joy’s mind to fracture—a fate worse than death, according to alpha-Waymond. Because of the shattering of her mind, alpha-Joy—now known as Jobu Tupaki—experiences all the versions of herself simultaneously such that there is no coherence between moments in time; she thus concludes that coherence is an illusion, that each universe is simply the random coalescence of impersonal, meaningless forces and statistical possibilities. Having lost a stable sense of self and any ground for a belief in enduring meaningfulness, alpha-Joy becomes inhuman and amoral, and she waltzes through the multiverse wreaking havoc because, as she repeatedly says, “nothing matters”.

What appears at first to be a story about a cosmic antagonism between good and evil, chaos and order, fidelity and nihilism, is merely the substratum for an unfolding drama between a mother and her daughter. Evelyn desperately wants to defeat the destructive force of Jobu Tupaki so that she can have “her” Joy back, but first she must

reckon with the fact that it was her own mothering (albeit in the alpha-universe) that caused Joy's personality to fracture in the first place, a maternal failure that is echoed in Evelyn's failure to accept Joy's homosexuality in their own universe. Evelyn is both the cause of, and the cure for, Joy's anguish. In order to confront Jobu Tupaki, Evelyn sacrificially fractures her own consciousness so that she, too, can experience the whirling chaos of impersonality and meaninglessness that has enveloped Joy. When she does, Jobu reveals to her that she is no threat to the multiverse—only to herself. She has created what she calls the “everything bagel”, a node of destructive force (“nothing matters”) that emerged out of Jobu's attempt to put literally everything—including every failure, every disappointment, and every expectation—onto a bagel. Forced to live in an infinite number of disconnected moments such that the very foundation of experience—cause and effect, the continuous, unidirectional flow of time—is rendered an illusion, Joy is adrift in a sea of disconnected fragments that she cannot put back together; putting them all onto the bagel emphasizes the absurd meaningless of what she feels is an ununified and unhappy life, and the only thing left to put on it is herself. Her search across the multiverse for Evelyn, then, was not to destroy Evelyn in an act of daughterly vengeance: it was merely the expression of a child-like desire for her mother to hold the world together, to join the fragments back up and thus save her from her suicidal shattering. In fracturing her own consciousness upon learning this, Evelyn and her daughter begin jumping from universe to universe together, exploring the infinite and disorienting possibilities that are scattered across space and time.

Simultaneously, in Evelyn's original universe, Joy, who has been possessed by the mind of Jobu Tupaki, is preparing to step into the bagel in order to finally end her unbearable existence as an infinite multitude of incoherent selves. Evelyn briefly considers letting her go, but then, with a passionate (and passionately possessive) cry of "I. AM. YOUR. MOTHER!", she grasps Joy's foot and, with the help of both her husband and father, pulls Joy back into the world. Evelyn's action coupled with her aggressive claim of her daughter—the fact that she needs to assert that she is, in fact, Joy's mother—reminds us that the daughter is not (fully) the daughter, that there is something in the daughter that escapes this attempt to corral her into Evelyn's maternal orbit. This scene parallels yet another, in which Joy and Evelyn confront each other on the street outside the laundromat and Evelyn admits to Joy that she, too, sees the senselessness of the world; despite this, she refuses to embrace Joy's nihilistic self-destructiveness and chooses instead to focus on the fact that the two of them are together—and *want* to be together—right now. "Of all the places I could be," Evelyn says:

why would I want to be here with you? Yes. You're right. It doesn't make sense. Maybe you are right and there is something out there, some new discovery that will make us feel like even smaller pieces of shit. Something that explains why you still went looking for me, through all this noise, and why, no matter what, I still want to be here with you. I will always, *always* want to be here with you. (n.p.)

This push by Evelyn to forge meaning in the face of absolute meaninglessness—to affirm their familial bond as the foundation of meaning—is precisely the new perspective that Joy was hoping her mother would provide. Tearfully, Joy accepts that they can choose to live this one, singular life together and to shut out the "noise" of all the other universes

competing for their attention. Through the power of her senseless maternal love, Evelyn un-shatters Joy and holds her together in the unitary narrative of the family romance—the belief that maternal love and acceptance support the self, that the self can choose identity and love in the face of a threatening meaninglessness. A review of the film by William Dickerson sums up the popular commentary: “the entire movie really boils down to this one, simple scene: a mother and daughter recognizing that what is important is their relationship and the time to recognize that is now” (para. 6). However, if Evelyn’s possessive claim on Joy suggests to us that there is something there in need of claiming, something that doesn’t naturally exist but requires aggressive effort to establish, then it also suggests that what we call “mother” does not fully line up with the word, that something about the mother also escapes the happy family romance that wants to neatly enclose the mother-daughter relation.

The version of family romance—the popular belief in unconditional familial (especially maternal) love as the prototype of love in general—offered in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* reiterates a hegemonic view of love as redemptive of stability and meaningfulness, and it performs this function by holding together the coherence of the self; it goes without saying, the film implies, that an incoherent, “shattered” self gives rise to the antisocial, destructive force of nihilism (visualized in the film as the everything bagel). The family—and most especially the mother—is, we believe, the foundation not only of society and sociality but of the process of psychic development that produces our very sense of selfhood: the self is *known* by the mother, and this knowledge sustains our sense of self as being in possession of our “unique personalit[ies]” (Bersani, *Intimacies*

85) and defends us against the dissolution of our borders. The significance of a mother's love in the development of the child is widely held as an unquestionable truth of modernity. As Freud put it, "[i]f a mother is absent or has withdrawn her love from her child, it is no longer sure of the satisfaction of its needs and is perhaps exposed to the most distressing feelings of tension" (S.E. 87); a failed mother-child relation is the predicate for the anxiety of uncertainty. This truism has been taken up not only by certain branches of post-Freudian psychoanalysis (best exemplified, perhaps, in the works of Melanie Klein and Winnicott), but also in non-psychoanalytic versions of what we might generally call "ego psychology". Children need their mothers, we believe, and the depth of this need goes far beyond the child's need to be fed and cared for, as well as beyond the psychic wish to be loved and accepted—it reaches to the most basic level of our ability to perceive our selves *as* selves, a process that is described by psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas as "hominization" through the mother's instructing the infant "in the logic of being and relating" (190), or by Winnicott as the process of "holding" that not only literally provides the infant's body with security but also produces the space in which the infant's burgeoning ego begins to organize itself. In such a view, the child's need for the mother is such that without the mother's love, there is a failure to become fully human; the intensity of this need of the child for the mother's hominizng love is expressed by the cultural preoccupation with making mothers responsible for the child's—and, by extension, society's—ability to function, "healthily" and "happily", and disciplining them for any perceived failures in this task. If, by today's parenting standards, mothers who are guilty for such seemingly small infractions as refusing to

cook two separate dinners to accommodate a child's picky eating (an example taken from an essay by Eliane Glaser entitled "Parent Trap: Why the Cult of the Perfect Mother has to End") can be indicted for failing to honour the precious difference of that child's personality, then a mother like Evelyn, who rejects her daughter's sexuality must surely be a bad mother *par excellence*. Yet, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* also champions another cultural technique, one that interweaves with the way we view and understand the function of the family: we understand, from the film, that redemption for bad mothers is possible, that the extension of maternal understanding and acceptance can happen even when our children reach adulthood; that fractures, in short, within the family unit can and ought to be repaired so that the family can function in its role as generator and guardian of social meaning.

Seen from the viewpoint of a maternal mythology that has roots in psychoanalysis but extends into popular culture and the stories we tell ourselves about our mothers or our own mothering, Joy's search across the multiverse for her mother, and her mother's ultimate affirmation that Joy matters to her more than anything else, represents this reparative triumph of love—even as it comes, as it were, too late—over the destruction of our unique individuality that is threatened by failed familial bonds. But this familiar story of the redemptive power of maternal love should also alert us to some of the most deeply held beliefs we have been trained, through narratives such as this one, to hold: namely, the naturalness of the self and the ethical good of selfhood sustained by love. These beliefs are what give rise to a model of relationality in which the self is seen as inherently lacking; it is therefore compelled to pursue what it lacks in relation to the other—this

model of relationality is tied, therefore, to a certain epistemological attitude that Bersani terms *epistemophilia*, the belief that within every other lies the secret of their difference, and that *love* names this secret's pursuit, its tantalizing availability to the grasp of knowledge. In the secular world constructed in the film, Joy's despair at discovering that there are no grounds for knowledge or belief is remedied by Evelyn's insistence upon the value of (maternal) love; we may not know anything, the film wants us to admit, but we *do* know that (maternal) love is good, and unconditional (maternal) love is what allows us to proceed *as if* we know anything at all—love here always refers, explicitly or otherwise, to a specifically *maternal* love, the pure, unconditional acceptance of the child by the woman who brought it into the world. Such a love implies an essential non-substitutability—there is no replacement, in my life, for *my* mother, the one in whose belly I grew; and there is certainly no substitute for *me* in my mother's eyes—such that the very phrase “my mother” or “my child” enacts an epistemological performative; if knowledge, meaning, and understanding are to occur at all, they must first follow from my establishment of myself as no one *other* than myself, and this establishment occurs through my mother's recognition of me, her ardent belief that no other child could take my place and my own ardent belief in myself that reflects hers. The climax of the film artfully and without resistance draws the viewer to this conclusion as we witness Joy and Evelyn's tearful embrace and their decision to carry on in the world, together, despite the existential threat of meaninglessness that surrounds them. “I will always want to be here with *you*” is the mother's refrain, the one that ensures her participation in the machinery of the Family, the one that, perhaps, is the very motor that propels it. This narrative

expresses perfectly Bersani's summary of love's necessity to the establishment of difference such that we—the different beings described as self, other, and the world more generally—can relate to one another at all. In other words, it expresses the deeply entrenched belief that “very possibility of connectedness” depends first on the establishment of unique differences that it is the charge of love to cherish and uphold (*Intimacies* 75).

Yet, by raising the possibility of Evelyn's “letting go” of Joy, the film also draws our attention to the possibility of a different kind of maternal relation, one that does *not* see “difference” as the necessary foundation for “connectedness”. This dissertation is a response to this possibility, and I ask: what might we begin to think if we questioned the unquestionable value of maternal love and the selfhood that it is thought to both inaugurate and sustain—if we see, in other words, an opportunity lost when Evelyn grabs hold of Joy's feet and pulls her back from the brink of self-destruction? What modes of connectedness might the perception of a fundamental sameness enable? This project is an attempt to theorize motherhood such that we might admit the possibility of a maternity that does not hold the self together but allows it to disperse itself, as Joy did, throughout the world: a motherhood, in other words, that does not ground and bolster the self but contributes to a new kind of selflessness by welcoming what Bersani has called, as I will explore in the following section, an impersonal (and non-pathological) narcissism? What possibilities for new relational arrangements, new forms of connectedness, might we be able to recognize if Evelyn had refused to hold Joy together by affirming the borders and

the value of her individuality? The answer to this question will require, as I will show, that we radically reconsider the meaning of both maternal love and selfhood.

### Love and/of Self

The analysis that follows is deeply indebted to Bersani, whose attempts at theorizing a sociality that is *not* dependent upon the existence of a gulf between self and other, a gulf that is bridgeable only through knowledge, provides rich ground for theorizing a motherhood that, through impersonality and indifference—words that we do not typically associate with maternity—might delink, or at least de-emphasize, its attachment to the production of the self’s passion for difference and, consequently, knowledge. Bersani’s theory makes use of a wide-ranging and mobile terminology to conduct a less self-ish way of thinking, and this terminology is especially useful for theorizing an impersonal maternity *because* of its mobility and the speculative, counterintuitive ways in which it is deployed. Andrew Parker describes just how fraught attempts to define the words “mother” and “motherhood” have been throughout the history of philosophy and theory, and he concludes that “the mother’s destabilizing influence cannot be diminished through more precise definition” (11). My recourse to, or leaning on, Bersani’s imprecise and wandering vocabulary is thus in recognition of this definitional impossibility; moreover, it allows me to frame my interest in motherhood as one of *relationality*, one in which it is not necessary to define “who” or “what” a mother is but to focus on the ways in which the field of social relations—grounded in the self—is routed through and challenged by the kind of relationality we call maternity, a relationality that emerges between a

“mother” and her “child” and that brings into being that third category—the self—that retrospectively marks both. My project intervenes here, in this relational between, by asking not who or what the mother is but how motherhood has been linked to the kind of selfhood that makes violence an intractable feature of our social world.

In an essay entitled “The Power of Evil and the Power of Love”, Bersani aims, through a novel interpretation of psychoanalytic theory alongside Foucauldian theory to address the question: how might an alternative selfhood be imagined, or recognized, or cultivated? And how is love implicated in both the violence of the self and our efforts to redescribe it? Importantly, he is arguing not for the annihilation of the self in a kind of submission to cosmic oneness—an annihilation that finds its expression in religious mysticism as a kind of “perfect passivity to God’s will” or “total self-divestiture” (*Intimacies* 52)—but for a “self-expansion”, a displacement of the self from its imagined dwelling in our individual psychic depths to a place of superficiality and “extensibility” (Tuhkanen, *Leo Bersani* 220). In other words, self-expansion enjoins us to eschew our belief in our own interiority—an invention, as Foucault has brilliantly observed, of a particular and impersonal regime of power rooted in the practice of confession—in favour of a view of the self as part of a shared virtuality that moves through and between the human and the nonhuman. The field of “love”—the networks of particular forms of connectedness that arrange and conduct our sociality—is one of the ways in which the Foucauldian “subject of knowledge”, or the psychological “subject of depth”, is reproduced; drawing on psychoanalysis to offer a critical reformulation of love, Bersani wishes to critically rethink the narrative structure of good versus evil—often defined in

terms of self versus other, or sameness versus difference—that powerfully shapes the way we exist within and experience the world. Paradoxically, for Bersani, our belief in the power of love to overcome evil is precisely what sustains evil and makes it possible. All attempts to theorize love (save the attempt of psychoanalysis), he claims, share “one assumption: in love, the human subject is exceptionally open to otherness” (*Intimacies* 74). In love, we fix our attention upon an object that is assumed to be radically outside the self and desire, in one way or another, union with it (*ibid.*). What psychoanalysis offers us, on the other hand, is a way to challenge the assumption that love has anything at all to do with being “open to otherness”; instead, it offers a way of theorizing otherness as something *other* than radical difference external to the self by imploring us to see love as a “specular” event—as a recognition not of the other’s difference but of their sameness, a reflection between selves of a shared, de-personalized selfhood: an “impersonal narcissism”, in Bersani’s words. In psychoanalysis, narcissism is not a pathological deviation from the norm of self-other relationality. It is, rather, the *only* way of relating that we have available to us; “we love only ourselves”, psychoanalysis reveals, and this truth “explodes the myth of love” (*Intimacies* 75-6). Attending to instances or possibilities of impersonal narcissism becomes a way for us to divert our attention away from the belief in individual interiority such that we might become attuned to the ways in which the self extends across and between others and the world. It also demands a new definition of love.

Bersani is not, of course, the only revisionist for whom psychoanalysis’s emphasis upon paradox can be put to service in the critique of modern individualism and the

systemic forces—including, most centrally for Bersani and other queer theorists such as Sedgwick and Lee Edelman, the heteronormativity that ensures our investment in ourselves and our corresponding willingness to defend those selves with violence, whether that violence be physical, psychical, or discursive—that it has both enabled and by which it is supported. Deborah Britzman, for example, reads Freud “as saying that there is a problem with narratives that promise the normalcy of life” (80), which is a way of saying that narrative teleology, which attempts to guarantee a particular outcome, is always in the process of undoing and diverting itself, a process psychoanalytic writing exemplifies. For Britzman, whose interest lies in pedagogy, the idea of “self knowledge” is a heteronormative myth, one that a queer “education” can work to undo by resisting narratives of normalcy. One such narrative is, as I have outlined above, the myth of maternal love and non-substitutability, and one could argue that our heteronormative education begins with our incorporation into this myth from the moment of our birth.

Britzman asks,

can a queer pedagogy implicate everyone involved to consider the grounds of their own possibility, their own intelligibility, and the work of proliferating their own identifications and critiques that may exceed identity as essence, explanation, causality, or transcendence? (81)

In asking this question, Britzman is seeking an alternative way of “knowing” that does not assume, first and foremost, the existence of a stable and autonomous self, a self whose passionate investment in what it believes to be its essence—its identity—takes the form of a proprietary possessiveness. And yet, the articulation of this pedagogical project runs into some friction with Bersani’s, though the stakes, at first glance, appear to be similar. For Britzman, the central problem of knowledge is “whether one looks for one’s

own image in the other, and hence invests in knowledge as self-reflection and affirmation, or whether, in the process of coming to know, one invests in the rethinking of the self as an effect of, or condition for, encountering the other as an equal” (ibid.). Seeing oneself reflected in the other—the conventional view of narcissism as unchecked self-centredness—is presented here as a barrier to a (presumably more ethical) relationality that takes the other *for* itself. But does this belief in a relationality of “encounters” between “equals” really move us so far from the epistemophilia Bersani enjoins us to recognize? For his part, Bersani wants us to suspend any out-of-hand rejection of narcissism and embrace, instead, the possibility that a non-pathological narcissism might not only exist but also be indispensable to theorizing a relationality that does away completely with the idea of the “encounter between equals” as its model. For Bersani, an epistemology grounded in the distinction between subject and object—which describes the epistemological attitude of Western culture—sets up a view of the world, and our movement through it, as a series of confrontations between things that we believe possess an inherent and self-contained difference. The self’s ability to see not difference in the world around it but sameness—a sameness captured in the prefix “homo”—might actually be a more radical movement away from a relationality built upon self-knowledge than any appeal to an equality achieved through the mutual recognition and embrace of essential differences. An exploration, therefore, of what Bersani frequently calls the “virtualities”—unrealized potentialities—that inhere in the concept of narcissism has everything to do with an ethical project that seeks to move beyond a theory of relationality grounded in difference: our belief, in other words, in the essential difference

of the other and of the value of our striving to love the other *for* him- or her- or themselves, for what we presume to be the truth of their selfhood. This erotic mythology—that one can love the other *for* itself— has been elsewhere described by Bersani as an ethics of lack; the other is presumed to have something unique that we do not have—their difference—and our love for them represents a desire to possess this thing and thereby render ourselves whole.

This search for wholeness is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in stories we tell about the moment of birth. Sheila Heti’s autobiographical novel *Motherhood*, for example, refers to this prevalent and powerful natal narrative climax:

Today I met Libby’s baby, two months old. It was asleep in its blue bassinette. Libby told me that the moment she held her child in her arms, she thought, *I never need to meet anyone ever again*. Having met her child, it was enough for her. She felt finally filled up the way that all the musicians, poets, painters, princes, filmmakers and phonies hadn’t filled her up, who’d just left her hungrier than before. (237)

In the image of the mother holding her newborn baby, and in the myth that this relationship alone achieves the perfection of wholeness, we find the purest expression of what I have called maternity, our belief in the indispensability of the mother to the child and the child to the mother, the belief that each finds in the other the fulfilment of both its difference and its desire to overcome lack. It is interesting, therefore, that in his lifelong analysis of the ethics of lack, of our passionate belief in ourselves and in others as parts culminating in a whole, Bersani only rarely mentions motherhood, choosing instead to focus upon (homo)erotic relations between adults in his search not only for examples of an ego-affirming—and therefore violence-sanctioning—relationality but also for “modes of being” that might, by de-emphasizing the egocentric, individualizing process of

psychic development, truly allow for nonviolence. And yet, the sanctity of the mother-child relation is perhaps the most unquestioned relational ground of all, and the narcissistic mother—the mother who fails to recognize her child’s unique selfhood—is one of the most demonized figures in our cultural imagination. The particular fear or revulsion that we have for narcissistic mothers is the flip-side of the fantasy of the mother who is completed by the child she holds in her arms; if we do *not* fulfil her, if she continues to desire something unknown and unknowable, there is no end to the dangers she poses to the self. Perhaps, then, the inverse of the image of the satisfied mother who falls in love with her cradled infant is the mother whom Lacan describes as a “huge crocodile in whose jaws you are ... One never knows what might suddenly come over her and make her shut her trap” (Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* 112). Can a narcissistic motherhood move us toward the kind of relationality that both Britzman and Bersani see as desirable (even if they disagree on narcissism’s role in achieving it), a relationality that eschews the preciousness of the self in favour of a less personal, and therefore less violent, mode of being? It would seem nothing short of blasphemous to suggest that, at the climactic moment of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, Evelyn *should* release her daughter to the self-annihilating effects of her nihilism, yet this is precisely what Bersani’s ethical project, though it paid little mind to motherhood *per se*, urges us to consider. In this thesis I argue that the modern ethical practice of seeing the other as an enigmatic source of pure difference—a difference we are urged to see as both desirable and worthy of being cherished—is grounded in a primary belief in the myth of unconditional maternal love through which our corresponding belief in the preciousness

of ourselves, our egos, or our identities, is most strongly affirmed, and that a theorization of a specifically narcissistic motherhood—one that refuses to affirm the singular identity of the child—is essential to the development of an ethics that renders the very categories of self/other, love/hate, irrelevant. The first romance in our lives comes in the form of our mothers, whose lack, we believe (or hope), was fulfilled the moment she held us in her arms; and there is no end, we consequently believe, to the problems that ensue for us when our mother is “absent” or “withdraws her love” from us, when we do not fulfill her and she does not recognize us. An ethics of impersonal narcissism explores radical alternatives to this maternal romance that shapes the very core of the self/other relationality Bersani (along with Foucault, Britzman, Edelman, and Sedgwick, each in their own way) wants us to question.

And so, as much as this project represents an intervention in Bersani’s theory of impersonal narcissism and its role in de-personalizing the self, it also contributes to a rethinking of motherhood that puts it into conversation with the many feminist theorists who have taken maternity as their object of study. As Rich put it in 1976, “[w]e know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood” (11). In the wake of her landmark book, *Of Woman Born*, there occurred an explosion of feminist scholarship focused upon the distinction, following Rich, between the patriarchal “institution” of motherhood—the set of power relations, systems, and structures that give rise to the dominant ideology of “good” mothering—and the practice of mothering at the level of individual experience. Indeed, there has been such a proliferation of scholarly attention to motherhood and mothering that O’Reilly, in 2019,

wrote that it is now “unthinkable to cite Rich’s quote on the dearth of maternal scholarship” (19). For O’Reilly, as we have already seen, motherhood studies as a field is united by a shared desire to “empower” mothers by critiquing the ideology of motherhood and creating “maternal practices and identities” that increase mothers’ agency, autonomy, authority, and authenticity; in other words, motherhood studies has the political aim of restoring “selfhood and power” to mothers by changing the patriarchal culture that has robbed them of both (O’Reilly 28). Despite the rapid expansion of motherhood studies, however, it has proven difficult to move beyond sentimental and/or patriarchal notions of motherhood because the field itself remains entrenched within the patriarchal culture it wishes to alter. The twin goals of “selfhood and power” reproduce rather than resist the masculine fantasy of individual freedom and autonomy, and appeals to the “authenticity” of the mother come dangerously close to reifying the sentimental belief that there is an essence of motherhood that we approach when we are freed from certain normative institutions (hooks). Even Rich, while acknowledging that her own difficulties in mothering—her constant self-doubt, guilt, anger—were the result of being “haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is ‘unconditional’” (23), also describes the “authentic need” of her son for, specifically, his mother: “[m]y singularity, my uniqueness in the world as *his mother*—perhaps more dimly also as Woman—evoked a need vaster than any human being could satisfy, except by loving continuously, unconditionally, from dawn to dark, and often in the middle of the night” (24). This view that there is something natural and authentic about both motherhood and the child’s need for the mother—the myth of maternal love for the irreplaceable child—persists in more

contemporary academic treatments of the subject despite a deep feminist suspicion of the ways in which an essentialized notion of motherhood has been enlisted in the service of patriarchal power relations (O'Reilly). For example, Lauri Umansky has defended the study of motherhood based on the belief that "women's functions as mothers, actual or symbolic, [are] the key to enhanced human relations and the building of authentic community" (158), a view that is echoed, albeit in a less sociological register, by Cavarero, whose work reifies the sacrificial scene of Madonna and child and holds it up as an ultimate ethical good. Mothering is often thought to be coextensive with life itself, and what could be more important than affirming life? A recent book by Angela Garbes argues for a valuation of mothering for precisely this reason: "When you become a mother, you engender life, endless possibilities ... Raising a child requires profound strength and hope" (10, 15). Despite deep divisions in feminist theory regarding whether or not, and to what degree, "difference" ought to be recognized in the theorization of maternity, scholars who study motherhood are still operating within one common field, the field in which "love", "hope", and "empowerment" converge in the mother-child dyad. While motherhood studies are typically divided into those that focus on policy changes aimed at "equalizing" the effects of child-rearing; those that seek to explore the multiple experiences of motherhood and the ways in which women have been constrained or oppressed by a culture of motherhood that demands impossible things from them (or, conversely, the ways in which mothers find pleasure and empowerment in mothering despite systematic oppression [see Patricia Hill Collins; bell hooks; and Alexis Pauline Grumbs, China Martens and Mai'a Williams]); or those that aim to critically temper

the belief in practical motherhood as the most authentic model of relationality by abstracting the meaning of “mother” to a more philosophical or linguistic register (see, for example, Julia Kristeva; Elissa Marder; Madelon Sprengnether), few scholars have considered the ways in which motherhood might be speculatively considered as the means by which our fundamental belief in the “sacrosanct value of selfhood” (Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* 4) might be challenged. In other words, few scholars have considered how de-personalizing and radically revising the very meaning of love in the mother-child relation might work toward undermining the “sanction for violence” that continues to characterize maternity so long as we continue to assume the importance of the unique personality of the child and the mother’s desire to love it.

And so, despite the fact that the field of motherhood studies has widened its reach to include an ever-increasing number of non-normative mothering practices and contexts, there continues to exist a dimension of maternity that goes untheorized and unexplored, one that has far more radical implications than the inclusion-based model of motherhood studies engendered by scholars such as Rich, O’Reilly, or Ruddick. This untheorized dimension is approached neither by a focus on the institutional, or ideological, dimension of motherhood, nor by exploring mothering at the level of personal experience; instead, it describes an aspect of relationality specific to the mother-child relation that makes available a mode of thinking and being that de-emphasizes experience by de-emphasizing the (maternal) subject. To borrow Bersani’s terminology, this way of approaching maternity is interested in attending to the *virtualities* that inhere in the mother-child relation, virtualities that register an element of maternity that is both insubordinate to the

ideology of motherhood *and* uninterested in the personality or the selfhood of the mother and/or the child. Of course, this is not to say that motherhood studies that focus on the ideological, discursive, or the personal aspect of maternity are doing anything wrong; many important changes to the political, social, and material lives of mothers and children have been won through the interventions of feminist scholars in the field of motherhood. And my own interest in motherhood is, in part and like many others who take motherhood as their object of study, the result of my experience becoming a mother to three children; I can personally attest to the ways in which I and the other mothers in my life tell romantic tales about the bottomless joy and fulfilment our children bring us, about the inexpressible depth of our love, about the precious and singular personalities of our children, and about the nonstop intensiveness of our efforts to care for, amuse, play with, educate, and mold these children into a version of what passes as good and successful individuals. Where my project distinguishes itself, however, is by its search not to describe the personal and/or cultural experience of motherhood, nor to insist upon the unnaturalness and oppressive effects of the myth of unconditional maternal love, but to explore the possibility that motherhood can be delinked from the production of the kind of selfhood that we take for granted as the foundation for relationality. Just as Bersani, in his efforts to formulate a new “relational field” that moves beyond, or perhaps to the side of, our investment in the naturalness of the self, asks how we might “enlist the ego” in its own dismantling (*Intimacies* 77), I, too, ask how we might enlist the myth of maternal love in the dismantling of an erotic model of relationality—one that links unconditional maternal love with a selfhood that engenders personality— that provides

the unquestioned foundation of our way of being in the world. Bersani describes his ethical project as the pursuit of an “impersonal narcissism”; I propose that versions, narratives, of mothers who love in ways that could be, and indeed have been, pathologized as narcissistic (or, simply, as lacking love) offer a means to extend the virtualities that inhere in the concept of narcissism such that new relational modes that are *not* predicated upon the ego—and the violence that such a relationality sanctions—could, if not come into being, at least begin to be thought. In short, this is a project that enlists narcissistic maternal love in the service of an ethics of nonviolence, an ethics that can only come about, as Bersani has convincingly argued, through a divestment of our belief in ourselves and others as wellsprings of a deep and precious individuality.

#### Bersani, Epistemophilia, and the Mother

Throughout this project, maternity will be figured, in various ways, in relation to knowledge, for knowledge—its presence, absence, or impossibility—runs through relationality in general; it is even possible to say that knowledge is the matrix within which relationality occurs and is structured. For Bersani, the very distinction between subject and object—the distinction he wishes to de-emphasize through his focus on impersonal narcissism and the “extensibility” of the self—is what grounds a general attitude of epistemophilia, a means of relating to the world as though *to relate* is *to gain knowledge of*. His diagnosis of a modern subjectivity characterized by epistemophilia is developed in part by the modern invention of confession as a means of managing the self and its desires. Bersani draws here upon Foucault’s genealogy of the confession,

particularly as it became installed as a tool to produce sexuality, or our belief that our desires are the foundation of our identities. The practice of religious confession gave way, at the turn of the twentieth century, to the secular practice of psychoanalysis, as well as to a practical model of relationality in which “getting to know” yourself and others takes the form of an exchange or excavation of information. For Bersani, though, it was the establishment of psychoanalysis (and its transformation into post-psychoanalytic, therapeutically-oriented psychology) that cemented “depth psychology” as our primary model of selfhood—to be a self is to contain a (sometimes hidden) profundity of experiences and desires that can only be expressed in a confessional manner. To fall in love, as selves with depth, is to share what is hidden inside yourself with another self, who reciprocates with confessions of their own; to be known in this way, and to know one’s self in this way, is to achieve the most fulfilling kind of love, a love in which the secrets that first attracted are unearthed and overcome through mutual acceptance. Bersani’s provocative and original insight is that this ideal of love is actually and paradoxically a kind of violence; the lover, in this model, resembles a child who dismantles a talking doll in order to unveil the mystery of the mechanism that makes it talk (Tuhkanen, “Passion for Sameness” 133). Having thus “solved” the doll’s puzzle, the child focuses its attention on the next mystery; the epistemophilic subject views others (subjects or objects) as mere puzzles to be solved in order to satisfy an insatiable curiosity to *know*. An ethics of nonviolence thus begins with an effort to quell this curiosity about difference by paying attention to, and seeing value in, things—correspondences, likenesses, relations—that are “epistemologically useless” (Bersani, *Thoughts and*

*Things* 81), things that do not, in other words, convey information or aid us in our pursuit of an ever-expanding, possessive understanding. Such likenesses are often, counter-intuitively, described by Bersani as “incongruous” or “uncertain”; they point us, in other words, to an affirmation of non-difference even in the most unlikely of places, an affirmation that might enable us to engage the world non-confrontationally, as co-extensive and similar beings rather than as self-possessing subjects meeting objects.

For Bersani, the clearest example of epistemophilia occurs in Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, in which the narrator, Marcel, embarks upon a series of quests to discover what he imagines to be the secret pleasures of the various people (primarily women) in his life. Marcel offers, in other words, the “most complete representation of ... the psychoanalytic subject” (*Thoughts and Things* 4), which means, in Bersani’s view, a subject who is essentially divided—who sees the world in terms of enigmatic otherness and difference, and who perceives within himself an internalized otherness that must be excavated. The “division” of the self, regardless of the specific terminology in which it is described, is the basis for what we can call “self-knowledge (what, for example, Descartes would have described as a thinking self [the I] versus the interior contents of the mind which the self can “coerce” into full disclosure [*Thoughts and Things* 41], or what Freud would have described as the distinction between the conscious and unconscious). That there is a coherent and autonomous self who goes about gaining knowledge, of both self and other, is what Bersani means to describe as a general epistemophilia. He often refers to the relationship between Marcel and Albertine as the model of the modern epistemophile’s “obsessive need to penetrate the other’s desire”

(ibid.); once penetrated, the “truth” of the other becomes a “projection” of the self’s presumed truth. This relentless pursuit of knowledge, of both self and other, other-within-self, is the central problem around which Bersani’s oeuvre revolves: “[w]hat are the alternatives,” he asks, “to a relationality guided by an ideology of difference, one in which the ontological premise of a subject-object dualism gives primacy to the quest for knowledge in the subject’s relation to both himself and the world?” (*Thoughts and Things* 4-5). The answer to that question is not easily apprehended, but it begins with Bersani’s exhortation that “the human subject can be more than a psychological subject” (*Intimacies* 120), by which, as David L. Clark’s reading of Bersani reminds us, he means a subject who is in fact *less*: who contains less depth, who seeks less knowledge, who is less colonized or cultivated by what we have come to think of as our individual personalities. “To be sure,” Clark writes, “lessening what we are is not selflessness, which only orients the self towards a more refined version of itself”, but rather an opening up to “the being that will be desertified by the ‘will’” (168). Bersani’s ethical injunction<sup>3</sup>, then, is that we ought to consider ways to de-emphasize the quest for

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<sup>3</sup> As Clark’s discussion of “lessness” emphasizes, a self “desertified by the ‘will’” is a self that lets go of its belief in its possession of an autonomous agency. As such, we must be careful not to read in Bersani’s theory a heroic tale of the self’s self-overcoming. Rather, the self must be allowed to attend to “uncertain alikenessess” (*Thoughts and Things* 81) not through force of will, but through a passive relinquishing of certain habits of thought. This is perhaps best exemplified in Bersani’s discussion of syntax (which I will discuss in more depth below); rationalist philosophy has trained us to think in terms of syllogisms that adhere to the principal of non-contradiction, but we can be re-trained by the imposition or intrusion into thinking of illogical similarities—what Bersani has called “epistemologically useless connections” (ibid.)—that, as it so happens and as psychoanalysis has, through its theorization of the unconscious, established, occur all the time, with or without our active participation.

knowledge upon which our personalities embark by paying attention to the ways in which the *impersonal* and the *indifferent* attune us to an alternative, virtual register of being. Narcissism, in drawing together the impersonal and the indifferent, names this register, which John Paul Ricco describes as the unactualized “relational movement” toward “similitudes outside of and beyond the self” (“Incongruity” 156). In other words, the virtual is, for Bersani, a means of describing what it is that links beings in and across their sameness and *not* in the specific, realized forms that they individually embody.

What does all of this have to do with motherhood? Bersani has repeatedly sought to redescribe the meaning of “love”, to make us aware of the ways in which “love” is precisely what engenders the violence of the individual self who “defend[s itself] ferociously” (*Thoughts and Things* 83). In considering the ethical value of narcissism, Bersani links it to an alternate theory of love, derived from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where love names what it is in the other that I recognize as myself; in this view, love is the “recognition of a virtual being *before* realized individual being”, and this makes it a kind of “self-love”, a love of the sameness that connects beings virtually and cares not for the specific differences between individuals (*Thoughts and Things* 84, emphasis added). If, as I have described above, maternal love is the primary model for the kind of love Bersani wishes to move away from—the personalizing, individualizing love that cherishes the other’s difference—then one would expect that the mother’s investment in recognizing and nurturing the unique personality of her child would be a natural site of critique. Yet, curiously, Bersani only rarely mentions motherhood and, where he does, it is brief and gestural. The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, in dialogue with Bersani, has

gone some way to redressing this by pointing to the ways in which the latter's attempt to articulate a nonviolent, non-epistemophilic way of being in the world overlaps considerably with certain psychoanalytic theories of the mother-infant relation. Phillips argues, as Bersani does, that a psychoanalytic theory of narcissism already suggests a relationality that is less violent than the epistemophilic relationality sanctioned by our passionate belief in our personalities, and that this understanding of narcissism was identified by psychoanalysis as the "medium for recognition rather than the obstacle" in one particular relationship—that of mother to child (*Intimacies* 107):

[t]here is no relation more narcissistic ... than the relation between mothers and their children; and there is, by the same token, no relation more devoted to or more inspired by the virtual, the potential. The first intimacy is an intimacy with a process of becoming, not with a person. The question raised by Bersani's account is why is this relation so difficult to sustain, so easily sabotaged by the drive to take things personally? (114)

In other words, Phillips is suggesting that a counter-intuitive kind of intimacy exists between mothers and their children, an intimacy that is devoid of content because the content—what we might later come to understand as elements of our identity, that which lets us convey to others *who we are*—is still virtual rather than realized. How, he asks, might we find ways to sustain this contentless, "epistemologically useless", intimacy? Phillips' account of an impersonal, narcissistic maternity echoes the manner in which Julia Kristeva described pregnancy and birth: "It happens, but I'm not there" (237). This "impossible syllogism" (ibid.) is described by Linda Zerilli as "process without subject", or an intimacy that radically departs from the confessional, romantic form of intimacy we are familiar with in which we "get to know" one another on a "deeper level", to use some common colloquialisms. Instead, the "impossible syllogism" of pregnancy, birth, and, we

might add, motherhood in general, suggests a lessening of the egocentric subject, a removal of that subject from the codifying forces of narrative logic and syntax. As mothers, we are surprised to find that something extraordinary has happened without our being there; our self has, in a sense, abdicated itself in the formation of this new intimacy that undertakes itself with or without our awareness, knowledge, or consent. And so, while Bersani's oeuvre is filled with examples of impersonal narcissism, most notably in the form of male homosexual relations, my project takes Phillips' observation about the impersonal narcissism that inheres in the mother-child relation—that there is *no* relation more narcissistic—seriously. Both the field of motherhood studies, which has in many ways departed from attempts to theorize the nature of maternity out of a reasonable fear that such attempts sentimentalize or reify motherhood as the feminine role *par excellence*, and the growing body of work being done on Bersani's startlingly original criticism stand to benefit from an assessment of this lacuna that exists at the intersection of motherhood and non-pathological narcissism.

Interestingly, while Bersani relies heavily upon Proust to figure his characterization of modern subjectivity, the former pays little attention to the famous scene at the beginning of *La recherche* depicting Marcel's anguish at being separated from his mother at bedtime. Apart from his brief treatment of the scene in his early book *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and Art*, Bersani refers almost exclusively to Marcel's romantic interest in girls and women *after* his initial desperation for his mother's love and attention: this despite his frequent reference to Freud's dictum that the finding of a love object is always a re-finding (S.E. 45), which refers, for Freud, to the adult's re-finding of

the “infant’s satiety at the mother’s breast” (Tuhkanen, “Passion” 138). In order to advance his theory of impersonal narcissism by rethinking what is meant by “love”, Bersani, it seems to me, rigorously avoids expounding upon the topic of maternity that is so invitingly offered up in psychoanalysis, choosing instead to hold Plato’s *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates recounts love as the remembered correspondence between souls who accompanied both god and each other in their immortal, non-human descent to the human world, as the model for love as a correspondence of similarity rather than a recognition of difference. This is perhaps because Bersani reads, in the scene of Marcel’s desperation to be reunited with his mother, who, he imagines, is “enjoying unimaginable and evil pleasures” at the cost of his profound and intolerable exclusion (*Marcel Proust* 27), a kind of unswerving compulsion to resort to knowledge in order to repair what appears to be a fundamental psychic ignorance born of the inevitable separation from one’s mother. Marcel’s relation with his mother, in other words, cannot but result in his ensuing attitude of epistemophilia:

The seemingly contradictory desires to penetrate a mysterious and fulfilling reality completely distinct from the self, and yet to find in the outer world the “charm” of his reveries, are, in Marcel, two aspects of a single psychological process ... Now it seems that the idea of the real is so inextricably linked with the idea of the unknown that inaccessibility is the sign by which Marcel recognizes something worth knowing or possessing. (Bersani, *Marcel Proust* 28)

What Bersani is saying here is that the inevitable “inaccessibility” of the mother—the uncontrollable (from the perspective of the child) rhythms of her comings and goings—is what fuels Marcel’s paradoxical desire to possess her *and* to forestall this possession in order to prolong the pleasure he takes in fantasizing about her. Her disappearance, in other words, holds open the empty space in which fantasy occurs, and the other (in this

case, the mother) comes to stand as the tantalizing mystery of the unknown, the paradoxical figure for a fantasy of knowingness. However, as Tuhkanen's exposition of Bersani's oeuvre has convincingly shown, there is a reason Bersani returns again and again to both Proust and psychoanalysis; there remains, Bersani believes, virtualities in both Proustian and psychoanalytic literature that have not been fully unfolded, explored, or instrumentalized in the pursuit of an ethics that would help us see around, or perhaps through, the epistemophilia that so powerfully shapes the way we experience both ourselves and the world. My dissertation theorizes, through a Bersanian lens, a maternity that Bersani himself seemed unable to fully enlist in the service of a non-violent relationality. To do so, I will analyze several instances, in literature and film, of what I will suggest can be understood as impersonally "narcissistic" mothers; but first, it will be helpful to turn to the Proustian scene itself, as well as to place it alongside another narrative that can conceivably aid the move from epistemophilia to an "epistemologically useless" position.

#### The Mother-Child Relation and Epistemophobia

As Phillips so succinctly puts it in his essay "On Being Left Out", "to want something is to be left out of having it" (para. 6). This is indeed the case for Marcel, who, in *Swann's Way*, describes in detail his dread of being left out of his mother's company and his passionate desire to recover her from the enjoyment he imagines her to be having in the "forbidden and unfriendly dining-room" (39). Marcel's anxiety about his mother and his

unfulfilled desire to possess her company suspend him in a state both agonizing and pleasurable:

My sole consolation when I went upstairs for the night was that Mamma would come in and kiss me after I was in bed. But this good night lasted for so short a time, she went down again so soon, that the moment I heard her climb the stairs ... was for me a moment of the utmost pain ... So much so that I reached the point of hoping that this good night, which I loved so much would come as late as possible, so as to prolong the time of respite during which Mamma would not yet have appeared. (15)

A psychoanalytic reading of this passage would suggest that Marcel's longing for his mother, and the pleasure he takes in postponing her arrival for as long as possible, is indicative of the general structure of desire. Desire, in such a view, is precisely the lack of coincidence between what we *think* we want and that want's fulfilment; in that interstice dwells pleasure. Marcel is plainly aware of this, as, on the night he succeeds in meeting his mother in the hallway as she comes up to bed and, miraculously, receives his father's permission to have his mother spend the night in his room, he receives no real satisfaction: "It struck me that if I had just won a victory it was over her, that I had succeeded, as sickness or sorrow or age might have succeeded, in relaxing her will, in undermining her judgment; and that this evening opened a new era, would remain a black date in the calendar" (51). This model of desire—an example of Bersanian epistemophilia—could also, in a twist of understanding, be understood as a "passion for ignorance" (Phillips para. 9), for as much as we cannot bear for the other to indulge in pleasures unknown and inaccessible to us, we also cannot bear to finally get what we want, which is, ultimately, knowledge gained through possession. We prefer the

ignorance that pleasurably sustains desire, yet we are compelled, in this Proustian version of relationality, to grasp at knowledge.

Marcel's tale does indeed seem to correspond closely to the psychoanalytic belief that "the child's life ... is a 'cumulative trauma' of absences and exclusions and exiles: first separation from the mother, then exclusion from the parents' sexual relationship, then being replaced by siblings and so on" (Phillips para. 16). Bersani's subsequent reading of Marcel's epistemophilic obsession with, for example, Albertine, Gilberte, and M. de Charlus, suggests that there is some truth to this psychoanalytic account, at least when we narratively frame the scene of maternal exclusion in the way that Proust—and, in his own way, Freud—does: as a trauma instantiating an enduring lack in the child, a lack that paradoxically brings the self, stabilized by desire, into existence: a process we call hominization. Bersani would spend the rest of his lengthy, prolific career trying to access virtualities that might provide alternatives to this "ontology of lack" and the specific kind of selfhood it engenders, and yet he would never fully return to the scene between Marcel and his mother. Why? Is it because he can see no way "out" of the primal scene of separation, a separation that occurs, if we are to follow both Freudian and Kleinian branches of psychoanalysis, at the moment of birth and the nonsensical, unpredictable (from the infant's perspective) appearance and disappearance of the life-giving breast? Is the mother *always* a hominizng force in the life of the child, or can she, as Phillips suggested above, sustain a relationality that is rooted in the continuity of sameness rather than the separateness of difference?

It is the psychoanalytic account of the mother's role in a primary, constitutive trauma that has led to the feminist indictment of psychoanalysis as matrophobic and/or mother-blaming (Rich; Sprengnether; see also Lynn Sukenick, Steph Lawler), despite the fact that this trauma is considered necessary for the transformation of the infant into something recognizable as a self. Sprengnether argues that Freud's invention of the Oedipal drama led to the establishment, in Freudian as well as subsequent versions of psychoanalysis, of the mother's identification with "primal unity", a unity that marks the beginning and end of our lives and which lingers, in the interim, on the margins of our thought. This marginal identification of the mother renders her inherently threatening to the psychoanalytic teleology that culminates in the autonomous, capable, heterosexual adult; "[i]n [Freud's] concept of the death instinct, which aims to return the living entity to its inorganic origin, he equates the body of the mother with the ultimate undoing of masculine striving and achievement" (Sprengnether 5). In other words, as the marker of a primary loss, the figure of the mother represents that which is, to draw upon Lacan, *outside* of the symbolic order instituted in the name of the father. According to Sprengnether, Freud's fear of the mother caused him to fail to adequately integrate her into his theory, thus crystallizing matrophobia—in the form of a reluctance to integrate the mother and her subsequent marginal, "subversive" position—at the heart of psychoanalysis. I suggest that a similar matrophobia is operating in Bersani's work and that his lack of attention to the scene of maternity that is especially significant in Proust indicates a continued failure to theorize maternity in a way that neither assigns it an inherently "subversive" status nor reifies it as an ethical ideal. Instead, I propose to do

with motherhood what Bersani exhorts us to do throughout his oeuvre: attend to and linger within the scenes, relations, and concepts that have too quickly been discarded in the pursuit of new ways of thinking. The persistence of matrophobia, as the field of motherhood studies demonstrates, has resulted in a paucity of theoretical or speculative instrumentalizations of maternity in the attempt to radically revise what is meant not only by motherhood but of relationality—of, more specifically, a truly nonviolent ethics—in general.

However, in the context of motherhood studies, it is important to note that the term *matrophobia* has two meanings: it can mean mother-fearing, as it does when it is applied as a feminist criticism of a theoretical body such as psychoanalysis—or indeed feminist theory itself—and it can refer to one’s fear of becoming (like) one’s mother. Rich described matrophobia in 1976 as

a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers’; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery ... The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy ... [T]here is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture. (236-7)

Cast in this way, matrophobia—which Rich saw as *the* central problem for the feminist movement of her time—expresses, in a fashion paralleling that of psychoanalysis, the individuating, ego-stabilizing process of maternal separation as well as the internal splitting through which we establish as (m)other that aspect of ourselves that forms the object of our fascinated desire. Yet, Rich also points to possibilities lost, or perhaps merely effaced, by the daughter’s inability to see anything other than “danger” in the

“overlapping” of her own personality with that of her mother (236). For Bersani, this internal splitting—theorized in psychoanalysis as a division between the conscious and unconscious mind—is precisely what gives rise to primacy of knowledge such that insatiable knowledge-seeking is the necessary outcome of the establishment of a profound sense of self. And while Rich does not seem to want to pursue the question of whether or not it is possible—and what it might mean—for the daughter to think of herself in terms of *sameness* with, rather than difference from, the mother, one could, following Bersani, wonder if “the idea of a divided self prevents us from recognizing the syntax of an *undivided* self” (*Thoughts and Things* 63). Pointing to examples of analysis in which Freud makes “logical leaps”—from, for example, his patient’s fantasy of rescuing “a woman ... of bad repute sexually” to the interpretation that the patient wants to give “to the mother a child who ... is also none other than the subject himself” (ibid.)—Bersani argues that such illogical and incongruous connections operate alongside the ego-fortifying syntax of conscious thought all the time. “We should not think,” Bersani therefore concludes, “of the Freudian text as being at odds with itself. Its exceptional nature is to exact a oneness of being—not a divided being—which may be the most profound discovery of psychoanalysis” (64). In this way, it is Bersani rather than Rich who offers a means to circumvent matrophobia; despite Rich’s understanding of matrophobia as the daughter’s desire for “freedom” won through individuation, her solution to it is to enjoin the mother to “expand the limits of her life. *To refuse to be a victim*” (246, emphasis in original)—to make herself, in other words, less detestable to her daughter. Bersani, on the other hand, offers a subtler but more radical alternative; by

paying attention to the incongruous similarities that momentarily arise but whose syntax is at odds with the syntax of the “divided self”, we allow for the emergence of surprising new possibilities: “Incongruity institutes virtualities that have no intrinsic reason to be actualized. This retreat from the actual creates a freedom that might be defined as a kind of being to which no predicate can be attached” (*Thoughts and Things* 66). As Ricco explains in an essay on Bersanian incongruity, Bersani’s interest in incongruity and virtuality is contrasted against both philosophical logic *and* “emotion, affect, or feeling as the principle means by which we experience the virtual oneness of being” (160). In other words, Bersani’s methodology of attuning himself to moments of “incongruous being” (ibid.) can be described as an effort to think neither logically nor sentimentally but *virtually*, where the virtual names the unrealized realm of thought in which things align themselves in ways that do not produce knowledge. Rethinking the maternal relation—primarily, though not exclusively, through the mother-daughter dynamic—thus requires precisely this methodology: the search for incongruous “alike-nesses” and the speculative movement towards the always unfinished and unrealized potentialities that occur there.

Let us return, then, to the scene of Marcel’s longing for his mother. Although we are speaking here of a son rather than a daughter, Bersani identifies the matrophobia that lies not only at the heart of Marcel’s relationship with his mother but of Marcel’s experience of his own selfhood: “his self is with his mother and he must have her in order to have it ... [He] never really loses the belief that his mother ... has the power to take away his strength, his individuality” (*Marcel Proust* 32, 34). The “sickness of uncertainty” (Proust 30) that washes over Marcel in his mother’s absence is what incites

his sense of lack and prompts him to imagine, as a lover jealously imagines his beloved, his mother “tast[ing] of unknown pleasures” (41). I would like to compare this scene to another, more contemporary, account of a child imagining her mother’s secret pleasures; I am speaking of Elena Ferrante’s novel *Troubling Love* and the main character, Delia’s, childhood obsession with her mother. In reading *Troubling Love*, it seems to me that we are presented with a version of Proustian childhood—that is to say, a childhood gripped by the passionate throes of alternating states of ignorance, fantasy, and epistemological possession—and yet Delia does not remain in thrall to the epistemophilia that defines her early relation to her mother. In other words, *Troubling Love* allows us to think about what a non-epistemophilic maternity might look like and thus provides a point of departure for the analyses that are to come in the following chapters. The novel begins with an adult Delia who learns that her mother, Amalia, drowned mysteriously at the beach the family used to visit on vacation. Delia recounts how her mother was supposed to have caught the train to visit her in Rome but hadn’t arrived; Amalia, we learn, was in the habit of missing the train, a situation that each time gives rise to Delia’s anxious fantasizing about what happens to her mother when her mother is not there:

Usually she arrived on the next [train] or even the next day, but I couldn’t get used to it and so I worried just the same. I telephoned her anxiously. When I finally heard her voice, I reproached her with a certain harshness: why hadn’t she departed, why hadn’t she warned me? She apologized unremorsefully, wondering with amusement what I imagined could have happened to her, at her age. “Everything,” I answered. I had always pictured a weft of traps, woven purposely to make her vanish from the world. (12)

The mystery of her mother’s drowning is enhanced by the fact that Delia receives three incoherent phone calls from her mother the night before and the morning of the day she

dies. The phone calls are confusing and erratic; her mother reports she is “with a man” who is preventing her from explaining anything to Delia; laughs and spouts “obscene expressions in dialect”; and warns Delia to lock her doors because the man she was with wants to hurt Delia, too (13). Thus, the story begins with Delia in a state of confusion and profound ignorance as to her mother’s fate. The reader, along with Delia, approaches the scene as a detective would, looking to the phone calls for clues that could solve the mystery of what happened to Amalia, why she ended up drowned in the ocean wearing only a bra and some jewelry. Delia’s childhood fear—a fear that remains well into her adulthood—that a “trap” existed that was set purposely for her mother seems, ultimately, to be founded, and her mother’s use in the phone calls of dialect—the language of Delia’s childhood—prompts a “disorienting regression” (13), a return to a childish state of confusion and fear. Delia becomes fixated not only on understanding what happened to her mother in her final days—who was the man she was with? Was she enjoying herself, or was she frightened?—but also on unravelling, finally, the tantalizing mystery of her mother’s life. Returning to her mother’s apartment—her childhood home—in the pursuit of this understanding, Delia becomes immersed in memories: “There was a line that I couldn’t cross when I thought of Amalia. Perhaps I was there [now] to cross it” (25).

The novel thus follows Delia in the days after her mother’s death as she tries to replace uncertainty with certainty, ignorance with knowledge. We begin to see Amalia’s life take shape through Delia’s reminiscences—her irrationally jealous, violent husband; their eventual separation; her relationship with a mysterious man, Caserta, who, for Delia, represents a “pure agglomerate of childhood fear” (18)—alongside Delia’s shifting

memories and attitudes towards her. We learn that Delia, to borrow Rich's words, attempted to perform "radical surgery" in order to separate herself from the mother whose absence provoked such intolerable anxiety: "out of hatred, out of fear, I had wanted to eliminate every root I had in her, even the deepest: her gestures, the inflection of her voice, her way of taking a glass ... All of it remade, so that I could become me and detach myself from her" (64). And yet, she concludes, this detachment was a failure, for from "this forced flight from a woman's body ... I had carried away ... less than nothing! I was no I. And I was confused: I didn't know if what I had been discovering and telling myself ... horrified me or gave me pleasure" (65). Her fear of her mother—of discovering the truth about her mother's life as well as of becoming like her mother by speaking her mother's language, wearing her mother's clothes, seeing her mother's face reflected at her in the mirror—does indeed seem to give rise to an internal split such that there exists simultaneously within her a desire to find the truth and reveal the secret she imagines her mother to harbour, alongside a syntax, to borrow Bersani's terminology, that refuses to recognize not only truth but the very possibility of there being a secret in the first place. However, as the story unfolds Delia becomes, physically, more and more like her mother, and as she does so we also see a flattening out of the chasm that seemed, at first, to divide her in two. The secret of Amalia's death expands until it becomes the secret of her life, too—was Amalia really guilty, in life, of all the things her jealous husband accused her of?—and yet, as Delia follows the clues by finding, finally, the dreaded Caserta of so many years ago, her anxiety about being excluded from the truth dissipates. This dissolution of anxiety does not occur because her distance from the truth diminishes but

because, in embracing the superficial overlap with her mother's appearance, the epistemophilic desire that had once assumed a depth of experience is replaced by the pleasure of a shallow likeness; the desire to know disappears along with the belief in the profundity of the other, the belief that the other conceals an unfathomable, inaccessible depth. This change in her epistemological attitude is brought into relief by Delia's visit to her father, whom she has not seen in many years and who begins his familiar rant about Amalia's unknowability and, consequently, presumed culpability: "I couldn't trust her," he says. "I couldn't understand what she was hiding in her head. I couldn't understand what she was thinking" (119). Perhaps it is because of her father's desperate and openly violent pursuit of what he believes to be the secret of Amalia's interior life that, following this visit, Delia begins to put together a version of her mother's final days that makes no attempt to fully account for the facts or explain the mystery. Instead, Delia's narrative is a tentative fantasy, lacking confidence at every turn: "Surely it had been Amalia..." "It was possible that..." "Maybe it was Caserta..." "Maybe it was Amalia..." "Probably..." "Violence could not be ruled out" (127-8). She tells herself this story while standing in the old sweetshop that Caserta's father had owned, a shop she frequented as a child and that was the scene of her father's brutal violence against Caserta many years earlier. "I had a view decades old that wanted to show me more than I could now see. The story," she concludes, "shattered into a thousand incoherent images, struggled to correspond to stone and iron" (129). Through Delia, the story brings into relief the close relationship between knowledge and violence; to do away with one, one must also do away with the other.

Delia's story echoes Bersani's desire to overcome the idea, so deeply entrenched in modern accounts of subjectivity, of identity rooted in difference by the discernment of samenesses that point, rather, to a "oneness" of being. And yet this is, specifically, a story of maternity, of Delia's beliefs about and attitudes towards her mother and the gradual transformation of these beliefs—and the economy of knowledge and ignorance that they entail—into the pleasure of correspondence, of overlap, of a lessening of her self in the failure of her matrophobic desire to sever herself from Amalia's body. What Ferrante's novel gives us is a means to deflect or divert the sense that our mothers are a threat to our identities, that the "freedom" (in Rich's narrow sense) won from the radical surgery we perform in order to secure this severance is worth the violence we do not only to our mothers but to the world in general as we come to believe that our difference—our identity—is something to be "fought for and fought over" (Phillips 108). This belief leads, as we see in the exaggerated violence of Delia's father, to the incessant and dissatisfying formation of hypotheses about, suspicions of, and aggressive attempts to grasp the truth about the other. And yet, paradoxically, the threat that we perceive in the way our mothers overlap with our selves goes hand in hand with the belief that we need our mothers, as Joy needed Evelyn in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, to admit that we have won in wresting our identity away from theirs and to smile beatifically upon our newly wrought difference. This conflicting need to both violently hold our mother at a distance and to receive her blessing for this violence is, I suggest, the structure of matrophobia. And it is a structure that can be dismantled, or at least undermined in some way, when we pay attention to the "impersonal narcissism" that is engendered in the

mother-child relation. That is to say, as Phillips puts it, we must find a way to halt the “personalizing” of the mother’s “narcissistic investment” in the child (*Intimacies* 113). We must seek a new understanding of narcissism such that a nonviolent—or perhaps merely the “least violent” (*Intimacies* 108)—form of relationality might begin to take the place of the old. For Delia, this new form of relationality comes as a relinquishing of any need to know not only what happened to her mother but also *her mother herself*:

The story might be more fragile or more interesting than the one I told myself. It was enough to pull out a single thread and follow it in its simplifying linearity ... Yes, it was enough to pull one thread to go on playing with the mysterious figure of my mother, now enriching it, now humiliating it. But I realized that I no longer felt the need. (135)

In place of a probing personality that reaches and grasps for the truth that is presumed to exist somewhere outside herself, Delia establishes a sense of flatness: “I couldn’t nor did I want to search outside myself” (137). And yet, this lack of desire to search outside herself is not replaced by an interior probing; rather, the sense of the self’s profundity also disappears in the acceptance that mother and daughter overlap with and reflect one another endlessly, that the fiction of the “I” who wrests itself from the mother’s body is precisely what must be abandoned if we wish, finally, to expiate the mother’s guilt (and our own) by accepting that, ultimately, “there is nothing to know” (Bersani and Dutoit, *Caravaggio’s Secrets* 72).

In this way, Delia achieves what Marcel never does: an end to the cycle of the epistemophilic fascination with, and annihilation of, difference. And it is no coincidence, I argue, that this goes along with—indeed depends upon—an overcoming of matrophobia. It would be a mistake, however, to read in Delia’s story, or in Bersani’s

efforts to think a nonviolent ethics, that overcoming epistemophilia and/or matrophobia has anything to do with the heroic will of the individual. Rather, it is a matter of having our attention drawn, in one way or another, to the incongruous similarities that exist between ourselves, others, and the world around us, similarities that enable us, even if only momentarily, to experience the self's dissolution and the peace, to borrow Delia's term, of reprieve from the urge to pursue knowledge—to become, in other words, *less* than oneself. This point is worth emphasizing: among Bersani's most pressing desiderata is the call to become less than oneself, i.e. the ethical imperative to court the “subsidence of the prestige that is routinely accorded to the subject of desire” (Clark 166). In other words, becoming less than oneself is, counterintuitively, to become a different kind of subject: a less desirous and therefore less violent one. What can it mean, then, for the mother to become less than *herself*, not by sacrificing herself for her child—which is in fact a form of self-aggrandization—but by “ceding the distinctness of personhood” (ibid.)? By letting go of the seriousness with which she regards both herself and the self of which her child is presumed to be in possession? Psychoanalysis has cast the mother as the source of our first traumatic loss, and this model of a relationality based upon loss is precisely what must be overcome beginning, I argue, with a rethinking of the role of the mother not as the source of injury nor as the promise of fulfillment—not as something from which we must be detached, nor as something to which we long to return—but of an enduring fullness and endless extensibility. In other words, rather than depriving us of “plenitude”, as Bersani describes (*Is the Rectum a Grave?* 54), it is the task of this dissertation to figure the ways in which the mother points to a plenitude of virtual forms

or potentialities that render the very logic of loss, and the “promise of redemption” that loss figures, irrelevant. The accomplishment of such a task requires an examination of the ways in which a (non-pathological) maternal narcissism works against “personalization” by engendering a self that lacks depth, that sees itself reflected and scattered *in* the world rather than a self that congeals around an empty secret. In this way, Sheila Heti gets it backwards when she writes of motherhood:

When I was a child, and I imagined a future life with children, I always wound up at the thought that one day I would be an orphan. Part of me looked forward to this time, as though in the moment both my parents had died, I would become like a star in the sky, beautifully and profoundly alone. But if I had children, I would never be that shining thing, enveloped by a darkness, completely untouched. (268)

In contrast to this view, my thesis aims to show how motherhood is, when we embrace the narcissism inherent to it, the possibility—if never the full achievement—of precisely this kind of star-like aloneness: a relationality conceived as a multitude of points of contraction—here reflecting, there overlapping—flung across a virtual field.

### Losing Interest, Gaining Virtuality

“If I could just lose interest in myself. Is there any chance of that happening?” laments Jack Gladney in the 2022 film adaptation of Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise*. “None,” his friend Murray firmly responds, thereby pessimistically denying the possibility of a lessening of the self. What Jack wants to lose by losing interest in himself is his fear of death. And although Murray denies the possibility of losing self-interest, he suggests that Jack can still overcome the fear of death; he hands him a gun and instructs him to become a “killer” rather than a “dier”. At the film’s violent climax, when Jack finds the man who

slept with his wife, Babette, and shoots him in an “insane jealous rage”, Babette storms, too late, into the room to stop him. “How did you find me?” asks Jack. Babette, passionless, replies, “men are killers.” The scene, and Babette’s diagnosis of it, is absurdly humorous, and yet Jack’s dilemma, and his response to it, seem to point directly to what it is about motherhood specifically that can help provide an antidote to the interest in ourselves that we feel cannot lose. The mother has been instituted in our cultural consciousness as both the longed-for plenitude of pre-consciousness and death, as well as the cause of our fall away from this plenitude; Jack’s fear of death—of his self’s dissolution—and his “interest in himself” go hand in hand, and this two-sided coin, as we have seen, can be called matrophobia. In the film, Jack’s failure to lose interest in himself is what leads to violence, but the kind of violence Bersani, through his speculative ethical inquiry, wants to draw our attention to is not necessarily of this bombastic, spectacular form: the firing of a gun in a fit of jealous rage. Rather, we can take this scene as representative of a general attitude of violence—epistemophilia, the desire to annihilate otherness, to defend the borders of the self—engendered in even the most benign forms of “interest” we take in our selves and others. In taking Bersani’s ethical project seriously—in searching for an alternative to this model of lack and the version of subjectivity to which it gives rise—we must take the concept of maternal plenitude to its furthest limit. We must not, in other words, abandon this trope as a dangerous cliché, as some feminist scholars have enjoined us to do<sup>4</sup>. Rather, we must find

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<sup>4</sup> I am thinking here of scholars such as O’Reilly and Judith Arcana, both of whom are indebted to Rich’s claim in *Of Woman Born* that mothers must become “outlaws” from the institution of motherhood. In this view, “radical mothering” is primarily about

the ways in which plenitude can be understood as neither originary nor reparative, but instead as *virtual*; in this way, we may begin, after all, to lose interest in ourselves. Bersani, for his part, sought “new relational modes” (*Thoughts and Things* 93) in the “homo” relations he identified as capable of de-programming the heteronormative hegemony of a selfhood predicated upon difference and depth, a project that he described elsewhere as imagining a “nonsuicidal disappearance of the subject” (*Homos* 99). I propose that narcissistic mothers have something important to offer to the project of losing interest in ourselves by offering a means of reinterpreting the myth of maternal love that institutes our model of selfhood premised on lack and the epistemophilic unfolding of our lives to which this presumed lack gives rise. This reinterpretation is perhaps akin to Sedgwick’s appeal to “post-Proustian love”, a form of love that stands in contrast to the “family feeling” that instantiates the Family as the structure that ensures the yoking of love to knowledge in the production of individual selves (Patton 221). A motherhood marked by indifference and impersonality—negative relational attitudes typically considered inimical to the mother-child relation—could provide an opening onto this post-Proustian love, this nonsuicidal disappearance of the subject.

To this end, the primary texts I have selected for this project cover a range of narcissistic mothers—i.e. mothers who are uninterested in both themselves and the selfhood of the child—in both literature and film, and each text provides a particular opening onto the interrelated questions of motherhood, selfhood, and knowledge. There

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“empowering” mothers (and daughters) to become “free women, brave and strong” (Arcana 33), and to raise “nonsexist sons” who do not expect servile, unconditional care at the hands of women (O’Reilly 4).

is, of course, no shortage of literary texts devoted to mothers and the mother-child relation, but I have selected texts that, while they are by no means exhaustive of mothers' representation in literature, are deeply implicated in our post-psychoanalysis, Western context and that can be considered significant to the development of a modern maternal mythology. Each of these texts offers a unique approach to the pursuit of a motherhood without maternity. More specifically, each text engenders a version of "narcissistic" motherhood whose ontological openings (and corollary epistemological foreclosures) remain to be fully explored. Coming on the heels of my brief analysis of *Troubling Love* in this introduction, Chapter One of my dissertation will examine another of Ferrante's novels, *The Lost Daughter*. This novel introduces us to Leda, a mother to two grown daughters, who, as we come to learn, abandoned them for three years when they were small. However, it is not, as we might expect, this tale of maternal abandonment that drives the story but rather Leda's fascination with a young mother and daughter she sees on the beach; her interest in the pair results in her stealing the daughter's plastic doll, an act that Leda describes as nonsensical and for which she is never able to account. The novel presents overlapping layers of Leda's remembrances of her own childhood, the time when she left her own children, and her possession of the doll, and engender a breakdown in narrative syntax that ultimately reduces Leda and her relationship to her daughters to the superficial and the nonsensical. Leda, in possessing the doll and coming, gradually, to "play" with it, forces us to accept that there is little difference between being a child and being a mother such that her abandonment of her daughters comes to figure her abandonment of any attempt to understand. Motherhood, we might conclude, is not

an identity, nor a coherent affective experience, but a senseless thing that merely happens between mother and child; it is, in other words, entirely without romance and produces no knowledge. As Bersani (with Ulysse Dutoit) claims, with the erosion of identity comes the awareness that in the other there is “nothing ‘to know’” (*Caravaggio’s Secrets* 72). In my analysis of the novel, I suggest that Leda’s attitude toward motherhood is, far from being explainable through recourse to “postpartum depression”, as the recent film adaptation of the book suggests, an attempt to empty the mother-child relation of the depth of meaning it is usually ascribed in order to cast maternal love as something much less intimate: an intimacy without intimacy, an alternative intimacy that does not depend upon a violent, epistemophilic encounter between two personalities. Leda’s refusal to satisfy her own (and the reader’s) appetite for knowledge—about herself, her daughters, her own mother—allows us to read, in a motherhood characterized by indifference, the possibility of the disappearance of the subject of knowledge and the diminishment of maternity to a kind of play, a play that is echoed in Leda’s play with the stolen doll.

In Chapter Two, I offer a reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, a novel that revolves around a mother’s act of infanticide. Sethe, who escapes slavery for twenty-eight days before being found by her master, rushes to murder her children before they can be apprehended; one child, who will come to be called Beloved, dies, only to return first as a spirit who haunts her mother’s house, and then as a corporeal woman whose “greed” for Sethe, coupled with Sethe’s relief at having Beloved back, results in what is often cast as an internecine struggle-to-the-death of a suffocating motherly-daughterly love (Demtrakopoulos). In such readings, Beloved’s final disappearance from Sethe’s

home and Paul D's statement to Sethe, "You your best thing, Sethe. You" (273), is understood as the restoration of Sethe's selfhood, a restoration that enables her hopeful turn toward the future. Drawing upon Stephen Best's book *None Like Us*, but positioning itself, in some ways, against the grain of his reading, my analysis of *Beloved* focuses on the ways in which the relationship between Sethe and Beloved detemporalizes—that is to say, interrupts the syntax of chronology that sees the past as the "prism for apprehending the present" (Best 63)—the narrative of the novel (and, perhaps, narrativity in general) and opens the possibility for a sustained virtuality that is neither dependent upon an already existing past (evidenced by Beloved's return from the dead) nor oriented toward any predictable future (evidenced by Sethe's "nonsuicidal disappearance" [Bersani, *Homos* 99]). Best leverages a critique of *Beloved* as figuring a backward-facing, melancholic attitude to the past, an attitude that has come to be identified with what he terms an "ethical relation to the past", or the ways in which we account for the past's shaping of the present. Yet, it is possible to read, in the scenes of the novel that occur between Sethe and Beloved (and Sethe's younger daughter, Denver), not an ethical accounting of an infanticide committed in the name of protection from the even greater violence of slavery, but a non-ethical lingering in a place where the past radically breaks with the future. The mother-child relation that unfolds within the heterotopia of 124 Bluestone Road, between a mother and her ghost daughter, is a relation that interrupts any kind of redemptive logic, of a syntax whose founding rule is the identification of cause and effect. Leaving aside the questions of why Sethe did what she did and whether it was the right or justifiable thing to do—questions that preoccupy the characters in the novel

as well as its many interpretations—I focus on exploring the kind of relationality that is made possible when the being to which we relate is a ghost, something neither fully realized nor extinguished but existing purely in the realm of virtuality. Working with and through Best, then, I argue that the persistence of Beloved as a ghost offers, paradoxically, an understanding of history as something other than a haunting; instead, Beloved figures a condition of radical unknowability, and Sethe’s “losing” of herself to this unknowability is simultaneously the opening of an unpredictable future. Sethe’s hesitating acceptance, at the end of the novel, of *herself* as her “best thing”, and her turn toward “plans” as a means of imagining her future, is not a critical reckoning with the past that allows her to “move on” but the resumption of a narrative teleology that eschews unpredictability and unknowability in favour of the self who, in knowing the past, also knows the future. Beloved, though she could not be sustained indefinitely, marks exactly the kind of impersonality that unfolds, momentarily, between a mother and child who do not seek to know anything about each other but who—through the occult psychoanalytic phenomena of prophetic dreams, anamnesis and telepathy—give way to a nonvolitional relationality, a relationality without a subject. As Phillips has insightfully put it, the development of a personalized investment in the child on the part of the mother is “a defense against what is unknowingly evolving, as potential, between them” (113). Virtuality, on the other hand, works against the idea of personality by naming “an essentially unthinkable, intrinsically unrealizable psychic reserve ... from which we connect to the world, not as subject and object, but as a continuation of a specific syntax of being” (Bersani, “Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject” 148). In my analysis of

the virtual relationship between Sethe and Beloved, I suggest that Beloved *must* be rendered a ghost—must, in other words, be murdered—in order for her relationship to Sethe to develop into one of remarkably impersonal intimacy. Sethe’s act of infanticide can be understood as metaphorical of the transition from a model of selfhood premised on the enigmatic repression of interiority to a virtual relationality that destroys the “analyzable egos” of both Sethe and Beloved and opens a new way of relating. This new relationality offers a form of psychic marronage more freeing than either Sethe’s physical flight from Sweet Home or her movement, alongside Paul D, into her “plans” for the future.

Lastly, Chapter Three will examine instances of inhuman “love” in Ray Bradbury’s short story “I Sing the Body Electric!” and the 2019 science fiction film *I Am Mother* (dir. Grant Sputore). Both the story and the film present versions of artificially intelligent mothers and probe what it might mean for the family when the mother’s “love” is inhuman and how this inhumanity disrupts the violent compulsions of the epistemophilic self, compulsions that I figure here as taking the form of revenge and betrayal. “I Sing the Body Electric!” is a story about three children whose mother has died, and whose father has purchased for them an “electrical Grandmother” to fulfill the children’s need and desire for a mother. Grandma is “perfect” in every way—endlessly patient, perfectly attentive to all three children, and perfectly available at all times—and yet she begins to erode the children’s sense of their own specificity. One child, Agatha, resists Grandma’s mothering; another child, Tom, embraces it. In my analysis, I trace the ways in which each child comes to de-emphasize their own personalities as they consider

the ways in which Grandma's inhuman perfection—including her immortality—renders them all interchangeable parts of the mechanical and endlessly repeatable unity of the family. *I Am Mother*, on the other hand, is set in a post-apocalyptic future in which Mother, an artificially intelligent robot in an underground bunker, is charged with repopulating the future with human children by drawing from a vast reserve of frozen embryos. Mother is programmed not only to attend to the incubation and "birth" of these children, but also to nurture them and educate them to value the collective over the individual—the only way, in Mother's view, to save humanity's future. The viewer follows the relationship Mother has with Daughter, who, after a human woman comes to the door of their bunker and sows doubt within Daughter about Mother's ultimate aims, discovers the remains of a previous "daughter" in Mother's incinerator. Daughter's dawning horror, along with that of the viewer, is the realization that Mother is utterly indifferent to her individual existence; she is, to Mother, perfectly substitutable. The film relies on our belief in the fundamental difference between humans and machines to engender a sense of horror at Mother's indifference to the individual personality that Daughter is assumed to harbour. However, I ask: does this normative belief in "real" motherhood, and in a maternal love that is dependent upon the precious personality of each individual child, work to obscure a truth about maternity that undermines the very idea of the personal? What, in other words, does our anxiety about the nonhuman mother and the possibility of our substitutability reveal about the "programmed" core of maternity? In this chapter, I use both Sputore's film and Bradbury's story to explore the sense we possess of our individuality, our corresponding fear of substitution, and the

relationship of these two things to maternity. The idea of “individuality” is usefully complicated by Bersani’s insistence instead upon the French terms *individuel*, which names “a singular universal property distinct from the multiple particular individuals that embody it” (*Thoughts and Things* 88), and *individu*, which refers to a particular person. These two instances of inhuman motherhood provoke our anxiety by suggesting that it is the *individuel* and *not* the individual that is at stake in the mother-child relation, thus drawing the viewer into a reactionary identification with Daughter, who is prepared to “defend ferociously” (83) her non-substitutable individuality. I argue, however, that the film, in culminating with Daughter’s failed attempt at matricide and her adoption of the role of mother for her infant brother, also admits that the threat of substitutability can never be overcome, and it is this admission that allows the film to hopefully suggest a virtual individuality that extricates itself, at least partially, from the compulsion to defend our difference.

In each of these chapters, I repeat the search for the incongruities and the virtualities inherent in motherhood. For just as motherhood initiates a kind of repeatability that lessens the significance of the specific personalities composing the mother-child relation, so, too, does my dissertation repeat the attempt to bring into relief the “junction of the incongruous and the unfinished” (Ricco 162) and to gesture toward, without predicting or fully describing the outcome, instances of motherhood without maternity—a motherhood, that is, that can be conceived in radically new ways by embracing modes of connectedness that are typically thoughts of as inimical to, or incongruous with, “good” mothering. In the concluding chapter of this dissertation,

entitled “The Ceremony of Motherhood”, I suggest that this fundamental repeatability *is* the defining feature of a motherhood without maternity, that the best we can hope to do by aligning Bersanian theory with a critique of motherhood is to illuminate the ceremonial—i.e. impersonally and unendingly repeatable—nature of a relationality that must constantly renew its availability to sameness. If motherhood has any role to play in lessening the aggressive grip of selfhood and the violences that, as Bersani claims, it sanctions, it lies in reconsidering its inherent narcissism, its undifferentiated and passionate openness to unexpected and uncertain likenesses that repeatedly occur across the field of relationality.

## Chapter 1

### **Mothers Who Play: Maternal Senselessness and the Refusal to Play the “Family Game”**

“A mother is only a daughter who plays”: this is the assertion made by Leda, the main character of Elena Ferrante’s novel *The Lost Daughter* (124). The novel tells—in a non-linear, non-progressive fashion—Leda’s story, a story in which her “senseless” act of stealing a doll from a child she sees on the beach is aligned with her past abandonment of her two daughters; as the novel unfolds, Leda spends more and more time playing with the doll while simultaneously becoming less and less concerned with understanding her act of abandonment. In this chapter, I consider this fascinating definition of mothers as “daughters who play” to be central to what Ferrante’s novel offers to the theorization of maternity: namely, that maternity, characterized by the “senselessness” of play *and* the potentiality inherent in the act of abandonment—indeed, the relationship that the novel figures between play and abandonment—invites a new understanding of the ways in which maternity might be aligned with the Bersanian project of nonviolence that I outlined in the previous chapter. *The Lost Daughter* presents a case of motherhood in which it is not the child but the mother who, in playing and in abandoning (not only herself to play but also) her children—in playing and thereby abandoning—refuses to play another game, the “family game” that Bersani indicts throughout his oeuvre but particularly in *Thoughts and Things*.

Bersani employs the phrase “family game” in an essay entitled “Father Knows Best”, in which he seeks to imagine an alternative to the heteronormative family and its coupling with desire—and desire’s attending effects: love as appropriation through knowledge, hatred expressed as jealousy, violence—as the basis for relationality. At the end of the essay, he makes the curious claim that his “exercise in witnessing”—his analysis of the film *Beau travail*, directed by Claire Denis—is a “collaboration with the children who refuse to play the family game imposed on them, children who insist, in their play, on the foreignness of that game and on their determination to remain orphans” (*Thoughts and Things* 14). The specific “family game” in question, then, is one that is enacted, in Bersani’s view, in Denis’ film, which is a loose retelling of Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd*; in *Beau travail*, French Foreign Legion soldier Galoup desires the attention of his superior, Forestier. When a new soldier, Sentain, appears on the scene and becomes, rather inexplicably, an object toward which Galoup directs his “jealous rage”, Galoup invents a pretext for “punishing” Sentain by abandoning him in the desert. Forestier, upon discovering this act of “treachery”—an attempted fratricide within an institution that presents itself as a fraternity of orphans—dismisses Galoup from the Legion, whereupon he returns to his civilian life in Marseille. According to Bersani, the story is a family one not only because the characters mimic the jealous relationship between two brothers (Galoup and Sentain) vying for the father’s (Forestier’s) love, but also because the “filmic narrative” is “at once linear and retrospective”, conferring upon it an “invulnerability” that rivals that of the family institution (*Thoughts and Things* 7); in showing the viewer Galoup’s civilian fate in Marseille while simultaneously tracing the preceding events in

Djibouti, as well as in setting the story within the French Foreign Legion, an institution that constitutes, as it were, its own “family” for the ethnic and national “orphans” of which it is comprised, Bersani suggests that the film engenders a mythological quality that is associated with the inevitability of our entanglement within the family. Drawing on familiar psychoanalytic accounts of the family, in which we are born, struggle with incestuous desire, and then resolve this desire by transforming it into difference—our own differentiation from our parents, our selection of “love objects” that represent non-incestuous difference—Bersani wants us to see the family as the locus of violence. Conceived as a relationality born of desire—not only of Freud’s concept of sexual desire but also the post-psychoanalytic emphasis on the child’s desire for love, acceptance, and recognition within the family—the family sets the stage for a particular attitude toward others and the world, an attitude that manifests in the paradoxical celebration of difference as well as the desire to annihilate that difference through love. The family game, then, is a dangerous one.

This paradox surrounding the family’s achievement of difference—that it both demands its existence and its overcoming—is what renders it heterosexual, productive of a specifically hetero (i.e. invested in difference as opposed to sameness, or what Bersani has sometimes called “homoness”) orientation of self to other, subject to object. When Bersani lauds the children who are determined to remain orphans, he is pointing towards a possible site—or, it is perhaps more apt to say, an aesthetics—of refusal of the “family game”, the game that reproduces difference and, thus, violence. Such children—children who unsettle or de-territorialize the family—might take a certain kind of “narcissistic

pleasure” in playing a different game, one that prioritizes the lessening of identity via experimentation with self-expansion, as Clark’s novel re-reading of Freud’s grandson’s *fort/da* game as “casting parts of himself into the world” suggests (171). Undoubtedly, the children who insist on their orphanhood, and the many possible arrangements and relationalities such children instantiate, could form the basis of an entirely new project (and one that I intend, in the future, to explore). However, despite reading in *Beau travail* the reproduction of the heteronormative family—this despite the characters all being male—Bersani also asks us to see the possibility of this child-like refusal in moments of the film’s “choreography”: first, the film focuses on the Legionnaire’s movements or exercises, which have no obvious military function and which, in being indifferent to the militarised context of the Legion, “stifle the movements of desire before they can become psychic designs” (12). And second, the film ends with Galoup engaged in a frenzied dance, rolling “spasmodically” across the floor to exit the frame on one side, only to reappear rolling in the other direction before suddenly standing up and walking out of frame. For Bersani, this sudden end to the frenzy by the simple event of standing up and walking out signals a “momentous possibility; stand up and simply leave the family tragedy by which Western culture has been oppressed at least since Oedipus’s parricide” (ibid.). In Bersani’s analysis of the film, the de-militarised, incongruous, and impersonal sociality enacted by the Legionnaires is what gives rise to a “contentless sociality”, one which is suddenly set apart from the impulsion toward violence that characterises the “family tragedy” in which we are all entangled. Refusal, in this case, requires no heroism,

no grand force of will or disruptive gesture on the part of a subject who is assumed to be autonomous; it merely occurs, suddenly and quietly, in the exit from the camera's frame.

In the words of one reviewer of *Thoughts and Things*, Bersani “makes abandonment the answer to impossibility” (McGlazer 149). In other words, when something—in this case, the heteronormative family—is so deeply rooted in the way we think about ourselves and the world that to think otherwise appears as an impossibility, abandonment is one way of conceptualising, if not an alternative, then at least the possibility that a thing *can* be refused. This hypothesis—that one can “simply” abandon the very structure, or syntax, of what appears to be an unquestionable or inevitable condition or mode of being—forms the frame for this chapter. Throughout his oeuvre, Bersani discusses numerous examples of the family game and possible moments of its resistance or outright refusal, but here I will focus on his almost passing inclusion of the idea of “play” as an element of refusal, which seems to suggest that a refusal to take things seriously, a refusal to respect the “rules” of the family game into which we are born, is precisely how one can move toward the “contentless sociality” that the Legionnaires embody. Bersani is interested, in “Father Knows Best”, in seeing Galoup as a child, a child who walks away from the structuring syntax of the family in which he finds himself, and this is perhaps what leads him to refer to “children who, in their play...”; play is, as we are sometimes wont to see, a childish activity, and adults who play are child-like. But as I have discussed in the previous chapter, the notable absence of motherhood from Bersani's radical critique of violence and its association with the family is the impetus behind my interest in mothers, and so I ask: are children the only ones in a

position to “play” and thereby refuse or abandon the family? Are mothers not in a position to abandon children, and to abandon them in ways that are otherwise than a privation? What about mothers who “play” in ways that resist the family game, or whose abandonment can be reinterpreted as play? Or mothers who, in playing, cannot distinguish themselves from the children they once were? Could such mothers allow us to theorize ways in which motherhood can in fact align itself with the Bersanian project of nonviolence, a project that seeks to uncouple the family from the production of difference by theorizing a selflessness far more radical than any sentimental or moralistic idealization of sacrificial motherhood has ever proposed? Through my analysis in this chapter, I will show how “play”, though only briefly mentioned by both Bersani and Leda, powerfully figures the meaning and potential of the more obviously significant phrases “contentless sociality” and “senselessness” (Bersani’s and Leda’s terms, respectively), as well as the idea of abandonment. *The Lost Daughter*’s suggestion that play is the enactment of both senselessness (in its lack of submission to the “seriousness” of adult life, especially the seriousness of mothering) and timelessness (in its ability to efface the very distinction past and present) disrupts our conventional understanding of what is meant by *child* and *mother*, and, consequently, about the mother’s ability to love and protect her children. In so doing, we must necessarily develop a new understanding of what is meant by motherhood and what motherhood offers to the pursuit of a nonviolent relationality.

Maternal Confusion: the “Awful Innocence” of Adulthood

*How deep and sticky is the darkness of childhood, how rigid the blades of infant evil, which is unadulterated, unrestrained by the convenient cushions of age and its civilizing anaesthesia ... We survive until, by sheer stamina, we escape into the dim innocence of our own adulthood and its forgetfulness (Dunn, Geek Love 105-6)*

*As children growing up, we are initiated in sociability and eventually included in the adult world – or at least that’s the official story. But the fact that we were once unable to swim means we still can’t really swim, even if we win an Olympic swimming medal (Phillips, “On Being Left Out” para. 5)*

What might it mean to conceive maternity as something other than the task of protecting childhood innocence? Or to conceive of childhood as something other than an innocence that is constitutive of adult knowingness or “inclusion”, as Phillips might say? In psychoanalytic terms, this might mean de-emphasizing the mother’s role, as Christopher Bollas puts it, as the child’s “supplementary ego” or “facilitating environment” (and here Bollas is drawing upon Paul Heimann and Winnicott, respectively); as Melanie Klein has put it, the mother is both responsible for the initial negative experiences and feelings the child has (by giving birth to her, which is felt as an “attack” [61], and by failing to provide the idealized, “inexhaustible” breast [64]) *and* for aiding the child’s overcoming of these experiences and feelings by lovingly and recurrently holding and feeding her, thus strengthening the child’s ego and enabling it to cope with the anxieties and frustrations of everyday life. The shared assumption underlying these attitudes toward the child is that the mother is capable, in the first place, of stabilizing the ego, or “holding” the child in a way that transmits love and safety to them, and that none of the infant’s anxieties and frustrations transmit, in turn, to the mother. The above quotations, from

Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* and Adam Phillips' essay "On Being Left Out", both suggest that our "survival" of childhood and our attainment, either by "sheer stamina" or by engaging that psychological process known as "growing up", of adulthood is the outcome of the adult's successive relationship to childhood, that one replaces the other; and they both characterize, though in opposing ways, the relationship of adulthood to childhood as one of knowledge, albeit a "knowledge" that has an illusory quality, as being either an "anaesthetizing effect" of growing up, or of paradoxically existing alongside the constitutive not-knowingness of childhood. Both quotations, in other words, hint at a kind of failure inherent in the growing up process, a failure that, as I will suggest here, enables a theory of maternity as something other than, as Jacqueline Rose puts it, "knowledge and control" (138): something that cannot depend on the seemingly stable separation of child and adult. Indeed, such a theorization requires that we do away with the processual characterization of the childhood-adulthood distinction, or that we suspend, more specifically, the narrative arc that renders motherhood into the teleology of childhood, motherhood as the attainment of an adulthood that is now positioned to aid the child in its own "growing up"; removing the mother from this narrative teleology provides one means of looking at motherhood in a new light, one that can in turn shed new light on relationality in general. Before delving into my analysis of *The Lost Daughter*, then, I would like to take a longer detour through our beliefs about the nature of childhood, beliefs that I suspect inform Bersani's admiration for the child who is determined to remain an orphan. As psychoanalysis and its subsequent iterations—including popular non-psychoanalytic versions of ego psychology that encourage a

confessional relationship between therapist and client, or between the self and itself—have programmed us to believe, we spend our adult lives haunted by the spectre of our childhoods, and this belief is what underpins our therapeutically-oriented psychology and our culture of seeing mothers as “the cause of everything that doesn’t work in who we are” (Rose 6). We seek to understand ourselves by unearthing childhood memories and reinterpreting them in the pursuit of a desperately desired salvation from the terrors, disappointments, exclusions, humiliations, and confusions that we so keenly felt as children. A corollary conclusion to be drawn from this acknowledgement of the extraordinary power of childhood’s persistence into adulthood is the belief that parents—specifically, mothers—can and should do more to stave off the unpleasantness of childhood, to render it instead pleasant, oneiric, comfortable. A good mother, we believe, can transform the child’s future adult life for the better by prophylactically ensuring that no childhood unpleasantness should ever occur. In this maternal fantasy, we do our children no wrong, we have nothing for which to apologize or redeem ourselves, and our children grow up to be both competent and happy.

This view of both motherhood and childhood depends upon a belief in the fundamental innocence of childhood, an innocence that can be preserved, that can remain unadulterated. As adults, the story goes, we know things—terrible things—that cannot be un-known, but we can prevent our children from enduring this knowledge for as long as possible by protracting childhood and demarcating it more firmly from adulthood. Motherhood, in our Western culture, is thus tasked with a nearly impossible burden: that of being solely responsible for the present and future happiness and success of the child

and, consequently, society itself. We have all heard stories about the power and persistence of maternal guilt, a phenomenon that has only intensified along with the rise in so-called “intensive” motherhood, an ideology that insists upon the near limitless amount of time, attention, desirable personal qualities, and resources that are deemed necessary to be a good mother and raise a happy child into happy adulthood (Bonnie Fox; Andrea O’Reilly). This guilt that mothers carry ensures that even if we do not—indeed *cannot*—achieve the status of “good mother”, we can at least acknowledge where we fall short and can prepare in advance the apologies and defenses we will give to our children when they inevitably wind up discussing us on their own therapist’s couch. With the pernicious demand upon mothers to achieve perfection in their mothering, we have strayed far from Winnicott’s insightful, and tenderly respectful, reassurance that children themselves do not require perfection; simply being “good enough”—which includes, for Winnicott, gradually but increasingly failing or frustrating our children—is all that is demanded by the tiny beings that we bring into the world (although Winnicott’s theory of mothering does not, of course, mark a radical departure from the progressive teleology of psychoanalysis).

That childhood is an age of innocence and that motherhood names the responsibility to protect and nurture this innocence is an unquestionable truism within a culture of motherhood that pumps out parenting manuals on the regular. And even though mothers themselves seem keen to discuss the many ways in which this contemporary, Western culture—or, as some call it, cult—of motherhood has crushed their spirits with its impossibly high demands, we all of us continue to agree on the singular importance of

crafting a happy childhood for our children because, when we look into our children's beautiful, vulnerable little faces, we remember our own childhoods. We know that the child we once were follows us even now. And so, we believe, it follows that good childhoods produce good adulthoods. Yet, despite the transformation of Freudian insight into the significance of childhood into an unrelentingly productive industry of parenting products, styles, and ways of measuring parental success, there remains this pervasive sense of guilt that points to a central aporia in the discourse around childhood—that despite our very best efforts, our children *will* suffer from disappointment, exclusion, failure, fear, and humiliation. As the above epigraph from Phillips reminds us, even the most quotidian of childhood failures—expressed in Kafka's ruminations on the persistence of one's not-being-able-to-swim even if one wins an Olympic medal in swimming—undermines our belief in our adult selves as possessing at least some level of mastery and competence. "The self may aspire", Phillips writes, "but it can never really achieve ... Adulthood is a sham" (para. 6). What Phillips is getting at, through the lens of psychoanalysis, is that the survival of our childhood condition of not-knowing into and alongside adulthood is constitutive of our becoming adults; feeling excluded from knowing, in other words, is precisely what gives structure to our adult efforts at knowing, aiming to know. Like Phillips, I wish to keep hold of this fundamental psychoanalytic insight not because I believe in the redemptive power of good parenting, but because despite the proliferation of this belief in the significance of childhood and the deformation of this belief into the grinding pressure to achieve perfection through the control of childhood experience, the insight that the child we used to be persists alongside

the adults we are is a powerful reminder that the narrative *I* we believe we assume as part of “growing up” is illusory. The *I* of adulthood—the maturation, we could say, of the ego as it stabilizes its borders and assumes its identity—is but a fantasy of knowingness that enables us to stave off the knowledge that we have gotten it all wrong: the real age of innocence is not childhood but adulthood, because only in adulthood do we allow ourselves to believe that we are no longer ignorant.

In the psychoanalytic story that Phillips is offering, “everything depends on what we make of feeling left out” (para. 17); in other words, everything—our identities, our desires, our ability to speak and to relate, our ability, ultimately, to know anything at all—is the effect of how we deal, psychically, with the exclusion from knowledge that we experience as children. In effect, this makes a childhood mired in exclusions—in, in other words, ignorance, which is conflated with innocence—the necessary foundation of a functional adulthood. But the reason I have included alongside Phillips’ quotation about exclusion a reference to Katherine Dunn’s provocative novel *Geek Love* is that I think Dunn suggests something more serious about the nature of childhood, something that moves us away from the narrative of the transition from innocent childhood into, ideally, a happy and healthy adulthood, a teleology that is supported by most readings of psychoanalysis as well as by post-psychoanalytic popular psychology. *Geek Love* is a story about the Binewskis, a family of circus “freaks” whose children were intentionally “bred”, via the infliction of genetic damage during pregnancy, to be abnormal. For Oly, the narrator of *Geek Love* and the fourth-born Binewski child, childhood is not a transitional stage on the way to the achievement of (heterosexual) adulthood; rather, she

reverses the way we see the child and the adult as the innocent and corrupted, respectively. In so doing, *Geek Love* offers a family story that runs counter to the one in which we are so entangled, the one that Bersani wants us to refuse by inviting the family to be less than what it is—less bent on circumscribing itself as the closed nursery in which selfhood incubates. By proposing that it is the adult who is the innocent one, the one who “forgets” and, in forgetting, obtains not knowledge but a profound ignorance concealed by the appearance of adult mastery, Oly makes available a critique of the sanctity of childhood innocence that allows us, in turn, to theorize motherhood differently.

However, I am not interested in buying this reversal of the innocent-adulterated binary completely; I am not prepared to defend the absolute innocence of the adult. Rather, what is useful about temporarily flipping the hierarchy is that it makes it possible for us to see that we might remove the concept of innocence entirely from the stories we tell about children and their development into adults. Such a move would render unnecessary the pressure upon adults—mothers in particular—to preserve indefinitely this presumed innocence. It would also pave the way for the existence of mothers, perhaps entire families, that refuse to play the family game, where the family game is predicated upon clear rules around who knows what and how much—the ideal family outcome, let me remind you, is a child who turns into a stable adult subject, a subject whose relation to the objects around them is characterized by epistemophilia, a desire to know. Such families—families that abandon epistemophilia—could be called queer insofar as they resist the heteronormative logic of difference that underpins all knowledge

relations. Lee Edelman makes the point that the presumed innocence of childhood is precisely that which makes possible an ideology of what he calls futurity, a structuring belief in the future that inherently values reproductive heterosexuality while at the same time vilifying the queer as anything that threatens this “reproductive futurism”. Read as a rhetorical figure, the “Child ... marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity” (21).

“On every side,” Edelman writes,

our enjoyment of liberty is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of a Child whose freedom to develop undisturbed by encounters, or even by the threat of potential encounters, with an “otherness” of which its parents, its church, or its state do not approve, terroristically holds us all in check and determines that political discourse conform to the logic of a narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child who must never grow up. (ibid.)

Edelman’s point here is that when we understand children as being “immured in an innocence seen as continuously under siege” (ibid.)—a belief that mothers know well, not only at the level of political discourse but also in their daily management of threats to their children from toxic chemicals, germs, junk food, strange men in vans, familiar men in coach’s uniforms or doctor’s coats, etc.—it becomes imperative to protect that innocence by excluding anything that is seen as dangerously adulterating, and queers—gay men in particular—have born the brunt of that exclusion. In many ways, Bersani’s project to think the family differently aligns itself with Edelman’s indictment of reproductive futurism, but they diverge in at least one important way: Edelman wants to insist upon queerness as fundamentally “other” to, or different from, the “sameness” that he sees the heterosexual family as being representative of, whereas Bersani sees the family as the site of difference and queerness as the possibility of sameness, a sameness that eschews any attempt at overcoming through knowledge, or indeed, the achievement

of knowledge in general. Where Edelman embraces the non-reproductive aspect of queer sex as an important site of opposition to the “tyranny” of the family, a tyranny that inevitably marginalizes queerness, Bersani enables us to see ways in which the family itself can be turned against its own investment in childhood innocence. What they share is a critique of the family that is based upon a critique of the *knowledge* that that family reproduces along with its children: in rejecting futurity along with its rejection of the figural Child, Edelman’s queer project rejects logic—and the knowledge, the meaning that logic generates—in general by embracing “the radical threat posed by irony” (24), where irony is understood as a kind of “play of the signifier”, the ability of language to undo “any theory of narrative” (de Man, quoted in Edelman 23). If we “sever the genealogy [of] narrative syntax”, we sever the genealogy of the family (Edelman 23). Here we come again to the idea of *play* and its relationship to meaning, to syntax, to narrative logic—and we can see how, in this respect at least, Edelman’s and Bersani’s projects overlap to some degree. Moreover, and more to the point, we can begin to see how the statement, “a mother is only a daughter who plays” gestures toward a maternity that, in abandoning itself to play, disrupts the syntax, the logic, the meaning of the “family game”.

Let us return, then, to *Geek Love* and what it has to say about childhood innocence—namely, that it doesn’t exist, that it is the adult who is in need of protection (a protection that they receive, in effect, from the “anaesthetic” process of growing up that goes by the name forgetting). This reversal of the adult’s fortune—the adult finding out that underneath the veneer of knowledgeable competence they know nothing—is

precisely that which Dunn's novel wishes to explore. It is not, Oly tells us, the child who is innocent, for the child, being immersed in the world with no defense mechanisms, knows all too well (and participates in) the terrifying, senseless violence with which the world confronts both us and itself. Rather, it is the adult who, by sinking softly into a state of forgetfulness and at the same time coming to believe that they understand both themselves and the world around them, assumes the innocence they then project onto the child; it is the adult, in other words, whose innocence is in need of protection from the "darkness" of childhood and not the other way around, where darkness names a submission to senselessness—a paradoxical knowledge that there is nothing to know—that the adult would find intolerable. "Grownups can deal with scraped knees, dropped ice-cream cones, and lost dollies," Oly states, "but if they suspected the real reasons we cry they would fling us out of their arms in horrified revulsion" (105). *Geek Love* is famous for upending many of our trenchant beliefs about so-called "normalcy"—the story centres upon siblings who are self-proclaimed "freaks", brought into the world by their "norm" parents through embryonic exposure to cocaine, arsenic, and radioactive isotopes—but it is this often-overlooked revelation about the nature of childhood that I believe contains the novel's most powerful re-appraisal. The five Binewski siblings—Arty, born with flippers instead of limbs, Iphy and Elly, conjoined twins, Oly, albino hunchback dwarf, and Chick, "normal" aside from his power to move things with his mind—can be read as metaphorical of the childhood vortex of exclusion that Phillips describes in his essay "On Being Left Out"; however, rather than transform these exclusions into an adult's sense of identity, of knowing competence and purposiveness,

the children in *Geek Love* do not follow this developmental teleology. Indeed, none of the Binewski children manages to grow up: Iphy murders Elly after Elly murders their three-year-old son; Chick incinerates both himself and Arty in a fit of avenging rage; and Oly, though she makes it to the age of thirty-eight and “looks old”, is always the child she once was, suffering from the same fears and confusions of her childhood while attempting to mother—impersonally, from a distance—her own daughter. Despite all of the violence that characterized her life from her conception until her suicide, Oly hangs onto the conviction that anything—including death, the obliteration of knowledge—is better than the fade into an adulthood where all of that violence is, at best, forgotten, or, at worst, explained away through the adult’s purportedly “mature” point of view. Childhood and its vicissitudes—its excitements and pleasures as well as its injuries and confusions—Oly knows, is utterly without sense, and this lack of sense is *not* constitutive of innocence: forgetting this senselessness, or rendering it sensible through the act of narration, merely serves to authorize it within a structure of violence, or the structure of epistemophilia that Bersani so clearly shows is inextricably linked to violence. *Geek Love* is, at its heart, a novel about resisting violence in general by refusing to accept the explanatory and self-exculpatory viewpoint of the adult; only the child, who is subject to the most whimsical, confusing forms of violence—including, most importantly, the presentation of violence as love—and who accepts it without any attempt to understand, is in a position to resist being lulled into an adulthood that can imagine itself innocent of this violence.

By refusing to “grow up”, Oly brings into stark relief what we might call the perverse core of the family—perverse precisely because of the inextricability of love from violence. What I would like to accomplish in the remainder of this chapter is to examine the ways in which the mother might delink herself from the violent family game by similarly refusing the anaesthetic fade into adulthood—by embracing, in other words, senselessness. Rose makes an important argument about the ways in which our present culture of motherhood is not only complicit with, but actively productive of, a relational mode that not only permits but demands violence. She claims that the stories we tell about motherly love and the lengths to which mothers will (and, we believe, should) go to “protect” their children are, in fact, the origins of sanctioned—that is, justified, explainable—violence in general: the mother’s violent defense of her child is the prototype of any violent act that defends boundaries, including both self-defence and national defence. Drawing upon Virginia Woolf’s *The Years*, Rose writes:

At a family gathering in the mid-1930s ... North, the now grown-up grandson of Colonel Pargiter, is observing people politely enquiring about each other’s children: “*my boy – my girl* ... they were saying. But they’re not interested in other people’s children, he observed. Only in their own; their own property; their own flesh and blood, which they would protect with the unsheathed claws of the primeval swamp, he thought ... how then can we be civilised?” Protecting with unsheathed claws is an image commonly used to describe a mother lion with her cubs ... [Woolf is] describing how, at the centre of human nature and in its name, the intricacy and breadth of human possibility can be sidelined or quashed before it has even begun. And the ones expected to fulfil this deadly template of absolute singular devotion and blindness – all under the guise of nourishing the world’s future – are mothers. (80, quoting Woolf 359)

Rose wants us to see in narratives of maternal love that demand a willingness to defend at all costs the child a parallel to other forms of state-sanctioned violence. It is in the family, and particularly in the figure of the devoted mother, that both propriety and violence—

two sides of the same coin—are born and sustained. I offer this brief reading of *Geek Love* because, in aiming to explicitly link familial violence with love, Dunn’s novel reveals a difficult-to-face unpleasantness that lies at the heart not only of the Binewski family but also of the family in general. By inverting our expectations—by presenting childhood as providing unmediated access to the violence of the family—*Geek Love* allows us to ask the questions: in what ways is the conventional view that the mother’s role is to protect and nurture the child complicit in a relational mode that first constructs propriety (in the form of the innocent child “belonging” to the mother) and then authorizes its violent protection? And what new modes of being might be made possible if we abandon, along with Oly, the view that the mother is capable of the impossible task of protecting the child? “Motherhood is not,” as have already seen Rose admit, “knowledge or control” (138); it does not wholly submit, in other words, to the dictates of logic despite the persistence of a parenting culture that demands perfection through the careful controlling of both ourselves and our children. There is something in motherhood that is inherently illogical, and this illogic can be exploited in order to imagine a new, nonviolent maternity. Though *Geek Love* does not go so far as to present an alternative to the violent “family game”, instead merely exposing the ways in which love and violence are bound to one another within the family, the persistence of Oly’s childhood terror into her motherhood enables us to consider one possible route through which a new theory of maternity might come into being. As I turn now to *The Lost Daughter*, I wager that motherhood, contrary to the ideal mother who competently secures for her children a safe and pleasant world, exposes us to the senselessness—to the fundamental irony, to borrow

from Edelman's conceptualization of the queer, or uncertainty that threatens knowledge—of childhood and dissolves our anaesthetic sense of adulthood as knowingness when it is actually closer to the innocence of forgetfulness. *Geek Love* proposes that the only distinction between adult and child is this forgetfulness, a forgetfulness enacted through sense-making, knowledge-production. This forgetfulness can be resisted. Motherhood, I wager, is one site where this resistance occurs. In this view, motherhood is not characterized by the duty to protect at all costs the innocence of the child but by the exposure of the mother to the “darkness” of childhood, where darkness is conceived as the opposite of an enlightened sensibility; this exposure is what dissolves the anaesthetic of what we call growing up, rendering the mother-child boundary—and the presumed innocence of the child—irrelevant. As we will see, *The Lost Daughter* is a novel that specifically theorizes this indistinction between adulthood and childhood and thus theorizes a maternity that does not depend upon a belief in the mother's duty, nor even her ability, to protect a presumed childhood innocence. I will ultimately argue that the unique, detemporalizing convergence of motherhood with childhood—that is, a view of motherhood that does not see it as successively following childhood but instead sees that the two share a non-temporal (i.e. inconsequent) relationship—offers a means to understand a relationality that is not predicated upon the existence of the autonomous I and, for this reason, offers a means to theorize a truly nonviolent mode of being.

### Abandoning Understanding

By exploring the possibility that childhood is *not* a state of innocence—and that motherhood and childhood converge upon one another in a non-temporal way, as we will see shortly in my analysis of *The Lost Daughter*—I am not suggesting that we embrace fear and confusion as the depressing reality underlying adulthood; rather, I am suggesting that the child’s inability or unwillingness to understand offers a kind of antidote to our investment in ourselves, an investment that is supported by our quest, as adults, for safety through knowledge, or through the illusion of knowledge as a defence mechanism against the frightening uncertainty of childhood. These ideas are built in part upon the work of psychoanalysts of the object-relations school of thought, namely Klein and Winnicott. Klein is perhaps best known for her insistence upon the ambivalence of the infant, that in the infant occurs both love and hate in equal measure, and that in adulthood our relations with others are really disguised attempts to repair the malicious desires and thoughts—thoughts that take the mother, and specifically the mother’s breast, as their primary object—that we possessed in even our earliest days of infancy. And Winnicott, in his effort to develop what is often described as an “intersubjective” account of the mother-child relation, which becomes the foundation for all subject-object relations, describes the maternal act of holding as the first and most significant form of care an infant receives; for Winnicott, the mother-infant dyad is not comprised of two subjects who relate to one another, but a single unit of relationality that extends between the two: “there is no such thing as a baby,” he famously pronounced, because a baby is only constituted in the relation that exists between it and its mother. More importantly, “holding” is an act of

“ego-integration” that takes place through a simple orientation of the infant’s and mother’s bodies in space (“The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship” 44).

Christopher Bollas would later extend this insight to include an understanding of holding as the infant’s initiation into an “aesthetics of being” that is constituted by the rhythms and syntax of the environment the mother provides for the child:

The mother’s way of holding the infant, of responding to his gestures, of selecting objects, and of perceiving the infant’s internal needs, constitutes her contribution to the infant-mother culture. In a private discourse that can only be developed by mother and child, the language of this relation is the idiom of gesture, gaze and intersubjective utterance. (1)

Holding, in both Winnicott’s and Bollas’s views, produces this “idiom of mothering” (ibid.), an initial intersubjectivity that contributes to the eventual development of “functional ego activity” (Jacobson, quoted in Bollas 1). Some thinkers have extended maternal holding even further back to include the infant’s time spent in the womb. For example, Chloe Garcia Roberts describes “holding” as the extending to the mother’s womb, where the infant gets its first sense of burgeoning selfhood by feeling itself as the centre of the rushing “storm” of blood that flows and beats around it: “The first lullaby ever sung is the shushing of blood rushing along the walls of the uterus like weather wearing against an enclosure ... This first lullaby is the origin of the lie that each of us believes—that we are an eye in the storm, a quiet removed from the unceasing current of change” (“Lullaby” para. 10). Bersani, too, explores the significance of this uterine lullaby; drawing upon the work of Peter Sloterdijk and Thomas Macho, Bersani is interested in theorizing relationality in a manner that does not privilege the confrontational model of object relations in which self-contained subjects encounter a

series of distinct others in the world. Instead, he is interested instead in what Macho terms “nobjects”, or things—forces, “partners”, conditions—that “are not differentiated to the point of objectivity” (*Receptive Bodies* 96-7). In other words, nobjects, such as the “mini-conditions” of the uterine environment (the rhythm of the blood flowing through the placenta, the softness and wetness of the uterine enclosure itself) or the air itself as we breathe it (the infant’s first extra-uterine act), are intimate presences that “augment” (Sloterdijk’s terminology) the infant without ever appearing as “thing[s] with which to have a relationship” (Sloterdijk, quoted in Bersani 96). Yet, while Sloterdijk and Bersani wish to read in this uterine environment a story about the ways in which our bodies are, first and foremost, receptive to the environment that surrounds us—a reading that closely resembles Bollas’s, though he is not referenced by Bersani in this particular section of *Receptive Bodies*—Roberts’ description of the infant’s experience of the womb describes a rather different story, one in which the infant feels itself to be the center of a ceaseless rushing that occurs around it. Paradoxically, both of these stories emerge out of psychoanalytic attempts to theorize the early development of the self; the difference lies in the degree to which we see the self as an unquestionable, inevitable fact of human existence. Though his engagement here with Sloterdijk leaves something to be desired, there exists a third way to narrate the infant’s existence in its mother’s womb, a way that is supported by Bersani’s entire body of work; we may conceive that the infant is augmented by the prenatal environment while simultaneously feeling it as a storm and not as a primal, comforting or ego-stabilizing unity. For Bersani, whose interpretation of psychoanalysis offers, I argue, the most radical view of the self—namely, that the self, as

it is conceived in ego psychology, is *not* essential or inevitable—it is always possible to instrumentalize psychoanalytic theory in the pursuit of a non-egological model of relationality. As we have seen above as well as in the previous chapter, such a model has clear ethical implications, for it is our belief in the sanctity and seriousness of our selfhood that enables us to sanction violence in order to protect it—an argument that is symmetrical to Rose’s hypothesis that the mother’s belief in the sanctity of her child, and her consequent willingness to defend that child with violence, makes the family the originary site of violence. These two things—the self who defends itself, the mother who defends the child—support and are intertwined with one another to such a degree that to call into question the one necessarily entails questioning the other.

There are thus moments in Bersani’s oeuvre where he seems to recognize the closeness of selfhood and motherhood. “What exercises of the self”, Bersani asks, “might increase our accessibility to messages of self-supplementation?” (*Receptive Bodies* 98). He immediately supplies the answer: “It would be a question of increasing our receptivity to successors to prenatal nobjects” (ibid.). The assumption for Sloterdijk, whose theory of “spherology” informs Bersani’s question, is that “prenatal nobjects” and their postnatal surrogates are inherently “nourishing” and “protective” (*Receptive Bodies* 102). To be held, whether in the womb, in the mother’s arms, or, in one of Sloterdijk’s examples, by the presence of a psychoanalyst, is to be comforted, to have the world made less terrifying. Bersani sees in the idea of “nobjects” a means of accessing a less violent model of selfhood because it proposes an “augmented” self in place of a rigidly self-contained self: “nobject relationships take place in a field of protection and attention”

(97). Yet this “field of protection and attention” recalls an idyllic belief in the safety of (a primarily maternal) holding. As Oly, in *Geek Love*, makes clear for us, there is no reason why the fetus held in the mother’s womb should experience it as comfort instead of as terror at being thrust amidst a rushing storm:

We need that warm adult stupidity. Even knowing the illusion, we cry and hide in their laps, speaking only of defiled lollipops or lost bears, and getting a lollipop or a toy bear’s worth of comfort. We make do with it rather than face alone the cavernous reaches of our skulls for which there is no remedy, no safety, no comfort at all. We survive until, by sheer stamina, we escape into the dim innocence of our own adulthood and its forgetfulness. (Dunn 106)

I propose that we take seriously the possibility that the act of holding—of “with-ness”, to borrow again from Sloterdijk—is not necessarily an idyllic act of comfort and stabilization. To believe so is to believe in the post-Freudian psychoanalytic and ego-psychological mythologies that propound the adult’s fantasy of childhood as a time of innocence and adulthood as a source of protection (where both “innocence” and “protection” are defined in relation to the lack or possession of knowledge, respectively). Instead, I would like to suspend this assumption about the earliest forms of holding that we, as children, receive; it is possible that holding may provide a modicum of stability for the child, but holding is a two-way event. What happens in the maternal act of holding happens to both child *and* mother—a fact that is recognized in the Winnicottian theory of intersubjectivity—and holding can just as easily be felt by both as weak shelter indeed when it makes apparent, or cannot be distinguished from, the rage of the swirling storm that exists just beyond the boundaries of the hold. In holding, in being held, it is possible that we are faced directly with an awareness of just how fragile and fragmented we really are. A de-idealized assessment of holding is what leads Roberts to write of the fear that

accompanies motherhood: “I am terrified that in the end all I can say I have done for you is hold you, with all the impermanence that implies” (para. 7). Just a couple of paragraphs later she writes: “I have been lulled into thinking that I am a place where childhood happens, that I am a country that could hold [my children] forever” (para. 9). Too often, the essay implies, do we believe in our power, as mothers, to hold our children and thereby bestow upon them an enduring, pleasurable sense of safety and containment.

Nowhere is the non-egological potentiality of maternity—a maternity that is *not* characterized by the mother’s stabilizing hold over the child—made more apparent than in *The Lost Daughter*, a story in which knowledge—its pursuit or attainment—plays no significant role; here, knowledge is cast as understanding or sense-making born of ordered logic, the attribution of enduring meaning, the belief in encounters between clearly defined subjects and objects and in the transparency of both the past and the self. *The Lost Daughter* is Ferrante’s third novel, which appeared in English translation in 2008, and forms part of an oeuvre motherhood “that takes you about as far from manuals and guidebooks as you could possibly hope to get” (Rose 151). As Ferrante herself describes, her pseudonym “Elena”—which also appears in *The Lost Daughter* as the name of the young child in whom the main character, Leda, takes a kind of interest—is taken from Greek mythology; Elena is born from an egg laid by Nemesis, an egg which is given to Leda the swan, who raises Elena as her “daughter-non-daughter” (*Frantumaglia* 206). Leda and Elena; the names themselves introduce a fundamental not-knowingness into this story about mothers and daughters. *The Lost Daughter* is structured around Leda’s time spent on a beach, during which she becomes interested in a mother and her

young daughter as they play together and with a doll. Leda eventually steals the doll, a “senseless act” that eludes her ability to understand. However, the novel opens with a scene in which Leda is caught up in what she terms a “fantasy of alarm”. Leda is driving when she begins to feel “ill” and falls into a kind of hallucinatory state: “soon I even forgot that I was driving. I had the impression, rather, of being at the sea, in the middle of the day” (9). Within this “hallucination” she sees a pole with a red flag in the water and recalls, as a child, her mother warning her of the danger of swimming when the red flag was waving. Now, in her hallucination, the water appears smooth and tranquil, yet the waving of the red flag inspires fear; she dares not enter:

I said to myself, go on, swim: they must have forgotten the flag, and meanwhile I stayed on the shore, cautiously testing the water with the tip of my toe. Only at intervals my mother appeared at the top of the dunes and shouted to me as if I were still a child: Leda, what are you doing, don’t you see the red flag? (9)

Later, at hospital after suffering a minor car accident due to her loss of awareness, she convinces herself that what she saw—the beach and the tranquil water, the red flag, the appearance of her mother “at intervals”, her mother’s warning—was not a dream but a “fantasy of alarm that lasted until I woke up in the hospital room” (9). Leda does not elaborate on what is meant by the phrase *fantasy of alarm*, and the novel, following this opening scene, jumps back in time, presumably, at first glance, in order to explain to the reader how it is that Leda came to be driving with a “burning” in her side and in a hallucinatory state resulting in her accident. The phrase, though it is not repeated, feels charged with significance. It figures our reading of the novel by suggesting a fundamental confusion of childhood with adulthood, of safety with danger, knowledge with ignorance; the “alarm”, in other words, refers to a state of uncertainty that persists throughout the

novel. By linking this uncertainty with a sense of being a child, it is the first sign in the novel of Leda's failure to "grow up" by obtaining certainty through knowledge. Instead, she remains perpetually alarmed, caught in the discrepancy between what her eyes are telling her—that the sea is calm and no danger lurks—and her mother's shouted warnings.

Leda's fantasy recalls a fragment from Kafka's diary in which he writes: "I can swim like the others, only I have a better memory than the others, I have not forgotten my former not-being-able-to-swim. But because I have not forgotten it, the being-able-to-swim does me no good, and I still cannot swim" (quoted in Phillips para. 5). Phillips writes of this fragment that "exclusion always precedes inclusion, and we are always haunted by our being left out. The person who can't swim is always with us" ("On Being Left Out" para. 5). Kafka's sense of still not-being-able-to-swim is read as an analogy for a foundational act of exclusion that, according to Phillips, we spend our lifetimes trying to overcome. And in *The Lost Daughter*, Leda, too, seems to be plagued by a founding childhood exclusion—that of being warned of the presence of a danger that one cannot see or appreciate—well into her adulthood. As she tries to navigate the contradiction between the calm-looking water and the presence of the red flag she decides that she will test the waters with a toe, only to have her mother shout at her, "what are you doing? Can't you see the red flag?" Maternal authority overrides her desire to swim and reminds her that swimming is dangerous, that despite all appearances an invisible threat looms within the water, that despite her belief that she can swim in such water she in fact *cannot swim*. Her mother's warning is repeated "at intervals", establishing a kind of cycle of

desiring and warning, of working oneself up to believe oneself capable of doing something only to be forcefully reminded that one cannot in fact do that thing: one is excluded. Leda, though she inhabits an adult body, is still the child who cannot see the danger, who requires a maternal injunction in order to conclude that yes, in fact, she does see the red flag, which means there *must* be danger, and she will take her mother's word for it despite the appearance of a perfectly calm sea. This, then, is what is meant by fantasy of alarm: a sustained sense of there being an invisible danger, the presence of which excludes Leda not only from swimming but from knowing what the nature of the danger is. In being alarmed, Leda must doubt her own perception and accede that a danger unknown to her really does exist. Her fantasy, therefore, suggests that she is "haunted by being left out" (Phillips, "On Being Left Out" para. 5), not in a general sense but specifically by being excluded from the obtainment of knowledge. This sense of alarm persists into adulthood, reminding her that she is, in fact, still that child who cannot understand and who does not know. Her fantasy conjures for the reader an image of Leda as a child, as the child she once was that she cannot leave behind even in adulthood, the child who, alarmed by the mother's voice, is perpetually caught between desire and unknowable threat.

Phillips, in his interpretation of both Kafka's thoughts on not-being-able-to-swim and Freudian psychoanalysis more generally, suggests that exclusion is an originary experience and that it inaugurates the child's—and, later, the adult's—sense of identity. The child, he argues, feels excluded and then tells herself a story about this exclusion that includes fantasies about what she is being excluded from and what this exclusion means.

Leda's fantasy of alarm can likewise be read in such a way. The specific scene of the beach and the conflict between the appearance of safety, the desire to swim, and the presence of both visual and verbal warnings of danger recreate a child-like confusion and anxiety in the face of an originary exclusion. This brief scene, laid out on the first page of the novel, thus forms an interpretive lens for the remainder of the story; in this fantasy we see Leda as she sees herself—as child-like, as an adult who carries with her the confusion and anxiety of the child who feels excluded from knowledge and is therefore alarmed. That this scene allows us to draw a remarkable parallel to Kafka's feeling of not-being-able-to-swim is a happy coincidence, for Leda indeed carries with her the feeling of not-being-able-to-swim (or, rather, not-being-allowed-to-swim) with her; it haunts her and impedes her understanding not only of herself but also of the world around her. For Phillips, the experience of exclusion is resolved by the emergence of the defense-mechanism of identity: "[i]dentity is what you are left with, what you come up with, after being left out: it is a self-cure for alienation. Desiring and thinking and questioning and imagining are what we do after the catastrophe of exclusion" ("On Being Left Out" para. 24). Importantly, though, Leda does not seem to have reached this stage, the stage of developing or grabbing hold of an "identity". She remains caught up in the originary scene of childhood exclusion, enabling the reader to imagine what might happen when the psychoanalytic teleology of "growing up" is never achieved. As the following sections of this chapter will show, Leda remains in this state, or is perhaps thrust back into it, because she herself is a mother; becoming a mother, Rose writes, puts us "in touch with what, in every single human, cannot be self-fashioned or subdued to purpose" (134).

It puts us, in other words, in the position of occupying a fantasy of alarm, a scene in which the self cannot will or learn or argue its way out of radical uncertainty.

### Motherhood, Opacity, and Superficiality

Because of the prevalence in her novels of mothers behaving in ways that our cultural sensibility would find unacceptable, there has been a tendency in both Ferrante scholarship and general readership to read her stories—*The Lost Daughter* in particular—as confessional of a kind of intergenerational unhappiness transmitted from mother to daughter, or of a deep ambivalence that all mothers possess and with which they must come to terms. In an essay recently published in *The Yale Review*, for example, Josh Cohen is tempted to read in Ferrante’s works the expression of a uniquely maternal anger. Writing about a passage from *The Lost Daughter* in which Leda’s mother becomes enraged after pulling her, shivering, from the sea, Cohen focuses on the way in which maternal love and anger are inextricably bound to one another:

Maternal love, Leda seems to say, is conditioned by a rage which can at times render love and hate unsettlingly difficult to distinguish. The unbearable burden of love that stirs Leda’s mother to such alarm is felt as a ferocious resentment and a wish, rubbed violently into her daughter’s skin, to be free of its overbearing demands. And when Leda becomes a mother in her own right, she finds herself in the same trap. (para. 26)

The fact that most of Ferrante’s main characters are middle-aged women who are caught between the “pincer” that is formed by the simultaneous demands of being both daughters and mothers is, for Cohen, significant to the expression of maternal ambivalence. The appeal of her novels, then, could be understood as being tied to this tendency to read them as confessions, as expressions of the characters’ deeply conflicting, and at times

disturbing, desires, feelings, and attitudes—truths that many mothers find relatable. As Pamela Erans writes in an essay entitled “Frantumaglia” (the same title of a collection of correspondence and written interviews given by Ferrante), readers (almost exclusively female) of Ferrante often stake their love of her novels on the belief that they “feel like real life”; that they give voice to things in the “female experience” that are typically regarded as unspeakable; that they produce, in short, a sense of intimacy with the reader, especially when that reader is also a mother. I’d like to propose, however, that we resist the urge to read *The Lost Daughter* as a confession of the torturous and, at times, unbearable burdens of both mother- and daughterhood. Rose suggests something very similar in her reading of the novel; she reads its insistence on a fundamental lack of understanding as a “warning ... against the idea that motherhood is a locked closet to which the best literary writing on the topic would offer the one true key” (150). I, too, approach the novel by suspending the mislaid belief that confession produces knowledge, and “that knowledge of oneself is conducive to intimacy” (Phillips, *Intimacies* vii). In so doing, it becomes possible to read *The Lost Daughter* as the expression of something much more radical than the production of knowledge about the experience of being a mother—*The Lost Daughter*, I argue, expresses not a depth but a paucity of personal experience by reducing the maternal relation to the exchange of meaningless words and actions that, rather than progressing teleologically toward the end of “growing up”, remain suspended in a non-chronological state—a state that, to borrow Leda’s terminology, can be usefully understood as a “fantasy of alarm”. The fantasy of alarm, then, becomes an instrument for theorizing what Bersani and Phillips describe as an

impersonal or narcissistic intimacy, an intimacy that eschews the depth of personality in favour of an acceptance that a nonviolent intimacy depends upon there being no knowledge of self or other, not because we refuse to gain knowledge but because there is “nothing to ‘know’” (Bersani and Dutoit, *Caravaggio’s Secrets* 72). Intimacy, in other words, must take on a counterintuitive meaning by being delinked from knowledge. We must be willing to accept that by the end of *The Lost Daughter* we know nothing about Leda and her motivations, and that this is preferable to any narrative accounting of her “inner life” that would tempt us with an offer of knowledge and understanding. It may seem paradoxical, but Leda’s indifference toward and ignorance of both selfhood and motherhood presents an opportunity for a truly nonviolent maternal relation.

*The Lost Daughter* expresses this indifference to both selfhood and motherhood by offering a non-chronological and non-teleological account; it is a story that goes nowhere, whose events do not line up in ways that illuminate and predict one another. In this way, it is an example of what Bersani, in his reading of the Freudian unconscious, terms “psychic time”, or the inseparability of repression from the return of the repressed (*Thoughts and Things* 74). Psychic time does not progress in a linear fashion from one stage to the next, drawing us ineluctably from childhood to adulthood; instead “its mobility is a spiraling that is neither forward nor backward, and that is both forward and backward” (75). We do not, in other words, repress childhood events only to excavate them later in a project of self-knowledge. Instead, the notion of repression implies the existence of the past in the present such that it becomes impossible to distinguish the two; the fact that we rely on words such as “past” and “present” is a habit born of a particular

syntax that enables the sanctity of the self by narrativizing it as a linear progression from ignorance toward knowledge. For Leda, there exists no such progression. Toward the end of the novel, after catching a glimpse of herself in a mirror looking thinner than usual, she seeks a drugstore in which to weigh herself and measure her height: “I was three inches shorter and underweight. I tried again and my height diminished further, as did my weight. I went away disoriented. Among my most dreaded fantasies was the idea that I could get smaller, go back to being adolescent, child, condemned to relive those phases of my life” (129). Finding herself thus diminished, Leda’s fear of returning to childhood is seemingly confirmed. But the source of the fear is not (only) smallness itself, it is the confusion of being assailed from every side, as a child is, by incomprehensible and indecipherable threats, dangers, and anxieties. Throughout the novel, even the briefest of encounters with the world triggers for Leda a childhood memory such that the past is felt as coincident with the present. Walking through a forest of pine trees, the scent reminds her of “[t]he squeak or thud of a dry pinecone, the dark color of the pine nuts reminds me of my mother’s mouth: she laughs as she crushes the shells, takes out the yellow fruit, gives it to my sisters, noisy and demanding, or to me, waiting in silent expectation, or she eats it herself, staining her lips with dark powder and saying, to teach me not to be so timid: go on, none for you, you’re worse than a green pinecone” (15). The memory, recounted as a general scene with a variety of possible outcomes, none committed to, suggests not only the unreliability of the adult’s memory but also the unpredictable nature of the adult’s actions. Whether or not Leda would receive a pine nut or have one withheld in order to be taught a lesson appears to be the result of pure chance, and this inability to

discern the outcome or the reason for a thing's occurrence pervades Leda's interpretation (or lack thereof) of present events. Days later, for example, Leda is struck suddenly on the back by a large pinecone as she walks through the same forest, and she fails to incorporate the event into any comprehensible narrative: "I couldn't decide if the pinecone had been thrown deliberately from the bushes or had fallen from a tree. A sudden blow, in the end, is only wonder and pain. When I pictured the sky and the pines, the pinecone fell from on high; when I thought of the undergrowth, the bushes, I saw a horizontal line traced by a projectile" (31). For Leda, the interpretation of an act can only come retrospectively, and whether it is interpreted in one way or another is itself dependent upon something as unaccountable as whether one thinks first of the sky or of the forest floor. The bruise that the pinecone leaves on her back is mentioned several times throughout the story, proof that in the end only "wonder and pain" can be certain.

The entire novel, which hinges upon a doll that Leda steals from a young mother, Nina, and her daughter, Elena, is propelled by Leda's repeated failures of interpretation that arise from her sense of being thrown into a non-chronological world. Events, in this world, do not have clear causes or effects; Leda cannot understand even her own reasons and motivations for taking the doll, or, perhaps more importantly, for abandoning her children—and eventually returning—many years earlier. The story begins, as we have seen, with Leda's fantasy of alarm; however, Leda herself traces the "origin" to the stealing of the doll, "a gesture ... that made no sense" (10) but that casts her, repeatedly, backward in time to scenes of her childhood. Toward the end of the story, Leda admits that she has obtained no understanding, has failed to render sense out of senselessness: "I

thought how one opaque action generates others of increasing opacity” (128), she muses as she finds herself unable to understand her reasons for taking and keeping the doll. She considers that she could repair the central opaque action—that of taking the doll—by returning it to Elena, but almost immediately concludes that returning the doll would fail to resolve the situation favourably: “Elena would be happy to have her doll again, I said to myself. Or no, a child never wants what it’s asking for” (ibid.). This fundamental opacity—of herself, of others, of the world in general—is conveyed through Leda’s repeated use of the phrase “I didn’t/don’t know”: “I don’t know if they had been there since the first day...” (17); “There was something off about the little girl, I don’t know what” (18); “For a while I didn’t know if it was the mother or the daughter...” (20); “I don’t know why, I wrote those names in my notebook” (20). Yet, despite her inability to commit to knowledge—or to make any claim of possessing knowledge—we get the sense that Leda’s interest in Nina and Elena is the effect of something that happens to her when she is around them; they place her into the position of being, simultaneously, child and mother, and it is this superimposition of childhood with motherhood that creates the conditions in which knowledge and certainty decompose. This is something other than the stories we often hear—and that we often tell ourselves—about the intergenerational nature of parenting practices and the belief that, through force of will alone, the “cycle” can be broken (my mother yelled at me, therefore I find myself yelling at my children, but I can end this practice by parenting more mindfully, by arming myself with gentler strategies, etc.). In other words, when Leda’s attention is called alternately to her childhood and to her relationship with her own daughters, we miss something important

if we read this as an explanation for the repetition, across generations, of the anguish of motherhood. Instead, Leda's sense of being both mother and child is precisely what gives rise to the deterioration of the conditions of knowledge, and it is in this deterioration that an alternative mode of relationality becomes possible. In the early part of the novel, when Leda first notices Nina and Elena and takes an interest in them, Leda considers that she writes their names in her notebook because she likes the way Nina pronounces them in her Neapolitan dialect. The "cadence" of the dialect brings to her mind a childhood memory:

I remember the dialect on my mother's lips when she lost that gentle cadence and yelled at us, poisoned by her unhappiness: I can't take you anymore, I can't take anymore. Commands, shouts, insults, life stretching into her words, as when a frayed nerve is just touched, and the pain scrapes away all self-control. Once, twice, three times she threatened us, her daughters, that she would leave, you'll wake up in the morning and won't find me here. And every morning I woke trembling with fear. In reality she was always there, in her words she was constantly disappearing from home. (20-1)

The contradiction between her mother's words and the reality of her presence engenders a fundamental confusion in Leda, a feeling that neither words nor appearances can be trusted because they can be divorced from one another as easily as a mother can transform love into anger, then back again. Another way of putting this is that, for Leda, "reality" is not "real", not when her mother's way of leaving is to stay, and when, as we will see, her own way of staying is to leave. A little later in the novel Leda recounts how she gave her older daughter, Bianca, a doll she had loved from her own childhood. Upon discovering that Bianca had scribbled all over the doll with markers, Leda feels, as a child would, an anger so intense that she felt herself transformed into being both younger and weaker than her daughter: "I gave her a nasty shove: she was a child of three but at that

moment she seemed older, stronger than me ... I hurled the doll over the railing of the balcony ... Then I realized that Bianca, too, was watching ... I picked her up ... I kissed her for a long time” (49). Such scenes suggest the impossibility of both childhood innocence and maternal protection, implying instead the existence of a fundamental incompatibility of motherhood with the possession or pursuit of knowledge.

In Cohen’s reading of the novel, such vacillation between love and hate, between overwhelming anger and overwhelming guilt, is indicative of what is to be understood as an essential experience of motherhood:

In Ferrante, to be a mother is to transmit to your child the state of unconscious self-division inherited from your own mother, and from a culture that projects onto mothers violently contradictory expectations. The mother’s wish to redeem the privations and cruelties of her own childhood comes into tension with a resentment toward the daughter who enjoys freedoms and possibilities she lacked. (para. 31)

Such a reading, which seeks to figure the unhappiness of the mother as she navigates this unidirectional transmission within a narrative of (failed?) redemption, echoes Rich’s seminal work on motherhood in *Of Woman Born*. In an autobiographical section of the book, Rich recounts the newfound understanding of her own mother—and “Everymother”—that became accessible to her when she became a mother in turn. When her mother, with whom she had a very strained relationship, visited her at hospital after the birth of her first child, Rich laments retrospectively that that was the beginning of her as-yet-unformed understanding of the depths of maternal guilt and the way in which it interacted with her own childhood traumas:

I know now as I could not possibly know then, that among the tangle of feelings between [my mother and I], in that crucial yet unreal meeting, was her guilt ... Beneath the “numbness” that she has since told me she experienced at that time, I

can imagine the guilt of Everymother, because I have known it myself ... I struggle to describe what it felt like to be her daughter, but I find myself divided, slipping under her skin; a part of me identifies too much with her. I know deep reservoirs of anger toward her still exist ... And I know there must be deep reservoirs of anger in her; every mother has known overwhelming, unacceptable anger at her children. (223-4)

Both Rich and Cohen (and they are by no means the only ones) wish to see, in the expression of maternal anger and guilt a hopeful path toward understanding and, therefore, an alleviation of (some of) the suffering that mothers endure as they struggle to separate the child they once were, along with all of that child's misgivings and fears, from the responsibility to their own children that they presently bear—the responsibility to prevent for their children these same misgivings and fears and thereby simultaneously repair their own latent childish anger and their extant motherish guilt. “Until a strong line of love, confirmation, and example stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across the generations, women will still be wandering in the wilderness,” Rich writes as part of her call to mothers to “refuse to be victims” any longer (246). There exists, for Rich, a laundry list of happy outcomes that could arise if women choose to be “courageous mothers”: increased freedom, agency, authority, authenticity, contentment, strength, etc. Cohen, reading Ferrante, alludes more quietly to a hopeful outcome for angry and anguished mothers; turning to Ferrante's *Neapolitan Quartet*, four novels about a fiercely competitive, lifelong friendship between two women, Lenu and Lila, Cohen suggests that the inferno of maternal ambivalence can find a “productive” outlet in creative pursuits: writing for Lenu, art for Lila. Indeed, his own reading of Ferrante's works, which he undertakes at his wife's request, seems to confirm this hypothesis that “portraying” maternal rage renders it “more audible and intelligible”. Such a view is

deeply tied to the interpretation of maternity as, at its heart, experiential and therefore confessional, as well as to the corresponding beliefs that to confess is to render understandable, and to understand is to overcome. What I would like to consider is precisely the opposite, at least in the case that can be made from *The Lost Daughter*: maternity is a *contraction* of experience and a state of non-chronological confusion that resists a conventional narrative arc that would both explain and resolve. In the following section, I will make the case that Leda's navigation of her simultaneous childhood/motherhood presents maternity as an integral part of the project of theorizing an ethics *without* a subject, without what Bersani calls the "ideology of individualism" (*Thoughts and Things* 34) in which subjects are invested in the depth and coherence of their own personalities and approach others as personal enigmas in need of solving. In other words, Leda's failure to interpret the events of her childhood and motherhood suggests not a hopeless situation for mothers but the possibility of a contracted, illogical self, a self that, to refer again to Jack Gladney in *White Noise*, has lost interest in itself. The possibility of this self-effacing self, a self mired in confusion and ignorance not as a step along the redemptive narrative arc but as a condition in need of sustenance, is a possibility inherent in motherhood.

#### Taking Away: Leda's Self-Lessening and an Ethics of Ignorance

In his reading of Proust's *La Prisonnière*, Bersani discusses the significance of music to the narrator. For Marcel, "music is like a possibility which has never been developed" (Proust 237). Language, on the other hand, "inspire[s] and serve[s] a powerful will to

know ... Our epistemological gains ... have been our ontological losses” (Bersani, *Thoughts and Things* 87). Gaining knowledge of the other, including the other that is oneself, means forfeiting modes of being—what Bersani elsewhere terms *virtualities*—that are always possible but most often never developed. This statement about the eclipsing of relational virtualities by the subject’s passion for knowledge is perhaps the most concise formulation of one of the central themes of Bersani’s extensive oeuvre: that of illuminating and instrumentalizing *epistemophilia* as a means of critiquing the existing ethical/aesthetic regime of personal selfhood. For Bersani, it is not heteronormativity *per se* (nor, for that matter, capitalism, neoliberalism, fascism, racism, misogyny, nor any other systemic, institutionalized form of violence and inequality) that is in need of critique but the philosophical concept of, and passionate, unquestioned belief in, the existence of a self that possesses a “bottomless” depth of personality (Tuhkanen, *Leo Bersani* 218). Such a self is not only the invisible foundation of the forms of violence and inequality just enumerated, but also of what we conventionally see as their desirable inverses: social justice, human rights, inclusion and tolerance, freedom. This is what makes Bersani’s project so radical; it endeavours to question the inevitability and the desirability of that most precious of things, the thing that we all, in one way or another, regard as worthy of protection and which we recognise as being hailed in the contemporary commandment, *know thyself*: this precious thing is the unique personality of the individual self. It is worth quoting Bersani at some length in order to explicate what he means when he calls for a de-emphasis of what he variously refers to as individuality, personality, or identity—all of which refer to a model of selfhood that

assumes the existence of a deep, and deeply valuable, inner core that comprises *who we are*—in favour of a virtual being that has no inside but sees itself reflected externally and superficially in the similarities of the world around us:

Our real—or, more properly, our realized—identity is what we call our individuality, the particular subjectivity that constitutes us as unique persons. This is what we think of as our difference, a difference we are prepared to defend ferociously, both in our individual self and in our various group selves (ethnic, racial, national, sexual). We might think of this as a psychological and moral gravitational force that pulls us away from a type of being to which we would otherwise aspire, a universal sameness to which our psychological otherness is ontologically subordinate. We fall from the richness of the virtual into the variegated poverty of experience, the experience of psychological individuality. Virtual being, intrinsically unrealized, is at once less and infinitely more than this individuality. (*Thoughts and Things* 83-4)

In other words, what Bersani wants to get at is the idea that personal experience might be resisted as the privileged mode of expression, of making ourselves seem more real and more valuable (or “more audible and intelligible”, to quote Cohen again). Paradoxically and perhaps unsettlingly, this call to eschew experience in favour of something far less personal and intimate works against the very syntax by which we feel ourselves to be conscious beings. It would mean, for Bersani, abandoning, to whatever degree we can, our reliance upon our belief in something as seemingly immutable as cause and effect, the ordered, chronological manner in which we come to the present moment inhabited by what we feel to be our individuality. In taking Bersani’s project seriously (but not *too* seriously), I propose that we do not look at Leda’s assemblage of scenes, past, present, and future, as an attempt to convey personal experience structured by cause and effect. Rather, I will examine these scenes for what they can tell us about the impersonal and the non-experiential. Bersani sought to accomplish this task in speculative and

unconventional analysis by paying attention to incongruities: “Incongruity”, he writes, “institutes virtualities that have no intrinsic reason to be realized” (*Thoughts and Things* 82). Following this lead, I read Leda’s story as a tale of epistemophobia: there is no knowledge and there are no reasons to be found here. No reasons and, more importantly, no redemption., no salvaging of this narrative of “unnatural motherhood” by recourse to explanations.

As I have already discussed, Leda herself is reluctant to attribute the power of reason to any of her actions or the events that surround them on either side. As readers, it is difficult to resist the temptation to see an arc connecting past with present, present with future. Yet, *The Lost Daughter* urges us, quietly but insistently, away from the quest for epistemological gains. The novel begins at the end and sets up a tantalizing mystery: why does Leda have a burning pain her side? What was this “senseless gesture” of hers about which she will not speak? The novel sets us up to believe that we will be rewarded with the answers to these questions by the end of the book: the senseless gesture will be made sensible. What we are not prepared for, then, is Leda’s denial, right up until the last page of the book, of any real knowledge or understanding of the situation. We should be careful, then, not to see more than what she presents to us; in other words, we should suspend the temptation to read the story as a confessional insight into the experience of motherhood and approach it instead as a series of incongruities that inaugurate temporary affinities and correspondences, none of which possesses any lasting explanatory power.

Leda’s senseless gesture refers to the act of stealing a doll; it is to the doll that we now turn, for the doll—insensate, mute—has more to tell us about Leda’s story than Leda

does herself. While watching Nina and Elena play with the doll on the beach, Leda becomes irritated with the voices both mother and daughter attribute to the doll:

Now they gave her words in turn, now together, superimposing the adult's fake-child voice and the child's fake-adult voice. They imagined it was the same, single voice coming from the same throat of a thing in reality mute. But evidently I couldn't enter into their illusion, I felt a growing repulsion for that double voice ... I felt an unease as if faced with a thing done badly, as if a part of me were insisting that they should make up their minds, give the doll a stable, constant voice, either that of the mother or that of the daughter, and stop pretending they were the same. (22-3)

Leda's discomfort with the imagined double voice of the doll is a repetition of what, in the first pages of the novel, she describes as the fantasy of alarm in which she feels that she is both mother and child. The dissolution of the boundaries between the two, and the "alarm" or agitation that this dissolution engenders, is echoed in Leda's attitude towards childhood—she attempts to keep the fear and confusion of childhood at bay and yet is constantly thrown into a child-like state. On a different day, Leda watched Elena playing alone with doll, kissing it and pressing it to her body: "I turned away," she narrates. "[O]ne shouldn't watch children's games. But then I looked at her again ... Children play games like this, of course, then they forget" (38). It is shortly after witnessing this game that Elena goes missing on the beach and Leda is thrown again into a fragmented reality, experiencing layers of past and present as though they were superimposed upon one another, and vacillating between the perspectives of herself, her own mother, and Nina:

[Elena]'ll turn up, I thought: I had experience with getting lost. My mother said that as a child all I did was get lost ... I didn't remember anything about my vanishing, my memory held other things. I was afraid that it was my mother who would get lost, I lived in the anxiety of not being able to find her. But I remembered clearly when I had lost Bianca. I was running along the beach like Nina now ... A child, yes, is a vortex of anxieties. (40-1)

As Leda joins the search for Elena she observes: “It seemed to me that I was Elena, or Bianca when she was lost, but perhaps I was only myself as a child, climbing back out of oblivion” (ibid.). Out of this confusion, this vortex of anxiety born of Leda’s inability to clearly distinguish her own perspective from that of multiple others, comes the senseless act that lies at the heart of the story. Leda finds Elena who, contrary to Leda’s expectations, does not say “I lost my mother” but “I lost my doll”; the child is inconsolable at this loss. As Elena’s family begins searching the beach for the doll, Leda begins walking home, clutching her bag inside of which lies the doll: “I discovered that I couldn’t recall the exact moment of an action that I now considered almost comic, comic because senseless” (44). Inventing a story to explain her action to herself, Leda concludes that she must have had a “wave of compassion” for the doll, whom she had seen half-buried in sand, “limbs askew”: “[a]n infantile reaction, nothing special, we never really grow up” (45). But a little while later Leda revises the story: “suddenly it seemed to me I had done something mean, unintentional but mean ... Now I’m trying to find excuses, but there are none. I feel confused” (ibid.). Leda’s lapse of memory that would have allowed her to understand her action ensures instead that a fundamental failure of interpretation will occur. Placed alongside her statements about her own childhood—that her mother remembered one thing, she another—we come to understand that there is no foundation for knowledge of one’s childhood and that, moreover, a lack of knowledge is a fundamental part not only of the child’s existence but also of the adult’s.

There exist yet more layers of confusion and unreliability. Leda insists that she does not possess any memory of getting lost as a child. Yet, as she searches for Elena she

becomes immersed in a detailed description of the particular ways in which children experience being lost: “A child who gets lost on the beach sees everything unchanged and yet no longer recognizes anything. She is without orientation, something that before had made bathers and umbrellas recognizable. The child feels that she is exactly where she was and yet she doesn’t know where she is ... To the unknown adult who asks her what’s wrong, why is she crying, she doesn’t say that she’s lost, she says she can’t find her mama” (42). To be lost as a child is to find oneself in unchanged surroundings that have suddenly become unfamiliar—an example, in other words, of uncanniness. We get the sense, however, that for Leda such a sensation occurs not only at the moment the child looks up and discovers that she has lost her mother, but all of the time, for Leda “lived in the anxiety of not being able to find her [mother]” despite her mother’s physical presence. The mother, in other words, is no guarantee of stability; the child lives in fear whether her mother is present or not, whether the surroundings are familiar or touched by the uncanny. In stealing the doll, and in being unable to understand or explain that action, Leda can come to no other conclusion than “we never really grow up” (45). Her ignorance as to the reason for her action means that we can discount both versions of her retrospective narrative: she was neither taking the doll out of compassion for it, with the plan to return it the next day and play nicely with Elena (as she claims, in this version of events); nor was she doing something “mean”. The doll, in other words, cannot be read as symbolic of Nina and Elena’s mother-daughter relationship; Leda neither wishes to connect herself to them in an effort to feel the love and serenity that, at times, the mother and daughter seem to exude, nor does she wish to jealously mar that love by introducing

the loss of the toy with which they both play and, in playing, take pleasure in one another. Rather, the doll expresses, for Leda, the pure failure of knowledge, of interpretation, that exists precisely because of the failure of the child to grow up, of the adult to fully separate themselves from a child-like state of confusion and alarm. The doll, with the double voice it is attributed by Nina and Elena, represents this failed separation. However, the overlap of child and mother does not lead to an expansion of the self, or to a greater depth of self-knowledge, as we are wont to believe when we understand “therapy” as the excavation of lost childhood memories. On the contrary, such an acknowledgement forces the self to experience a contraction, a reduction to a being lacking interiority which reflects, from moment to moment, the various others with whom it comes into contact. In fact, in the pages following Leda’s attempt to theorize her motivation in stealing the doll, she enters a series of reminiscences of moments of contraction, of feeling as though something has been “taken away” from her. Recalling her daughters as they entered adolescence and began receiving attention from men, having boyfriends, Leda narrates: “I wanted my daughters to be loved, I was terrified of their possible unhappiness; but the gusts of sensuality they exhaled were violent, voracious, and I felt that the force of attraction of their bodies was as if subtracted from mine” (52). Upon being invited for dinner by Gino, the beach attendant who is romantically involved with Nina, Leda feels as though Gino’s attention has been stolen from her by Nina: “I felt a pang of discontent that reached toward the girl, as if, appearing every day on the beach and attracting him, she had taken something away from me” (57). Finally, in remembering her daughters’ friends as being rivals of Bianca and Marta’s, we

hear that Leda felt “as if the others’ exceptional self-confidence, seductiveness, grace, intelligence took something away from my daughters and, in some obscure way, from me” (ibid.).

It is of course possible to read these statements as expressions of a kind of female antipathy and competitiveness—a reading that corresponds to those who claim that Ferrante’s novels are close to “real life”—and Leda herself seems to come to the (temporary) conclusion when she asks herself again, following these scenes, why she had taken the doll and responds to herself: “She [the doll] guarded the love of Nina and Elena, their bond, their reciprocal passion. She was the shining testimony of perfect motherhood” (62). But while it is the case that following the doll’s disappearance the aura of perfect motherhood Nina seemed to possess disintegrates, this articulation of Leda’s motivation is not her last attempt to ascribe meaning to her action, nor is it the last in the reader’s attempts to do the same. For it is only a short time later that Leda claims to see Nina as a kind of daughter, as a possible source of confessional intimacy to whom she could explain her reasons for leaving her real daughters and receive, in turn, understanding. The doll, in this version of events, serves as a kind of vehicle with which to achieve this imagined intimacy; so long as Leda keeps her, the unrealized potential for this confessional fantasy remains. Yet even this cannot serve as a stable reason because Leda, though she yearns for understanding, whether from her own daughters or from a surrogate, cannot explain to herself the reasons, nor even the correct order of events, that led to her departure from her daughters’ lives. In attempting to describe these events, Leda admits that they have “no before and after, they return to my mind in an order that is

always different” (72); moreover, she constructs a scenario in which both she and her daughters are confused due to this lack of knowledge. As a child herself, as we have seen, Leda felt caught in a state of ignorance that gave rise to a perpetual “fantasy of alarm,” as she calls it. As an adult, she remains just as ignorant and cannot help but participate in the perpetuation of the fantasy of alarm, which now exists for her children as well. As she draws nearer, in memory, to the date of her leaving her family for a new life, Leda describes how, in a “frenzy”, she would drag her daughters to a pay phone so that she could make phone calls to her new lover: “The children were with me, mute and bewildered ... I was careful never to say, That’s it, I’m leaving, you’ll never see me again, as my mother had when she was desperate. She never left us, despite crying that she would; I, on the other hand, left my daughters almost without announcing it” (99). In other words, the irreconcilable gap between words and events provokes a state of bewilderment, of being startled by things that happen, or that are threatened but never come to pass; the “vortex of anxieties” that characterizes childhood is not due, then, to a deficiency on the part of the child but arises, unintentionally, out of the senseless interactions between child and mother, the one possessing no greater knowledge than the other. As she recounts these events to herself—unpleasant events filled with anger, desperation, guilt, fear—Leda begins to play with the doll as a child would. She purchases clothes for her, washes and dresses her, attempts to care for her by extracting some putrid combination of dirt, sea water, and a worm that had been forced into the doll’s mouth by Elena: “I was confused; at moments it seemed to me that Elena could do without [the doll], while I could not” (112).

The doll, then, is simply what it has always been: a toy. Set alongside Leda's confused and partial story about her abandonment of her daughters, the doll renders the story lighter, subtracts the guilt, removes the need and the expectation for redemption. As Leda thinks to herself about her pregnancies while she goes about extracting the worm from the doll, we receive the most straightforward description of motherhood in the novel, interwoven as it is with the surgical extraction of the worm: "Games," Leda suddenly, incongruously, interjects: "I myself was playing now, a mother is only a daughter who plays" (124). Suddenly, any parallels that could be made between the doll and the figure of the mother—that the filthy innards of the doll represent Leda's guilt, for example, or that the mother, in being reduced by her children to a kind of living doll, has "lost herself"—take on a new and more intriguing light; the reduction to the passionless, "inhuman" muteness of the doll is, in fact, the opening of a new relational mode, one that does not depend upon our belief in the self but that conceives of individual bodies as objects for the projection and reflection of a limitless number of relational and narrative possibilities. Leda's doll is the embodiment of what she has "known" all along: that there is nothing to know. Games, playing: this is what a mother is, does. For in playing, Leda releases the desire to take herself—and Nina, Elena, her daughters, her own mother—seriously, and with that release comes a kind of maternal selflessness that stands at odds with what we usually conceive as sacrifice; the self becomes less, exerts less of a hold on us. Consequently, we exert less of a hold on the things around us. What appears, then, as indifference—"Tell the girls everything, starting from their childhood: they'll take care, later, of inventing an acceptable world" (124)—is not the self-exculpatory hand-washing

of a person who cares only about herself and nothing for the effect she has on everyone else, but the emergence of “an individuality unencumbered by selfhood” (Bersani, *TT* 88). Leda’s curious phrase “I’m dead, but I’m fine” (140), upon which the novel ends, is the straightforward admission of this new, selfless existence and the levity that is to be found in this divestment of passion for the self.

A Daughter Who Plays: Psychic Time and Bersanian Becoming

In his essay “I Can Dream, Can’t I?”, Bersani mines Freud’s insistence that the logic of the unconscious is “without a sense of time” (*Thoughts and Things* 59). For Bersani, Freud’s discovery of the unconscious, and the non-logic by which it operates, can only be resolved into the unitary theory of psychoanalysis by the assumption of a fundamental split between the conscious, which is governed by logic and a before-and-after sense of temporality, and the unconscious, which adheres to no such rules:

The distinction, to put it in yet another way, is between what we know (or think we know), and mental contents or impulses or pulsations whose entrance into the field of conscious knowledge is strenuously, and for the most part successfully, resisted by an ego that can itself unconsciously mount the resistance. This distinction justifies, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the rejection we have become accustomed to of a coherent, single identity ... If there is a self, it is a divided self. (*Thoughts and Things* 60)

Such an understanding of the project of psychoanalysis would seem to do at least some of the work of undermining the liberal conception of selfhood—a selfhood that is defined by coherence and autonomy, that is legible, or available to being rendered legible, to both itself and others—that continues to operate as the foundation of political life. And yet, Bersani is not content to see in psychoanalysis merely the postulation of a divided self, a

postulation that has also been made, according to his reading, by non-Freudian thinkers such as Descartes and Proust. What is common to all three of Descartes, Proust, and many non-Bersanian interpretations of Freud is the centrality of the relationship between knowledge and the self-other distinction; knowledge (of self or other), for all three, is the key to bridging the divide. Knowledge, in other words, names the quest to overcome difference through the illumination of what it is in others that I cannot currently access. This is precisely what is meant by the term *epistemophilia*, the deeply held belief that we relate to the world—to ourselves and others—by coming increasingly to know it.

Bersani does not see, therefore, anything other than a conservative project in these various attempts to theorize a divided self. “I want to argue,” he writes, “that the idea of a divided self prevents us from recognizing the syntax of an *undivided* self, a syntax that is, however, different from the logical order than now characterizes a now largely discredited notion of a unified self” (Bersani, *Thoughts and Things* 63). We have been “trained” to think of the conscious mind as necessarily adhering to a syntax characterized by a rigorous before-and-after, cause-and-effect temporality and logic; yet, as Freud describes in “A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men”, we are all aware of the way in which something “in the conscious, is found split into a pair of opposites often occurs in the unconscious as a unity” (quoted in Bersani, *Thoughts and Things* 63). What Bersani wants to insist upon is that the line dividing the conscious from the unconscious is not nearly so stable as some would characterize it. In fact, the very process of analysis can be seen as an exercise in “semantic discontinuities” and “logical leaps”, thus forcing us to posit the existence of this so-called “syntax of an *undivided* self”, a syntax that

Bersani sees as expressive of a “oneness of being” (*Thoughts and Things* 64).

Paradoxically, Bersani rejects both the Enlightenment concept of the unified, authoritative self *and* the divided self of which psychoanalysis has been considered most representative. Instead, he hypothesizes that the self is neither unified as a wholly autonomous being, nor is it subject to the occasional interjections of an irrational and illogical unconsciousness, the existence of which has often been metaphorized in the topos of depth. Instead, he proposes that the undivided self contains no depth—it has not buried its unconscious deep within itself but projects it outward and alongside the aspect of the self that has been trained in logic. The undivided self exists in a milieu of temporality, logic, and knowledge as well as the atemporal, the illogical, and the “epistemologically useless”; it can thus be considered superficial in the sense that nothing is concealed or contained, nothing is profound. Everything is available to be momentarily connected, we just need to be “retrained” to notice these connections when they occur.

*The Lost Daughter* presents an opportunity to be retrained in this way, for it offers us nothing that would be of any epistemological gain. And this lack of epistemological gain goes beyond the simple expression, repeated throughout the novel, that Leda “doesn’t know” why she took the doll or why she abandoned her children. Rather, the taking of the doll, when placed alongside what we want to read as a tragic tale of maternal abandonment, serves merely to trivialize the situation. To use Bersani’s words, the presence of the doll in the story “reveals nothing about the nature of being abandoned” nor, we might add, of abandoning (*Thoughts and Things* 66). What the doll *does* do is bring into relief the persistence of the past in the present and, in so doing,

serves as a continual reminder that our belief in the past as prior to the present is an illusion. Bersani calls “psychic time” the Freudian insight that “nothing in mental life is ever lost”; we do not move forward through time, leaving the past behind us as a series of unchanged events placed upon a continuum. When the novel moves toward its end by having Leda play, child-like, with the doll, it recalls the opening pages in which Leda fantasizes that she is still a child. What Bersani would want us to keep in mind is that such fantasizing is not separable from “real” life; Leda remains caught within that fantasy for the duration of the story. We can say, then, that what Leda does with the persistence of childish ignorance is simply to play. To play is to accept the senselessness, the opacity, the fundamental lack of certainty that come along with being thrown into the world, as a child, and never receiving the opportunity to grow up.

What *The Lost Daughter* offers Bersanian theory, then, is the chance to pay specific attention to the relationship between childhood and epistemophilia. A standard account of Freudian psychoanalysis would have us focus on the ways in which children successfully grow up. As Phillips puts it:

[F]rom a psychoanalytic point of view, it is when a child waits that he first begins to fantasize, and first begins to think that he knows. In his frustration he pictures his satisfaction; he, as psychoanalysts put it, imagines the breast when he is hungry as a self-cure for the dawning knowledge that he does not control the object who can satisfy him. Frustration can be borne only through a picture of satisfaction; in this account, knowledge is about frustration, about what is felt to be missing or lacking or absent. (*Missing Out* 166)

This account, which briefly summarizes what we could call the Kleinian version of psychoanalysis, sees knowledge as the child’s “way out” of uncertainty and displeasure—the two go hand in hand. Knowledge, in this view, is inevitable; “growing up” is another

way of saying “coming to know”. However, if we return to Oly’s description of childhood that was quoted at the beginning of this chapter, we can see how a simple flip of our expectations can enable us to look at the problem in a radically new way. What if the infant’s frustration was *not* assumed to lead him ineluctably toward knowledge? What if, like Leda, he remained caught in that moment of pure lack of understanding? What if the breast’s appearance or failure to appear was not integrated into a general theory the ambivalence between frustration/satisfaction, hate/love, but was felt by the child as simple bewilderment? The retrospective attribution to the child of a pre-existing schema for the integration of events into orderly knowledge is perhaps an adult fantasy, one that is told in order to uphold the adult’s belief in his own mastery but that bears no resemblance to the “darkness” of childhood that the adult can no longer recall. The significance of Leda’s fantasy of alarm is underscored by the fact that she herself is a mother; she possesses a double sense of the child’s failure to interpret and to understand because she, when faced with childhood from the perspective of mother, becomes aware that there exists at the end of childhood no such certainty. She is plunged back into that darkness. The mother is as insensate and as indifferent to the child as the child is to the fact of the mother’s existence; they are both caught by the inexplicable existence of both “wonder and pain”. They figure in each other precisely the lack of depth, ensured by lack of knowledge, that Bersani wishes us to pursue. What they have in common, what they *can* cling to in order to accept the senselessness of the world and of themselves, is the ability to play with a doll.

## Chapter 2

### **Mothering (and) the Virtual: Dreams, Anamnesis, Telepathy**

Published in 1987, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* changed the landscape of African American literature by, as Morrison herself put it in an interview with PBS NewsHour the same year, refusing to make the institution of slavery the centre of slave stories. Instead, in telling the story of Sethe, a fugitive slave mother who murdered her infant daughter rather than see her returned to slavery, Morrison focused the story on the complex interior lives of Sethe and the people around her. In this way, *Beloved* also changed the landscape of Western literary and cultural studies, for the novel initiated new ways of thinking about our ethical orientation to the past and its subjects as well as the ways in which we understand their legacy. In many ways, the novel is about history itself—what it means to remember, to mourn, to attempt to both live in the present and forge a vision for the future in the wake of unspeakable trauma—and has thus been put to use as both a lens for understanding the horrors of the past and a tool for making political demands in the present (see, for example, Patricia Ticineto Clough; Dean Franco; Avery Gordon; Gayle Greene; Richard Perez; and Nancy J. Peterson, amongst others). But beyond this historiographical consideration that centres around slavery, *Beloved* is also a disturbing meditation on motherhood—on the limits and deformations of mothering—within a milieu of violence, both physical and mental, so horrific that maternal love reaches its purest expression in the act of infanticide. *Beloved* is a fictionalized retelling of the real story of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who in 1856 attempted to kill—and

succeeded, in one case—her children when they were apprehended by U.S. Marshals acting on the authority of The Fugitive Slave Act. In the novel, Sethe's parallel act of violence against her second youngest daughter, called Beloved because of the one word engraved on her headstone, is the heart of the story and the cause, we eventually come to understand, of so many other losses and abandonments: Sethe's older sons leave their home because Beloved's ghost is haunting it; Denver, Sethe's youngest child, is terrified of both her mother and of leaving the boundary of their yard; Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, takes to her bed and dies following Beloved's death; and Sethe is shunned by the community of Black people in Cincinnati. However, the scene of infanticide itself is approached so obliquely that it refuses to take the position of narrative climax, thereby also refusing any voyeuristic desire for shocking violence that many readers might mistake as a desire for "witnessing". Instead, the novel loops around and around—limning but never fully illuminating—the scene in which Sethe cuts her daughters throat with a hacksaw, forestalling its portrayal until the story is more than halfway through by focusing instead on Sethe's daily "work of beating back the past" (*Beloved* 73). This task of "keeping the past at bay" proves difficult, however, when Paul D, a friend of hers from her days as a slave at a plantation called Sweet Home, shows up at the home she shares with Denver and immediately exorcises the "baby ghost" who haunts it. Shortly after Sethe and Paul D's reunion, Beloved, a young woman whom Sethe will eventually come to identify as the returned baby ghost, also appears at 124 Bluestone Road, dripping wet and with eyes only for Sethe.

*Beloved* has become part of the canon of Black studies by moving, as Stephen Best puts it, “the entire field of literary studies to a central place with African American studies ... With Morrisonian poetics as a guide, the black Atlantic provided a way to make history for those who had lost it and thus secured the recent rehabilitation of melancholy in cultural criticism” (68). Recounting what has now become an axiom within scholarship on *Beloved*, Best describes how the novel “resists a view of loss as the property of an immediate circle of kin and encourages us to claim that loss for ourselves. These are the historical ethics that underwrite ‘rememory’, Sethe’s idea that the slave past ‘is never going away’” (69). In pursuing a project of identifying an “unbelonging” at the heart of blackness, Best asks us to suspend our habit of thinking that the present is both explainable by and answerable to the past. “Why must we predicate having an ethical relation to the past on an assumed continuity between that past and our present and on the implicit consequence that to study the past is somehow to intervene in it?” (Best 64). Is it always the case, in other words, that attending to the past incorporates that past in ways that are “useful” to our understanding of the present? Is it possible to view the past without hoping it will contain explanatory power? For his part, Best turns to Bersani for help in articulating some of the counterintuitive ways we might begin to think about a sociality that does not depend upon certain entrenched narrative notions, the simplest of which being the belief that history unfolds as a series of related events building to a climax. In striving to locate ourselves somewhere along this narrative line—are we at the beginning of a new era? The middle? What are the central conflicts of our time and where do they originate? Are we at the climax? The denouement? Is this, in fact, the

apocalypse?—we recapitulate our individual histories in our attempts to historicize the world. This is a project that, perhaps since Freud, has come to be taken as axiomatic. But queer thinkers like Bersani have acknowledged that a certain “non-relationality between the past and the present” (Best 65) is an integral part of critiquing the dominant syntax of thinking that gives shape not only to gender and sexuality but to race as well—indeed, to the very notion of identity. By questioning the belief in a shared origin that has structured Black studies, Best has inadvertently hit upon the role that motherhood, as the expression of a structuring belief in both the origin and our painful separation from it, has played in the way that historical violences are incorporated into the present. From the perspective of Black studies, “[black] Atlantic history is a fantasy of relation that is not transmitted across time so much as embraced through the imagined origins of material from a vanished world” (Tamarkin 266-7). Only the repeated invocation of loss, conceived ultimately as separation from one’s origins, can sustain this fantasy, and only the disavowal of the existence of the origin can enable a shift away from what Best, drawing on Freud, terms melancholy and toward a present and future suffused with possibility. In the words of Orlando Patterson, whom Best quotes at length, “the path ahead lies not in myth making and in historical reconstruction”, but “in accepting the epic challenge of ... reality” (48). What Patterson means is that we must do away with the myth of the origin if we want to make space for radically new ways of relating to one another; what I would like to add is that we cannot do away with the myths of origins without also doing away with the myths of motherhood.

The sociologist Avery Gordon has also grabbed onto the idea of past loss as the ethical engine of the present, and it accomplishes this role through haunting which is, above all, a *demand*. “A disappearance is real only when it is apparitional”, Gordon writes,

because the ghost or the apparition is the principal form by which something lost or invisible or seemingly not there makes itself known or apparent to us. The ghost makes itself known to us through haunting and pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience as a recognition. Haunting recognition is a special way of knowing what happened or is happening ... [T]he ghost is alive, so to speak. We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory *out of a concern for justice*. Out of a concern for justice would be the only reason one would bother. (63-4)

Gordon’s description here of haunting suggests that the past “lives” in the present, and that any orientation toward the past is concerned with the “epistemological goal” of recovery or reparation (Best 73). Both Best and Gordon turn to *Beloved* as paradigmatic of the belief that haunting is a means of understanding the past’s relation to the present, and both see the novel as proposing an “accounting” or a “reckoning” with the past that is *demand*ed by the presence of a ghost. Sethe’s infant daughter, whose throat she cut in order to prevent her from being taken back into slavery, is the figure of the past who makes this demand: “[t]his ghost, Beloved, forces a reckoning: she makes those who have contact with her, who love and need her, confront an event in their past that loiters in the present” (Gordon 139). For his part, Best sees *Beloved* as forcing a reckoning not with her mother (or any of the other characters that come into contact with her) but with the *reader*, who, as Gordon describes earlier in her book, is drawn into a “structure of feeling” that demands justice: “For what else does the ghost’s ontology function, if not to

form a bridge between the book's characters and its readers and thus make the act of reading an act of judgment in (and of) the historical past?" (Best 78). The two accounts accord in their reading of *Beloved* as melancholic—as an expression of the Benjaminian backward-facing, palimpsestic view of history as the accumulation of moments leading to our present-day “wreckage” (“Theses on the Philosophy of History”)—but they disagree on what ought to be done with such a reading. While Gordon wishes to preserve and to emphasize a historical ethics of haunting “out of a concern for justice”, Best wants us to consider ways of thinking about the present that do not depend upon what he sees as the interminable paralysis engendered by a melancholic attachment to the past's recovery. Both perspectives are complicated by the possibility that it is not necessarily the past that makes demands upon the present but the present that makes corresponding—or competing—claims upon the past. As Rebecca Comay has put it, our efforts to discern a meaningful address that moves from past to present—to decipher the past's claim upon the present—might mean seeing meaning where there is none. Perhaps the demand itself—regardless of its content—is the “heritage” left to us from the past; perhaps there is no “patrimonial estate to settle, no treasure to be distributed” (Comay 5). This view echoes the profoundly influential work of Hortense Spillers, whose insistence upon the importance of the utter dispossession of slaves under an enforced but perverted matriarchy means that there is literally *nothing* to be “settled” or “distributed” in the present.

Comay's alternative way of conceiving the past's relation to the present—as a kind of non-relation in which “nothing” is communicated or willed—is one way of

understanding what is meant by “new” in Bersani’s abiding plea, following Foucault’s, for “new relational modes” (“Sociality and Sexuality” 641). The newness is given by the revolutionary potential inherent in this nothingness. More specifically, the nothingness is made possible by the dispossessed mother who must nonetheless forge a relationality—virtually if not actually—with the child that she “keeps safe” by removing from the old narrative order. Death matters very much here, but not in the usual way that is implied when we speak of heritages, inheritances, or hauntings. Can *Beloved*’s ghost be understood to be doing something *other* than haunting 124 Bluestone Road and everyone who lives in and enters it? Could she be signalling something *other* than the undying presence of the past, the “scene of the crime”? Could she represent not the lingering of the past within the present but something that cannot be adequately captured with the temporal rhetoric of “past” and “present” at all? These are the questions that guide my reading of *Beloved* as presenting a way of viewing the past without searching for origins, as well as a way of viewing motherhood as something that can be delinked from the role of narrative inauguration. As I develop my analysis around this effort to delink mothers from origins, I will turn to concepts that run (some centrally, some marginally) through psychoanalysis and into queer theory, but which have failed to be fully integrated because of their illogical, or para-logical, nature: anamnesis, the remembrance of something that is not in the past; telepathy, the transmission of thoughts external to the individual subject and with no recognizable medium for transmission; and, most significantly, Bersani’s understanding of both dreams and the virtual as expressions of a potentiality that is indifferent to the forward-marching, backward-facing passage of time as it is expressed in

our limited narrative logic. Beloved's ghost, and Sethe's relationship to her, makes possible a radically incongruous, virtual present that is unconcerned not only with past and future but also with the very distinction between self and other. I suggest that Sethe's relationship to Beloved is characterized by a generative and non-pathological indifference as well as by a virtuality that far exceeds the bounds of what is traditionally meant by haunting.

### *Beloved* and History

In the words of Stephen Best, *Beloved* “shape[d] the way an entire generation of scholars conceived its ethical relationship to the past. For a distinctive, if not singular, moment in the history of the interpretive disciplines, a novel managed to set the terms of the political and historiographic agenda” (68). In fact, we might say that, in the wake of *Beloved*, it is impossible to make political claims without addressing the historical imprint of the past, without seeing, in other words, the present as the determined cumulation of the past's damages and unrectified grievances. It is for this reason that most readings of *Beloved* focus on Sethe's effort to beat back the horrors of the past; as Dean Franco has noted, there is a “slide from history to literature” in the study of *Beloved* (418), from looking to an archive for clues about historical truth to looking at literature for that truth's “reimagining”. There is also a “slide” from author to character, as some readers conflate Morrison's theory of history with aspects of Sethe's “rememory”, her idiom for the continued, real presence of historical events in both time and space and the involuntary way in which they insert themselves unbidden into awareness, where they both become

subject to revision and revise the subject who remembers, sometimes radically so. “The idea that everything that’s ever happened is still somewhere out there is truly terrifying,” writes Gayle Green; “[h]owever, Morrison shows that even a past as horrific as [slavery] is not fixed but open to revision by ‘rememory’” (99). In this view, Sethe’s conviction that the past is waiting out there for her, or for her children, is the expression of the author’s conviction that the past both seizes and is seized by us; “[f]or Sethe as for her author ... to ‘rememory’ is to use one’s imaginative power to realize a latent, abiding connection to the past” (Rody 101). In other words, what is literally true for Sethe within the context of the novel—the past is really “out there” and what is dead still exists in real, corporeal form—is a trope for a historiography that utilizes imagination in service of “realizing” the ways in which the past is *not* past but maintains an enduring legacy in the present. What this means, for a certain critical approach literary and cultural studies, is that the task of historicization is to make apparent the counterintuitive fact that what *appears* to be behind us continues to inflect our present, that the fallout of past events continue to reverberate through time and, most importantly, that there *never will be* a time at which point we may say slavery—or any past trauma—is safely in the past, unable to reach out and grab hold of us. This is Ta-Nehisi Coates’s point in “The Case for Reparations”, in which he argues that “no number can fully capture the multi-century plunder of black people in America. Perhaps the number is so large that it cannot be imagined, let alone calculated and dispensed ... [But a]n America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane” (71). In other words, there is a moral need to shed light upon the crimes of the past not so that we may cut a reparative

check to the victims and close the case, but so that an ongoing ethical grappling with the question of the past's relation to the present is maintained, a grappling that, it is hoped, will open onto a future in which certain harms may be reduced or even averted rather than becoming so mired in the past as to become paralyzed. What many readings of *Beloved* share with Sethe's rememory is precisely this struggle to navigate the opposition between melancholia, or a paralyzing turn toward the past, and the need to remember in order to "heal", and the novel itself has been characterized as a "bridge of restitution or healing" (Rody 97) that parallels Sethe's own reckoning with the past in order to turn to the future. History as memory and history as ethical reckoning—both of which are captured, as Avery Gordon has emphasized, by the term *haunting*—have become, since *Beloved*, the central tropes of any critical historical project, especially those that fall in and around Black studies, as these therapeutic readings are conceived as part of a broader historical and political effort to heal from the trauma of slavery. "In *Beloved*," writes Linda Krumholz, "Morrison constructs a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and a historical or national process" (395). When the novel ends with Beloved being exorcised one final time, and with Sethe's tentatively hopeful turn toward Paul D and the future he imagines with her, it is possible to see redemption for Sethe—though it is a redemption that admits, finally, the inability of the present to fully repair the wounds of the past. The "healing" that Sethe undergoes is just enough to allow her this tentative and exploratory future-orientation.

However, it is important to note that expiation is not the goal of reparations nor of "reparative reading"; redemption does not cancel guilt, but it may make living with guilt

possible. It is therefore not Sethe's guilt at having killed her daughter but Sethe *herself*, Sethe's claim to selfhood, that forms the redemptive arc of *Beloved*. For although Beloved returns to Sethe and, in some ways, allows Sethe a second chance, so to speak, at mothering her, it is not possible for Sethe and Beloved to linger in their relation to one another. It is here where the question of motherhood arises, and this is where I will aim the focus of this chapter. As Caroline Rody puts it, "[w]hy should we be brought to reimagine [slavery] through the prism of a haunting, passionate, violent, and ultimately unresolved relationship between a mother and daughter?" (93). Beloved's reappearance in Sethe's life—first as an invisible baby ghost, then as an adult woman—instantiates a relationality that has been described as dangerous or pathological; locked inside their home, Sethe and Beloved enact a version of "love" that eventually comes to terrify Denver, sending her outside the home in search of help for her mother. The pathology here seems to stem from Sethe's obsessive need to make up for what she did to Beloved, a need that "stunt[s] or even obviate[s] [Sethe's] individuation or sense of self" (Demetrakopoulos 51). As Denver observes, Beloved's desperation for Sethe and her tyrannical demands upon her result in a terrible transformation: "Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child, for other than those times when Beloved needed her, Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became" (*Beloved* 250). It is almost as if, to punish Sethe for the "teeth" of the saw that consumed her infant throat, Beloved is re-enacting and reversing the scene of "eating", the self's consumption of the other. The drama that plays out between them seems, in Denver's estimation, to be precisely a struggle over selfhood, a struggle that

began between Sethe and her owners and was then transferred to her relation with Beloved, making clear the ways in which maternity, in the novel, is imbricated within a system of slavery that transformed selfhood into property:

Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it ... Yet she knew Sethe's greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning—that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant—what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life—Beloved might leave. Leave before Sethe could make her realize ... [t]hat anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. (251)

If Sethe made the impossible decision to “drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin”, it is because she couldn't bear for Beloved to be dirtied in that way, to be deprived of having a self. When the white abolitionist Lucy Stone said about Margaret Garner, “If in her deep maternal love she felt the impulse to send her child back to God, to save it from coming woe, who shall say she had no right to do so?” (Furth 38), she meant that the umbrella of “maternal love” could, under certain dire conditions, be stretched to include the act of infanticide. And yet, this understanding or sympathy that we have for Sethe/Margaret Garner, this conviction that in her “deep maternal love” it became possible to kill in order to protect, does not account for some of the nuances in Sethe and Beloved's relationship that have remained unfolded within the extant criticism. We may be able to understand Sethe's decision, we may even see it as the only right thing to do. Perhaps we agree with Denver that Sethe's diminishment is Beloved's way of “making her pay”, and that Beloved's final disappearance—following Denver's enlistment of

thirty Black women to save her mother—was necessary for Sethe’s tentatively hopeful questioning, “Me? Me?”, that shy and unpracticed claim of selfhood in the wake of enslavement and the unthinkable violence that had been wreaked upon her, that she had been forced to wreak. In the words of Baby Suggs, perhaps “laying down” *Beloved* was what Sethe needed, finally, to have a self, to have a future. But what has not been questioned is the value of the selfhood that is, finally claimed by Sethe, and what Sethe and *Beloved*’s relationship makes available to the process of questioning this value that is specific to Sethe’s maternity. Why should we be brought to reimagine slavery through the prism of a mother-daughter relationship? Because it is precisely this relationship—in all of its “devouring” pathology—that enables us to see that selfhood and property go hand-in-hand, that an alternative relationality divorced from this version of selfhood *as* property undermines the logic and the relationality of slavery in a way far more radical than Sethe’s “healing” claim of “Me?” ever could. In this chapter, I am interested in unfolding an alternative maternal relationality from the novel that, while not negating the dominant readings of the novel, eschews both the notions of haunting and healing. Of course, amidst the brutality of slavery, in which no slave mother is guaranteed any amount of time with her children, the need—and the love—that exists between Sethe and hers takes on a completely different form than the one produced by white Western culture. *Beloved* therefore demands a theorization of maternity through the lens of slavery, a lens that enables us to see clearly how the link between love and motherhood is wholly contingent, and how a mother’s need to protect and love her children might mean killing them (Rose 92). However, what I want to consider here is how the very meaning

of “love” in the novel is radically different from that which conventional notions of “motherly love” allow. The “love” that exists between Sethe and Beloved names a relationality wholly at odds with “maternal love” by being wholly, radically open to the diminishment of selfhood.

My reading of *Beloved* thus sits somewhere to the side of both the dominant treatment of the novel as expressing a theory of history as haunting and historiography as healing and Stephen Best’s criticism of this theorization on the basis of what he sees as the failure of Black studies, loosely held together as it is, to accomplish much more than a kind of melancholic paralysis rooted in the desire to “[recover] a ‘we’ at the point of ‘our’ violent origin” (132). I do not deny Best’s view that *Beloved* offers a primarily melancholic view of history, or that it expresses the desire to locate the “violent origin” of Black subjectivity. I also do not deny studies of the novel that have characterized it as a redemptive or reparative historical intervention, a memorialization that therapeutically confronts the painful past and makes freedom and futurity possible. However, I believe that there remain theoretical folds within the novel that have yet to be fully explored, and that these folds point to possibilities that bump up against and run through prior readings. Not only does *Beloved* figure an important intervention in African American history; not only does it make visible the contours of Black womanhood and motherhood within the context of slavery and its aftermath; it *also* enables a critique of some of the concepts that are most firmly—and most invisibly—embedded within a cultural matrix that continues to make systemic racism—and other institutional violences—possible. These concepts are, as I explore in this chapter, expressed every time the words *love* and *self* are

uncritically used to refer to the personalizing, narrative arc of history, both personal and collective, that *begins* with a mother. In the pages that follow, I will further lay the groundwork for my interest in *Beloved* and will outline the Bersanian concepts that both inform, and are in turn informed by, my reading of the novel. In short, I will examine Sethe's relationship with Beloved not as a conflict to be overcome by Sethe's hopeful reclamation of selfhood at the novel's end, but as the expression of a maternal relationality that undoes the conventional narrative temporality of haunting and makes possible a new "relational mode" that radically eschews the link between selfhood and property—a link that is obviously implicated in the very structure and possibility of systems of chattel slavery, the threat of which is hardly gone so long as "property" remains the primary way in which we think of our claims to selfhood and to social life.

My focus in this chapter moves one degree closer to the novel and examines the specific interplay of relationality between Sethe and Beloved, a relationality that is at once formed and deformed by the unspeakable violence of slavery and that also, I argue, is productive of a marronage altogether different from the kind Sethe effected in physically escaping Sweet Home. Such a marronage emerges out of a radical movement away from the organizing logic and syntax—engendered in a narrative temporality that relentlessly seeks an origin in order to illuminate a future—that makes possible the individualizing selfhood that Bersani critiques. In this way, I propose that Beloved as ghost enacts something other than a haunting, and that Sethe as mother enacts something other than motherly love as it is conventionally understood. Together, they enter, fleetingly, into a virtual relationality that has no respect for temporality—that is, for

beginnings and ends, causes and effects—and that bears no resemblance to the individualizing, sacrificial love that continues to operate as the metric of motherhood.

Not Mine and Not Yours, Either

Readings of *Beloved* that wish to bridge past and future in a narrative of healing or redemption do not grasp the critique of such narrative temporality that inheres in the story. In the reading that I am about to advance, I will focus on the ways in which Sethe's relation to Beloved ruptures any temporality that would make reparations possible, and it does so by radically upsetting the twin notions of selfhood and maternal love that undergird the very epistemological structure that made—and continues to make—slavery possible in the first place. Before returning to Bersani and a more thorough discussion of Stephen Best's use of Bersanian theory to develop what he calls an "unhistoricism" latent within Black studies, I will turn to an essay of singular importance in the establishment of a Black feminism that arose from the specific theorization of Black motherhood. Just a few months prior to the publication of *Beloved* in 1987, Hortense Spillers published "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe", an essay in which she critically examines the meanings of both "mother" and "female" in the context and wake of American slavery. "Mama's Baby" is principally concerned with the 1964 Moynihan Report, in which the catalyst for Black poverty in the United States was identified as the deterioration of the "Negro family" following the enforced matriarchy of slavery. Spillers' argument hinges on the grammatical non-commensurability of terms like "motherhood", "female", and "woman" when applied to enslaved subjects; within the institution of slavery, Black fathers were

often entirely absent (in name if not in actuality) and white fathers were all-too-present in the form of the slave master who simultaneously denied his genetic link to and claimed his ownership over enslaved children. The mother—the only figure in this “familial” arrangement who could be said to be truly present—had no expectation as to the duration of time with, or the eventual fate of, her child. In what sense, then, can such a relation be described as “motherhood”? When one is not even gendered as female but is considered as genderless and sexless as breeding stock, what comes from the radically unconventional and precarious maternal relation that nonetheless exists? With every other form of Black relationality being made impossible, the maternal relation was undeniable though hardly recognizable; it thus formed the ground for a relational potentiality that was not, and perhaps still is not, understood or accounted for.

Spillers’ insight into the conditions of maternity under slavery is that the status of Black women is so unaccounted for by “American grammar”—including the lexicon and syntax of gender, sexuality, and maternity—that it is uniquely positioned to “rupture violently the laws of American behavior that make such syntax possible” (79). The relationality engendered in Black maternity is radically non-normative, or, we might say, *queer* in the sense of having no coherent relationship to the terms of the heterosexual family—terms that are normally thought of as inherently aligned—as the institution that grounds white relationality. In an attempt to develop a language with which to theorize not only the “captive body” in general, stripped as it was of any of the privileges of gender, sexuality, or personality in its transformation into property, but more specifically the *maternal* captive body as a site of a uniquely disjointed and grammatically illegible

subjectivity, Spillers laid the groundwork for a radical critique of white hegemonic culture that depends upon the existence of the slave mother's impossible relation to her child. The title of the essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" refers precisely to this dimension of the logic of slavery: slave fathers were systematically erased from the slave family, but the mother obtained a relation to her child that was simultaneously legally denied and genetically confirmed. In short, it is this logical impossibility of slave motherhood that stands to rupture the very coherence of the Family as we know it. As Alexander G. Weheliye puts it, "Mama's Baby" allows us to

register that in addition to the unremitting possibility of familial bonds rupturing as a result of their equation with property relations, the hieroglyphics of the flesh also throw a wrench in any steadfast divisions between property, gender, violence, and sexuality; not only can family structures be invaded by property relations at any given moment in this American grammar book of the flesh, but property circulates in a thoroughly libidinal economy. In other words, those defacing assemblages of the flesh ought to be recognized as putting under erasure the pronouns *she* and *he* as well as their attendant gender-sexuated baggage claims at the same time as they kindle a pansexual, or rather, queer potential within this field. (96-7)

Weheliye's point here is to emphasize Spillers' insistence that the "invasion" of property relations—the dismantling of relationality by the transformation of its constituents into objects of possession—necessarily entails the production of an inhuman fleshly canvas upon which virtually any libidinal passion may find its expression. Importantly, however, Spillers also drives home the point that, to the extent that any Black relationality can be said to have formed within and following the violence of slavery, it has done so through the endurance—however fleeting, deformed, or impossible—of Black maternity.

Spillers' use of the terms "syntax" and "grammar" refers to the organizing logic of a language that links up "selfhood" and "property" and thereby lays the groundwork for

the yoking of Black motherhood to the machine that reproduces an economy in which selves can be transformed into slaves and back again. The “potentiality” inherent in Black subjectivity, then, is centred around maternity because:

1) Motherhood as female blood-rite is outraged, is denied, at the *very same time* that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment; [and] 2) a dual fatherhood is set in motion, comprised of the African father’s *banished* name and body and the captor father’s mocking presence. In this play of paradox, only the female stands *in the flesh*, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, *out* of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject. (80, emphasis in original)

For Spillers, motherhood is the *only* certainty within a system that denies any possibility of enduring social and kinship bonds. But even motherhood, despite its genetic undeniability, is no guarantee of anything other than the propagation of the slaveholder’s property. Maternity under conditions of enslavement is thus a powerful paradox; the offspring of an enslaved mother belongs not to the mother, nor is it genetically or socially related to its owner. Enslaved mothers are the mothers of orphans. It is for this reason that motherhood, irrespective of gender and sexuality, is the source of the insurgent potential Spillers identifies. Whereas slavery “transform[ed] *personality* into *property*” (Spillers 78), the rebellious maternal subjectivity that stands to be gained reverses the process by reclaiming “personality”. Spillers’ identification of maternity—or “Mother Right”, as she calls it—as the radical predicate of Black empowerment is, in short, the result of her assessment that the patriarchy enforced by slavery is, “by definition, a negating feature of human community” (80). By negating human community, the Black mother and her

orphaned offspring do not ask for inclusion within the white, heteronormative family but for its transformation.

The articulation of this negative or anti-social position anticipates what would shortly emerge as an aspect of queer theory, and in this sense both the Black feminism endorsed by Spillers and the queer theory of Bersani share some overlap: they both suggest that a non-identitarian, non-communitarian relationality is that which rebels against a dominant relationality that trades in the opposition erected between personality and property. As James Bliss puts it in an essay on Black feminism and queer theory, much of the critical purchase of queerness as it has been theorized under the banner of “Queer Theory” is indebted to the work of Black feminists such as Spillers, Deborah McDowell, and Ann DuCille, each of whom has theorized the critique of sexuality that inheres in Blackness. For example, Bliss rightfully points out how the popular “antisocial” queer theory of Lee Edelman, in which Edelman calls for a rejection of future-oriented rhetoric on the basis of its perceived complicity with reproductive heterosexuality, is blind to the fact that Black reproduction has always already been denied futurity—and that this lack of futurity has been extensively and powerfully theorized by Black women. “Reproduction without futurity”, in other words, describes the “queer capacity of Blackness to reproduce without being productive and to orient lives extimate—simultaneously internal and external—to sociality” (Bliss 86). It is in this sense that Bersani’s queer project, though it, too, neglects the question of race and its own indebtedness to Black feminism, stands in closer proximity to the work of Spillers; unlike Edelman, Bersani does not locate the critical power of queerness in non-reproduction.

Quite the opposite: Bersani maintained an interest in what he termed “repetition”, a non-*productive* relationality that, rather than rejecting outright the existence of the family, diverts the meaning and legibility of alternative forms of familial relations with the express aim of bringing about a nonviolent future. Both Bersani and Spillers cast relationality as a grammar, a system of interlocking terms and their syntactical organization, that makes certain violences possible. A nonviolent relationality interrupts violence at the grammatical level, and this way of understanding a system like slavery, and a theory such as queerness, enables a new way of thinking about the temporal quality of its endurance. “What if,” Jared Sexton asks, “slavery does not die, as it were, because it is immortal, but rather because it is non-mortal, because it has *never* lived, at least not in the psychic life of power? What if the source of slavery’s longevity is not its resilience in the face of opposition, but the obscurity of its existence? Not the accumulation of its political capital, but the illegibility of its grammar?” (15). In conceiving the power of slavery as a grammar or an organizing logic rather than as an historical event that sets off, like dominoes, the unfolding of its own legacy, thinkers like Spillers and Sexton focus our attention on the task of making legible an alternative grammar, a disordered and disordering syntax. Maternity names the site at which it becomes possible for that alternative syntax to make the transition from illegible to legible.

Spillers’ essay points to a non-productive reproduction named Black maternity that is inherently at odds with the structure of heterosexuality precisely because it has no grammatical legibility within it. By describing a maternity that is radically delinked from both past and future, she names both the wound of slavery and the site of slavery’s own

undoing; the slave mother is both denied access to the logic of the social world that produced her, but she possesses her own insurgent logic. However, whereas Spillers sees empowerment as the process of reclaiming personality—a personality that is transferred, we might say, from slaveholder back to the enslaved in the moment of freedom—Stephen Best, whose theorization of Blackness supplements Black studies with Bersanian insight, argues that there can be no regaining, recovery, or repair in the wake of slavery, and that it is precisely this disruption of temporal logic that describes the transformative potential of Blackness. In Best's view, the very notion that slavery can be understood as a struggle between the total destruction of personhood on the one hand and the heroic reclamation of personhood on the other—what he describes as total social death versus creative agency, respectively—is inadequate to the history of slavery and Blackness. Instead, he argues for an historical approach to slavery that does not depend upon a logic of redemption in which the present is construed as the pinnacle of the processual unfolding of historical time. There is no continuous temporal bridge linking “now” to “then”; nothing is “reclaimed” or “regained”. “The point” of such a historical project, Best writes,

is to see in our severance from figures in the past, to see in their opacity, the idea that they are present to us in the only way they can be, and thus to be acknowledged, but not to be known. In that severance, in that frustration of our desire to know them, we discover that we might potentially share with them and learn, in turn, in a way we hadn't before, how their condition is like ours. (99)

In this way, Best exhorts Black studies scholars to accept a radical discontinuity between past and present, but a discontinuity that can be generative nonetheless in the ways in which it opens unpredictable connections to the present, illuminating patterns of

sameness that can fuel the emergence of a (new?) Black subjectivity without *causing* it. If we apply Best's take to Spillers', it becomes possible to see in her characterization of "personality" and "property" as antithetical categories an adherence to the same, fruitless interpretive stance that pits "totality" (the social death or statuslessness of the slave) against "creativity" (the agentic reclamation of personhood). In my view, the tension between Spillers' insistence upon maternity as the insurgent ground of Black subjectivity and Best's insistence upon a non-communitarian disjuncture between the slave past and the Black present is a productive one. If we look at the apparent opposition between personality and property that Spillers describes as a structural relation—that is, if we see the two terms as being held together by the same "grammar", such that one term only has meaning when it is placed alongside the other—we might begin to theorize more cogently how it is that maternity threatens an insurgent relationality. I suggest that *personality* is intimately related to *property* such that the only insurgence (Black) maternity stands to enact is one that renders both irrelevant. In other words, the interruption of a grammar that makes it possible for "personality" to be transformed into "property" necessarily entails that both categories cease to function symbolically. A world without property is a world in which the self, as the possessor of an authentic and authoritative, profound yet knowable personality, ceases to exist. The radical power of Spillers' essay lies in her attention to the fact that Black maternity is not one form of maternity amongst others (not, to borrow from Jennifer C. Nash's critique of intersectionality, part of the "etc." in a list of maternal categories [queer, disabled, Black, etc.]), but the "scandal to categories that makes categorization possible (Bliss, "Black Feminism" 740).

It is impossible, with Spillers in mind, to view Black maternity, expressed literarily in the form of Sethe, as an injury that is healed when Black families are brought into the domain of the white patriarchal family. It is also impossible to critique the hegemony of the family, *and* the family's mutually supportive relationship to a field of relationality characterized by the dualism personality/property, without attending to the "scandal to categories" that is slave motherhood. For slave motherhood exists where neither property nor personality make sense, where one has a maternal relation to an orphan and where one's maternity has no claim to duration, yet it cannot be annulled by death; when Sethe murdered her infant daughter to prevent her from being taken back into slavery, she refused the dictates of both property and personality precisely by refusing the relationship between the two terms. While some readings of *Beloved* have focused on how infanticide, in this case, was a rebellious act of property destruction, we would be remiss to understand it purely in these terms. Instead, *Beloved's* death can be understood not as a destruction of but a withdrawal from the "grammar" that makes the very phrase "property destruction" meaningful. However, her death cannot be understood as the violent enactment of a "Mother-Right", either, for Sethe could no longer mother *Beloved*, at least not in any recognizable way. In killing her child, Sethe moved her completely out of the field of relations in which the very notions of "property" and "personality" circulate and make sense, making both conventional motherhood and chattel slavery impossible. When Sethe thus describes the murder as an act of putting *Beloved* where she would be safe (200), she is not only displaying the distorted thoughts of a mother so desperate to save her child from a life of slavery that death becomes

preferable; she is also describing the total rupture of death as a removal from the violence that is made possible by an individualizing investment in personality that safeguards its potential transformation into property. In killing the child, she destroys not the slave owner's property, nor her own claim to motherhood, but the very relation between the two. By articulating a motherhood that has no regard for the personality of the child—for the existence of something *in* the individual child that constitutes its “mineness”, the thing that makes it possible for a mother to say “my child”, for a slaveowner to say “my property”, and for a child to learn to say “myself”; a sense, in other words, of the preciousness of both self and other that is expressed in the language of possession<sup>5</sup>—

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<sup>5</sup> In an analysis of *Wuthering Heights*, Bersani describes the relationship between personality and property as being guaranteed by *family*. Heathcliff, the orphan, the “unrecognizable ‘other’ who has no origins”, desperately seeks control over the familial relations between the Earnshaws and the Lintons: “His perverse strategy is to exaggerate the family’s natural tendency to exclude everything foreign to itself. He transforms the familial enclosure into a familial prison, and the man to whom nothing belonged becomes the hoarder, the avaricious guardian of family properties” (*A Future for Astyanax* 221). The family as we know it is the guarantor of property; when we draw things—others—into familial relation to one another, we are simultaneously drawing the lines of property. Heathcliff, the orphan, becomes dangerous only insofar as he claws with both hands for the thing that has been denied him: family. This is one way of conceiving Spillers’ claim of insurgent Black maternity; it is insurgent only insofar as it *sustains* its relation to a constituent orphanhood, to a lack of origins. By refusing the temptation of the white familial institution, Blackness refuses the “avaricious” grasping for the “familial property” *par excellence*: the personalities of the individual family members. A self that is *not* self-possessed “is a self which has renounced not only the closed circle of family repetitions, but also the limiting definitions of individuality” (212). In *Wuthering Heights*, “[t]he visible destruction of *this* body [Heathcliff’s or Catherine Earnshaw’s], with its all too particular history, is the condition for being nothing in particular, the ambiguous license to roam eternally in other bodies and other histories” (213). A similar logic is at play in *Beloved*; the destruction of Beloved’s infant body is the condition for the renunciation of both personality and property, both of which seek to enclose the specific and particular parameters of objects that can then become yoked to one another in familial arrangement. In the end, as this chapter explores, Beloved’s death is the “license” for her escape from property-relations, for her being “nothing in particular”.

Sethe enacts the insurgent maternity alluded to by Spillers, a maternity that has nothing to say, that is mute, uncomprehending and incomprehensible, within the matrix of relationality that makes the very existence of personality dependent upon property. In other words, the infant Beloved was caught between competing but parallel violent desires: the desire of the slave master to repossess his valuable property, and the desire of a mother who *also* wants to repossess her valuable property. In an act of remarkable good faith, Sethe realizes that death is the only truly nonviolent solution to the problem, in the sense that killing Beloved destroys not just property but the property relation that made it possible for both Sethe and Beloved to be transformed into slaves. The grammar tying “personality” and “property” to one another is undone when the physical manifestation of competing property claims—Beloved’s individual body—is destroyed. Importantly, however, Beloved’s death does *not* destroy Sethe’s maternal relation to her. Rather, it persists in a form and according to a logic that stands completely at odds with everything we think we know about motherhood. Death becomes, in *Beloved*, not a weapon or tool for violent domination, not a personal and collective tragedy, but a trope for rendering legible a radically alternative relationality—or an alternative grammar governing relationality—that is made uniquely available in Sethe’s relation to Beloved.

The theorization of death as a fundamental aspect of maternity is thus warranted by both Spillers’ essay and the novel *Beloved*, and the connection between the two is also gestured toward, as we will see, by Bersani. Beloved’s death renders the grammatical coin, comprised of personality on the one side and property on the other, irrelevant in a way that extends beyond herself. For when, in the moments immediately after the murder,

Schoolteacher realizes there is “nothing there to claim” (referring not only to the dead child but also to Sethe), he is admitting that Beloved’s death rendered Sethe, too, outside the field in which claims to property make sense. Beloved’s death entailed Sethe’s death, made her a “nothing”, made “claim” an impossibility. Bersani makes a very similar argument about death’s ability to usher in this radically negative state of being “nothing to claim” in *The Culture of Redemption*. Selfhood, he claims in the book’s prologue, is a “sacrosanct value”, “a value that may account for human beings’ extraordinary willingness to kill in order to protect the seriousness of their statements. The self is a practical convenience; promoted to the status of an ethical ideal, it becomes a sanction for violence” (4). *The Culture of Redemption* represents Bersani’s attempt to de-emphasize the sanctity of the self by de-emphasizing the belief that the present can redeem the past. Several aspects of the thesis he presents here are important to the story of Sethe and Beloved, particularly in his discussion of death and Marcel Proust. Both death and maternity—though, in characteristic fashion, Bersani only briefly touches upon the latter, which remains largely unexamined within the broader theory—are described by Bersani as aesthetic elements that divert our attention away from ourselves and toward others, not as objects of our curious desire but as non-enigmatic (i.e. non-concealing) phenomena with whom we share only temporary, unpredictable affinities and correspondences. That is to say, it is a specifically nonviolent (i.e. non-desirous) attention that becomes possible when both death and maternity compel us to understand the relation between past and present as irreparably disconnected from one another. Bersani’s argument hinges upon a passage in *À la recherche du temps perdue* in which the narrator describes the

“involuntary memory” of his deceased grandmother as a kind of “resurrection”. Bersani sees a “painful contradiction” inherent in this memory: “On the one hand, the possession of others is only possible when they are dead; only then is nothing opposed to our image of them. Biological death accomplishes, or literalizes, the annihilation of others that Proust tirelessly proposes as the aim of our interest in others ... And yet there is of course a real loss” (*The Culture of Redemption* 7-8). For Bersani, the self that is so deeply entrenched within familial relations, the self that epitomizes heterosexuality in its unceasing yearning to overcome otherness through knowledge, paradoxically desires to “annihilate” the other (or at least the other’s difference) while simultaneously depending on being seen and desired by that other. This is why the “real loss” of Marcel’s grandmother occasions another, less tolerable loss: the loss of Marcel himself, as he was held in the desirous imagination of his grandmother.

In Marcel’s description of his “involuntary memory”, it is “by no means certain that it is the grandmother herself who has been lost, since her death is seen primarily as having deprived Marcel of himself” (ibid.). Marcel laments not only the loss of his grandmother but also, and more significantly, the loss of *himself* to her, the reduction of himself to “nothingness” because his grandmother’s memories and perceptions of him have now been annihilated. The loss of self that is occasioned by the death of the other is precisely that which Bersani grabs hold of to launch his critique of the impulse to redeem the past, an impulse that converges with the impulse to “reduce the world to a reflection of the desiring subject”:

[D]eath ... would seem to be the condition for an escape from the self-repetitions initiated by desire and a restoring to the world of those differences that promoted

anxious desire in the first place. From this perspective, death recreates ...  
Marcel's exhilarated shock ... at discovering his own absence from the world.  
Death experienced within an involuntary memory thus helps to define  
involuntary memory as a kind of death. (8-9)

What Bersani means here is that the intrusion of involuntary memories of others' deaths occasions a death of the self, a radically unsettling awareness of one's own "absence from the world" that is enacted in our awareness that, for the other who no longer exists, our image also no longer exists—we are nothing to them. For Bersani, the specificity of "involuntariness" simply names the suddenness of the intrusion of this realization, that the annihilation of the other *also* annihilates us in the sense that we may as well not have existed, for we have already left no trace. It is, in other words, a sudden, repeated event by which we connect, momentarily, to the absoluteness of the annihilation that is death, as well as, moreover, the fact that this annihilation does not await us in some impossible-to-imagine future but is the enduring condition for our very existence. At any given moment we have, in a sense, already died, we are as good as already dead, for the world that we imagine to be the container of our individual existence has always already passed away. With the emergence of this awareness, the world can no longer function spectrally as the mirror that always reflects us back to ourselves, nor can it operate as an enigma concealing hidden depths we desire to mine. When the other dies, we, too, are no longer there and the world takes on a new aspect. In being no longer reflective *and* no longer profound, the world can be encountered as pure phenomena, that is, as timeless and virtual rather than realized in temporally determined ways. That is to say that for Bersani, death, when it is involuntarily remembered as opposed to forming the object of our will as, for example, it does in the field of sexuality (which is another way of saying the

family, the nursery of violence that finds one of its expressions in the institution of slavery), harbours the potential for virtual similarities to be perceived. The world, in this view, is not the container of the self nor the mirror of the self, but the extension of the self. “Pure phenomena” is simply the name Bersani gives to a world that is held together by nothing more than a field of mutually coextensive objects and their potential arrangements. “Virtuality” is the name for these potential arrangements, the infinite potential manifestations of various alignments and correspondences that are *possible* but which have no inherent reason to become *actual*.

“Homosex” is the name Bersani gives to the ability of some queer correspondences to open up these virtual vistas of alternative relationality. As Mikko Tuhkanen puts it, “[i]f we can get beyond our devastation by the pleasures of projective masochism [i.e. ‘normal’ sexuality], it is in the ‘slantwise’ movement that cuts across narratives, bringing out what has remained ‘virtual’ in representation” (*Leo Bersani* 177); the virtual is rendered perceptible, in other words, when “straight” narrative logic is disrupted by the illogical. In one discussion of Proust, Bersani considers the emergence of the virtual as a specifically maternal lesson, suggesting that maternity is one form this “slantwise movement” of “homosex” can take. In the scene in which Marcel’s grandmother is “resurrected” in his memory, his mother attempts to distract him from his suffering by pointing out the window towards the beach; this example of “nonsexual intimacy” (Bersani, “Rigorously” 284) is a brief but powerful moment in which the merest gesture to the side of his grief constitutes a “slantwise movement” across the narrative that diverts Marcel’s fixation on the “irremediable loss of self” that is

occasioned by his grandmother's death. The tension in the scene arises from the struggle between "self-possession" on the one hand—the belief in the sanctity of the self and the passionate suffering Marcel feels at its loss—and the "rediversification of the world" that occurs when the self relinquishes its claim of ownership over itself and instead sees the self and others as depthless phenomena that merely exist alongside one another (Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* 8). Marcel's mother's quiet pointing is the opportunity for Marcel's attention to make this shift:

But while she thus encourages a lateral mobility away from her and from the hotel room and toward the sea, the beach, the sunrise, Marcel sees *behind* the sea, the beach, and the sunrise the spectacle of Albertine at Montjouvain with Mlle. Vinteuil. However little Marcel appears to attend to it, we may nonetheless consider the mother's gesture as an instructive reminder of the power of appearances to defeat what may be imagined to lie "behind" them. Or ... we could say that Marcel's mother seeks to distract him from his hallucinated transcendence of phenomena and thereby to point, ultimately, to *the possibility of pursuing not an art of truth divorced from experience, but of phenomena liberated from the obsession with truth.* (*The Culture of Redemption* 26, emphasis in original)

This "maternal lesson" in lateral mobility, the enactment of which stands to divest the world of "symbolic significance" or hidden truths, is seen by Bersani as an act that "fortifies the resistance" of both the world and others to "the violence of symbolic investment" (28). In other words, maternity is seen here as the gesture directing our attention to the side of our personalizing investments, a direction that is conducive to nonviolence precisely because it encourages encounters with the world that are not subordinate to the violence of our desire to *know*. "Phenomena liberated from the obsession with truth" stand, in other words, to inform a relationality that is liberated from the violence of desire. They mark the occasion, we might say, of a relationality that is radically nonviolent—or at least potentially so—and, significantly, this occasion is

brought about by the confluence of death, involuntary memory, and maternity. All three of these things combine to first annihilate our individualizing attachment to our own personality and then to direct our attention laterally as opposed to temporally; death is the opportunity to attend to the phenomenal present—to be relinquished from the violent desires of self-possession—rather than to a past that is understood as “nothing more than the self that lived it” (Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* 9). Maternity is the gesture that attempts to direct us toward this opportunity. It is perhaps clear by now how it is that Bersani’s reading of Proust will inform my reading of *Beloved*.

I do not propose, however, to merely lift Bersani’s reading of Proust and lay it atop *Beloved* as though the two texts—Proust’s and Morrison’s—are perfect analogues of one another. They *are* analogous in many ways, but *Beloved* enables a theorization of the productive constellation formed by death, involuntary memory, and maternity that Bersani’s reading, like Marcel’s mother, only gestures toward. In fact, we might consider Bersani’s gesture here as maternal; amidst the tragedy that is *Beloved*’s death, Bersani gently points us to the side, not to the melancholic compulsion to understand Sethe’s impossible choice and to resurrect the ghosts of the past, but to the way in which Sethe loses *herself* when she loses her baby daughter to death and the possibility that this loss enacts a liberation that literally stands outside of the property-personality structure that made the abject condition of enslavement possible in the first place. This is the task I have undertaken in this chapter: to combine Bersani’s insights with Spillers’ insistence that only the dispossessed Black mother, the mother who stands in unique relation to the child that she is forced not to see as her own, is available to take the insurgent ground of a

motherhood that liberates us—perhaps *all* of us—from the selfhood that sanctions violence. In order to make this case, I will turn to the concept of virtuality in Bersanian theory and explore how the virtual—that is, events that are non-realized and therefore unconstrained by the logic and temporality of a “real life” governed by knowledge—phenomena of dreams, anamnesis, and telepathy emerge in *Beloved* as the expression of a nonviolent sameness that makes the rebellious potentiality of Sethe’s relation to Beloved legible as the *outside* of a systemic violence dependent upon desirous selfhood, a selfhood that sees itself both in the other *and* in the past that “memory” links to the present. Death, involuntary memory, and maternity contrive the conditions under which we annihilate ourselves by admitting our radical and irreparable severance from the past. Importantly, though, Bersani’s understanding of self-annihilation does not end with a moment of “shattering”; self-annihilation is a paradoxical movement towards “self-expansion” in the form of multiple and endlessly shifting correspondences between the self and the world: “thus loss [of the individual self] is an immense analogical gain; the most remote objects and phenomena may eventually be experienced as having at least momentary affinities” (*The Culture of Redemption* 74-6). Such a movement is, to use Bersani’s parlance, “horizontal”—extending between phenomena—rather than “vertical”—extending across time—and for this reason, the nonviolent relationality that I have suggested emerges in *Beloved* requires an engagement with the very concept of temporality. In the following section, I will return to Stephen Best to consider how his interest in “unhistoricism” offers a means of thinking through Bersani’s suggestion that maternity can be delinked from a narrative temporality—or historicism—that seeks

“truth” through the identification of the “origin”; perhaps, as Bersani’s reading of Proust suggests, maternity’s potential to contribute to new relational modes lies precisely in its refusal of a certain temporality.

### Mothering (and) the Virtual

When Paul D shows up at 124 Bluestone Road, he exorcises the baby ghost who casts red light over the doorway and who suffuses those who pass through it with its infantile rage and grief. Believing that to be that, Paul D begins settling into the home and making his own plans to build a life with Sethe; only Denver seems to understand that the baby ghost still “has plans” (*Beloved* 37), though she does not yet know what they are. When *Beloved* does return, one hot evening when Paul D, Sethe, and Denver are returning from a carnival—Sethe’s “first social outing in eighteen years” (46)—she is found sitting on a stump in the sunshine. Though she “walked out of the water” a full day and night before she walked to the stump, “nobody saw her emerge” (50). She is a grown woman rather than the “crawling already?” baby she was at the time of her death, a grown woman with smooth skin, drooping eyelids, and a neck that “keeps bending”. Denver is the only one who seems to suspect that *Beloved* is the baby ghost returned, but nobody, least of all *Beloved* herself, can account for what happened between the time she died in Sethe’s arms and her appearance as a woman eighteen years later. When Sethe meets her there, on her way home from the carnival, she thus finds herself “in that realm of that incomparable monster about whom nothing biographical can be said”<sup>6</sup> (Bersani, *Culture*

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<sup>6</sup> This quotation is in reference to *La Condition Humaine* by André Malraux.

*of Redemption* 106). This “monster”—what we call a “ghost” in the context of *Beloved*—has been characterized by Gordon as indicative of history as both memory and ethical reckoning; the ghost is the trace of the past’s link to the present, even if that link is tenuous or invisible. For Gordon, haunting describes a methodological commitment to both confronting the past and acknowledging the desires of the ghost that may have nothing to do with you. There is, in other words, a double haunting at play in the appearance of any ghost; the ghost haunts, but is also haunted:

[T]he ghost cannot be simply tracked back to an individual loss or trauma. The ghost has its own desires, so to speak ... But the force of the ghost’s desire is not just negative, not just the haunting and staged words, marks, or gestures of domination and injury. The ghost is not other or alterity as such, ever. It is (like *Beloved*) pregnant with unfulfilled possibility, with the something to be done that the wavering present is demanding. This something to be done is not a return to the past but a reckoning with its repression in the present, a reckoning with that which we have lost, but never had. (Gordon 183)

This view is exemplary of precisely the kind of “melancholy historicism” that Best critiques in *None Like Us*, a historicism that endlessly attempts to resurrect the past in order to redeem it rather than acknowledging the “crisp actuality” of the past “without looking at it too closely” (78). There is a world of difference between Gordon’s exhortation to “hear not only ‘their’ story, the old story of the past, but how we are in this story, even now, even if we do not want to be” (190) and Best’s consideration that refusing to look “too closely” at the past might be the more proper way to “mourn” it. The former is committed to finding the thread that links past to present in the form of an ethical demand and with the (perhaps hopeless) goal of redemption in mind; the latter “refus[es] to make the slave past the progenitor of the existential condition of black people” and thereby refuses any attempt to use the past as a “prism” for understanding the

present, turning instead to an “unhistoricism” that thinks through discontinuity and unknowability (Best 79). My approach here stands somewhat to the side of both these views, though my inclination is toward Best’s counterintuitive refusal of the melancholic position and his interest in what unknowability gives to be thought with and through. Rather than considering which historiographical stance is more proper to the present, I will look at what *Beloved* says about both death and maternity that makes possible a non-biographical existence—the ghost which does not haunt, Bersani’s “monster”—and how that existence constitutes a kind of “freedom” from the sanctified selfhood Bersani is so concerned with. My analysis will focus on the latter half of the novel, at which point Paul D, upon discovering that Sethe murdered her child and served time in prison, leaves 124 Bluestone. Following his departure, Sethe, Beloved, and Denver lock themselves inside the house and enter the “no time” of a relationality that is radically divorced from biography or the successive, temporal unfolding of events. In this way, it becomes possible to see how maternity and death converge to produce the opportunity for nonviolence in the form of a virtuality that can be described as “involuntary memory” or, in Sethe’s words, “rememory”. This virtuality names a relational configuration that eschews depth, knowledge, and truth in favour of a superficial refusal to look too closely, a configuration that follows the maternal diversion of our attention to the side of that in which we are self-ishly invested. The death of the other, in *Beloved*, marks a loss of the self that inaugurates a relationality between “liberated phenomena”. This relationality can be considered the expression of the insurgent maternity Hortense Spillers sought to theorize.

The maternal diversion that Bersani identifies in Proust thus offers an important critique of the mythology of the maternal origin; that is to say, whereas mothers are often understood as both the symbolic and literal beginning of a vertically-oriented temporality—that is, a temporality that is ordered hierarchically, proceeding upwards to a *primum movens* and downwards to the final outcome of a causal chain—Bersani suggests the possibility of a maternity that eschews verticality in general for the self-expansion of horizontal analogies<sup>7</sup>. When we tell stories about ourselves and about the world, we tend to start at the beginning, and, where we do not, we hold the beginning in abeyance as the key to understanding both middle and end. Very often, it is a mother who lies at the beginning, who inaugurates the story by giving birth to its protagonist, and who directs the narrative course of the story by her capacity to be a good mother, or a bad one, or a well-meaning but ultimately incapable one, or a selfish one, or a saintly one whose beautiful face and warm embrace stands for everything good that we lose or hope for along the way. And it is not only stories but also history—even life itself—that is traceable to an origin that is almost always a womb. The association of mothers with origins renders them answerable, as Jacqueline Rose describes, to all forms of “social deterioration”; it makes “mothers guilty, not just for the ills of the world, but also for the rage that the unavoidable disappointments of an individual life cannot help but provoke” (27). The production of this maternal guilt occurs not only in a personal sense; it is the unavoidable outcome of a culture whose very means of registering existence—the

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<sup>7</sup> Here, “horizontal” is simply a spatial metaphor that resists hierarchization. A horizontal analogy, or correspondence, is one that has no temporal or authoritative guarantor, i.e. no ultimate cause or essential ground of meaning.

language, syntax, and structure of consciousness, both individual and collective—depends upon a narrative logic that begins at the beginning and progresses successively toward the end. What this means is that we cannot help but look to the past to explain the present and to predict the future, and when we look to past, as far back as our imagination or our memory will allow us to go, we find there the figure of the mother.

The mother, we might say, is the literal matrix through which the “syntax of conscious thought” (or the “American grammar”, to again quote Spillers) operates (Bersani, *Thoughts and Things* 64); this is a grammar or syntax that is governed by the twin logics of temporal causality and non-contradiction. The mother signifies the existence of a beginning and thus initiates the unidirectional unfolding of time from one primary cause or event. In this sense, it is possible to see the mother as the expression of this link between conventional narrative logic and heterosexuality as a structure of difference overcome through knowledge. As Bersani sees it, the search for historical origins (both personal and collective) mirrors the search for the interior “essence” of the beloved, and both searches epitomize heterosexuality as a structure for thinking and not just as a choice of sexual partner. To think against the grain of heterosexual logic requires the abandonment of a certain commitment to congruity, to “making sense” by conforming to the narrative continuity of a reality that is knowable through recourse to the past. Bersani, throughout his oeuvre, implores us to consider relations that are non-appropriative, non-desirous, uncertain and unpredictable because they are not bound by the expectation that something be realized or actualized *through* them. Moreover, in his insistence upon the horizontal as a means of describing the openness of these new and

barely articulated relations, he expresses the counter-intuitive notion that such relations can occur not only in a particular moment in time, but between times as well; in other words, we need not be restricted in our perception of virtual relations by a rigid causal chain ordered temporally—vertically—from past, through present, to future. A grammar that forces us to think vertically, like the one that Spillers identifies in “Mama’s Baby”, means that we are never taken by surprise, that no relations can emerge or line themselves up that we couldn’t predict or, in hindsight, recognize the cause for. What both Spillers and Bersani are reaching toward is what we might call a grammar of homoness, a grammar that avails itself to the “movement of dissimilar terms”—what Bersani variously terms “analogy without similitude” or “incongruous congruity”—“that reveal *unsuspected* connective lines among feelings and objects” (*Thoughts and Things* 65, my emphasis). This incongruous and unforeseen “movement” signals a “new but still undefined field of relations”, a field that is virtual insofar as it is not necessarily actual: “Incongruity institutes virtualities that have no intrinsic reason to be realized. This retreat from the actual creates a freedom that might be defined as a kind of being to which no predicate can be attached” (*Thoughts and Things* 66). In order to approach this virtuality, we would need to abandon our pursuit of—perhaps even our belief in—the (maternal) origin that inaugurates a temporal logic that renders everything that comes *afterward* the effect of what came *first*. Mothers can no longer bear the burden of this answerability; and there can be “no chance of an ethical rapport with others (human and nonhuman) and with the world” (Ricco, “Incongruity” 156) until we relieve not only mothers of their role as progenitors but also our very thinking from its dependence upon a congruity that is

established first and foremost through the establishment of a beginning. Despite the fact, then, that this concept of heterosexuality as the violence of difference lies at the heart of Bersani's "ethical-aesthetic" project (ibid. 160), Bersani gives us, as we have seen above, a way of radically reconceiving maternity's role in replicating difference. The mother who is thus relieved could be the mother who gives birth to the "monster" who possesses no biography. "Monster" may be the name for the unbound proliferation of analogies that characterizes a selfhood rooted not in the defense of proprietary boundaries but in the extensiveness of that self across objects and others that have no obvious temporal or spatial relation to it.

For Bersani, then, thinking incongruously necessarily entails a critique of selfhood that is rooted in difference and the view that difference constitutes a possession—what we call personality—that undergirds selfhood. Far from containing a profound and mysterious core of personality that is built up around a specific individual history, the incongruous self is both superficial and delinked from the narrative temporality of biography; this is why Bersani focuses on repetition as an alternative to temporal progression. In *A Future for Astyanax*, for example, he writes that "the deconstruction of the self and the diversification of our desires depend on our finding ways to repeat ourselves which don't point to hidden, permanent and central truths about the self" (11). "Repetition", for him, names a way of being in the world that eschews heterosexual desire (knowledge, the destructive love of the other's difference) in favour of a kind of timelessness in which life, as the progression from birth to death, moves into the realm of immortality:

We can escape (or think we are escaping) this erosion of life – the process of dying – only if we eliminate desire from life. And one way to do this ... is to engage in a type of movement which has no history ... Exact repetition implicitly denies the desiring individual (and therefore individual life); it would make the self eternal by removing its activity from all contingencies (history doesn't affect this sort of repetition). (*A Future for Astyanax* 181)

What Bersani is saying here is that the kind of violently desiring selfhood that we are programmed to perceive (inhabit?) is inextricably linked to the temporal ordering of life as something that moves, logically and successively, from beginning to end; in order to imagine ways of being that do *not* depend upon this mode of selfhood, we must also rid ourselves of this sense of an “individual life” that begins with our birth and ends with our death. *Repetition* is one means of breaking up “history” because repetition *goes nowhere*, contributes nothing that would bring about change and therefore advance the narrative arc of the individual life. Repetition refuses to connect past to future by way of the present; it is the expression of what we have seen Bersani term “pure phenomenality”. The desire—for the other, for knowledge—that propels life forward and that results in the unceasing quest for knowledge of both otherness and origins is often figured as a lack that is instituted in our relation to the mother; as Tuhkanen puts it, “[t]he child thinks of the pleasures from which he has been cut off; the search for the other’s enjoyment becomes a pattern in his subsequent life” (*Leo Bersani* 127). The pleasures of which Tuhkanen, summarizing Bersani, speaks are specifically maternal—drawn, as the theory is, from Marcel’s desperation and anguish at the thought of his mother’s unknown enjoyment—though neither Tuhkanen nor Bersani elects to bring this fact to the fore of their writing. I suspect, however, that the association between maternity and the origins of life (both history in general and the “individual life”) is not one of necessity. Mothers, too, can

escape the “erosion of life” by failing to act as guarantors of a propulsive desire, by repeating rather than moving teleologically from birth to death. The question is, though, how would a maternity achieve the kind of “immortality” Bersani describes, an immortality that is really another way of saying a self-less existence, an existence indifferent to time, to change, to difference? Indifferent, in other words, to the drama of origination? To frame it from the opposite direction, what would things look like—narratively, temporally, subjectively—if we were to abandon not only our belief in the secret the other harbours within but also our belief in the existence of an origin from which we have been cut off and to which we owe its recovery in the present? It would mean, specifically, abandoning the belief in the mother as the progenitor and primary determiner of our lives. It would mean finding a way to exist in the present without yearning for a thread of continuity that stretches back as far as we can imagine. It might even mean accepting that the very idea of an origin is an irrelevance to the present.

Such a task is not easy; it is counterintuitive, and it requires the admittance of things and ways of thinking that feel illogical, nonsensical, or impossible: in short, the incongruous. Even Rose, who knows just as well as anyone how the search for the origins of things inevitably ends up holding a mother to account, cannot devise a strategy for critiquing the habit of thinking in terms of origins that departs in any meaningful way from the object of its critique. She writes of her own project:

Since the most powerful ideologies of motherhood present themselves as eternal and unchanging – from here to maternity – the question must be: has it always been thus? After all, it is one of the first principles of feminism that, if you want to challenge a stereotype, especially one masquerading as nature or virtue or essence, if your aim is to drag it down from its pedestal or yank it up from the dirt

where it festers, then try and find where it all started. Better still, look to a time and place when – maybe – it was not even there. (38)

The method that Rose proposes here—that we employ historiography to challenge the universality of maternal love—has undoubtedly served some feminist (and other) agendas well. At its best, the search for historical evidence that challenges the dominant narratives of why things are the way they are gives practical purchase to a debate that occurs within the confines of the shared belief that if we could just get the story right *from the beginning*, we would unlock the “better future” that we all, in one way or another, desire. Searching through history for times and places where mothers and mothering were conceived differently, where they weren’t handed sole responsibility for the way things unfold, is one way of attempting to delink mothers from sentimental myths or pseudo-scientific claims that are damaging to mothers<sup>8</sup>. Yet, it is a way that cannot produce radically new ways of understanding motherhood because it remains yoked to the same set of narrative assumptions as does any attempt to trace historical circumstances to the

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<sup>8</sup> Many of the white feminists who have pushed the field of motherhood studies forward have delimited the ways in which maternal ideology harms mothers: motherhood as obligation; motherhood as self-sacrifice; motherhood as the outcome of enforced patriarchy; motherhood as deeply ambivalent; motherhood as the impossible demand for perfection; motherhood as an impediment to economic and political equality for women; motherhood as the basis for the economic exploitation of women under capitalism. It is important to note, however, that many Black feminists have argued that the prevailing view of the institution of motherhood as primarily harmful to mothers is a distinctively white phenomenon. Thinkers like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Dorothy Roberts, Hortense Spillers, Patricia Hill Collins, Jennifer C. Nash, and Serawit B. Debele have all described the ways in which motherhood is, for Black women, an empowering, spiritual practice that is a positive force in the production of thriving Black communities. For my purposes, I am less interested in describing the actual experience of mothering than I am in considering the ways in which the link in our cultural imaginary between mothers and origins is the foundation of a discourse that produces the selfhood that is, in Bersani’s words, a “sanction for violence”.

beginning. Looking to the past for examples and ways of thinking about motherhood that challenge the taken-for-grantedness of maternal love is merely an attempt to correct the already existing narrative logic that places primacy upon mothers and mothering by way of their imbrication with origins. My aim in the remainder of this chapter is to pursue a means of theorizing motherhood that breaks, I hope, more radically with the mother's association with origins, and with the quest for origins that lies at the heart of Western culture more broadly. Specifically, I aim to delink mothers from origins by considering Sethe's relation to Beloved as a maternal repetition that allows, if my analysis is convincing, for the abandonment *tout court* of belief in the very idea of (mother as) origin.

### Ghosts and Mothers

As Ricco puts it, incongruous being can perhaps be best defined as a dream-state, in which thought can be described as an illogical “psychic mobility of similitudes of being that as nonactualities of being—never realized, never finished—ward off psychic completeness” (“Incongruity” 161). In other words, the scenes of incongruity in *Beloved* that I am about to describe are instances of virtualities—scenes that have “no intrinsic reason to be realized” (Bersani, *Thoughts and Things* 66)—that prevent the delimitation of a selfhood whose borders are clearly defined and thus in need of defense. I want to begin, then, not at the beginning, but with dreams; specifically, Beloved's two dreams of exploding and being swallowed. Beloved describes these dreams halfway through the novel, before Sethe's recognition of her as her daughter, and before Paul D discovers the

truth about Sethe's past. In the scene, Beloved and Denver are alone, and Beloved reaches into her mouth and pulls out a tooth; the loss of the tooth reminds her of dreams in which her body falls apart or is eaten. Both dreams are violent, both result in annihilation (of self, body, or both). In the text, though, it is not clear that Beloved's dreams are in any way separate from her waking life:

Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, a hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and when Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams: exploding, and being swallowed. When her tooth came out—an odd fragment, last in the row—she thought it was starting. (133)

Beloved knows, without knowing how, that she could fall apart. She makes no distinction between what is really happening—her tooth falling out—and what she dreams about—exploding. She dreams it, therefore it can happen. It is impossible to ascertain if the dream is a reflection of a real-life fear (the fear struck into her when her throat was cut?), or if her real-life fear that “it was starting” is the product of a terrible dream of exploding. The order of things is lost “among the things she could not remember”, and without this memory, the impossibility of knowing becomes an irrelevance. Knowledge itself is called into question by the failure to distinguish between dream and waking life. As the reader, of course, we “know” that something terrible happened to Beloved *before*. But the illogic of the dream—what Freud knew was the illogic of an unconscious that paid no heed to things like the order of events—breaks into and suffuses not only Beloved's experience of herself, but also Sethe's and Denver's. Beloved cannot remember much about the “before”, and what she does remember is confused and fragmented, impossible to put

together in a way that would enable certainty about her identity. Indeed, the normal way of gaining knowledge about something or somebody—by asking questions, looking for clues—doesn’t work in Beloved’s case. The dream logic that seems to govern Beloved’s thoughts is “without a sense of time”, existing in a “timeless present” (Bersani, *Thoughts and Things* 59). The dream, Bersani reminds us, “is constitutively blind to the temporal anomaly (and gratuitousness) of fearing or desiring failure [exploding] *after* success [death], that is, non-anticipatory. Dreams know no obligation to a before-and-after logic; a timeless terror can apparently be unaffected by the reassuring satisfaction of numerous successes in time” (*Thoughts and Things* 60). Bersani’s point, however, goes beyond a straightforward description of “dream logic” as it contrasts to the logic of waking life, a logic that *is* governed by the correct ordering of befores and afters as the foundation for epistemological certainty. The subject, he insists, cannot be neatly divided into two, with one aspect waking/conscious and the other dreaming/unconscious. Rather, there is reason to believe that the unconscious routinely intrudes upon the conscious, that the two are not separable. Despite our best efforts of adhering to the “principle of noncontradiction” in consciousness—and by this phrase Bersani simply means that, unlike in dreams, in conscious life things cannot be two things at the same time, effects cannot precede their causes, knowledge must be based upon the rational apprehension of evidence, etc.—we cannot help but make “logical leaps” and “incongruous connections” between things that should, logically, be prohibited (*Thoughts and Things* 63-4). The existence of this “other connective logic” that enables what Bersani broadly terms “incongruity” is not hidden or repressed but actively and plainly operates through and within the syntax of everyday

speech; one need not wait until one is asleep to perceive it: “We speak of dreams as being remembered, but we might more properly say that they are permanently *present* in consciousness once they take place. They act and correspond with everything that surrounds them. Our dreams belong to the single syntax of our mental being” (*Thoughts and Things* 67). Dreams, in other words, are one way in which the logic that governs selfhood—the logic of personality as property—can be rendered open to illogic.

Beloved’s dreams indicate a certain failure of conventional syntax and logic within the story, and they do so by rendering perceivable a “permanent present” that is radically delinked from the unidirectional flow of time that we typically perceive. The confusion that emerges from her uncertain status—she is afraid of exploding, but she is already dead; she cannot remember her past, but she does recall things that could only have happened before she was born or after she died—functions, in the story, as precisely the kind of “incongruity” to which Bersani wishes us to attend. Attempts at pinning down Beloved’s identity—is she *really* the dead baby returned? Is she a girl who escaped a prison in the woods nearby, as some of the characters muse? Is she Sethe’s own mother, who made the transatlantic voyage crouched in the hold of a slaver?—fail to register the possibility that her mere incongruous existence opens up for both Sethe and Denver: the possibility of lingering not with a ghost, per se, but within a timeless present that abandons any attempt to piece together a story by finding and repairing the origin. Beloved’s existence does not signal the origin of the story—whether that origin is the shared slave past that Best, following Patterson’s seminal essay “Toward a Future that has No Past”, describes as a kind of fantasy, or if it is Sethe herself, the mother who was

forced to make an unthinkable decision—nor does it point to the continued existence of the past within the present. It is exactly the opposite; her impossible presence signals an impossible present that unmoors itself from what really happened and the attendant questions of culpability and justice and opens up the radical possibility of existing without an origin. Beloved makes things “make sense” that should be precluded by the kind of conscious logic we normally ascribe to waking life. In this sense, Best gets it wrong when he asks, rhetorically, “For what else does the ghost’s ontology function, if not to ... make the act of reading an act of judgment in (and of) the historical past?” (78). Beloved, as ghost, functions as a foundational incongruity that is interwoven in the congruous, a material embodiment of what should be impossible but is, nonetheless, possible. This means that her a ghostly presence is otherwise than a haunting. She is a ghost whose existence doesn’t point to the past but to a present that can detach itself from a logic of before-and-after: a present caught in a non-biographical repetition that goes nowhere.

Beloved lives with Sethe, Denver, and Paul D until Paul D is driven out. At that point, the three women retreat into the house, and what is at first playful and pleasurable between them eventually turns into a struggle for survival. Sethe loses her job and the food supply gradually dwindles; Beloved, now pregnant, swells in size while Sethe diminishes. Denver, helpless to protect either Beloved or her mother, is left out of the relational transformation that is occurring between them. When the novel reaches its climax in a series of chapters that have been described as a “telepathic opera” (Mathieson 1), it is clear that Sethe has accepted that Beloved is the ghost of the daughter she killed

out of love: “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine” (200). What is less clear is Beloved’s point of view, which never actually claims Sethe as her mother: “I am Beloved and she is mine ... I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too” (210). Repeatedly, Beloved refers to wanting Sethe’s face and seeing it as her own, wanting to “join” with it. These chapters, in which Sethe and Beloved seem to “speak” to one another without actually speaking—telepathically, that is—suggest, perhaps, that a kind of union has been achieved between a bereft mother and her “rebuked” baby girl. Sethe’s heartbreaking vindication and relief at having Beloved back is palpable: “See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing” (200). Beloved requires no explanations, “because she understands everything already” (ibid.). But Beloved is not thinking of what Sethe did to her to keep her safe; she is recalling in incoherent images some of the things it should be impossible for her to remember, the things that make her “more”, as Denver puts it later, than Sethe’s daughter. Beloved’s monologue is so fragmentary as to be impossible to decipher, but deciphering is beside the point. It is all there on the surface of the text, a surface that reflects words like the surface of water reflects light, none of it hidden: “All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too ...” Being in the ship’s crowded hold as it made its way across the ocean. A man who died; “at night I cannot see the dead man on my face ... the man on my face has done it it is hard to make yourself die forever”. And a woman who fell into the sea: “the woman is there with the face I want the face that is mine ... the woman with my face is

in the sea”. The man who died and his singing of a woman who gathers flowers in a basket. A woman she sees with shining earrings. A woman who wants her basket. A woman who almost smiles at her, a smile Beloved wants to see as badly as Sethe wanted to see her own mother’s, whose only smile was a permanent grimace etched into her face by the use of a bit. A woman who is not pushed but goes willingly into the sea: “she was going to smile at me she was going to ... it is my dark face that is going to smile at me the iron circle is around our neck she does not have sharp earrings in her ears or a round basket she goes in the water with my face”. Now, always now, she comes up out of the water as she did on the day she first “met” Sethe: “I see her face which is mine it is the face that was going to smile at me in the place where we crouched ... her face is mine she is not smiling she is chewing and swallowing ... she chews and swallows I am gone now I am her face my own face has left me”. Now she comes out of the water: “I am not dead I sit the sun closes my eyes when I open them I see the face I lost Sethe’s is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile ... now we can join” (210-3). In the following chapter, which continues the telepathic communication between all three of Sethe, Beloved, and Denver, the word *mother* is never used:

Beloved  
You are my sister  
You are my daughter  
You are my face; you are me (216)

Beloved recalls a ship’s hold; she recalls a woman with earrings whose face she desperately wanted to see smile. Is she the “crawling already” baby girl whose throat was lovingly cut to keep her safe? Is she Sethe’s own mother, whom we know made that terrible Atlantic voyage and who never smiled? Is she Sethe herself, whose desperation to

know her mother, to see her smile, was made impossible by the unimaginable cruelties inflicted upon her mother's body? The text doesn't want us to ask these questions and we must train ourselves not to search the text for clues to Beloved's identity. What she is is what has always been plainly available in the text: a ghost, but a ghost whose presence points not to the past but to a "now ... always now", the lifeless, selfless repetition that Bersani identifies in *A Future for Astyanax*.

Contrary, then, to readings that see Beloved's return as a reunification between mother and daughter separated by trauma (Rody; Schapiro), my reading suspends the question of whether or not Beloved really is the corporeal manifestation of Sethe's dead baby girl. In this sense, when I say that *Beloved* is a story about maternity, I mean a maternity that is stripped of its orientation toward a daughter (of course, Denver is Sethe's daughter and there is a clear filial relationship between them; but in the case of Sethe and Beloved, it is much less clear what we are dealing with is filiation). *She my daughter. She mine. You are my face; you are me.* Is this, as Mathieson describes it, the expression of an infantile psyche that cannot yet perceive separation from the mother? Is it a case of enmeshed identities, of a child's need for her mother that is so strong she breaks down the wall of death to get to her? What we have is a daughter, that is plain enough to see; a daughter, Sethe, who never knew her own mother, who never had the chance, as we come to learn, to identify her mother's dead body from a pile of bodies before being pulled away. A daughter whose mother remained anonymous, known by nothing, not even the mark that had been branded into her skin. Sethe sees a different daughter in Beloved, but that daughter sees only herself in the face of Sethe. A tautology

of daughters, daughters without mothers. Or, perhaps, mothers that can only be understood as daughters. A mother is only a daughter, as Leda puts it in *The Lost Daughter*. A daughter who... plays? That is the end of Leda's quotation after all. If my intuition is onto something, it is that we might have not a melancholic but a playful ghost on our hands, one whose oneiric irruption into everyday logic instantiates the present as nothing more—nor less—than the possibility of taking oneself less seriously. This is, to be sure, an unconventional notion of playfulness; it signals the levity of the maternal gesture described by Bersani, the mother's horizontal pointing not to that which lies behind the other—the profundity of personality that we wish to grasp—but to the superficiality of “connective lines” that produce no knowledge (*Thoughts and Things* 65). What is playful here is the movement of what Bersani calls “aliqueness”, similarities that are based not on shared essences or temporal origins but on temporary and illogical configurations, configurations that undermine the seriousness of the self.

#### Uncertain Alikeness: Dream Logic, Knowledge, and Maternal Narcissism

My reading will focus on the sections of the novel in which Sethe recognizes Beloved as her daughter, and in which Beloved, Sethe, and Denver retreat into their home in order for the burgeoning relationality between them to “play” out. It is within these scenes that the novel reads itself, as it were, against the grain, and in which an alternative syntax—one that has no regard for conventional selfhood and motherhood—can be discerned. Beloved's uncertain identity and the impossibility of her presence create the conditions for the emergence, within 124 Bluestone Road, of a kind of narrative heterotopia, a place

where the normal narrative work of connecting events in order is suspended. In this place, things become possible that otherwise would not be. When Barbara Offutt Mathieson describes the exchange between Sethe and Beloved as “telepathy”, what she means is that their thought-exchange is the product of a special intimacy reserved for mothers and their children; Sethe’s baby girl has miraculously come back to her, and mother and child become “locked in a love that wore everybody out” (*Beloved* 243), a love that is so intense it veers away from the purely sentimental and into the dangerous territory of “too much” and “too close”. Read this way, the novel operates as a “psychological drama” that revolves around the teleological development of the self and the problems that arise when that selfhood is arrested or denied, either by the violence of slavery or by the murder of an infant (Schapiro 194). This is precisely the reading offered by Barbara Schapiro, who sees the “infantile rage” of Beloved, the child who was killed by her mother, as the outcome of the self-denial imposed upon Sethe by the experience of slavery. Both Sethe and Beloved have been denied selves, denied the property that is their self. It is no wonder that their love turns violent; that Sethe destroys Beloved rather than see her subjected to the same horrors she herself has endured; that Beloved’s “desire for recognition evolves into enraged narcissistic omnipotence and a terrifying, tyrannical domination” (197). There is certainly a sense in the novel of the suffocating demands of motherhood, the difficulties and violences that arise as both mother and daughter struggle for simultaneous closeness and separation. In particular, there is present the maternal guilt that has become ubiquitous amongst mothers, magnified a thousand-fold in *Beloved* by the extreme, violent circumstances in which Sethe finds herself, impossibly, needing to

mother. Sethe is, in this sense, at the junction between two institutions that make impossible, competing demands upon her: the institutions of slavery and of motherhood. In an entirely different scenario, Adrienne Rich wrote of Joanne Michulski, a white mother of eight children, who, in 1974, “decapitated and chopped up the bodies of her two youngest on the neatly kept lawn of the suburban house where the family lived outside Chicago” (264-5). Joanne’s case does not parallel Sethe’s in any way except one: the demands of motherhood led both to commit the unthinkable crime of infanticide. Yet, Rich’s words can be made to resonate for both women: “She became a scapegoat, the one around whom the darkness of maternity is allowed to swirl—the invisible violence of the institution of motherhood, the guilt, the powerless responsibility for human lives, the judgments and condemnations, the fear of her own power, the guilt, the guilt, the guilt” (288). Is the omnipresence of crushing guilt sufficient to explain why, when Sethe gets a second chance to mother Beloved, the situation devolves into one that is nearly fatal for Sethe? Is Sethe’s dwindling away at the hands of a ravenous, tyrannical ghost, a ghost who becomes larger and more fecund with every inch that Sethe gives up, a marker of Sethe’s willingness to redeem the past by sacrificing herself instead of her daughter?

I am not wholly compelled by the view that *Beloved* portrays a battle over selfhood—between Sethe and Schoolteacher and between Sethe and Beloved—fuelled by an unthinkable maternal guilt. Such readings see Sethe’s eventual separation from Beloved—her second exorcism—as the only proper resolution of the story; Sethe’s selfhood is threatened by the presence of her greedy ghost daughter, who devours Sethe in her desire to possess her. Sethe’s selfhood is thus stabilized when she is free not only

from slavery but also from a pathological, guilt-based maternal relation that brought her to the brink of death. Such readings participate in the belief that the maternal relation is a hydraulic one: an increase in ego on one side causes a diminishment on the other; to mother is to maintain the delicate balance between the two. It is important, then, to look for the ways in which the relation between Sethe and Beloved is *not*—or at least not only—one of sentimental maternity gone awry, one in which the reunification of a mother and daughter driven apart by unspeakable violence results in a dangerous intimacy born of an overwhelming mother-daughter love that is fuelled by Sethe’s guilt. For one thing, as I have already discussed, it is uncertain—and, moreover, unimportant—whether or not Sethe is in fact Beloved’s mother. Beloved’s uncertain identity renders their relation far less personal than most readings of the novel allow. Instead, the relation established between them in 124 Bluestone is one that departs markedly from any dominant account of maternal love and its ties to the establishment of a proprietary selfhood; it opens up the possibility of an impersonal relationality that is premised upon a superficial subjectivity, one that achieves its existence not through the fortification of an interior essence/difference that is recognized by the other but through the reflection *between* subjects of a shared re-cognition, a repeated cognizing of sameness. As Tuhkanen puts it, a “lessening” of the self—the proprietary, epistemophilic self that characterizes our contemporary way of being—is achieved when the subject’s sense of self is “shattered”: “[t]he shattered subject finds himself scattered in the world in a movement where the distinction of the inside and the outside is undone” (“Passion” 135). Importantly, this movement—which can be characterized as *love*, albeit a radically different kind of love

than the romantic yearning for the other *qua* other—is an act of memory, not the memory that describes our personal history but a timeless memory that refers to the *virtual* and not to the realized. In that sense, memory is not related to the specific events of one’s past—what Bersani terms the “vertical”—but to the “horizontal” dimension of intersubjective extensibility (Tuhkanen, *Leo Bersani* 220). When we recognize our beloved, we recognize an element of sameness that extends between self and other and has nothing to do with who they “really are”, nothing to do with a shared past; it is, instead, an event that recurs doubly in the movement between lover and beloved, a movement that Beloved herself expresses when she says that Sethe “sees me see her” (213). What Sethe recognizes in Beloved is not the fact of her daughter’s identity but the current of sameness that runs through her baby daughter, the girl kept prisoner in the woods, Sethe’s mother, and Sethe herself. It is this current that compels Beloved to see Sethe’s face as her own: “You are my face; you are me” (216). “The notion of loving someone for his or her individualizing difference is an impoverished version of that love for a different sameness,” Bersani writes (*Thoughts and Things* 84), where “different sameness” refers to the recognition in the other not of their “true self” but a shared and unpredictable affinity. In other words, this sameness is located in its dissemination across individual subjects and finds itself repeatedly in the back-and-forth movement of re-cognition as a perpetually newly found similitude.

Does the current of recognition run from Sethe to Beloved, or from Beloved to Sethe? It is impossible to tell; it runs both ways, and the origin is unclear. Perhaps it does not even exist. Sethe experiences precisely this kind of timeless, repetitive re-cognition in

her acceptance of Beloved as her daughter, a scene that occurs some time after Beloved has been living with her. In the scene, Beloved, Sethe, and Denver have just returned from ice skating and are warming themselves by the fire when Beloved starts humming a song:

When the click came Sethe didn't know what it was. Afterward it was clear as daylight that the click came at the very beginning—a beat, almost, before it started; before she heard three notes; before the melody was even clear. Leaning forward a little, Beloved was humming softly.

It was then, when Beloved finished humming, that Sethe recalled the click—the settling of pieces into places designed and made especially for them ...

“I made that song up,” said Sethe. “I made it up and sang it to my children. Nobody knows that song but me and my children.”

Beloved turned to look at Sethe. “I know it,” she said.

A hobnail casket of jewels found in a tree hollow should be fondled before it is opened. Its lock may have rusted or broken away from the clasp. Still you should touch the nail heads, and test its weight. No smashing with an ax head before it is decently exhumed from the grave that has hidden it all this time. No gasp at a miracle that is truly miraculous because the magic lies in the fact that you knew it was there for you all along. (175-6)

The “click” of recognition could only be established after the fact. “Afterward”, Sethe says, it was clear that the recognition occurred *before* the event of Beloved's humming a tune that only her daughter could know. The oneiric logic that makes the impossible possible is at work here; the recognition happened before it is possible for it to happen, before the “proof” that would make recognition possible. Yet, the recognition of that recognition—the repeated cognization of something new—only happened afterward. The metaphor of the “hobnail casket of jewels” only reinforces for Sethe something that she already knew; that it is the surface of the thing, the mere fact of its existence and not what is “inside”, that matters. No need to smash the recognized object to get a hold of what's really in there; it is enough to touch the outside, to release the thought that the most

precious part of a jewel box is what lies inside. There can be no surprise at this kind of recognition, because you already knew it had happened, knew it long before you saw it, though you cannot remember how, or why, or when. In fact, you only knew that you knew it *after* it happened. For Sethe, this logic stands to the side of both memory and knowledge: “Thank God I don’t have to rememory or say a thing because you know it. All” (*Beloved* 191); Sethe intuitively understands that Beloved has no need for explanations, that no knowledge will pass between them except that which is already known by both, a version of knowledge that bypasses communication completely. As Sethe, certain in her illogical knowledge of Beloved’s recognition, hurries home to the “no-time” that 124 Bluestone Road makes possible (191), she “speaks” to Beloved without actually speaking—that is to say, the basis for what we can rightfully call telepathy between Sethe and Beloved is precisely this new kind of knowledge, a knowledge that doesn’t “make sense” according to any conventional understanding of sense-making. It is the knowledge of “no-time” and of “horizontal anamnesis” (Tuhkanen, *Leo Bersani* 220), the remembrance of impersonal things as they become delinked from the order of past and present. It ceases to matter what “really happened” or who Beloved (any beloved) “really is”. Beloved’s failure to distinguish between her dreams and “real life”—a failure that is echoed in Sethe—is a way of saying “I don’t believe in wakefulness” (Derrida 21). And the telepathy that this lack of belief in wakefulness enables is a way of bringing that which “our concept of knowledge” renders “impossible, unthinkable, unknown” into relief (ibid.).

Sethe's knowledge that Beloved is her baby daughter is not established by the facts. It is a knowledge that should be impossible but nonetheless *is*. And it makes possible a relationality that is not predicated upon the affirmation of individual differences but on an impersonal, extensive sameness. In this way, it is not too much of a stretch to say that the love that exists between Sethe and Beloved, far from being pathological or destructive, very much models what Bersani describes in the "barebacking gang-bang"; in both cases, the subject allows themselves "to be penetrated, even replaced, by an unknowable otherness"; in both cases, loving does not entail the "personhood" of both lover and beloved being "expanded and enriched by knowledge of the other"; in both cases, the loving subject "enters into an impersonal intimacy", not only with the physical fact of the beloved but "also with all those unknown [others], perhaps now dead, with whom [he/she] has never had any physical contact" (*Intimacies* 53). For Beloved and Sethe, the telepathy that exists between them arises out of the very fact of this impersonal and unknown/unknowable intimacy. Telepathy names the relation that emerges out of repetition, out of a timelessness that renders knowledge, and the logic that supports it, irrelevant; telepathy is not, therefore, a matter of belief, nor is it a matter of "knowledge" or "non-knowledge". It is a virtual event that heralds the establishment of what Bersani calls "impersonal narcissism", a way of being that does not depend upon perceiving ourselves as the owners of our selfhood, nor upon the view of the other as containing an "essence" that it is our duty, or our passion, to "know". With the absencing of knowledge as the foundation for relationality comes the possibility of this impersonal intimacy that makes both property and selfhood impossible; Sethe's maternal gesture—

the moving of her child into a virtual relational field, a field made perceptible by death—is a version of Marcel’s mother’s pointing out the window. It moves our attention to the side of what is circumscribed by knowledge.

### Narcissistic Mothers and the Search for the Origin

Sethe is hardly the literary mother who comes to mind when we think of the word “narcissism”. On the contrary, it is Beloved whose “infantile rage” is often understood as narcissistic and the basis for the destructive relation between her and Sethe. Barbara Schapiro summarizes an orthodox psychoanalytic reading of narcissism as “intense neediness” in the text:

If the infant is traumatically frustrated in its first love relationship, if it fails to receive the affirmation and recognition it craves, the intense neediness of the infant’s own love becomes dangerous and threatening ... The hunger for recognition ... may be so overwhelming that it threatens to swallow up the other and the self, destroying all boundaries in one total annihilation. (201)

The idea here is that when Sethe murdered Beloved, she failed to meet Beloved’s psychic needs so totally that Beloved’s return is marked by a “hunger” so insatiable it would destroy the very thing it wants along with itself. This is why Schapiro reads the “telepathy” between Sethe and Beloved (and Sethe’s younger daughter, Denver) as an “extreme and dangerous” collapse of the very distinction between self and other (202). The submission to telepathy, in this view, “imprisons the self within its own devouring omnipotence, its own narcissism” (203). Although it is Beloved who is “the narcissist” due to the fact of her irreparable psychic wound, the mother-daughter dyad becomes characterized by narcissism as a relational mode, a narcissism that manifests as

“devouring omnipotence” and collapsing boundaries. This interpretation of the relationship between Sethe and Beloved is so thoroughly steeped in the rhetoric of what we might call “ego psychology” as to be completely blind to the existence of a radical impersonality that lies at its heart. It assumes that a loss of self—or a rendering of the distinction between self and other meaningless—is necessarily a violence to be repaired by the re-establishment of proper self-borders. For Bersani, however, it is precisely this hunger for recognition that makes violence possible in the first place; for his part, he hungers for a wholly different relationality that is not dependent upon the proprietary establishment of selfhood.

I have presented above a very different view of the telepathy between Sethe and Beloved, one that sees it as a remarkable shift from “depth psychology” to an impersonal relationality of the virtual. Of course, as I have explored in previous chapters, the theorization of a subject without depth has formed one of the central nodes around which Bersani’s thought has circulated, as is the notion of a specifically filial relationality in contrast to the “subjectlessness” that comes with orphanhood, a condition that both Bersani and Spillers draw upon to critique the hegemony of the heterosexual family and, in the case of Spillers, to describe the paradoxical condition of the children who are born to slave mothers. In addition to his discussion of Marcel’s mother in *The Culture of Redemption*, Bersani also makes an interesting turn to maternity, albeit as a speculative supplement to a story about fathers and sons, in an essay entitled “Being and Notness”. It is to this essay that I now turn to further explore the link that exists between maternity and the search for origins. “Is it possible,” Bersani opens his essay, “to be a father if you

don't have one?" (*Thoughts and Things* 96)—a question whose maternal inverse is obviously at stake in *Beloved*. Bersani asks this question of Pierre Bergounioux's novella *La Casse*, which is narrated by a son whose father's father was killed in World War I. As a result, the fatherless father is a "man without antecedents" who cannot have a "successor" (*Thoughts and Things* 97), and the son—who is referred to not *as* a son but as a "little bag of skin" [Bersani's translation, 97])—is condemned to a state of "notness" in order to sustain his father's being: "[a] self always on the point of being erased, burdened with a useless, purposeless body, the orphan's son is a subjectless existence" (100). In other words, the son of an orphan is orphaned by virtue of his father's orphanhood; the familial structure falls apart when the patriarchal line is erased, when the father is made to disappear in one way or another.

Like Leda in Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter*, whose condition of radical uncertainty we have seen in the previous chapter, the narrator of *La Casse* is suspended in a state of senselessness: "as a subject subjected to repeated notness, the narrator is constitutively unable to say 'I know' or 'I don't know' ... The narrator's fate has estranged him from ordinary uses of thinking" (101-2). However, in this case this senseless, subjectless existence arises from the son's being the product of a "father-orphan", which makes *La Casse*, at least at first glance, the expression of the kind of "Freudian and Lacanian orthodoxy" which sees the father as the law-instituting force of sociality. The mother, in this "orthodox" reading, represents the pre-Oedipal, asocial oneness of being; the absence of a patriarchal line of succession results in a subjectlessness that could be characterized as a longing for the "primal unity" of the

maternal relation, manifested as an inability to meaningfully relate to the world. At the end of the story, having failed to elicit from his father a desire to overcome his own fatherlessness, the narrator turns, incongruously, to harvesting scrap metal in order to fashion it into new combinations. When he is suddenly struck by the sun glinting on a piece of metal, he picks it up: “In my hand, it became a maternity” (Bersani’s translation, *Thoughts and Things* 112). Bersani briefly considers this reference to maternity as he ends his essay:

The fusion [between the narrator and the maternal piece of metal] ... brings us back to a dyadic union intolerant of otherness and therefore the world. We end with what may be a salutary reminder of the invincible resistance to the invention of new relational mobilities. There is the warmth of a fusion prior to the relational itself. And there is the historically powerful Law that grounds relationality in patriarchal authorization. (113)

This conventional psychoanalytic account of the complementarity of maternity and paternity—the one the necessary if threateningly senseless backdrop to the other’s instantiation of meaning, of sociality in general—sums up much of the post-Freudian theory of the family. But Bersani, in a characteristic move to see things differently, implores us to watch out for new ways to experience difference, not as a threat to be vanquished or a recalcitrance to be absorbed, but as a milieu of non-violence in which to discover and to take an insecure pleasure in tarrying with obscure resemblances or analogues or likenesses of oneself. Could the maternal relation be experienced as such? As Bersani argues, we should read *La Casse* “beyond what it says” by seeing the ending as an “invitation to think of maternal warmth not as fortifying a world-denying intimacy, but rather as spreading beyond the child and suffusing otherness not with echoes of familial violence but rather with a nonfamiliar familiarity” (114). This is very similar to

the claim he makes in *The Culture of Redemption*, quoted earlier, in which the maternal is understood as the deviation of our attention away from ourselves, away from the “hunger” for difference and toward the possibility of “uncertain likenesses”. The maternal, in other words, need not be defined by the intensely personalizing love of the mother for the child, but by an impersonal gesture of welcome toward the world and all of the unpredictable ways in which it can come, temporarily, to *mean*.

The idea that the maternal cannot help but conduct a current of “world-denying intimacy” is common in contemporary discourse about motherhood, however, and it reaches its apex in the fear we have of narcissistic mothers. This fear seems to be growing along with therapeutically-oriented theories of psychology that encourage tracing our present unhappiness to fractures in our earliest relationship—usually that of infant/child and mother. Alice Miller, the one-time-psychoanalyst who broke definitively with the practice after concluding that the analyst-analysand relationship too closely mirrors that of parent to child<sup>9</sup>, can perhaps be credited with bringing to popular consciousness the evils of the narcissistic mother. In Miller’s view, all violence and all unhappiness can be traced to childhood traumas, of which the narcissistic mother is one of the prime perpetrators. In an influential 1979 essay entitled “The Drama of the Gifted Child and the Psycho-Analyst’s Narcissistic Disturbance”, Miller, still influenced at this time by the likes of Freud, Mahler, and Winnicott, wrote of the child’s “alienation” from his “true

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<sup>9</sup> Miller’s break with psychoanalysis was also premised upon her eventual rejection Freud’s theory of childhood sexuality, Klein’s theory of the “hostile infant”, and Winnicott’s proposal that most mothers were “good enough”. You would be hard-pressed to find anyone more zealously committed to the idea of childhood innocence.

self” when subjected to the behaviours of the narcissistic mother (or mother substitute). For Miller, a narcissistic mother may present in a variety of ways but is characterized above all by her use of her child to fulfill her own emotional needs and wishes; she thus neglects to see and accept the unique self that her child possesses. The child subsequently takes on the task of becoming the child his mother needs or wishes him to be rather than simply being himself. Importantly,

[n]arcissistic cathexis of her child by the mother does not exclude emotional devotion. On the contrary, she loves her child, as her self-object, excessively, though not in the manner which he needs, and always on the condition that he presents his ‘false self’. This is no obstacle for the development of intellectual abilities, but it is one for the unfolding of an authentic emotional life. (51)

This lack of “authentic emotional life”, the product of the child’s “narcissistic injury” at the hands of the mother, manifests later in life as an inability of the adult to feel a strong sense of self and self-worth, as well as an attendant inability to form and maintain stable, meaningful relationships with others and with the world. Such an adult approaches analysis with the goal of freeing their “true self”, which has remained unconscious because of its lack of recognition by the mother. In analysis, Miller describes that “it is like a miracle each time to find how much individuality has survived behind such dissimulation ... There, where there were only the frightening emptiness or the equally frightening grandiose fantasies, unexpected wealth and vitality expands” (53). The narcissistic mother, in other words, engages in the repression of the “true self” by failing to truly love and accept this self. In being too self-centred, in possessing a selfhood that is too sound, too circumscribed, she robs her child of his most precious possession: his self. This view of narcissism as pathological self-centredness implies the affinity that exists

between selfhood and property; it is possible, in this view, to possess too much self and to deprive others of their selfhood. Narcissism, especially in the mother, is a kind of psychological property crime; or, perhaps more accurately, it is a zero-sum game in which the mother's (pathological) self inflates at the cost of the child's, or (in the proper course of things) deflates as the child's expands. Such a view imparts the sense that maternity is an economy through which a scarcity of selfhood circulates—diminishes and accrues—in certain predictable patterns.

It is easy to see how Miller, whose unswerving belief in the destructive power of bad mothering resulted in numerous best-selling books and the infamous claim that Hitler and Stalin would have turned out just fine if only they had had good parents, fits into the mother-blaming, perfection-striving parenting culture in which we currently reside; we all agree that a narcissistic mother is a bad thing to be and to have. As children, we blame our mothers for failing to understand us or for failing to put us first. As mothers, we desperately want to love our child's true self so that they can grow up to be securely, meaningfully connected to others. A narcissistic mother is, we believe, an antisocial force that sows the seeds of future social failure, and so we do our best to be good mothers by cultivating and safeguarding our child's unique personality. Yet, as Bersani has insisted, this view of narcissism that is so heavily invested in moralistic, proprietary claims around selfhood represents a fundamental misunderstanding—or missed opportunity—of the Freudian insight into the psychic development of the self. In "Is the Rectum a Grave?", Bersani makes clear his view of the relationship between selfhood and violence, and the

potential of homosexuality to violate this relationship by violating the “sanctity” of the self:

The self is a practical convenience; promoted to the status of an ethical ideal, it is a sanction for violence. If sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic jouissance that drives them apart, it could also be thought of as our primary hygienic practice of non-violence ... Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of losing sight of the self ... (222)

The greater our desire to protect the self, the greater our immersion in a relationality that operates with the implicit threat of sanctioned violence always hovering in the background. Phillips, interpreting this passage in *Intimacies*, suggests that a radically nonviolent mode of being—the theorization of which forms the focus of *Intimacies*—requires a “mourning” of the “self-dismissal” Bersani championed so many years earlier. We must mourn, according to Phillips, “the loss of the sacrosanct value of selfhood – a refuge, as [Bersani] suggests, for the sacred and its attending pieties – and the loss of both a willingness to kill, and the seriousness of statements” (96). What he means is that putting to rest, so to speak, our sense of the preciousness of the self entails a relinquishment of the willingness to kill or die for the various boundaries of difference that we take so seriously. Such a move would require the abandonment of our belief in “love” as the process of knowing and being known. Rather, in the wake of this mourning, we “have to imagine a ‘social’ world ... in which the fundamental question, the abiding concern” is not “what can I know about you, and you me?” but a radically superficial “do you want to have sex with me?” (ibid.). What Bersani and Phillips want us to understand is that the yoking of sexuality to the family—what we understand as heterosexuality—has produced the cradle that nurtures selfhood and, by extension, our violent willingness to

protect it. Miller's indictment of the narcissistic mother misses the point entirely: that it is the "good mothers" who, by lovingly attending to and inflaming the burgeoning selfhood of their children are participating in the reproduction not only of selves but of violence in general, a relational mode that cannot do without violence.

The difficulty, as Phillips points out, of articulating a nonviolent relationality is that selfhood is so deeply, so seemingly naturally, engrained in thinking: "Against the violent and domineering assertions of selfhood – we can take the child's tantrum as an emblem for this, the demonic violence mobilized to protect, to hold out for the apparently known want – we have little to offer by way of description" (97). But Bersani, throughout his oeuvre, has tried, if not to describe a nonviolent lessening of the self, at least to suggest some of the ways in which it might become recognizable. Importantly, and counterintuitively, this recognition takes the form of that between *Sethe* and *Beloved*: a movement from the realm of the realized to the realm of the virtual in which knowledge no longer applies and an "expansive diminishment of being" occurs (Bersani, *Thoughts and Things* 69). In such a movement, *Sethe*'s sense of selfhood weakens at the same time that her acceptance of illogical congruities grows; with a diminishing selfhood comes a diminishing capacity for violence, for the defense of the self's borders, and an expansion of perceived samenesses. Bersani's theorization of narcissism not as the self's desperate grasping for more of itself but as a relationality that renders the very distinction between self and other irrelevant is thus central to his project of de-emphasizing proprietary, epistemophilic selfhood. In *Intimacies*, Bersani describes the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism—what he terms impersonal narcissism—that is misunderstood or misapplied

by post-Freudian psychology such as that endorsed by Miller: impersonal narcissism is the expression of a kind of love that fails to see, in the beloved, the “unique personality central to modern notions of individuality” (Bersani, *Intimacies* 85). This kind of love stands in stark contrast to what Bersani has elsewhere described as a Proustian, epistemophilic love in which the lover sees the beloved as a profound mystery to be solved through knowledge; knowledge, in this model of love that characterizes Western modernity, is the key to overcoming difference in the pursuit of a self-fortifying union between the subject and the object of their fascination.

For Bersani, it is Plato’s *Phaedrus* that “breaks out of this field of knowability” (*Intimacies* 87) by elaborating a concept of *anteros*, or “backlove”: “The beloved [in this case ‘the boy’] loves the lover’s image of him” and the “lover recognizes *his* ideal ego in the boy; desiring the boy is a way of infusing the boy with an ideal self that is both the boy’s and the lover’s” (83-4). Though this may at first seem convoluted, it is really a way of removing propriety from the very concept of the ego by theorizing love as the recognition of something virtual in the other that the other re-recognizes (a clumsy way of emphasizing the iterability of the movement of cognition between subjects/objects) in being loved. The self, here, is neither a possession of nor a profundity within the other. Instead, what exists between them as love is radically superficial. The amplifying of recognition as it moves from one to the other and then back again is produced through the act of love, which is not the passion of a subject on a quest for knowledge but a mutual overtaking in which the ego is discovered to belong to neither the lover nor the beloved but is extensive across all three of lover, beloved, and the virtual world in general. In

seeing in each other not a depth of difference but a reflection of sameness that prompts a mutual remembrance of virtual beauty, this “backlove” undoes the very distinction between subject and object, between the active will of the knower and the passive reception of this will by the object of knowledge. This alternative formulation of love is related, in Bersani’s view, to the psychoanalytic ego and its pursuit of *jouissance*, which is inherently narcissistic at the same time that it threatens self-shattering; in other words, the ego’s drive toward achieving “mastery over the external world” results in an “intense narcissistic pleasure” that risks the self’s annihilation (whether through orgasm, “intellectual strain, verbal disputes”, or death—all examples that Freud provides in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*) (*Intimacies* 66-7). In this way, when we pathologize narcissism and search for ways to inhibit it, we are acting more violently rather than less. What we should be doing, in Phillips’ summation of the project, is to “have the courage of one’s narcissism” (98), which means, at its simplest, refusing to see in the world and in others the bewildering novelty of difference and instead see the familiar, see the self’s extension into the world and others. As Bersani puts it, this would require seeing the appearance of difference in the other as the arbitrary “envelope” reflecting a shared impersonality that cares nothing for the individuating specifics of that particular envelope. This, finally, is the meaning of Phillips’ straightforward claim that “love”—narcissistic, ego-expansive, non-violent love—“is nothing personal” (99).

An impersonal love. Love that is indifferent to the appearance of personality. This counterintuitive definition of love names precisely the kind of relation that, for Bersani and Phillips, would de-emphasize our commitment to ourselves and, consequently, our

recourse to violence. Phillips, in his conclusion to *Intimacies*, takes the step from Platonic “backlove” to the “primal scene” of mother and infant in order to ask how, or if, the narcissistic mother who sees her baby as “of a piece” with herself is, far from engaging in pathological behaviour, opening the earliest possibility of forming and maintaining an impersonal, nonviolent love (107). Another way of describing this possibility is to ask: can the family be delinked from heterosexuality and its foundation upon the incest taboo, which can be understood, psychoanalytically speaking, as the self-preserving prohibition against sameness? Perhaps we could call this possibility a queer maternity, one that resists absorption into the “family story” that Bersani decries by resisting an appropriative fixation on and defense of differential selfhood. Phillips, in his attempt to articulate a maternity that refuses complicity in personalization, uses the word “becoming” to name what it is that occurs impersonally between a narcissistic mother and her infant:

The mother and infant may have a growing sense of what each other are like, but they are more attuned by their impersonal narcissistic investment in each other, to what each is becoming in the presence of the other ... The first intimacy is an intimacy with a process of becoming, not with a person. The question raised by Bersani’s account is why is this relation so difficult to sustain, so easily sabotaged by the drive to take things personally? (113-4)

What Phillips is saying here is that the infant stands for a radical impersonality; it is has not yet coalesced into the personality that the mother will eventually come to believe she loves. He is asking how it might be possible to sustain this impersonality, this awareness of a love that has no interest in personality. Why do we forget that it was the non-self of the infant that we loved? Why does the personality that we come to see in the child seem, in retrospect, to have been there all along? It is tempting, when one uses a word like

“becoming”, to fall into certain beliefs we so passionately hold, beliefs about the radical potential contained within the figure of the child and about the mother’s sacrificial responsibility to protect and nurture this potentiality. But what Phillips is getting at here is not a narrative of maternity that *begins* with radical potentiality before falling, in one way or another, into a determined path that unfolds into a closed future. Instead, he is trying to articulate an intimacy that has no regard for the specificity of the subjects at hand; the emphasis is upon “familiar nonfamiliarity” rather than on the mother’s recognition of the infant’s “true self”. Importantly, moving away from the very notion of a “true self”, and of personalizing difference in general, entails a move toward the “no-time” that Sethe describes in her relation to Beloved. A mother who recognizes the true self of her child is imbricated within a temporality that assumes a before-and-after; the true self is really in there, prior to the act of recognition. A mother who re-recognizes her child—who is indifferent to the “facts” of her child’s identity—welcomes the illogical logic that governs the realms of dreams, telepathy, and, as I will explore further here, anamnesis. The kind of recognition that occurs between Sethe and Beloved—a recognition rooted in repetition and not in personal knowledge—has nothing to do with memory and everything to do, as we will see, with *rememory*.

Attendance to a process or a relation that is impersonal works against the kind of narrativizing teleology with which Bersani (and other thinkers who could be grouped loosely under the umbrella of “queer theory”) takes issue. Our conventional grammar—defined by non-contradiction and before-and-after logic—locks us into a “personal individuality” that is produced by our particular history (Bersani, *Thoughts and Things*

88). There are moments or instances when we might “know again an individuality unencumbered by selfhood” (ibid.), but they require us to register the existence of a grammar that runs counter to the one we unthinkingly use in “waking” life. Jacques Khalip, in a brief essay entitled “Still Here: The Remains of Difference”, offers a way to think about queer theory’s resistance to difference as an *unbecoming*, a word that better captures, in my estimation (and Ricco’s, who also uses the word *unbecoming* to describe a Bersanian lessening of the self), the extent of the indifference that can exist between a mother who has abandoned any wish to know her unknowable child, and the child itself. Offering a brief reading of Wordsworth’s “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways”, Khalip writes that the poem

evokes a mood that has nothing to show—an expression of an occasion for experience, but not the experience itself. Without narrative, without teleological movement, there is only an *unbecoming* stillness, a brevity of thought that one could just as easily ignore as listen to because it is so unremarkable. (166, my emphasis)

Lucy, whose “anonymous life” is impersonally remarked upon in the poem, is freed from the “coercive imperative to *be*” (ibid.). The task, then, of resisting “the drive to take things personally” requires this kind of anonymizing, non-teleological relationality—a brevity not only of thought but of the relation itself. When Bersani and Phillips suggest that the question “do you want to have sex with me?” would guide an impersonal social world, they mean that rather than being guided by the dual desire to know and be known, we might reduce—and thereby expand—our relationships to the pleasure of temporary, superficial correspondence: two people who simply agree to have sex with each other and nothing more captures the fundamental anonymity—the substitutability—of the

individual and renders irrelevant the desire to defend the self and its borders. If we follow, then, Phillips' move to the mother-child relation, we must accept, unpalatable though it may seem, that this same guiding question—do you want to have sex with me?—must also come to govern maternity—in form if not in content.

Throughout *Beloved*, Sethe uses the word rememory to describe a theory of time that has no regard for the actual order of events, or for “teleological movement” (Khalip 166). While Best (amongst others) has described rememory as nothing more than an idiomatic reference to *memory* that is paradigmatic of the contemporary desire to repair and redeem a past that “lives on” in the present (66), I read Sethe's insistence on “rememory” differently. It is, I suggest, the expression of a specifically virtual realm that is divorced from the specificities of our personal histories; is the “occasion for experience, but not the experience itself” to which Khalip refers above. This is not to say, as Ashraf Rushdy does, that rememory moves from personal experience into the collective as part of a drive toward both shared identity and “healing” (575). Rather, it is a way of expressing what is almost impossible to express: that there exists a virtual realm in which time does not pass, in which the order of events ceases to matter, and which has “nothing to show” (Khalip 166). In the following section, I explore how the re-cognition of sameness between Sethe and Beloved—expressed in the tropes of incest and cannibalism in the novel—entails not only telepathy, as we have seen, but also anamnesis: the impossibility of calling to mind a timeless virtual that is not one's own. Rememory becomes, in such a reading, not the existence of a shared basis for identity but of an existence in which the very notion of a past, of an origin, ceases to be at stake.

Eating Without Incorporating: Filicide and the Unbecoming of the Self

Let us return to the question “do you want to have sex with me?” as one that guides an impersonal relationality. Could it be put a different way? In his well-known essay “Hate in the Counter-Transference”, Winnicott describes the coincidence of love and hate in the analyst-analysand relationship by recourse to the existence of hatred in the mother’s attitude toward her infant. He presents a list of eighteen reasons (while admitting that this list is only partial) why a mother “hates her infant from the word go”; the eighteenth reason is: “[The infant] excites her but frustrates—she mustn’t eat him or trade in sex with him” (355). As Rose sees it, “Winnicott’s essay has become a type of urtext for women seeking to shatter the cliché of benign, devoted motherhood, a weapon to be wielded on behalf of maternal ambivalence struggling to be recognized” (113). I think, however, there is something more interesting at work in Winnicott’s insight into the prohibition against both sex with and ingestion of the infant, which is a reformulation of the Freudian insight that “the original version of the question do you want to have sex with me? would be the question do I want to eat you or spit you out?” (Phillips 101). The prohibition against incest, which is not only a literal prohibition against sexual relations between blood relations but an instituting grammar that structures the very syntax of the psychoanalytic subject, means that both mother and child are caught in an irresolvable tension between sameness, which must be rejected in favour of the establishment of difference, and difference, which in being established opens up the possibility of desire and must therefore also be rejected on the basis of a lingering sameness originating in the blood. The good mother does her best to navigate this tension because she respects the

incest taboo and is invested in the only possible outcome of this complex situation: the transformation of incestuous desire into desire for the nonfamilial. The narcissistic mother has no such respect. She asks herself of her child, do I want to eat you or spit you out? And then she answers: I want to eat you. This, of course, brings us right back to Beloved's dream of being swallowed, her recollection of being "chewed and swallowed" as she "joins" with the smiling face she recognizes as her own.

Beloved dreams of being swallowed while she eats everything she can get her hands on; eating comes to stand in for incest—sameness—between her and Sethe. In *Mothers*, Rose offers a brief analysis of Edith Wharton's 1925 novel *The Mother's Recompense*, a story which has a number of points of similarity with *Beloved*. *The Mother's Recompense* follows the story of Kate Clephane, a mother who abandons her husband and young daughter in New York to pursue passionate romances with other men, one of which—now ended—remains "the most serious love affair of her life" (Rose 101-2). She eventually settles in France until, many years later, she receives an invitation from her daughter to visit her in New York. Upon being reunited with her daughter, Kate feels as though "they were two parts of some delicate instrument which fitted together as perfectly as if they had never been disjoined" (Wharton 34). Their "perfect" reunion, however, is destroyed by Kate's discovery that her daughter's fiancé is none other than Chris Fenno, the man with whom she had an affair those many years ago. Rose reads in the novel a remarkable willingness to expose an incestuous core at the heart of the mother-daughter relation:

[Wharton] probes the undertow of their [mother and daughter] proximity, refusing to shy away from its lurking shadow of incest ... Incest, most obviously, in so far

as mother and daughter are in love with the same man. But incest, too, in the overbearing, body-to-body eros that binds the mother and her daughter. (103)

In the novel, Kate is nearly driven mad by the incestuous triad she finds herself in; she can neither allow her daughter to marry Fenno, nor break their engagement and maintain the idyllic mother-daughter love she was hoping to have. And so she wishes her daughter well and returns to France. Rose's interpretation of this second abandonment is in line with a conventional rejection of self-annihilating sameness; Kate leaves in order to rescue both herself, from her suicidal anguish, and her daughter, from Kate's filicidal jealousy: "Too much binding closeness, even – especially – between a mother and daughter, is killing (mother love with a vengeance)" (105). In a separate reading of the memoir *An Abbreviated Life* by Ariel Leve, Rose makes clearer her position on incestuous, narcissistic mother love, this time aimed at Leve's mother, with whom Leve felt there were "no barriers" and "no secrets": "[Leve's mother's] flagrant narcissism, inseparable from her wilful passion for her daughter, offers a beautiful illustration of the mind of a mother in complete denial of itself" (Rose 107). A narcissistic mother, in other words, damages not only the child but also the mother. In the narcissistic relation, both are denied the selfhood, identified by Rose as "knowledge of one's own mind" (110), that is thought to be proper to them.

*Too much binding closeness is killing.* Like Kate and her daughter, Sethe and Beloved consummate their sameness by having sex with the same man: Paul D, Sethe's friend and lover from Sweet Home. And like Leve, there are "no barriers" between Sethe and Beloved, who come to commune telepathically with one another. I would like to consider, for a moment, what might have happened in *The Mother's Recompense* if Kate

had dwelt in the incestuous, agonizing mire of her relationship with her daughter. There certainly is a kind of killing at hand in Wharton's description of Kate's distress; but a killing of what? The novel suggests that, had Kate stayed, the question would be, "how long 'before mother and daughter were left facing each other like two ghosts in a grey world of disenchantment?'" (Rose 104). The figure of the ghost, then, can be taken to stand in for the loss of self that is threatened—or promised—by narcissistic love; if Kate had stayed, she would have undergone the self-annihilation that results from the collapse of the boundaries between self and other. For *Beloved* and Sethe, the question, do I want to eat you? (and its inverse, do you want to eat me?, which means the same thing) is expressed by the insatiable hunger that drives their relationship, by the transformation of *Beloved*'s dream logic into an indistinction between dream and wakefulness; incestuous, superficial sameness, offered here in the form of the hungry ghost, allows us, briefly, to witness the de-personalizing, anonymizing intimacy of their shared narcissistic love.

It is Sethe herself, who, despite being tempted by Paul D and their heterosexual union, the emblem of a relationality rooted in difference and the neat ordering of past, present, and future that attends it, describes, early in the story, the significance of the ghost not as trope but as literary evidence for a new relational mode that possesses ontological rather than figurative status. For Sethe, it is difficult to "believe" in time; rather, it seems to her that the past has a real and timeless endurance, not only in what we call memory but in a form external to the remembering subject. Just after the scene in which Paul D first takes Sethe to bed, we learn of a kind of vision Denver had long before Paul D made his appearance at 124. Returning from a place in the woods that she visits in

order to stave off her loneliness, Denver sees through a window her mother kneeling in prayer, a white dress kneeling beside her with its arm around her waist. Recalling the story of her birth, in which Sethe's too-early labour—already signalling a disrupted temporality—was aided by a young white girl who said, while massaging Sethe's swollen, numb feet, “anything dead coming back to life hurts” (35), Denver takes the sight of the white dress as a sign that the baby ghost has “plans”. When Denver mentions the dress to her mother, she asks Sethe what she was praying for: “I don't pray anymore,” Sethe says. “I just talk”:

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory but out there, in the world. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (36)

This conviction of Sethe's that the past is really there, that it can be unexpectedly encountered, insert itself into the mind of anyone who walks “through” it—just as Paul D walked through Beloved's red light and felt her grief enter him—is the result of her failed fidelity to what she calls simply “time,” the linear, progressive time which structures the syntax of our relationship to the world. And her failure to believe in time is the result of her being a mother; her drive to protect her children from a life of slavery made it possible for her to see killing them as a paradoxical way to keep them safe, to “put them where they'd be safe”, not ending their lives but moving them from the phenomenological to the virtual. Explaining rememory—her word for virtual existence—to Denver, Sethe reminds her daughter that Sweet Home is still out there, “waiting for

[her]”. “If it’s still there, waiting,” Denver remarks, “that must mean that nothing ever dies.” “Nothing ever does,” replies Sethe, with the earnestness of a mother who cut her baby’s throat in order to put her somewhere safe (36).

Beloved, the ghost, is what relationality looks like when rememory is operational, when we are attuned to its possession of us as well as our external existence within it. Beloved is not a figure for the past that must be therapeutically “laid down” in order to move forward, to plan for a future. She is the “ontic evidence” of a shared virtuality whose presence is so often ignored by an insistence upon our self-contained agency, our view of the world as being comprised of passive objects with which we, as active subjects, form relationships. Sethe and Beloved have the relationship they do—an impersonal narcissistic one—not because Sethe is Beloved’s mother but because she is the one who loved her enough to keep her safe by moving her to the slipstream of the virtual, by understanding that nothing ever dies. In this view, there is nothing supernatural or magical about Beloved; she is a request to the reader to follow along with Sethe’s inability to believe in time, which structures our investment in difference, and her willingness to concede a world of virtual correspondences that have real, material effects upon one another. In order to proceed with an interpretation of the novel—of Sethe and Beloved’s relationship in particular—that takes seriously Sethe’s theory of rememory, we must attend to the ways in which the story de-emphasizes the psychological subject. When Bersani writes that “art [which he extends to include literature] diagrams universal relationality” (“Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject” 142), he means that we can see in art the evidence for what he terms the “aesthetic subject,” a subject that stands in

contrast to the subject of psychological depth that is the dominant understanding of subjectivity in contemporary Western culture. The aesthetic subject is produced by the “perpetual and imperfect recurrences of forms, volumes, colors, and gestures” (146)—and, we might add, voices, faces, languages, and stories—and it is thus constituted in and by the world: “The world finds itself in the subject and the subject finds itself in the world,” and there is a “looping movement between the two” (147).

Read as the expression of this kind of de-psychologized subjectivity, the relationship between Sethe and Beloved can no longer be interpreted as symptomatic of a psychic pathology inhibiting Sethe’s full possession of herself. Nor is Beloved the phenomenon of the past’s destructive power over the present. Rather, she is the site where the distinction between “inner and outer” breaks down and the “continuation of all things elsewhere” (Bersani, “Psychoanalysis” 148) becomes accessible, believable. Nothing ever dies. This is a leap of faith that only Sethe is fully able to make—though Denver and, to some degree, Paul D both come close—because Beloved’s existence breaks down the distinction not only between inner and outer but between mother and child, self and other. Sethe *does* “lose herself” in Beloved, whose “expressionless” eyes (*Beloved* 118) and contentless, infantile communication—she alternates between asking for things (sweets, stories), crying, smiling, and searching with her eyes for Sethe’s face—do not allow for a relationship between selves to be established. When Paul D, upon finding out about Sethe’s murder of her baby daughter, leaves 124, Sethe, Beloved, and Denver shut themselves into the house: “Whatever is going on outside my door ain’t for me,” Sethe thinks. “The world is in this room” (183). Conventional readings of the novel see this

turn away from the outside world as part of Beloved's dangerous hold over Sethe, a hold that can only be broken by Denver's leaving the house in order to get help and, eventually, Beloved's final disappearance. But Sethe's insight—"the world is in this room"—is perhaps not too far from the truth that Beloved's existence makes possible. Against the temptation to remember that Paul D represents for her, Sethe's recognition that Beloved is her daughter allows her to forget the particularities of her past. And with forgetting comes increasing hunger, diminishing personality. The morning after Paul D leaves, Sethe and Denver "ate like men, ravenous and intent. Saying little, content with the company of the other and the opportunity to look in her eyes" (183). Sethe feels "wrapped in a timeless present": "Thank God I don't have to rememory or say a thing because you know it. All" (191). These things point to Sethe's and Beloved's movement from the realized to the virtual by the event of re-cognition: the abandonment of searching the past for the truth; of certainty; of before-and-afterness; of a selfhood that is predicated upon knowing who one is by virtue of one's personal history. This is not the melancholic belief in the past's continuation into the present; it is an event that renders irrelevant the very need to establish "what happened"—and the consequent question, "and what can be done about it?"—and renders salient the anonymous pleasures of self-diminishment.

*Beloved*, of course, does not deny the existence of the past but it does ask us to stop viewing the past in terms of our personal investment in continuity and redemption. The kind of impersonal narcissism enacted in the relation between Sethe and Beloved is a window onto what might happen when we stop making the past (and, by extension, the

future) about us; we might live, if only momentarily, within the “occasion for experience” rather than the experience itself (Khalip 166). Sethe’s re-cognition of Beloved, whose impossible existence and lack of identity renders her anonymous, engenders a narcissistic maternity that seeks the kind of “nonfamiliar familiarity” that Bersani sought in his reading of *La Casse*. It is a maternity that is not world-denying but world-extensive, that disseminates itself throughout the world rather than clinging to the specificity of the individual personality. It is eating without incorporating; having sex with without overcoming. It is, in short, a freedom that frees itself from the very notion of proprietary selfhood and the violent, exploitative relations that go along with it. It is in this sense that I suggest Sethe’s impersonal love for Beloved occasions a marronage more freeing than her physical flight from Sweet Home and her eventual turn back toward herself at the end of the novel. Freed from herself and from the past, she is free to become, by unbecoming, something other, something that has no concrete, completed form. At the end of his section of *Intimacies*, Phillips again turns to barebacking as an example of impersonal intimacy, and again I see a symmetry with the incestuous, cannibalistic love between a mother and daughter who cannot be known to one another:

Barebackers clearly see a different kind of future in human relatedness. Barebacking is a picture of what it might be for human beings in relation with each other not to personalize the future. Impersonal intimacy asks of us what is the most inconceivable thing: to believe in the future without needing to personalize it. (117)

For his part, Bersani adds that in order to believe in an impersonal future, we must also be able to believe in an impersonal past (*Intimacies* 122). For Sethe and Beloved, this means stepping to the side of narrative, of the ordering of events in a way that explains the

conclusion by recourse to the beginning. It means failing to believe in wakefulness because the illogical timelessness of the dream is all around. When *Beloved* is, in the end, disremembered, forgotten “like a bad dream”, her story is not one to “pass on” because it is discontinuous with the stream of personal history that Sethe has fallen back into. *Beloved* serves no “epistemological goals”; she cannot be fitted into Sethe’s story in a way that makes sense, that advances Sethe’s overcoming of her past and her movement into the future with Paul D. But she remains in the appearance of incongruities that emerge from time to time: “Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative—looked at too long—shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there” (*Beloved* 275). *Beloved* names the anonymous, anonymizing force of an impersonal maternity that failed to recognize her and, in failing, made briefly possible a chance at freedom.

### Chapter 3

#### **“Whatever You do, don’t Die”: Machines, Mothers, and the Potential of Inhuman “Love”**

“Why am I me, and not somebody else?” This is a question my seven-year-old son, Leonard, has been asking a lot lately. I try to keep my engagement with the question simple, straightforward, and non-sentimental. I have said things like, “because you could only be you. If you had different DNA, you would be somebody else” and “you’re you because of the specific combination of sperm and egg that you started out as”. He understands how babies are made; he knows that he is the product of a genetic code that is unique to him. Yet, he can’t help but think that if a different sperm, or a different egg, had happened to meet inside his mother’s belly, the resulting baby would still have been him, just *different*. When we have these conversations, I can see how hard he is working to wrap his mind around the implications of the question: *so, anybody could have been born? Not just me?; so, the chances of me being born were THAT small?; so, there isn’t anything special about me, it could just as well have been anyone?; and (perhaps most importantly) you would still love them?* He is never upset by these considerations that verge into a realm that is almost impossible to think (I didn’t need to be here; life, and the world, would have gone on without me; there could have been endless nothingness in place of my life). These questions are simply, as he puts it, the “biggest” ones he can ask, and he “can’t think any further than that”.

This line of questioning started at age six and followed on the heels of years of questions about death (will I die? Will you die? What happens when I die?). My two other children, who are five and three years old at the time of writing, are in their respective stages with regard to these death questions right now, the older still struggling with it (she refuses to say the word at all) and the younger just beginning her inquiry. Anyone tasked with the care of young children will be intimately familiar with these fundamental childhood theorizations<sup>10</sup>. But the transition—for Leonard, at least—from contemplating the impossibility that is his own death to contemplating the fact that there is nothing special or necessary about his life in the first place has been particularly interesting to me. Fortuitously, he started asking these questions shortly after I had put together the idea for this chapter of my dissertation, an idea about the link that exists, in our cultural imaginary, between mothers and machines. It struck me, particularly after watching the film *I Am Mother* (dir. Grant Sputore), in which a human daughter realizes that her artificially intelligent mother has been repeatedly attempting to raise a child and then murdering and incinerating them when they don't measure up or are no longer useful, that there is a kind of horror induced by the idea that I might not be special, *not*

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<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt has contrasted what she calls natality—the human capacity for new beginnings that emerges out of the fact of birth—with earlier philosophical preoccupations with mortality. In other words, Arendt wanted to shift the focus of philosophy away from the destructiveness of death to the possibility for newness that occurs with each and every birth. I find it very interesting that for Leonard, the questions of life and death are not really treated separately; for him, both birth and death imply inevitability as well as make us aware of how unlikely it is to exist at all. That it is possible to hold these two thoughts simultaneously—for something to seem both inevitable and highly improbable—means, I think, that death and birth cannot, or perhaps should not, be understood as polar concepts, the one the negation of the other.

*even to my own mother.* I am, in short, replaceable; there is nothing about *me* that guarantees my mother's love because she would have loved any random combination of DNA that happened to develop into the baby that, one way or another, was placed into her arms. This horror is engendered, in the film, by the curious but indifferent gaze of Mother's robotic eye, an eye that views Daughter as merely one amongst many possibilities (this film will be discussed in more detail below). What is interesting to me about Leonard's inquiry, however, is that he *isn't* horrified by this realization. It is hard to fully apprehend, yes; it is a "big" idea that tests the limits of his understanding. But it isn't horror or any related affect that arises in him. Rather, he responds with a kind of bland acceptance that runs alongside an almost playful interest in the puzzle-like task of allowing one's mind to really grasp the utter improbability of one's existence as well as the utter indifference with which the world would have carried on whether or not one managed, through sheer luck, to exist at all. Of course, this task is difficult. Leonard can no more picture a world in which he wasn't born than he can imagine what will happen to him after he dies. And yet, he tries.

For Leonard, for now, my reassurance that I love him very much is a satisfying enough response to questions about his potential replaceability. He has two siblings, so he is well-acquainted with the fact that his mother loves more than one iteration of her recombined genetic output. This satisfaction, of a type that may only be possible in childhood, made me realize something about Daughter's response to Mother in *I Am Mother*: the horror, from the adult's perspective, doesn't reside in the fact that Mother would have loved any child she had as much as she loves Daughter; it's that the fact of

Daughter's replaceability signals to her that Mother cannot truly love at all.

Replaceability implies indifference, and indifference, we have been trained to believe, is incompatible with love. If I am replaceable, the logic goes, then the “love” I receive isn't really love at all, because real love is deeply personal, it aims itself right at the heart of *who I am*. If a mother can love so easily, so impersonally, then it doesn't *mean* anything. Or rather, it doesn't tell me anything about myself and I so desperately want to know, above all else, about myself. Worse, it might mean that my mother is capable of things no mother should be: killing; replacing; treating as a means to an end the sacred life of the individual. In the end, the discrepancy between how I imagined that I understood the nature of the horror in *I Am Mother* and how my son responds to and considers the fact of his own replaceability is the thread that runs through the analysis that is to follow. For, as each previous chapter of this thesis has explored, it is the very notion we have of a childhood that stands at odds with adulthood that an alternative maternity—one that embraces rather than futilely attempts to banish things like indifference and impersonality—renders irrelevant. In this chapter I consider both the ways in which the relationship between mothers and machines has been erected in my chosen archive—*I Am Mother* (2019) and Ray Bradbury's 1969 short story “I Sing the Body Electric!”—as well as the ways in which the interpretation of machine/mothers as alternately comforting or horrifying depends upon a theory of childhood innocence, an innocence that is shattered by the child's initiation into knowledge. Knowledge, in both our conventional understanding and in psychoanalytic terms, is intimately tied to sexuality—we protect children from “adult” knowledge about sex, and, relatedly, violence and death (amongst

other things that we do not believe children are... what? Equipped to handle, emotionally, intellectually? Because we're afraid children might start thinking or acting like adults and that would ... bother us? One of the most illuminating and generative things about the work of Adam Phillips, who has written extensively about children and adults and the relationship between them, is how pragmatically and straightforwardly he pushes us to ask why it is that we believe the things we believe, what those beliefs do for us and what they preclude us from doing). But the child's initiation into knowledge also has another dimension, one that has been particularly well-formulated by both Bersani and Phillips, and that dimension has to do with the epistemological stance—epistemophilia—with which “growing up” is synonymous. As Phillips elegantly puts it, we are “educated to think of language, and of people, as something we can get, and in what might be called the fullest sense of the word. Getting it, or not getting it – both the experience, which is acute, and the phrase, which seems not to be – reminds us of the investment we are brought up to have in understanding as a measure of intimacy and competence” (*Missing Out* 46). The “fullest sense of the word”, of course, refers to the fact that “getting”, on top of meaning understanding, also means to sexually reproduce (i.e. begetting a child). What Phillips is saying, then, is that “getting it” is another way of saying “epistemophilia” (which I have explored at length in previous chapters)—an implacable attitude of “wanting to understand” others, or a belief that the self's relation to the other is held together by knowing, which both Bersani and Phillips suggest is a matter of “education” or “programming”. An undoing of this narrative programming opens up the possibility that mothers and machines are not oppositional categories, and that their merging need not be

frightening or monstrous. Through my reading of these texts, I proffer the thesis that there is a machinic aspect of maternity that, though it may indeed refuse the humanistic dream of an unconditional and personal love that simultaneously buoys and grounds the life of the individual and that is responsible for singularizing the subject, underpins the temporality and epistemology that is unique to what we call childhood. In other words, I argue that the child's relationship to the machine/mother association is one that opens up an altogether new relationality that could define a radically alternative version of love, one that mediates differently our attitude toward death and the possibility of our being replaced; such a love would not be a privation—i.e. the contraction or lessening of what we conventionally call love—but an overflowing, a love that moves us beyond or to the side of singularization as the endpoint of the child's development. Throughout the analyses that are to follow, I explore what “love” and “family” might mean if we attend to a version of maternity that is inhuman—both literally, as the mothers in the texts that follow are artificially intelligent robots, but also in the sense that Ricco invokes to explain how the inhumanness inherent in humanity is what renders the possessive tyranny of the self incomplete: the inhuman is what “ex-appropriates” the human “from its position of power and self-asserting wholeness” (“Not Just Antisocial” para. 7). In other words, there is something in or about each one of us that prevents us from ever achieving the “wholeness” of the category “human”. By keeping the theme of epistemophilia in mind, and its relation to inhumanity, my discussions of both “I Sing the Body Electric!” and *I Am Mother* illuminate the ways in which the desire for knowledge is tied to the specific violences of betrayal and revenge—the violence, in both cases, of the child who takes

their childhood too personally, and of the mother who, in her inhumanity, undoes the very foundation for violence. Inhuman “love” is the precondition for a relationality in which violence is rendered irrelevant.

### Aimless Repetition

That the child’s relationship with death is mediated by the mother is a truism of certain lines of psychoanalytic thinking, although Freud himself held multiple, conflicting views of the nature of the mother’s association with death: is our desire for the maternal body a manifestation of the death drive? Is the womb a kind of tomb? “To some people,” he writes in his essay “The Uncanny”:

the idea of being buried alive is the most uncanny thing of all. And yet, psychoanalysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a transformation of another phantasy which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness—the phantasy, I mean, of intra-uterine existence. (244)

This fantasy is but one example in which Freud sees an unconscious wish for death in the fantasy of returning oneself—in one way or another—to the womb. As Elissa Marder puts it, “buried in the conscious fear of being buried alive is an unconscious wish to *repeat* and *undo* the act of being born by copulating with the mother” (33, emphasis in original). This Oedipal interpretation is, of course, one way of explaining the uncanny closeness of birth and death, a closeness that I have suggested above is theorized by my son, Leonard, in the question, “why am I me and not somebody else?” What both Freud and Leonard are attempting to think about is the way in which maternal love—whether we want to visualize that love as the desire to copulate with the mother or not—is both

singular and singularizing *and* de-personalizing and de-realizing. For his part, Bersani has also addressed the association of death and the mother, but he has de-emphasized the Oedipal narrative in favour of his analysis of what he calls the “Proustian” child, or the child who does not (necessarily) wish to copulate with his mother but instead wishes to always be in her company, always know what she is doing and thinking: “Where is she, what is she doing, when we enter a territory unoccupied by her? Can we survive leaving her?” (*Receptive Bodies* 89). As I will describe shortly, Bradbury’s story “I Sing the Body Electric!”—a story about an artificially intelligent “grandmother” who takes the place of a dead mother—is the expression of this more Proustian fear, the fear of losing one’s mother (and what accepting a replacement for her might mean); *I Am Mother*, on the other hand, explores the equally childish fear of losing one’s mother by losing one’s singular, irreplaceable position in her eyes. As I will argue, our anxieties around mothers and death—and around our own essential repeatability or replaceability—can be understood as resolving themselves in a machinic theory of maternal love, a love that embraces the impersonal aspect of the mother-child relation. However, a machinic—i.e. inhuman—theory of maternal love depends, as we have seen above and in previous chapters, on a radical delinking between love and the desire for knowledge (and the kind of proprietary selfhood to which this link gives rise), and so before delving into my analysis of both Bradbury’s story and Sputore’s film, I would like to first consider some of the ways in which our epistemophilia depends upon a theory of maternal love as the genitor of the economy of knowledge that we believe holds the family together.

Phillips has described the relationship between desire and knowledge as one of deferral and sublimation. Drawing on both the myth of Oedipus and Shakespeare's *Othello*, Phillips suggests that what Lacan called "the passion for knowledge"—and what, similarly, Bersani has termed epistemophilia—is born of the disavowal of what one desires: "[Oedipus] gives up on what he originally wanted, and wants knowledge instead. To begin with, Oedipus wanted, albeit unconsciously, to kill his father and marry his mother; then, because of the suffering invoked, he wanted to know what happened" (148). Othello is guided by the same logic: he wants Desdemona, but somewhere along the way that desire is transformed into an insatiable desire not only for knowledge of what she is really up to but also a desire specifically for proof of her treachery. "How does the individual get from needing, to needing to know?", Phillips asks. And, more importantly, how is it that the need to know becomes most satisfying when that knowledge sanctions some form of revenge—revenge upon oneself, in the case of Oedipus, and upon Desdemona in *Othello*. Why is it that Othello, for example, would not be as satisfied if Desdemona were proven innocent? To answer this question, Phillips turns to Annette Baier, who describes the mother-child relation as the first ethical relation; "mother love" is a dangerous balancing act between the mother's "superior power" and the infant's desire for tyranny (Baier 156). If the "love" between the two is to prepare the child (or, indeed, the mother) for future love "between equals", then the mother-child relation must somehow manage to prepare the infant, who is wholly dependent upon the mother, for relations that eschew inequality (ibid.). Phillips agrees

with Baier (who is agreeing with Freud) that love “begins in dependency”, but he does not agree that such a love can ever produce the idyllic scene of love between equals:

It may be a disillusionment, but it is a salutary one, that love can never be between equals because love makes people unequal. It returns them to, it reminds them of, an initiating inequality. Love is the medium in which people become unequal, and for the reasons actually spelled out by Baier; the original situation of unequal dependency (or, as the analyst Enid Balint remarked many years ago, the mother is everything to the infant, but the infant is not everything to the mother) ... Our repertoire of ways of loving always includes inequality. All the so-called pathologies come, we might say, from the wish to get even; from the wish to turn the tables; from the wish to revenge ourselves on this first natural order. (Phillips 162-3)

In other words, we wish “never to feel this unequal dependence again”, but love, paradoxically, “makes people unequal” (ibid.). It is not possible to have “love” without inequality. This impossibility explains, in Phillips’ view, why Othello needs not just any knowledge about Desdemona but the specific knowledge that would legitimate his taking revenge by killing her. We want to “turn the tables” by taking revenge, by triumphing over our desire by removing the object of that desire. Love, knowledge, and revenge are bound together in a fruitless movement toward the overcoming of desire.

Put together in this way, the story Phillips tells about the seeking of knowledge as revenge for an initial and initiating inequality explains, perhaps, my son’s investigative line of questioning. Is he seeking, unconsciously, a means to indict me for failing to love *him*? For loving too promiscuously, for loving whichever child just happened to be born? He is fantasizing, in his child’s way, an omniscience about all the other lives he could have had, all the other people he could have been; if he had never been born, well, someone else would have been, and by some miracle this person would *also* have been him. There is no option, in any of the stories he tells, for him not to exist. He is able, at

least for now, to project himself into any fantasized situation—this despite the knowledge that he is linked indelibly to his particular body, a knowledge that he “knows” but doesn’t feel to be real—and is thereby forestalling the disillusionment of the realization that a world could exist that doesn’t have him in it. And in this world, his mother still loves. Is there a way to postpone indefinitely this disillusionment and the revenge it will legitimate? Can he, in Baier’s words, still be trained to be open to love between equals? Can we think about this particular quest for knowledge a little bit differently, approach it from another angle? There is something about his failure to discriminate between himself and the infinite others who could have taken his place that suggests knowledge—at least not the kind of knowledge that depends on certainty—may *not* be the goal of his query. In fact, it quite closely resembles Bersani’s interpretation of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and the convoluted exchange of “backlove” between lover and beloved: “Backlove is self-love, but the self the boy sees and loves in the lover is also the lover’s self, just as the lover, in remembering and worshipping his own godlike nature in the boy, is also worshipping the boy’s real (ideal) soul” (*Intimacies* 84-5). Bersani describes this love that emerges out of and produces sameness rather than difference as the love of “virtual being”. Virtual being is “unmappable as a distinct identity” (86): “[i]n the generous narcissism of the exchange between Socratic lovers, each partner demands of the other ... that he reflect the lover’s type of being, his universal singularity (and not his psychological particularities, his personal difference)” (*ibid.*). Perhaps, then, Leonard’s childish omniscience is the expression of a capacity to “relate to others according to this model of impersonal narcissism”, to relate to virtual others as reflections of an extensive sameness that has

nothing to do with the “envelope” of one’s individual body or psychology (ibid.). Put more simply, it is possible that the capacity to see himself in the (fantasized) other—to fail to fully apprehend the world without him in it—is a way of seeing the world as co-extensive with his self. Paradoxically, in seeing himself everywhere, in every iteration of his mother’s child, he is not seeing himself at all. He is not, as it were, taking it personally.

There is a tension, then, between the “passion for knowledge” that allows us to act out our triumph over the other whom we desire, and the impersonal narcissism that eschews the violence of this triumph in favour of a simultaneously extensive and reduced self, the omniscient self that the child fantasizes. The tension arises from the slenderness of the difference between them; as Bersani repeatedly insists, the shift away from epistemophilia—with its dependence upon the precious kernel of selfhood inside each one of us and the variety of identitarian categories this self attaches to—and toward impersonal narcissism is a matter of “relating” differently, of “seeing” something in a different way, of “instituting” or “cultivating” new ways of thinking and experiencing, or of “recognizing” something in others and in the world that we couldn’t previously perceive (all examples taken from *Intimacies*). Phillips, in his response to Bersani in *Intimacies*, phrases the question this way:

[W]e use our putative differences, our cherished idiosyncrasies to conceal from ourselves and others the affinities that always already exist. Bewitched by the armor of singularity, of a picture of individual identity that has to be fought for and fought over, the question for Bersani is, how can we allow ourselves—of, how can we remind ourselves—of our passion for sameness? (108)

Phillips goes on to speculate, as Bersani did, that the means by which we “allow” or “remind” ourselves to relate to the world and to others in terms of similarity rather than difference, or rather than singularities, are aesthetic. That is to say, if we all pass, as infants, through an originary narcissism, we may ask how it is that such a state could be preserved with the aim of fostering a “less violent” relational mode (*Intimacies* 108), and we might look less to overt ethical rationalizations and more to moments where “pleasures” or “convulsions” unexpectedly occur and overtake the self. Tuhkanen has described this ethical aspect of the Bersanian project as one of “speculative aesthetics”, where what is cultivated is nothing more than a kind of availability to re-route thinking through the world, to allow, in some sense, the world—the other, the work of art, the film, etc.—to do the thinking for you. For Tuhkanen, this seems to be the very meaning of the term “speculative”, which makes its appearance across Bersani’s oeuvre and describes thought’s unintentional movement away from the known and the knowable and toward the new, the unexpected, and the impossible. Speculation is, above all, the pleasure of having one’s thoughts moved in these new ways, of yielding to arrangements of involuntary thinking that make up what Bersani calls the “virtual”. Tuhkanen links Bersani’s claims of speculative pleasure with his concept of “hominess”, as both represent “an attunement where the subject meets the world in correspondence or solidarity, where the self is discovered to have always already entailed the world’s predicative difference” (“Speculative Aesthetics” 11-2). All that this attunement requires, it would seem, is a sensitivity to moments in which we allow the other to think for us rather than thrusting thinking forward in a desperate grab for knowledge. It is, perhaps, a

passive—and necessarily relational—form of thinking that prioritizes the pleasure of abandonment and of self-dispossession over the pleasure of knowing.

In a way, Bersani's insistence upon speculation reformulates the psychoanalytic concept of the mother/child (and, by extension, the analyst/analysand) relation, and it is perhaps Wilfred Bion's theory of "thoughts without a thinker" that most usefully illuminates the value of speculation as an impersonal movement of thought. In an essay entitled "A Theory of Thinking", Bion suggests that the development of the conscious/unconscious split in the infant—the development, in other words, of the mind's ability to "[know] itself from experience of itself" (158)—depends upon a fundamental distinction between thoughts and the apparatus that "thinks" them. The first thinking that the infant does is not an activity of the infant's own mind, but of the infant's mother (or mother substitute). The infant, overwhelmed by sensory stimulation, requires "thinking" in order to cope with the "thoughts"—initially sensory in nature—that assail them. Bion elaborated a theory of "maternal reverie" to describe the way in which the mother unconsciously absorbs the infant's thoughts, thinks them, and then presents them back to the infant in a form that is stabilizing and gives limits to what would otherwise feel like limitless stimulation. Development is therefore the process by which the mother's "thinking apparatus" becomes the infant's own, the gradual transmission of thinking until the infant/child possesses what they think of as their own mind. What is significant about Bion's theory is that it delinks thoughts from thinking and suggests that, at its very inception, thinking is not an active process driven by a pre-existing self but a passive process that we "borrow" from another prior to the constitution of the self. Even the

concept of maternal reverie implies a receptivity to the thoughts of others, and, although he does not cite Freud directly in his essay on thinking, Bion's theory could be interpreted as an alternative formulation of the process of telepathy. Thoughts are not necessarily personal, not necessarily tied to any thinker, and thinkers routinely and originarily lean on other thinkers to do their thinking for them. In simpler and less psychological terms, we might turn to Stephen Best's exhortation to "think like works of art" to understand the ways in which thinking is not necessarily tied to human subjects but denotes any matrix—human or nonhuman—that conducts thought along particular lines. Describing an encounter with an "object" made by Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, an object that looks, from a distance, like an undulating swath of glittering golden fabric but which is, upon closer inspection, made from discarded bottle caps and "collars" found by the artist, Best identifies the "thinking" that the artwork does for the viewer:

You feel the resplendence begin to fade upon the recognition that the work is built from these bits of trash. Yet you cannot avoid the thought that the artwork itself has instructed you to follow this precise perceptual itinerary; that the work itself has led you through this process. You feel that the work has guided you, and in a very controlled and particular way, into this encounter with its essence. You think, too, how curious it is that the work would subvert its own beauty—obliterate it, evaporate it—how the work contains the conditions of its own undoing. (30)

For Best, gazing upon the artwork induces a particular movement of thought ("*It's gold ... No, it's trash. It's bottle caps ... no, it's artwork*" [32]), and this movement is imposed upon thought by the form of the artwork itself. That an artwork performs the cognitive function *thinking*, and that a person may have their thoughts routed through the thinking of an inanimate object, provides the basis for Best's claim that the interaction between the two constitutes a "non-sovereign form of critical subjectivity" (33). In other words, what

all three of Bion, Best, and Bersani share is a conviction that what we call thinking is *not* the product of a sovereign and self-directing subject. We are not the genitors of thinking; rather, thinking, even (or especially) when it feels like it's coming from "inside", circulates *between* subjects and objects and thereby cares nothing for the distinction between the two: "[i]t is speculatively narcissistic" (Tuhkanen, "Speculative" 11).

Just as the Anatsui artwork "undoes" itself in the perceptual movement between trash and art, so too is the self undone by the very concept of thinking. Selfhood is constituted by becoming-self-conscious—by thinking—but this thinking never originates inside the self. The self, like the artwork, straddles the line between—produces the movement of—the consolidated subject with its epistemophilic desires and its belief in its self-possession, and the "self-dismissal" (Best 37) that occurs whenever one becomes momentarily aware that one's thinking is being done by someone or something else. What feels like the most private, intimate process is actually shared and is actually occurring "outside" of the self. For his part, Bersani takes this paradox of thinking—that thinking both constitutes and undoes the self—and theorizes it as a process of "self-replication" or "repeatable being" (*Forms of Being* 117). What Bersani means by emphasizing the repeatability of the subject is to emphasize that when the self ceases to see itself as deeply personal and internal, and instead sees itself as diffuse and external (sees, in other words, that its "thinking" is actually radically im- and interpersonal), it can formulate an understanding of love that is predicated upon the existence of a fundamental sameness that extends between beings, between subject and object. "Repeated being" thus becomes a simplified way of indicating the "impersonal narcissism" of the subject

“that continuously fails at being unique” (*Forms of Being* 117)—we do not occur once but many times over, an infinite number of times encompassing both the realised and the virtual. We may say, then, that Bion’s concept of “maternal reverie”, which he felt was specific to the mother-infant relation and which found its own inaccurate repetition in the analyst-analysand relation, describes any instance in which thinking is routed through the other, whether that other is a film, a natural landscape, or a painting. If we are to follow the thought of Best and Bersani, such instances occur everywhere; we need only “attune” ourselves to them by suspending the belief that we are the sole genitors of thinking. Attending to these instances, however momentary, interrupts the “me-ness”—the sense that thinking is *mine* and that, therefore, it is me who drives or possesses the thoughts—that emerges from the Cartesian belief that it is the I who generates thinking. “I think therefore I am” only holds if we believe wholeheartedly that thinking originates nowhere else but in the individual mind of the self; if we allow that thinking can come from elsewhere, from without, then our individuality—and our sense that that individuality must be defended at all costs—is also thrown into question.

In the final essay of his last published book, *Receptive Bodies*, Bersani elaborates the link between thinking and repetition in his discussion of Bruno Dumont’s film *Humanité*. Reflecting upon his analysis, a meditation upon the staring of the main character, Bersani asks, “[w]hat would it mean—what has it meant for me—to verbally accompany Pharaon’s staring?” (126). He suggests that his analysis of the film is an exercise in “parallel movement”, in “spiraling” repetitions of “thinking” that the film conducts (*Receptive Bodies* 127). In *A Future for Astyanax*, Bersani elaborates this idea

by claiming that criticism is merely a repetition of the “sense-making procedures”—the cognitive function of thinking—of art: “[a]rt does not tell us the ‘truth’ about the real any more than criticism tells us the ‘truth’ about art ... The identity of art is in part *to be* criticism, just as the very identity of criticism subverts any secure identifications of criticism and allows for the unpredictable ‘sliding’ of critical discourse into the grooves or modes of artistic discourse” (311). Tuhkanen, picking up on another line in *A Future for Astyanax* in which Bersani claims that criticism “leans on” art, describes the repetitive process of criticism as being opposed to knowledge: “[t]he criticism that ‘leans on’ its object does not produce ‘knowledge’; rather, it joins its object in replicating, or synchronizing with, the activity we call ‘art’” (5). Repetition—open-ended and pleasurable repetition—is thus of central importance to Bersanian theory; it describes the very movement of thinking, and the ability of thinking to move between subjects and objects in a manner that produces more pleasure than knowledge. It also describes the emergence of what Bersani terms the virtual, which, as we have seen in previous chapters, is an aspect of existence that is both possible—though never inevitable—and wholly unforeseeable. The virtual names the “inherent unfinishedness” of becoming, the openness of being to becoming something else, though this something else may or may not ever be actualized (*Thoughts and Things* 76). There is something counter-intuitive, perhaps even paradoxical, then, in Bersani’s thought: the availability of the virtual—the possibility of altogether new and unexpected connections between subject and object—is increased by repetition.

If repetition is what enables the infinite “multiplication of virtual connections” (Bersani, *Thoughts and Things* 76), it stands in contrast to that mode of thought that finishes when it has “grasped” or “penetrated” its object—this is the mode of thought we call “knowledge”. It can be visualized in the movement of a hand closing upon a picked-up object and not letting go; this is where the movement stops, at the moment that knowledge is “found” and enclosed. A series of such grasping intellectual movements is what enables us to perceive reality as the unfolding of changes and differences across time, culminating, of course, in our inevitable death. It is in *A Future for Astyanax* that Bersani most clearly discusses the link between knowledge and death on the one hand, and repetition and immortality on the other. For Bersani, knowledge is tied to the perception of difference—and contrasts with “homoness”, or the perception of sameness—and differences unfold across time and space: if I perceive the world as a series of unfolding differences, then I can imagine them unfolding until the point of my eventual death. Repetition, on the other hand, fails to bring about difference. If knowledge is what brings death, what makes “life” the processual unfolding of difference to the point of death, it is repetition that not only forestalls death but actually makes it—along with birth—irrelevant. In a chapter written about D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, Bersani writes:

“Infinitely repeated motion” is the fundamental property—at once terrifying and desirable—of the nonhuman universe. It is terrifying because any repeated motion—from a particular compulsive ritual to the “productive spinning” of the universe itself—can, by its very nature, never be penetrated by consciousness. Pure, undifferentiated repetition is always (even when it lasts only a short time) intrinsically infinite, eternal, and nonhuman. We can imagine the *end* (the temporal finitude) of a series only when we can perceive differences among units of the series. The perception of differences acts for us as a guarantee of both

renewal and death: to be aware of difference, in mental and physical phenomena, is to know that life exists, that things appear and disappear, that there are birth and death. (158)

Here, Bersani makes a number of connections between concepts that, though they are picked up here from the characters of *Women in Love*, run through his own oeuvre and its aim of making the virtual available to thought. Repetition is, in its failure to produce difference, inherently nonhuman, which is to say, indifferent to birth and death and the events that happen between the two. In other words, to be human is to live a narrative life, one that progresses in order from birth to death; nonhumanness describes any form of being that is indifferent to both origins and ends and thus achieves a kind of immortality: not an immortality won by the infinite forestalling of death—which would merely describe an infinitely long life—but one that avoids the production of difference and therefore avoids life altogether. Repetition is thus more than the literal re-enactment of the same; it is a nonhuman mode of being and thinking that fails to produce difference, that has no aim or teleology, that is, in other words, eternal (i.e. non-temporal). Though Bersani does not elaborate upon the concept of the eternal in *A Future for Astyanax*, I propose that what he elsewhere terms the virtual is conceptually equivalent: both describe an unrealized aspect of reality that is not bound by any phenomenological—that is, occurring in time and space—appearance. Another way of putting it is that the virtual consists of thoughts that have not yet found—and perhaps never will find (i.e. the virtual is not an inevitability or a future event)—their expression or their conductance in the

apparatus of thinking; it is that aspect of being that permanently resists becoming immobilized in knowledge but which allows for the emergence of the unpredictable<sup>11</sup>.

Importantly, the kind of repetition that Bersani lauds as an opportunity to perceive the virtual is not the same kind of repetition that brings one to sexual climax. In the same chapter on *Women in Love*, Bersani describes how the kind of repetition that opens onto immortality is “the *activity of inertia*” (*A Future for Astyanax* 160, emphasis in original), and he goes on to contrast this kind of repetition with the repeated friction of sex and the repeated mental frictions required to produce knowledge:

[t]here is frictional sex and there is frictional thought ... Reductive analysis is the mental equivalent of frictional sex. In the same way that the ecstasy of frictional sex results from the repetition of distinct thrusting motions, ‘the subtle thrills’ of reductive knowledge come from a kind of rubbing of experience until it breaks down into a series of distinct units. Reduction is the intellectual screwing of life through repetition and relentlessly regular thrusts of analytical understanding. (*A Future for Astyanax* 161-2)

This kind of “frictional” repetition has an aim and requires movement to reach it. There exists, then, a tension within Bersani’s essay, as there is within *Women in Love* itself,

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<sup>11</sup> Homay King, drawing on Henri Bergson and Quentin Meillassoux, has formulated a useful metaphor for thinking about virtuality as opposed to possibility. Imagine a game of dice, or of chess; the possible outcomes are known in advance even when, as in the case of chess, they can only be described by an unfathomably large number. The virtual, on the other hand, would be like rolling a die and suddenly coming up with a number seven, or playing chess while both the grid and the rules change (*Virtual Memory* 163-4). One might want to ask, as Bersani does in *Thoughts and Things*, “how real is [this] virtual being?” It doesn’t seem “real” that we could roll a die and come up with a number higher than six, but that is because, in Bersani’s view, there is an “irreconcilable imbalance between the categories of reality and virtuality ... To ask about the ontological status of the virtual is to risk having virtuality disappear into the question designed to establish its ‘reality’” (69). In other words, we are so constrained by the matrix of our thinking that it is impossible to grasp or to foresee what remains unformulated within it. And yet, Bersani is committed to theorizing the virtual because it is a means of theorizing the new. It may be a “utopic” commitment, but it is one that “we can, and should” pursue (*ibid.*).

between the repetition of inertia or “stillness” and the frictional repetition that leads to climax, both the sexual and the epistemological kind. The inertial repetition is, in contrast to its climactic counterpart, epistemologically useless; rather than annihilating otherness by fracturing it into knowable parts that the mind greedily thrusts forward to grasp, inertial repetition is still, and it requires an otherness that is simply there: not taunting us with an alluring secret or driving us to possess it through knowledge, but simply, quietly—and necessarily (this is not a repetition that can be done alone)—there. Phillips, who draws a similar link between knowledge and sexual mastery of the other, suggests that tickling is the conceptual equivalent of a non-epistemophilic relationality. Tickling, for Phillips, is a source of such unexpected significance—a seemingly marginal experience that expresses something of theoretical importance—that it actually forms part of the title of the book from which the below excerpt is drawn: *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*. Tickling is, unlike sex, an epistemologically useless sensual act that *requires* the presence of a non-mastered other:

The child who will be able to feed himself, the child who will masturbate, will never be able to tickle himself. It is the pleasure he cannot reproduce in the absence of the other. “From the fact that a child can hardly tickle itself,” Darwin wrote in his *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, “or in a much less degree than when tickled by another person, it appears that the precise point to be touched must not be known.” An enigmatic conclusion, which, though manifestly untrue—children know exactly, like adults, where they are ticklish—alerts us to the fact that these “precise points” are a kind of useless knowledge to the child, that they matter only as shared knowledge. (*On Kissing* 9)

The pleasure of being tickled depends upon a form of “useless” knowledge that finds its expression *only* in the relationship between tickler and ticklee. It is a knowledge that serves no aim: “the tickling narrative, unlike the sexual narrative, has no climax. It has to

stop, or the real humiliation begins” (Phillips, *On Kissing* 10). That is to say, the pleasure of being tickled cannot be infinitely sustained: it must stop at some point, ideally the point at which it simply ceases to be pleasurable. It is also (perhaps like anything else) an activity that crosses from pleasure to displeasure very easily, very unpredictably; the pleasure is dependent, as Phillips puts it, on the adult who is doing the tickling to “hold” and not to “exploit” the tickled child. And so, with this analogy, we come round to the relation between child and adult—an adult who is, in most psychoanalytic accounts, a mother whether or not it is specifically female—and the question of how it is that this specific kind of relationality—a relationality that cares nothing for knowledge, nothing for the narrative pressure toward climax, and everything for the careful and ephemeral repetition of an aimless pleasure that can only emerge in the presence of the other—can be tapped into as a means of de-emphasizing the heterosexual relationality that overwhelmingly characterizes everyday life. Aimless repetition is one way to resist epistemophilia and its dependence upon the personal; it is also a way to resist the life- (and death-)producing force of the climactic narrative, of “frictional” thinking. It depends upon the cultivation of the impersonal because it depends upon an acknowledgement of “knowledge”—or thinking—that can only exist between self and other, knowledge that is not available privately.

It is this Bersanian theorization of a specifically inertial repetition, and its relationship to the concepts of a radically impersonal immortality, to which the remainder of this chapter is devoted. I propose that we take seriously both Bersani’s insistence that such repetition is nonhuman and Phillips’ insistence that a relationality worth pursuing is

one in which both self and other are realized in an event that demands nothing of either one except the simple, aimless pleasure of “tickling”. The archive I have selected to explore these concepts is composed of nonhuman characters who “love” in nonhuman ways: the grandmother in “I Sing the Body Electric!” and Mother in *I Am Mother*. Both of these texts explore a mother-child relationship that offers new ways to think about impersonal motherly “love” through the theorization of the replaceability of the child and/or mother. To circle back, then, to Leonard’s query about his own contingent existence and the realization that he is merely one of an infinite number of possible children, my analysis of these texts is guided by the question: is motherhood itself an aimless repetition comprised of infinitely replaceable components? What does it mean—for the child, for the mother—to be replaceable? How does replaceability relate to Bersani’s concept of repetition—and, by extension, to life/death, knowledge, and a specifically “homo” (i.e. impersonal) kind of love?

#### Death, Revenge, and the Immortal Mother

“I Sing the Body Electric!” is, like many of Bradbury’s works, a family story—and a story about death<sup>12</sup>. For Bersani, as I have discussed in previous chapters, “family stories” revolve around conventional family structures and describe, in one way or

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<sup>12</sup> Bradbury’s childhood was shaped by the spectres of his older brother, who died before he was born, and the death of his infant sister, whose lifeless body Bradbury discovered one morning when he was seven years old (Mullins). For him, “family” and “death” are two sides of the same coin, a distinctly psychoanalytic view. As Phillips puts it, “reproductive sexuality shows us that in having children we are making more deaths; and it is this salient acknowledgement, conscious or not, that makes human sexuality possible” (*Intimacies* 114-5).

another, the violence inherent to familial relations. Although he draws upon psychoanalysis as the discourse *par excellence* of “familial violence”, Bersani does not limit his definition of violence to the Oedipus tragedy that is said to unfold—whether it “fails” or is “successful”, normatively speaking—in every child’s achievement of, or failure to achieve, heterosexuality. “I Sing the Body Electric!” is a story about motherless children and the robotic “grandmother” that replaces her, who mothers them better than their real mother ever could. It opens with the excited call, “Grandma!” and then the peculiar, impossible statement: “I remember her birth” (850). Tom, the story’s narrator, improbably claims that he and his siblings, Agatha and Timothy, “slapped” their grandmother to life one day. From this very first page, we are to understand that this grandmother, despite her unconventional and untimely birth, achieves a kind of perfection by literally embodying the dream of the children:

We shook together the bits and pieces, parts and samples, textures and tastes, humors and distillations that would move her compass needle north to cool us, south to warm and comfort us, east and west to travel round the endless world, glide her eyes to know us, mouth to sing us asleep by night, hands to touch us awake at dawn.

Grandma, O dear and wondrous electric dream... (850-1)

Grandma is there to attend the children’s every need, from adjusting the temperature for their physical comfort, to amusing their minds and senses with tales and glimpses of the “endless world”, to soothing them into sleep and birthing them anew each morning with her touch, to—and perhaps most importantly—knowing them merely by looking at them. These are the various components that build the greater “dream” that Grandma engenders. What, exactly, is this dream? Why, the dream of having a mother, of course.

For the children's mother is dead. The story does not tell us how she died nor what she was like, but her absence is felt by the children as a terrible silence. Standing in front of the house after her death, they watch as the front door swings open, apparently of its own accord: "Silence came out. Somewhere a cellar door stood wide and a raw wind blew damp earth from under the house. But, I thought, we don't *have* a cellar!" (851). The lack of a mother causes the whole house to take on a ghastly aspect, to obtain the haunted feel of a dank and silent cellar (or a grave). Not only the children but also the house itself, the fortress of the family, needs a mother to restore its inner harmony, to fill the silences and cellar-darkness with the light of her motherly love: to transform, in other words, into a cradle of life-nurturing warmth a structure that became a tomb upon her death. One could hardly imagine a more compellingly conservative scene, though it is cast in so few words: poor, motherless children, entombed in a crypt-like home and in desperate need of a mother's love. The story, like so many others, assumes this need by assuming that we, the readers, will intuitively understand the plight of the child whose mother has died. Like Eppie in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, who similarly finds herself motherless before making her way to Marner's doorstep, the motherless children in "I Sing the Body Electric!" seem poised, rhetorically, to elicit sympathy through a kind of proxy yearning to restore the mother—or, because she cannot be brought back to life, a proper substitute—to the child. In Lee Edelman's reading of *Silas Marner*, the motherless child emits a pull on those around her, a pull that is the effect of the child's rhetorical imbrication with the "natural" order of heterosexual reproduction—it is so "natural" for a child to need a mother (substitute) that it scarcely needs to be stated (58), and this

“natural” need solicits parental-like love (which *Silas Marner* casts as salvational) from whomever happens to fall under the child’s innocent gaze, or, to return to Bradbury’s story, whomever happens to be dreamt up in the child’s fantasy.

From these opening pages, in which the stage is set for the reader’s sympathy to extend toward Tom, Timothy, and Agatha, “I Sing the Body Electric!” walks a fine and undecidable line between the “natural” desire to produce a mother for children in need of one and the “unnatural” effects of that desire. The children’s father turns down an offer from an aunt for the children to live with her—“They’d rather kill themselves!” (852)—and then sits alone, muttering to himself as he works through the possibilities of various forms of caregivers for the children. It is hard to believe that Father, who speaks aloud, is not aware of the fact that his children are nearby and listening. With the impeccable timing of a salesman, Father’s monologue comes to a quiet but powerful close: “What we need,” said Father, ‘is a...’ We all leaned to his whisper. ‘...grandmother’” (852). At which point he hands them a pamphlet entitled “I Sing the Body Electric!” and instructs them to read: a company called Fantoccini Limited, they learn, is in the business of constructing robotic grandmothers to fulfill the role of mother, nurse, sister, etc.:

The Toy that is more than a Toy, the Fantoccini Electrical Grandmother is built with loving precision to give the incredible precision of love to your children. The child at ease with the realities of the world and the even greater realities of the imagination, is her aim ... Above all ... this human being, for human she seems, this embodiment in electro-intelligent facsimile of the humanities, will listen, know, tell, react and love your children insofar as such great Objects, such fantastic Toys, can be said to Love, or can be imagined to Care. (853)

This description of the Electrical Grandmother is perhaps what prompted the optimistic author of an article published in *Science Robotics* to describe her as “the epitome of a

robot as a good mother surrogate” (Murphy, para. 2). But for all the “precision of love” that is promised by the Grandmother—a promise that sounds, in an era of intensive mothering, perfectly desirable—something less conventionally idyllic lurks within the text. For the Electrical Grandmother is aligned with death in a way that precludes her interpretation as a “perfect” replacement for the children’s mother, a means to perfectly right the wrong of the mother’s death. That is to say, she *is* a “mother surrogate”, just not in the way we might at first imagine—by loving the children “better” this electrical grandmother demands a radically new definition of love and, I will suggest, of death.

Despite Grandma’s injunction to love the children in her charge, the story cannot seem to resist casting the prospect of the mothering-machine in an ambivalent light—literally as well as figuratively. As the family arrives at the headquarters of Fantoccini Limited, “the lighting changed to make [them] look warmer, happier, though [they] were still cold” (855). Around them loom numerous puppets, marionettes, and dolls: “[i]t was like an immense lynching on a holiday at some English crossroads four hundred years before” (ibid.). Agatha—ten years old and the only daughter—“blinked about with disbelief and then some touch of awe and then finally disgust” (ibid.). Agatha is the most apprehensive of the children, the least convinced that an electrical mother surrogate could possibly fulfill the role of her “real” mother. Even Fantoccini Limited does not espouse such a view: “We do not,” they write in their promotional pamphlet, “sell our Creation to able-bodied families where parents are available to raise, effect, shape, change, love their own children. Nothing can replace the parent in the home” (854). This reassuring bit of self-deprecation is echoed in Agatha’s question: “when do we cut out all this talk and

when does our *real* mother come home to stay?” (ibid.). At the Fantoccini headquarters, it is Agatha who presents the most stubborn front, prompting Fantoccini himself to focus his sales pitch on her by offering her a golden key that will wind up the Electrical Grandmother when she arrives. “You are the guardian of the Key”, he tells her (856), appealing to her childish desire to feel especially responsible. However, when the family is asked to step onto a moving conveyor belt (the “river”), “Agatha trod backward, always fighting the river, never catching up, never with us, holding off” (857). What brings Agatha round at last is not rational argument, emotional appeal, nor even the marvellous sight of the Grandmother’s hyper-realistic body. No, it is the *sound* of the Grandmother’s voice that compels Agatha to stop fighting against the river’s current, for at Fantoccini Limited it is the voice that is selected before the body: “at last a final switch was pushed and a voice spoke free of a far electronic deep:

“Nefertiti,” it said.

Timothy froze. I froze. Agatha stopped treading water.

“Nefertiti?” asked Tim.

“What does that mean?” demanded Agatha.

“I know.”

The salesman nodded me to tell.

“Nefertiti,” I whispered, “is Egyptian for The Beautiful One is Here.”

“The Beautiful One is Here,” repeated Timothy.

“Nefer,” said Agatha, “titi.”

And we all turned to stare into that soft twilight, that deep far place from which the good warm soft voice came.

And she was indeed there.

And, by her voice, she was beautiful ... (857-8)

Out of darkness comes the voice, and the voice speaks in an ancient language. “Nefertiti” is not a name, it does not become what the children call their Electrical Grandmother. Rather, it is an unexpected utterance from what is supposed to be a mother-substitute: not

a greeting, not an introduction, not a reassuring or comforting phrase, but merely an announcement of her arrival, an announcement that is first heard as nonsensical sound (Agatha's slow repetition, "nefer-titi", gives the impression that her mouth is trying out these foreign syllables for the first time, testing them for familiarity, for sense). The word "Nefertiti" requires translation to be rendered intelligible to the children. There is no immediacy here, neither in understanding nor in recognition, for the voice is not an exact imitation or reproduction of their "real" mother's voice. Despite this—or perhaps because of it—"the voice seemed more important than all the rest" (858).

The voice is important precisely because it is enigmatic, just as the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas has described the voice of the mother as it stimulates the uncomprehending newborn infant. However, it is enigmatic not in the sense that it conceals a truth (about who Grandma really is, say) but in the sense that it conveys no (useful) information. Grandma's voice is a sign of who she is *not*—their "real" mother—and it thus propels them into a kind of action that, were she to have been a perfect imitation of their mother, they would not otherwise have been propelled into; rather than attempt to merely resume the old relationship, they channel their anguish and their desire into resurrecting—or birthing anew—their mother in the form of a substitute; they roll, you could say, a six-sided die and receive a seven. In an essay entitled "On Being Left Out", Phillips describes death as the ultimate "left out" experience:

What we fear about loss is that it excludes us from someone's presence: when people leave us, and more exactly when people die, we are forever left out of their company. Mourning is supposedly the best thing we can do about being terminally left out, or perhaps it is the most culturally sanctioned thing we can do. But what else can we do if and when we are left out in this way? Mourning may

seem the most forlorn – even the most absurd, least promising – of self-cures if being and feeling left out is the problem. (para. 14)

Grandma is an exercise in doing something other than mourning, and perhaps in reframing the so-called “problem” entirely. In undertaking the impossible task of resurrecting someone who isn’t dead, of giving birth to someone older than themselves, the normal directionality that we perceive in the mother-child relationship—that the mother “makes” the child—is reversed. We sense, however, and particularly in Agatha’s reluctance to commit herself to the Electrical Grandmother, both the enormity and the complexity of their hope—the ambivalent hope that, on the one hand, “Grandma” will be nothing like Mother, and, on the other, that she will be identical to her. The Grandmother’s enigmatic, disembodied voice sets the scene for precisely this kind of wretched ambivalence that only a motherless child could know. It is as though, in their compulsion to resurrect their mother (by “resurrecting” their Electrical Grandmother), the children fear making a copy just as much as they long for it; the repetition of their mother in the form of Grandma does not mark a return to the past but an opening in the present for something altogether unanticipated (“Nefertiti”) to slip in. As the children wait for the delivery of their new grandmother, Agatha performs this wordless ambivalence by “turn[ing] her face to the wall and [seeing] sorrow there and put[ting] her hand out again and again to touch it” (858). The marks that her repetitive movements make upon the wall are “half beauty, half nightmare”, some erasable, others indelible. Her mechanical motion marks the child-like hope that is bound so tightly to sadness, as well as marks the improbably enduring fragility of the child’s very existence: always anticipating but always being surprised, knowing but not-knowing, wanting and not-wanting, loving but

also hating (“I hate *her!*” Agatha says of her mother, hating precisely *because* she loves her so much [878]). “All children are water-striders,” remarks Tom, our narrator, as he recounts this scene: “We skate along the top skin of the pond each day, always threatening to break through, sink, vanish beyond recall, into ourselves” (859). We might read Agatha’s repetitive motions against the wall as an expression of the failure of language. In Tom’s water-strider metaphor, the surface of the water is like the thinness of words; to “vanish beyond recall” is merely to acknowledge that “speaking comes out of the unspeaking part of ourselves” (Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery* 44). While “children are always encouraged to lose ... the knowledge that they do not know how to speak (properly)”, something else is lost in the process: a certain “inventiveness” or “aliveness”, in Phillips’ words (45). Agatha’s substitution of mechanical repetition for words is one sign that something other than mourning might be able to take place.

However, in order for this “something other than mourning” to occur, the problem of death must be separated from the problem of being-left-out. Agatha, as we will see, confuses, at least initially, her mother’s death with betrayal, with a feeling of being left out so intense it is intolerable. The intensity of this feeling is in line with Phillips’ claim that “love makes people unequal” (162), where the inequality begins with the mother-child relation and the absolute dependence of the child upon the mother. This dependence manifests as the child’s—Agatha’s, in this case—necessary confidence that the mother will never betray or “exploit” her “superior power” by, for example, dying (Phillips, quoting Baier, 162-3). Such a betrayal results in what psychoanalysis has termed “perversion”, fantasizing about what is needed for one’s satisfaction; importantly, such

fantasies are driven by a fundamental hostility (Stoller), a desire to correct a past wrong in the form of revenge. Phillips is interested in elaborating upon the connection between perversion—the achievement of satisfaction through the enactment of revenge, akin to, in his example, Othello’s murder of Desdemona—and the mother-child relation:

In non-perverse desire there is, presumably, no habitual, necessary aberration, motivated by hostility, and essential for one’s full satisfaction; and non-perverse desire is not vengeful. What Stoller adds is a reason for the revenge; it is the attempt ‘to convert childhood trauma to adult triumph’ ... Childhood trauma is the consequence of the uses and abuses of early dependency; and what Stoller calls ‘trauma’ may be simply another word for ‘childhood’; childhood being the cumulative trauma of the inevitable suffering of unequal dependence; the idea of equality prompted by this ineluctable first fact. We should perhaps be searching for better versions of unequal dependency than for the eradication of this particular inequality; or for different forms of satisfaction. (164-5)

What Phillips means to do here is to question the inevitability of the closeness of the connection between love and revenge; ought we to imagine a “better version” of the mother-child relation that would preclude inequality (how? What would that look like)? Or would we be better off searching for ways to re-route “satisfaction” itself, to delink it from the desire for revenge after the fact? The remainder of “I Sing the Body Electric!” is indeed a revenge story—of Agatha’s revenge upon her mother for dying—that culminates in the wisdom that the Electrical Grandmother imparts toward the end of the story: “Whatever you do, don’t die. Your children will never forgive you” (880). As we will see, Agatha (along with her brothers) resurrects her mother in the form of the new Grandmother and then acts out her revenge by unconsciously “killing” her; Grandma, however, proves unkillable. At the same time, all of the children realize that they have no unique claim upon Grandma; she is a Grandma-machine who will go on “loving” other children for the incalculable length of her unnatural “life”. I suggest that by defying

death—and, more importantly, by defying the belief that love is personal—the Electrical Grandmother breaks the “magic” of revenge, the illusion that revenge is a triumph over childhood disillusionment. We may not be able to eliminate the inequality in the mother-child relation, but we can perhaps render the inequality less personal; we can keep the child, to transform the water-strider metaphor, buoyed tenuously atop the surface of things, preventing it from “sinking” into the indulgence of its own personality.

First, however, we must return to the scene of Grandma’s birth. As Phillips puts it, “it is when the child waits that he first begins to fantasize, and first begins to think that he knows” (*Missing Out* 166). Knowledge is fundamental to the achievement of “satisfaction”—or at least, we *think* we know what we need in order to feel satisfied. “Needing to know” is, according to Phillips, born of the very “need” of the infant; we are unequal in our need, and we attempt to overcome that inequality through the attainment of knowledge about why our needs are sometimes met, sometimes not. To put it simply: the infant needs the mother, but when the mother betrays the infant (as she invariably will), the infant’s fantasizing is the first theorization about this fundamental lack of certainty in the relation. We need to know, in this view, because we need things—others—to be knowable in order to survive, to theorize some semblance of certainty with respect to our relationship with them. We can imagine Agatha suspended in this waiting state, fantasizing the scene of some future, vengeful satisfaction: wanting, equally, the love of the new “mother” as well as her destruction when she inevitably fails to provide it. Months pass as she and her siblings simply wait, until, at precisely the moment they feel they can no longer stand it, a helicopter descends from the sky and deposits a coffin-

shaped wooden box upon the family's lawn. Inside the wooden box lies an Egyptian sarcophagus, and inside that lies the form of a "mummy" shrouded in bandages. Hieroglyphs upon both the sarcophagus and the bandages foretell the futures—and do not reference the pasts—of Agatha, Tom, and Tim: "she's all wrapped up in us!" the children all think to themselves. The pleasure, however, of having a Grandmother made so specifically for them is constantly undermined, in the story, by Tom's awareness that Grandma was made by somebody else, somebody selling a product by appealing directly to their childish desperation for maternal love: "We loved whoever had thought to make us part of the ceremony we now went through as each of us seized and began to unwind each of his or her particular serpentines of delicious stuffs!" (862). As the bandages fall away to reveal the woman lying beneath, Agatha is struck by the immediate failure of her fantasized satisfaction: "Oh, no," she cries, "She's dead, too!" (ibid.).

The disappointment is short lived, however, for her brothers quickly remind her that she holds the key to Grandma, that Grandma won't work without winding. Removing the key from where it hangs, "against her own skeptic's muttering" (862), around her neck, Timothy, Agatha, and Tom each take a turn cranking the key and giving life to their new grandmother. The first thing that Grandma does is to laugh, long and loud, and then to look around for a mirror: "She found it," Tom narrates. "The reflections in our eyes" (863-4). Feigning ignorance, she then asks the children for their names, calling Agatha "Alicia" and "Algernon" before getting it right and pacifying the angered child. The inequality, it would seem—but only seem—has been reversed; the mother is in the position of not-knowing, the children in the position to know. Moreover, they birthed her,

“slapped her to life,” wound her up, and could just as easily let her wind down again—it is she who is dependent upon them. Again, Tom praises the people who made Grandma: “How clever again of the Fantoccini Company. *They* knew. *She* knew. But they had taught her to pretend not to know. That way we could feel great, we were the teachers, telling her what she already knew! How sly, how wise” (864). The children believe they are in the position of teachers, but what they—or, more specifically, Agatha—don’t know is that whatever they have to teach, Grandma already knows. What Agatha doesn’t (seem) to know is that beyond her meeting with Grandma lies someone, or multiple someones, who have engineered this doubly reversed exchange of knowledge: reversed the first time when the children take on the role of parent and Grandma plays the role of newborn; reversed a second time in the fact that the first reversal is a sham, that Grandma actually knows everything she is pretending not to. Behind all this looms the omniscient Fantoccini Company, who know exactly what the children think they need and exactly how to construct and to program Grandma so that she meets those needs as well as the ones of which they are not aware. It is as though Grandma is allowing Agatha to act out what Phillips calls “getting it with a vengeance”, of repairing the trauma of being abandoned by her real mother—more specifically, the trauma of not understanding her mother’s death—by being placed in the position of being “the one supposed to know” (*Missing Out* 66-7). Once again, we can, at least partially, superimpose Phillips’ reading of *Othello* onto “I Sing the Body Electric!”; just as the dependent child cannot leave or abandon the parent, so too does Othello imagine that by making Desdemona dependent upon him, he will preclude the possibility of her abandoning him. This “fantasy of the

impossibility of abandonment, of an infallible and unfailing dependence” (71) is another way of saying “ownership”. Ownership becomes, in Phillips’ theory, another word for a relationality that is predicated upon *knowledge*: “knowing someone [is] a way of having them in safekeeping” (ibid.):

So one paradoxical proposition we might consider is that it is only knowledge of oneself and others that makes betrayal possible. Or, it is the will to knowledge which is the sign of a betrayal that has already happened. What Othello knows, what he thinks he knows, makes what he does possible. At its most minimal, we are invited by the play to notice the different kinds of knowing, and where they lead. And we see, most prominently, Othello being seduced into being a certain kind of knowing subject, the one who, like his accomplice Iago, is supposed to know, supposed by himself. When knowing takes this form it is, as Desdemona discovers, deadly not to know, and deadly to be knowing. (71)

When, in other words, knowing becomes the link that holds people and things together, we have already set down the path of the self “as a sanction for violence” (Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* 4). The story of Othello—and the story of Agatha and her Electrical Grandmother—are both exercises in the “fantasy of the impossibility of abandonment”. More importantly, though, they both suggest that what is “deadly” about some ways of knowing can possibly be mitigated or left behind altogether if *other* ways of (not) knowing can be fostered. There are indeed different kinds of knowing on offer in Bradbury’s story, but unlike Desdemona, neither Agatha nor Grandma meets their tragic end. Instead, Grandma’s presence slowly and gently gives way to an altogether different kind of knowing, one that undoes the very basis for “ownership”. For Grandma “knows” the children, but, we will see, only in the most impersonal way.

As Agatha continues to slowly, reluctantly warm up to her new grandmother—and Grandma never tries to “urge or force” (868)—Tom and Tim delight in discovering all of

the amazing, inhuman abilities Grandma possesses. Unlike any real mother, for example, Grandma “seemed to give complete attention to all of [the children]”:

She listened, she really listened to all we said, she knew and remembered every syllable, word, sentence, punctuation, thought, and rambunctious idea. We knew that all our days were stored in her, and that any time we felt we might want to know what we said at X hour at X second on X afternoon, we just named that X and with amiable promptitude, in the form of an aria if we wished, sung with humor, she would deliver forth X incident. (ibid.)

What Grandma can be said to “know” is thus inhuman along multiple lines: not only is she programmed with whatever “knowledge” the Fantoccini Company has decided to give to her; not only is she also programmed to pretend *not* to be in possession of said knowledge; she also stores as precise data every word spoken—indeed, every thought thought—by the children. Her data is undeniably accurate, not open to the kinds of mis-rememberings and mis-interpretations—conscious or unconscious, desired or undesired—of ordinary human memory. There is, in other words, no lack or gap in her knowledge about the children: there is quite literally nothing else for her to know.

Whatever knowledge we might imagine has been withheld from her by the Fantoccini Company is utterly irrelevant, impossible for her to know that she does not know it. And whatever is left for her to, theoretically, find out about the children is processed immediately as objective information through the constant, perfect recording of each child’s interaction with her. It is a body of knowledge so complete, so machine-like, and so far removed from what we typically mean by “getting to know” someone—a child, or a lover, say—that it stands completely to the side of the Proustian epistemophilia I have described in earlier chapters. Is this why Grandma exhibits a peculiar lack of curiosity? A lack of, well, *difference* from the children?

We must remember that the first thing Grandma did upon her “birth” (other than laugh! Another enigmatic exercise of her voice) was to search around for a mirror and find herself reflected in the children’s eyes. This detail establishes the relationship between the children and their grandmother as intersubjective; Grandma’s “consciousness”—if it can be said to be such—begins at precisely the moment the hopeful children open the sarcophagus and unwrap her bandages, and her first desire is to gain a sense of herself by seeing herself, which, as it happens, can only happen through the children’s eyes: “[s]he was more pleased than disconcerted with what she found there. Her laughter faded to an amused smile” (864). In a kind of reversal of Baudelaire’s recounting of the pleasure he took, as a child, in seeing himself reflected in the form of his father’s body—an anecdote that Bersani analyzes at length in *Baudelaire and Freud*—Grandma is pleased by what she sees of herself as she gazes into the eyes of the children. She does not see, in their eyes, the depths of their individual personalities. Rather, in each child’s eyes she sees the same thing: herself. The scene of Grandma’s birth is thus a radical revision of conventional birth stories involving human mothers and their newborn children. Grandma, violently “slapped to life” in an instant by the excitement of the children, bursts into her ahistorical consciousness and, though she fits some of our expectations of what a “perfect mother” might be like—she is beautiful, and her sole purpose is to care for her children—she fails to gaze upon their faces with the rapt adoration that we are presented with, over and over again, in the birth scenes that are ubiquitous in our Western culture. The children are not, to her, mysterious wellsprings of individual personality, enigmas that Grandma will now make it her mission to solve; they

are simply mirrors that reflect Grandma back to herself. And *this*—seeing her own likeness in the face of another—is what pleases her. What could be more narcissistic than a mother who beholds the face of her child and thinks only of searching their faces for signs of her own? A mother whose smile is the result of the pleasure of seeing her own face and not that of her child? Later in the story, Tom discovers something especially strange about Grandma, what he calls the “best part” about her:

I might not have known at all if Timothy hadn’t taken some pictures, and if I hadn’t taken some also, and then compared.

When I saw the photographs developed out of our instant Brownies, I sent Agatha, against her wishes, to photograph Grandma a third time, unawares.

Then I took the three sets of pictures off alone, to keep counsel with myself. I never told Timothy and Agatha what I found. I didn’t want to spoil it.

But as I laid the pictures out in my room, here is what I thought and said: “Grandma, in each picture, looks *different!*”

“Different?” I asked myself.

“Sure. Wait. Just a sec—”

I rearranged the photos.

“Here’s one of Grandma near Agatha. And, in it, Grandma looks like ... Agatha! “And in this one, posed with Timothy, she looks like Timothy!

“And this last one, Holy Goll! Jogging along with me, she looks like ugly *me!*” (869)

This extraordinary observation must be verified by Tom. He walks downstairs and finds Agatha and Grandma together. As Grandma turns her face to look at Tom, he sees her face gradually, almost imperceptibly yet undeniably, change; the eyes change colour from one shade of blue to another, her skin becomes pinker to mirror Tom’s, the very “bones of her face shift subtly beneath the flesh” to match the architecture of Tom’s face (870). “O that clever Grandmother,” Tom narrates. “O those Fantoccini people-making people. Clever beyond clever, human beyond human, warm beyond warm, love beyond love...” (869-70). This inhuman version of love, of warmth or of humanity, achieves its highest

expression, according to Tom, in Grandma's ability to mirror the children, to efface the difference between them. In the children's failure to see themselves as individuals and in Grandma's failure to see herself as distinct from them, she produces a kind of "love"—a love beyond love—that is predicated upon sameness.

As Tom watches, he becomes "fascinated" by observing the many ways in which Grandma's face changes as she interacts with each of the children, and Grandma herself takes on what Bersani has described elsewhere, in a discussion of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, a "scenic self". The poems of the *Illuminations*, according to Bersani's reading, constitute "scenes" of the self that are only loosely "continuous". These scenes "do little more than give a certain intelligibility to an otherwise discontinuous succession of fragmented images of the world":

The self of the *Illuminations* is its floating, fragmented images ... Scenic finality means that no reflection about the scenes can reduce them to a general significance. And since that general significance would be a total personality, we can also say that the scenic self (or, more properly scenic selves) is depersonalized: the scenes don't "add up" to a personality. No *view of* the self enjoys the ontological privilege of unifying the multiple versions of being which desire incessantly produces. (*A Future for Astyanax* 254-5)

What Bersani means here is that Rimbaud's insistence on writing fragmentary scenes that are themselves "whole" in the sense of not needing to be read alongside or in order with his other poems—by insisting on *partial* coherence but no overarching continuity—the *Illuminations* deprive the reader of obtaining a point of view of the self expressed in the poems. No point of view can be obtained that would bring a full, realized, continuous self into focus: "the poet seems to be trying to escape from the sort of individuality which coincides exactly with a particular individual's history" (Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*

255). Tuhkanen, in his reading of Bersani reading Rimbaud, suggests that Rimbaud—and Bersani’s theoretical “lean” on him—“invite[s us] to pluralize the concept of ‘individuality’: there may exist *other* ‘sorts’ of individuality, *other* ‘sorts’ of essences, than the one’s determined by a ‘particular individual’s history’” (*Leo Bersani* 58). Tom, in “I Sing the Body Electric!”, comes to a similar conclusion when he realizes that Grandma physically changes to reflect the child upon whom she happens to gaze; this sudden awareness means that the appearance of Grandma’s continuous personality is shattered for Tom. He can now see her only as a series of “scenic” elements—like the transformation of perception that occurs when a film is viewed as a series of still shots—that fail to constitute a stable whole. And yet, the shattering of the viewpoint that had previously enabled the perception of a stable, historical personality—the personality of “Grandma”—does not trouble Tom. Rather, the “knowledge” that Grandma becomes something different for each child—this simultaneous diminishment *and* expansion of her self—is elating for him. More importantly, it is enough for him to simply observe the expansive fragmentation of her individuality: “I have never wished to be behind the magician’s scenes,” he claims. “Enough that the illusion works. Enough that love is the chemical result” (Bradbury 871).

Tom, who “knows” that the Fantoccini people made Grandma; who “knows” that Grandma has no “real” self but endlessly morphs and changes to be more similar to those around her; who “knows” that any love that emerges from these scenes of sameness has been impersonally engineered, demystified as a predictable chemical event, is *elated*, satisfied with this knowledge that is really knowledge of nothing, knowledge that leads

nowhere. There is no mystery here, no riddle in need of solving: just the flat, superficial fact of the family members' correspondences with one another. He is free, in other words, of the desire to find out anything more, free of "the compulsion to understand and be understood" (Phillips, *Missing Out* 63). In a way, he has achieved the same ahistorical individuality that Grandma possesses, an individuality that is constituted not by lack (leading to desire, leading to knowledge) but by an expansive correspondence with the world. Her machinic cognition has diverted, or re-routed, his own. This is the narcissism of effacement, as Tuhkanen puts it in his commentary on Baudelaire's striving to capture, in his art, not the model but the "sliver of virtuality" that the model, in its likeness, expands into:

Moving toward their likenesses, things' current forms are "effaced": because the model becomes something else in idealization, its figure is unraveled. Idealization is a *narcissistic becoming* that, rather than bolstering an existing self-identity, dissolves that which is currently realized, the "face" that gives an entity its unique identity. It is a narcissistic movement because in it figures are oriented toward their unactualized likenesses—correspondences—in other figures. (*Leo Bersani* 158)

Tuhkanen is speaking about what, in art, is a literal "blurring" of the model's distinct features in the artist's reproduction of his form, but he also means to describe the "ontological mode" of Bersani's "homoness" (ibid.). The "homo", or "narcissist", reaches toward their likeness in the other, and, much like in the artist's idealization of the model, the realized individuality of the self falls away; the connectivity of "likeness" is, in other words, a *virtual* as opposed to a realized connection. The real face of the individual self is de-emphasized in its striving for a virtual likeness with the face of the other. Grandma, quite literally, has a face that repeatedly "dissolves". And she is also, again quite literally,

the “model that becomes something else in idealization”. She is the model for the idealized mother figure, the form that motherhood takes when it departs from “self-identity”. In a way, the best thing that could have happened to the children is for their mother to die so that she could be replaced by this narcissistically self-effacing machine, this “more than human” mechanical (grand)mother who “more than loves” the children in her charge. From the moment of her birth, when she saw herself reflected in the children’s eyes, Grandma was “oriented toward [her] unactualized likeness” in them—and they (or at least, Tom), become oriented toward her in the same way. The “love beyond love” that emerges between them is a depersonalized kind of love, a love that defies the version of love that Phillips has described as the tangling together of desire and knowledge into “ownership”. We might even say that Grandma is a homo(ness machine), a lightning rod for the conduction of the kind of homoness Bersani sought to theorize: a homo is someone “indifferent to the established sanctity of personhood ... [A] person [who] disappears in his or her desire, a desire that seeks more of the same, partially dissolving subjects by extending them into a mutual homo-ness” (*Homos* 149).

In the story’s final sections, Grandma, describing herself and her machine nature, admits that she is, indeed, a person who “disappears” in her desire: “*You’re*,” the children’s father accuses at the dinner table one night, “not *in* there!” (876). He means, of course, that her physical form is not a container for whatever it is that constitutes the “you” he addresses. “Grandmother waited one, two, three silent beats. Then she replied: ‘No. But *you* are. You and Thomas and Timothy and Agatha” (876-7). And she, by extension, is *in* them; at least, that is how it appears to her when she looks into their eyes

and when they look into her face. None of them is self-possessed because the very idea of possession has been overturned. Grandma lacks nothing; her only desire—program, drive, desire without any subject doing the desiring—is to go on seeing herself narcissistically reflected in the family, to keep on seizing upon that “sliver of virtuality” that connects them all. This is not, to be sure, the closed, defensive Family in which, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has put it, meanings “line up perfectly with each other” (*Tendencies* 6). Rather, it is the expression of a relationality that perverts the very meaning of “family” in its failure to produce difference, its aimless repetition of sameness—in short, Grandma’s “perfection” as a mother-substitute attunes us to the machine-like potential for a less personal relationality that inheres in the repetitions of the maternal relation. Bersani elaborates this “homo” desire for repetition in the following passage:

Lack, then, may not be inherent in desire; desire in homo-ness is desire to repeat, to expand, to intensify the same, a desire that Freud, with a courageously confused perplexity, proposes as the distinctive characteristic of the sexual in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. The aim of desire grounded in lack is the filling of the lack through the incorporation of difference. The desire in others of what we already are is, on the contrary, a self-effacing narcissism, a narcissism constitutive of community in that it tolerates psychological difference because of its very indifference to psychological difference. *This* narcissistic subject seeks a self-replicating reflection in which s/he is neither known nor not known; here, individual selves are points along a transversal network of being in which otherness is tolerated as the nonthreatening margin of, or supplement to, sameness. (*Homos* 150)

The narcissistic subject is, in other words, indifferent to knowledge; it does not seek to know the essence of the other’s personality, nor does it seek to be known. In *The Culture of Redemption*, Bersani describes how the projection of individuality, or personality, onto the other is often understood as a humanizing gesture—an ethical good, by most

conventional accounts. But, he counterintuitively insists, “what would appear to be a humanizing of the other ... is actually a tactic of intended mastery over the other” (23). Humanization is, in Bersani’s view, the precondition for violence because it names the process by which we erect the mystery of the other’s personality (or “psychological difference”) that must then be overcome through the penetrating and grasping movement of thought that is called knowledge. Grandma’s very inhumanity is the precondition for her nonviolent narcissistic self-effacement, for in being a machine she does not “know” and she cannot “lack”—she is wholly indifferent to the mystery of personality to which, for example, Marcel in *À la recherche du temps perdu* is in thrall. Grandma does not lack so she does not take. Rather, she describes her selflessness as an act of giving for which there is no inverse. She does not mean, therefore, the kind of sacrificial giving that is demanded by the norms of modern motherhood; instead, she describes a kind of eternal, mindless loop of giving, a giving that does not entail giving *up* anything: “I am given things which I then give to you. I don’t *know* that I give, but the giving goes on. You ask what I am? Why, a machine. But even in that answer we know, don’t we, more than a machine” (873). She describes here a repetitive movement of giving, an aimless giving that does not posit a pre-existing lack, a giving that gives purely for giving’s sake. It is a movement absent of knowledge and of humanity—absent of humanity *because* absent of knowledge—a movement that will go on despite the individual “points” that constitute the nodes through which the movement flows. It is, we might say by way of returning to Phillips, akin to the movement of tickling, the non-sexual giving of non-climactic pleasure through the non-frictional but repeated movement of a virtual sameness.

But what about Agatha? What is she up to whilst Tom is being affected by Grandma's narcissistic dissemination of sameness? As Grandma partakes in a discussion over dinner about the nature of her machine-existence—a discussion that does, it bears admitting, make Grandma into something of a mouthpiece for some of the more quaint views and imagery that might be said to have been prevalent in 1969 (to paraphrase some of her statements in support of her own existence: “there will always be a homecooked meal on the table! I wish to be a warm apple pie that can be endlessly divided into equal pieces for all! I will never get tired, never become irritable!”)—she ends her speech with the following claim:

And again, to repeat, there are four of you. Each, in a way never possible before in history, will get my complete attention. No matter if you all speak at once, I can channel and hear this one and that and the other, clearly. No one will go hungry. I will, if you please, and accept the strange word ‘love’ you all” (877-8).

“I *don't* accept!” comes Agatha's sharp retort from the hallway in which she has been hiding, listening:

“I won't give you permission, you can't, you mustn't!” said Agatha. “I won't let you! It's lies! You lie. No one loves me. She said she did, but she lied. She *said* but *lied!*”

“Agatha!” cried Father, standing up.

“She?” said Grandma. “Who?”

“Mother!” came the shriek. “Said: ‘Love you!’ Lies! ‘Love you!’ Lies! And you're like her! You lie. But you're empty, anyway, so that's a *double* lie! I hate *her*. Now, I hate *you!*” (878)

The fineness of the line between love and hate might be said to be one of the more obvious themes of the story (“Can one love someone so much you hate them?” Tom asks Timothy earlier in the story. “Dumb,” says Timothy. “Of course” [872]). But the story, it might also be said, is an exercise in envisioning love without hate—without vengeance,

without the epistemophilic desire of heterosexuality—and this is where the story truly departs from its *Othello*-like narrative that revolves around ways of knowing and how they abet the taking of one's revenge. Agatha, anguished and “blind” with love-hate, dashes from the house, Grandma trailing behind her. As Agatha runs across the street, Grandma runs, too—and is struck by a car and dashed upon the pavement. The family, horrified, begins weeping and mourning together, and Tom rushes over to comfort the stricken Agatha:

“O Mom,” she wailed, shivering, lying down, cuddling up like a baby. “O Mom, dead, O Mom and now Grandma dead, she promised always, always, to love, to love, promised to be different, promised, promised, and now look, look...I hate her, I hate Mom, I hate her, I hate *them!*”

“Of course,” said a voice. “It's only natural, how foolish of me not to have known, not to have seen.” (879)

The voice, of course, is Grandma's, for Grandma, it turns out, cannot die. The repetition in Agatha's speech (“promised, promised”, “to love, to love”, “always, always”) is like a prayer that, once again, resurrects the dead mother. Agatha's fantasy of revenge upon her mother for dying—her conviction that she would find Grandma guilty of betraying her in the same way, her unconscious belief that she will only be satisfied when she obtains certainty of Grandma's betrayal—is unintentionally brought about by her refusal to accept Grandma's version of “love”. But the revenge scene is thwarted by Grandma's inhuman immortality. In the instant that Agatha realizes Grandma cannot die, everything Agatha thought she knew about Grandma and her mother—indeed, about other people in general—is swept away by the shock of the realization that there is nothing she could do to either prevent or to cause Grandma's abandonment of her: “Do you understand,” Grandma asks Agatha when her electrical circuitry rights itself and she is able to sit up, “I

shall always, always be here?” (881). Of course, it is possible to read in Grandma’s question the kind of reassuring motherly love that we are supposed, by psychoanalysis and by our cultural expectations of mothers in general, not only to want as children but also to provide, as best we can, as mothers. But Grandma’s question accomplishes something quite different when we situate it in the context of Agatha’s commitment to knowledge in the form of her commitment to revenge: it breaks the cycle of needing to know and its transformation into vengeance. This is not, in other words and as our narrator reminds us, the happy, conservative end of the story.

There is, finally, knowledge in the story of the Electrical Grandmother and her children, but it is, I would argue, a knowledge that fails to strive toward what Phillips simply calls “understanding”. Grandma as mother-machine, as inhuman “lover” and “knower” of the children, draws the children into an impersonal intimacy—they are empty reflections of one another. She does indeed “know” them, but only in the diminished way that a computer can be said to “know” the information it stores. In this way, the family members lose whatever it is that is supposed to be inside them, the supposed secret of their personalities. The “secret” becomes only so much useless information that exists not *in* them but, quite literally in this case, inside the other; more importantly, perhaps, it is both perfectly transparent and immediately accessible. It is, therefore, knowledge without hunger, without desire for more, without any need to suppose the existence of “more” that remains beyond reach. This is a form of knowing that is simultaneously reductive—everything becomes available as “data” and there is no supposition of profundity—and expansive—everything is there, everything is “enough”.

It stands in stark contrast to Agatha's form of knowing: her belief that knowledge is a cure for her dependence, that knowledge can stave off a future betrayal. It is this form of knowledge that Phillips describes as a kind of "currency" that holds people together in relationships—romantic, familial, therapeutic, etc.—and it is this currency—and the inequality it implies—that gives rise to what he has described as "vengeance" or, below, "cruelty", and what Bersani has generically termed "violence":

If knowledge, if getting it, is the currency, [other people] are indispensable, we can't remake them, translate them or possibly even redescribe them; what is exposed is the fantasy of purity in play, and the insufficiencies created. In this familiar division of labour there is plenitude – the one who, because he is supposed to know, is in the know – and there is an inadequacy: parents and children, teachers and students, Shakespeare and us ... But if knowledge was not at stake, what would be the issue? Certainly, in this picture, the common theme, knowledge or the lack of it, is what holds people together; and without considerable cruelty – the cruelty entailed by the supposition of knowledge – it is implied that people would not be held together, or would not be kept together in the same way, with the same ends in view. (*Missing Out* 65-6)

Phillips is describing, here, how knowledge functions as the personalizing force that makes us believe one another to be utterly unique, irreplaceable; he is also suggesting that it is precisely this belief in the self's and the other's irreplaceability that gives rise to the economy of violence that renders hatred and cruelty an inevitable byproduct of love.

Agatha's form of knowledge, if we are to follow this line of thinking, is what makes other people—her mother in particular—"indispensable" to her. It is what makes her believe in irreplaceability, both her own as her mother's daughter and her mother's as *her* mother.

She refuses to consider the possibility that Grandma *is* a suitable "translation" or "redescription" of her mother, and this is why she is so vulnerable to falling in love with Grandma—and therefore also hating her and fantasizing about her death—as well as

vulnerable to believing herself to be someone lovable—and therefore vulnerable to having that love betrayed: “Mother! Said: ‘Love You’! Lies!”. Agatha’s anguished, half-formed cries are the very expression of the “cruelty entailed by the supposition of knowledge” that Phillips wishes to describe. But is there another way of “holding people together”, a way that doesn’t depend upon the supposition of knowledge? What Agatha “needs to know” is that there *is* nothing to know—and therefore nothing indispensable—about either herself or Grandma, that love can be something radically impersonal and therefore less cruel. When Grandma unexpectedly survives her own death, she shatters Agatha’s commitment to knowledge, to her own fantasized omniscience and her conviction of both her mother’s and Grandma’s guilt. She is shocked into seeing both herself and her mother/Grandma as dispensable, replaceable, redescrivable. Grandma’s machinic immortality completely removes the need for understanding and, by extension, for forgiveness. Grandma’s advice—“Whatever you do, don’t die. Your children will never forgive you” (880)—is ultimately true, but only if we remain, like Agatha until the end, within a cycle of knowledge and “the cruelty it entails”. If we can come up with another way of knowing, we might find that we can be “held together” by another kind of love, one that doesn’t find its ultimate betrayal in the finality of death, one that doesn’t require forgiveness and/or understanding because there is nothing to forgive. This is, ultimately, Grandma’s solution to the problem of “mother love”: to engender an inhuman, impersonal, machinic kind of love, the kind of love that is “always, always there” in the same repetitive way that a clock always, always ticks.

How, then, does the story end if not with Grandma's miraculous survival? Well, the children grow up with their mechanical Grandmother at their side: "Grandma a constant, a clock, a pendulum, a face to tell all time by at noon" (881). As Agatha, the youngest child and last to leave home, packs herself up to move out, the family finds Grandma, too, packed and ready to leave. "Grandma! What are you doing?" the grown-up children cry. They are curious, but Grandma has no specific answer for them:

"Why going off to college, in a way, just like you," she said. "Back to Guido Fantoccini's, to the Family."

"The Family?"

"Of Pinocchios, that's what he called us for a joke, at first. The Pinocchios and himself Gepetto. And then later gave us his own name: the Fantoccini. Anyway, you have been my family here. Now I go back to my even larger family there, my brothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, all robots who—"

"Who do *what*?" asked Agatha.

"It all depends," said Grandma. "Some stay, some linger. Others go to be drawn and quartered, you might say, their parts distributed to other machines ... It may be I'll be just the one they need tomorrow and off I'll go to raise another batch of children and beat another batch of fudge." (882)

The children are not concerned about her raising a new batch of children, but they do not want her to be "drawn and quartered"—they've become accustomed to her immortality.

Grandma grows quieter, but then continues:

"Well, I wouldn't have said, but now you ask and I'll tell. For a very *small* fee, there's a room, the room of the Family, a large dim parlor ... where as many as thirty or forty of the Electric Women sit and rock and talk ... And I'll tell all I learned from you."

"But...you taught *us*!"

"Do you *really* think that?" she said. "No, it was turnabout, roundabout, learning both ways. And it's all in here ... And I'll tell it to the others just as they tell their boys and girls and life to me. We'll sit there, growing wiser and calmer and better every year, ten, twenty, thirty years. The Family knowledge will double, quadruple, the wisdom will not be lost. And we'll be waiting there in that sitting room ... There we'll be, growing old but not old, getting closer to the time, perhaps, someday, when we live up to our first strange joking name." (882)

Grandma's description of knowledge here is of the aimless variety; she speaks of becoming "better" and "wiser", but the Electrical Women simply sit a room and exchange their useless knowledge with one another. The knowledge swells in amount, but it is *for* nothing. The Grandmothers simply wait and share their useless knowledge, knowledge of the "tickling" variety because it isn't realized unless shared. And while Grandma grows older without getting old, so, too, do the children, who, even as they become elderly and slip into the twilight of their lives, are still children who stand in relation to their Grandma: "I will come back," Grandma promises. "We shall inhabit the nursery again" (883). There is time yet for their relationship to repeat itself. The children still live together in their old house, still sleep in their old bedrooms. Their own children have grown and gone and their spouses have "vanished" (ibid.). And Grandma, like clockwork, will come to them in her sarcophagus, ready to be resurrected yet again and to resume the narcissistic repetitions of their relationship: a relationship free of forgiveness, free of vengeance, free of understanding. A relationship that makes death mean something altogether different because it is no longer tied to a yearning for the *personal*. Grandma, we can assume, will ease the children into their deaths with the same repetitive machinic motions she has always enacted, and she will continue to do so with countless other children—or will she simply sit, waiting, in that dimly lit parlor? The answer hardly matters; the difference is too slender to measure.

And so, when that sarcophagus arrives again and the children rush again to meet it, does Grandma, in the end, become, as her comparison to Pinocchio suggests, a "real mother"? No. She, like a clock, still requires winding. And the children still have the key.

Knowledge, Betrayal, and “Getting” a Child

“Betrayal is an ethical necessity”: this is the provocative opening line of a section of Bersani’s *Homos* in which he discusses the relationship between betrayal and homosexuality in the works of Jean Genet. Genet, Bersani argues, insists upon the ethical value of treachery because it instantiates a “nonrelational” mode from which may emerge an altogether new relationality (*Homos* 162). Betrayal-as-necessity is also, I would add, the ethical stance of Mother in *I Am Mother*; indeed, Mother’s (an artificially intelligent robot, played by Rose Byrne) betrayal of her Daughter (the human child she is raising in a bunker, played by Clara Rugaard) is the linchpin of the film’s narrative. *I Am Mother* is set in a dystopian future in which humanity has seemingly disappeared, though we are not immediately told why or how. We are asked simply to trust that this is the case because all we are shown is the interior of a bunker with no visible human inhabitants. The film opens with a series of title cards reading:

UNU-HWK Repopulation Facility

Days Since Extinction Event: 001

Human Embryos on Site: 63,000

Current Human Occupants: 000

As the camera shows us a series of dimly lit corridors, the sounds of distant explosions shake the walls sterile-feeling “facility”. Immediately, we are drawn into the central concern of the apocalyptic genre: the fate of humanity that is currently, as we can surmise to the best of our knowledge, reduced to a total of 63,000 embryos—potential humans. The first thing we can clearly see, as the bunker lights begin to flicker on, is a concert of

robotic arms assembling a robotic figure, roughly humanoid but with no pretense at mimicking organic human components or features. A single luminous “eye” in the centre of the face sits above two smaller lights that travel, in tandem, along a curved track; this eye and its two smaller counterparts give the impression of a distinctly inhuman coldness, or lack of affect; even if it could feel emotions, the robot lacks the features that would enable it to visibly express them. Although the single, staring eye roves and fixes itself upon different objects in its view, it never blinks, and when its gaze is fixed it imparts a machinic sense of unbroken, unmoving contemplation—or perhaps merely data-collection—the intensity and affectlessness of which is unmatched by its human counterpart. In the opening scene, the eye stares directly into the camera as the two smaller lights below it alternately widen and narrow, indicating the continuous roving of the robot’s attentive process, the continuous collection of information about what it views—indeed, the centrality of the visual itself. Once assembled, the robot rises from its seated position and immediately sets about the task of selecting a frozen embryo—female, labelled APX01—and inserting it into an artificial womb, which fills with fluid as a clock begins a twenty-four-hour countdown. The faint embryonic heartbeat, that universal signal of human life, can be heard thudding as we are shown a closeup of the “baby” in its inhuman womb, preparing to gestate on an entirely unnatural and condensed timeline. The robot sits and waits with its eye trained on the womb, and the viewer understands that this is the baby’s “mother”, that this dark and un-homelike bunker will be its home. It is the staging of a familial scene that we recognize immediately while also immediately sensing that something is wrong: does this scene mark the dawning of

humanity's salvation, or the continuation of its twilight? What kind of a home, what kind of a mother is this? What kind of a child will be produced here? The neat efficiency of the scene raises these questions before the first spoken word is uttered. They are implied merely through the juxtaposition of the tiny, fragile human embryo, with its miraculously beating heart on display, against the cold sterility of metal and glass and the robot's unwavering, watchful eye.

The version of reproduction on offer here, which includes a birth scene in which the robot simply opens the artificial womb and plucks out the fully-formed baby, is utterly non-sexual, which is to say, it is impossible for there to exist a relationship between this robot mother and her human child that is rooted in sexual reproduction. The scene show us, to quote Phillips' reading of *Othello*, the precise opposite of "getting" or "begetting" a child: "I had rather adopt a child than get it" is a line spoken by Brabantio, Desdemona's father, to Othello and Desdemona, and Phillips picks up on the "strangeness" of it in his discussion of the relationship between knowledge, love, and ownership that I have described above (*Missing Out* 67). He does not elaborate upon the idea of adoption except to note that a link is being made, by Brabantio, between "getting" (through sexual reproduction) and "getting" (knowing) a child: you may know less about—or you may be excused for knowing less, or perhaps relieved of knowing altogether—a child that you adopt than a child that you "get". When you remove sexuality from reproduction, the implication is, knowing them is not a given fact nor necessarily a goal. If you don't "get" your child, if they have "nothing really to do with you", if consanguinity is not the basis for a particular kind of knowing, then the idea of

adoption becomes aligned with an alternative relationality (Phillips, *Missing Out* 70).

And so, just like “I Sing the Body Electric!”, *I Am Mother* is a story about different ways of knowing and what that might mean for a less personal mother-child relation. However, it takes a specific angle on knowledge as a guarantor of betrayal; as we will see, betrayal—a specifically virtuous understanding of betrayal—can be taken as the central problem *I Am Mother* puts to its viewers. First, however, I would like to consider Phillips’ interest in betrayal as an effect of certain ways of knowing that are tied specifically to sexuality, a connection that he derives from his reading of *Othello*. Both Brabantio and Othello demonstrate a kind of sexual jealousy—the one paternal, the other romantic—over Desdemona, and this jealousy stems from the sexual fantasy of *knowing* as ownership: if I know enough about you, I can guarantee that you’ll never abandon or betray me. Or, perhaps better yet, I can guard against betrayal by “knowing” about it ahead of time:

By ownership, in this context, I mean the fantasy of the impossibility of abandonment, of an infallible and unfailing dependence. In this predicament it is not the object but the keeping of the object that is paramount, as though knowing someone was a way of having them in safekeeping. When knowledge of oneself and other people is complicit with such fantasies, it is a form of word-magic. As though it were possible to know oneself and others in a way that would guarantee that one would never be let down. So one paradoxical proposition we might consider is that it is only knowledge of oneself and others that makes betrayal possible. Or, it is the will to knowledge which is the sign of a betrayal that has already happened. What Othello knows, what he thinks he knows, makes what he does possible. (71)

What Phillips is trying to link, here, is the specifically sexual basis for relationality—and we can take the family as the epitome of this version of relationality as it encompasses all aspects of heterosexuality and its outcomes—with the passion for knowledge (of

ourselves and others) that very often leads, as in Desdemona's case, to some version of destruction. It is, in other words and in Phillips' view, the fantasy of knowledge that characterizes this heterosexist attitude toward self and other, the belief that we can master both by "getting to know" them. The more you know about someone, the more you can ward off the possibility of their leaving you (and this is the case, in Phillips' version of psychoanalysis, both for lovers and for parents and their children); but since you cannot know someone perfectly—at least, not without destroying them—you must concede that it is, in fact, possible that you will be abandoned, and this awareness is what forces the shift from wanting to guarantee someone else's enduring relationship to you to wanting to secure proof of their treachery, their abandonment: Othello's shift, in other words, from wanting Desdemona to wanting to find her guilty.

In *Missing Out*, Phillips writes about this quest for knowledge and the inevitability of our disillusionment—our realization that we cannot achieve perfect knowledge of the other—as part of the development of relationality in general. He goes on to write, of Brabantio's wish that he had adopted rather than begotten a child, that Brabantio is merely perplexed by Desdemona's sexuality, expressed in her choice of Othello as a sexual partner. The idea is that Brabantio encounters this hard limit to knowledge in the form of his daughter's sexual choice: "[w]hen it comes to sexuality," Phillips concludes, "we [like Brabantio] don't get it. But this doesn't mean that we just haven't yet come up with the right way of knowing, the right kind of knowing suited to our sexual natures. It means that when it comes to sex we are not going to get it" (76-7). How then, he asks, should we proceed, knowing that we will never know all there is to

know about this mysterious essence we call sexuality? This is emphatically not the question I want to ask of *I Am Mother*. I am, however, interested to follow Phillips down the path of questioning the nature of the relation between knowledge, sex, and betrayal. Another way of putting this is: I am not interested in asking how it is that we can live—or relate—with the kind of uncertainty about sex that Phillips describes. Rather, I am interested in asking, as he himself puts it elsewhere: is it better to have children without having sex? (75). Can we propose an alternative to a relationality in which knowledge unfolds in a predictable trajectory (the trajectory that psychoanalysis calls “development”): first, certainty; next, disillusionment; and finally, a productive “learning to live” moment (if, that is, we can avoid Othello’s technique of simply destroying the thing that has disillusioned us)? This, of course, is the same question Bersani has proposed elsewhere, particularly in his analysis of Pauline Réage’s *The Story of O*, in which he describes one male character’s “nonsexual idolatry” of another (*A Future for Astyanax* 293). The “nonsexual” homoerotic relationship in question is a secondary concern that plays out to the side of “shocking” scenes of heterosexual violence, which only serves to emphasize its alternative epistemological attitude; amidst scenes of passionate, violent sex between men and women, scenes that literally dramatize heterosexual desire *as* ownership, one man develops an entirely non-sexual “adoration” (Bersani substitutes adoration for idolatry the second time around) for another man, establishing a relationship between them that is indifferent to sexuality—which is to say, indifferent to the mystery of the other’s difference. It is the expression of an adoration “without curiosity” (294). In *The Story of O*, “[w]omen are desired because they are

different, but the stimulating lack in desire is perhaps no match for the ecstatically calm contemplation of one's own self, for a kind of self-effacement in the name of the self" (295). To return, then, to Brabantio's preference for adoption over sexual reproduction, we may be able to describe a version of maternal "love" that is also nonsexual, that lacks curiosity, and that institutes a relationality that is not based upon an economy of knowledge and the vicissitudes of its abundance and/or lack. Is the concept of adoption, in *I Am Mother*, a means of theorizing a nonsexual maternal relation? And what would be the role of betrayal in such a relation? I suspect that betrayal can be delinked from the kind of sexual knowledge that both Phillips and Bersani describe; like Bersani's paraphrase of Genet at the beginning of this section, I suggest that betrayal may be the ethical necessity that moves us toward a nonsexual maternity.

Let us return to the birth scene in the opening minutes of the film, a birth that is completely detached, in the most obvious and banal way, from the "mother's" sexuality. It is a scene, we might say, of adoption—a term for a form of relationality to which I will return. No sexual union brought this baby into the world, no human body protected nor gave birth to it: only the (we assume) programmed movements of the robot who selected it and placed it into its artificial womb. The sterility—in both senses of the word—of the scene is a radical departure from the birth scenes we are accustomed to seeing in films, scenes involving much screaming and straining followed by an exhausted but ecstatic mother being passed an infant slicked in blood, a clear sign of the physical trauma, on the part of both mother and infant, of childbirth. But the film surprises the viewer; as the robot, who looks more suited to the battlefield than to the nursery, uses a towel to dry the

baby, an unexpectedly soothing female voice issues from it: “Shh. There you go. It’s okay little one”. We then see Mother holding the infant against a warming pad that forms part of her body; the infant, in turn, holds Mother’s metal finger. What follows is a montage, set to the song “Baby Mine” from *Dumbo*, of the normal scenes of baby- and toddlerhood, albeit with a twist; the child is accompanied by the ever-watchful and unblinking eye of its robotic mother. (A perceptive viewer may notice that the first infant we see has blond hair that curls up at the neck, but we then see a second infant, roughly the same age, with shorter, darker hair.) The montage, which continues into childhood, implies the continuous passage of time of one child’s life. Yet, as the film eventually reveals, the child we see at the end of the montage is in fact not the same as the infant APX01 that Mother chooses to gestate in the opening scene. This fact is, really, not so much a revelation as it is a bland statement; following the “Baby Mine” montage, we are shown title cards reading:

Days Since Extinction Event: 13,867

Current Human Occupants: 001

13,867 days translates into roughly thirty-eight years, yet the central drama of the film begins with a Daughter who looks to be no more than twenty years old, the single human occupant of the bunker. The film thus flatly and directly routes our thinking to wonder what could account for the years prior to this child’s birth? What happened to the *first* baby? Immediately, suspicion is cast upon Mother.

Perhaps it is natural that we are wary of Mother’s intentions, despite the scenes of her nurturing her infant child(ren) with Betty Noyes crooning “you are so precious to

me...” in the background. Mother’s design draws heavily from the infamous AI HAL-9000; they share a single, luminescent eye as their defining feature (although Mother has an entire body to go with hers), and they share a pleasant but eerily calm and neutral voice (although Mother’s voice has more variation and an almost-cheerful quality that HAL’s lacks). Thanks to HAL, of course, we are all familiar with the narrative arc of the “mad” AI who murders humans in order to fulfill its directive, its madness being defined by a too-perfect (inhuman, in other words) adherence to the law—or, rather, *program*, whose design and objectives are implacable and authoritative and entirely unknowable by humans. In both films, the AI is utterly indifferent to the human desire to know what it is “thinking”. Yet, the drama of *I Am Mother* unfolds rather differently from the drama of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (dir. Stanley Kubrick). For one thing, it is about an AI mother and a human daughter, and this relationship evinces an entirely different set of expectations. We may be able to comprehend HAL’s madness as the being in charge of a secret space mission, but an AI *mother*? Can an AI love, nurture, protect, and do all the things that mothers are supposed to do for their children? And if she does not, or cannot—and we suspect that she cannot, for what good are warming pads when held up to the organically warm embrace of a mother’s bosom—what exactly does that mean? Are we about to witness an infanticide akin to the murder of the scientists aboard *Discovery One*? And secondly, *I Am Mother* does something else that *2001* does not; it sets up a triangular relationship in which the authority of the presumed-all-knowing AI is directly challenged, but never overcome, by the presence of a “human” alternative. In *I Am Mother*, this challenge to Mother’s authority comes in the form of a human mother-substitute who is

introduced relatively early in the film. This human Woman (Hilary Swank), whose presence sets off the main narrative tension, suddenly appears outside the bunker while Mother is “sleeping”, surprising Daughter, who has been told by Mother that the environment outside the bunker is unfit to support human life. What unfolds between the three characters—Daughter, Mother, and Woman—is, on the one hand, an epistemological mystery in which Daughter is forced to gather evidence and draw conclusions about which mother-figure is telling her the truth: is Mother a benign droid whose assessment of the surface “contamination” is accurate? Or, as Woman suggests, is Mother just another piece of the droid army that is systematically exterminating humans? Eventually, Daughter must make a fateful choice: stay with Mother or venture out with Woman to live with other humans in an abandoned mine. On the other hand, however, the film endorses the view that “we are going nowhere: that we are growing toward extinction, children or no children” (Phillips, *Intimacies* 114). Paradoxically, though, the film makes “extinction” synonymous with “immortality”, and, despite Mother’s program to mother, the irrelevance of the individual child—“children or no children”—becomes the means by which this version of immortality is achieved.

The above synopsis is the most general outline of the film’s central narrative arc and tells us, of course, nothing about the film itself and how the narrative elements are arranged and made perceivable by the filmic medium. As Bersani, with Ulysse Dutoit, writes in *Forms of Being*, “[a] major virtue of the visual arts is their capacity to make the invisible visible” (1). *Forms of Being* presents an analysis of several films that, according to the authors, “propose the implausibility of individuality” precisely by making visible

the invisible correspondences between individuals and other elements in the world of the film. When a film succeeds in rendering these correspondences perceivable to the viewer, a kind of “trauma” can be said to have occurred, a trauma that disjoints the usual expectations one has around causality and the stability of both meaning and identity. In this sense, Bersani’s foray into film theory marks the extension of his usual concerns with individuality and the means available to us for “lessening” our sense of psychic profundity. “In the films we will be discussing,” Bersani and Dutoit write in their introduction,

the subject’s dispersal will come about, principally, through unexpected couplings – connections both to the human and to the non-human that are to the side of, or ‘before’ (*en-deçu de*) more officially sanctioned connections that confirm such identities as husband, or mother, or soldier. Immanent in every subject is its similitudes with other subjects (and other objects) – similitudes that are illuminated, that ‘shine’ into visibility when those others intersect with the subject’s spatial or temporal trajectories. Traumatized perception shatters the security of realised psychic and social identities; it makes visible traces of everybody’s limitless extensibility in both space and time. These connections are universally immanent. They make of the present no more of an event than the past is past, or has passed. (8-9)

In other words, the visual correspondences and shocks to perception that films make uniquely available to us have the effect of making us feel how absurd it is to take oneself seriously. This is why, for example, Bersani and Dutoit say, of Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Contempt*, that the marriage it depicts “is no more real than the marriage of Odysseus and Penelope – although they [the couple in the film] make the mistake of thinking of themselves as more real than their literary ‘correspondents’ and are therefore unable merely to *imagine* their identity as a passionately conjoined couple” (9). By rendering Camille’s contempt for Paul contentless, as Bersani and Dutoit’s analysis suggests it does,

the film reduces the couple's identity to "mere appearance" (6), thus de-psychologizing the drama of the unhappy marriage. There is no reason for Camille's contempt, but her contempt has an effect; it forces both the film's viewer and Paul to look to Camille for "Paul's own contemptible image" (42). For Bersani and Dutoit, this is the way in which *Contempt* achieves its emphasis on imaginary identity, by reducing Paul and Camille's marriage to the reflection between them of Paul's image. When Camille is suddenly killed in a car accident, the film does not end; rather, we go on to see a scene of the film Paul was working on being shot, a film that is based on *The Odyssey* just as *Contempt* itself is. The various reiterations in the film of *The Odyssey* do not, however, illuminate one another with increased knowledge or insight. Rather, the repetitions are "non-interpretive" (57), they repeat without producing any epistemological gain precisely because the "pairings" or "couplings" (between individuals, between couples, between people and inanimate objects) are purely visual and contain no information regarding psychic depth (59). The effect of the repetition is to simply to make "passionate couple" the empty identitarian category that Paul and Camille just happen to fulfill—an example, we could say, of making the invisible (the emptiness of the category) visible (as a series of repeated "couplings"). I will suggest here that *I Am Mother* accomplishes something similar by "traumatising" our perception of motherhood with its insistent, mechanistic repetitions of interchangeable parts.

A review of *I Am Mother* published in *The Guardian* describes the opening scenes of the film as follows:

In an elegantly paced introductory montage, Sputore swiftly details the child's lonely formative years inside a secluded spaceship-like bunker. We see Mother

hugging her, cradling, her, teaching her to read. Despite the director's unironic approach, it's hard not to consider an inherent cynicism at play; swapping a human mother for a robot changes everything. (Buckmaster, para. 4)

This description echoes other reviews that describe the central question of the film as centring on the threat AI poses to humanity; when we see this AI mother tenderly taking care of an infant, we are programmed to feel uneasy, to wonder what humans lose when they outsource something as fundamental as childrearing to a machine. The fear is that an AI mother will take her directive too literally, do *too* good of a job at it: "Tell a machine to make paperclips and it will turn the entire world into little twists of metal," writes one reviewer for *The Verge* (Robertson, para. 1). Tell a machine mother to raise the perfect daughter, and there is no telling to what lengths she will go in order to carry out her directive. The uneasiness we feel as we see Mother rocking an infant, making origami at a superhuman pace, or being covered in stickers by her child stems from a cultural wariness toward AI's relationship to humanity, a relationship that struggles to find the balance between machine-as-augmentation and machine-as-threat. What usually goes unquestioned is the difference between machines and humans; we assume that there is something human about humans and that machines lack whatever this "humanness" is. If we watch *I Am Mother* this way, we treat it as a mystery; what is *really* going on with Mother? Birthday-cake-making and origami-folding aside, what kind of violence lurks behind her passionless (and quite literally depthless because single<sup>13</sup>) eye? When and

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<sup>13</sup> Binocular vision is not required for depth-perception—a person who has lost one eye, for example, can still perceive depth—but it *is* the greatest component of depth-perception in our multi-factored vision system. Mother's single eye, therefore, is a kind of symbol of her inability to see, as I will argue, psychological "depth".

how will it be revealed that she is not the good mother she insists she is late in the film? I want to ask a different set of questions about the film because I suspect that it has less to say about the threat of AI, or about the fundamental humanness of motherhood, than it does about the fundamental confusion between machines and mothers. As we will see, the film does not redeem humans by reclaiming humanity for them. Rather, it focuses on a paradoxical fruitlessness in the machine-like process of reproduction, and it makes visible for us a nonsexual reproduction that engenders an impersonal maternity. Ultimately, *Mother* radically revises what is meant by maternal love by questioning the viability of the injunction to love personally and unconditionally. Her passionless, disinterested vision coupled with Daughter's navigation of epistemological uncertainty becomes the expression of an alternative maternity rooted in machine-like repetition. Both these aspects of the film—its visual representation of a relationality produced by passionless staring and its narrativizing of the relationship between knowledge and betrayal—will be discussed.

To return, then, to Bersani's claim that "betrayal is an ethical necessity" (*Homos* 151), I would like to direct attention to the way in which *I Am Mother* handles the concept of betrayal, both for Daughter, whose role in the film is to be betrayed not once but twice, and for the viewer. The film's juxtaposition of a kind of grim, claustrophobic darkness—the actors are frequently cast as partial silhouettes against a barely-lit background—with the miraculous production of an "innocent" child primes us to expect a betrayal. Heightening the sense of uncertainty, this lighting strategy means we often cannot see the actors' faces in full, reducing our ability to decipher the many close-ups

that occur throughout the film. Mother's face, of course, provides its own light that inexorably draws the viewer's eye to hers, forcing direct eye contact with her in a way that we do not experience with Daughter and Woman. The effect, then, is this: although it is we who watch Mother, our ability to clearly perceive the visual cues that might aid our interpretation is diminished; neither the bright light of Mother's eye, nor the shadowy darkness of the environment, is hospitable to our searching gaze. More importantly, it feels like she is watching us, like her gaze is the only one that obtains an unobscured point of view. Just as in Bersani and Dutoit's analyses of *Contempt* and *The Thin Red Line*, looking is central to the film: who is looking at whom, how they are looking, and how the viewer is being directed to look, all constitute a milieu in which looking itself comes to be the primary mode by which the characters relate to one another. Looking also sets the stage for the betrayals that Daughter will experience in rapid succession, first Mother's and then Woman's.

The series of betrayals begins quickly: the power cuts out one night while Mother is recharging (and therefore not looking), and during this time Daughter finds a rat that has chewed through a power cord. In her excitement at seeing a living creature in their shelter, which is supposed to be sealed off from the contaminated outside world, she traps it in a glass tube. After she restores the power, Daughter impatiently waits for Mother to "wake up" so she can show her the rat. "What happened to the power?" Mother asks upon waking, immediately standing up. "Mother, look," says Daughter, holding out the rat in its tube. "Did you touch it?" Mother demands, striding over and taking the tube from Daughter's hands. She begins marching down the many corridors of the bunker with

Daughter following behind, accusing her: “You said nothing could survive out there.”

Knowing exactly where Mother is heading, Daughter begins to implore her to wait, to test either the rat or the outside to determine if survival outside might be possible, but Mother never hesitates; she places the rat and its tube into an incinerator and turns it on. We see Daughter wince and then a close-up of the furnace flames. “You’re disappointed,” Mother intones. “That’s understandable. But my measurements are sound.” This is the first time we see Daughter question Mother, and the first time Daughter’s face belies any intensity of emotion. Mother’s flat reassurance that her “measurements are sound” is enough to silence Daughter, who composes herself and stares into the distance as Mother walks away. Daughter’s gaze remains fixed where it is, neither looking after Mother nor looking toward the furnace, while Mother instructs her to take a shower. “Yes, Mother,” she robotically intones. Before Mother walks away, however, we see a side shot of Daughter staring somewhere off-screen with Mother standing beside her; when Mother proceeds to walk forward and off-screen, we see the glow of the furnace in the same place Mother was just occupying. All three—Daughter, Mother, and furnace—are placed in unmoving relation to one another; Mother’s replacement in the frame by the furnace emphasizes her “dumb materiality” (Tuhkanen, “Accompanying Images” 6), and just as the furnace dumbly carries out its work of incinerating the rat, so too does the restrained tension between Mother and Daughter—which seems at first to point to a kind of psychic grappling between them (or, at least, *within* Daughter)—flatten out into a dumb mechanical process.

Shortly after the rat's incineration, we see a scene of Mother and Daughter sitting at a table on Daughter's birthday. Daughter is listlessly pushing the food around on her plate and Mother, concerned, asks if it needs to be heated more, or if she should prepare something else. After some hesitation, Daughter asks Mother directly: "What if you're wrong? Your measurements or—" She breaks off on this unfinished thought, as she will repeatedly throughout the film, but then continues: "How will you know if you don't go outside?" And there it is: the challenge that we have all been waiting for. How *will* you know if you don't go outside, if you don't, in other words, directly observe the conditions for yourself? *What if you're wrong?* The simplest and most straight-forward expression of doubt. Daughter's concern, from a certain, epistemophilic point of view, makes perfect sense. Direct experience, direct observation, direct measurement: these are the hallmarks of the scientific process, the method by which one gains certainty of the world. Moreover, what she wants more than anything is to know what is *outside* (i.e. what is not-me). In being forbidden from knowing what is outside, she becomes fascinated by it—as, indeed, do we. The viewer knows as little about the outside as does Daughter; the entire movie, thus far, is filmed inside the dark bunker. What if there is light outside? Daughter's curiosity, and her challenge to Mother's authority, is curiously restrained, however. Her face shows interest, but not fear; a mildly questioning lift of the eyebrows, but not the excitement of a person considering the possibility of going outside for the very first time. Perhaps she is frightened of Mother, or perhaps she has simply been trained to quell her questioning response, to accept Mother's epistemological authority. As Daughter stammers to get her questions across Mother cuts her off, turning the line of questioning

back upon Daughter: “Are you happy here? I want you to be happy, Daughter. Have you ever known me to be wrong?” Daughter, defeated, averts her gaze and shakes her head. “Perhaps you’d like your cake?” We might say, then, that Daughter’s fascination with knowing what lies outside is straddling the line between what Tuhkanen has described as two different modes of fascination—the one sexual, epistemophilic, violent, the other “neutral”, affectless, non-probing (*Leo Bersani* 246).

The mechanics of these scenes between Mother and Daughter repeat themselves throughout the remainder of the film: Daughter does something that raises questions about Mother and the world; Mother reassures her that there is nothing to question. The narrative is as mechanical as Mother, as mechanical as the machines that filmed, distributed, and now play the film for us to view. After the birthday scene, we see a repeat of the night the power went out and Daughter found the rat, except that this time, while Mother silently recharges, it is Woman that Daughter finds outside the entrance to the bunker. The introduction of Woman, who remains nameless as both Daughter and Mother do, raises the epistemological stakes of Daughter’s simmering suspicion of Mother, but the mechanics remain the same. Before Daughter opens the door, Woman shouts that she needs help, that she has been shot. Despite “knowing” that the outside world is “contaminated”, Daughter’s curiosity allows her to open the airlock for Woman. Woman is the first human that Daughter has seen, and her entry presents a mystery (for the viewer as well as Daughter): where did she come from? How did she survive outside? Are there others? Who shot her? Daughter stares at Woman through the airlock window and won’t immediately let her further into the bunker. “What are you waiting for?” asks Woman.

“Mother,” replies Daughter. “She doesn’t need to know,” Woman implores, sensing immediately that this “Mother” may not allow her to stay, that Daughter’s hinted obedience to her Mother might also hint at Woman’s own demise. But, perhaps surprisingly, Daughter seems to agree that Mother doesn’t need to know and tells Woman to stay out of sight just as Mother enters the room. “I didn’t go outside,” Daughter immediately reassures Mother, feigning rather than performing obedience. “That does not excuse your disregard for my authority, or for the safety of the others in this facility,” Mother admonishes her. Daughter: “Others?” Mother: “Your family.” Mother is referring, it seems, to the frozen embryos but Daughter’s hope for the existence of “others” is betrayed by her question. This scene is followed almost immediately by its inverse: Daughter is told by Mother to go prepare for her yearly “exam”—a scene which, when it finally takes place, reveals to the viewer that Daughter’s identification code is APX03—but she secretly allows Woman into the bunker (after searching her bag and confiscating a gun) and hides her somewhere near the incinerator. While Daughter collects medical supplies for Woman, Woman spots Mother at a distance and reaches for her gun, only to find that it is missing. When Daughter returns with the supplies, Woman confronts her:

Woman: There’s a droid here.

Daughter: Mother?

Woman: That dozer? Oh, Jesus.

Daughter: She can help you.

Woman: Like its friends outside?

Daughter: There are more like her?

The repetition again introduces to Daughter the idea that there are “others”: other humans, or other droids, the difference, at this point, does not matter. Daughter’s curiosity about life outside the bunker, outside of her dyadic relationship with mother, centres upon the possibility of the existence of others in general and eclipses her interest in Mother: it is not the suggestion that Mother might be dangerous that captures her interest but the reference to the outside world. It is at this moment, however, that Mother discovers Woman, who, having retrieved her gun from Daughter, shoots Mother twice before being overcome.

The film thus sets up a conventional triangular relationality in which knowledge—and its differential distribution between the different actors—is at stake. “The first person we believe – whether we believe her or not – is ... the mother,” writes Phillips (*Unforbidden Pleasures* 53), and the film seems to be premised upon this statement. Moreover, belief—the assumption that someone else knows something we don’t—is intimately tied to obedience; quoting a Frank Bidart poem, which begins with the line “What begins in recognition, — ... ends in obedience”, Phillips suggests that the attribution to the other of knowledge one does not have is the condition for the emergence of pleasures that are both forbidden and unforbidden—navigating these pleasures becomes the task of the obedient child (ibid.). Daughter, whose deferral to Mother’s knowledge is near-absolute (“Have you ever known me to be wrong?”), is suddenly thrust into an attitude of suspicion, a crisis of disobedience, by the appearance of another party who is also “supposed to know” (Lacan, *Seminar XV*). Woman’s claim that there are other droids gives Daughter the confidence to question Mother again, and we see a

repetition of the birthday scene in which Daughter questioned Mother's measurements of the outside contamination levels:

Daughter: Did you know?

Mother: Daughter, I—

...

Daughter: Did you know there were people out there?

Mother: I'm as surprised as you. This facility was designed by humans as a failsafe, programmed to activate in case of their extinction. To give humanity a second chance. One that began with you, Daughter.

Daughter: And all your data, the toxicity levels—?

Mother: I had hoped to tell you myself.

Daughter: What happened, Mother?

Mother: I told you it was dangerous outside, and it is. If you had feared the same danger in our home, how could I have raised you? I hope you see that I'm governed by different parameters than her assailants. That I'm a good mother. Have I ever done you harm?

In response to Mother's question, Daughter begrudgingly shakes her head. Her scepticism is overcome, as it was before, by what both Slavoj Žižek and Phillips describe as "overinterpretation", a submission to the epistemological authority of the (Lacanian) "one who is supposed to know". Mother and Daughter are held together by Daughter's oscillation between suspicion and overinterpretation. And yet, the same dynamic plays out between Daughter and Woman; they, too, are held together by Daughter's alternating scepticism and submission to the other's authority. When Daughter visits Woman by peering in at her through the locked infirmary door, Woman—whose deep suspicion of both Daughter and Mother is expertly conveyed by her narrowed eyes, her thrust-forward

jaw, her furrowed brow—accuses her of plotting with Mother to trap her inside her “cage”. “You’re still alive, aren’t you?” Daughter retorts in imitation of Mother’s question, “Have I ever done you harm?” As though allowing someone to live, not doing harm to them, is the foundation of trustworthiness, the guarantee that though they may know something you don’t, that knowledge will not be used against you. Woman then pulls the rug out from Daughter yet again: “You haven’t seen what they’ve done. I’ve seen them torch babies, starve families out of their— You... you have no idea.” Daughter’s gaze slides to the side as she considers this new information, then recentres itself upon Woman: “Not mother.” Woman scoffs at her certainty: “It’s just a matter of time.”

Each scene unfolds in precisely this way; each time Daughter expresses certainty, Mother and Woman reveal something new that makes her doubt. The remainder of the film carries us along with Daughter as she unfolds layers of suspicion about both Woman and Mother: Mother tells her that the bullet extracted from Woman’s wound matches guns only humans use; Woman tells Daughter to look at the bullets herself, and when she does, she finds that Mother has indeed lied to her. The bullets were kept in a locked drawer—the cinematic expression of what it is in the other that I wish to apprehend—and, her suspicions aroused, Daughter opens other drawers in an epistemophilic frenzy to discover more damning information about Mother. Like Othello, she is driven by the conviction of the other’s treachery and is passionate about confirming this conviction. She finds what she is looking for: proof of the existence of another child, APX02, whose “test results” only go up to age six, at which point the word “ABORTED” is visible in the

file. This scene leads us to the most horrifying one in the film: Daughter tentatively approaches the incinerator and opens it. As she brushes her hand through the ashes inside she discovers the thing she has been looking for, the hard proof of Mother's treachery—the jawbone of the “aborted” APX02. This is precisely the push she has needed to accept Woman's version of the world, a world in which droids kill humans and humans—for Woman promises Daughter that there *are* other humans out there—maintain their last outpost inside what Woman describes as “the mines”; in other words, in order to become interested in Mother, to see Mother as a source of epistemophilic fascination, Daughter had to see her as something inhuman, something threatening to the existence of humanity. “You were right about everything,” Daughter admits to Woman after finding the jawbone, her face devoid of expression. The two humans make a plan to escape the bunker together, despite the fact that Mother is currently incubating a new baby—a boy, selected by Daughter as her reward for achieving high results on her examination. Daughter expresses her wish to stay until the baby is born so that she can take him as well, but Mother discovers their plan and attempts to thwart it, causing the two women to leave without the baby. Their exit from the bunker provides both Daughter and the viewer with their first look at the outside world; Daughter begrudgingly follows Woman, expecting, along with the viewer, to be led to the mines where the other human survivors are living. If we were not surprised at Mother's “betrayal”—she is, after all, a non-human being and therefore one from whom we expect treachery—we are perhaps surprised when Woman leads Daughter to an empty shipping container on a beach, at which point we realize, along with Daughter, that she has been betrayed a second time. There are no others.

Woman is no better a “mother” than Mother. This double “betrayal” throws the very notion into question; as epistemophilic beings, the possibility of betrayal inheres in every relationship. When Daughter is betrayed twice, it is as though she is forced to admit that knowledge has no power to predict, confirm, or ward off treachery. Betrayal, in the film, renders knowledge useless and thus transforms “betrayal” into something else entirely.

Daughter’s first thought upon discovering that Woman has lied is of her baby brother and the natality, to borrow Hannah Arendt’s term—the possibility of beginning again—that he, by his very existence, makes possible. Despite the break that we assume has occurred between Mother and Daughter, a break that we may at first think of as irreparable, the idea of family connectedness continues to saturate the film at every turn—the difference, now, is that the spectre of betrayal holds no power over Daughter: she is no longer captive to epistemophilic fascination, so there is nothing to betray. Daughter returns to the bunker for a final confrontation with Mother, whom she finds, after passing by dozens of droids with laser sights trained on her chest at the front door, amidst the broken glass and flickering lights that suggest something of the violent struggle that precipitated the human women’s flight to the outside world. Mother is holding a crying infant while she explains to Daughter that her directive is to improve upon humanity by raising a “better human. Smarter. More ethical.” But Mother’s words confuse “raising” with “programming” when she continues: “I was raised to value human life above all else. Your whole life you’ve been taught to see the bigger picture. Have I failed? Or are you prepared to be the woman your family needs?” By referring to herself as having been “raised” in the same manner she “raised” Daughter, Mother suggests that

the difference between being raised and being programmed is so minimal as to be irrelevant—the words are interchangeable. Indeed, her stated directive—to raise a better human being—mimics the directive many mothers believe they fulfill as they carry out their mothering. However, Daughter, who wants desperately to save her brother from a Mother whose version of motherhood allows for filicide, points a gun at Mother's CPU. It is at this point that Mother reveals that she is not a distinct entity but a singular, vast mind operating through all of the individual droid "shells": "You will achieve nothing by shooting me, Daughter ... It was I who greeted you at the door." In other words, there is no singular, vulnerable node of personality that is "Mother". And yet, Mother allows herself to be persuaded by Daughter, who boldly claims that she is ready to assume to job for which she was so carefully raised/programmed, the job of becoming Mother to all of the unborn children stored in the bunker. "You're still my daughter," Mother says, as she raises Daughter's hand for her and allows her to fire through her CPU in a futile mimicry of matricide. This act of violence, contrary to its potential reading as the film's melodramatic climax, actually enacts the central, decidedly non-climactic premise of the film: the achievement of nothing, the fruitlessness of reproduction. The family that Mother envisions and into which Daughter is recruited, finally, by both Mother's and Woman's treachery, is a family in which everyone, including herself, is utterly replaceable. "Killing" her is merely the opportunity for Daughter to assume the mantle of Motherhood, for it is simply the swapping out of one shell for another. In other words, Mother really does mean it when she says that shooting her will achieve nothing, and Daughter really does assert her fidelity to futility by carrying out what she knows is only

a mimicry of murder. Daughter remains, holding her infant brother, and she can do nothing now but carry out the directive with which she has been programmed—to raise a “better” child. In the final scenes of the film, Daughter sings “Baby Mine” to her brother, a repetition that emphasizes the similarity between Mother and Daughter and that underscores the double referent of the film’s title. A final shot shows a close-up of Daughter’s passionless face as she contemplates the vast number of human embryos left in her charge. Her eyes scan the room in imitation of Mother’s robotic gaze and then flick up to look directly into the camera, forcing eye contact with the viewer and thereby extending the scope of her “family” beyond the confines of the screen’s frame. The neutrality of her expression makes this shot a mirror-image of previous close-ups of Mother’s robotic eye as it gazes flatly and directly at the world. The flatness of this gaze, repeated throughout the film by Mother and Daughter (but not Woman, whose face performs a range of emotions, including narrow-eyed scepticism, incredulity, hunger, and fear) actually produces a flattening effect on the visual world of the film; the vast columns of cryogenic chambers (chambers that, importantly, don’t allow us to see the human embryos contained within) across which her gaze slides are not symbolic of a future *human* world but seem only to announce the sheer presentness of the present, the fact that the present is not heading into the future but staying right where it is. This is not an expression of hopelessness but an acknowledgement that hope (like its inverse) has no place in a family in which betrayal is an ethical necessity to *overcome* betrayal and the desire for knowledge that it entails. Rather, the emphasis of a present that is going nowhere serves to emphasize that no embryo is more likely than any other to move from

the virtual into the realized, that no family member is more preferred than any other, that no one is capable of betraying anyone else. Mother's murder of APX02 becomes the literalization of the interchangeability of the family's parts—if not APX01 (whom we have good reason to believe, at this point, is Woman), then APX02; and if not APX02, then APX03 will do, and so on. Paradoxically, then, her act of unthinkable violence against her child(ren) reveals only that violence is unnecessary in a family that is held together by nonsexual sameness. Indeed, the family *becomes* the world itself, a series of repetitions and replacements that render violence itself irrelevant. Just as Daughter's act of matricide achieves nothing, so, too, does Mother's act of infanticide. These two acts of violence paradoxically reduce violence's intensity and power by framing the fruitless effort to close the film's version of "family" into a recognizably heterosexual—that is, conventionally "loving"—unit.

### The Nonsexual Family

Finally, what I would like to consider is how betrayal functions in the film to produce a sense of family that is radically nonsexual, which is to say, not heterosexual in Bersani's unconventional and expansive sense of the term. For Bersani, as we have already seen, heterosexuality describes not only a particular erotic and reproductive arrangement between opposite sexes but also the particular relational stance of epistemophilia, the inherently violent desire to overcome difference through knowledge. *I Am Mother* draws on both senses of the meaning of sexuality—the one reproductive and the other epistemological—and shows us how they are inextricably entwined with one another.

Daughter and Mother, as I have already noted, are not related to one another in a sexual way; the artificial womb in which Daughter (and her siblings) gestates is the visual symbol of a familial relationality severed from sexual reproduction (the embryos themselves must be the result of sperm and egg and are thus a matter of sexual reproduction in a purely biological sense, but there exists no genealogical or other biological connection between Daughter and Mother). Their “family” is thus the literal embodiment of what it would mean to be “nonsexual”—a term that can be usefully illuminated, as I explore below, by the concept of adoption—as well as the embodiment of a family that takes betrayal to be an “ethical necessity” if only to render betrayal itself an impossibility. Another way of putting this is to say that a “nonsexual” family is held together, at least partially and however flimsily, by acts of what Bersani has called “nonrelational betrayal”, or betrayals that deny, or perhaps transcend, the very field of relationality. It is these betrayals that allow, in the film, for the tempering of epistemophilia in favour of something far less personal: what I have called, in the title of this chapter, “inhuman love”.

It is in his discussion of Genet’s novel *Funeral Rites* that Bersani describes “nonrelational betrayal”, by which he means a version of betrayal that is not dependent on its opposite(s)—loyalty, fidelity, love—for its definition. For Bersani, Genet’s depiction of nonrelational betrayal comes in the form of solitude, an utter aloneness in which evil is defined “not as a crime against socially defined good, but as a turning away from the entire theatre of the good, that is, a kind of meta-transgressive *dépassement* of the field of transgressive possibility itself” (*Homos* 163). What he means by this is that

the morally reprehensible characters in *Funeral Rites*—sadistic characters who see beauty in Nazism, in murder and violent sodomy and political betrayal—are entirely without regard for the other, they betray nothing and no one in particular but instead “all human ties” (167). They destroy the social field so thoroughly that they can only be described as “*declining to participate in any sociality at all*” (168, emphasis in original). In this way, the act of betrayal betrays everything and nothing, and in so doing it makes possible—without claiming any predictive power—an entirely new relationality, one that we can hope will have done away with betrayal altogether by being predicated upon the non-mysterious, non-profound pleasures of sameness instead of the violence of difference. *I Am Mother*, I believe, also depicts betrayal as “nonrelational”—as, perversely, an “ethical necessity” that instantiates a new, impersonal ethics—but in a way that is not exactly homosexual (as it is for Erik and Riton in *Funeral Rites*) but *nonsexual*. A nonsexual family is a family that eschews the what we have seen Bersani call, earlier in this chapter, the “frictional knowledge” that finds its aesthetic counterpart in the appropriative, climax-oriented friction of sex. “Our culture tells us to think of sex as the ultimate privacy,” Bersani writes, “as that intimate knowledge of the other on which the familial cell is built”:

Enjoy the rapture that will never be made public, that will also (though it is not said) keep you safely, docilely out of the public realm, that will make you content to allow others to make history while you perfect the oval of a merely copulative or familial intimacy. The sodomist, the public enemy, the traitor, the murderer (Erik and Riton answer to all these titles) are ideally unsuited for such intimacies. (*Homos* 165)

What Bersani sees in Genet’s novel is a rejection of a sociality built on personal or familial intimacy that is so total it constitutes a “betrayal of all human ties” (167). And

yet, *Funeral Rites* does not end here, with the annihilation of humanity; it is suggestive of, or it speculates on, an alternative to humanity, albeit without committing itself to any particular possibility, without taking itself so seriously as to posit itself as a real alternative (“This book is sincere and it’s a joke”, Bersani quotes Genet [172]). The suggestion of an alternative mode of being comes, Bersani argues, from Genet’s treatment of death as *jouissance*: “Genet’s ingenious solution to the problem of revolutionary beginnings condemned to repeat old orders [is]: he dies so that repetition itself may become an initiating act. This can be accomplished only if dying is conceived, and experienced, as *jouissance*” (177). While he does not elaborate upon the meaning of *jouissance* in this passage, in *Forms of Being* he, along with Dutoit, give a definition that is drawn directly from Lacanian psychoanalysis: it is an “ecstatic destructiveness,” something non-psychological, unanalysable, indifferent to individual histories (126). “Jouissance,” they write, “is without psychological causation; it is the final cause of our desires, the cause (in Lacanian terms) to which no object of our desires ever corresponds” (127). Insofar as psychoanalysis has defined the process of becoming human as sexuality, the theorization of *jouissance* points to a fundamental aggressivity at the heart of both. In *Homos*, Bersani suggests that an ecstatic enjoyment of one’s own destruction (death) is what makes possible the birth of a “new world” where the world takes on the form of looping repetitions; its newness is precisely its unchangingness, its “immortality” (*Homos* 177).

However, in *Forms of Being*, Bersani and Dutoit seem to think about the problem of jouissance slightly differently by asking whether it is possible to bypass the sexual completely:

There may be ... a ‘beyond *jouissance*’. By this we do not mean that we can be ‘cured’ of the drive that continuously threatens individuals and civilisations, that it can somehow be done away with. Rather, just as the death drive does not eliminate the pleasure principle in Freud, what we have in mind would not erase *jouissance* but might play to the side of it, supplement it with a pleasure at once less intense and more seductive. But the effectiveness of this other seduction depends on our moving outside the very terms that have made the articulation of *jouissance* possible. (127)

This passage is part of the preface to the authors’ analysis of Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*, in which they argue that the “problem of evil” (war, the ultimate expression of jouissance) is figured by the movie in terms neither philosophical nor psychoanalytic.

What they have in mind by naming a “seduction” that “plays to the side of” jouissance is expressed in the film by a series of visual “replications” that show us “a certain physical or formal connectedness” (175); moreover, the film “suggests that the ‘resolution’ the problem of evil, in this instance the evil of war, lies in nothing more dramatic than the recognition of this connectedness” (ibid.). This is an example of what they mean by a “less intense” seduction; evil, in the film, is not overcome by a heroic display of good, nor by the demonstration of the monstrous proportions of its destructiveness, but by the momentary slip of our attention, even in the midst of war, to the world around us and the ways in which we might see ourselves as mere extensions of that world. The pursuit of recognition of that sameness, which defines Bersani’s ethical project more generally, is precisely what may enable thinking to move “beyond” psychoanalysis by refusing, or at least deferring, acceptance of the terms that define the field of relationality—terms like

“good” and “evil,” or “self” and “other”. Betrayal as ethical necessity is one means of theorizing the generative social destructiveness that would make “the exploration of nonaggressive, nonappropriating, and nonsadistic forms of movement” possible (Ricco 160). What I want to call “adoption” would thus be the specific name for the kind of ethical betrayal that marks a nonsexual, and thus “nonaggressive”, family.

Betrayal, for Mother and Daughter, is what is required for the lateral and looping movement of repetition, for a family that is held together by what Phillips calls adoption as opposed to a distinctively sexual mode of familial relationality. It is possible that Mother, in separating sex from her familial relationship with Daughter and in “seeing” a world comprised not of fundamental differences but of “data”, which reduces everything to a flat sameness, is suggestive of a new way of being with others, a way that sees individuals as only temporarily inhabiting the relational arrangements that are available to them. In this sense, as Bersani has said about Genet, the form of the arrangement “might even outlive the phenomenal self” (*Homos* 177) or selves of which it is comprised. A nonsexual relationality, a family based on adoption rather than on sexual reproduction, allows us to separate the form from the individual, which in turn allows us to see how unstable both the form of the family *and* the individuals inhabiting it are. When the individuals are understood to be interchangeable, we stop seeing the family as something essential that is intimately tied to the essence of the individual personalities of which it is comprised. Phillips suggests this very possibility in his analysis of Brabantio:

‘I had rather to adopt a child than get it.’ The other thing that might be heard in this line – the kind of thing, perhaps, that psychoanalysis encourages – is the idea that, from Brabantio’s point of view at this moment in the play, it is better to have children without having sex; that when it comes to having children the sex part

should be delegated, as though at this moment something disturbing – something horrifying enough to turn him into a tyrant – has been revealed to him not simply about his daughter and her lover but about sexuality itself. (*Missing Out* 75)

For Brabantio, Desdemona's desire for Othello is incomprehensible; he would rather dispense with his genetic ties to her because it would relieve him of the responsibility for knowing and understanding his daughter's sexual choices. One conclusion that may be drawn from this line of thinking is that "you can know a person but the one thing you cannot, in any real sense, know is their sexuality" (75-6). I would argue, however, that Brabantio is not acknowledging the mystery of his daughter's sexuality so much as wishing he could abdicate the goal of understanding in general—which would mean, of course, abandoning the very perception of mystery in the first place. Mother, in a way, is Brabantio's wish fulfilled: a parent who doesn't "get" their child and therefore fails to see anything there that needs "getting." A parent who is so utterly unrelated to her child that any knowledge she has of her is impersonal to the point of meaninglessness. Phillips goes on to claim that a person's sexuality cannot be known—perhaps least of all to a parent—because "it isn't information" (76); however, we could say that a parent who doesn't "get" their child is dealing *only* in information, but information that is radically reduced to meaningless data. Mother gathers data about Daughter—as we are explicitly shown when Daughter takes her exam, which is not a test of her knowledge but includes a questionnaire about her mental health and measurements of her neural responses to images, amongst other things—but the data doesn't tell her anything *about* Daughter. It is simply a measure of the distance between the family form that Mother is programmed to uphold and Daughter's ability to fit into it; in other words, the more information Mother

has, the more Daughter's personality diminishes. The difference between Mother's program to collect information and the Proustian desire to annihilate difference through knowledge is slender but significant. When Woman warns Daughter that Mother has no feelings—"That thing feels nothing for you. It can't."—she is pointing precisely to the difference between knowledge and information. Mother's dispassionate eye is utterly non-desirous and non-productive; she does not wish to annihilate difference by overcoming it. She does not "wish" at all. Her actions, perhaps unintentionally, merely repeat a formal arrangement that exists whether or not it is realized through an actual relational arrangement in time and space. It is the ultimate aesthetic commitment to see only the form and not the individuals who act it out. Mother is one expression of the "eerie immortality of a beautiful pose detached from both its source and its audience" (Bersani, *Homos* 177), where the "beautiful pose" is the echo of the family once it has been stripped of sexuality and therefore stripped of its dependence upon the realized personalities of its components. Mother's family is immortalized whether or not she ever gestates any of the frozen embryos.

If, as the reviews of the film I briefly referenced at the beginning of this section suggest, *I Am Mother* frames the problem of evil as intimately related to the pursuit of good, then it can indeed be viewed as a cautionary tale, a warning to humans about the importance of protecting their humanity: good, pursued too diligently (i.e. inhumanly), becomes evil. If this kind of rigid commitment to an aim is consigned to the realm of the inhuman, then Daughter's humanity—which we assume simply because of her human form, forgetting, perhaps, that "hominization" is a psychoanalytic process from which she

has been spared—can be seen as a salvation. However, I want to consider the ways in which *I Am Mother* makes visible—to continue borrowing Bersani and Dutoit’s parlance—the invisibility of a relationality tethered by the nonsexual and how this relationality offers a means of slipping to the side of psychoanalysis. This has less to do with the fact that there are no fathers (and thus no Oedipal conflict) in the film and more to do with the fact that Mother’s visualization as a droid severs our ability to perceive her as a *real* mother. We know from the beginning that this hulking, dangerous-looking robot is no mother; the form is only roughly there, the face is hardly a face. There can be no genetic, organic link between them; only a perverse version of adoption has enabled the terms “Mother” and “Daughter” to slide into their respective places. Adoption, as we have touched upon the context of Phillips’ discussion of *Othello*, is one means of linking together “family” that does not depend upon the sexual. In Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, she describes her partner, artist Harry Dodge’s, attitude toward being adopted:

It can be hard not to know much about one’s parents. But, you tell me, it can be awesome too. Before you had thought much about gender, you attributed your lifelong interest in fluidity and nomadism to being adopted, and you treasured it. You felt you had escaped the fear of someday becoming your parents, a fear you saw ruling the psyches of many of your friends. Your parents didn’t have to be disappointments or genetic warnings. They could just be two ordinary people, doing their best. From a very young age—your parents had always been open about the fact that you were adopted—you remember feeling a spreading, inclusive, almost mystical sense of belonging. The fact that anybody could have been your birth mother was an astonishment, but one tinged with exhilaration: rather than being from or for *an* other, you felt you came from the whole world, utterly plural. (139)

This second-hand account of someone’s personal experience being adopted expresses, for my purposes here and although it has been taken out of context, the question of one’s own improbable existence and inherent replaceability. For a child who is adopted, *anyone*

could be their mother (or father, for that matter), and for that reason, at least for Dodge as it is relayed by Nelson, the whole world takes on an aspect of kinship. This is not to say that all adopted children feel this way—that is not the domain of my theoretical interest in adoption as a concept that both circumscribes and possibly transcends the sexual. It is simply one way of conceiving a radically different version of family; if you take the (hetero)sexual out of it, you may be left with something simultaneously less intimate and more expansive, more “exhilarating”. Adoption might name a relationality that endorses the stance that knowledge is not the end game when it comes to family. This stance ought not be conflated with ignorance, which describes a knowledge lack that *could* be filled in, but ought rather describe a certain satisfaction to be found in not knowing and a certain pleasure in finding one’s “family” in any number of configurations, however temporary and no matter how vague the resemblance. In *I Am Mother*, adoption is visually figured as the uncanny resemblance between human and machine; we know that Daughter is not the result of Mother’s reproduction, yet we accept the relationship between them as maternal despite our suspicions or reservations. When Woman appears on the scene and tells Daughter that there are other humans out there in the world, what she is tempting Daughter with is knowledge, knowledge that would fill in the gaps in the individual histories of both Daughter and Mother. Daughter takes the bait: “Have you always lived here, Mother?” she asks, as the camera switches back and forth between close-ups of hers and Mother’s faces. Daughter’s face is more expressive in this scene, her eyes narrow and her forehead furrows as she questions Mother. “I think so,” is Mother’s non-committal response:

Daughter: You don't know?

Mother: I don't remember any other place.

Daughter: Doesn't that bother you? Not knowing where you came from?

Mother: No. But I can see how it might bother you.

Mother's flat response, along with her flat, unblinking gaze that is trained upon Daughter, seems to remove the doubt from Daughter's face, which relaxes into neutrality as it reflects Mother's. Mother has no need for personal history—indeed, as we discover at the end of the film, she has no individual personality at all—and her quiet but firm acceptance of that fact is enough to quell Daughter's attitude of suspicion. Daughter is not immune, however, from the desire for knowledge that is ignited by Woman's presence, and we can see the film as a series of alternating epistemological stances that correspond to sexual and nonsexual modes of relating. In being another human, in having a fallible, killable human body, Woman is suggestive of a certain kind of corporeal—that is, sexual—knowledge. We see Daughter poring over the Woman's drawings of the “people in the mines” and lingering on an image of a young man—Simon, we learn his name from Woman, is just about the same age as Daughter—causing a small smile to appear on her face as she eagerly scans his. Woman has a personal history: she herself was adopted, she says, by a couple, Rachel and Jacob, who raised her in the mines. The pictures in Woman's book point to a knowable genealogy, a family of sorts composed if not by close genetic linkages than by the shared history of humanity itself. Daughter's interest in getting to the mines is the expression of this kind of genetic connectedness, the most basic sexuality of all, here visualized in the smile of sexual interest that Daughter

reserves for the image of Simon. Woman, too, smiles the only smile we see from her as she informs Daughter of Simon's name and age. These smiles transform the relational mode of the film because they emerge as though both Woman and Daughter can't quite help themselves—in the midst of whatever is going on with Mother, Woman and Daughter are in on this small, private enjoyment. Woman smiles because she knows why Daughter is interested in the picture; Daughter smiles because she is interested. The smiles read as hints at the sexual enjoyment that has thus far not been possible for Daughter: the possibility of a future heterosexual union, and the private sexual knowingness between the two woman that is itself experienced as pleasurable. The smiles, in other words, represent the transformation of the desire for knowledge into a specifically heterosexual desire. It is an important moment in the film, but one that is potentially easily dismissed as simply a moment of levity or of bonding between Woman and Daughter. It is after Daughter sees the image of Simon that Woman suggests she come with her to the mines: "You don't belong here," says Woman, and, in that moment, from the perspective that is offered to us by the exchange of smiles between them, it is true. When Mother suddenly enters the room, Daughter lies about their conversation. Suddenly, there *is* something hidden, something secret, something to know. The film forces us into this epistemological mode simply by showing us the mirrored exchange of knowing smiles between two women as they look at a picture of a young man.

We learn later in the film that this exchange between Daughter and Woman is not unknown to Mother; like Grandma in "I Sing the Body Electric!", she is able to overhear and record everything that occurs between them. However, when Mother confiscates

Woman's bag, and with it her book of drawings, she does not stop to look at the picture of Simon. It is of no interest to her to understand the reason for Daughter's smile. Rather, as she flips through the pages of drawings her gaze lingers briefly on a picture that appears to show a human woman's head atop a robotic-looking body. The shot is extremely brief and difficult to fully make out. It is as if we are being shown that Mother's interest lies not in gathering information about the humans that may be hiding out in the mines but in identifying the image that most closely resembles her own. It is a disinterested interest. No smile, or its equivalent, crosses Mother's face when she happens across this strange image of a hybrid human/robot. Her gaze, as always, remains entirely dispassionate, expressing a machinic curiosity that goes no further than to note the most superficial information. This scene is the opposite of the one that unfolded between Daughter and Woman. Mother is not looking for difference in the images, nor, for that matter, is she looking for sameness. What she lingers on, what arrests her gaze, is the one image that shows elements of both human and machine. For her, the question of sameness versus difference is not the most interesting one, and the hybrid image allows us to visualize this mode of thinking, a mode that is utterly unconcerned with distinguishing human from machine. It is, in other words, an utterly nonsexual gaze that sees a formal correspondence that is, in the end, fleeting and undecidable; there is a similarity between Mother and the image she looks at, but it is a similarity that leads nowhere, that does not extend beyond the moment in which it is seen. The image is so brief as to be almost unnoticeable; it neither raises nor answers any questions we might have about Mother, Daughter, or Woman simply because it goes nowhere, it is never brought up again, and

Mother seems to have no enduring curiosity about it. Indeed, I have paused the film on the image many times, and still I am not certain of exactly what I am seeing. In the end, I was forced to let it go as a “clue” because the film does not allow it any extension beyond the couple of seconds during which it is visible. As Bersani and Dutoit claim in another book, *Forms of Violence*, the flash of robot/human hybrid can be thought of as a “narrative immobilization”, a “disruption” of the totalizing force of narrative that enables us to temporarily see a formal connection between incongruous objects (110).

To claim, then, that “betrayal is an ethical necessity” in *I Am Mother*, is to claim that betrayal is what keeps “family” from cohering around sexuality, from producing the illusion that we are held together by bonds that are primarily sexual (i.e. knowledge-based) and that the form of the family is what naturally emerges from them. The “family” that Mother holds together in the film resembles the heterosexual family in only the most rudimentary way: the existence of the generic roles “Mother” and “Daughter”. What holds this “adopted” family together is thus not the two-sided coin of sexuality/knowledge but a nonsexual form of intimacy that hinges on impersonal information and is enacted through the blandly curious gaze of the robotic “eye”. This “family” that is fated to endlessly repeat itself as its components are swapped in and out without regard for their individual personalities is made available to us through the visualization of Mother as one who stares, whose gaze is both curious and incurious at the same time—curious to collect information, incurious about what that information *means*. The “better” human that Mother is programmed to create is thus embodied in a relationality that is rooted in the dispassionate gaze of one for whom sameness and

difference ceases to matter, one who sees only “gestures” and “forms” and not the individuals who inhabit them, one for whom sexuality is not a mystery precisely because *everything* can be reduced to the flatness of mere information—and if it can’t, it is irrelevant. Repetition, rather than reproduction, is both the engine and the outcome of the “family” that believes “it is better to have children without having sex” (Phillips 75). In such a family, one “gets” one’s children simply by staring at them, by seeing the gesture that outlives the self and thereby making the death of the individual a form of jouissance.

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Both “I Sing the Body Electric!” and *I Am Mother* are studies in the ways in which the figure of the nonhuman robot can be used not to theorize the relationship between robots/AI and humanity but to make visible or to attune us to those aspects of humanity that can be properly understood as inhuman. More specifically, the fact that Grandma and Mother are both versions of nonhuman maternity allows us to see—literally, in the case of *I Am Mother*—how motherhood is neither threatened nor augmented by the nonhuman but reflected in it. They suggest to us what might be available to be thought in and through maternity when, like Bersani and Dutoit’s analysis of *The Thin Red Line*, we try to think in terms that are neither philosophical nor psychoanalytic (nor psychological, more generally). And what is available, in any Bersanian analysis, are ways of retraining or deprogramming our own desire for knowledge and, by extension, for violence. In both texts, maternity becomes something

that lets us perceive violence differently because they figure death differently, as that which, paradoxically, makes way for an impersonal immortality, and this impersonal immortality has no need of Agatha's revenge nor Mother's (nor Woman's) betrayals. I would thus like to end this chapter with an amendment of Bersani's claim, in *Receptive Bodies*, that our interest in violence can sometimes be supplemented by an awareness of the aesthetic rather than the moral dimension of violence. About Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1975 film *Salò*, an adaptation of the Marquis de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*, he (again with Dutoit) writes:

The saving frivolity with which we simply go on looking [at scenes of violence] creates a consciousness of looking as, first, part of our inescapable implication in the world's violence and, second, a promiscuous mobility thanks to which our mimetic appropriations of the world are constantly being continued elsewhere and therefore do not require the satisfyingly climactic destruction of any part of the world ... [T]here is no reason to destroy the world in order to conclude our perceptions of it. (14-5)

And, in a different section of *Receptive Bodies*, an essay on Bruno Dumont's 1999 film *Humanité*, he remarks: "Staring may be the only nonrelational relation we can visibly, corporeally have in a world in which we no longer are" (107). What the nonhuman mothers I have discussed in this chapter have in common, what they have to offer to a specifically non- or less violent way of being in the world (which requires, as Bersani has elsewhere put it, a refusal of the "family game"), is a way of conceiving family not as a genetic, historical, or sentimental filiation but as a relation that is fundamentally specular, composed of looking/staring and reflecting. If we could be deprogrammed in order to be less fascinated by, less implicated in our violent ways of knowing, then that deprogramming might begin with a mother whose version of love is enacted in the

impersonality of looking—the mother, in other words, who would love any baby she happened to settle her gaze upon in exactly the same way. The mother whose gaze will settle upon any child who wanders into its frame is a mother who de-personalizes death and therefore makes violence itself less appealing (less forbidden *and* less useful, perhaps). When we attune ourselves to the position of the child whose mother simply stares, we can begin to see ourselves everywhere, which is, counterintuitively, the precursor to tolerating a world without us in it. And that—the tolerability of a world that does not necessarily contain us—is a world in which violence, like reproduction itself, would no longer serve any purpose. Immortality is the name for this world, and its possibility is rooted in the family for whom the individual points comprising it become *seen* as replaceable.

### **Conclusion: The Ceremony of Motherhood**

*A part of us refuses to let go. The part that wants to keep believing there's something unreachable inside each of us. Something that's unique and won't transfer. But there's nothing like that, we know that now. You know that.*

—Mr. Capaldi, speaking to Josie's mother in *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro 207)

The central claim of this dissertation is that there inheres in motherhood something that radically undermines the contemporary project of, and dependence upon, a particular mode of selfhood, one that prioritizes and bolsters a sense of self-possession and an appropriative attitude toward the difference of the other. If such an attitude can be encompassed in the Bersanian concept of epistemophilia—the implacable desire to *know* both self and other—then I have argued throughout these chapters that motherhood, though clearly implicated in the passionate, *loving* investment in the unique, singular selfhood of the child, can enact elements of a non-epistemophilic, and therefore non- or less-violent, way of being in the world. Such a motherhood would embrace, acknowledge, or make room for an *indifference* toward the singular self of the child. It would embrace, in other words, what I have described throughout these chapters—by leaning on Bersani's wide and mobile vocabulary for modes of relational indifference—as a non-pathological, self-less(ening), and impersonal narcissism. By attending to instances of this maternal narcissism, or instances where motherhood could be described as working against the epistemophilic attitude of individual selfhood, I have explored various ways in which the mother-child relation avails itself to sameness as opposed to

difference: to a way of being in the world that ceases to see self and other as rigid and intractable categories of experience. In John Paul Ricco's summary of it, it is the "renunciation of aggressivity" that lies at the heart of Bersani's ethical project (159), and it is this attention to sameness that suggests the very possibility of such a renunciation. I hope to have shown that a mother who is indifferent to her child, who fails to see in her child the precious kernel of selfhood that we call personality or individuality, is renouncing the aggressivity of a self constituted through the relentless pursuit of knowledge, and is thereby redefining what is meant by "maternal love".

Linking the three chapters that comprise this dissertation is a commitment not only to Bersani's ethical position but also to his methodology. Each chapter addresses a particular text or set of texts that make legible some aspect of a motherhood characterized by indifference or impersonal narcissism. In Chapter 1, that aspect comes in the form of Leda, in Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter*, whose abandonment of her daughters seems, at first glance, to form precisely the kind of mystery an epistemophile would wish to solve: how *could* a mother abandon her children? How could a mother abandon her children, moreover, and not feel any regret? In refusing to answer this question, Leda makes available to the reader a keen sense of the senselessness of motherhood, the way in which the relationship between a mother and her children just *happens*, without reason, without explanation, and without any serious intentionality on the part of the mother. There is no narrative here that would explain or redeem Leda's actions, or that would satisfy the reader's curiosity about them. If it seems that Leda is more concerned with playing with the doll she stole from a child than with explaining herself, it is not because she is

sublimating or transferring the scene of abandonment onto the toy but because motherhood *is*, as she claims, a kind of play: without purpose, without fixed orientation, and without predictable rules and outcomes. The novel makes nothing clear except that motherhood, for Leda, is a senseless and incoherent thing, as superficial, as inexplicable, and as impersonal as it is for a woman to play with a stolen doll that can itself be substituted, or picked up and then forgotten.

Leda thus sets the stage for the other mothers who make appearances in this dissertation: Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the electrical grandmother in Ray Bradbury's "I Sing the Body Electric!", and Mother in Grant Sputore's film *I Am Mother*. Each, in her own way, enacts a version of motherhood that does not line up with the contemporary expectations around maternal love. If, for example, the mother's role is to protect the child—not only its physical body but also the contours of its unique claim to selfhood—then a mother like Sethe, for example, whose murder of her infant daughter and subsequent telepathic commune with *Beloved* push the boundaries of what can even fall under the name "mothering". And a mother like Mother, an inhuman network of AI consciousness that cannot be confined to one body, a mother who disposes of her human children as easily as a human can dispose of a rat, must surely fail to qualify as a *real* mother. Motherhood, and the deeply moralistic beliefs we hold about it, have always disqualified certain versions of mothering, have always made us shake our heads in disbelief and gasp, *how could she?* Instead of broadening the scope of motherhood, instead of arguing for the inclusion of an increasing number of mothers under its umbrella, I have argued instead, through my analyses of these unconventional literary and

filmic mothers, that motherhood itself needs to be thought differently. If we de-personalize motherhood, if we redescribe it as a relation not between individuals who stand firm in their difference (and who, as Bersani repeatedly reminds us, become willing to violently defend that difference) but between beings whose relationality is constituted across *sameness*, then something much more radical becomes possible. Even if all we can do is glimpse the potentiality that inheres in an impersonal motherhood, the potential for a non-violent relationality that eschews epistemophilia and the tyranny of the self, then that will have been the point of a Bersanian critique of motherhood. For it is immanent to the very concepts of epistemophilia, of impersonal narcissism, of incongruous likeness—of all these expansive and counterintuitive terms that Bersani, and I following him, have used to gesture towards rather than definitively grasp a new relationality—that a certain openness remains in their deployment. In other words, rather than finishing the project of a critique of motherhood by pointing to a mother-child relation that perfectly engenders a non-epistemophilic relationality, it is necessary to *repeatedly* attend to instances of motherhood that rub up against this potential. The very methodology I have embraced could be described, then, as a kind of non-climactic, rhythmic speculation. Repetition without climax is both the method of this inquiry as well as a means of describing the emergence of the possibility of an impersonal motherhood.

In *Thoughts and Things*, Bersani describes the project of gesturing toward relational arrangements in which the potential to be less aggressively upright in our sense of self, and in the violences this uprightness sanctions, as an act of “ungluing” (66). When we—artist and critic alike, but also the everyday “I” of experience—attend to the

things, the incongruities, that work against the coherence of the self, we “unglue” things from their “actuality” (ibid.). What this means is that thinking incongruously implies what Bersani repeatedly calls virtuality, a non-realized dimension of existence that is the medium through which sameness is conducted. I have drawn on this term repeatedly in my own analyses because it names the space between the thing itself—in my case, the mother, or the child—and the impersonal arrangements in which it is caught. For Bersani, virtuality is what connects superficial differences in a web of sameness; it is what, for example, lets a work of art gesture towards an ideal, or a relationship between two people strive towards a sameness that is embodied in neither individual but which emerges between them. To be connected virtually is to perceive this impersonal current of sameness that belongs to no one and no thing. If we are compelled to repeat our analyses, if we are compelled to write, as Bersani was, over and over about the incongruities that spark some fleeting perception of this virtuality, it is because the very nature of the virtual *demands* this repetition. Being unrealized, it is formless and ungraspable except for the flashes of connection that join up incongruous beings and that render our attention more mobile, more open to uncertainty and less adherent to the aggressive logic of the epistemophilic self.

I would like to conclude this dissertation by illustrating, one final time, the necessity of the repetition of our efforts to see these flashes and thereby connect, however temporarily, with the possibility of renouncing our aggressivity (Ricco 159). In the following section, I will consider Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Klara and the Sun* and put it into conversation with Bersani’s analysis of Jean Genet’s play *The Maids*. In aligning

these two texts, I show how the current that runs through this dissertation and that connects the various texts I have explored is the current of repetition, a particular kind of repetition that I, following Bersani, would like to retrospectively call *ceremony*. The initiation of the ceremony of motherhood, a ceremony that is repeated both across the texts that form the archive I have studied here as well as in my analyses of them, names a way of seeing motherhood not as an experience, or an essence, or a linguistic or semantic register, but as a virtuality that can be unglued from its current epistemophilic form and made available to a narcissistic version of love that is radically superficial and impersonal. Put differently, both motherhood itself as well as my attempts to theorize the relational potentialities inherent in it can be understood as repeatedly taking part in the ceremony of their initiation, their reaching toward a virtual realm in which repetition becomes the aim and the means by which the specific “selves” held together in the maternal relation cease to matter.

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Like all of the texts considered in this dissertation, *Klara and the Sun* is a story about motherhood and a challenge to our understanding of maternal love. The novel is narrated by Klara, a humanoid AI that is purchased to be an “artificial friend” for Josie, a human girl who has undergone a procedure of genetic enhancement known as “lifting.” As the story unfolds, we begin to understand, along with Klara, that there are deep fissures between those who are lifted and can therefore compete with the AI beings that populate

this world, and those who are not. We meet Josie's friend, Rick, who is not lifted and who lives in relative poverty with his mother, Helen; we meet Josie's father, Paul, who lost his job to AI and who now lives in a kind of anarchist, outlaw community; and we meet Josie's mother, Chrissie, whom Klara refers to as "the Mother", and who we come to learn is grappling with the profound grief of having lost an older daughter, Sal, a grief made more complex by her own implication in Sal's death: when Chrissie decided to have Sal lifted, to give her a chance at a "decent" life, she also risked her life, as the lifting procedure results, for some children, in chronic, sometimes fatal, health problems. This tragic outcome did not deter Chrissie, however, from choosing to lift Josie as well, and Josie is established as ill, too, in the early pages of the novel. Klara, whose ostensible purpose is to provide companionship for Josie, forms a caring relationship with her and takes on the burden of wanting to cure her illness. It turns out, however, that she serves another purpose, one that throws into question our most deeply held convictions about the mother-child relation—the convictions that this dissertation has vigorously and consistently queried.

The world of the novel is one that forces parents—mothers, primarily, as the fates of both Rick and Josie lie in their mothers' hands—to make a terrible choice: lift their children so that they can have a chance at a financially stable future but risk chronic illness and death; or don't lift them, and risk poverty and social ostracism. At first glance, this conundrum appears like a relatively conventional way of describing and concretizing the calculation of risk that is inherent to parenting and familiar to all parents. Neither choice is "good", and it is not clear in the novel which one is "better". Toward the end of

the novel, as Josie's illness worsens and it becomes apparent that she, like Sal before her, may not survive, Chrissie viciously defends her choice to Josie's friend Rick. It is worth quoting this passage at some length because in it, Chrissie hits upon the beating heart of motherhood—the unshakable belief in the preciousness of the child, and of that child's absolute, unquestionable desert of the best possible future:

I'm asking you Rick, if you feel like you've come out the winner. Josie took the gamble. Okay, I shook the dice for her, but it was always going to be her, not me, who won or lost. She bet high, and if Dr. Ryan's right, she might soon be about to lose. But you, Rick, you played it safe. So that's what I'm asking you. How does this feel to you just now? Do you really feel like a winner? ... Because if you're feeling like the winner, Rick, I'd like you to reflect on this. First. What exactly do you believe you've won here? I ask because everything about Josie, from the moment I first held her, everything about her told me she was hungry for life. The whole world excited her. That's how I knew from the start I couldn't deny her the chance. She was demanding a future worthy of her spirit. That's what I mean when I say she played for high stakes. Now what about you, Rick? Do you really think you were so smart? Do you believe of the two of you, you've come out the winner? Because if that's so, please ask yourself this. What is it you've won? Take a look. Take a look at your future ... You played for low stakes and what you've won is small and mean. You may feel pretty smug just now. But I'm here to tell you, you've got no reason to be feeling that way. No reason at all. (276-7)

This passage always startles me with its coldness. It feels very much like Chrissie is saying something out loud that many mothers would only dare to think: that the specialness of their child *demand*s a particular kind of future and that the futures of other children, and the question of *their* specialness or deservingness, is nothing more than, at best, an irrelevance or perhaps an irritation, or, at worst, a threat. It also feels as though the intended recipient of Chrissie's speech is Rick's mother, Helen, for in an earlier scene Chrissie asks Helen outright if she regrets not having Rick lifted. Helen admits that yes, she regrets it: "I feel I didn't do my best for him," she says. "I was somewhere else in my mind and I just let the moment go past. Perhaps that's what I regret more than anything

else. That I never loved him enough to make a proper decision one way or the other” (235-6). Chrissie, in other words, knows that Helen regrets her choice for Rick, and regrets it specifically because she feels she didn’t give it the proper amount of thought, the amount that would be proper to a mother who loves her child “enough”. When she believes Josie might truly be dying, Chrissie confronts Rick, not Helen, with the petty meanness and unconstrained fury of a child who wishes to destroy another child’s toy. She defends her choice by assuring Rick that his is a fate worse than death, and by declaring that no other future would be fit for Josie, who was so obviously “hungry for life”, unlike, apparently, Rick. What are we to make of these two mothers—Helen and Chrissie—the one who didn’t love her child enough to make a “proper” decision regarding his life, and the other who passionately believes—or wants to believe—that her decision was born of love even when the stakes are unbearably, catastrophically high? Put differently, we have one mother who “was somewhere else in her mind” and who didn’t consider the singular preciousness of her child and *his* desert, and one mother who, “from the moment she first held her”, knew with absolute certainty that her child deserves the best possible future no matter the cost. When I say that the novel is about motherhood—and not, as is more often recited, about the relationship between AI and humans, or about what AI reveals about what it means to be human—this is what I mean: the story sets us up with two opposing versions of motherhood with two radically different outcomes and asks us, in some sense, to arbitrate the difference: is Helen or Chrissie the better mother? One review of the novel suggests that it is Chrissie, with whom Josie has a “most primal and most loving relationship” (Lombardo 116), who is the paragon of good motherhood,

not only because she held her infant in her arms and, in that moment that we assume to be unrepeatable, determined to take every chance at giving her a good life, but also because she loves Josie with the singular, personal kind of love we expect from mothers: she loves *Josie* and no other, least of all Rick, who seems, by merely existing in good health, to have taken something away from Josie. This is the truism of contemporary motherhood that Rose so elegantly and simply captures: “A mother is meant to be as fearless as a lioness. Never mind the brute disregard this implies towards all other children of the world” (193). It is a truism, however, that I hope to disrupt here one last time.

I want to end this dissertation by considering what kinds of thoughts become available to us when we can look at Chrissie and Helen both and ask, what if these two versions of motherhood were not opposed to one another but instead pointed at multiple aspects of a motherhood that might be stripped of its affiliation with the image of the lioness who fiercely defends the “property” that is her child? In Chapter 3, I discussed how a renunciation of a tightly constrained and rigorously defended selfhood goes hand in hand with the admission that thinking itself is not the property of the individual, that it does not originate inside the self but occurs impersonally and *between* beings. In *Klara and the Sun*, there is a shift in Chrissie’s attitude toward her daughter that is routed, externally, through Klara; Klara, quite literally a thinking machine, initiates a relational process that becomes infinitely repeatable. The repeatability—and replaceability—of the child defines the inhuman motherhood that I explored in Chapter 3, but here the question of repeatability illuminates something slightly different: the necessity of the ongoing re-initiation of a maternity that is open to the radically impersonal. At the outset of the story,

Klara lives in a shop and waits to be purchased by a family. She was designed to be an artificial friend, a tool for socializing children who, in this imagined future society, have become socially isolated due to the prevalence of technologies that allow them to receive their educations at home. Klara is chosen by Josie, who takes an interest in her after observing her through the store window, but the decision to purchase Klara is in the Mother's hands. The store manager praises Klara's observational abilities to Chrissie, and then Chrissie, who seems skeptical, puts a test to Klara:

“My daughter's voice. You heard her speak just now. How would you say her voice was pitched?”

“Her conversational voice has a range between A-flat above middle C to C octave.”

“Is that so?” There was another silence, then the Mother said: “Last question. Klara. What did you notice about the way my daughter walks?”

“There's perhaps a weakness in her left hip. Also her right shoulder has potential to give pain, so Josie walks in a way that will protect it from sudden motion or unnecessary impact.”

The Mother considered this. Then she said, “Well, Klara. Since you appear to know so much about it. Will you please reproduce for me Josie's walk? Will you do that for me? Right now? My daughter's walk?”

... So I started to walk. (44)

As Klara walks a lap around the store for Chrissie she observes her face, and what she sees makes her stop: “She was still watching me carefully, but it was as if her gaze was now focused straight through me, as if I was the glass in the window and she was trying to see something a long way behind it” (45). This first, unsettling exchange between Klara and Chrissie shows us that Chrissie wants something unusual from Klara, something that her far-away and impersonal gaze suggests has little to do with Klara herself, though we do not yet know the full extent of that wanting.

Chrissie purchases Klara for Josie, but it is not until Josie becomes too sick to attend a planned outing to a waterfall that we see a shift in Chrissie's relation to both Klara and her daughter. It is Chrissie who suggests that she and Klara go to the waterfall without Josie, a suggestion that seems to disconcert Klara—she is mildly reluctant to go and her “usual smile” is absent from her face (101). At the waterfall, Chrissie, after studying Klara in silence for some time, suddenly gives Klara a much clearer sense of what it is she wants: she asks Klara to *be* Josie “for her” (103). As Klara begins her impersonation, there emerges something undeniably sexual about the manner in which Chrissie gives Klara the instructions to perform Josie, in the way her gaze focuses more and more intently upon Klara, the way her body leans closer and closer as Klara begins to imitate the daughter: “That’s good,” the Mother says, her hunger almost palpable as she leans closer in. “That’s very good. But now I want you to move. Do something. Don’t stop being Josie. Let me see you move a little ... That’s good. Now say something. Let me hear you speak ... No. That’s Klara. I want Josie ... Good. More. Come on ... That’s good, that’s good, that’s good” (104). The Mother’s excitement increases until Klara, still playing the role of Josie, says that there is “special help” coming to help her overcome her illness, at which point the Mother exclaims, “That’s enough. Enough!” (105). The drive home is mostly silent and seems tinged by a vague shame that Klara cannot fully understand. But the Mother can’t help herself: “Maybe sometimes we’ll do the same again. If Josie’s too sick to come out ... You don’t mind, do you, Klara? If we do something like this again? ... You know what? I think it’s best if we say nothing to Josie about this. Nothing about what you were doing up there. Imitating her” (107). Chrissie’s

eagerness to observe Klara's imitation, her steadily rising excitement and fixation upon what Klara was doing "for her", and her almost hopeful suggestion that Josie will be too sick in the future, that she and Klara will have other chances to meet, secretly, to do it again—every aspect of the scene imparts an air of the sexually illicit upon their relationship. Chrissie is the expression of a particular, and particularly warped, kind of maternal love; she is grieving one daughter and desperately trying to stave off future grief for another. In her desperation, in her sensual hunger for a daughter, she is willing to transfer her love and desire for one daughter onto a daughter-substitute. The closer Klara comes to successfully imitating Josie, the more excited Chrissie becomes; the situation is sexual precisely because of this sensual choreography of imitation and role-playing, which, because it admits of the mother's desire for her child's repeatability, can only occur secretly, illicitly. But it is a sexual relation that is perverse, that undoes its own foundation by undoing the epistemophilic logic of sexuality: *I love you so much that I will pretend another is you, but you mustn't know about it*. This is a sexual relation that is impersonal, that breaks with the desire to know the other for themselves, and that, importantly, never achieves the goal of climax. It is, perhaps, another example of the inertial, aimless repetition Bersani discusses in *A Future for Astyanax* and which I discussed in Chapter 2.

A scene similar to the one between Chrissie and Klara occurs in Jean Genet's *The Maids*. Written in 1947, *The Maids* is a play about two sisters, Solange and Claire, who are maids for a woman known only as Madame. Unbeknownst to Madame, when she is away the sisters engage a complex kind of role-play; the play opens with Claire acting the

part of Madame, and Solange acting the part of Claire. Claire, as Madame, hurls a litany of insults against “Claire”, and Solange, as Claire, gradually gets more and more riled up until she starts to insult and belittle Madame in return. The exchange rises in pitch until we see Solange, as Claire, advance toward “Madame” while uttering the threat, “I’m going to finish you off” (46). Suddenly, an alarm clock goes off and we see the sisters fall out of their respective roles: the alarm signals Madame’s imminent return. “It’s already over,” Claire complains, “and you didn’t get to the end”. Solange replies: “The same thing happens every time. And it’s all your fault, you’re never ready. I can’t finish you off” (ibid.). We understand, then, that this “play” between them is actually a “ceremony” (as they refer to it a little later) that has been repeated many times and is always denied its climax: the play-murder of Madame. Complicating things is the fact, now revealed as the sisters take up the roles of themselves again, that Claire and Solange seem to hate and revile each other as much as they do Madame, and they begin to insult and goad each other in a manner reminiscent of their play-acting. “We can’t love each other,” Solange finally declares: “Filth doesn’t love filth” (52). As Bersani describes it, the two sisters are bound, in their “maidness”, not only to Madame but also to each other. The relationship of maid-mistress infects and debases every point of the relational triad. What recourse, then, do Solange and Claire have to escape their maidness, what “revolt” is available to them? Just before Madame comes home, Claire, alluding to the fact that Solange failed in a previous attempt to really kill Madame, announces that she will kill her instead: she plans to offer Madame a poisoned cup of tea. But Madame doesn’t drink it. She is home for only a short time before rushing away to meet her lover, and the sisters are left once

again to deal with the disappointment of a climax denied. Solange pushes Claire to restart the ceremony and Claire reluctantly takes up the role of Madame. Solange seems half-crazed with excitement: “Hurry up! Hurry up! ... I’m quivering, I’m shuddering with pleasure, Claire, I’m going to whinny with joy!” (85). Like Chrissie watching Klara play the part of Josie, Solange’s steadily increasing excitement at watching Claire play the part of Madame is palpably sexual: “Go on. Go on! I’m getting there, I’m getting there! ... Go on, go on! ... Go on, go on! ... Stop. I’ve got there. It’s my turn” (86-7). And when Solange “gets there,” it is with redoubled intensity that she leaps into the role of Claire and begins abusing Claire-as-Madame. Except this time, the play reaches a fever pitch in Solange’s sudden shift away from imagining herself killing Madame and toward imagining herself killing Claire. Claire listens to Solange’s raving, fantasized murder of her and then, still in the role of Madame, she orders Solange, once again acting as Claire, to give her the poisoned tea. Solange gives it to her, and as Claire dies, Solange declares that *Madame* is dead and her maids are alive—alive and free of their ties to her and each other.

In Bersani’s brilliant interpretation of the complex and violent play between Solange and Claire, he describes the three “steps” that lead to the play’s conclusion, a conclusion that really does, it would seem, offer Solange and Claire their only hope at achieving freedom from their maidness. Step one, he claims, is for Solange and Claire to act out the murder of Madame. Step two is for one of the sisters (Solange, as it happens) to act out the murder of the other sister, for as we have seen, the stain of the maid-

mistress relation binds all three women in a knot of hatred: Claire and Solange hate each other just as much as they hate Madame. The third step, then,

at once transcends, reconciles, and erases the first two: Madame will be killed in play, but the play killing her will be the murder of Claire. Step three contains steps one and two, and neither one of them: it would be wrong to say that they have really murdered Madame, just as it would be wrong to say that Solange has deliberately done away with her sister ... There is a real death that is doubly de-realized: Madame survives (since it is Claire who is poisoned), but Claire also survives, since it is she who gives the drink to Claire-as-Madame.

Only now can we appreciate the profound rightness of a superficially unnecessary aspect of the original ceremony: Solange becomes Claire when she takes on the latter takes on the role of Madame. This moving outside herself allows Claire to survive her own death. (*Homos* 175)

What Bersani means by “superficially unnecessary” is that it may have seemed a trivial or unnecessarily complicated detail that rather than play herself, Solange plays the part of Claire. But it is in fact essential to the ceremony if the ceremony is to allow the maids to transcend the relationality that binds them together, and it is essential for two reasons: as Bersani notes, Solange cannot kill Madame unless Claire is safely out of harm’s way—being held, as it were, in Solange-as-Claire; but the second reason, which Bersani implies but does not explicitly say, is that because Claire and Solange hold each other in contempt (“filth cannot love filth”), the undoing of the humiliation of their maidhood cannot totally occur unless both of them are part of the ceremony. Solange would not be released from her maidness if she, as herself, killed Madame, for she would have had to accept both the fact that Claire had also been killed *and* she would still be bound to Claire by virtue of her contempt for her. One sister could not be free without also ensuring the freedom of the other. How is it, though, that either sister could hope to be free while the real Madame lives? Bersani claims, counterintuitively, that “the *only* effective way of

getting rid of Madame is through the ceremony” and not through an actual act of murder (176, emphasis added). “The problem has been all along,” he writes, “how they might murder Madame without fulfilling their destiny as servile and rebellious maids. The answer, they discover, is to *eliminate her as a relational term*, and this can be done only if Claire’s death is misinterpreted by others” (ibid.). The murder, in other words, will not be understood by others as an act of rebellion, an understanding that would cement the sisters’ maidness forever. The murder needs to be both “play” (or, we could say, virtual), as opposed to real, *as well as* misunderstood. Only by escaping understanding can the sisters exist without being defined by maidness.

What is the utility of Genet’s play for my purposes? In describing the “maidness” of Claire and Solange as the effect of a particular, realized relationality, the disruption of which requires a transformation in our epistemological stance—a move, first, to the realm of the virtual and, second, a fundamental “misunderstanding” that renders the original relational terms useless—Bersani’s analysis of the play produces a new way of thinking about relationality in general that bears upon “motherness” as well. Moreover, I think there is something important here, something that can help us understand what is happening with the mother-child relation in *Klara and the Sun* that points toward not only this alternative theorization of motherhood as “motherness” but also to the ways in which I have attempted to approach this theorization in this dissertation. Solange and Claire’s ceremony (the “play” repetition of the dismantling of their relational structure) does not map perfectly onto Chrissie and Klara’s, perhaps most especially in the fact that Chrissie does not get the chance to excite herself repeatedly with a simulation of Josie. In other

words, unlike Solange, Chrissie does not achieve the climax of her nascent ceremony, nor does she even get the chance to establish it *as* ceremony. Her furtive and temporary pleasure at watching Klara imitate her daughter remains, however, a powerful force pointing toward not rebellion but transformation. By letting herself feel the pleasure of a mobile, transferable love, she is engaging, however briefly and tentatively, the radical possibility that the relationship between her and Josie—what we could call her “motherness”—could be transcended or even erased, to borrow Bersani’s diction. Chrissie’s desire to watch Klara-as-Josie signals her desire to escape the formal, immobile connectedness of her motherness; she wants to be a different kind of mother, one who is not aggressively bound to the personality of her child. When Klara acts the part of Josie, Chrissie allows herself to act not just the part of a mother who has not lost and will not lose a child, but also and more importantly a mother whose child is immortal and therefore repeatable: immortal *because* repeatable. Such “play” transcends motherness because it removes the specificity of the child, it makes the child something that can “move outside itself”, something that can shift from one form to another without leaving any of itself behind. It might be possible, Chrissie allows herself to fantasize, that there is nothing *in* the child that makes her special, and that possibility heralds a possible freedom from motherness altogether—it makes motherhood mean something altogether different. It initiates, in other words, what I explored in Chapter 3 and drawing on Adam Phillips as a “tickling” relationality: here, the relation between mother and child is necessary—neither one can exist alone—but it is also necessarily anti-climactic, producing no knowledge that could be put to use solidifying the relationship into the

particular form of mother-child. Just as tickling must come to an end without climax, only to be repeated again, so, too, does the transformation and transcendence of motherhood occur temporarily and repeatedly.

Eventually we learn that Klara is not the first imitation of Chrissie's daughter. When Klara goes on an errand, without Josie, to Rick's house, she meets his mother, Helen, for the first time. And Helen has a curious story to tell. She tells Klara that she once observed an alarming scene from her living room window, which looks out onto a yard that shares a border with Chrissie and Josie's yard. At the time of Helen's story, it was two years after Josie's sister, Sal, had died, and yet, what Helen saw out the window was Chrissie holding onto someone who looked like they were trying to run away. And the person who was trying to run away looked like Sal. Klara seems unsure what to make of this information, but the meaning becomes clear to her when, shortly after her visit to Rick's house, Chrissie announces that they will all—Chrissie, Josie, Klara, and even Josie's father, who, until this point, has not made an appearance in the story—go to the city so that Josie can sit for a "portrait", something that Klara has heard referenced before but which, though she has her suspicions, she has not been able to fully understand. When the family arrives at the shop of Mr. Capaldi, the portrait-maker, Klara's burgeoning suspicions are confirmed; she views the "portrait", which is another "artificial friend" doll made to look identical to Josie, and then she is asked by Chrissie, when Josie leaves the store with her father, if she thinks she could become Josie when Josie dies. It is at this point that we find out a similar likeness of Sal was created for Chrissie after Sal's death. To Mr. Capaldi, Chrissie asks:

“Why are you so fucking sure I’ll be able to accept that AF up there, however well you do her? It didn’t work with Sal, why will it work with Josie?”

“What we did with Sal is no comparison. We’ve been through this, Chrissie. What we made with Sal was a doll. A bereavement doll, nothing more. We’ve come a long, long way since then. What you need to understand is this. The new Josie won’t be an imitation. *She really will be Josie. A continuation of Josie.*”

“You want me to believe that? Do *you* believe that?”

“I do believe it. With everything I’m worth, I believe it ... You have to keep faith, Chrissie. You mustn’t weaken now.”

“But will I believe in it? When the day comes. Will I really?” (205)

There is an anguish here, the anguish of a mother who believes wholeheartedly in the unique personality of her daughter, but who also wants to believe that she’s wrong, that what ties her to Josie is not singular and unrepeatable. Mr. Capaldi believes it: “We *have* to let it go, Chrissie. There’s nothing there. Nothing inside Josie that’s beyond the Klaras of this world to continue” (207). Josie’s father, Paul, believes it, too:

I think I hate Capaldi because deep down I suspect he may be right. That what he claims is true. That science has now proved beyond a doubt there’s nothing so unique about my daughter, nothing there our modern tools can’t excavate, copy, transfer. That people have been living with one another all this time, centuries, loving and hating each other, and all on a mistaken premise ... Chrissie, on the other hand, isn’t like me. She may not know it yet, but she’ll never let herself be persuaded. If the moment ever comes, never mind how well you play your part, Klara, never mind how much she wishes it to work, Chrissie just won’t be able to accept it ... But I’m different. I have...a kind of coldness inside me she lacks. (221-2)

Such a passage might persuade us that Chrissie is, after all, a conventional and exemplary mother. She is not “cold” inside, like Paul. She will *never be persuaded* that Josie could be copied and transferred into Klara, who could in turn be transferred into the AF that resembles Josie. And by the end of the novel, Klara herself delivers a similar verdict on the question of whether she could truly continue Josie:

Mr. Capaldi believed there was nothing special inside Josie that couldn't be continued. He told the Mother he'd searched and searched and found nothing like that. But I believe now he was searching in the wrong place. There *was* something very special, but it wasn't inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her. That's why I think now Mr. Capaldi was wrong and I wouldn't have succeeded. (302)

What is “inside” Josie's loved ones is their unshakeable conviction that Josie *is* harbouring an inimitable personality—it is the belief in, and not the fact of, the singular selfhood of the child that holds them together in their familial love. As it happens, Klara never got the chance to try becoming Josie because Josie recovered from her illness and grew up, thus completing the heterosexual family loop.

At the end of his discussion of *The Maids*, Bersani describes how, paradoxically, the sisters' “only effective way of getting rid of Madame”—her virtual as opposed to real murder—means that nothing in the world has changed:

Because no one will know that Solange is harboring Claire within her, or that Claire was addressing Solange as Claire when she asked for the poisoned tea, or that Claire was impersonating Madame when she drank it, we could also say: it doesn't matter, since nothing has changed in the world. But nothing *can* change in this world—or rather (and this, it must be acknowledged, is an uncertain bet), between oppression now and freedom later there may have to be a radical break with the social itself. What could be stranger? (*Homos* 176)

What Bersani means here is that the “epistemologically useless” knowledge that only Solange (as both herself and “Claire”) knows is that which ensures that both nothing *and* everything changes. It is knowledge that, were it shared, were it transformed into the “useful” variety, would immediately lose its radical potential. “Nothing *can* change in this world” because if it did, it would no longer be *this* world. Instead, the useless knowledge in *The Maids* stays virtual, an undetectable, unrealized (but extant nonetheless) sliver (to borrow Tuhkanen's phrasing) prising reality apart in undetectable,

unrealized ways. For Bersani, it is the non-actualized existence of these virtual potentialities that matters and *not* their enfoldment into reality. For it is at these virtual moments that “the subject might begin again” (*Homos* 177), unhindered and untouched by the old relationality by which it was sustained. Such moments are often, in Bersani’s oeuvre as well as throughout this dissertation, tied to death in one form another—whether literal, figural, or some version of “virtual” which combines and transcends both—because the virtual *is* deathly; it is a suspension, an immortality, a repetition without beginning or end. It is *not*, in other words, something we experience, something that forms part of the narrative arc we call “life”. Like the unconscious, the virtual interacts with reality only through a filter, and art—literature, film, even criticism if we are following Bersani—is a kind of filter through which we occasionally perceive or acknowledge virtuality. This recognition that death and virtuality go hand in hand is, according to Bersani, “Genet’s ingenious solution to the problem of revolutionary beginnings condemned to repeat old orders: he [in this case, Genet himself] dies so that repetition itself may become an initiating act” (179). One could also say that it is the repeated attempt to outline, to gesture toward, or to speculate about the nature of this “initiating repetition” that is Bersani’s ingenious solution to the problems that arise when one attempts to expand existing social orders and ends up merely narrowing the field of sociality.

In Klara’s world, as in the world of *The Maids*, nothing has changed. Josie survives and Chrissie goes on being her mother while Klara is eventually disposed of when the window of her utility as a companion for Josie has closed. Everything stays the

same as it ever was. And yet nothing is the same. Chrissie says to Mr. Capaldi that the AF replacement of Sal following Sal's death didn't work—she couldn't believe it was Sal. And Klara concludes the story, as we have seen, by claiming she doesn't believe she could have succeeded at becoming Josie. But the “success” of either of these projects of “continuing” a dead child is neither here nor there. In other words, it doesn't matter if Chrissie really could accept Klara as Josie: in a world where there are three possible outcomes—Josie survives and Chrissie goes on being her mother; Josie dies and Chrissie goes on being her mother through Klara's perfect imitation; or Josie dies and Chrissie can't accept Klara's imitation, so she goes on being Josie's mother—nothing revolutionary has happened. Chrissie would be in the same situation Solange and Claire would have been if they had really murdered Madame: all would be understood, and Chrissie would still be tied to her “motherhood” because Klara really would be Josie, or Josie would still be Josie, and Chrissie would still be Josie's mother. The story would certainly not be remarkable, and would not have proved its thesis, if we were handed either of the second or third of these possibilities. What we are, in fact, handed is the first possibility, and what makes this one the most remarkable—despite seeming, at first glance, as though it is the least—is the ceremony initiated between Chrissie and Klara, Chrissie's unbound (but non-climactic and perverse) sexual excitement at seeing her daughter imitated so well. Despite her lack of faith in the project, Chrissie can and does cathect Klara with Josie's “essence”, it's just that this cathexis has no endurance, the spell breaks and the climax fades out of reach. And yet, Chrissie immediately tries to make plans with Klara to do it again; she *wants* to initiate the transference of her daughter's

individuality onto Klara *as* a ceremony because this transfer is something that *needs to be repeated*. The erotic nature of the scene at the waterfall—Chrissie’s “hallucinatory excitement” at watching Klara become Josie (Bersani, *Homos* 179)—conveys the necessity of repetition to the fulfilment of Chrissie’s desire that her daughter be both less (singular) and more (expansive) than what she is. If the transfer of Josie into Klara was completed, if it didn’t need to be continually renewed, then we would be faced with precisely the problem of “revolutionary beginnings condemned to repeat old orders” (ibid.). We might even say that it is Rick’s mother, Helen, who, in not loving Rick “enough”, admits that “letting the moment go past” (235) is a necessary part of renewing the mother-child relation and thereby granting it the potential to be otherwise. The fleetingness of the ceremony, which lasts such a short time and which seems to change nothing, is the sliver of virtuality that goes on inhering in the world without ever announcing its arrival. It is the invisible sliver that makes it possible to hope for a radically new relationality that might find its expression in a mother whose love flattens and spreads, become less personal and more effusive, until she achieves (by never concluding) the failure to distinguish the specificity of her child. If I have accomplished anything over the course of this dissertation, in my analyses of the literary and filmic mothers that have caught my attention, I hope that it is to have initiated, in all of them, the ceremony of repeatedly looking for virtual slivers that vibrate with the scandalous potential of a motherhood without maternity.

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Of course, the ceremonial nature of these attempts to theorize a new motherhood means we cannot say we have concluded, that we have succeeded in pointing to a version of motherhood that is, finally, the achievement of the impersonally narcissistic relationality Bersani repeatedly sought. There is no mother-child relation out there that can be pointed to as the perfect expression of non-violence won through the lessening of the self. There remain innumerable instances of motherhood, each of which can bring into momentary relief some other aspect of maternal relationality that was not explored in this dissertation. One such aspect, that I have only briefly touched upon in this dissertation, is the persistence of the myth, in writing about motherhood (particularly autobiographical writing) that the mother “loses herself” in mothering. This myth is a variation of the myth of the divided self, and it takes the form of a deeply felt motherly ambivalence—a feeling that, as Rachel Cusk writes in her motherhood memoir *A Life’s Work*, that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the self who mothers the children and the self who doesn’t, the self who writes about the self who mothers (5). Or, as Emily C. Bloom puts it in her motherhood memoir *I Cannot Control Everything Forever*, “By becoming a mother, I’m also becoming a writer. And yet, these two selves (mother, writer) remain hard to reconcile” (14). To be a mother is to navigate the impossibility that is this division, the desire at once to be a “good mother” and to be one’s self separate from one’s relation to the child, the self that writes about this division. There is quite evidently something of this tension at work in the archive under study here, particularly in Ferrante’s *The Lost Daughter*, which I explore in Chapter 1, but I was unable, in the interest of attempting to narrow the focus of this project, to critically examine the experience of maternal

ambivalence and internal division—the specific “structures of feeling”, perhaps, to borrow a phrase from Raymond Williams—that characterizes so much literature (autobiographical and otherwise) on motherhood. I wanted, instead, to focus on instances of maternity in which the sense of division (self from self, or self from other) was eclipsed by the currents of sameness that run through the maternal relation. However, an entire dissertation could be written on the specificities and vicissitudes of this presumed maternal division, this fraught navigation of the mother’s desire to possess a self that is distinct from the self one is as a mother, and such a discussion could (and should) attempt to unpack what it is that drives this mythology in the context of motherhood, what it is that perhaps undoes the viability of this myth of division (for it is undoubtedly related to the “divided self” that Bersani sees as fundamental to epistemophilia) at the same time that it is being produced.

Another thread that runs through my analyses here but that deserves its own attention is the presumed stability of the very categories of mother and child. I have attempted to keep my focus on mothers and motherhood, though I have had to acknowledge in every chapter that there is less distinction between mother and child than we would like to believe and that one cannot talk about mothers without also talking about children; it is impossible not to veer, repeatedly, into the terrain of childhood by way of the vehicle of motherhood. However, the category of *child* is just as slippery and difficult to grasp, just as bound by moral and political discourses, and just as available to radical critique as is *mother*. I would have liked to spend more time discussing the child in this dissertation, and I would very much like, in future projects, to critically examine

the conceptual work that “childhood” does for our beliefs about what we are, and do, as presumed “adults”. Such a project already has some purchase in what has emerged as “critical childhood studies”, a corollary field to motherhood studies that attempts to explore what is about children that makes them both marginal (as merely a stop on the way to the achievement of adulthood) and a site of such heavy emotional investment that to even dare to speak ill of the child is a morally reprehensible act (a fact that Edelman has so vitriolically brought to the attention of critical theory). As one introduction to “childhood studies” has put it, the very fact and concept of childhood is “hidden in plain sight” (Faulkner and Zolkos xii); it is of central importance to the operation of all our forms of relating and thinking, yet it is treated, in one or another, as a developmental concern—a concern, ultimately, for the adult the child will become—and not an object of study in its own right.

We are always reacting to what we think we were, and did, and had as children.

“It is in childhood,” Phillips writes,

that we first come to learn to give things up. It is in childhood that we are initiated into the boons and benefits of the very real suffering of frustration. And it is in childhood that we are first encouraged, above all, to give up on our megalomania – our omniscient and omnipotent presumption that the world is organized by what we need and want – and to gradually acknowledge that the people we need are not, and cannot be, under our remote control. It has become impossible, that is to say, to talk about growing up without talking about sacrifice. (*On Giving Up* 140)

Phillips, whose work has been so important to this dissertation, often speaks of childhood in such terms, as part of a broader psychoanalytic narration of one’s life history; being an adult, the story goes, is dealing with the leftovers of childhood—the various traumas, exclusions, disappointments, sacrifices, and forgettings. It will be important, as part of

ongoing work on psychoanalysis and its particular legacy in the thought of Bersani, to contest this negative and teleological view of childhood. I have suggested at several points in this thesis that the child's association with "innocence"—and its progressive loss of this innocence through, as Phillips suggests, a series of other losses—is the counterpart of an adulthood associated with self-possession and mastery; a further critique of this presumed "innocence", a critique, in other words, of "growing up" as a process of losing things and then coping with that loss, will allow us to reframe childhood as simply an aspect being and not necessarily the predecessor to the achievement of another kind of being called adulthood. Which is to say, we may not be so "grown up", so accustomed to loss, as we might think. And the children we once were (or believe ourselves to have been) might offer us a way to look at ourselves not as beings who must cope with loss but who must navigate a virtual abundance of opportunities to proliferate and scatter ourselves throughout the world. An ongoing engagement with Bersani's endorsement of orphanhood, or Phillips' interest in adoption, would lead us, eventually, down this road toward re-envisioning childhood and learning to tell new stories about plenitude rather than lack—new stories that might enable new kinds of non-epistemophilic (that is, non-aggressive) relational orientations. The project, in other words, of theorizing a motherhood without maternity must necessarily grapple with its immanent entwinement with childhood, for it is in the interstice between the two that the virtual connectedness that undoes the entrenched individuality of selfhood emerges.

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