'I must climb inside the skin of the girl':

Becoming Posthuman in British Fiction, 1950-1980

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds

School of English

January 2024

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

This thesis responds to a question Alexander Weheliye poses in *Habeas Viscus*: 'what different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?'. Concentrating on fiction published in Britain between 1950 and 1980, a point in history in which that 'master-subject' comes under scrutiny and under pressure, this thesis reads mid-century literature through the lens of the posthuman. In doing so, the chapters that follow offer a fresh perspective on texts by Angela Carter, Barbara Comyns, Kamala Markandaya, Barbara Pym, and Muriel Spark, developing an approach to reading those texts that embraces the diversity of form and style in post-war fiction. This approach draws on posthuman and posthuman adjacent theory to show how mid-century literature critiques what Weheliye calls the master-subject and what I call the Human, a hierarchical way of organising the world predicated on bounded, agential subjectivity. Anticipating what is now termed critical posthumanism, British post-war fiction makes connections between acts of violence and the hierarchical Human to link racism and misogyny in post-war society with the dominance of Weheliye's master-subject. Going beyond that systemic critique, the texts I focus on in this thesis also explore other ways of being and knowing. Invoking a fluid poetics that turns improbable and impossible bodies into posthuman 'bodyings', these novels invite attention to a mutable, affective ontology 'outside the world of Man'.

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> [W]hat different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?[1]

In *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, Alexander Weheliye describes the ways in which the 'set of sociopolitical processes' he terms 'racializing assemblages' 'discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans'.[2] Rather than 'reinscrib[ing] the humanist subject (Man)' as 'the category to be overcome', Weheliye invites attention to 'cultural and political formations outside the world of Man that might offer alternative versions of humanity'.[3] Building on the work of Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, Weheliye reclaims these 'different modalities of the human' by turning attention to the imaginings of those debarred from the domain of the master-subject. Rather than working to expand or define the categories of inclusion and exclusion, Weheliye advocates for a shift in focus, a turning attention to 'the sorrow songs, smooth glitches, miniscule movements, shards of hope, scraps of food, and interrupted dreams of freedom' of those deemed not to be fully human, in other words, to 'the elsewheres of Man'.[4]

In this thesis, I explore the presence of these 'elsewheres' in mid-century British fiction. Focusing on a point in history in which Weheliye's master-subject is coming under scrutiny and under pressure, I read mid-century texts through the lens of the posthuman to show how post-war fiction is thinking otherwise about what it means to be human. As white British women, four of the five authors I focus on in this thesis are not subject to the exclusions of race detailed in Weheliye's work, and I am not arguing for equivalency of experience with the Black American subjects of *Habeas Viscus*. What I am suggesting is that Weheliye's focus on imaginings outside the 'domain of the master-subject', including the underpinning premise of race as the primary category of exclusion from that subject position, has implications that go beyond Weheliye's contemporary American context. Weheliye's

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[1] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 8.
[2] Weheliye, p. 4.
[3] Weheliye, pp. 9-10.
[4] Weheliye, pp. 131, 137.

provocation also invites attention to the ways in which mid-century British literature imagines humanity outside the frame of 'Man'.

In the chapters that follow, I offer fresh perspectives on a selection of mid-century texts, developing an approach to reading the mid-century that embraces the diverse forms, styles, and perspectives of post-war fiction. My approach draws on posthuman and posthuman adjacent theory, including the work of Gilles Deleuze, to show how mid-century literature critiques what Weheliye calls the master-subject, and what I call the Human, a hierarchical way of organising the world predicated on bounded, agential subjectivity. Anticipating what is now termed a critical posthumanist perspective, British post-war fiction makes connections between acts of violence and the hierarchical Human in its mid-century incarnation to offer a form of systemic critique that links racism and misogyny in post-war society with the dominance of Weheliye's master-subject. Going beyond critique, these novels also explore other ways of being and knowing. Rather than a future oriented, technologically mediated aspiration, these novels understand the posthuman as an everyday experience. As such, these texts invoke a fluid poetics that turns improbable and impossible bodies in mid-century fiction – bodies that levitate, change sex, and tell stories after they are dead – into posthuman 'bodyings', inviting attention to a mutable, affective ontology 'outside the world of Man'.

To clarify my terms, in what follows I use mid-century and post-war to refer to the period between 1950 and 1980. Writing in 1993, Malcolm Bradbury was typical of late twentieth-century critics in breaking the mid years of the twentieth century into two distinct phases. In *The Modern British Novel*, Bradbury distinguishes between a post-war era, running from 1945 to 1960, dominated by a return to nineteenth century realism, and a second, increasingly experimental, literary phase running from 1960 to 1979.[5] This thesis cuts across that periodisation, fitting with more recent shifts in critical thinking. In *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History*, for example, Joseph North analyses social and economic data trends to identify three distinct periods in twentieth century literature. The first runs from the early years of the century to the 1930s. The second, a period of greater stability, runs between 1945 and the early 1970s. And a third 'neoliberal' period comes into view from the 1970s until 'somewhere in or around 2008'.[6] Focusing on North's middle ground, this thesis builds

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[5] Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Penguin Books, 1993).
[6] Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 13.

on recent work by Marina MacKay and Mark Greif to address what MacKay describes as the 'unfinished business' of the mid-century, unfinished both because the legacy of mid-century politics, society, and culture continues to press and because there is more to be said about fiction from this 'critically awkward' period.[7]

This introduction lays the foundations for the chapters that follow by exploring key terms and ideas – Human, nonhuman, posthuman, critical posthumanism, feminist new materialism, affect, fabulation – and by situating these ideas within their critical landscapes. I begin by giving shape and definition to the Human, meaning a hierarchical way of organising the world dominated by 'heteromasculine, white, propertied, and liberal subjects'.[8] In the second and third sections, I consider existing research in the fields of mid-century fiction and the posthuman, areas of study which, to date, critical theory and practice holds apart. Exploring the literary landscape during the mid-century, I show how questions about what it means to be human play out in key debates about literature from this period before finding in the crossover term 'fabulation' the potential for a posthuman turn. In the third section, I explore the ways in which critical posthumanism, feminist new materialism, and affect theory open to other ways of being and knowing. In the fourth section, I introduce Gilles Deleuze's version of reality, an expansive blend of 'virtual' and 'actual' experiences that reimagines subjectivity and embodiment, as a way of thinking about the posthuman as a condition of the everyday. Finally, I close with an overview of the chapters to come.

BEING HUMAN

> It is not the case that one simply is human. Rather, one must be deemed so. To be human, then, is not a state of being or an attribute but rather an aspiration, an attribution, an achievement.[9]

> The human, in short, is an ideology masquerading as a species.[10]

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[7] Marina MacKay, *Ian Watt: The Novel and the Wartime Critic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019a), p. 3; Lyndsey Stonebridge and Marina MacKay, 'Introduction: British Fiction After Modernism', in *British Fiction After Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century,* ed. by Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 1-16 (p. 1).
[8] Weheliye, p. 135.
[9] Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 7.
[10] Cristin Ellis, *Antebellum Posthuman Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), p. 144.

In this thesis, I use the uncapitalised term 'human' to refer to the broad biological category of *Homo sapiens* as a species. In contrast, I use the capitalised term 'Human' to reference a distinct ontological and epistemic paradigm, a way of organising the world with its roots in Enlightenment philosophies and ideas. The Human references a context specific way of being and knowing, a situated response that makes claims for a universal applicability that its history does not support. As Juanita Sundberg argues, the Human is neither pregiven nor inevitable. Rather, it is an historically emergent paradigm with a definable set of limits and limitations:

> Enlightenment humanist dogmas represent a particular, indeed provincial, body of thought on the question of the human. […] [S]uch dogmas originated in European societies involved in colonization, were globalized in and through colonial practices, and are currently given life in white supremacist settler societies.[11]

Recognising the Human as a context specific paradigm, in what follows I bring into focus four persistent ideas that influenced mid-century (re)constructions of the Human.[12] By giving form and specificity to the Human in its mid-century incarnation early in this introduction, it becomes possible to see the limits and limitations of this apparently universal paradigm, thereby making space for other modalities of the human.

Foundational to mid-century conceptions of the Human is the idea that the nonhuman gives the Human unity and coherence. As Sylvia Wynter's work details, the Enlightenment effectively displaced God as the arbiter of justice, bestowing intellectual and moral authority on human beings and making 'Man' the primary object of philosophical enquiry. That process of 'degodding' relied on a fundamental distinction between human and nonhuman to counter the conceptually unstable nature of a self-determining, sovereign subject.[13] Kant's metaphysics, for example, responds to the instability of the human as a concept by drawing on an opposition between inside and outside. On an individual level, for 'I' to persist over time Kant needs to posit 'something *against* which this persistence can be measured'.[14] In

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[11] Juanita Sundberg, 'Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies', *Cultural Geographies,* 21. 1 (2014), 33-47 (p. 36).
[12] The following texts give a comprehensive history and outline of the Human: Sylvia Wynter, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument', *CR: The New Centennial Review,* 3. 3 (2003), 257-337; Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialisms ', in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics,* ed. by Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
[13] Wynter (2003), pp. 277-281.
[14] Victoria Browne, 'Memory and the Metaphysics of Music: Battersby's Move Away from Deleuze and Guattari', *Women: A Cultural Review,* 22. 2-3 (2011), 155-167 (p. 155). Emphasis in original.

other words, the coherence of the Human subject as an independent 'I' depends on the relationship with an 'I am not', a dependency which produces the divide between self and other. On a conceptual level, a hard border between human and nonhuman works to buttress the Human as a coherent category. The '/' in self/other, human/nonhuman functions as a load bearing wall offering the Human structural integrity as well as separating it from what it is not. Conceptually and politically, the Human draws strength and security from the dividing line itself as much as from the term on the other side meaning that the nonhuman is essentially an expediency created to shore up both the individual subject and the political and social structures that reinforce and enable that subject. As Wynter's work demonstrates, 'race' functions as the original nonhuman other in this exclusionary dynamic, replacing oppositions between 'mortal/immortal, natural/supernatural, human/the ancestors' with 'Blackness' the construct that brought 'Man' into being.[15]

Resting on this regulated threshold between two oppositional terms is the Cartesian hierarchy of mind over body. Famously defining the Human as principally a rational being, Descartes's 'I think therefore I am' appears around the same time as biological functions associated with sex and hygiene move behind closed doors, becoming associated with private bedrooms and bathrooms rather than public places.[16] As society privatises experience, the body becomes connected with shame and 'corporeality [comes] to be negatively associated with everything unreliable, transitory, and base'. That category of baseness includes 'the emotions (rather than the intellect and will), the private (versus the public), nature (rather than civilization), exteriority (as opposed to interiority), [and] the animal (versus the human)'.[17] As these negative associations take hold, the border between Human and nonhuman becomes a hierarchy, a hierarchy that privileges rationalism and the intellectual over bodies and embodiment.

In 1948, at a key moment in post-war reconstruction and in an attitude of 'never again', the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) sought to protect and inscribe the rights of all human beings. In so doing, the UDHR produced a discursive definition of the Human which owes much to Enlightenment conceptions of freedom and

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[15] Wynter (2003), p. 264.
[16] Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), pp. 97-98.
[17] Elizabeth S. Anker, *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), p. 17.

equality, appealing as it does to the 'inherent dignity' and 'the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family' as 'the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world'.[18] As an Enlightenment inspired document, the UDHR follows Cartesian dualism by setting up a hierarchical distinction between actual human bodies that need protection and discursive definitions of bodies and rights, with the discursive taking precedence. As Elizbeth S. Anker's work shows, the international human rights framework 'exhibit[s] a profound ambivalence toward embodiment' only extending its protection to those bodies who conform to its implicit 'script'.[19] That 'script' presupposes a 'fully integrated and inviolable body' producing 'a dangerously purified subject, one purged of the body's assumedly anarchic appetencies: its needs and desires, its vulnerability and decay'.[20] In other words, the complexity and messiness of real bodies cannot be accommodated by the straightforward rhetoric and neat lines of responsibility contained in the UDHR.[21] The result is a conception of the body that evades the multiplicity of embodied matter to deliver another stabilising exclusion.

This exclusionary dynamic also has implications for the question of Human subjectivity. In the same way as the body must be 'fully integrated and inviolable' to count as Human, to count as a subject 'I' must denote a singular identity, a person that is rational, agential, and consistent over time. As Wynter describes, without God to regulate behaviour, 'Man' becomes responsible for 'himself' making the Human the sovereign agent of change, both self-regulating and self-determining. For this Human subject, self-fulfilment, self-realization, and personal development are key, reinforcing the idea that progress and perfectibility are core components of the Human condition. But as W.E.B. Du Bois's description of Black experience as 'double-consciousness' shows, the 'I' as a singularity is unavailable to those

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[18] Universal Declaration of Human Rights <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights> [Accessed 3 November 2023]

[19] Anker, p. 2. Despite Anker's focus on embodiment her work does not discuss the relationship between human rights and disability in detail, nor does she refer specifically to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which came into force in 2008. For a helpful background to the convention and the relationship between disability rights and human rights see Maya Sabatello and Marianne Schulze, 'Introduction', in *Human Rights and Disability Advocacy,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 1-12.

[20] Anker, p. 4.

[21] In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt argues that '[f]rom the beginning the paradox involved in the declaration of inalienable human rights was that it reckoned with an "abstract" human being who seemed to exist nowhere, for even savages lived in some kind of a social order'. As Chris Abani suggests, '[t]he textual body, words in other words, can be a seduction that locks us out of all sides of the truth, which is that words can obliterate real bodies'. Chris Abani, 'The Graceful Walk', in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights,* ed. by Sophia A. McClennen and Alexandra Schultheis Moore (London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2018), pp. 499-506 (p. 501); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1962), p. 291.

considered other-than-Human.[22] It is this perspective that Franz Fanon later echoes in *Black Skin, White Masks,* describing how '[m]y body was given back to me' by the expectations and judgements of the white world such that Fanon became 'overdetermined from without'.[23] In other words, 'I' figures as singular only for those occupying a fully Human position.

To be Human, then, is to be a rational individual with a stable identity and a whole, inviolate body. It is to inhabit a world organised through a hard border between Human and nonhuman and a hierarchy of mind over matter. It is also to carry that hierarchy into a host of other supposed binaries, including gender, sexuality, class, and ability, with race as the primary category of exclusion. But there is a slipperiness and tenacity to the Human as a concept that this figure of a bounded being cannot fully account for, meaning that to understand the persistence of this paradigm, I need to consider one more trait.

Grounded in ideas of progress and perfectibility, the Human works as an aspirational concept, a transcendent promise for the future that, as such, avoids critique in the here and now. That the Human as a concept and an aspiration transcends individual human beings is a point explicit in Kant's original theorising on the nature of Man. In *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant argues for the Human as an end in itself: 'act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means'.[24] In making this argument, Kant distinguishes between 'humanity', 'you', and 'your own person' to imply that the Human can be thought of independently of actual people. That is to say, the Human is an idea or ideal rather than an embodied being. As Joseph Slaughter and Sophia MacLennan argue, '[h]uman rights are the proper name of a particular set of promises about a future of social equality and justice'.[25] With the Human as a transcendent promise realisable at some indefinable future point, those invested in the *status quo* can describe the mistreatment of actual bodies as an anomaly, a glitch that does not invalidate that idealised future. However violent individual humans may be, the Human as an ideology defines that violence as exceptional, a move that avoids both

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[22] Du Bois describes that 'peculiar sensation' of 'double-consciousness' as 'always looking at one's self through the eyes of others'. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 8.

[23] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 2008), pp. 86, 87.

[24] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 38. Emphasis removed.

[25] Sophia A. McClennen and Joseph R. Slaughter, 'Introducing Human Rights and Literary Forms; or, the Vehicles and Vocabularies of Human Rights ', *Comparative Literature Studies,* 46. 1 (2009), 1-19 (p. 4).

censure and critique and goes some way to explaining the tenaciousness of this transcendent paradigm.

Bounded, singular, hierarchical, and always just out of reach, this is the version of the Human that sits at the centre of mid-century anxieties about political rights, responsibilities, and the individual's place in society, coming under scrutiny and under pressure in post-war literature and philosophy. As the discussion that follows suggests, shaken by the events of World War Two and the ongoing threat of annihilation presented by the Cold War, mid-century fiction has an ambivalent relationship with the Human, simultaneously asserting the importance of and expressing concerns about a society grounded in the principles of agency and self-determination. As I go on to suggest, that ambivalence influences both the thematic content of novels during this period and literary choices about form and style.

FICTION DURING THE MID-CENTURY

> The writer's subject-matter, the thing all literature is *about*, can be indicated very simply: it is about what it is like to be a human being. […] The artist's function is always to *humanize* the society he is living in, to assert the importance of humanity in the teeth of whatever is currently trying to annihilate that importance.[26]

Critics tend to approach British fiction from the mid-century either through a socio-historical lens or through attention to style and genre. Those focusing on the social, political, and historical significance of the period explore the ways in which fiction reimagines Britain in the wake of World War Two, in the context of the continuing threat of nuclear war, international debates about rights and entitlements, and comprehensive domestic reforms to health, social care, and education. In contrast, critics interested in genre and style respond to a sense of the mid-century as 'lack[ing] both experimental force and high literary value'.[27] Excavating overlooked writers and forms, critics working on genre and style expand the mid-

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[26] John Wain, 'Along the Tightrope', in *Declaration,* ed. by Tom Maschler (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1957), pp. 85-106 (p. 87). Emphasis in original.

[27] Clare Hanson and Susan Watkins, 'Introduction', in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1945-1975: Volume Nine,* ed. by Clare Hanson and Susan Watkins (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 1-15 (p. 2). Carole Sweeney describes the genesis of this judgement on the quality of post-war fiction. She cites Bernard Bergonzi's *The Situation of the Novel* (1970) and Rubin Rabinowitz's *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960* (1967) as being particularly influential in perpetuating this assessment. Carole Sweeney, *Gender and Experiment in British Women's Writing, 1945-1970: Vagabond Fictions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), pp. 12-14.

century canon through studies of the experimental and 'avant-garde' as well as through attention to the inventiveness of post-war realism. In this section, I show how my research brings these two disparate strands of engagement into relation with each other, exploring the way in which questions about what it means to be human run through both.

From a socio-historical perspective, mid-century literature's primary concern is the place of Enlightenment 'man' in post-war society. Mark Greif, for example, writing about American philosophy and fiction between 1933 and 1973, labels this period the 'crisis of man'.[28] That 'crisis' plays out in a shifting dynamic of interrogation and affirmation. On the one hand, there is distrust of Enlightenment values, as evidenced by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's argument that, rather than being an anomaly, the Holocaust figures as the inevitable consequence of Enlightenment inspired rationalism.[29] That distrust is also evident in the anxiety about 'the socially damaging effects of individualism' that Marina MacKay finds in Ian Watt's work, as well as in Iris Murdoch's argument that unconstrained liberalism has produced a debased version of 'man', a self-centred person concerned only with their own needs and wants, and Doris Lessing's 'A Small Personal Voice', an essay that appeared in the same publication as John Wain's 'Along a Tightrope'.[30] In that essay, Lessing makes a connection between the singular, self-determining subject as the primary of mediator of

[28] Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015). Malcolm Bradbury makes a similar point in *The Modern British Novel* when he argues that, as post-war novels 'respon[ded] to the horrors of history, the crisis of authenticity, [and] the problems of representation that affected the post-war era', the period experienced a 'dilemma of continuity and crisis'. Bradbury, pp. 274, 282.

[29] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002). Critics describe a similar anti-Enlightenment perspective in the work of Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997). Specifically, Berlin was sceptical of the 'boundless faith in human reason' that he understood to be at 'the core of the Enlightenment'. This scepticism led him to argue against '[t]he Enlightenment's belief in the uniformity and permanence of a common human nature' and to explore a form of 'moral pluralism'. As Steven B. Smith describes: 'If the besetting sin of the French *philosophes* was to conceive of human nature as fundamentally the same across time and place, the Counter-Enlightenment – best expressed by the German romantics – posited that there are different, but still rational and coherent, ways of being human, that cultures and nations differ from one another just as people do, and that the only way to understand this diversity is through a form of historical interpretation that regards all human institutions and activities as forms of self-expression'. Steven B. Smith, 'Isaiah Berlin on the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment', in *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin,* ed. by Joshua L. Cherniss and Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 132-148 (pp. 135, 140, 143, 139).

[30] MacKay (2019a), p. 149; Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness', in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature,* (London: Penguin Books, 1997a), pp. 287-296; Doris Lessing, 'The Small Personal Voice', in *Declaration,* ed. by Tom Maschler (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1957), pp. 11-28.

experience and standards of literary fiction to take issue with the shallowness of novels that focus solely on one person's point of view.[31]

On the other hand, a 'project of re-enlightenment' is also evident in the post-war era, a project exemplified by the quotation from Wain's 1957 essay that stands as the epigraph to this section.[32] Wain's forceful affirmation of humanity speaks to a mid-century preoccupied with defining and defending agential, self-determining subjectivity. Referencing Britain's first atomic test at Malden Island in the Pacific in May 1957 while also invoking the legacy of World War Two, Wain's essay acknowledges the precarity of human bodies at the mid-century. However, with species level annihilation an increasing possibility, for Wain it is not just the human as a species that needs protection. In Wain's first novel, *Hurry on Down* (1953), Charles Lumley rejects expectations of class and education as he moves through a series of jobs – window cleaner, drug trafficker, chauffeur, hospital porter, bouncer, and, finally, comedy script writer – to try to make a life for himself in post-war Britain. Exploring the borders of autonomy and agency, the novel is about Charles's right to exist in defiance of a constraining society, a right asserted both by the content of his story and the fact of the telling of it.[33] In the aftermath of a war which curtailed self-realisation and autonomy for most people, often in brutal ways, asserting the right of the Human individual to exist becomes a moral as well as an aesthetic choice.

Recent scholarship picks up this ambivalence towards Enlightenment models of humanity to position mid-century literature in relation to the Human as the dominant post-war paradigm. Allan Hepburn, for example, focuses on the question of faith to discuss the ways in which a religious sensibility in the work of Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, and Barbara Pym, among

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[31] Both Lessing and Murdoch respond to their concerns with the self-centredness of post-war society by proposing a return to nineteenth century realism, a style in which Lessing finds 'warmth', 'compassion', and 'love of people'. Lessing (1957), p. 15.

[32] Greif, p. 16.

[33] John Wain, *Hurry On Down* (London: Penguin Books, 1979). James Gindin, writing in 1963, summarised the main theme of Wain's work as 'a constant commitment to the value of the individual and the personal, a constant assertion of the dignity of the human being. Although frequently describing and satirizing a world of chaotic folly, each of the novels contains a central statement of the moral worth of the individual'. James Gindin, *Postwar British Fiction: New Accents and Attitudes* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1963), p. 128. Novels such as Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965), Rosamond Lehmann's *The Echoing Grove* (1953), Andrea Newman's *The Cage* (1966), and Pamela Hansford Johnson's *An Impossible Marriage* (1954) evidence similar concerns with autonomy and independence in the context of social expectations of women and the restrictions of marriage and motherhood.

others, confronts the 'prevailing philosophical question of the time: 'what is man?''.[34] In *Placeless People: Writings, Rights, and Refugees*, Lyndsey Stonebridge draws on writers such as Hannah Arendt, George Orwell, and Samuel Beckett to focus on the question of rights and entitlements, arguing that the post-war human rights agenda functioned as a front for the entrenchment of states' rights. As a result, refugees became doubly disenfranchised, effectively excluded from definitions of what it means to be human.[35] Marina MacKay's recent biography of Ian Watt, a central figure in the post-war literary landscape, makes an explicit link to Greif's 'crisis'. MacKay reads Watt's literary critical work, including his influential *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), in relation to his Japanese prisoner of war experiences to position that work as a liberal humanist counterbalance to the extreme violence and inhumanity displayed during World War Two.[36] As these critics describe it, mid-century fiction scrutinises the Human by playing out debates about rights, responsibilities, and the individual's place in society.

The issue with taking the Human as the dominant critical frame, however, is that it risks foreclosure, sidestepping more open questions about what it might mean to be or not to be human. Perhaps figuring the mid-century as a crisis *for* rather than *of* 'man' might be more accurate, thereby avoiding a universalism that turns attention away from lives lived outside the domain of the master-subject.[37] Rather than centring critique on debates grounded in Human conceptions of bounded, singular, hierarchical being, this thesis asks how thinking about mid-century British fiction might shift should attention turn to fiction concerned with 'the elsewheres of Man'. Thus, while the idea of a mid-century preoccupied with Enlightenment values and paradigms offers this thesis a starting point, inspired by

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[34] Allan Hepburn, *A Grain of Faith: Religion in Mid-Century British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 222.

[35] Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People: Writings, Rights, and Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[36] MacKay (2019a). MacKay also discusses the mid-century's ambivalence towards the Human in her appraisal of the work of Angus Wilson and Ian McEwan: 'It would be fair to say that the forces of sadism and cruelty in their novels that so insistently prove liberal humanism vulnerable also prove it indispensable, but the overridingly pessimistic impression these books leave is that no consoling belief in human goodness could survive a confrontation with the abysmal moral and political realities that World War II made visible'. Marina MacKay, 'World War II, the Welfare State, and Postwar "Humanism"', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century English Novel*, ed. by Robert L. Caserio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 146-162 (p. 161).

[37] As Lauren Berlant argues in *Cruel Optimism*, '[c]risis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming'. Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 10.

Weheliye's provocation I am also interested in ways of reading the mid-century that can account for other forms of being and knowing.

Recent work exploring genre and style in mid-century fiction potentially offers such an alternative account. In the immediate post-war period, the primary genre distinction was between realism and experimentalism with '"experiment" as a code-word for modernism'.[38] In the context of the mid-century, defending realism meant being 'aligned not only with 'good old English tradition' (empiricism, common sense, social comedy along the lines of Fielding and Dickens) but also with a broad commitment to liberal humanism', suggesting there is more at stake in these debates than the novel as a form.[39] In contemporary analysis, work on the topic of genre continues to explore how literary form and style intersect with wider social, political, and cultural issues at play in post-war Britain. Most recently, growing interest in experimental fiction links into this thesis's concern with texts which, to date, critics have tended to position on the periphery of narratives about the literary mid-century. The recent anthologies *British Experimental Women's Fiction, 1945-1975: Slipping Through the Labels* and *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s*, together with Carole Sweeney's *Gender and Experiment in British Women's Writing, 1945-1970 Vagabond Fictions,* Adam Guy's *The Nouveau Roman and Writing in Britain after Modernism*, and new studies of the work of Anna Kavan, Brigid Brophy, Ann Quin, and Christine Brooke-Rose speak to this growing interest in avant-garde, experimental fiction, and the challenge that that fiction presents to the dominance of modernism and postmodernism as frames for reading post-war literature.[40] As Kaye Mitchell points out, while avant-garde fiction overlaps with techniques

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[38] Adam Guy, *The Nouveau Roman and Writing in Britain After Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 121. As described in Rabinovitz's often cited *The Reaction against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950–60*, writers on the side of realism include John Wain, John Brain, C.P. Snow, Angus Wilson, and Kingsley Amis. Those described as experimental included Brigid Brophy, Christine Brooke-Rose, Anna Kavan, B.S. Johnson, and Ann Quin.

[39] Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: E. Arnold, 1995), p. 4.

[40] Andrew Radford and Hannah Van Hove, eds., *British Experimental Women's Fiction, 1945-1975: Slipping Through the Labels* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021); Kaye Mitchell and Nonia Williams, eds., *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Victoria Walker, *Anna Kavan: Mid-Century Experimental Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023); Richard Canning and Gerri Kimber, eds., *Brigid Brophy: Avant-Garde Writer, Critic, Activist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Nonia Williams, *The Precarious Writing of Ann Quin* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023); Karen R. Lawrence, *Techniques for Living: Fiction and Theory in the Work of Christine Brooke-Rose* (Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2010). As this overview of texts suggests, one of the recurring themes in critical engagement with British experimental fiction from the mid-century is the relationship between literary form and gender. It is a perspective that has its origins in the work of Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs. In *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (1989), Friedman and Fuchs describe experimental fiction as an overtly feminist strategy. While in its focus on novels by women this thesis appears to support that argument, I am not making the case for fabulation as a feature of fiction by women per se. Rather, as the

associated with both modernist and postmodernist writing, neither form is sufficient for describing mid-century fiction. A more nuanced understanding of the relationship between form and content is needed.[41]

Although I am not arguing that the novels I discuss in this thesis are experimental or avant-garde, by focusing on the significance of style and form in often under-researched texts, this thesis does intersect with these debates about genre. In doing so, it develops a latent posthuman perspective in critical engagement with mid-century fiction. Julia Jordan, for example, arguing that 'the traditional novel' became 'impossible' in the post-war era given the 'seismic trauma of historical events', shows how avant-garde literature responds through a focus on 'accident, error, and indeterminacy'.[42] In a similar vein, Nonia Williams draws on Gilles Deleuze in analysing the work of Ann Quin, Karen R. Lawrence references N. Katherine Hayles's ideas about the posthuman when writing about Christine Brooke-Rose, and, while writing about Spark in the context of the avant-garde, Marina MacKay acknowledges that 'the "humanist self" is probably not the most relevant model for mid-century fiction'.[43] Patricia Waugh also hinted at a form of textual reimagining when she figured Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark, and Iris Murdoch as 'humanists who profoundly challenge the assumptions of humanism from within'.[44] Clare Hanson and Susan Watkins push that challenge further by making an early connection to the posthuman in relation to the work of Doris Lessing and Naomi Mitchison. 'In modelling such alternative subjectivities', they suggest, in a quotation that could equally refer to all the texts discussed in this thesis, 'these writers [Lessing and Mitchison] anticipate the concerns of twenty-first century posthumanism, which similarly calls in question both the humanist conception of the subject and human exceptionalism'.[45] In bringing an explicitly posthuman lens to bear on texts from

chapters that follow make clear, the posthuman as a critical frame allows for discussion of, but is not limited to, issues relating to gender. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[41] Kaye Mitchell, 'Introduction: 'The avant-garde must not be romanticized. The avant-garde must not be dismissed'', in *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s,* ed. by Kaye Mitchell and Nonia Williams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 1-19.

[42] Julia Jordan, *Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel: Oblique Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 4, 2.

[43] Williams (2023); Lawrence, p. 16; Marina MacKay, 'Muriel Spark and the Possibility of Popular Experiment', in *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s,* ed. by Kaye Mitchell and Nonia Williams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019b), pp. 20-35 (p. 30).

[44] Patricia Waugh, 'The Woman Writer and the Continuities of Feminism', in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction,* ed. by James F. English (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 188-209 (p. 202).

[45] Hanson and Watkins, p. 11. In addition, in *Posthuman Space in Samuel Beckett's Short Prose,* Jonathan Boulter puts Beckett's work into dialogue with that of Heidegger to argue that Beckett's version of the posthuman 'stands at the limits of subjectivity' to also draw attention to the 'limits of the human'. Jonathan

this period, this thesis develops these discussions of form and style to figure the mid-century as a moment concerned with ontological as well as textual experimentation.

At present, these two approaches to advocating for the significance of the mid-century as a literary period – the socio-political and the stylistic – work in parallel, rarely if ever in dialogue with each other and with few overlaps in the texts they study.[46] In this thesis, I want to use the posthuman to bring these two approaches into relation with each other and so to explore the interplay between politics and poetics. In doing so, I am advocating for a way of reading the mid-century that fits with not only the openness and ambiguity of mid-century fiction but also the ongoing significance of this in-between moment. In the final part of this section, I introduce the idea of 'fabulation', an unexplored point of connection between post-war British literature, posthuman theory, and the work of Gilles Deleuze that offers the opportunity to integrate these discussions of form and content.

Writing in 1967, Robert Scholes uses fabulation to sidestep mid-century debates about genre and posit a literature of the in-between. In Scholes's terms, mid-century fabulation builds on its roots in the fable by 'tend[ing] away from the representation of reality but return[ing] toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy'.[47] Mid-century fabulation, as Scholes defines it, marries stylistic traits, a 'delight in design', with an ethical stance which produces 'a less realistic and more artistic kind of narrative: more shapely, more evocative; more concerned with ideas and ideals, less concerned with things'.[48] In distinguishing between morality and ethics, Claire Colebrook defines morality as the assumption that there is 'some good or law from which the world might be judged', while ethics works 'to comprehend the emergence of moral judgement, to assess its forces'.[49] In other words, morality tends towards the transcendent while ethics towards the immanent. In a later work, Scholes refines his thinking to argue:

Boulter, *Posthuman Space in Samuel Beckett's Short Prose* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 33.

[46] Spark is the exception here, appearing in work relating to both politics and poetics. In *The Judicial Imagination, Writing after Nuremberg*, for example, Stonebridge explores Spark's *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965) in the context of debates about legal justice and human rights in the post-war era. Spark also features in discussions of avant-garde and experimental fiction, including in Williams's discussion of Quin, Walker's discussion of Anna Kavan, and in MacKay's discussion of Spark's 'popularly experimental fiction' in British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s. Stonebridge (2011); Williams (2023); Walker (2023); MacKay (2019b), p. 20.

[47] Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 11.

[48] Scholes (1967), pp. 10, 12.

[49] Claire Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze* (Crows Nest, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 2002b), p. 176.

Fabulation, then, means not a turning away from reality, but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality. Modern fabulation accepts, even emphasizes, its fallibilism, its inability to reach all the way to the real, but it continues to look toward reality. It aims at telling such truths as fiction may legitimately tell in ways which are appropriately fictional.[50]

Delighting in the potential of language, form, and structure to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, mid-century fabulation plays in the messy margins it creates.

In Deleuze's work, fabulation, sometimes translated as 'story-telling', means creating 'larger-than-life image[s]' to enable 'a people to come'.[51] As Aline Wiame parses the term, 'fabulation refuses to locate its subjects in one formed identity, therefore resisting the solidification of emptied myths that rigidify places and positions and that subjugate their subjects'.[52] Deleuzian fabulation, then, is about mutability and change, about fiction as a way of reimagining the possible. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest in *What is Philosophy?*:

Creative fabulation has nothing to do with a memory, however exaggerated, or with a fantasy. In fact, the artist, including the novelist, goes beyond the perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived. The artist is a seer, a becomer.[53]

In line with Deleuze's use of the term, for Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, 'speculative fabulation' marks a way of thinking and writing differently about the world, signalling acts of narrative invention which bring new possibilities for being and knowing into the everyday.[54] Erin Manning aligns 'fabulation' with a sense of 'what-else' or 'more-than', underlining the immanence of the term by arguing that '[f]abulations are lively with the power of the false. They distance themselves from the truth of first principles (including first cuts) […] to invest in the collective exploration of what life can be, here, now'.[55]

[50] Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 8.

[51] Ronald Bogue, 'Fabulation', in *The Deleuze Dictionary,* ed. by Adrian Parr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010b), pp. 99-100.

[52] Aline Wiame, 'Gilles Deleuze and Donna Haraway on Fabulating the Earth', *Deleuze and Guattari Studies,* 12. 4 (2018), 525-540 (p. 536).

[53] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 171.

[54] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[55] Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 219.

In highlighting the significance of fabulation for mid-century fiction, I am not making the case for a new literary grouping or advocating for a new label akin to that of modernism or the avant-garde. The story I am telling is different to but not in competition with these other perspectives. Fabulation is not what these texts *are* but what they *do*. My argument is that, as a turn to 'the elsewheres of Man', fabulation runs throughout mid-century fiction, with the novels discussed in this thesis standing as exemplars of that concern with the interplay of language, reality, and ethics.

BECOMING POSTHUMAN: THEORY AND CONTEXT

> Philosophically, as critical label, there are few good uses of an 'ism', whether idealism, anarchism, scepticism, rationalism, pragmatism, modernism, materialism or correlationism. They might have a pedagogical role to allow learners to grasp family resemblances, but this initial understanding must be undone as soon as possible. If an 'ism' takes root it strangles more subtle and adequate kinds of understanding.[56]

In contemporary theory, the posthuman features in a wide range of often competing agendas. While it is outside the scope of this thesis to give a full account of all these versions of the posthuman, and mindful of James Williams's warnings about the pitfalls of relying on an 'ism', rather than focusing on defining the field, in what follows I share an overview of those forms of posthuman and posthuman adjacent thinking that have most influenced this research. I begin with critical posthumanism, a field of study concerned with critiquing the Human. I then consider the ways in which feminist new materialism and affect theory move beyond critique to signal a shift in ontology as well as a shift in epistemology. I end the discussion with reference to a group of posthuman adjacent thinkers whose work answers Weheliye's call to focus on lives lived outside the domain of the master-subject and which, in doing so, evoke an everyday, experiential version of the posthuman. Sharing an alertness to the limits and limitations of the Human alongside a commitment to thinking otherwise, this group of thinkers moves this thesis beyond the stasis of posthuman*ism* as a noun to invite attention to the posthuman as a verb, revealing how mid-century fiction evokes different modalities of the human.

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[56] James Williams, 'Matter and Sense in Gilles Deleuze's *Logic of Sense*: Against the 'Ism' in Speculative Realism', *Deleuze and Guattari Studies,* 15. 4 (2021), 477-496 (p. 478).

Emerging as a field of research in the late 1990s, critical posthumanism has its origins in the work of scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe. While there are significant differences in approach across the field, broadly, critical posthumanist research takes the Human as the primary object of analysis, exploring and critiquing the violence and exclusions inherent in social, cultural, and political manifestations of the anthropocentric paradigm.[57] As such, critical posthumanism distinguishes itself from transhumanism, a scientifically mediated form of hyper-Humanism that advocates for technological augmentation with the aim of extending human capabilities indefinitely. Critical posthumanism, in contrast, critiques the model of bounded, singular subjectivity at the centre of the transhumanist project, working to displace that Human subject from its privileged position at the apex of the species hierarchy.

For scholars such as Stefen Herbrechter, Pramod K. Nayar, and Neil Badmington, fiction is *the* crossover space in which the question of what it means to be human can be explored. In 2003, for example, Badmington argued for 'a critical practice that occurs *inside* humanism, consisting not of the wake but the working-through of humanist discourse'.[58] Ten years later, in 2013, Herbrechter similarly posited a critical posthumanism capable of 'inhabit[ing] humanism deconstructively'.[59] An early posthuman canon that included Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go,* and the work of Octavia E. Butler has, more recently, given way to a wider group of texts that critical posthumanist scholars employ to address diverse questions of disability, gender, race, and human rights through a posthuman lens. In *Disability and the Posthuman*, for example, Stuart Murray explores the synergy between disability studies and critical posthumanism by analysing a wide range of contemporary film and fiction.[60] The recent *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, which at 1,225 pages speaks to the breadth of current critical posthumanist scholarship, also extends the possibilities for literary critique by including discussions of the posthuman in classical, early modern, medieval, romantic, and Victorian literature.[61]

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[57] For a more detailed history and overview of posthuman theoretical categories see Francesca Ferrando, 'Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations', *Existenz,* 8. 2 (2013), 26-32.

[58] Neil Badmington, 'Theorizing Posthumanism', *Cultural Critique,* 53 (2003), 10-27 (p. 22).

[59] Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism a Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), p. 14.

[60] Stuart Murray, *Disability and the Posthuman: Bodies, Technology and Cultural Futures* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

[61] Stefan Herbrechter and others, *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2022).

While the texts I explore in this thesis do bear witness to the violence inherent in the anthropocentric paradigm, they also go beyond critique to explore other ways of being in the world, alternative ontologies that invoke the posthuman as a condition of the everyday. Work in the field of feminist new materialism offers a starting point for assessing this ontological move. Building on the principle that 'matter also acts', feminist new materialism works to reconcile the estrangement of mind and body which is inherent in Enlightenment conceptions of the Human.[62] As scholars such as Karen Barad and Stacy Alaimo make clear, while the independence of terms such as nature and culture, mind and body, language and matter, human and nonhuman make it theoretically possible to explore each half of the binary on its own, these linguistic distinctions hide a fundamental level of co-production such that the concepts themselves are impossible to separate. Barad's concept of 'intra-action', for example, undermines scientific objectivity by calling into question the very possibility of a detached observer.[63] Similarly, Alaimo, in describing her concept of transcorporeality, argues that matter as a dynamic 'agent of change' is 'always already within and without the permeable membrane of the human'.[64] Bodies, for Alaimo, are not 'passive, plastic matter': they actively participate in the cocreation of the world.[65] Likewise, Nancy Tuana's early discussions of a 'material-semiotic matrix', Susan Hekman's 'mangle', and Samantha Frost's work on the 'biocultural' are all ways of trying to understand life as more complex and interrelated than the rigid boundaries constructed by the Human allow.[66] Debunking ideas of the body as 'whole, autonomous, and self-enclosed', feminist new materialism invites a reappraisal of the impossible and improbable bodies that feature across mid-century fiction; as texts from this period reimagine bodies and embodiment, they are also reimagining what it means to be human.[67]

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[62] Rebekah Sheldon, 'Form / Matter / Chora: Object-Oriented Ontology and Feminist New Materialism', in *The Nonhuman Turn,* ed. by Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), pp. 193-222 (p. 202).

[63] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[64] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 154.

[65] Alaimo, p. 3.

[66] Frost (2016); Nancy Tuana, 'Re-fusing Nature/Nurture', *Women's Studies International Forum,* 6. 6 (1983), 621-632; Susan J. Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge: Feminist Disclosures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

[67] Anker, p. 4. Another overlap between discussions of genre and this thesis comes from Patricia Waugh's analysis of the '[m]onstrous bodies, anorectic bodies, hybrid bodies, cyborg bodies, fantastic bodies, [and] zombies (bodies without souls) [that] fill the pages of women writers from the sixties to the nineties'. 'In all of these fictions', Waugh argues, 'the monstrous body functions not only as a means to voice and overcome anxieties concerning dominant constructions of femininity as uncontrollability and irrationality, but also as a

Although it was interest in the work of Braidotti, Barad, and Alaimo that first drew me to the posthuman as a field of research, as I read and reread mid-century novels, I found myself turning to affect theory as another way of responding to the unusual bodies in these texts. Much like feminist new materialism, affect theory also offers the opportunity to reimagine the interrelationship between mind and body. Michael Hardt describes affect as a form of synthesis that 'refer[s] equally to the body and the mind', involving 'both reason and the passions'. For Hardt, affect simultaneously describes 'our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it'.[68] Yet, affect also opens the potential for a relationality rooted in a world view which is more complex than that of the individual subject implicit in Hardt's definition. Mel Chen's work, for example, 'include[s] the notion that affect is something not necessarily corporeal and that it potentially engages many bodies at once, rather than (only) being contained as an emotion within a single body'.[69] In Rachel C. Lee's terms, '[a]ffective intensity is a function of something ineffable, the suspension of meaning, which we might also see as the potentiality of plural, indeterminate meanings'.[70] It is this plurality and indeterminacy that I find in mid-century British fiction. Concerned with actual bodies and lived experiences, the fluidity of affect evokes an ontological posthumanism, an alternative way of being in the world that is independent of developments in technology or science. Through affect, attention turns to possibility and potential but not in the sense of delayed fulfilment or futurity, rather as a reimagining of the here and now. In this thesis, affect theory speaks to both the fluid poetics of mid-century fiction and to this sense of possibility, shifting attention to what a body can do rather than what it means.[71]

As well as drawing on work from the field of critical posthumanism, feminist new materialism, and affect theory, this thesis also finds inspiration in scholarship that blends these fields together to explore an everyday, experiential, or *praxis*-based version of the

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way of asserting the contingency of matter over and against the crystalline perfections of rationalistic philosophy. The body, in this indigenous novelistic tradition, is both the topos of a "cautious" feminist politics and a firewall against the more extravagant claims of academic feminist theory'. Waugh (2006), p. 196.

[68] Michael Hardt, 'Forward: What Affects are Good For', in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* ed. by Patricia Clough (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. ix-xiii (p. ix).

[69] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 11.

[70] Rachel C. Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), p. 27.

[71] Posthuman scholars including Gilles Deleuze frequently reference what has become a famous quotation from Spinoza's *Ethics*: 'no one has yet determined what the body can do'. Benedict de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 155.

posthuman. Without reifying posthuman theory as an 'ism', scholars such as Kara Keeling, Elizabeth Povinelli, Christina Sharpe, Erin Manning, Anna Tsing, and Jasbir Puar use posthuman thinking to bear witness to lives lived outside the domain of the master-subject. While not representative of a definitive, coherent field of research as such, the work of these scholars is important given my focus in this thesis is less on extending the reach of critical posthumanism into a new period and more on how a posthuman lens can reimagine the mid-century by bringing into view new perspectives in post-war literature. One of the points of connection between these scholars is their use of what Povinelli terms an 'immanent critique', meaning a focus on the contradictions and limitations of socio-political structures from within.[72] Rather than measuring the world against an overarching, transcendent moral code, or theoretical paradigm, the work of Keeling et al focuses on relationality and connectivity, attending to what Barad calls the 'intra-actions' between matter and bodies.[73] In the chapters that follow, I trace a similarly immanent perspective through exemplar mid-century texts, bringing into view a reimagining of the transcendent paradigm of the Human.

As well as encouraging a reimagining of mid-century fiction, the work of Keeling et al is also pivotal in addressing one of the weaknesses of posthuman theory: an overidentification of the posthuman with the 'new'. In 1977, the literary critic Ihab Hassan was one of the first scholars to use the term posthuman to speculate on the impact of technology on late twentieth-century culture and the human form. Thinking about human development through the myth of Prometheus, Hassan cites advancements in science and the 'expansion of the human consciousness into the cosmos' to suggest that 'five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end'. In its place, 'humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism'.[74] For Hassan, invoking a perspective that continues to feature

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[72] In *Economies of Abandonment*, Povinelli aligns immanent critique with critical theory, tracing the history of this mode of research back to 'the mid-1960s'. As Povinelli describes it, 'the ethical substance' of this form of critique 'is embodied potentiality', meaning an attention to 'new possibilities of life'. In *The Minor Gesture,* Erin Manning discusses the characteristics of immanent critique in the context of interdisciplinary practice. Like Povinelli, Manning thinks of immanent critique as 'begin[ning] in the midst, in the mess of relations not yet organized into terms such as "subject" and "object"'. That messiness overturns the 'knower-known relation as it is customarily defined', with all matter involved in 'research-creation' coming into being in relation to that process. In this thesis, I use immanent critique to refer to research and creative practice that situates itself amidst the messiness of the problem it is exploring. Povinelli (2011), pp. 8, 16; Manning (2016), pp. 29, 30, 37.
[73] Barad (2007).
[74] Ihab Hassan, 'Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?', *The Georgia Review,* 31.4 (1977), pp. 830-850 (p. 843). While the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the term posthuman had been used earlier in the twentieth century, for example by H.G. Wells in his novel *Babes in the Darkling Wood* in 1940, and in correspondence from Jack Kerouac in 1944, posthuman critics typically credit Hassan with initiating posthumanism as a critical perspective. 'posthuman, adj.', in *Oxford English Dictionary,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

prominently in work related to posthuman theory, the posthuman signals a new condition, a step-change in what it means to be human made possible by science and technology. Countering this attachment to novelty, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's work critiques the allure of the new in posthuman discourse to argue that the 'beyond' figures as a 'beguiling habituation, a seductive doxa effectively eluding the imperative of renewed reflexivity'.[75] In Jackson's work that focus on futurity makes possible a form of posthuman redemption that avoids confronting the racist underpinnings of the contemporary world. As I discussed earlier, the tenaciousness of the Human as a structuring paradigm comes, at least in part, from the concept's capacity to elude criticism by promising a better future. Jackson's work brings into view the posthuman iteration of that promise. As well as reinforcing a Human paradigm of progression, the 'seductive doxa' of Jackson's 'beyond' allows posthuman theories to, on the one hand, avoid confronting the violent exclusions of contemporary society and, on the other, claim novelty for ways of being and knowing that exist prior to the posthuman as a discourse.

Speaking to the first of these weaknesses, one of the texts that inspired this thesis was Cristin Ellis's *Antebellum Posthuman Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. Arguing, as I do, that the posthuman comes into view at points in time when the Human is under scrutiny and pressure, Ellis finds an 'antislavery materialism' at work in the writing of Frederick Douglass, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. Rather than simply expanding the category of Human to include Black bodies, however, Ellis suggests that these writers fundamentally redefine what it means to be human. In making her argument, Ellis critiques posthuman scholarship's 'inattention to racism and other forms of discrimination', making the point that posthuman 'rhetoric' turns the Human into a 'monolithic singular' thereby disregarding the racializing assemblages that, as Weheliye describes, continue to categorise some human bodies as less than Human.[76] In other words, implicit in theoretical work to decentre the Human is the assumption that that positionality is open to everyone. If that were the case, then an unencumbered move into the posthuman should be possible for all. Yet, as Jinthana Haritaworn asks, given 'the uneven terms on which bodies' are categorised, 'sorted' and judged, 'for whom might identifying with the nonhuman be too risky a move?'.[77] Failing

[75] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, 'Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement "Beyond the Human" ', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies,* 21 2-3 (2015), 215-218 (p. 215).
[76] Cristin Ellis (2018), p. 140.
[77] Jinthana Haritaworn, 'Decolonizing the Non/Human', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21. 2-3 (2015), 210-213 (p. 212).

to acknowledge the riskiness of ceding the Human as a category, the seductive doxa of the posthuman beyond continues to exclude other modalities of the human.

Zoe Todd's work helps to articulate the second, related issue that comes from Jackson's challenge to the posthuman beyond. In 'An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism', Todd describes attending a lecture by Bruno Latour in Edinburgh in 2013:

> I left the hall early, before the questions were finished: I was unimpressed. Again, I thought with a sinking feeling in my chest, it appeared that another Euro-Western academic narrative, in this case the trendy and dominant Ontological Turn (and/or post-humanism, and/or cosmopolitics—all three of which share tangled roots, and can be mobilised distinctly or collectively, depending on who you ask), and discourses of how to organise ourselves around and communicate with the constituents of complex and contested world(s) (or multiverses, if you're into the whole brevity thing) - was spinning itself on the backs of non-European thinkers. And again, the ones we credited for these incredible insights into the 'more-than-human', sentience and agency, and the ways through which to imagine our 'common cosmopolitical concerns' were not the people who built and maintain the knowledge systems that European and North American anthropologists and philosophers have been studying for well over a hundred years, and predicating many of their current 'aha' ontological moments (or re-imaginings of the discipline) upon. No, here we were celebrating and worshipping a European thinker for 'discovering', or newly articulating by drawing on a European intellectual heritage, what many an Indigenous thinker around the world could have told you for millennia: *the climate is a common organizing force!*[78]

As Todd's work demonstrates, posthuman theorists claim to have discovered new ways of being in the world without recognising or acknowledging that those ontologies have been integral to Indigenous thought for millennia. How is it that work by scholars such as Robert Bunge, Vine Deloria, Jr., Eva Marie Garroutte, and E. Richard Atleo goes unreferenced by this 'ontological turn'?[79] Eve Tuck, Vanessa Watts, Juanita Sundberg, and Kyla Wazana

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[78] Zoe Todd, 'An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism', *Journal of Historical Sociology,* 29. 1 (2016), 4-22 (pp. 7-8). Emphasis in original.

[79] Robert Bunge, *An American Urphilosophie: An American Philosophy BP (Before Pragmatism)* (New York: University Press of America, 1964); Vine Deloria, Jr., *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader* (Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999); Eva Marie Garroutte, *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); E. Richard Atleo, *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004). See also Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, eds., *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World through Stories* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

Tompkins have all set out similar critiques, showing how this privileging of Anglo-European scholarship effectively feeds into those 'ongoing colonial imperatives' that the academy seems unable to find a way out of. [80]

In the chapters that follow, I use Jackson's 'beyond' to reference this transcendent tendency in posthuman thinking. I work to mitigate that tendency, in part, by drawing on posthuman adjacent theory, including the work of Keeling et al. I also seek to respond to Ellis's critique by understanding the posthuman as an experience of the everyday. Rather than focusing on posthuman tropes commonly found in speculative fiction such as enhanced technology, the sentience of other-than-human life, and environmental disaster, I approach the posthuman as both a critical tool capable of responding to the violence enabled by the Human at the mid-century and as an immanent ontology made perceptible by the indeterminate poetics of post-war fiction.

Deleuze's philosophy helps to bring that immanent ontology into view, describing a non-oppositional relationship between Human and posthuman that allows for each to co-exist with the other and so avoiding the idea of a posthuman beyond. [81] In the section that follows, I outline those aspects of Deleuze's work, originating from the mid-century but rarely applied to texts from that period, that underpin this thesis's understanding of the fluid, mutable ontology of the posthuman. In drawing on Deleuze's research, however, I recognise that I am also reproducing the form of Euro-centric thinking that Todd critiques and I return to this issue at the end of the discussion.

GILLES DELEUZE: RETHINKING THE 'REAL'

> Our model of the cosmos must be as inexhaustible as the cosmos. A complexity that includes not only duration but creation, not only being but

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[80] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society,* 1. 1 (2012), 1-40; Vanessa Watts, 'Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go On a European World Tour!)', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society,* 1. 1 (2013), 20-34; Kyla Wazana Tompkins, 'On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy', *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 5.1 (Spring 2016). Todd, p. 9.

[81] A comprehensive discussion of Deleuze's work as a form of immanent philosophy is available in Tamsin Lorraine, *Deleuze and Guattari's Immanent Ethics: Theory, Subjectivity, and Duration* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2011); Christine Daigle and Terrance H. McDonald, 'Introduction: Posthumanisms through Deleuze and Guattari', in *From Deleuze and Guattari to Posthumanism: Philosophies of Immanence,* ed. by Christine Daigle and Terrance H. McDonald (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), pp. 1-26.

becoming, not only geometry but ethics. It is not the answer we are after,
but only how to ask the question …[82]

The work of Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), both writing on his own and in partnership with Félix Guattari (1930-1992), figures as one of the points of contact across the fields of critical posthumanism, feminist new materialism, and affect theory. In Weheliye's terms, Deleuze and Guattari deliver an open invitation to scholars to 'plunder' their 'toolbox', and their ideas and concepts are a consistent presence in both posthuman and posthuman adjacent scholarship.[83] In the initial research for this thesis, that recurring presence intrigued me. Why the reliance on this strand of European philosophy in posthuman criticism and theory? What is it about this work that makes it relevant to so many different settings and fields? What might a dialogue between mid-century fiction and the work of these mid-century critics make possible? In this section, I explore both the contribution that Deleuze's reimagining of reality makes to this thesis's understanding of the everydayness of the posthuman and the challenges of working with Deleuzian theory.

My starting point is Deleuze's understanding of reality as a composite of 'virtual' and 'actual' experiences. As Deleuze describes it, we directly interact with the actual; we touch, see, and feel it, often mistaking it for all there is. But reality is more than the actual; constantly present and entwined with our experiences of the actual are 'virtual ideas and intensities'.[84] Virtual is the space of 'continuous variation', of affect in the sense of potential unrealised in actual bodies, and of always-in-motion becoming.[85] In contrast to the binaries of real and unreal, mind and body that are foundational to hierarchical Human thinking, virtual and actual are not opposites, nor is 'the relationship between the two […] that of cause to effect, or of idea to embodiment'.[86] Rather, virtual and actual are two parts of a whole acting in 'reciprocal determination'.[87] This expansive version of reality, allowing for both the specificity of being and the fluidity of becoming, offers a non-oppositional alternative to the bounded, hierarchical Human as a way of understanding the world.

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[82] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (London: Gollancz, 2019), p. 187.
[83] Weheliye, p. 47.
[84] James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 8.
[85] Ronald Bogue, *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010a), pp. 23-24.
[86] Bogue (2010), p. 24.
[87] Williams (2003), p. 164.

Deleuze's version of the posthuman, then, rather than arguing against bounded, singular subjectivity, folds that limited perspective on what it means to be human into the fluid mutability of a posthuman becoming. In doing so, Deleuze is not denying that people experience and think of themselves as bounded, singular beings. He is, however, arguing that understanding reality as a combination of virtual and actual experiences means accommodating ways of being and knowing in excess of that bounded self. For Deleuze, the problem with Human conceptions of selfhood is that 'I' is an inherently splintered concept. Deleuze traces that splintering back to the way in which Kant reinforces the stability of 'I' through attention to the 'not I'. Rather than disregarding or redefining 'I', however, Deleuze explores its potential as a rift through which creativity flows: 'What, after all, are Ideas, with their constitutive multiplicity, if not these ants which enter and leave through the fracture in the I?'.[88] In this way, Deleuze figures 'I' as a posthuman fracture rather than as a coherent identity, a fracture that allows ideas to leak through.

In the same way as 'I' cannot stand for an independent, volitional subject, for Deleuze, the body cannot represent a 'whole, autonomous and self-enclosed' materiality.[89] Rather, Deleuze's work reimagines the culturally constructed wholeness of 'the' body through the openness of 'a' body. Shifting from the definite to the indefinite article, bodies become mutable and fluid, open to the world around them and always in flux. As Deleuze and Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

> A body is not defined by the form that determines it nor as a determinate substance or subject nor by the organs it possesses or the functions it fulfils. On the plane of consistency, *a body is defined only by a longitude and a latitude*: in other words the sum total of the material elements belonging to it under given relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness (longitude); the sum total of the intensive affects it is capable of at a given power or degree of potential (latitude).[90]

However much 'the' body carries meaning and weight in the 'actual' world, thinking of bodies as fixed entities puts limits on matter that the openness of 'a' body undoes. There is a correlation here with the work of Hortense Spillers, and through Spillers to Weheliye. Drawing on Spillers, Weheliye argues that thinking of the enslaved body as 'flesh' 'resists

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[88] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 363.
[89] Anker, p. 4.
[90] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 304. Emphasis in original.

the legal idiom of personhood as property', a move with the potential 'to usher in different genres of the human'.[91] Mapping that distinction back on to Deleuze's work, flesh, in the sense of 'a' body, is not subject to the legal and political requirements placed on 'the' body. Enfleshment, therefore, offers this thesis a way of thinking about humans as material beings outside of those legal, discursive inscriptions of 'the' body that characterise the mid-century.

In *Dialogues* (1977), Deleuze and Claire Parnet discuss the ways in which Deleuze's expansive reality, and its reimagining of both subjectivity and materiality, appears in everyday life. That discussion describes a world made up of three interrelated lines. Firstly, there is the 'rigid segmentarity' of family, profession, and school, a hierarchy of achievement and performance rooted in continual progression. Secondly, there is the 'supple', 'molecular' line made up of 'thresholds' where 'becomings' happen.[92] Thirdly, there is a line 'which is even more strange: as if something carried us away, across our segments, but also across our thresholds, towards a destination which is unknown, not foreseeable, not pre-existent'.[93] To focus on the first line is to mistake the structures of home, work and school, and the coherent subject those structures presuppose, for the whole of reality. Instead, shifting perspective by focusing on an ongoing process of individuation allows individuals to explore the potential of the second and third lines alongside the identities attached to the first. Crucially, 'the three lines are immanent, caught up in one another' so that Deleuze is not proposing an either-or choice.[94] In fact, chaos, figured as 'an ever-present potentiality in both our mental lives and the physical world', requires the response of the first line to keep it at bay.[95] Without this 'segmentarity' individuals risk the 'madness [that] arises at the point at which the individual contemplates itself in this free ground', where 'this free ground' is experience outside the steadying presence of 'I'.[96] The Human, from this perspective, is a necessary but nonetheless problematic domain of reality, a domain which Deleuze's concept of the posthuman both accommodates and exceeds. The mistake, which plays out in debates about individual rights and responsibilities during the mid-century, is to allow any form of transcendent 'I' to obscure other possibilities and other ways of seeing the world.

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[91] Weheliye, pp. 44, 42-43.
[92] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 124.
[93] Deleuze and Parnet, p. 125.
[94] Deleuze and Parnet, p. 125.
[95] Ian Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory and Method: An Introduction and Guide* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 85.
[96] Deleuze (2020), p. 199.

As with theories associated with the posthuman, there are issues with using Deleuze's work as a critical resource for this thesis. One of the most well-known critiques of Deleuze, for example, comes from Gayatri Spivak. In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak criticises both Foucault and Deleuze for ignoring the specificity of the subaltern experience, effectively moving past and therefore overlooking the power structures that deny colonized people agency and subjectivity.[97] As Weheliye puts it, the work of scholars such as Foucault is

> deemed transposable to a variety of spatiotemporal contexts because the authors do not speak from an explicitly racialized viewpoint (in contradistinction to nonwhite scholars who have written about racial slavery, colonialism, indigenous genocide, etc.), which lends their ideas more credibility and, once again, displaces minority discourse.[98]

More recently, Tiffany Lethabo King has described Deleuze's work 'as a form of white self-actualizing posthumanism', a move into the beyond that preserves the Human paradigm of progression and perfectibility.[99] In 2010, Eve Tuck wrote about the need to break up with Deleuze, arguing that his conception of desire does not distance itself sufficiently from capitalist norms thereby putting limits on the usefulness of Deleuze's work for thinking outside an Anglo-European frame.[100]

These limits also attach themselves to this thesis with the issue of positionality being key. In 2020, Colebrook responded to Tuck's break up with Deleuze to suggest that, while 'a different terrain of desire' might be possible for Tuck,

> for those of us who have composed our selves and our worlds from fragments of modernism, phenomenology, deconstruction, avantgarde cinema and psychoanalytic theory, only Deleuze and Guattari can help us imagine life without this world, life without *the world*.[101]

In other words, Deleuze and Guattari offer those embedded in the Human paradigm an accessible starting point for thinking otherwise. Recognising my embeddedness within that paradigm, I use the concepts that Deleuze and Guattari create as a starting point for finding a

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[97] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1988), pp. 271-313.

[98] Weheliye, p. 6.

[99] Tiffany Lethabo King, 'Humans Involved: Lurking in the Lines of Posthumanist Flight', *Critical Ethnic Studies,* 3. 1 (2017), 162-185 (p. 171).

[100] Eve Tuck, 'Breaking up with Deleuze: Desire and Valuing the Irreconcilable', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education,* 23. 5 (2010), 635-650.

[101] Claire Colebrook, 'Extinction, Deterritorialisation and End Times: Peak Deleuze', *Deleuze and Guattari Studies,* 14. 3 (2020), 327-348 (p. 347). Emphasis in original.

way outside of the Human. Like Weheliye, I aim to 'plunder' Deleuze and Guattari's 'toolbox' rather than consecrate their work. Haraway's 'situated knowledge' and Braidotti's 'embedded, embodied' subject similarly draw attention to the importance of context for any form of research.[102] With that in mind, I acknowledge that as a white, cisgendered, able-bodied researcher I am 'critiqu[ing] the very systems that [I] benefit from', a positionality that inevitably puts limits on my critique.[103] Similar restrictions come from the form and format of this research. There is an inherent contradiction in exploring an ontologically posthuman perspective through a Human mode of discourse. A PhD thesis is conventionally predicated on a hierarchy of learning and on the principle of unique and original research tied to the effort of a bounded, singular subject, thus eliding the complex interdependencies that brought this work into being. That is to say, there is an inherent paradox to the posthuman as a theoretical and discursive mode. I make these points not as a corrective or an excuse but to be clear about the limits and limitations of this thesis. I make no universal knowledge claims here. Instead, my analysis of the mid-century suggests one possible response to the problem of the Human, a response that emerges from the specifics of my context. In the closing section of this introduction, I begin to set out that response in more detail.

MID-CENTURY FABULATION: (RE)IMAGINING REALITY

> More generally, it's not beginnings and ends that count, but middles.
> Things and thoughts advance or grow out from the middle, and that's where
> you have to get to work, that's where everything unfolds.[104]

In this thesis, I read the mid-century through the lens of the posthuman. In doing so, rather than thinking of the mid-century as transitional, a stop on the journey from early to late twentieth century, or as an origin point for contemporary literature, I think of the mid-century as an unfolding in the Deleuzian sense of the term, meaning an immanent moment which connects to what came before and what comes after without any implication of cause and effect. In this dynamic 'middle', literature takes the opportunity to think otherwise about

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[102] Donna J. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies,* 14. 3 (1988), 575-599; Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

[103] Jamie B. Smith, Eva-Maria Willis, and Jane Hopkins-Walsh, 'What Does Person-Centred Care Mean, If You Weren't Considered a Person Anyway: An Engagement with Person-Centred Care and Black, Queer, Feminist, and Posthuman Approaches', *Nursing Philosophy,* 23. 3 (2022), 1-13 (p. 9).

[104] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 161.

what it might mean to be human. In the chapters that follow, I focus on five texts from a variety of genres that exemplify this open, fluid version of mid-century fiction. Working with the three facets of fabulation outlined earlier – language, reality, and ethics – I trace the presence of the posthuman as critique and ontology through, in order of discussion, *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Memento Mori* (1959) and *The Vet's Daughter* (1959). In doing so, I describe a vibrant, multifaceted, continually unfolding mid-century.

Through its subject matter, this thesis explores three well-recognised concerns of the mid-century as both an historical and a literary moment. In Chapter One, my focus is on the way in which Human norms hold bodies in check by categorising embodied differences into hierarchies of race, gender, and sex. In Chapter Two, the focus is on space and the divisions between inside and outside that bring nations, bodies, and homes into being. Finally, in Chapter Three, I turn to the distinction between life and death, exploring post-war Britain's conflation of death, victimhood, and otherness. Taken together, this triad of borders speaks to the way in which the British post-war project of re-enlightenment works to restore those hierarchical categories of difference that unravelled during World War Two. Expanding reality through the fluid indeterminacy of their poetics, the novels I discuss both critique the constructed contingency of these borders, highlighting the violence inherent in the Human as a way of understanding the world, and explore other ways of being and knowing. The result is an immanent ontology, an invitation to consider different modalities of the human which avoids recourse to the futurity of the Human by staying grounded in the here and now.

In Chapter One, I start with a discussion of *The Passion of New Eve*, the most overtly posthuman of all the texts in this thesis. Carter was born in 1940 and therefore unlike Pym (1913-1980), Markandaya (1924-2004), Spark (1918-2006), and Comyns (1907-1992) did not experience the Second World War as an adult. Situated on the brink of the contemporary technological revolution and at the end of the period of anxiety and promise that characterises the mid-century, Carter's novel has both a twentieth and a twenty-first century sensibility. This connection to the contemporary world makes *The Passion of New Eve* a helpful gateway into this thesis's exploration of the posthuman at the mid-century. In Chapter One, I bring that text together with *Quartet in Autumn* to explore the way in which these two novels reimagine the relationship between identity and embodied difference. In Carter's dystopian novel, unwanted surgical intervention turns the male protagonist, Evelyn, into the female,

Eve. Playing with the categories of male and female, *The Passion of New Eve* engages with late mid-century feminism to take issue with male and female, masculine and feminine as fixed points of difference. Against that fixity, Carter's posthuman poetics figures the world as mutable and unknowable, thereby challenging two facets of the Human: that a coherent, independent subject mediates experience and that there are two sexes. Moving away from the binary of two sexes, Carter's novel evokes what Erin Manning and Brian Massumi call a 'bodying', a material becoming that figures matter as always-in-motion potential.[105] *Quartet in Autumn*, Pym's novel about age and aging, similarly embraces indeterminacy to critique fixed categories of difference and ask what possibilities for connection and community the world misses out on when the Human takes precedence. Where *The Passion of New Eve* focuses on gender and sex, Pym's novel takes a broader look at the way in which identity holds bodies in check, exploring the structural dynamic of inclusion and exclusion that underpins the Human as a social and political paradigm. At the same time, the text also plays with form and style to evoke a multi-voiced, multi-dimensional reality that immerses the reader in a posthuman ontology of encounter akin to that explored in Carter's novel.

In Chapter Two, I consider literal as well as metaphoric borders through a reading of Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man*. Markandaya's novel is nearly twice as long as the other novels discussed in this thesis and so, in this chapter, I concentrate on this single text. In doing so, I show how the novel explores patterns of invasion and incursion in the interconnected spaces of home, nation, and body. Bringing the ideological connections between imperial India and post-war London into view, *The Nowhere Man* plays with fixed distinctions between inside and outside to reimagine 'nowhere' as non-binary 'no-where'. Bearing witness to the violence required to keep porous borders and boundaries intact, Markandaya's novel critiques mid-century debates about who gets to take up space in post-war Britain. At the same time, *The Nowhere Man* also posits a posthuman ontology grounded in encounter and becoming, a relationality that undoes '[t]he assumption of self-containment' to figure disruption and disturbance as the norm rather than the exception.[106]

This thesis's last pair of readings brings Barbara Comyns's *The Vet's Daughter* together with Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* to explore the border between life and death. Both novels find

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[105] Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 39.
[106] Tsing, p. 28.

their way to the posthuman through the posthumous, offering the reader a world in which death figures as both imminent, brought close by abuse and age, and immanent, meaning pervasive and all around. In Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*, a disembodied voice, which may or may not be death itself, upsets the elderly characters it speaks to on the telephone by disturbing normative boundaries between life and death. With Spark's 'never-the-less' poetics expanding reality to encompass all ways of being and knowing, the novel parodies an unwillingness to confront mortality while also positing a posthuman becoming that plays out in the understudied hospital spaces that frame the text. In Barbara Comyns's *The Vet's Daughter*, a levitating protagonist tells her story after she has died. There are no clues that she is either dead or able to levitate until the very end of the novel and there are no other fantastical elements in the text. Who has narrated this story? Is Alice's levitation an allegory, a metaphor, a fairy tale, or something else? Leaving these questions unanswered, *The Vet's Daughter* makes the everyday strange. In doing so, the novel draws attention to the limits of agency, reason, and self-determination, undermining the rationalist Human as a way of understanding the world. Opening to other ways of being and knowing, *The Vet's Daughter* collapses distinctions between agency and victimhood, replacing this binary dynamic with a fluid posthumanism in which precarity blends with potential and being with becoming.

The readings in these three chapters explore the presence of what Weheliye calls 'the elsewheres of Man' in mid-century fiction. In doing so, they intervene in critical debates about post-war British literature in two main ways. Firstly, in drawing on the posthuman as a critical frame, this thesis proposes a way of reading texts from this period that is attentive to mid-century literature's blending of poetics and politics. Secondly, the chapters that follow bring a new lens to bear on the work of Carter, Pym, Markandaya, Spark, and Comyns. Making connections between novels that critics do not typically read together, this thesis explores a form of post-war fabulation that anticipates contemporary theorising on the posthuman.

POSTHUMAN DIFFERENCE IN ANGELA CARTER'S *THE PASSION OF NEW EVE* AND BARBARA PYM'S *QUARTET IN AUTUMN*

This chapter explores the way in which mid-century fiction challenges and reimagines Human conceptions of difference. Where the Human approaches difference through the lens of identity, meaning classifying bodies through definable categories of race, gender, and sex, the posthuman understands difference as always-in-motion becoming, figuring matter as mutable and fluid to define difference as a verb rather than as a noun. In what follows, I read Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and Barbara Pym's *Quartet in Autumn* through a posthuman lens to show how these texts intervene in mid-century debates about gender and race by critiquing the way in which Human conceptions of difference hold bodies in check. At the same time, as well as challenging what Claire Colebrook calls a 'doxa of difference', the indeterminate, fluid, non-sense poetics of these novels opens to a version of the posthuman in which difference reads as always-in-motion becoming.

THEORISING DIFFERENCE

> Nouns – names were the most powerful words. They strike home like the pin through the butterfly – liar, cheat, girl, bastard, king and you're caught wriggling, staked through the heart by an identity, and no matter how much you squirm and protest, 'No it isn't like that,' the noun holds you down till you set fast in the post it nails you to.[107]

In Maureen Duffy's novel, *That's How It Was* (1962), Paddy recoils from the identity 'girl', bemoaning the way that language turns vitality into thingness, stratifying and holding difference in check. Nouns keep bodies static, making life wieldy and controllable by formalising a fixed identity that is as wounding, for Paddy, as a stake through the heart. In the quotation above, Paddy's complaint centres on the relationship between language, bodies, and power and so speaks to Deleuze and Guattari's conception of identity as a restriction and 'taming' of difference, as an 'iron collar' that makes difference 'thinkable':[108]

> Whenever we think difference, we tend to subordinate it to identity (from the point of view of the concept or the subject: for example, specific difference presupposes a genus as the concept of identity). We also tend to

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[107] Maureen Duffy, *That's How it Was* (London: Virago Press, 1983), p. 179.
[108] Deleuze (2020), p. 345.

subordinate it to resemblance (from the point of view of perception), to opposition (from the point of view of predicates), and to the analogous (from the point of view of judgment). In other words, we never think difference in itself.[109]

For Deleuze, the concept of difference, when approached through the lens of identity, becomes synonymous with a set of concrete nouns, those 'powerful words' that 'strike home like the pin through the butterfly'. Rather than the fixity of a noun, thinking 'difference in itself' means thinking difference as a verb, as continuous variation or as always-in-motion becoming. It is this fluid, mutable version of difference that I find in *The Passion of New Eve* and *Quartet in Autumn*. In this introduction, I outline the relationship between Human and posthuman conceptions of difference. I begin by using Brian Massumi's analogy of rules in sport to think about the connections between difference and identity. I then turn to the work of Claire Colebrook to explore ways of thinking difference outside the constraints of identity. In the second part of the discussion, I suggest that it is in playing with sense and non-sense that mid-century fiction finds a way to approach 'difference in itself'.

Just as the nouns 'liar, cheat, girl, bastard, king' hold bodies in check so too does a sport's rulebook, defining acceptable behaviour and conduct to determine how bodies in that sport interact. Given the importance of that rulebook, rugby, netball, and football, for example, become synonymous with the rules that define them; to contemporary spectators it seems as if the rules precede and therefore produce the game. But, as Massumi points out, there must have been a moment *before* the rules were set, a moment in which someone kicked or threw a ball for the first time, meaning that the rules were formulated *after* the game was first played. Rules, like nouns, are helpful because they create 'the condition of the play's identity across its serial repetitions in disparate times and places. The positivity of the rules is in preservation'; rules keep chaos at bay making it possible to play a game more than once.[110] But there is a flip side. Where rules hold back chaos, they also hold back variation, keeping bodies in check in the same way that nouns do, hence Paddy's complaint:

> Codifying capture cuts both ways. Negatively, it stops and contains variation. Positively, it preserves the game for repetition. […] From one point of view (the rulemakers' and referees') variation is a departure from

[109] Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), p. 301.
[110] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 79.

identity. From another point of view, identity is a moment (a productive lapse) in the continuation of variation.[111]

On the one hand, identity politics, a term first used by the Combahee River Collective in 1977, the same year that *The Passion of New Eve* and *Quartet in Autumn* were published, offers sanctuary and security by writing marginalised identities into the rules as equal players in the game.[112] On the other hand, with identity as a *post hoc* construction, a rule put in place after the game was initiated, a critical practice centred on identity politics risks leaving the Human fundamentally unchanged and unchallenged, interrogating the rules without making an impression on the game itself. In this chapter, while I recognise the value of identity as a tactical response to the violent exclusions of the Human, I also recognise the limitations of that response. I therefore look for an alternative lens through which to read difference in mid-century fiction.[113]

One such alternative, articulated first by Gilbert Simondon, referenced in Deleuze, and reframed by Colebrook in the context of sexual difference, is the idea of trans-individuation. Individuation is the becoming of matter, the movement from pre-individual potential into individual form.[114] Describing that pre-individual state, Colebrook argues that '"in the beginning is 'trans'": […] a not-yet differentiated singularity *from which* distinct genders, race, species, sexes, and sexualities are generated in a form of relative stability'.[115] In essence, 'prepersonal singularities' turn into 'persons' by 'taking on recognizable predicates: gender, race, sexuality'. In other words, identities individuate prepersonal matter rather than describe inherent characteristics; identities are *post hoc* rules imposed on pre-individual potential.[116] The process by which 'prepersonal singularities' become 'persons' is the process of 'trans-individuation', meaning that 'I become a singular being only by being the effect of

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[111] Massumi (2002), p. 79.
[112] 'The Combahee River Collective: A Black Feminist Statement', in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism,* ed. by Zillah R. Eisenstein (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), pp. 362-372 (p. 365).
[113] In proposing an alternative frame, this chapter also takes inspiration from Jasbir Puar's discussion of the overlap between theories of intersectionality and the concept of the assemblage. Jasbir K. Puar, '"I Would Rather be a Cyborg than a Goddess": Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory', *philoSOPHIA,* 2. 1 (2016), 49-66.
[114] In *Difference and Repetition,* Deleuze describes the 'individual' as 'a process of individuation, of actual and virtual relations that work against a necessary identification'. Understood in this way, the individual is not synonymous with Human subjectivity. Instead, individuals are 'a take on the whole of reality, where reality is not restricted to actual things that we can show or identify in the world'. Williams (2003), pp. 205, 6.
[115] Claire Colebrook, 'What Is It Like to Be a Human?', *Transgender Studies Quarterly,* 2. 2 (2015), 227-243 (p. 228). Emphasis in original.
[116] Colebrook (2015), p. 229.

encounters and relations that are not preceded by any propriety or authentic ground'.[117] The Human as a set of socio-political norms stabilises the process of trans-individuation through the predicates of gender, race, and sexuality. Rather than being fixed properties of individual bodies, categories of gender, sex, and sexuality become pragmatic overlays on the world, convenient classifications through which contemporary society organises itself rather than absolute truth. The result is that a society grounded in the Human relies on a 'doxa of difference', a 'fetishization of identity' grounded in a common-sense belief in pre-existing categories of difference.[118] In a society reliant on difference, a trans-individuating body threatens because it risks undermining a foundational tenet of what it means to be Human. In a paper which draws on the synergy between contemporary trans theory and Simondon's concept of trans-individuation, Colebrook argues:

> What a trans-individuating body threatens the doxa of difference with is not so much another difference, another identity whose singularity demands recognition and relation: if the animal and 'woman' draw me back to the singularity of my being and my world, then the trans-individuating body is evidence that difference might always be eroded by indifference, by the nonmeaning of indistinction.[119]

That is to say, the counter to Human identity is *in*difference and indistinction.

Indifference, in Colebrook's terms, turns attention away from 'the exoticism of "the other"' and towards uncategorised, prepersonal forms.[120] Instead of embodiment, indifference privileges matter, a world of shifting, individual singularities disconnected from Human categories of sex, gender, and race; indifference implies a proliferation of difference. Instead of two sexes there are Deleuze's *n* sexes, an array of possible relations that breaks the tyranny of Freud's Oedipal frame.[121] Indifference also pushes beyond a post-binary subject position. It is not that the 'trans-individuating body' somehow envelops or incorporates the plurality of contemporary identities and subject positions into a controlling and coherent subject. Instead, an indistinct and 'prepersonal' body implies a similarly indistinct and 'prepersonal' subject, entangled and coeval with that body. In other words, 'I' is not a plural in the sense of adding

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[117] Colebrook (2015), p. 229.
[118] Colebrook (2015), pp. 229, 230.
[119] Colebrook (2015), p. 230.
[120] Colebrook (2015), p. 230.
[121] Deleuze uses the example of Freud's discussion of Little Hans's phobia of horses, arguing that Freud's Oedipal schema 'reduce[s]sexuality, i.e. desire as libido, to the difference between the sexes'. The result is that '[w]hen the child sees itself reduced to one of the two sexes, masculine or feminine, it has already lost everything; man or woman already designates beings from whom *n* sexes have been stolen'. Deleuze (2006), pp. 93, 94.

identities, the indifferent 'I' is in the process of a becoming *with*. Indifference, then, is the condition for what Brian Massumi and Erin Manning call 'bodying', a form of material becoming in which matter figures as always-in-motion potential.[122] Potential here means something akin to Spinoza's *conatus*, a life force continually striving but without a specific object, end, or purpose, without a destination point. Indifference, then, counters the way in which the Human understands difference as limited to pre-existing forms and categories. Indifference rejects the idea of authentic, originary difference to turn instead to a prepersonal materiality, a moment-to-moment bodying centred on pure difference.

In this chapter, I think of *The Passion of New Eve*'s and *Quartet in Autumn*'s use of non-sense as a kind of textual bodying, an undoing of the Human limitations imposed on difference that opens to the always-in-motion becoming of the posthuman. As Deleuze describes it, sense mediates between words and things, 'introducing value or meaning into a neutral system'.[123] In other words, '[t]he extinction of a species is a neutral event if considered without values or sense; the sense of the extinction therefore brings something essential to the physical process by allowing it to be differentiated'.[124] One of the episodes from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the primary intertext for Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, serves as an exemplar here. Early in the novel, Alice, falling into a pool of her own tears, meets a 'queer-looking party' of animals and birds. After finding their way out of the water, the party, realising they are 'dripping wet, cross, and uncomfortable', need to dry off. The Mouse then takes control:

> 'Ahem!' said the Mouse with an important air. 'Are you all ready? This is the driest thing I know. Silence all round, if you please! "William the Conqueror, whose cause was favoured by the pope, was soon submitted to by the English […]"'[125]

Having 'trouble with the *sense* of words', the Mouse applies 'dry' meaning uninteresting, rather than 'dry' meaning without water, to the bodies around the pool.[126] The point is that, on their own, the cluster of consonants that make up 'dry' and the concepts of uninteresting and without water bear no relation to each other. Without sense mediating between the

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[122] Manning and Massumi, p. 39.
[123] James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's Logic of Sense: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 3.
[124] Williams (2008), p. 4.
[125] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 23.
[126] Dorothea Olkowski, 'After Alice: Alice and the Dry Tail', *Deleuze Studies,* 2. Suppl (2008), 107-122 (p. 111). Emphasis in original.

abstraction that is language and the world there is nothing intrinsic to those noises requiring them to relate to either concept. Common sense holds the two definitions of 'dry' apart while Carroll's non-sense, playing with that relationship, forces them together.

In 1977, the same year as *The Passion of New Eve* and *Quartet in Autumn* first appeared, Stuart Hall wrote about how common sense keeps mid-century culture and society in check. Setting aside 'reasoning, argument, logic, [and] thought', common sense refuses to 'examine the premises on which it is founded' thus resisting 'change' or 'correction'.[127] While sense-making is a creative act, common sense puts limits on that creativity, binding society into an unexamined ideological norm. In her recent work, Sara Ahmed, drawing in part on Hall's thinking, suggests that common sense moves through the twenty-first century 'as a legacy project', calling upon the sort of timeless truths that Hall describes to defend 'social institutions and traditions'.[128] This thesis, then, in reassessing common-sense assumptions about post-war literature also reassesses that 'legacy project'.

Take, for example, those shared narratives about 1970s feminism that influence readings of Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*. In 'Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s: Toward a Less Plausible History', Finn Enke argues that critics read the unqualified definition of sexual difference Janice Raymond sets out in *The Transsexual Empire* (1980) backwards onto the mid-century so that a narrative of exclusion dominates.[129] That exclusionary narrative privileges stories of radical feminists preventing trans people from attending feminist meetings and events. Nuancing this narrative, Enke asks why 'stories of exclusion and abjection are so magnetic' when the evidence suggests that the reality was much more fluid.[130] There are, Enke argues, ways to talk about this period which 'don't

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[127] Stuart Hall, 'Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect'', in *Mass Communication and Society,* ed. by James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott (London: Edward Arnold [for] the Open University Press, 1977), pp. 315-348 (p. 325). As Hall goes on to say, 'You cannot learn, through common sense, *how things are*: you can only discover *where they fit* into the existing scheme of things.' Hall, p. 325. Emphasis in original.

[128] Sara Ahmed, 'Common Sense as a Legacy Project', <https://feministkilljoys.com/2023/05/30/common-sense-as-a-legacy-project/> [Accessed 9th August 2023].

[129] Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* interprets the sexed body as a fixed point of difference. As Sally Hines describes it, Raymond understands sex as 'chromosomally dependent and thus secured at birth', a position which results in a categorical rejection of transsexual women as women and a strict policing of the boundaries of sex. Sally Hines, *Transforming Gender: Transgender Practices of Identity, Intimacy and Care* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2007), p. 18.

[130] Finn Enke, 'Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s: Toward a Less Plausible History', *Transgender Studies Quarterly,* 5. 1 (2018), 9-29 (p. 10).

perpetuate the abjection and removal of trans from feminism'.[131] In an argument that echoes Massumi's sports analogy, Enke's work figures this dominant narrative of exclusion as a *post hoc*, common-sense interpretation of contemporary rules rather than a faithful retelling of mid-century 'mixings'.[132]

In line with Enke's 'plea for a more mixed-up sensibility', this chapter brings together two texts which convention typically holds apart.[133] In doing so, it blends Enke's focus on social and cultural 'mixings' with an attention to the mixed-upness of literary style and genre at the mid-century. Even though Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and Pym's *Quartet in Autumn* share a publication date, critics rarely discuss these novels together. The violent, dystopian world Carter conjures in *The Passion of New Eve* and the slow-moving chronicle of age and aging centred on the minutiae of urban living that Pym offers in *Quartet in Autumn* appear to be different in kind. Yet, despite their surface differences, as this chapter shows, these novels share both a fluid, indeterminate poetics and an engagement with mid-century debates about sex, gender, and race. Critiquing the way in which Human conceptions of difference hold bodies in check, *The Passion of New Eve* and *Quartet in Autumn* enact Enke's 'mixings', reimagining difference as an always-in-motion verb rather than a static noun.

To explore that mixed-upness at the textual level, in what follows I take inspiration from Kara Keeling's work on sense, non-sense, and embodiment. Keeling draws on Deleuze to define common sense as the 'shared set of motor contrivances' and 'collective set of memory-images that includes experiences, knowledges, traditions, and so on' open and available to the body in the process of 'self-constitution'.[134] In *The Witches Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*, Keeling explores moments where an onscreen affective response does not correspond to common sense, thereby refusing the typical filmic cliché and tracing a line of flight which can 'explode the human'.[135] Where common sense keeps the borders of the Human intact, upholding categories of difference, keeping bodies in check, and limiting their capacity to act, in Paddy's terms 'strik[ing] home like the pin through the butterfly', non-sense resists and finds ways outside the restrictions of

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[131] Enke, p. 11.
[132] Enke, p. 10.
[133] Enke, p. 10.
[134] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 14, 13.
[135] Keeling, p. 157.

that Human paradigm, disinhibiting bodies by orienting them towards not what is but what might be. In other words, 'nonsense is not the absence of sense but rather the presence of an important kind of sense that can only operate through nonsense'.[136] Following Keeling, in this chapter I read moments of material and linguistic non-sense in mid-century fiction as moments of resistance, mixed-up moments which 'explode the Human' by turning attention to difference in itself. In doing so, I show how *The Passion of New Eve* and *Quartet in Autumn* play with sense and non-sense to evoke a textual bodying, setting up an ontology of encounter in which reader and text become *with* each other.

ANGELA CARTER: *THE PASSION OF NEW EVE*

> [T]here went missing in my own mind not, indeed, my sense of my identity (on which I retained a clear, firm clasp throughout the lamentable incident which I am now going, in a manner as straightforward and circumstantial as I can muster, to narrate) but a piece of information which, though less individual to me than my identity, was in certain immediate respects even more vital.[137]

In Brigid Brophy's 1969 novel, *In Transit*, Pat (Evelyn Hilary according to their passport) tries to answer the 'vital' question of whether they are male or female. Suspended in the 'interval' of an airport, Pat finds they have forgotten whether they are a man or a woman and so becomes stranded, unable to move on without having the question of their sex answered.[138] In Brophy's playful text, a binarily sexed body is a ticket to somewhere else; sex, rather than gender, is the animating force that orients bodies to the world and keeps them moving forward. For Pat, sex is not equivalent to identity, nor is it necessary for a coherent sense of self, but it is indispensable for getting about. As an epigraph for this chapter, Brophy's novel parallels *The Passion of New Eve* by turning attention away from what sexual difference means and towards what that difference enables or makes possible. What work does difference do?

Like *In Transit*, Angela Carter's seventh novel, *The Passion of New Eve,* imagines a world in which sex both is and is not a given property of individual subjects. In the violent and

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[136] Williams (2008), p. 68.

[137] Brigid Brophy, *In Transit* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002), p. 63.

[138] Sara Ahmed, 'Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement', *International Journal of Cultural Studies,* 2. 3 (1999), 329-347 (p. 330).

fragmented future of Carter's first-person narrative, enhanced medical intervention surgically transforms an unwilling Evelyn into Eve, a transformation that the text balances against transgender movie star Tristessa de St Ange's choice to live as a woman. Questions of reality and authenticity are central to the novel, a point underlined by Carter's decision to begin the story in the dream space of a cinema. In that dream space, *The Passion of New Eve*'s narrator, Evelyn, is watching Tristessa, his childhood obsession. The cinema trip is a form of farewell the day before Evelyn leaves Britain for America, taking up a university job in what he imagines will be a 'clean, hard, bright city where towers reared to the sky in a paradigm of technological aspiration'.[139] Instead, Evelyn finds himself unemployed and living in a 'lurid, Gothic darkness' surrounded by rats and murder.[140] He decides to stay in America regardless and has a brief, violent relationship with Leilah, a relationship which ends with Leilah's pregnancy, an illicit abortion, Leilah's hospitalisation, and Evelyn's liability for the medical bills. Evelyn escapes to the desert only to be captured and taken to Beulah, an underground city run by Mother. Mother is a skilled surgeon and operates on Evelyn to create Eve. Again, Eve runs away, this time to escape the pregnancy Mother has planned for her. Captured by Zero, Eve lives for a time with his harem. Zero is also obsessed by Tristessa, now thought to be living somewhere in seclusion in the desert. Zero believes Tristessa made him infertile, and his focus is revenge, tracking her down only to discover that Tristessa is anatomically male. Eve and Tristessa escape together while Zero and his harem die in the spinning collapse of Tristessa's glass house. After spending the night in the desert, Tristessa is murdered by a group of teenage soldiers while Eve again manages to escape. Eve then finds Lilith, formerly Leilah, who takes her to the West coast to meet the faded and fading Mother. Eve's final journey in this episodic novel is an incomplete one. She steals a small boat and pushes off out to sea, leaving questions about her future unanswered.

In what follows, I find in *The Passion of New Eve*'s whistle-stop tour through issues of biological essentialism, gender acquisition, sexuality, and subjectivity a critique of Enlightenment rationalism alongside an ontology of encounter that evokes a posthuman becoming. Embodied difference becomes the lens through which Carter's novel challenges two widespread assumptions about the Human: the binary division of sex into male and female and the presence of a coherent, independent subject as the mediator of experience. In

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[139] Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Virago Press, 2001), p. 10.
[140] Carter (2001), p. 10.

place of the certainties of the Human, the novel's posthuman poetics tunes into the possibilities of sense and non-sense to lead the reader into an unknowable world, a world which fractures the coherent, volitional 'I' and in which, as the final part of my reading shows, two sexes multiply to become *n* sexes.

There are hints at Carter's posthuman credentials throughout scholarship on her work and particularly in discussions that concern the issue of subjectivity. Joanne Trevenna, for example, describes Eve/lyn as 'involved in a continual process of becoming', Şule Akdoğan writes about the 'decentered self' in the context of *The Passion of New Eve*, and Paul Magrs invokes Donna Haraway's cyborg to think through the 'unstable, shifting subjectivity' in Carter's canon.[141] In relation to *The Passion of New Eve*, Alison Lee describes the moment when Eve/lyn looks in the mirror for the first time after their surgery as exemplary of the 'dizzying' array of subject positions in the novel.[142] This complex mirroring evokes multiplicity such that '[t]he constantly shifting and often ambiguous focalization, the multiple "voices" of the intertexts, and the temporal indeterminacy of persistence of vision point out not only the multiplicity of narrative but also multiply the possibilities for gender beyond the absolutes of maleness and femaleness'.[143] In a similar vein, Lizzie Welby describes the text as 'rhizomatic'.[144] For Rebecca Munford, Carter's work is 'multiple and unstable; it is concerned with offering new perceptions of wor(l)ds, new ways of knowing and seeing', while Rosi Braidotti describes Carter's writing as an example of 'a new "post-human" techno-teratological phenomenon that privileges the deviant or the mutant over the more conventional versions of the human'.[145] Yet, despite references to posthuman themes, to date, no critic has quite set aside the sense of an independent, volitional subject as the primary mediator of experience or the reliance on difference as the primary determiner of identity in

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[141] Joanne Trevenna, 'Gender as Performance: Questioning the 'Butlerification' of Angela Carter's Fiction', *Journal of Gender Studies,* 11. 3 (2002), 267-276 (p. 274); Şule Akdoğan, 'Undecidability as a Feminist Strategy in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and Fay Weldon's *Praxis*', *Women's Studies,* 50. 5 (2021), 428-442 (p. 441); Paul Magrs, 'Boys Keep Swinging: Angela Carter and the Subject of Men', in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism,* ed. by Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London and New York Routledge, 1997), pp. 184-197 (p. 194).

[142] Alison Lee, 'Angela Carter's New Eve(lyn): De/EnGendering Narrative', in *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology & British Women Writers,* ed. by Kathy Mezei (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 238-249 (p. 241).

[143] Lee, p. 243.

[144] Lizzy Welby, 'Abjected Landscapes: Crossing Psychogenic Borders in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*', *Studies in the Literary Imagination,* 47. 1 (2014), 73-87 (p. 77).

[145] Rebecca Munford, 'Angela Carter and the Politics of Intertextuality', in *Re-Visiting Angela Carter: Texts, Contexts, Intertexts,* ed. by Rebecca Munford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1-20 (p. 16); Rosi Braidotti, 'Teratologies', in *Deleuze and Feminist Theory,* ed. by Claire Colebrook and Ian Buchanan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 156-172 (p. 157).

The Passion of New Eve. Those are the topics that this chapter addresses directly, building on these hints and allusions to show how Carter folds critique of the Human into an ontological posthumanism rooted in encounter and becoming.

Finally, and importantly, a note on terms. This chapter follows convention and uses '*sex* to refer to characteristics of the physical body, *gender* to refer to psychological attributes and social behaviours that are associated with masculinity and femininity, and *sexuality* to the realm of erotic desires and practices'.[146] These terms help to make explicit the way in which Human society organises itself around two sexes (male and female) which are taken as corresponding to two genders (masculine and feminine), a structure that underpins the implicit and explicit social, cultural, and political regulation of sexuality. In the discussion that follows, I acknowledge Tristessa's chosen gender by using she/her pronouns throughout. I follow Claire Westall and use the name Eve/lyn and the neutral pronouns 'they/them' wherever I refer to the text's first-person narrator. In doing so, I am signalling not just the transgender position of Eve/lyn as Westall does, but also the inherent ambiguity and instability of this narrative 'I'.[147] I use Eve (she/her) and Evelyn (he/him) to distinguish between this ambivalent narrative voice and the embodied, textual actors within the novel.

CRITIQUING THE HUMAN

Enlightenment ideas about what it means to be human figure as critical reference points throughout *The Passion of New Eve*. From the epigraph by John Locke, 'In the beginning all the world was America', to the image of sovereign Man sailing off on 'his' own into the sunset at the end of the novel, Carter's text employs what theorists now describe as a critical posthumanist frame to call into question Human conceptions of subjectivity and embodiment.[148] In this section, I explore that posthuman perspective through attention to the novel's structure, form, and style. In doing so, I show how, despite Carter's violent,

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[146] Rebecca M. Jordan-Young, *Brain Storm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 15. Emphasis in original.

[147] Claire Westall, ''His almost vanished voice': Gendering and Transgendering Bodily Signification and the Voice in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*', in *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices: Appropriating, Resisting, Embracing,* ed. by Claire Westall and Rina Kim (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 131-147.

[148] Elaine Jordan first pointed in this direction by suggesting that Carter 'rethink[s] the gables of Enlightened modernity'. Maggie Tonkin then develops that reference, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari to explore Carter's critique of Enlightenment conceptions of utopia. Elaine Jordan, 'The Dangerous Edge', in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter,* ed. by Lorna Sage (London: Virago Press, 2004), pp. 201-226 (p. 208); Maggie Tonkin, 'Traveling Hopefully: The Utopian Impulse in the Fiction of Angela Carter', *Contemporary Women's Writing,* 9. 2 (2015), 219-237.

dystopian plot line, *The Passion of New Eve* chooses humour, with a focus on parody, as the primary mode of critique.

That critique makes its presence felt in a variety of ways across the novel. Take the form of the text, for example. Beginning with Evelyn as a productive member of society and ending with Eve/lyn cast out to sea, *The Passion of New Eve* delivers an inverted *Bildungsroman*, reversing the 'genre of demarginalization' to call into question the linear, coherent development of subjectivity which that form typically describes.[149] Similarly, in the friction between Evelyn's intellectualism and Eve's preoccupation with her physical form, the novel sets up a Cartesian critique, parodying Descartes's absolute distinction between mind and body by placing those twin concerns in the impossibly separate subjects of Eve and Evelyn. Through Mother's surgery, the perfectionism of Man also comes under the spotlight, prefiguring a transhuman agenda by imagining a future in which bodies are projects perfectly realised through advanced medical intervention. In effect, *The Passion of New Eve* takes the Human as a rational, self-determining being to the extreme, making both the figure and the concept of Man ridiculous.

The incongruous coherence and rationalism of *The Passion of New Eve*'s narrative 'I' offers perhaps the best example of Carter's critique of the Human. The novel opens, for example, with Eve/lyn's notorious articulation of dominating, educated masculinity: 'The last night I spent in London, I took some girl or other to the movies and, through her mediation, I paid you a little tribute of spermatozoa, Tristessa'.[150] By naming Tristessa in the first sentence, Carter turns *The Passion of New Eve* into an elegy, a love letter, and an act of memorialisation, a way of coming to terms with a loss underlined by the English meaning of the French word *tristesse*, sadness. Yet, this loss conflicts with the speaker's disdain for the 'girl' and the pretentious, medical term 'spermatozoa' such that the emotional implications of the novel's opening jar with the text's overblown expression to make fun of Eve/lyn's controlled, first-person prose.

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[149] Joseph Slaughter, 'Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects: The *Bildungsroman* and International Human Rights Law ', in *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature,* ed. by Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 41-64 (p. 48).
[150] Carter (2001), p 5.

That jarring continues throughout the novel as, disconcertingly, the language of the text remains grammatically stable, structurally coherent, and largely dispassionate despite describing rape, murder, and extreme social dysfunction. On one level, this measured tone underlines the narrative's status as recollection as Eve/lyn describes a set of events from which they are now at one remove. On another level, there is comedy in the absurd dissonance between the high blown language of the text and the banal events described: 'I had a choc-ice and my companion a strawberry sundae. We sat and ate our ice-creams under the flickering blessings of the divine Tristessa'.[151] On yet another level, this self-assured narrative 'I' exemplifies the type of hegemonic masculinity that the novel works to subvert, a masculinity tied to ideas of transcendent Human exceptionalism and reflected in the dismissal of 'some girl or other'.[152] In the introduction to this thesis, I described how the Human persists as a structuring paradigm, in part, because the concept transcends critique by holding out the promise of a better, fairer future. In a similar vein, Eve/lyn's ostentatious language generates a grandiose meta-narrative which works to elevate sex and violence to the level of myth and legend. As well as a hyper-masculine contempt for women, *The Passion of New Eve*'s opening parodies one of the tactics that allows the Human to elude criticism, a kind of meta-textual mythologising through which the mundane sexual encounter in the cinema becomes a stately ritual.

Carter's parody also makes fun of the way in which the Human uses the nonhuman to find unity and coherence, the way that 'I' only comes into being through 'not I'. With 'woman' figured as that stabilising other, *The Passion of New Eve* makes fun of the work the Human does to keep that fixed point secure. Take, for example, the beginning of Chapter Seven, the transition chapter between Eve's escape from Beulah just after she has seen herself for the first time as a woman and her capture by Zero:

> I know nothing. I am a tabula erasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched
> egg. I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman's shape.
> Not a woman, no; both more and less than a real woman. Now I am a being
> as mythic and monstrous as Mother herself; but I cannot bring myself to

[151] Carter (2001), p 8. In 1985 Carter herself described the novel as 'a piece of black comedy'. John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 86.
[152] See Magrs (2014) and Westall and Kim's anthology for detailed analyses of issues of masculinity in the text. Claire Westall and Rina Kim, eds., *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices: Appropriating, Resisting, Embracing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

think of that. Eve remains wilfully in the state of innocence that precedes the fall.[153]

The noun 'woman' functions as the convergence point here, clustered in the middle of the text and bringing Locke's ideal of the Human into relation with the Bible story. The reformulated 'tabula rasa' metaphor, from Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, pairs with Eve's new body as the literalisation of the 'blank sheet', catching Eve/lyn in the middle as they try to navigate that position. The Biblical origin myth and its Enlightenment counterpart work against each other as Carter shows how the weight of meaning which the Bible story invests in the noun 'woman' undoes Locke's idealistic conception of untainted beginnings for anyone other than the unmarked 'male'. Innocence is not available to Eve, she must 'will' it into life, suggesting that, since the Biblical fall, unencumbered rebirth is impossible. As Carter famously declares in *The Sadeian Woman*, 'our flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else does'.[154] In other words, the biblical myth of the fall constructs a version of femininity which the text settles on the noun 'woman' through a representational relation it seems impossible to escape. 'Woman' as myth and 'woman' as embodied being struggle against each other, catching Eve/lyn and Eve in the middle. In this way, Carter's mockery of Locke's work both foregrounds 'woman' as an overdetermined Human construction rather than a fixed point of difference *and* skilfully picks apart those myths that determine 'her' to mock the Human's attempts to hold that fixed point in place.

Discussions of Carter's views on gender and sex dominate scholarship about *The Passion of New Eve*. Does the novel theorise 'women' as biologically determined or socially constructed? Is Carter's text supporting or undermining the 'essentializing tendency within 1970s feminism'?[155] What is the text saying about the interplay between societal norms, gender identity, and body morphology? In early attempts to rehabilitate Carter's 'problematic feminism', critics made alliances with Judith Butler's theories of performativity to figure gender in *The Passion of New Eve* as a construction and hint at a 'queer sensibility' in the

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[153] Carter (2001), p 83.
[154] Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago Press, 1995), p. 9. Published a year after *The Passion of New Eve* in 1978, *The Sadeian Woman*'s analysis of the stories of Justine and Juliette in the Marquis de Sade's writings is often read as a companion piece to Carter's novel, highlighting a shared interest in questions of sexuality across the two texts.
[155] Nicoletta Caputo, 'Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve:* Sexual Transmutation as Psychophysical Exile ', in *Displaced Persons: Conditions of Exile in European Culture,* ed. by Sharon Ouditt (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 138-148 (p. 139).

novel.[156] While Joanne Trevenna questions that 'Butlerification', reading the text as having more in common with the work of Simone de Beauvoir, the problem she discusses is still one of origins: does 'I' pre-exist 'woman' or does 'woman' pre-exist 'I'?[157] This chapter takes a step back from these discussions of a first cause, reading the text as a critical posthumanist narrative to suggest that Carter's humour instead explores the work that difference does to hold the Human in place.[158] Whether difference is biologically determined or socially constructed, mid-century (re)constructions of Enlightenment man bring 'woman' as a fixed point of difference into literal being. *The Passion of New Eve* materialises that process by figuring Evelyn as the determinate of Eve. By refusing to allow the category of 'woman' to stand unquestioned, however, the novel also calls the Human into question, thereby intervening in debates about what it means to be human and making space for alternatives to that bounded, rational, hierarchical paradigm.

It is those alternatives I explore in the rest of this reading, showing how the text goes beyond a critical posthumanist critique of the way in which 'man' brings 'woman' into being to evoke a posthuman bodying. I begin that discussion with consideration of Carter's poetics. In 1997, Elaine Jordan criticised scholars for allowing politics rather than poetics to take centre stage in their analysis of Carter's work.[159] Responding to Jordan's critique, Rebecca Munford foregrounds Carter's intertextuality to explore 'the dissonances and fissures between style and substance' in her novels.[160] This chapter takes analysis of Carter's poetics a step further, identifying a posthuman poetics in *The Passion of New Eve*. Critics typically read *The Passion of New Eve*'s mocking tone as emblematic of Carter's postmodernist frame. As postmodernist equivocation, the novel becomes caught up in distinctions between 'signifier

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[156] Lucie Armitt, 'The Fragile Frames of *The Bloody Chamber*', in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism,* ed. by Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 88-99 (p. 88); Rachel Carroll, *Transgender and The Literary Imagination: Changing Gender in Twentieth-Century Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 65.

[157] Trevenna, p. 271.

[158] Andrzej Gąsiorek, in his 1990s summary of mid-century fiction, firmly positions Carter as a postmodernist. It is a position shared by many of Carter's early critics, including Christina Britzolakis who writes about Carter's 'postmodern aesthetic'. More recently, critics such as Kari Jegerstedt and Rebecca Munford have questioned whether the term fully reflects the range of Carter's skill and ability. Christina Britzolakis, 'Angela Carter's Fetishism', in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism,* ed. by Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 43-58 (p. 44); Kari Jegerstedt, 'The Art of Speculation: Allegory and Parody as Critical Reading Strategies in *The Passion of New Eve*', in *Angela Carter: New Critical Readings,* ed. by Sonya Andermahr and Lawrence Phillips (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), pp. 130-146; Munford, p. 13.

[159] Elaine Jordan, 'Afterword', in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism,* ed. by Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London and New York Routledge, 1997), pp. 216-220.

[160] Munford, p. 13.

and signified, sign and world, representation and the real'.[161] Critical inquiry then traces these points of reflexivity to bind that inquiry into a kind of 'terminal reflexiveness', a never-ending feedback loop in which *The Passion of New Eve* becomes a hyper-referential space holding the text and the world it references in stasis.[162] Paying attention to the novel's critique of the Human and reading *The Passion of New Eve* through a posthuman rather than a postmodern lens, this thesis avoids that feedback loop, building on Eve's description of herself as 'mythic and monstrous' to show how Carter's non-sense poetics finds a way out of that dynamic of real and unreal, signifier and signified in favour of a shifting, always-in-motion becoming *with*.

THE POETICS OF WRITING FROM THE MIDDLE

In 'Notes from the Front Line', written for Michelene Wandor's 1983 collection *On Gender and Writing,* Carter famously describes herself as being 'in the demythologising business'. She goes on to describe *The Passion of New Eve* as her 'one anti-mythic novel'.[163] As defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a myth is '[a] traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something'.[164] In other words, myths are not just stories or fables, they are *creation* stories; myths, like rules, are *post hoc* attempts to posit an origin, a beginning which the world then repeats. In the passage that leads up to Carter's declaration of her work as anti-mythic she discusses the summer of 1968, the period during which she began to question 'the nature of my reality as a woman', including reflecting on '[h]ow that social fiction of my "femininity" was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing'.[165] Myths, for Carter, function in the same way as rules in a sport. Rather than being the starting point they appear to be, they come *after* the game has already been invented, taming difference and reifying identity. Understanding myth in the same way as Massumi

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[161] Claire Colebrook, *Sex After Life: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 2* (Open Humanities Press, 2014), p. 213. Emphasis removed.

[162] Lorna Sage uses the phrase 'terminal reflexiveness' when discussing the use of postmodernism in Carter's work. Rather than postmodern, Sage prefers Linda Hutcheon's term 'historiographic metafiction', meaning fiction that interrogates the situated subject as a discursive creation. Novels such as *The Passion of New Eve*, Hutcheon's work suggests, pay attention to 'how we represent – how we construct – our view of reality and ourselves'. The issue with Hutcheon's definition in the context of this thesis is the subjectivity implied by the pronouns 'we' and 'our'. Lorna Sage, *Angela Carter* (Tavistock: Northcote/British Council, 2005), p. 58. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 40.

[163] Angela Carter, *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), p. 38.

[164] 'myth, n.', in *Oxford English Dictionary,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[165] Carter (1997), p. 38. Emphasis removed.

describes rules, as a 'codifying capture', means that myth 'stops and contains variation' while also 'preserv[ing] the game for repetition'. In Carter's essay, the game is 'femininity' with society parsing bodies through myth to produce the identity 'woman'. In what follows, I read *The Passion of New Eve* as an anti-mythic novel, meaning that I pay attention to the restrictions that myth imposes on bodies and to the way in which the novel's poetics, including the text's structure, form, style, and sentence composition, reworks and reimagines those restrictions.

I find a helpful model for Carter's anti-mythic poetics in Deleuze and Guattari's call to 'kill metaphor' and 'proceed from the middle'.[166] As they describe it, metaphor presupposes a distinction between the literal and the figurative thereby bringing with it an 'anthropocentric entourage' including the baggage of binary hierarchies associated with the Human.[167] Metaphor keeps the Human at the centre of interpretation by depending on shared perceptions of reality reproduced in representational form. Inherent in metaphor is 'a kind of transfer of sense, a relationship of resemblance, or imitation, or mimesis, or even an imaginary identification', a reification of difference as the condition of identity.[168] That is to say, the relationship between the metaphoric and the literal, which functions in the same way as that between myth and reality, where reality and the literal are the privileged terms, depends on a hierarchical web of common-sense resemblances that trap individuals into a Human frame thereby taming, categorising, and stratifying difference.

To unbind difference from the binary of real and representation, Deleuze and Guattari advocate for 'a relationship of becoming' within language. In that relationship, 'one term does not simply resemble the other; rather, each term encounters the other, and the becoming is something that passes between the two, outside the two. In literature, this "in between" is a pure affect or percept'.[169] The literary example which Deleuze and Guattari use to illustrate

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[166] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 70. Deleuze and Guattari (2019), p. 27.

[167] Deleuze and Guattari (1986), p 36.

[168] Daniel Smith, 'Sense and Literality: Why There Are No Metaphors in Deleuze's Philosophy', in *Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy of Freedom: Freedom's Refrains,* ed. by Dorothea Olkowski and Eftichis Pirovolaki (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 44-67 (p. 60).

[169] Smith (2019), p. 60. Italics removed. Discussing rhizomatic literature, in *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari use examples from German romanticism: 'Kleist, Lenz, and Büchner have another way of traveling and moving: proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing. American literature, and already English literature, manifest this rhizomatic direction to an even greater extent; they know how to move between things, establish a logic of the AND, overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings'. Deleuze and Guattari (2019), p. 27.

their point is the relationship between Ahab and Moby Dick. It is not that Ahab transforms into the whale or that the whale represents aspects of his character but that both Ahab and Moby Dick 'lose their status as subjects in favor of "an infinitely proliferating patchwork" of affects that escape their form'.[170] The consequence of that escape is a shift in critical focus away from exploring the symbolism or meaning of a text and towards consideration of the concepts and ideas that text brings into being. Rather than asking what *The Passion of New Eve* means, approaching Carter's novel through the lens of encounter invites attention to what the text makes possible.

Middle writing, then, is a form of what Povinelli calls 'immanent critique', the enfolding of beginnings and endings into the ongoing interplay of continuous variation. In the context of *The Passion of New Eve*, that middle-writing looks like non-sense. Evoking *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Carter's novel makes myths come alive in the same way as the animals, objects and metaphors do in Carroll's story, turning Eve/lyn into an Alice figure forced to navigate and make sense of Wonderland as best they can.[171] While common sense reads Eve's fall as myth, meaning not present in the 'real' world, Carter's non-sensical text materialises Eve to conflate myth and reality. That conflation sets up encounters with, rather than delivering representations of, second wave feminism, biological essentialism, gender identity, and subjectivity. Rather than adjudicating between opinions or deciding on what is 'true', those encounters work to produce something new, with the text coming into being in relation to these myths just as these myths come into being in relation to the text.

Structurally, *The Passion of New Eve*'s cyclical form sets up a counterpoint to the linear paradigm of the Human, opening the way for a posthuman becoming. The closing chapter, for example, begins with the sentence, '[w]e start from our conclusions', returning the reader to the beginning and inviting a second reading.[172] Taking up that invitation, the reader finds the novel begins and ends with Tristessa, recreating Leilah's description of Tristessa as the symbolic snake eating its own tail, 'the uroboros, the perfect circle, the vicious circle, the dead end'.[173] Yet, Carter is careful to avoid the 'dead end' this circularity implies. Returning

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[170] Smith (2019), p. 60.
[171] The three main mythic forms Eve/lyn encounters in Carter's Wonderland are 'the Bible', 'the alchemical tradition' and 'psychoanalysis'. Jegerstedt, p. 133.
[172] Carter (2001), p 191.
[173] Carter (2001), p 173. Writing in 1996, Steven Connor argues that, '[f]rom about half-way through, [*The Passion of New Eve*] itself seems to give up its commitment to the forward movement and starts to circle in on

to the novel's opening line, 'you' simultaneously calls to Tristessa as the intended reader *and* denotes the reader, whoever they are, as Tristessa. This 'you' opens the novel out from its closed loop, putting the text in relation to the world outside itself and inviting the reader to become an active participant in the construction of meaning. From this perspective, the encounter between the text and the reader produces an unforeseeable interaction that models a world always in the process of becoming.

Carter discusses the relationship between author and reader in a 1985 interview with John Haffenden, reflecting on the mixed reception to *The Passion of New Eve* and the futility and hubris of authorial intent. As Carter describes it, it is the reader that generates meaning, not the author:

> One of the snags is that I do put everything in a novel to be *read* – read the way allegory was intended to be read, the way you are supposed to read *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight* – on as many levels as you can comfortably cope with at the time.[174]

Carter's 'many levels' calls to mind Deleuze and Guattari's 'plateaus'. As a text, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) is a 'multiplicity', a work which the reader can approach in any order and in which each chapter connects to every other chapter through 'superficial underground stems, in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome'.[175] Deleuze and Guattari borrow the idea of plateaus from Gregory Bateson, describing a plateau as 'a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end'.[176] The result is a text in the midst of posthuman becoming, a shifting matrix of signs which defies final interpretation, never settling into definitive meaning. Reading Carter's 'many levels' as 'plateaus' positions the reader and each unique reading experience as part of that assemblage of textual becoming, undoing the possibility of a definitive textual interpretation.

The ending of *The Passion of New Eve* emphasises the indeterminacy of that text-reader assemblage, leaving Eve/lyn probably, although not definitively, pregnant. Carter does not confirm their pregnancy one way or the other, leaving it open for the reader to decide. In

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itself in a series of thickening concentricities'. Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 35.
[174] Haffenden, p. 86. Emphasis in original.
[175] Deleuze and Guattari (2019), p 23.
[176] Deleuze and Guattari (2019), p 23.

doing so, the novel delivers its own version of Erwin Schrödinger's famous thought experiment about a cat in a box. As Karen Barad describes it, the quantum mechanics experiment is more complicated than popularly imagined but the point is clear:

> It is *not* the case that the cat is either alive or dead and that we simply do not know which; or that the cat is both alive and dead simultaneously (this possibility is logically excluded, since [alive] and [dead] are understood to be mutually exclusive states); or that the cat is partly alive and partly dead (a kitty in a coma); or that the cat is in a state of being neither alive nor dead (a vampire cat living among other "undead" creatures). Rather, the correct way to understand [the experiment] is to realize that the cat's fate is not simply metaphorically *entangled* with the radioactive source - it is literally in an *entangled state*.[177]

Eve/lyn's unknowable pregnancy, like the cat's entanglement with the atom, upsets Enlightenment trust in objective reason and knowledge to implicate the reader and figure the world as both unknown *and* unknowable. In place of a knowable world, *The Passion of New Eve* offers readers a becoming *with,* an entangled position in which reader and text, Eve/lyn and their pregnancy, both 'escape their form'. Here is Colebrook's trans-individuating body in another guise, a non-sense cat and a non-sense pregnancy, both existing in a material *in*difference that opens to alternatives to the Human.

At the sentence level, that indifference also features, calling into question the apparent coherence of the text's narrative 'I'. The short declarative statements in Chapter Seven I quoted earlier and repeat here for ease of reference, for example, appear straightforward but read with an attention to sense become more puzzling:

> I know nothing. I am a tabula erasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg. I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman's shape. Not a woman, no; both more and less than a real woman. Now I am a being as mythic and monstrous as Mother herself; but I cannot bring myself to think of that. Eve remains wilfully in the state of innocence that precedes the fall.[178]

The first sentence of the passage, 'I know nothing', is non-sense, the statement is false – to know that one knows nothing is to know something. Neither is 'tabula erasa' correct, Eve/lyn is not a blank sheet of paper, they are the text the reader holds in their hands. Eve/lyn's 'I cannot bring myself to think of that' is undone by the thought that precedes it while Eve's

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[177] Barad, p. 278. Emphasis in original.
[178] Carter (2001), p 83.

'innocence' is similarly undermined by her decision to will that state into being. Carter sets up 'woman' as a negative space, an identity which Eve/lyn dances around, is 'more and less than', but cannot claim. From a Butlerian perspective, this dance performs the relationality of subject and norm: Eve/lyn exceeds the bounds of 'woman' and so cannot be held by the noun but nor can they escape it. From a posthuman perspective, the 'I' in this passage literalises Kant's fractured Human subject to reframe postmodern instability as posthuman multiplicity and unbind the text from the narrative 'I'.

Take, for example, the scene in which Eve/lyn looks in the mirror for the first time after their surgery:

> But when I looked in the mirror, I saw Eve; I did not see myself. I saw a young woman who, though she was I, I could in no way acknowledge as myself, for this one was only a lyrical abstraction of femininity to me, a tinted arrangement of curved lines.[179]

Carter presents the reader with a woman looking at a man who looks back at the woman who used to be a man all vying for position in the single subject denoted by 'I'. For those persuaded by Kant's stabilising distinction between 'I am' and 'I am not' to expect coherence between the speaker and the subject represented by 'I', that array of potential subject positions becomes 'dizzying'. But rather than searching for coherence in the Human 'I', Deleuze finds creativity in the idea of 'I' as a split subject:

> in so far as the Cogito refers to a fractured I, an I split from end to end by the form of time which runs through it, it must be said that Ideas swarm in the fracture, constantly emerging on its edges, ceaselessly coming out and going back, being composed in a thousand different manners.[180]

Like Deleuze, *The Passion of New Eve* revels in the fracture of 'I', finding it full of potential and possibility. In the extract from Chapter Seven, 'I', speaking in the present tense from a future position about a remembered event, is simultaneously blank and written, not woman and (more than) woman, knowing something and knowing nothing.

In this discussion, I have positioned Carter's non-sense text, a novel that 'do[es] away with foundations' and 'nullify[s] endings and beginnings', as a mid-century example of Deleuze and Guattari's writing from the middle.[181] This circular novel, ending with the status of Eve's

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[179] Carter (2001), p. 74.
[180] Deleuze (2020), p. 225.
[181] Deleuze and Guattari (2019), p. 27.

pregnancy both unknown and unknowable, roots itself in indeterminacy to become *with* the reader and evoke posthuman alternatives to the discrete rationalism of a Human paradigm. At the sentence level, the complex mobility of the novel's language undercuts the Human as a coherent subject position, evoking the creative potential inherent in a fractured 'I'. In the final part of this reading, I turn to Tristessa to ask what the implications of Carter's posthuman poetics are for sexed bodies. If non-sense frees 'I' from Human subjectivity, what does non-sense do to the body? How might the concept of bodying help to explain the mystery that is Tristessa? And in what ways does Tristessa's bodying unbind the novel from a normative doxa of difference in favour of an indifferent becoming?

TRISTESSA AND BECOMING-IMPERCEPTIBLE

As she is in the title of the novel, Tristessa is everywhere and nowhere in *The Passion of New Eve*; passion as an echo of Christ's time of suffering is also an evocation of Tristessa as Eve/lyn's first object of desire. Even as the text's opening sentence directs the novel towards Tristessa, 'I paid you a little tribute of spermatozoa, Tristessa', the silent movie star stays hidden behind Eve/lyn's self-centred narrative. As a result, she is largely unknowable, a contingent materiality entangled with both Eve/lyn and the reader. Approaching Tristessa's house in the desert for the first time, Eve/lyn describes Tristessa as

> one of those super-sensitive ghosts who manifest their presence by only a sound, an odour, or an impression of themselves that they leave on the air behind them – a sense, a feeling that, for no definable reason, penetrates us with a pure anguish, as if they were telling us, in the only way left to them, that is, by a direct intervention upon our sensibilities, how much, how very much they want to be alive and how impossible it is for them to be so.[182]

For Eve/lyn, Tristessa is a somatic haunting, an affective, shifting materiality rather than a solid, embodied presence. On one level, Tristessa changes Eve/lyn in the way Butler theorises in *Precarious Life*. Grief is the condition in which 'I' am emotionally and materially 'undone' by 'you', 'by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel'.[183] Grief makes bodies 'something other than "autonomous"', not boundless but 'open to becoming unbounded'.[184] Tristessa's haunting of *The Passion of New Eve* is a kind of narrative unbinding in which the memory and presence of Tristessa undoes

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[182] Carter (2001), p. 113.
[183] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 24.
[184] Butler (2004), pp. 27-28.

Eve/lyn's body. Yet, despite the entanglement of an ''I' who cannot come into being without a 'you'', in Butler's work 'I' and 'you' continue to signal an attention to embodied subjectivity, albeit a more vulnerable and interdependent subjectivity than a contemporary politics grounded in the Human as an autonomous subject often allows. In Butler's terms, the aliveness that both Tristessa and Eve crave is a secure place in the world, the right to 'count' as Human subjects.

But, while Human subjectivity might offer Tristessa a measure of protection from the violence she encounters, it is not the only way of being in *The Passion of New Eve*. From a posthuman perspective, Tristessa offers the reader another kind of open-ended, always-in-motion middling. Not quite of the world and not quite outside it, Tristessa brings a Deleuzian virtuality to the text, a sense of possibility and potential that comes from her non-sense position somewhere outside of the Human. At the beginning of the novel, Eve/lyn claims 'I only loved her because she was not of this world', becoming 'disillusioned' when 'I discovered she could stoop to a pretence of humanity'.[185] Tristessa, then, is feted for not being Human, allowing Carter to make a point about the bounded nature of Man as a concept and the feminine as the marked, 'other' term. Yet, there is also potential in this position, potential seen in, for example, Tristessa and Eve/lyn's sexual encounter in the desert, an episode which critics often overlook in favour of the much-discussed mock wedding in the glass house.[186]

Initially figuring the couple as Tiresias, Eve/lyn reinforces an either/or border between masculine and feminine. As a result, the idea of trans as hybridisation, as the fusing of two discrete sexes, comes to the fore.[187] Yet, as the encounter progresses, the sexed body falls away in favour of a sense of enfleshment that takes over from an embodiment categorised by male and female. 'Flesh', for Eve/lyn, 'is a function of enchantment. It uncreates the

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[185] Carter (2001), p. 8.

[186] In *Transgender and The Literary Imagination: Changing Gender in Twentieth-Century Writing*, for example, Rachel Carroll discusses the wedding scene as an example of *The Passion of New Eve*'s problematic reinforcement of binary gender identities. In contrast, Sarah Gamble considers the scene as part of Carter's ongoing interest in the 'bridal Gothic'. Carroll (20170), pp 75-80. Sarah Gamble, ''Isn't it Every Girl's Dream to be Married in White?': Angela Carter's Bridal Gothic', in *Angela Carter: New Critical Readings,* ed. by Sonya Andermahr and Lawrence Phillips (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), pp. 23-32.

[187] Laura Mulvey discusses the way in which '[i]mages of the hybrid recur throughout Angela Carter's writing, bearing witness to her preoccupation with dualisms, not as binary oppositions but as either the merging of two differences into one, as in the androgyne Tiresias, or the separation of sameness into two, as in the mirror image'. Laura Mulvey, 'Cinema Magic and the Old Monsters: Angela Carter's Cinema', in *Essays on the Art of Angela Carter: Flesh and the Mirror,* ed. by Lorna Sage (London: Virago Press, 2007), pp. 241-253 (p. 244).

world'.[188] There is an echo here of Weheliye's argument that enfleshment, rather than embodiment, has the potential 'to usher in different genres of the human'.[189] In the encounter between Eve and Tristessa there are no words to equal 'this mute speech of flesh' which 'people[s]' the desert with 'all we had been, or might be, or had dreamed of being, or had thought we were'.[190] Together, Eve and Tristessa produce 'the concentrated essence of being', exceeding the bounds of pre-determined difference to become an 'interpenetrating, undifferentiated sex' reminiscent of Colebrook's trans-individuated bodying.[191] As Frida Beckman describes, '[c]aught up in a language system, sexuality begins to mimic the organisation of sense and nonsense'.[192] But sexuality as generative desire rather than stratified pleasure does not need corporeal borders or defined bodies. The result is that Eve/lyn and Tristessa's non-sense coupling undoes common sense notions of both sexual difference and gender identity, anticipating the potentiality and plurality inherent in contemporary trans theory. Desire overwrites sex and gender to blur normative distinctions between man and woman, male and female but also to show how, as Paul B. Preciado points out in *The Countersexual Manifesto*, sexuality exceeds both sex and gender and is not reducible to either body morphology or social norms.[193] Tristessa and Eve/lyn, like Ahab and the whale, escape their subjectivity and their form to become a version of Deleuze's affective 'patchwork', becoming *with* themselves and each other. In the desert, sex is not just variable between the two fixed positions male and female but is brought into being in relation to the bodies of Eve and Tristessa. As a result, the question is not how Eve/lyn and Tristessa stand in relation to the norms of two sexes but how together Tristessa and Eve/lyn deterritorialise sex to open the way for Deleuze's *n* sexes, a multitude of ways of becoming *with* rather than in relation *to*.

As this reading suggests, *The Passion of New Eve* figures sex as multiple rather than mutable. That multiplicity creates an infinitely proliferating series of identities that overwhelms pre-determined difference. Thus, difference collapses into a moment-to-moment bodying, as the encounter between Eve/lyn and Tristessa brings *in*difference into being. As difference loses definition, the fractured 'I' also multiplies to overwhelm the idea of an independent, coherent

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[188] Carter (2001), p. 148.
[189] Weheliye, p. 2.
[190] Carter (2001), p. 148.
[191] Carter (2001), p. 148.
[192] Frida Beckman, *Between Desire and Pleasure: A Deleuzian Theory of Sexuality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 36.
[193] Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

subject. Both sex and subjectivity depend on difference as the predicate of identity and as difference disappears into this proliferating series so, too, Carter seems to suggest, do those common-sense assumptions about what it means to be human.

On one level, at the end of *The Passion of New Eve,* Tristessa is literalising Deleuze and Guattari's sequence of becoming-woman through becoming-animal and on to becoming-imperceptible where becoming-imperceptible is the ultimate escape from territorialised bodies.[194] And yet, against this collapse of difference, it also seems as if Tristessa's death restores order, stabilising the categories of sex and gender and allowing the Human to return. The group of young Christian militia that find Eve and Tristessa in the desert seemingly remove the threat that her transgressive body presents, and sex resettles itself. Despite Eve/lyn's assertion that '[h]e, she – neither will do for you, Tristessa', after the desert Tristessa remains 'he' for the rest of the novel with Eve/lyn's use of the masculine pronoun stabilising Eve's own experience as that of a woman.[195] Tristessa's ethereal presence becomes an actual haunting, a ghostly return vividly evoked in the novel's last chapter: 'He himself often comes to me in the night, serene in his marvellous plumage of white hair, with the fatal red hole in his breast; after many, many embraces, he vanishes when I open my eyes'.[196] Carter's novel ends, then, by raising questions about the ethics and efficacy of the posthuman as a counter to Human hegemony, questions which, as I show in the second part of this chapter, also recur in *Quartet in Autumn*.

In 'Notes from the Front Line', Carter described *The Passion of New Eve* as 'about the social creation of femininity, amongst other things'.[197] My posthuman reading of Carter's novel has examined those 'other things' to argue that, while 'the social creation of femininity' might sit in the foreground of *The Passion of New Eve*, the novel also explores an alternative posthuman ontology. I began by showing how *The Passion of New Eve* engages with mid-century debates and concerns about what it means to be human. The novel explores how sex as a fixed point of difference helps to preserve the hierarchical Human as an everyday social

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[194] Deleuze and Guattari (2019), p. 325.
[195] Carter (2001), p. 143.
[196] Carter (2001), p. 191.
[197] Carter (1997), p. 38.

and political practice, meaning that constructed difference understood as a necessary pre-condition of identity perpetuates the Human as a figure and as a concept. This critique opens the way for an alternative ontology that is akin to Deleuze's conception of writing from the middle. Enfolding common-sense distinctions between real and representation, the literal and the metaphoric into a becoming *with*, Carter's posthuman poetics speculates on an unknowable, indifferent world, a world in which non-sense doesn't just rebut common-sense but also opens language up to its 'own outside'.[198] That unknowable world challenges two common sense assumptions about what it means to be human – that a coherent, independent subject mediates experience and that there are two sexes. The novel's non-sense sexuality opens out from two sexes to *n* sexes, from bodies to flesh and from mutability to multiplicity, thereby to an indifferent, prepersonal bodying outside of pre-determined difference. Tristessa's affective presence enacts that bodying to entangle reader and text and evoke a sense of matter as potential. In portraying Tristessa in this way, Carter's novel evokes the kind of socially and culturally mixed-up mid-century that Enke describes. While *The Passion of New Eve* does not advocate for trans rights in their twenty-first century form, read through the lens of the posthuman Carter's novel does offer readers a complex consideration of sex and gender that refuses to adhere to Human categories of difference.

In the next part of this chapter, I read *Quartet in Autumn*, a novel centred around experiences of age and aging, as a counterpart to *The Passion of New Eve*. In contrast to the dystopian elsewhere of Carter's text, *Quartet in Autumn* explores the posthuman as a condition of the everyday, paralleling and developing *The Passion of New Eve*'s critique of difference through attention to the Human as both *praxis* and paradigm. Where Carter plays with norms of sex and gender, approaching the posthuman through speculating on a dystopian future, Pym uses everyday experiences of age and aging to explore lives lived outside of the Human, critiquing the underlying logic of inclusion and exclusion on which those categories rely.

BARBARA PYM: *QUARTET IN AUTUMN*

> What if, the girl says. Instead of saying, this border divides these places.
> We said, this border *unites* these places. This border holds together these
> two really interesting different places. What if we declared border

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[198] Ian Buchanan, 'Introduction ', in *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Literature,* ed. by Ian Buchanan, Tim Matts, and Aidan Tynan (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 1-24 (p. 3).

crossings places where, listen, when you crossed them, you yourself became doubly possible.[199]

Pairing *The Passion of New Eve* with *Quartet in Autumn* is, on the surface, an unconventional move. With its references to Locke and the Enlightenment, *The Passion of New Eve* engages with the Human on a conceptual level, lending itself to posthuman critique in a way that *Quartet in Autumn*, a novel that never overtly references philosophy, history, or politics does not. At the sentence level, however, in the details of its syntax and grammar, Pym's novel creates a complex, multi-voiced, multi-dimensional reality that enacts Deleuze's blending of virtual and actual to match the indeterminacies in Carter's novel and figure the posthuman as a condition of the everyday. The epigraph to this section, taken from Ali Smith's *Spring* (2019), speaks to the 'doubly possible' version of reality that *Quartet in Autumn* creates and that I read as emblematic of this novel's posthuman ontology.[200] In Pym's spaces of double possibility, day-to-day events refuse to cohere into a single, stable, linear narrative, creating a kind of experiential non-sense. In effect, Pym's novel places readers in a disconcerting middle ground, a middle space in which what is, and what might be, are equally real.

Although, in contrast to Carter, Pym does not explicitly engage with 1970s feminism, *Quartet in Autumn* is nonetheless a novel about what it is like to live with and within a mid-century doxa of difference. In Pym's case, that doxa centres on differences of race, gender, ability, and age. Set in London, *Quartet in Autumn*'s plot revolves around four colleagues who are all nearing retirement age. Edwin, Norman, Letty, and Marcia work together in an unnamed office doing unspecified clerical jobs. *Quartet in Autumn* immerses the reader in the everyday intricacies of these four lives, detailing the spoken and unspoken connections between them, describing what they eat for lunch, what they do during their holidays, and how they spend Christmas. In the first half of the text, Letty finds herself with a new landlord and the question that preoccupies the group is whether or not she will move out and, if so, where to. At the novel's midpoint, Letty and Marcia retire and the second half of the text

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[199] Ali Smith, *Spring* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), p. 196.. Emphasis in original.
[200] I chose this quotation because the content resonates with the discussion that follows and because Ali Smith's seasonal quartet, of which *Spring* is the third novel, explores the mid-century's links with and continuing influence on contemporary Britain. Smith has also written about the influence of Spark and Carter on her own writing. Ali Smith, ''Vital, witty, formidably blithe': Ali Smith on Muriel Spark at 100', The Guardian (29th January 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/29/ali-smith-on-muriel-spark-at-100> [Accessed 11 Nov 2023]; Ali Smith, 'Get Carter: An Introduction to the New Edition', in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter,* ed. by Lorna Sage (London: Virago Press, 2004), pp. 1-19; Ali Smith, *In The Spirit of Spark: The Muriel Spark Society Lecture* (Edinburgh: Polygon Books, 2018).

explores how the quartet adjusts to this change in circumstances. Letty's identity crisis gradually resolves itself, while Marcia's health deteriorates and she dies shortly before the end of the novel, unexpectedly leaving her house to Norman. In doing so, Marcia inadvertently brings the group together again, setting up an ending that juxtaposes hope and sadness and leading Letty to think, in the final words of the novel, that 'life still held infinite possibilities for change'.[201]

In line with orthodox readings of Pym's work as realist fiction, critics tend to approach her novels through an anthropological lens, using her canon to explore shifts in the habits and behaviours of mid-century society.[202] The fact that Pym spent her working life at the International African Institute editing the anthropological journal *Africa* and that she both references and makes fun of anthropological methods in nearly all of her novels lends weight to anthropology as the dominant critical frame. From this anthropological perspective, Pym's novels appear as forms of reportage, mostly centred on the experiences of white, middle-class women who spend their time navigating the worlds of religion, university, and marriage. As such, Pym's characters appear as marginal observers, commenting on society from its fringes but disengaged from the underlying principles and concepts on which that society is based. As Penelope Lively, writing in Dale Salwak's 1987 anthology, argues, in Pym's world '[t]he course of history is somewhere else, out there, irrelevant'.[203] But figuring Pym as predominantly a chronicler of behaviour means that critics rarely analyse her work in relation to the ideological substructure which is both expressed in and created by the institutions of church and state, ignoring the structural issues Pym's work engages with. Tim Watson describes this as a form of 'willful [sic] avoidance' predicated on 'an imaginary version of England' 'shorn of almost all associations with empire, politics, race, immigration, and working-class communities'.[204] While the superstructure of newspapers, political debate, and

[201] Barbara Pym, *Quartet in Autumn* (London: Pan Books, 2004), p. 186.

[202] As commentators often note, the hopefulness at the end of *Quartet in Autumn* parallels events in Pym's own life. Although Pym published nine novels between 1950 and 1981, there was a period between 1961 and 1977 when no one would publish her work. The trigger for Pym's renaissance was an article that appeared in January 1977 in the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) asking key public figures to name the people they considered to be the most underrated authors of the twentieth century. Both Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil cited Pym, with Pym being the only writer mentioned twice. The article generated renewed interest in her novels, leading to the publication and shortlisting of *Quartet in Autumn* for the Booker Prize later that year. Hazel Holt, *A Lot to Ask: A Life of Barbara Pym* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Paula Byrne, *The Adventures of Miss Barbara Pym: A Biography* (London: William Collins, 2021).

[203] Penelope Lively, 'The World of Barbara Pym', in *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym,* ed. by Dale Salwak (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 45-49 (p. 49).

[204] Rather than reading Pym's work *as* anthropology, Watson explores Pym's critique *of* anthropology, describing her novels as an exploration of non-normative family structures that challenges 'the calcified

public incidents that constitute and record historical events may not appear in *Quartet in Autumn*, viewing Pym's fictional world as peripheral privileges an implicitly male centre located somewhere outside the boundaries of the text, a distinction that, as I show in this reading, *Quartet in Autumn* refuses to allow.

In what follows, I begin by exploring *Quartet in Autumn*'s version of the posthuman, showing how the novel's use of free indirect discourse and narrative voice sets aside the bounded, singular subject as the primary mediator of experience in favour of a multi-dimensional, multi-voiced reality that evokes the fluidity and mutability of a posthuman becoming. In the second section, I read *Quartet in Autumn* as a critical posthumanist text, showing how the novel uses Letty's post-retirement identity crisis as a way of commenting on and critiquing the absurdity of Human conceptions of difference. Where Carter's novel engages with the Human as a philosophical and theoretical paradigm, Pym's text critiques that paradigm by exploring how it plays out in the everyday, holding bodies in check through definitive categories of race and gender. In the final part of the reading, I find in *Quartet in Autumn*'s ending a problematic return to the Human that parallels that of *The Passion of New Eve*.

THE 'PYMEAN REAL'

Stylistically, free indirect discourse dominates *Quartet in Autumn*, undoing distinctions between bodies and perspectives to blur the boundaries between people and events and return language to its prepersonal form. In *Two Regimes of Madness,* Deleuze describes free indirect discourse as 'a unique syntactical form':

> [That form] consists in slipping another expressing subject in a statement which already has an expressing subject. […] It is almost as if every

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orthodoxy of British social anthropology that obsessed over kinship diagrams and lineage systems at the expense of studies of cultural, social, and political change'. Indeed, compared to Claude Levi-Strauss's use of sex and gender as the primary organising categories for analysing society, Pym has more in common with Marilyn Strathern's conception of gender as a reasoned but shifting response to the practicalities of physical existence. Pym's attention to aging in *Quartet in Autumn* also echoes the work of Oyeronke Oyewumi who argues that age is a more meaningful categorisation than sex or gender for anthropological investigation. Tim Watson, *Culture Writing: Literature and Anthropology in the Midcentury Atlantic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 54, 69; Marilyn Strathern, *Before and After Gender: Sexual Mythologies of Everyday Life* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2016); Oyeronke Oyewumi, 'De-Confounding Gender: Feminist Theorizing and Western Culture, a Comment on Hawkesworth's "Confounding Gender"', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 23. 4 (1998), 1049-1062.

expressing subject contained others, each of which speaks a diverse language, the one in the other.[205]

As Colebrook puts it, 'free-indirect style frees language from its ownership by any subject of enunciation' so that 'we can see the flow of language itself, its production of sense and nonsense, its virtual and creative power'.[206] The result, in *Quartet in Autumn*, is a novel with no singular, authoritative narrative voice. Rather, Pym's multi-voiced, polyphonic prose blends perspectives by picking up and putting down points of view in quick succession, often mid-sentence, reflecting the musical reference of the title and conjuring a flowing, melodic tone. In *Time and Free Will,* Henri Bergson likens the movement of notes in music to the movement of moments in time to suggest that, though independent, the 'notes of a tune' are also 'melting, so to speak, into one another'.[207] In *Quartet in Autumn,* that melting challenges the Human by refusing the authority of any singular, self-determining subject, meaning that there is no consistent, solid ground for experience. And so, as well as undoing the boundedness of bodies, Pym also unbinds events from the hegemony of a single experiencing subject, expanding reality to give equal textual weight to what is and what might be.

Reality is a recurring theme in critical engagement with Pym's work. While Mary Eagleton suggests that Pym 'push[es] at the boundaries of realism', Deborah Donato goes further to argue for the distinctiveness of 'the Pymean real', a form of disconcerting reality that undercuts common expectations of realist fiction.[208] In the discussion that follows, I offer a series of short close readings that focus on the details of Pym's prose to show how *Quartet in Autumn*'s fluid, multi-voiced, multi-dimensional version of reality makes space for the posthuman. Refusing to be bound to any singular, Human perspective, the narrative flows between voices, spaces, and time to construct a story out of 'might-have-been' moments, making those 'might-have-beens' as real as the actual events of the text.[209] In so doing, Pym's novel both critiques the absurdities of the Human and draws the reader into the text's indeterminate ontology of encounter, an always-in-motion becoming *with*.

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[205] Deleuze (2006), p. 367.

[206] Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002a), p. 114.

[207] Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1950), p. 100.

[208] Mary Eagleton, 'Angry Young Women: Education, Class, and Politics', in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1945–1975,* ed. by Clare Hanson and Susan Watkins (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 91-107 (p. 103); Deborah Donato, *Reading Barbara Pym* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005).

[209] In the diary Pym kept during her first year at Oxford, she described an almost-encounter with a rower from another college, as 'one of the many might-have-beens about which it's so lovely to speculate'. Holt, p. 26.

Quartet in Autumn opens in a library, the place Marcia goes to at lunchtimes for warmth and to find out 'what was due to her in the way of free bus travel, reduced and cheap meals, hairdressing and chiropody'. Edwin uses the library to research 'a certain clergyman who had recently been appointed to a living in a parish he sometimes frequented' while Norman finds it 'a good place to sit'.[210] Only Letty uses the library 'for her own pleasure and possible edification':[211]

> That day the four of them went to the library, though at different times. The library assistant, if he had noticed them at all, would have seen them as people who belonged together in some way. They each in turn noticed him; with his shoulder-length golden hair. Their disparaging comments on its length, its luxuriance, its general unsuitability – given the job and the circumstances – were no doubt reflections of the shortcomings of their own hair.[212]

On one level, in this opening, Pym is delivering an astute social commentary on the invisibility of older people. '[T]he four' move through space unobserved by youth, in turn marking and judging that youth only to regret their loss of it. Aging, it seems, becomes a condition of exclusion and unreality. But there is more going on here than social critique. When looked at closely, the twists and turns in this passage are as 'dizzying' as Carter's fractured 'I'. The narrator begins with the classic unity of time and place – 'that day the four of them went to the library' – only to undo that unity with an easily missed aside. The next sentence repeats this pattern, burying in its centre the fact that the library assistant did not actually interact with the group: the librarian doesn't see 'the four', they don't meet in the library, they never talk about their judgements with each other. As Human subjectivity dissolves, real and unreal share space, seamlessly blended into one intricate, multi-voiced, multi-dimensional experience that evokes another form of textual bodying.

While, in the passage above, *Quartet in Autumn* moves between voices to blend the perceptions of Letty, Marcia, Edwin, and Norman with that of the library assistant, Pym's narrator also blends perspectives in portions of the text seemingly centred around one voice. Take, for example, Letty's comments on Eulalia, the 'young black girl, provocative, cheeky and bursting with health' who works in Letty's office as an assistant:

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[210] Pym, p. 2.
[211] Pym, p. 3.
[212] Pym, p. 1.

> the girl was irritating and needed to be disciplined, even though there was
> no doubt that her exuberant vitality was disturbing, especially to an elderly
> woman who felt herself in contrast to be greyer than ever, crushed and dried
> up by the weak British sun.[213]

Notice how the narrative finds distance from the immediacy of Letty's irritation through the impersonal form of 'an elderly woman'. In the gap this distance creates, Pym's narrator shifts perspective, slipping away from Letty's surface irritation into a deeper semiconscious or even unconscious feeling that modifies Letty's exasperation. The point I am making here is not about narrative voice as such but about the way in which the novel plays with perspective to never identify completely with any one point of view. That detachment holds meaning open in a way which allows for critique alongside the fluidity of a posthuman becoming. In *Animal Joy*, Nuar Alsadir suggests that '[t]he absurd is marked by a tension between the seriousness you attach to your life and the inherent meaninglessness that is revealed when you catch a glimpse of yourself from an outside perspective'.[214] In relation to *Quartet in Autumn,* I read 'meaninglessness' not as existential angst or despair but as something akin to the neutrality of sense discussed earlier in this chapter, an indifference or refusal to mean that reads as meaning-less non-sense against the 'seriousness' of the Human. Pym's narrative finds that 'outside perspective' through the multi-voiced, multi-dimensional reality that free indirect discourse creates to turn *Quartet in Autumn* into a novel about the absurdity of the Human.

Look, for example, at the interplay between the serious and the meaning-less at Letty and Marcia's retirement party, the literal as well as figurative centre of the novel. Standing with Letty, Norman, and Edwin,

> Marcia was glad to be with people she knew. When she met other members
> of the staff she was conscious of her breastlessness, feeling that they must
> sense her imperfection, her incompleteness. Yet on the other hand she liked
> to talk about herself, to bring the conversation round to hospitals and
> surgeons, to pronounce in a lowered, reverent tone the name of Mr Strong.
> She could even, if it came to that, take some pleasure in saying 'my
> mastectomy' – it was the word 'breast' and the idea of it that upset her.

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[213] Pym, pp. 7-8.

[214] Nuar Alsadir, *Animal Joy: A Book of Laugher and Resuscitation* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2022), p. 90. In a similar vein, Jeffrey Peer explores the way in which Pym's novels play with hints and insinuations of sexuality to make fun of the 'prudish narrator'. Peer goes on to argue that 'Pym's prose, rather than being simple, displaces meanings and disturbs our sense of the most basic words, making them resound suggestively. Pym creates an ambiguous linguistic register, a syntax of hesitation and obfuscation that approximates prudery only to end up seeming lascivious. Her style performs in prose the double figure of mixed permission and negation, confused secrecy and intimation'. Jeffrey Peer, 'Hot Spinsters: Revisiting Barbara Pym's Virtuous Style', *Journal of Modern Literature,* 44. 3 (2021), 93-111 (pp. 95, 97).

> None of the speeches and conversations dealing with her retirement had contained any references to breast (hope springing eternal in the human) or bosom (sentiments to which every b. returns an echo) as they might well have done had the deputy assistant director's speech been more literary.[215]

Enacting the way in which flesh becomes subject to language, in the passage above it is 'the *word* 'breast' […] that upset' Marcia; she reacts as much to the intimacy of naming as to her own illness. Through that naming, the word functions as a kind of 'semiological skin', giving form to affective associations of sexual desire, bodily intimacy, and motherhood, as the *sense* of the word turns Marcia's flesh into more-than biology and language into more-than description.[216] Yet, just as Marcia's lost breast functions as an absent presence, inflecting interactions with those around her, the word itself remains unspoken as Pym's narrator shifts register to incorporate anonymous notes for a 'more literary' speech not actually given at the party. Marcia ends the passage doubly excluded from the banality of the sentiments, firstly by her personal circumstances and, secondly, because, bizarrely, they are never spoken. These might-have-been moments, moments which, like the non-meeting in the library, are both there and not there, haunt *Quartet in Autumn*, just as Tristessa haunts *The Passion of New Eve*. Those hauntings undermine the possibility of a consistent ground for experience. In this passage, for example, the expansive reality which Pym's narrator creates slips away from the specificity of Marcia's body into the absurdity of the unspoken speech, so serious yet so meaning-less because it is never spoken.

Quartet in Autumn, then, refuses to coalesce into a single, stable version of reality, thus forcing the reader into an act of sense-making that echoes that demanded by *The Passion of New Eve.* That openness may explain, at least in part, the ambivalence towards this novel among critics and readers. Pym's seventh novel has always been regarded as an anomaly in her canon. For both Allan Hepburn and Annette Weld, *Quartet in Autumn* is Pym's 'masterpiece', while for Robert Graham it is 'brilliantly experimental' containing the most 'technically accomplished' of Pym's prose.[217] Yet, it is a novel that polarises readers, delivering, in comparison to Pym's other work, a 'darker, modern vision of social disintegration', with that darkness making the novel 'uncomfortable' and 'melancholy' for

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[215] Pym, pp. 87-88.

[216] Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 100.

[217] Hepburn, p. 221; Annette Weld, *Barbara Pym and the Novel of Manners* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992). Robert J. Graham, 'The Narrative Sense of Barbara Pym', in *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym,* ed. by Dale Salwak (London: Macmillan Press, 1987), pp. 142-155 (p. 144).

some.[218] Weld makes the point that the choice between melancholy and hope in this multi-layered novel says more about the reader than the text. In doing so, she positions this novel within that ontology of encounter I described in relation to *The Passion of New Eve*, a space in which text and reader become *with* each other. Holding meaning open, Pym allows for both hope and despair without privileging either perspective.

In the final close reading of this section, I connect this discussion of Pym's poetics to the focus of the novel, old age, and the focus of this chapter, a posthuman reimagining of difference and identity. Looking at another passage from the retirement party, I explore the way in which, for Pym, aging offers a way into a posthuman reimagining of difference as always-in-motion becoming:

> Retirement was a serious business, to be regarded with respect, though the idea of it was incomprehensible to most of the staff. It was a condition that must be studied and prepared for, certainly – 'researched' they would have said – indeed it had already been the subject of a seminar, though the conclusions reached and the recommendations drawn up had no real bearing on the retirement of Letty and Marcia, which seemed as inevitable as the falling of the leaves in autumn, for which no kind of preparation needed to be made. [219]

This short paragraph, beginning with the novel's characteristic free indirect discourse, plays with the 'collective assemblage', the 'murmur' or 'constellation' of voices that underpins 'the nonsense or noise of everyday language'.[220] Focusing on the collective voice of the office, 'the staff', Pym's narrator avoids the 'serious business' of retirement settling on any individual subject. The passive construction of 'recommendations drawn up' denies the absent 'I' linguistic autonomy. Instead, the subject is subsumed into a matrix of business speak from which there is no escape, thereby challenging the idea of self-determination. Deprived of autonomy, the collective voice also loses its ability to reason as, despite all the learning and research, the 'staff' are still unable to approach the 'incomprehensible' idea of retirement. Here, then, is the absurdity of the Human as the narrative's wry humour mocks the self-centredness of youth rather than disputing it completely, balancing the 'seriousness' of claims for independence against the meaning-lessness of an ideology which cannot account for Letty and Marcia in their position on the other side of 'real'.

[218] Weld, p. 191; Holt, p. 259.
[219] Pym, pp. 85-86.
[220] Deleuze and Guattari (2019), p. 98; Colebrook (2002a), p. 113.

It is on 'real' that this passage pivots, exchanging sharp plosives and short vowels for the elegiac sounds of 'the falling of the leaves in autumn'. On one level, 'autumn' functions as a metaphor for old age with Letty and Marcia as the leaves. Retirement in the sense of transition becomes a moment which all life will repeat, including the 'staff', regardless of their ability to comprehend it. On another level, however, 'autumn' echoes Nietzsche's 'eternal return', a moment of pure difference or indifference that 'transforms the whole of life, and does this over and over again'.[221] As Deleuze understands it, the eternal return is not 'a return of the same', nor is it positing life as cyclical or in any way knowable.[222] Rather, the 'eternal return' frees life from the habit of repetition, challenging concepts of identity and subjectivity that rely on a return of the same in favour of a universe constantly in flux. In this passage, that clause, 'the falling of the leaves in autumn', shifts the prose into an affective register to put the focus on change rather than repetition. The result is what Erin Manning would call a 'minor gesture', a 'force that makes the lines tremble that compose the everyday'.[223] Manning offers a resonant description of a similar experience when thinking about the weather:

> The weather pattern comes all of a sudden, just this way, iteratively and yet always as though for the first time. A weather pattern, as activated by a minor gesture, creates a direct feeling of variability, a direct experience, in this case, of the rhythm of time tuning to its difference, made active and palpable by how this red (leaf), this (fall) ion, this (October) slant of sun moves the feeling of summer into the feeling of fall. The minor gesture: not the leaf, not the color or the month or even the season, but the internal variability, active in the differential, that tunes this particular ecology to the felt experience of time shifting.[224]

Like the weather, autumn and aging are simultaneously recurrent and unique, these 'felt experiences' are both inevitable and unexpected, eternal and fleeting. In a way that echoes Manning's 'minor gesture', Pym's fluid prose tunes the reader in to a fuller sense of the real, a sense in which events are both actual and virtual, Human and posthuman, repeatable and unrepeatable, without needing to choose between either possibility.[225]

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[221] Colebrook (2002a), p. 121.
[222] Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), p. 87.
[223] Manning (2016), p. 7.
[224] Manning (2016), pp. 65-66.
[225] A second example of a minor gesture would be Marcia's enigmatic smile as she dies. Towards the end of *Quartet in Autumn,* Edwin, together with a social worker and a local vicar, find Marcia semi-conscious in her kitchen. She is taken to hospital but dies soon after: 'Mr Strong was still wearing that green tie – was it the same tie or did he just like the colour green? […] … Marcia remembered what her mother used to say, how she would

In the next section, I develop this discussion of Pym's poetics to consider the novel's critique of identity, showing how *Quartet in Autumn* uses Letty's post-retirement identity crisis to question a doxa of difference, challenging the limits and limitations the hierarchical Human imposes on mid-century society.

IDENTITY IN CRISIS

As a single woman relying on her own resources, Letty Crowe is, in many ways, a typical Pymean archetype. In comparison to Pym's other protagonists though, without the bonds of church, family, and community to sustain her, she stands out as experiencing a greater degree of social and economic insecurity, an insecurity reflected in how Letty thinks about herself in relation to others. Making a catalogue of judgements against herself in comparison to other people, she details her lack of bravery, 'courage', 'vitality', imagination, intelligence, and family and wonders 'where in all these years she, Letty, had failed'.[226] Lacking a clear sense of self and overtly conscious of her status on the periphery of mid-century society, Letty looks externally for validation but finds herself nowhere. In the opening paragraph of the novel, the reader learns that, while Letty was 'an unashamed reader of novels' in her younger years, more recently she has shifted her attention to 'true' biographies, having 'realize[d] that the position of an unmarried, unattached, ageing woman is of no interest whatever to the writer of modern fiction'.[227] In evidence here is Pym's particular brand of metatextual postmodernism, simultaneously mocking the publishing industry which had ignored her work and writing Letty into the gap Letty herself names. Yet, even as Pym's text brings 'an unmarried, unattached, ageing woman' into the world of the reader, there is no equivalent text in the world of the novel and, in *Quartet in Autumn,* Letty remains a character in search of herself.

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never let the surgeon's knife touch her body. How ridiculous that seemed when one considered Mr Strong! … Marcia smiled and the frown left his face and he seemed to be smiling back at her'. Gifting a smile to the doctor, a Cheshire cat like grin, Marcia tunes into an affective register in which death does not equate with despair. In doing so, she counters the kind of common sense that conflates aging with deterioration and linear progression towards death, the perspective that feeds Letty's revulsion towards the dead animals she sees on her country walks. Pym, pp. 154-155, 36.

[226] Pym, pp. 14, 101, 8, 100, 102, 107.

[227] Pym, p. 3. In many ways, Pym's writing career delivers a neat history of the British publishing industry in the post-war period. Hazel Holt links the 1961 to 1977 gap in the publishing of her works to the demise of the circulating libraries, one of the primary routes to market for Pym's books. Her later return to publishing marks the rise of prizes and publicity as marketing tools to help sell novels. Despite her seeming dependency on the vicissitudes of the publishing market, Pym continued to write throughout the hiatus and her books offer a timelessness that is perhaps linked to her need to write as distinct from her ability to be published. Holt, p. 194.

In what follows, I read Letty's identity crisis as a critique of Human conceptions of difference. As Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs argue:

> As an inherently dynamic process, ageing threatens to destabilise whatever settlement might be negotiated between the particular embodied identities represented by gender, race and disability and the institutional practices and cultural narratives of [sic] operating in society.[228]

In other words, moving into old age proves how transient and fragile Human identity categories are, opening to the chaos or 'free ground' that, as I described in the Introduction, the Human subject sets out to resolve. By returning bodies to an indifferent, prepersonal state, old age calls into question both the categories themselves and the doxa of difference which brings those categories into being.[229] Exploring this threat to Human conceptions of difference through Letty's post-retirement identity crisis, *Quartet in Autumn* also sets up a kind of inverse *Bildungsroman,* playing with the stereotypical infantilising of old age to consider both the problems associated with having to negotiate these shifts in identity at the level of the individual and the absurdity of a society reliant on fixed categories of difference.[230] In doing so, Pym's novel shows how the changes that old age entails threaten not just individual subjects but also the coherence of the Human as a way of organising the world. Where *The Passion of New Eve* focused in on gender and sex, Pym's novel takes a broader look at the way in which identity holds bodies in check, critiquing the structural dynamic of inclusion and exclusion that underpins Human categories of gender and race.

Quartet in Autumn is full of solemn pronouncements about what 'women', as a seemingly static, definable category, are like. Those pronouncements, made by both men and women, include the idea that women are 'helpful in case of illness or accident', that they do 'the kind

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[228] Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs, *Ageing, Corporeality and Embodiment* (London: NBN International, 2013), p. 4. *Quartet in Autumn* often appears in studies exploring age and aging in twentieth century literature. See, for example, Zoe Brennan, *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005); Jago Morrison, 'Aging Reimagined: Exploring Older Women's Attitudes to Aging through Reader Response', *Contemporary Women's Writing,* 7. 1 (2013), 1-17; Anne M. Wyatt-Brown, Ruth Kay Karpen, and Helen Q. Kivnick, *The Big Move: Life Between the Turning Points* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2016).

[229] In *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative*, Amelia DeFalco describes age 'as an undertheorized sign of difference'. She goes on to discuss the complex range of stereotypes and tropes that contemporary culture attaches to age and aging, arguing that 'old age simply represents a new awareness of pre-existing strangeness'. Amelia DeFalco, *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2010), pp. 1, 12.

[230] In *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984), Lessing addresses this infantilising tendency directly: 'The very old are too frightening, too much of a threat, we can't stand it, *mementoes mori*, one and all, so they have to be dear little children. For our sakes'. Doris Lessing, *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 354.

of work that could easily be replaced by a computer', and that it is their job to 'cope' with 'mess'.[231] Here are the everyday myths, mirroring the origin myths Carter examines in *The Passion of New Eve*, that continually reify fixed categories of difference, defining the *post hoc* rules of 'woman' as an identity. In contrast to these assertions, however, Letty does not know what she would do if her new landlady, Mrs Pope, had a 'fall', it was Marcia that created the 'mess' Norman does not know how to deal with, and, while Marcia confidently proclaims that '[a] woman can always find plenty to occupy her time', Letty struggles to fill her days after retirement.[232] 'Woman' therefore becomes, through Alsadir's definition, absurd, an idea that oscillates between the seriousness and certainty with which characters define 'women' and the meaning-lessness of those definitions given they do not apply to any actual women in the novel. In other words, gender becomes an organising principle with little basis in reality, setting up a structural critique of difference that plays out across the novel.

Alongside this structural critique, *Quartet in Autumn* also bears witness to the impact on actual bodies of living within a paradigm predicated on fixed categories of difference. Witness, for example, Letty 'crouched in her room' as she listens to the religious celebrations taking place in her landlord's flat. She blames her predicament on her unmarried state, thinking she had 'wasted' her time believing 'that love was a necessary ingredient for marriage'. Feeling 'like a drowning man', Letty moves so far outside of the category 'woman' that she thinks of herself as a man.[233] J. L. J. Kennedy reads Letty's crisis as Pym's advocacy for a form of identity politics centred on the figure of the 'spinster-queer'.[234] In other words, Pym's novels add another cluster of identities to those bounded by the term 'woman', expanding the definition to include those who are 'unmarried, unattached, ageing'. Going beyond this feminist positioning, however, in addition to a critique of the exclusions inherent in the mid-century category of 'woman', I also find in *Quartet in Autumn* a critique of the absurdity of any categorisation of difference, no matter how defined.

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[231] Pym, pp. 62, 86, 170.

[232] Pym, p. 95.

[233] Pym, p. 56.

[234] Janice Rossen and Elizabeth Maslen make similar points, attributing to Pym's work a feminist position that seeks recognition for the value of women's domestic lives. In contrast, Hazel Holt, Pym's biographer, is quoted by Annette Weld as saying that she 'fought to keep Barbara out of the hands of the feminists'. J. L. J. Kennedy, 'Something Unsatisfactory: Queer Desires in Barbara Pym', *Women: A Cultural Review,* 25. 4 (2014), 356-370 (p. 357); Janice Rossen, *The World of Barbara Pym* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987); Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Weld, p. 204.

To bring that deeper, structural critique into view, I want to consider *Quartet in Autumn*'s engagement with mid-century debates about race. Racism is a ubiquitous presence in the novel, part of the fabric of urban life exemplified by the anonymous, violent graffiti Marcia encounters on the underground.[235] To put this incident in context, *Quartet in Autumn* appeared a year after Enoch Powell made a speech decrying the presence of 'unassimilated and unassimilable populations' in Britain.[236] In Pym's novel, reactions to Mr Olatunde speak to this Powellian rhetoric of cultural overwhelm. Described as, 'in a manner of speaking', 'a foreigner', Mr Olatunde buys the house in which Letty has a bedsit when the owner retires to a 'home for gentlewomen in the country'.[237] While the other residents of the boarding house move out quickly, and while her work colleagues recommend she does the same, Letty is initially reluctant to move, thinking she 'may get on very well' with her new landlord even as she worries she will not.[238] Her fears seem realised when, overwhelmed by the 'bursts of hymn-singing and joyful shouts' taking place in her landlord's flat, Letty goes to speak to Mr Olatunde to ask him to be quieter.[239] The encounter is positive and kind but ultimately a failure as the narrator suggests that in 'some surprising way' Norman, Edwin, and Marcia would all 'have been drawn into the friendly group' while only Letty excludes herself: 'We are not the same, she thought hopelessly'.[240] Positioned on the threshold of the warmth and companionship inside her landlord's flat, Letty can only parse her encounter with Mr Olatunde through the difference that that encounter offers the opportunity to overturn.

Unable to find a way to connect, Letty leaves Mr Olatunde's house to rent a room in the home of elderly, white Mrs Pope, enacting the kind of cultural protectionism that Paul Gilroy describes as typical of late mid-century Britain.[241] By segregating herself from Mr Olatunde, Letty adheres to dominant categorisations of race, reconstructing her identity as a white

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[235] As Rachel Carroll points out, *The Passion of New Eve* also offers readers 'a distinctly racialised landscape', with both Mother and Lilith/Leilah figured as women of colour and the urban violence which Evelyn meets in New York described as a function of both race and gender. Yet, as Carroll demonstrates, the violence 'to which Eve is subject as Zero's property' 'is implicitly constructed as a crime against white women, erasing the long American history of the sexual expropriation of black women's bodies'. In other words, while Carter's novel recognises the intersection of race and gender in mid-century society, the novel subsumes issues of race into a focus on gender. Carroll (2017), p. 82, footnote 14.

[236] Paul Gilroy, *'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 43.

[237] Pym, pp. 48, 47.

[238] Pym, p. 52.

[239] Pym, p. 56.

[240] Pym, p. 57.

[241] In *'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack'*, Gilroy describes a cultural protectionism put into play by British racism encoded in nationalist rhetoric. In this context, Letty's response to the presence of Mr Olatunde is an attempt to restore order in the vein of Powell.

woman through her alliance with Mrs Pope. Yet, after a disconcerting Christmas lunch, 'Letty could not help feeling that on this occasion she might have done better if she had stayed in her room in Mr Olatunde's house'.[242] Antoinette Burton reads Letty as emblematic of an increasingly irrelevant British state trying to shore up an increasingly unstable hierarchy of difference to draw a line between *Quartet in Autumn* and the nationalist rhetoric which drove the vote in favour of Brexit. In doing so, she argues that, in *Quartet in Autumn*, 'Blackness out of place produces Whiteness with no place'.[243] But while Letty blames Mr Olatunde for putting her in a literal and figurative 'no place', her wistful remarks at Christmas also draw attention to the missed opportunities that a logic of singular, fixed identity produces. As such, as well as speaking to the individual struggles that a renegotiation of identity demands, this wistfulness, another 'might-have-been' moment in the novel, asks what possibilities for connection and community the world misses out on when the Human takes precedence and difference reads as absolute.

To be clear, I am not arguing that *Quartet in Autumn* in any way transcends the racism it portrays. Whatever symbolism Mr Olatunde might offer, that symbolism does not translate into meaningful contact; *Quartet in Autumn* goes no further than Mr Olatunde's flat door, unable or unwilling to imagine life from his point of view. Similarly, figuring Pym as a proto-feminist or queer advocate without qualifying the implicit whiteness of those identities in her work obscures the way in which, even as *Quartet in Autumn* undoes some boundaries, it holds others firmly in place. Indeed, much of the novel's humour and pathos comes from the assumption that the reader holds a white subject position. What I am arguing is that, intersecting with this Powellian narrative of national overwhelm, is a scepticism about the logic of difference which underpins it. Without offering a workable, real-world alternative to that logic, *Quartet in Autumn*'s multi-layered narrative nonetheless manages to call that logic into question. It does so, again, by drawing on that tension between the serious and the meaning-less which Alsadir describes as absurd. On the one hand, there is Letty's redrawing of racial boundaries, an aspect of the novel that speaks to an ongoing, Human preoccupation

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[242] Pym, p. 76.

[243] Antoinette Burton, '*Quartet in Autumn* and the Meaning of Barbara Pym', *Historical Reflections,* 47. 2 (2021), 36-48 (p. 44). In contrast to Antoinette Burton, Tim Watson uses *Quartet in Autumn* to argue that '[f]ar from being a nostalgist for a vanishing middle England, Pym […] is a worldly, cosmopolitan writer whose serious engagement with anthropology is the crucial element in her fictional representation of postwar, decolonizing England in the throes of massive social, cultural, and political change in the 1950s'. Reinforcing the idea that any reading of *Quartet in Autumn* says as much about the reader as the text, Watson argues that narrower readings 'produce a caricature of Pym in the service of their own fantasy'. Watson, pp. 49, 51.

with holding bodies in check, fixing categories of difference even as the novel shows how age and aging calls those categories into question. On the other hand, *Quartet in Autumn* also parodies fixed categories of difference. In the final part of this section, I offer two further examples that illustrate this novel's awareness of the absurdity of race as a way of organising the world.

Firstly, there is the narrator's counterproductive denial of Edwin's motivation for biting the head off a black jelly baby: 'There was nothing racist about his action or his choice, it was simply that he preferred the pungent liquorice flavour'.[244] In a reversal characteristic of Pym's destabilising humour, while denying that Edwin's choice of jelly baby is racist, the narrator manages to nonetheless settle a charge of racism on him and figure race as an absurd structuring paradigm permeating all aspects of society; not even a jelly baby is just a jelly baby. Secondly, there is Marcia's parody of difference evident in her obsession with milk bottles. Marcia empties and cleans the bottles, filling her shed and 'occasionally' going 'as far as dusting them'.[245] A pseudo-Freudian reading of this obsession would draw attention to the sexual and maternal significations on view. The bottles work within the matrix of absences and 'might-have-been' moments which populate the novel to function as an uncomfortable reminder of Marcia's mastectomy and her grief for her mother. Marcia attaches herself to a symbol of what she has lost, a symbol she then cares for more than she cares for her own body.[246] Reading through a posthuman lens, however, Marcia's obsession becomes a parody of the Human need for control, a response to the chaos or 'free ground' which sits behind social habits and norms and which 'I' works to stabilise. Detached from the normative structures of society, Marcia configures her own interpretive framework to keep that chaos at bay. When she finds an 'alien' bottle amongst her collection, 'County Dairies' rather than 'United Dairy', for example, it troubles her deeply and she spends much of the rest of the novel trying to remember to give it back.[247] She finally succeeds, to Letty's embarrassment, in the middle of the library. Setting up and policing her own categories of difference,

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244 Pym, p. 4.
245 Pym, p. 55.
246 In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter explores the dissonance between lust and biology through an image of the movie star Jayne Mansfield: 'Jayne Mansfield clutches the milk bottles to her mammaries, a crude reminder as to the primary function of these glands - no, they are not orbs of delight; by no means that magic place where Freud, the romantic, thought that love and hunger met … they are farcical globes of fat and their function is more hygienically superseded by any dairy'. Carter (1995), p. 69.
247 Pym, p. 55.

Marcia's obsession reads as a non-sense version of the racist categorisations which keep Letty and Mr Olatunde apart.

This is a novel, then, about how difference plays out in mid-century Britain. It is a story about how common-sense definitions of gender and race hold bodies in check and about the absurdity of thinking of identity as fixed and stable, a perspective that leads to the kind of rigid policing of boundaries parodied in Marcia's sorting of milk bottles. In the final part of this reading, I discuss *Quartet in Autumn*'s critique of difference in the context of the novel's ambiguous ending.

POSTHUMAN OR 'HYPER-HUMAN'?

In what follows, I focus on *Quartet in Autumn*'s ending and the implications of the novel's final words, Letty's realisation 'that life still held infinite possibilities for change'.[248] It is possible to interpret those words as a celebration of posthuman becoming, an awareness of life as always in flux. The circumstances that lead to Letty's declaration, however, temper that celebration, particularly given the concerns I have already expressed about the allure of the posthuman beyond. Given Letty only considers life's 'infinite possibilities' *after* a shift in power dynamics it is also possible to read this ending as evoking what Colebrook describes as 'hyper- or super-humanism'.[249] For the hyper-Human, becoming means self-actualisation, personal fulfilment, and an opportunity to transcend the messiness and entanglements of everyday life. This subject-centred becoming continues to rely on Human hierarchies and logic, contrasting with the immanent, contingent form of becoming which this thesis describes as posthuman. As well as raising the question of the posthuman beyond, this tension between the hyper-Human and the posthuman also brings the ending of *Quartet in Autumn* into relation with the end of *The Passion of New Eve*. It is that relationship that I explore in this section, inspired by the similarly ambiguous journeys with which both texts end.

The closing image of *Quartet in Autumn* is that of Letty 'smiling' to herself at the idea of a 'slightly ludicrous' future trip: 'Marjorie and Letty and the two men – squashed up together

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[248] Pym, p. 186.
[249] Claire Colebrook, 'Humanist Posthumanism, Becoming-Woman and the Powers of the 'Faux'', *Deleuze and Guattari Studies,* 16. 3 (2022), 379-401 (p. 380).

in the Morris'.[250] This is quite a transformation given nothing has significantly changed. Letty is still retired, not very well off, single, and female. The shift in perspective comes late in the text after Letty learns that her friend Marjorie's wedding has fallen through and she is now free to pursue their original plan of sharing a house together if Letty decides that is what she wants to do. At lunch, after Marcia's funeral, Letty

> took a long draught of the sweet sherry and experienced a most agreeable sensation, almost a feeling of power. She felt as Norman had felt when he discovered that he could influence the lives of other people by deciding whether to live in Marcia's house or not. Letty now realized that both Marjorie and Mrs Pope would be waiting to know what *she* had decided to do.[251]

With two people dependent on Letty's decision, power, it seems, is the vital force that animates her future. In other words, Letty makes sense of her situation through a Human logic of competition and hierarchy, finding security in her power over others. As Tiffany Lethabo King puts it: 'While the human as man may become elastic and more diverse (as proletariat and woman [and also posthuman]), it still requires an outside'.[252] In *Quartet in Autumn,* Letty finds that 'outside' in Marjorie and Mrs Pope, securing for herself an elevated position within the social hierarchy. It is that position of power that makes it possible for Letty to then invoke the potential of a hyper-Human future, the 'infinite possibilities for change' with which she ends the novel. The point I am making here is that the Human is not solely aligned with white, heterosexual, masculinity; as long as there is some form of hierarchy the Human remains intact. While there is a correlation between these masculine identities and the mid-century's dominant paradigm, being Human is not a property invested in actual bodies, it is a mutable, relational power dynamic that also benefits Letty.

Reading *Quartet in Autumn* in relation to *The Passion of New Eve* suggests that, at their close, both novels struggle to hold space for the posthuman. Both texts, for example, lose their most transgressive characters, Marcia and Tristessa, characters that, while largely overlooked by critics, are deeply troubling to the people who are around them.[253] In *Quartet*

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[250] Pym, p. 186.
[251] Pym, p. 185. Emphasis in original.
[252] King, p. 177.
[253] Critics tend to figure Marcia as a reflection of changing social norms rather than as a character in her own right. Allan Hepburn, for example, figures her search for consolation in medicine rather than religion, evident in her reverence for Mr Strong, her surgeon, as emblematic of shifts in the role of the church in mid-century British society. Alone in affording Marcia an agency that other critics deny her, Robert Liddell reads Marcia as determinedly Human to argue that she is 'a really memorable character', 'an independent, eccentric solitary who triumphantly slips "through the net" of the Welfare State, and fights off the attentions of social workers and

in Autumn, Letty thinks of Marcia as more animal than human, with her eyes 'alarmingly magnified behind her glasses, like the eyes of some nocturnal tree-climbing animal. A lemur or a potto, was it?'.[254] Occupying a position somewhere on the edges of the Human, Marcia defies common sense, challenging the rule-governed reality that Letty inhabits. For Letty, just as 'one did not drink sherry before the evening' and 'read a novel in the morning', a 'woman' should care about her appearance to the extent that Letty is 'appalled', 'embarrassed' and 'almost conscience-stricken' by Marcia's dishevelled clothing when they meet for lunch.[255] Although evoking a less dramatic response than the kiss that leads to Tristessa's murder, Marcia's appearance and behaviour are no less troubling to social norms. And, in both novels, the death of these problematic characters moves the text towards its resolution. In *Quartet in Autumn*, Marcia's passing seems to figure as the contingent event that allows Edwin, Norman, and Letty to thrive. Hepburn describes *Quartet in Autumn* as 'hold[ing] out hope that a human community, even if it numbers just a few bachelors, spinsters, and retirees, has a viable future'.[256] The important word here is 'human'. In the world of the novel, the 'viable future' which Hepburn argues the text foresees is only open to those who are normatively embodied and live within a Human version of reality. Materiality which transgresses that embodiment has no place in the future the text imagines. In her illness Marcia becomes the disabled body, the 'crutch upon which literary narratives lean', that must die to make way for the Human.[257]

Letty's 'infinite possibilities', therefore, seem to rest on the reinforcement of Human boundaries. And yet, just as Eve's possible pregnancy re-materialises Tristessa's somatic haunting in Carter's novel, there is a sense in which Marcia never quite disappears. Throughout *Quartet in Autumn*, Marcia consistently refuses food because, in her own words,

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those who are eager to "fall over backwards to do her unwanted good"'. Hepburn, pp. 173-222; Pamela Osborn, ''The Priest and the Doctor': Medical Mystique as a Substitute for Religious Authority in the Work of Barbara Pym and Philip Larkin', *Women: A Cultural Review,* 25. 4 (2014), 384-394; Robert Liddell, 'A Success Story ', in *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym,* ed. by Dale Salwak (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 176-184 (p. 183).

[254] Pym, p. 9. Pym often uses animal imagery in *Quartet in Autumn* including, for example, Norman 'shak[ing] himself like a tetchy little dog' after he has visited his brother-in-law in hospital, and the description of the tenants that share Letty's house coming together 'like animals emerging from burrows'. These descriptions draw attention to the way in which those on the margins of mid-century society become other-than-Human while also speaking to the absurdity of that paradigm by puncturing any sense of self-importance. I return to this discussion of the relationship between animals and Humans at the end of Chapter Two. Pym, pp. 11, 47.

[255] Pym, pp. 101, 111.

[256] Hepburn, p. 221.

[257] David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), p. 49.

'she had never been a big eater'.[258] Despite regularly buying tins, to the extent that when she gets them home 'there [is] a good deal of classifying and sorting to be done', she has a cup of tea or eats a tin of her cat's pilchards rather than 'disturb her supply'.[259] She continues to lose weight, despite doctors' encouragements to eat, to the extent that Norman queries anorexia. Although the text hints at medical, psychological, and societal explanations for her restraint, no definitive cause is ever confirmed. Instead, *Quartet in Autumn* asks 'how' rather than 'why' to focus, as *The Passion of New Eve* does, on enfleshment rather than embodiment.[260] Through this lens, Marcia's ability to buy tins of meat and fruit while refusing to eat the contents of those tins, transforms her flesh into food. And, after she has died, Letty, Norman, and Edwin, confronting Marcia's well stocked cupboards, transform Marcia's body from food back into flesh as they, '[h]esitantly, for it seemed very wrong to be helping themselves to Marcia's store cupboard like this', share out Marcia's tins amongst themselves to take home and eat.[261] In line with the ambivalence of the novel's ending, there are two possible interpretations here. On the one hand, as the trio eat the tins of food that Marcia bought, they are consuming her transgressive body to make way for Letty's hyper-Human future. On the other hand, with a focus on the everydayness of Pym's version of the posthuman, as Letty, Norman, and Edwin eat Marcia's food they are re-embodying her disembodied form, thus echoing Eve's reembodying of Tristessa. Through this posthuman lens, Marcia's presence continues to haunt the novel, offering another form of prepersonal bodying, a sense of matter as always in motion, made and remade through the bodies of Norman, Letty, and Edwin.

And so, even as *Quartet in Autumn* closes off Marcia's parody of difference, allowing Letty and her friends to move seemingly unimpeded into their hopeful future, that closure is never final. I am, therefore, hesitant to suggest that the text's apparently neat conclusion overwrites and invalidates the expansive fluidity and openness of the rest of the novel. Rather, I prefer to think of Pym's text as another example of a 'minor gesture', that 'force that makes the lines tremble that compose the everyday'. While appearing to conform to a Human paradigm, *Quartet in Autumn* nonetheless nudges the reader in new directions, inviting attention to ways

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[258] Pym, p. 95.
[259] Pym, pp. 54, 122.
[260] Helen Malson, 'Anorexic Bodies and the Discursive Production of Feminine Excess', in *Body Talk: The Material and Discursive Regulation of Sexuality, Madness, and Reproduction,* ed. by Jane M. Ussher (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 223-245 (p. 225). Emphasis removed.
[261] Pym, p. 184.

of being and knowing outside of the Human. Holding meaning open, Pym's novel blends Human and posthuman together without privileging either perspective.

In *Politics of Affect,* Massumi argues that the 'improvised novelty' that is life comes not from the 'thingness' of bodies but from the interplay of events and matter, an interplay that relies on there being space and pause:

> Life is not a thing. Life is the way in which the mental and physical poles of events come together – differently every time, always under singular circumstances, moving in the general direction of the accumulation in the world of differences, of improvised novelty. […] This means that life is the movement between the mental and physical poles, between conformation and supernormal excess, between one event and another, between all of the various factors in play. Life lives in the gaps. [262]

Exploring Massumi's 'gaps', *Quartet in Autumn* builds a story out of non-happenings and 'might-have-beens', eliciting connection and significance out of seemingly empty spaces. Blending actual interactions with unspoken almost-encounters, Pym's novel gives equal textual weight to both, creating a multi-dimensional version of reality that sets aside the idea of a singular, bounded subject as the primary mediator of experience to evoke a posthuman ontology of encounter. Refusing to bind itself into any single point of view, the novel finds space to critique the Human as absurd, positioning the reader amidst the 'tension' between the serious and the meaning-less. In an echo of the way in which Pym's multi-voiced, multi-dimensional poetics refuses the Human as a point of view, the novel also considers the mutability of embodied difference, reading age and aging as a form of trans-individuation, a move towards a prepersonal bodying that threatens the Human. Exploring that threat through Letty's identity crisis, *Quartet in Autumn* bears witness to the absurdity of parsing the world through stable categories of difference, highlighting the losses that communities and individuals experience by staying within that restrictive frame.

In *British Literature in Transition,* Kate McLoughlin argues for a 'project of de-classification', uncovering 'the experimental in [novels which have] usually been seen as

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[262] Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p. 183.

realist and the realist in what has generally been accepted as experimental'.[263] My reading of *Quartet in Autumn* covers similar ground, showing how Pym's novel speaks to the mixed-upness of the mid-century in relation to style and genre. In doing so, the novel enacts one of the tenets of mid-century literary critique. As post-war literary commentators frequently pointed out, when looked at too closely realist texts are 'liable to come apart in one's hand'.[264] David Lodge's often-quoted defence of literary realism, for example, describes realist fiction as pragmatic contingency rather than truth. As Lodge suggests in 'The Novelist at the Crossroads' (1969):

> while many aspects of contemporary experience encourage an extreme, apocalyptic response, most of us continue to live most of our lives on the assumption that the reality which realism imitates actually exists.[265]

Simultaneously admitting and disregarding alternative ways of being in the world, Lodge's 'most of us' makes explicit the gap between realism and reality that runs throughout mid-century literary critique. A debate between John Goode and W.J. Harvey makes a similar point. Harvey outlines a mimetic conception of literary character to argue that the novel is the archetypal liberal form. Goode then refutes Harvey to show, through a reading of Henry James's novels, that realism depends on an implicit contract between reader and author, a contract designed to hide the fact that any stable conception of character is a product of the liberal ideology, a majority conspiracy which overwrites other ways of being and knowing.[266] Mid-century critics John Bayley, Rubin Rabinovitz, and J. P. Stern are also clear on this point: while reality and realism may overlap, they are not the same.[267] As a representative

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[263] Kate McLoughlin, 'Introduction', in *British Literature in Transition, 1960-1980: Flower Power* ed. by Kate McLoughlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 1-29 (p. 19). In making this argument, McLoughlin is building on earlier work by, for example, Andrzej Gąsiorek, Nick Bentley, and Elizabeth Maslen. In *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (1995), one of the first works to focus attention on mid-century fiction, Gąsiorek disrupts the distinction between realism and experimentalism to argue against the stability of either position. Discussing authors including Henry Green, George Lamming, Doris Lessing and Angela Carter, he articulates a middle ground of 'reflexive' fiction in which experimentalism is not necessarily radical and realism does not necessarily entail a direct relationality between world and text. Nick Bentley's work similarly explores the presence of a radical realism in post-war fiction while, in her exploration of British women's fiction between 1928 and 1968, Maslen shows how realism 'learns lessons from the more experimental works of its contemporaries' to '[become] a vehicle for exploring different constructions of reality than that of the dominant culture'. Gąsiorek, p. 4; Nick Bentley, *Radical Fictions: The English Novel in the 1950s* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007); Maslen, p. 11.
[264] Bernard Bergonzi, 'The British Novel in 1960', in *British Fiction after Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century,* ed. by Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 203-211 (p. 211)..
[265] David Lodge, 'The Novelist at the Crossroads', *The Critical Quarterly,* 11. 2 (1969), 105-132 (p. 131).
[266] W. J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965); John Goode, 'Character and Henry James', *New Left Review,* 40 (1966), 55-75.
[267] John Bayley, *Tolstoy and the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966); J. P. Stern, *On Realism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

mid-century text, *Quartet in Autumn* also plays with this distinction between reality and realism, underlining the need for a critical approach that exceeds normative categories of genre and form.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused on two novels which critique and reimagine a mid-century doxa of difference. I began by showing how *The Passion of New Eve* plays with hierarchies of sex and gender, collapsing distinctions between real and representation to reimagine two sexes as the multiplicity of *n* sexes. Exploring Deleuze's 'fracture in the 'I'', I have shown how Carter's novel finds an alternative to the Human in an immanent posthuman ontology, a way of being in the world grounded in indeterminacy, encounter, and becoming. I then showed how the expansiveness of the Pymean real similarly makes space for the posthuman. Starting with the fluidity and multi-dimensional nature of *Quartet in Autumn*'s poetics, I explored the novel's use of free indirect discourse as a reimagining of Human subjectivity and embodiment. I then showed how Pym's text, never identifying with any single point of view, critiques the absurdity of fixed categories of difference. In doing so, the novel's multi-voiced, multi-dimensional poetics grounds readers in indeterminacy and uncertainty to open to ways of being and knowing outside of the Human.

As fabulative texts, *The Passion of New Eve* and *Quartet in Autumn* practice a form of middle-writing or immanent critique, a crossing of borders and boundaries that speaks to the fluidity of the posthuman as a condition of the everyday. In other words, the 'mixed-up sensibility' that Enke advocates for is a feature of both the design of this thesis, meaning the connections I make between texts that critics typically hold apart, and of the way in which these texts work. Through the fluidity and indeterminacy of their poetics, *The Passion of New Eve* and *Quartet in Autumn* collapse distinctions between embodied categories of difference 'to usher in different genres of the human'.[268] In the next chapter, I explore another fabulative text that practices a similarly 'mixed-up sensibility'. In Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man*, however, those mixings have a spatial dimension as the novel engages with post-war debates about the meanings of home and nation.

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[268] Weheliye, p. 2.

MAKING SPACE IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *THE NOWHERE MAN*

This chapter centres on Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* (1972), a novel that explores the entangled spaces of home, nation, and body in mid-century Britain. It begins by bringing Markandaya's novel into dialogue with Deleuze's concept of the fold, showing how *The Nowhere Man*'s fluid poetics creates a textual space which is as open and mutable as the novel shows material space to be. It goes on to show how *The Nowhere Man* plays with spatial distinctions between inside and outside, thereby reimagining 'nowhere' as non-binary 'no-where'. Focusing on patterns of invasion and incursion, Markandaya's novel explores the ideological connections between British imperialism and post-war xenophobia, finding an affective, subject-less version of the Human at work in both India and London. In the final part of the reading, I consider Srinivas's improbable body in relation to Weheliye's work on 'racializing assemblages', arguing for the presence of an immanent, post-anthropocentric materialism in Markandaya's novel.

THEORISING SPACE

> Why is the Second World War taken as a break? The fact is that, in Europe, the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe. These were 'any spaces whatever', deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction. And in these any-spaces-whatever a new race of characters was stirring, kind of mutant: they saw rather than acted, they were seers.[269]

When I was considering which texts to include in this thesis, my focus was on bringing together a group of novels with similar affects and poetics. It was only as I began to draft this chapter that I realised I had also brought together texts that have similar settings. *The Passion of New Eve* explores a dystopian New York cityscape. But with that one exception, London is a constant presence in the novels this thesis explores. As my research developed, I wondered about this unexpected connection. Did this urban focus reflect a London-centric publishing system or was I seeing evidence of writerly assumptions about the interests of the people who bought post-war novels? Might the narrowness of setting be a symptom of my own failure to

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[269] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. xi.

read widely enough? Or was it simply coincidence? In his preface to the English edition of *Cinema Two: The Time-Image*, Deleuze's reading of the 'deserted but inhabited' post-war European city suggests another potential reason for this interest in urban space. Something is 'stirring' in the post-war city, Deleuze writes, a new becoming that has been made possible by the unprecedented devastation of World War Two. In *Cinema Two,* Deleuze explores the impact of these urban 'any spaces whatever' on post-war film makers, citing 'Rossellini's great trilogy, *Europe 51, Stromboli, Germany Year 0*' as examples of these post-war shifts in perspective, shifts that mean images are 'no longer linked by rational cuts and continuity'.[270] In this chapter, I connect the 'whateverness' of post-war space with the 'whateverness' of post-war fiction. In taking cities as their settings, I want to suggest, Carter, Pym, Markandaya, Spark, and Comyns recognise a synergy between the posthuman imaginaries they detail in their novels and the posthuman potential of these 'whatever' spaces.

As is well documented, space was a key concern in post-war Britain. In *Reconstruction Fiction: Housing and Realist Literature in Postwar Britain*, Paula Derdiger focuses on issues with domestic space, exploring literary responses to post-war housing shortages. Around 250,000 homes were destroyed during World War Two, another four million were damaged and two and a quarter million people were made homeless.[271] Examining texts such as Elizabeth Taylor's *Angel* (1957), Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* (1959), and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Little Girls* (1964), Derdiger analyses what she calls 'reconstruction fiction' to highlight a concern with distinctions between private and public space in mid-century literature.[272] Peter J. Kalliney links this cultural concern with domestic space to wider shifts in the composition of Britain as a nation state, arguing that 'the family home emerged as a

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[270] Deleuze (1989), p. xi.

[271] Nick Tiratsoo, 'The Reconstruction of Blitzed British Cities, 1945-55: Myths and Reality', *Contemporary British History,* 14. 1 (2000), 27-44; Jose Harris, 'War and Social History: Britain and the Home Front during the Second World War', *Contemporary European History,* 1. 1 (1992), 17-35. Responding to the consequent lack of housing, between 1945 and 1957 a post-war national renovation and rebuilding programme created around 2.5 million new flats and homes. Claire Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History,* 40. 2 (2005), 341-362 (p. 347).

[272] Paula Derdiger, *Reconstruction Fiction: Housing and Realist Literature in Postwar Britain* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020). In addition to Derdiger's focus on reconstruction, Leo Mellor, Sara Wasson, and Lisa Mullen discuss the impact of World War Two bombsites on mid-century culture. Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Lisa Mullen, *Mid-Century Gothic: The Uncanny Objects of Modernity in British Literature and Culture after the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019). These concerns with domestic space feature prominently in a range of post-war texts, including Patrick Hamilton's *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947), Pym's *Excellent Women* (1952), Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957), Lynne Reid Banks's *The L-Shaped Room* (1960), and Lessing's documentary account of life in post-war London, *In Pursuit of the English* (1960).

popular site for rethinking the geographic boundaries of Englishness in a moment of forced self-examination'.[273] In *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*, Jed Esty focuses on those geographic shifts. Picking up Doris Lessing's description of post-war Britain as 'parochial', Esty argues that late modernism responds to changes in the constitution of the British Empire through an increasingly anthropological literary turn.[274] In contrast, J. Dillon Brown explores post-war renewal, arguing that 'migrant Windrush writers constitute an important, alternative strain of modernist practice, different from and far less pessimistic than the inward-turning late modernism posited by critics such as Tyrus Miller and Jed Esty'.[275] Returning to the convergence of the domestic and the imperial, John McLeod and, more recently, Clair Wills focus on the impact of immigration, exploring the ways in which life in London shifts and changes in response to Britain's preoccupation with drawing and redrawing its international borders.[276] As this work suggests, while 'the legacy of empire' is 'central to British culture', that legacy is subject to a continual renegotiation and reimagining.[277]

This chapter builds on critical interest in the relationship between the domestic and the imperial in post-war fiction. Bringing a posthuman lens to bear on these debates, it links questions about the meaning of space in mid-century Britain to questions about what it means to be human. In doing so, it foregrounds the implications of the term 'British' in this thesis's title. Like McLeod and Wills, and unlike Kalliney and Esty, I use the term British rather than

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[273] Peter J. Kalliney, *Cities of Affluence and Anger: A Literary Geography of Modern Englishness* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2006), p. 8.

[274] Lessing (1957), p. 24; Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[275] J. Dillon Brown, *Migrant Modernism: Postwar London and the West Indian Novel* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), p. 5.

[276] Two contrasting legislative events serve as examples here. In 1948, the British Nationality Act gave all Commonwealth nationals the right to British citizenship, a pragmatic move intended to shore up the Commonwealth against attempts by member countries to gain increasing political and legal independence. That Act was replaced in 1962 by the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, reversing the earlier open stance by putting extensive restrictions on immigration into Britain. As a result, with the meaning of nationhood increasingly 'vexed' during the post-war era, citizenship becomes another stabilising border between the Human and the nonhuman. As Hannah Arendt argues, personhood, understood in this thesis as Human subjectivity, is granted only to those who can first prove their right to be citizens. John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2004); Clair Wills, *Lovers and Strangers: An Immigrant History of Post-war Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2017); Kathleen Paul, '"British Subjects" and "British Stock": Labour's Postwar Imperialism', *The Journal of British Studies,* 34. 2 (1995), 233-276. Stonebridge (2018), p. 19; Arendt (1962), p. 292.

[277] Graham MacPhee, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 2. Graham MacPhee and Matthew Whittle both bring a postcolonial lens to bear on discussions of space in mid-century fiction. In doing so, they also counter Esty's focus on enclosure to argue for an ongoing process of 'cultural renewal'. Matthew Whittle, *Post-War British Literature and the 'End of Empire'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 5.

English to describe the focus of my research. One of the distinctions Kalliney draws between England and Britain is that England as a geographical space is relatively stable, whereas the borders of Britain continue to shift and change. It is that fluidity I am interested in here, using the term British to reference the legacies of empire and the ongoing negotiations as to what it means to be British that feature prominently in discussions of literature at the mid-century.

That said, any spatial marker in literary critique is an act of definition and construction, an act that feeds into the ongoing making and unmaking of space. Writing about the period 1940 to 1960, for example, Susheila Nasta describes the 'process of exclusion' that 'buoyed up' ideas about the 'national character': 'what was British was defined in contradistinction to those [Britain] regarded to be the nation's "others", whether at home or abroad'.[278] It is a perspective Clair Wills also references: 'whiteness in Britain was not a social category – defining a hierarchy of class and power, as it did in Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados – but a political one, defining those who belonged and those who did not'.[279] I am struck by the way in which the exclusionary dynamic these critics describe mirrors the distinction between 'I' and 'not I' that Kant uses to stabilise the Human; both Britain as a nation state and the Human as a category of being define themselves through what they are not. So, while I use the term British to reference an open and porous space, this chapter also recognises and explores the ideological connections between this spatial marker and the Human.

Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* centres on the entangled relationship between homes, bodies, and nations in post-war Britain.[280] The plot of the novel revolves around Srinivas, a young man born into a Brahmin family in India in around 1900. In the 1920s, Srinivas moves from India to London after his involvement in the independence movement makes his future in India untenable. Setting up a business importing spices, Srinivas marries Vasantha, buys a house, and has two sons. One of those sons, Seshu, dies during World War

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[278] Susheila Nasta, ''Voyaging in': Colonialism and Migration', in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature,* ed. by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 563-582 (p. 564).
[279] Wills, pp. 20-21.
[280] Markandaya (1924-2004) published 11 novels during her writing career. Her first, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), a novel about rural life in India, gained significant traction in America where it often appeared on school syllabuses. Yet, in an echo of the writing lives of Pym and Comyns, Markandaya's work later fell out of favour, and she published nothing after 1982. *The Nowhere Man* is her seventh novel. For an overview of Markandaya's life and work, please see P. S. Chauhan, 'Kamala Markandaya: A Tribute', *South Asian Review (South Asian Literary Association),* 25. 2 (2004), 218-221; Bidisha, 'The Challenges of Writing in Britain', *Wasafiri,* 34. 4 (2019), 27-29.

Two and although their other son, Laxman, survives, his determination to assimilate into British life leads to an estrangement from his parents. After Vasantha dies, Srinivas meets the kindly Mrs Pickering and invites her to move into his increasingly rundown house in Ashcroft Avenue. While the couple navigate financial hardship, relationships with their lodgers, neighbourly politics, their own sexual relationship, and Srinivas's treatment for leprosy, an increasingly violent atmosphere of xenophobia and bigotry builds around Srinivas. That violence escalates when, to treat Srinivas's leprosy safely, he and Mrs Pickering ask the families renting rooms in their house to move out. Fred Fletcher, the son of Srinivas's neighbour and the instigator of the violence Srinivas experiences, uses that event to turn the local community against the couple. The novel ends on the day the tenants leave with both Srinivas and Fred dying in a fire that Fred starts at Srinivas's home.

As well as foretelling Srinivas's death at the end of the novel, the 'nowhere' of *The Nowhere Man*'s title speaks to the physical and emotional dislocations that Srinivas experiences throughout his life. As such, that 'nowhere' holds the echo of 'somewhere', a place both literal and figurative that offers the potential for a situated belonging. Srinivas's two homes, *Chandraprasad* in India and No. 5 Ashcroft Avenue in London, his two nationalities, his family, his community, and his own body all hold out the possibility for belonging somewhere. As Markandaya details, however, those somewheres dissipate as British imperialism, inter-generational conflict, post-war xenophobia, illness, and poverty all move Srinivas outside the protective borders of family, nation, and home. Typically, critics engaging with *The Nowhere Man* suggest that Markandaya responds to these exclusions by evoking a form of expansive humanism, a privileging of sameness over difference that transcends the borders between countries and families. Scholars then connect that transcendence into debates about, for example, the relationship between nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the post-war world. Most commentators read these two positions as mutually exclusive, with Ruvani Ranasinha, for example, figuring Markandaya's work as evoking 'a falsely inclusive Eurocentric universalism', a post-nationalist cosmopolitanism that results in the 'effac[ing of] cultural difference'.[281] In contrast, Pranav Jani finds in

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[281] Ruvani Ranasinha, 'Assimilation and Resistance: Kamala Markandaya and A. Sivanandan', in *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 145-185 (p. 161). Rosemary Marangoly George suggests that this apparent refusal of 'nation-centred parameters' has led to Markandaya's work being largely absent from critical discourse. Certainly, compared to the work of Carter and Spark, Markandaya's work has received relatively little critical attention in the UK even though Markandaya was resident in Britain from 1948 until her death. When critics such as Maroula Joannou and Ruth Maxey do discuss her work, they tend to bracket her novels with writers such as Anita Desai, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and

Markandaya's fiction a position that is neither wholly inside nor outside the nation as a conceptual frame. For Jani, the cosmopolitan is not a universalising ideal that overwrites difference. Rather, 'cosmopolitan identity, especially for colonized/postcolonial subjects, is always specific and contingent, shaped by class, nation, race, and gender'.[282] Drawing on Jani's nuanced positioning and the 'whateverness' of Deleuzian space, in this chapter I suggest that, rather than arguing for inclusion over exclusion, for an expansive humanism over the Human, *The Nowhere Man* reframes debates about nationalism and cosmopolitanism by reimagining the implicitly binary relationship between somewhere and nowhere.

As I was writing this chapter, Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* was one of the texts that prompted me to explore the potential of Markandaya's 'nowhere'. Tsing's multi-modal work blends quotations, interviews, photographs, scientific, cultural, and historical narratives to tell the story of the matsutake mushroom. Matsutake mushrooms are rare. That rarity is, at least in part, a consequence of the spaces in which these prized fungi grow. Matsutake thrive in what Tsing calls 'disturbance-based ecologies':[283]

> Disturbance is a change in environmental conditions that causes a pronounced change in an ecosystem. Floods and fires are forms of disturbance; humans and other living things can also cause disturbance. Disturbance can renew ecologies as well as destroy them. How terrible a disturbance is depends on many things, including scale. Some disturbances are small: a tree falls in the forest, creating a light gap. Some are huge: a tsunami knocks open a nuclear power plant. Scales of time also matter: short-term damage may be followed by exuberant regrowth. Disturbance opens the terrain for transformative encounters, making new landscape assemblages possible.[284]

Attia Hosain. This confluence of texts risks preserving, albeit implicitly, the 'Commonwealth writer' label that Markandaya herself rejected. In her 1976 lecture 'One Pair of Eyes', Markandaya spoke about the 'herding instinct in literary editors': 'They do like to keep like with like. […] Best of all they like keeping the women, bless their hearts and tiny minds, together'. In the same lecture, speaking to the tendency to judge her work against standards of authenticity, Markandaya defended her work as a unique literary contribution, rather than as a representation of Indian life: '[i]n everything I say I speak for myself. I am not, and never have been, a spokeswoman, or spokesperson if you prefer, for India'. Rosemary Marangoly George, 'Where in the World Did Kamala Markandaya Go?', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 42. 3 (2009), 400-409 (p. 400); Maroula Joannou, ''Unsettled and Unsettling' Women Migrant Voices After the War', in *British Women's Writing, 1930 to 1960*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020); Ruth Maxey, *South Asian Atlantic Literature, 1970-2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Kamala Markandaya, 'One Pair of Eyes: Some Random Reflections', in *The Commonwealth Writer Overseas: Themes of Exile and Expatriation*, ed. by Alastair Niven (Liege: Didier, 1976), pp. 23-32 (pp. 26, 27).
[282] Pranav Jani, *Decentering Rushdie: Cosmopolitanism and the Indian Novel in English* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), p. 37.
[283] Tsing, p. 5.
[284] Tsing, p. 160.

Focusing on sites of disturbance allows Tsing to tell a posthuman story about collaboration, interdependence, and becoming. The story of the matsutake is one in which organisms and species are neither self-determining nor 'self-contained'; this is not a story about autonomous, agential subjectivity.[285] Rather than relying on self-sufficiency and competitive endurance, the matsutake thrive through collaboration and cooperation, through biological, economic, social, and cultural interdependencies or 'open-ended gatherings'.[286] Tsing is not writing about formless chaos here. Rather, she is situating her analysis at the intersection of being and becoming; the matsutake in all its rarity and distinctive uniqueness is also the matsutake as always in flux and inseparable from its milieu. In other words, this complex mushroom is simultaneously a unique being *and* part of a collective becoming.

Like Tsing, *The Nowhere Man* pays attention to potential and possibility in sites of ecological disturbance. There is, for example, Srinivas's care for the bombed-out buildings where 'birds and weeds had flourished'.[287] My interest in the synergy between these two texts, however, goes beyond these ecological connections, finding a resonance between Tsing's work and the political, cultural, and social disturbances Markandaya's novel describes. As I imagine it, Tsing's 'disturbance-based ecology' echoes the possibility and potential of Deleuze's 'any-spaces-whatever' which in turn echoes Markandaya's reimagined 'nowhere'. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World,* disruption helps to unfold a posthuman story, making cooperation and collaboration visible and tangible. In Tsing's analysis, that story challenges assumptions about the workings of contemporary capitalism and the hierarchical, binary Human as the dominant paradigm. In this chapter, I describe a similar dynamic at work in *The Nowhere Man*. In this novel, Markandaya focuses on two contested sites, imperial India and post-war London, to explore domestic, physical, and political disturbances in both spaces. The posthuman story that the novel tells carries a critique of the Human grounded in an unbinding of space from the binary of somewhere and nowhere. That unbinding offers another example of the mixed-upness of mid-century fabulation. Folding India and London together, Markandaya's novel undoes fixed definitions of country and home to explore the spatial mixings that typify post-war Britain and understand disturbance, as Tsing and Deleuze do, as the norm rather than the exception.

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[285] Tsing, p. 28.
[286] Tsing, p. 23.
[287] Kamala Markandaya, *The Nowhere Man* (London: Small Axes, 2019), p. 101.

Inherent in *The Nowhere Man*'s attention to disturbance is a definition of space as mobile and fluid, as always in the process of being made and unmade. That definition connects Markandaya's novel with the work of critics such as Henri Lefebvre, Yi-Fu Tuan, and Doreen Massey. For Lefebvre, the theorist who triggered the 'spatial turn' in literary studies, space is dynamic, mutable, and always changing, appearing through the interaction of three 'fields'. These 'fields' are the 'conceived spaces' that planners and architects work with, the 'perceived spaces' or 'spatial practices' that everyday life makes possible, and the 'lived' or 'representational' spaces of art and culture.[288] Also writing about movement as important for thinking about space, Tuan makes a distinction between space and place, describing place as 'a pause in movement', a moment of calm offering 'security and stability'.[289] The implication is that in the binary of 'somewhere' and 'nowhere', place is always 'somewhere'. But as the work of feminist geographer Massey suggests, Tuan's pause is an elusive privilege afforded only to those who have the power to hold the world in stasis. Accepting Massey's point, in this chapter I use the terms 'space' and 'place' interchangeably.[290] Emphasising mobility, Massey describes space in a way that echoes *The Nowhere Man*'s critique of borders and boundaries. For Massey, space is 'open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming'; it is a 'throwntogetherness' or the 'simultaneity of stories-so-far'.[291] This is space understood as a verb rather than as a noun, as the flux and flow of permanent disturbance and 'whateverness' rather than as the specificity of houses and nations.

In Deleuze's work, that mobile dynamic figures as the distinction between smooth space and striated space. Striated space is locatable, defined, structured, and ordered while smooth space is mutable, unbound, and pliable. It is tempting to think of the structures of towns and nation states as inherently striated and the openness of deserts, seas, and wastelands as smooth. But striation and smoothness are not properties of specific locations. As Arun

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[288] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 33-39. There are also possible connections between *The Nowhere Man* and the work of Walter Benjamin and Michel de Certeau. Benjamin, through the figure of the *flâneur*, and Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, explore urban landscapes to also argue for movement as a way that space comes into being. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknapp Press of Harvard University Press, 2002); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1988).

[289] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), pp. 138, 136.

[290] In the context of 'historical migrations and cultural relocation', Homi Bhabha's definition of the 'unhomely' as 'the shock of recognition of the world-in-the home, the home-in-the-world' and Sara Ahmed's undoing of the fixed border between home and away similarly make the case for both space and place as porous and mutable. Ahmed (1999); Homi Bhabha, 'The World and the Home', *Social Text,* 31-32. 31/32 (1992), 141-153 (p. 141).

[291] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005), pp. 59, 140, 149.

Saldanha writes, '[s]triation is not simply the construction of places in the geographical sense but the physical and ideological framework by which place construction becomes possible. It is specific not to the human species but to stratified society'.[292] So, rather than being empty, smooth space is space that ideological 'structures cannot get a grip on'.[293] '[A] stroll taken by Henry Miller in Clichy or Brooklyn' for example 'is a nomadic transit in smooth space; he makes the city disgorge a patchwork, differentials of speed, delays and accelerations, changes in orientation, continuous variations'.[294]

Posthuman theory tends to privilege smooth space and the 'nomadic transits' that help to create it.[295] But Deleuze is clear: 'Never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us'.[296] Smooth space is not a form of posthuman fulfilment; it is not something to aspire to and I am not going to argue that 'nowhere' rescues Srinivas from the injustices of 'somewhere'. Rather, what is important is how these two aspects of space flow together. As Deleuze describes, smooth and striated spaces are not 'simple opposition[s]'. Rather,

> the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space.[297]

As Saldanha puts it, smooth and striated spaces are 'only distinguishable on the conceptual plane', '[n]o real space is perfectly smooth or perfectly striated. Smooth space allows for and tends to become traversed by striation, while striation enables new kinds of smoothness'.[298] In other words, smoothness can come into being in urban space even as striation asserts order over the middle of a desert. In the distinction between striated and smooth there are obvious echoes of the binary relationship between 'somewhere' and 'nowhere'. But in Deleuze's focus on the flow between these two aspects of space another possibility appears, the possibility of 'no-where', a hyphenated term that signifies a refusal or rejection of space as a noun in favour of the mutable, always becoming verbiness of 'whatever' space.

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[292] Arun Saldanha, *Space After Deleuze* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 113.

[293] Saldanha, p. 108. Territorialisation is the more generic term that Deleuze and Guattari use for any kind of boundary making, whether driven by ideology or not.

[294] Deleuze and Guattari (2019), p. 560.

[295] See for example, Rosi Braidotti, 'Writing as a Nomadic Subject', *Comparative Critical Studies* 11.2-3 (2014), 163-184; Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). See also Ahmed's critique of Braidotti's shift of the figure of the nomad from 'the literal into the metaphoric' in Ahmed (1999), p. 334.

[296] Deleuze and Guattari (2019), p. 581.

[297] Deleuze and Guattari (2019), p. 552.

[298] Saldanha, p. 107.

It is this reimagining of nowhere as non-binary no-where that I explore in this chapter. In doing so, I show how Markandaya plays with perhaps the most basic spatial distinction, that between inside and outside. While the Human in its mid-century incarnation works to stabilise the borders between nations and bodies, *The Nowhere Man*'s understanding of space as open and mutable dismantles those borders in favour of space as flux and flow. Starting with a discussion of the novel's poetics, I figure *The Nowhere Man* as a text which is not just *about* space, but also aware of itself *as* space. Working with Deleuze's concept of the fold, I show how the novel's idiosyncratic prose and complex structure disturbs textual space to hold meaning open, refusing to settle into the easy distinction between nowhere and somewhere. In the second part of the chapter, I show how the complexity of Markandaya's politics matches the complexity of her poetics. Against the backdrop of imperial India and post-war London, *The Nowhere Man* explores patterns of invasion and incursion in the interconnected spaces of home, nation, and body. As well as bearing witness to the violence inherent in British imperialism and post-war xenophobia, the novel undoes the borders on which those exclusionary dynamics are based, finding an affective, subject-less version of the Human at work in both locations. That affective version of the Human, situated at the intersection of being and becoming, allows the novel to explore both a nuanced critique of racism in post-war London and empire in 1920s India and an awareness of the deeper, ideological conditioning that binds both locations together. In the third and last section of the chapter, I offer a reading of Srinivas's improbable body which figures Markandaya's no-where as an immanent, material relationality, an opening to the posthuman as an everyday reality rather than as a seductive beyond.

POETICS OF THE FOLD

In this section, I begin by bringing *The Nowhere Man* into conversation with Deleuze's concept of the fold, a term that makes frequent appearances in this thesis. As Deleuze describes it, the fold is a way of thinking about being and becoming through the images conjured by the French word *pli*. *Pli* literally translates as 'a twist of fabric' or fold in a piece of material.[299] Being is the specificity of each individual fold while becoming is the ongoing movement of the fabric as it unfolds and refolds. Each fold is unique, a 'singularity', because 'the unfold' 'is not the contrary of the fold, nor its effacement, but the continuation or the

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[299] Tom Conley, 'Folds and Folding ', in *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts,* ed. by Charles J Stivale (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2011), pp. 192-203 (p. 192).

extension of its act'.[300] In other words, folds are not repetitions, but extensions, part of an ongoing process of becoming. Even though each fold is unique, because these folds are also part of the same piece of fabric, they are all connected. Think of the folds in origami, an art in which 'there is no cutting of the paper. No outside elements are introduced into it. Everything happens as an expression of that particular piece of paper'.[301] In a folded universe the particularity of being and the mutability of becoming are part of one whole, flowing into each other. As Arun Saldanha puts it, '[a]t its most simple, folding can be understood as a kind of *osmosis* between milieu and body, whole and part, multiplicity and identity'.[302]

Preventing binaries such as virtual and actual, smooth and striated from taking hold, in spatial terms, '[t]he fold allows Deleuze to imagine reality as a surface which eschews inside and outside'. If we imagine the universe as a single piece of fabric, in the sense that the universe is made up of interconnected matter, then inside and outside cease to have fixed definitions; what might be inside when the fabric folds one way becomes outside when it folds another:

> a folded surface, depending on the nature of the folding, will be sometimes folded outwards and sometimes folded inwards. Indeed, any fold in one direction will necessarily produce a fold in the other direction on the obverse face of the fabric. In this way, interiority and exteriority are always being produced out of a single continuous textile. With this metaphor, it becomes possible to do away with the old Western dichotomy of self-and-world, interior-self and external-reality, while showing how it came to be that one can perceive oneself as possessing an enclosed interior consciousness set off against a surrounding environment.[303]

It is this undoing of inside and outside that makes the fold as a concept and as a verb so significant for Markandaya's novel. At the sentence level, *The Nowhere Man*'s folded poetics unbinds from the constraints of grammar and syntax to refuse self-containment in favour of sentences which blend into each other, telling a posthuman story of syntactic flux and flow. At the plot level, the novel's folded structure refuses to delimit events in time and space, expanding reality to explore, instead, the way in which these events resonate across time and space to hold meaning open. Taken together, as the next part of the discussion shows, Markandaya's folded poetics fabulates a 'throwntogetherness' that conflates the spaces of the text with the spaces of the city and the spaces of the body.

[300] Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p. 35.
[301] Todd May, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 38.
[302] Saldanha, p. 196. Emphasis in original.
[303] Russell West-Pavlov, *Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze* (Amsterdam: BRILL, 2009), p. 234.

The Nowhere Man opens in Dr Radcliffe's surgery. Srinivas has an appointment to discuss the symptoms of what the reader learns much later in the novel is leprosy:

> There was a screen behind which patients dressed and undressed. Usually they did not take long: but his Indian patient would, Dr Radcliffe surmised, from the layers of clothes he would now be resuming against the chill English evening. There had been, he thought, no need in fact for the stripping ritual, because while a whole spectrum of illness could present bewilderingly similar signs and symptoms, there were some whose pointers were as coldly and precisely aligned as those of the Pole Star. The two stars, (α) and (β), of the Ursa Major constellation, for which navigators looked. Which pointed unmistakeably. Uncompromisingly, as in this case.[304]

In this opening passage, Markandaya presents the reader with the novel in miniature. The security of spaces which science has made navigable and which politics has drawn borders around sits in tension with space as an openness that comes into being through relations. The novel opens with the dummy subject 'there', evoking the 'nowhere' of its own title by conjuring an indeterminate space with hints of the fairy tale; 'there was a …' is not far away from 'there once was a…'. In the midst of this indeterminate space is the floating 'screen' behind which patients come and go, slipping out of view in the second sentence as they disappear into the nebulous 'they'. Against these non-people and no-place, the 'Indian patient' briefly stands out only to also disappear as the specificity of naming brings Dr Radcliffe into focus and his unnamed patient vanishes into his many 'layers'. Implying movement by wrapping images of travel and navigation into its opening, the text then shifts towards the specificity of definable space. Pointing the way to Srinivas's illness, the 'Pole Star' of symptoms undoes the need for any 'stripping ritual', thereby overwriting those implications of custom and ceremony. Yet, in the 'coldness' and 'precision' of this star something is missing, and it is that absence that comes to the fore as the sentences fracture and the grammatical subject disappears, suggesting that, even as space becomes more defined, meaning begins to disintegrate. At this point, the passage approaches non-sense, ending with the two incomplete sentences that demand a re-folding of the prose, a bringing forwards of words that have gone before to focus attention on the contingency of sense-

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[304] Markandaya (2019), p. 1.

making and the impossibility of syntactic containment. The result is an opening paragraph rooted in semantic encounter, in the leaps and connections the reader must make to find coherence and meaning.

As it does in this opening paragraph, *The Nowhere Man* continues to make extensive use of free indirect discourse, paralleling *Quartet in Autumn*'s shifting, polyphonic prose to blend voices and perspectives. In this first paragraph, it is Dr Radcliffe's voice that dominates. As he reacts emotionally to his patient's illness, his language breaks down; the prose struggles to mean to reflect the doctor's psychological struggle to manage his feelings for the patient he has come to care deeply about. Thinking of these textual and psychological breaks as folds as well as fractures, however, suggests that *The Nowhere Man* is also bringing a posthuman lens to bear on questions of subjectivity and trauma. As the sentences gather and fold into each other, each fragment of text signals interdependency and vulnerability, suggesting that *The Nowhere Man* is setting aside a paradigm of self-containment in favour of cooperation and collaboration. The result of this syntactic interdependency is a textual space which is as open, mutable, and fluid as the 'whatever' spaces of Deleuze's post-war cities. Rather than the 'carefully pruned standard English' and 'Western novelistic norms' that characterise Markandaya's other novels, *The Nowhere Man* employs long, complex sentences, eccentric grammar, and shifting tenses, perspectives, topics, and scale.[305] As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

> *The Nowhere Man* shows [Markandaya] handling words as if they are tangible three-dimensional objects. She lingers over the surface of experience and circles around until she has found the exact nuance of meaning. Her sentences are often convoluted but that is a necessary corollary of her prismatic manner of perception.[306]

Working in 'three-dimensions', the twists and turns of *The Nowhere Man*'s folded poetics set textual space in motion, forcing words to encounter each other and sentences to collaborate so that disturbance becomes the norm rather than the exception.

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[305] George, p. 403.

[306] Meenakshi Mukherjee, 'The Theme of Displacement in Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya', *World Literature Written in English,* 17. 1 (1978), 225-233 (p. 232).

The plot and structure of *The Nowhere Man* features a similarly folded set of events. The novel opens in 1968 as Dr Radcliffe is diagnosing Srinivas with leprosy. But almost straight away the story turns back to 1938, the year that Srinivas and Vasantha bought No. 5 Ashcroft Avenue. From that 1938 restart, the novel progresses forwards through the events of World War Two, Vasantha's death, and the beginning of Srinivas's relationship with Mrs Pickering before landing in 1956 and the Suez crisis. That crisis is the trigger for another set of memories, this time from 1920s India, as Srinivas shares with Mrs Pickering the events that led to his move to London with Vasantha. Folding back again to 1956, the novel then moves forwards in time to return to Srinivas's illness and explore the consequences of his isolation before finally closing in 1969.

As this summary suggests, the key pivot point in *The Nowhere Man*'s folding of time and space is the 1956 Suez crisis. For critics and historians, that crisis was a watershed moment in British history as Britain's humiliating withdrawal from Egypt spotlighted uncomfortable truths about shifts in the country's international reputation and status.[307] In the context of Markandaya's novel, however, the significance of Suez lies in the continuities rather than the changes the event signals. For Srinivas, '[a] naturalized Briton, who must needs share Britain's guilt', the return of British '[g]unboat diplomacy', the 'ominous jingling parade which had been used to intimidate People of Many Lands, who had objected to People of Other Lands ruling them' is deeply disturbing.[308] As Mrs Pickering and Srinivas listen to the events on the radio,

> [i]n between the static they heard the announcer's voice giving the casualty figures: two hundred Egyptians killed or injured, a total of five for British and French. In this, despite himself, Srinivas again discerned the old pattern: a ratio of forty to one, forty Oriental lives for each European, the familiar equation with its bitter inflections.**[309]**

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[307] In collaboration with Israel and France, British troops landed in Egypt in 1956 with the aim of 'restor[ing] international control to the Suez Canal'. This invasion led to anti-war protests in Britain and was not supported by the US who put significant financial pressure on the British government to withdraw. Forced to concede their position, Britain announced a ceasefire on 6th November, evacuating British troops from Egypt even though none of the aims of the invasion had been achieved. Simon Hall, *1956: The World in Revolt* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016), p. 352. In addition to Hall's work, more details about the way in which the events that surrounded the Suez crisis unfolded are available in Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2006); Peter Hennessey, *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).

[308] Markandaya (2019), p. 114-115.

[309] Markandaya (2019), p. 117.

The reference point here is the 1919 massacre at Jallianwala Bagh (Amritsar), an event the reader encounters shortly after Suez as the novel folds back to focus on Srinivas's early life. In the world of 1956, to escape the implications of this 'old pattern', Srinivas goes out for a walk, taking off his shoes and socks after he has stepped in 'dogshit' to walk barefoot around 'icy' London. Revisiting his barefoot self, Srinivas gains 'pleasure' 'like tiny champagne bubbles in his brain' from the 'grip and slap of toe and heel upon the glistening flags'.[310] Yet, that pleasure prompts an illness that, in turn, prompts Srinivas to share the reasons for his exile from India with Mrs Pickering, as he finds himself forced to 'dredge up what he believed he had left behind'.[311] In other words, inverting the timeline of the two events, Suez becomes both the consequence *and* the instigator of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

As a unique event, the Suez crisis is a singular historical moment, a never-to-be-repeated combination of actions and decisions. But, as a fold in the fabric of the universe, the event is also part of a collective becoming; rather than being self-contained it has a multiplicity of connections, resonances, and relationalities. Folding and unfolding the event across the novel, *The Nowhere Man* balances the specificity of this event against the multiplicity of its possible relations. Travelling from Jallianwala Bagh to Suez, the novel would conform to and confirm a narrative of British decline; Britain's imperial power shifts into the past as time moves on. Leading the reader in the other direction, from Suez to Jallianwala Bagh, *The Nowhere Man* refuses to accept an outside to British imperialism, there is no end to the 'old pattern' that continues to repeat. In that repetition is Markandaya's refusal to allow either event to stand as exceptional. While each moment holds its specificity, witness, for example, the detail of General Dyer's 1919 decision to fire '1,650 rounds' into the crowd and kill '379 civilians', these are also moments rooted in a consistent, coherent ideology, the 'familiar equation' that this thesis understands as emblematic of the Human.[312]

Noemí Pereira-Ares writes about Suez as a haunting in *The Nowhere Man* and there is something gothic in the novel's breaking of temporal and spatial borders, and the way in which Suez intrudes into Srinivas's life.[313] But that haunting also signals the open, mutable, 'throwntogetherness' of a posthuman ontology, an ontology that folds out of the novel's

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[310] Markandaya (2019), p. 118.
[311] Markandaya (2019), p. 121.
[312] Markandaya (2019), p. 145.
[313] Noemí Pereira-Ares, 'Sartorial Memories of a Colonial Past and a Diasporic Present in Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature,* 50. 2 (2015), 179-196.

critique of the Human. Towards the end of *The Nowhere Man*, as tensions rise and Fred plans his attack on Srinivas, Markandaya refolds the political crisis back into the textual present so that Suez in all its incarnations works as both being and becoming, as both a fixed point, an axis on which the text's plot pivots, and a shifting signifier, a space that signals connection and encounter even as it leaves the meaning of those encounters open:

> So the two men, who had little in common, and were not on speaking terms, at least as far as Fred was concerned, were borne towards each other, in roles each had drawn, perhaps, when lots were being cast. […] Srinivas floated, or so at times it seemed to him, and certainly to those who saw the thin figure wafting along the wintry streets in a diaphanous cloud of muslin. The cloud gave off whiffs, of coconut oil and sandalwood paste, causing nostrils to wrinkle, and conducting the owners to places vaguely east of Suez which they would visit with pleasure, or distaste, according to preference and a dash of conditioning.[314]

Tsing describes smell as 'the presence of another in ourselves', a marker of encounter and transformation.[315] And, as Suez returns, the smell of Srinivas's clothes generates encounters between Suez the event, Suez the place, and the people of London, with the porousness of bodily space making tangible the ongoing materiality of that relationship between Suez and mid-century Britain. The uncontrollable, invasive quality of scent underlines the impossibility of self-containment in any space, including in the spaces of the body, while the differing reactions to that smell reinforce the contingency of sense-making. As it unfolds and refolds into the text, Suez becomes a no-where space, an always in motion, mutable space that is both smooth and striated at the same time.

Folding, unfolding, and refolding syntax and structure, *The Nowhere Man* evokes the 'throwntogetherness' of space as permanent disturbance. Putting language and events in motion, the novel opens itself to a posthuman perspective, setting aside a paradigm of self-containment in favour of interdependence and encounter. There is no outside to the events *The Nowhere Man* describes; those events fold into one another through an interdependency that Markandaya's syntactic folds reinforce. In the next section, I consider the implications of the novel's folded poetics for *The Nowhere Man* as a critical posthumanist text, exploring the connections the novel makes between imperialism in 1920s India, racism and xenophobia in mid-century Britain, and the Human as an exclusionary paradigm.

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[314] Markandaya (2019), p. 292.
[315] Tsing, p. 45.

POLITICS OF THE FOLD

As well as bearing witness to the violence that connects 1920s India and post-war London, *The Nowhere Man* is also concerned with *how* the Human, as the exclusionary paradigm that underpins both British imperialism and post-war racism, works. Central to that paradigm in its mid-century incarnation is the symbolic triad of home, body, and nation. Attentive to the way in which each of these spaces comes to be defined through its own outside, the novel focuses on moments of disruption and disturbance to explore what happens when borders break down. Two such moments are the search of *Chandraprasad* by English soldiers and Fred's attack on No. 5 Ashcroft Avenue. In the example from India, *The Nowhere Man* draws attention to an affective, subject-less empire-ing, an infinitive form of empire that settles in and on bodies but is not bound to them. That empire-ing returns in the London parts of the novel, evident in the exclusionary rhetoric of Enoch Powell and in the images and symbols that Fred uses to fuel his attack on Srinivas. As a critical posthumanist text, *The Nowhere Man* unfolds British nationalism, playing with the mobility of distinctions between inside and outside to draw attention to the inherent instability of concepts such as nation and home.

IMPERIAL SPACE

Coming at the forces of Indian politics obliquely, *The Nowhere Man* picks out moments from Srinivas's childhood to trace the gradual unfolding of his political consciousness. At eight years old Srinivas finds it 'difficult to comprehend' how 'the British, so alien, so aloof that one was scarcely aware of their existence' could have any relation to his world.[316] At fourteen, with the arrival of World War One, he comes to have 'a fair inkling' as Britain raises taxes and recruits Indian soldiers to support the war.[317] By sixteen, when Srinivas passes his school finals 'with distinction in seven subjects', he is becoming aware of the 'sacrifice[s]' that the 'long struggle' for independence will require.[318] With Srinivas the focal point for the novel, this political becoming offers the non-Indian reader an easy introduction into Indian politics; Srinivas's unknowing is an assumed reader's unknowing and both come to consciousness at the same time.

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[316] Markandaya (2019), p. 125.
[317] Markandaya (2019), p. 125.
[318] Markandaya (2019), p. 128, 129.

The context here is India's Non-Cooperation Movement. Led by Mahatma Gandhi, non-cooperation entailed the boycotting of British imports, merchandise, government, and administrative bodies, including those relating to education and law. In comparison to their neighbours, Srinivas's family's involvement in the movement is hesitant and cautious. As Srinivas comes to realise that 'there was something not quite right about' his ambitions for 'MAs and PhDs', '[i]n Vasantha's household such ambitions as still survived were now renounced'.[319] The men in his neighbour's family 'sent in letters of resignation' and the women 'kindled a bonfire and burned on it every article of what they thought to be British-manufactured that they could find'.[320] The financial struggles that result from these resignations lead to a merger of the two households, a disruption of domestic space that blends into the national level political disturbances that are in progress outside of the home.

When soldiers demand to search Srinivas's house, that disruption of domestic space goes a step further as distinctions between public and private space collapse completely. The family never finds out what the soldiers are looking for, but the implication is that it has something to do with Vasudev, the son of Srinivas's neighbours. Vasudev's militant, active opposition to British rule contrasts with Srinivas's ambivalent relationship to the independence movement. With the soldiers at the door, the spaces of the house stand for the spaces of the country as the forces of empire close in on Srinivas, leaving him 'huddled […] in his contracting allotment of space'.[321] Finding nothing, the unnamed Englishman who leads the group becomes frustrated. He has brought with him a 'cane, a springy malacca which he kept tapping, rap-tap, on the backs and legs of chairs and tables as if they were limbs that would jump to attention':[322]

> Suddenly he saw new scope for this exhausted tool in his hand, and bending slightly inserted it under the frill of Vasantha's skirt. What it did to him, this physical act, astonished and alarmed him. He would have withdrawn if he could, but now control had slipped away entirely. The supple cane flicked upward, and the flounces gathered soberly around Vasantha's ankles flew up over her head and left her naked, ready for bed as she had been, of her own though, which was an entirely different kind.[323]

[319] Markandaya (2019), p. 133, 134.
[320] Markandaya (2019), p. 134.
[321] Markandaya (2019), p. 166.
[322] Markandaya (2019), p. 164.
[323] Markandaya (2019), p. 168.

With obvious sexual connotations, the double meaning of the Englishman's 'exhausted tool' connects Vasantha's body with the body of the Indian nation to figure imperial power as a form of physical desire. But there is also more than a symbolic relationship between the home space, the female body, and the nation space on view here. This incident also engages with the ideological grounds of imperial power, showing how the Human as an exclusionary paradigm conditions the encounter.

Earlier in the novel, trying to explain the behaviour of his friend Abdul ben Ahmedi to Mrs Pickering, Srinivas says that 'it affects everyone, when a country is occupied. Both sides, I mean, overlords as much as inhabitants, it seems to twist them out of shape, out of any recognizable human shape'.[324] For the Englishman, that twisting started as soon as he arrived in the country:

> already the climate had worked on him, seeding the blood with imperial implants, potent drugs that bore him to spheres from which he looked down, cold distant eye above the common run: an attitude which annihilated any basis of parity between the two human sides, substituting the split levels of vassal and overlord.[325]

In effect, 'worked on' by the 'drug' of empire, the Englishman materialises Kant's formula of identity through exclusion. The hierarchical distinction between 'vassal and overlord' sets aside 'parity' between humans in favour of a form of sovereign subjectivity grounded in the formula 'I am because you are not'. The Englishman's later behaviour then connects the violent performance of imperial power with this form of exclusionary hierarchy to imply that, where relationships ground themselves in fixed categories of difference, violence is always a legitimate possibility. In this episode, however, that violence never quite materialises with the resolution to the stand-off coming from the 'spark' that 'leapt between white man and brown'. Although Srinivas worries, 'I might have killed him, [...] I might have killed this man, who is a human being like myself', he reins himself in by focusing on sameness and connection over difference.[326] This shared humanity acts as a counter to the violence inherent in the politically grounded Human.

Humanity and the Human remain in tension throughout *The Nowhere Man*. On the one hand, the relationships that develop between Srinivas and Mrs Pickering, Dr Radcliffe, Mrs

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[324] Markandaya (2019), p. 99.
[325] Markandaya (2019), p. 164.
[326] Markandaya (2019), p. 169.

Fletcher, and Constable Kent are rooted in a shared humanity, a sense of connection and community that overrides difference. On the other hand, the tentative and fragile nature of those relationships, together with the novel's violent conclusion, speaks to the entrenched position that the Human holds in post-war Britain. However well-meaning the support and care these characters offer Srinivas, that care is not enough to prevent the text's final tragedy. As this incident with the English soldier suggests, one of the reasons Fred's aggression is so difficult to diffuse is the insistent presence of what Weheliye calls 'racializing assemblages', those 'sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans'.[327] These processes '[etch] abstract forces of power onto human physiology and flesh' to 'produc[e] racial categories, which are subsequently coded as natural substances'.[328] The result is a kind of affective racism where affect means 'a body's openness to becomings that are not its own'.[329] As Weheliye describes it, race is not the property of individual bodies but an affective relationality imposed on bodies from without. In the encounter between Srinivas and the Englishman, Markandaya explores the way in which those assemblages work, figuring the Human as a mobile hierarchy settling in and on bodies but not bound to them.[330]

Notice, for example, the way in which, by the end of the passage above, agency has come to rest in 'the supple cane' rather than in the Englishman himself. The implication is that, as it circulates across the novel, settling in and on the Englishman's body rather than being a pregiven property of that body, empire is functioning as incorporeal affect. Deleuze writes that, rather than being discrete happenings with a definitive beginning and end, events are 'hinge-point[s] where a habitual course of things is interrupted'.[331] Transformative but not causal, events mark shifts in intensities or becoming. Anything can be an event: 'a garden, a chair, the great pyramid, a collision with a bus, Adam sinning, a concert'.[332] What makes the event significant is that it is working on two levels at the same time. A battle, for example,

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[327] Weheliye, p. 4.
[328] Weheliye, pp. 50-51.
[329] Colebrook (2022), p. 396.
[330] As Sylvia Wynter describes it: '*humanness* is no longer a *noun*'. Rather than being a nameable, definable object: '*Being human is a praxis*', a verb signalling a process of continual making and unmaking. Katherine McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 23. Emphasis in original.
[331] Saldanha, p. 165.
[332] James Williams, 'Event', in *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts,* ed. by Charles J. Stivale (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2011), pp. 80-90 (p. 82).

has both a material presence in the actions of bodies and weapons *and* an immaterial presence with a continuity and significance outside of those actions. As Ronald Bogue describes:

> Everywhere on the battlefield bodies encounter other bodies, piercing, cutting, tearing and penetrating one another, yet "the battle" is nowhere present at a given locus, always somewhere else. The battle emanates from the bodies, hovers over them like a fog. It is produced by the bodies as an effect, yet it preexists them as the condition of their possible encounters.[333]

Making sense of the battle means attending to both the experiences of the bodies on the field *and* to the pre-existing 'fog' that 'hovers over them'. When the Englishman searches Srinivas's home, empire 'hovers' over the family and the soldiers as 'the condition of their possible encounters' such that the Englishman's violation of Vasantha both produces and is produced by those imperial relations.

To be clear, I am not figuring the Englishman as a victim of empire here. Rather, I am drawing attention to another way of reading the novel's title: 'man', in the sense of a bounded subject, is absent; 'he' is literally nowhere. Supporting this idea of an absent subject is Deleuze's description of events as 'strictly impersonal'. In other words, events 'happen to subjects not because of them'. It therefore 'makes more sense to say, "there is blushing" than "he blushes" or "she blushed"':

> Verbs in the infinitive like 'to grow' and 'to blush,' and the fourth person singular ('it snows,' 'one can be sure'), are therefore precise ways to express Deleuze's idea of the event. Infinitives and impersonals are abstracted from places and times, yet necessary to characterize their specificity.[334]

In the infinitive form, verbs allow for 'specificity' without relying on subjectivity, making the infinitive the ideal grammatical form for thinking about events. To say that 'he thinks' is to imagine a 'him' that pre-exists the act of thinking. But, as Claire Colebrook puts it, '[t]he infinitive—"to think," "to green," "to act," "to write," "to be"—does not admit of a division between what something is and what it does. There is the event itself and not some prior transcendence of which the event would be an act'.[335] In other words, tending to the infinitive, events such as the invasion of Srinivas's home are subject-less. Emerging out of the colonial 'fog' that 'hovers over them' those events are not simply the actions and

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[333] Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), p. 24.
[334] Saldanha, p. 165.
[335] Colebrook (2002b), p. 34.

consequences of individual agential subjects. Rather, they are complex moments in which Human subjects emerge as part of a collective becoming rather than as the primary instigator.

This posthuman perspective on the Englishman's loss of control figures the invasion of Srinivas's house as a form of empire-ing, a subject-less event that also suggests an interpretation of Vasudev's unexplained death. At some point just before or just after the English soldiers arrive to search Srinivas's home, Vasudev hides in a 'camphor-wood chest whose rusty locks [defeat] the searchers'.[336] After the soldiers leave, he is unable to get out. He dies in the chest and the family only finds his body after 'gases' from his decomposing corpse force the lid of the chest open.[337] To both the family and the reader, '[i]n death, as in life, Vasudev revealed nothing', '[taking] his secrets with him'.[338] This subject-less killing figures as another instance of empire-ing; imperial power does not rest in any one individual but rather tends towards the infinitive, interacting with bodies but not bound to them. While the novel does engage with and offer a critique of empire as both an economic and a political paradigm, showing the Human to be mobile, *The Nowhere Man* also pays attention to *how* imperialism works. Figuring empire through the non-binary no-where, the novel offers a critique of the events in Srinivas's Indian home without limiting its critique to that time and place.

In *Possession* (1963), *The Coffer Dams* (1969), and *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) Markandaya writes about the imperial relationship between Britain and India. But *The Nowhere Man* is the only one of Markandaya's novels to explore the impact of that imperial legacy on life in post-war Britain. In London, the symbolic triad of home, nation, and body remains significant even as the meaning and definition of those spaces transforms. Drawing attention to the ideological conditioning that binds 1920s India and post-war London together, *The Nowhere Man* argues that there is no outside to empire, no way of leaving that past behind; it continues to circulate as affect. It is this affective and ideological continuity between India and London that I consider in the next part of the discussion, focusing on the novel's critique of racism and xenophobia in mid-century Britain.

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[336] Markandaya (2019), p. 171.
[337] Markandaya (2019), p. 172.
[338] Markandaya (2019), p. 172.

In the London parts of the novel, Markandaya explores the ways in which racism as affect circulates, showing how language and images materialise in and on both Fred and Srinivas. In doing so, *The Nowhere Man* draws attention to the inherent mobility of those images, unfolding and refolding the hierarchies and exclusions they call into being to challenge and reframe the terms of post-war debates about who gets to take up space in mid-century Britain.[339] Key to that challenge is the novel's engagement with Enoch Powell's infamous April 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech. Although John Ball and Emma Garman have both commented on the fact that the plot of *The Nowhere Man* begins in the same year as Powell's speech, to date, critical discussion of the relationship between the two texts has not gone further than noting this coincidence.[340] Yet, as my reading suggests, Powell's speech is a critical intertext for *The Nowhere Man*. At the centre of that speech is a complex denial of Britain's lost empire. As Anna Marie Smith describes, Powell erases the 'trauma' of that loss by figuring empire as an anomaly, an exceptional episode that sits outside what it means to be British.[341] In defining Black bodies as un-British, effectively denying and excluding the colonial 'other', Powell advocates for a form of *pre*colonial rather than *post*colonial nationalism. The result, Smith argues, is a 'phantasmatic reconstruction of Britain as a naturally white, antagonism-free and racially exclusionary space unaffected by de-colonization'.[342] With the mixed-upness of the post-war city threatening this precolonial imaginary, Powell brings order and structure to urban space by emphasising fixed definitions of home and nation. Folding Powell's rhetoric into the novel, *The Nowhere Man* plays with the outside that that rhetoric conjures to bear witness to the contingency of mid-century definitions of nation and home.

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[339] Although my discussion focuses on Markandaya's engagement with the Human as a structuring paradigm, the novel is also bearing witness to the violence inherent in everyday racism in Britain during the mid-century. Specifically, *The Nowhere Man* was published two years after the racist murder of Tosir Ali in Tower Hamlets in April 1970 and in the context of a rise in racist attacks on Asian people in London in the 1970s. In its focus on arson, *The Nowhere Man* also anticipates the 1981 New Cross Fire. Stephen Ashe, Satnam Virdee, and Laurence Brown, 'Striking Back Against Racist Violence in the East End of London, 1968–1970', *Race & Class,* 58. 1 (2016), 34-54.

[340] John Clement Ball, 'London South-East: Metropolitan (Un)realities in Indian Fiction', in *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), pp. 174-221; Emma Garman, 'Introduction ', in *The Nowhere Man,* (London: Small Axes, 2019), pp. ix-xviii.

[341] Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[342] Smith (1994), p. 174.

In his speech, Powell tells the story of an 'old-age pensioner', widowed by the war, who 'turn[s] her seven-roomed house, her only asset, into a boarding house'. She is prospering 'until the immigrants moved in' and 'her white tenants moved out'.[343] Refusing to rent rooms to Black tenants, she struggles financially, 'becoming afraid to go out'. 'Windows are broken. She finds excreta pushed through her letter box', and children shout at her on the street.[344] In *The Nowhere Man*, Markandaya reimagines the widow as a widower, the 'excreta' becomes the dead mouse left on Srinivas's doorstep and the dog dirt Srinivas steps in as he traverses London, and the old lady's refusal to rent to Black tenants become the evictions which are Srinivas's attempts to keep his own tenants safe from his illness. On one level, in rewriting the old lady's story, Markandaya is calling out the fictive nature of Powell's words, figuring the reluctant landlady as a parable or allegory open to the same reimagining that Carter famously brings to the fairy tale. But in replacing the pensioner's white body with Srinivas's brown one, Markandaya is not just mocking the oversimplified, surface level reasoning in Powell's speech. While Powell uses the story to reinforce his idea of a nationalist identity rooted in fixed categories of difference, Markandaya, in her retelling, undoes those categories to draw attention to race as a relational contingency rather than an unconditional truth. In *The Nowhere Man,* the bodies that Powell defines as outside the nation move inside and vice versa as Markandaya uses the open-ended, 'throwntogetherness' of post-war London to refold the borders on which Powell's argument relies; otherness in *The Nowhere Man* is mutable, relational, and fluid rather than absolute.

As the example of the elderly pensioner's story shows, one of the ways in which Powell claimed legitimacy for his views was through positioning himself as a spokesperson for 'ordinary, decent, sensible people'.[345] Playing down his own agency, Powell becomes a mouthpiece for, rather than an instigator of, concerns about immigration. *The Nowhere Man* replicates this technique, folding Powell's words, unattributed, into the text to echo the tone of implied, subject-less menace that is central to Powell's rhetoric. Take for example these

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[343] Enoch Powell, 'Speech at Birmingham, 20th April 1968', in *Freedom and Reality,* ed. by Michael Wood (Kingswood: Paperfronts, 1969), pp. 281-290 (p. 287).

[344] Powell, p. 288. Amy Whipple describes Powell's use of this anecdote as an example the 'new racism' emerging in post-war Britain. From this perspective, race shifts 'from being a category of biological difference into a category of instinctive cultural difference'. It is this fear of cultural overwhelm that is then played out in Letty's reserved attitude towards Mr Olatunde. Amy Whipple, 'Revisiting the "Rivers of Blood" Controversy: Letters to Enoch Powell', *The Journal of British Studies,* 48. 3 (2009), 717-735 (p. 721).

[345] Powell, p. 286.

quotations, moments from the text which allude to Powell's premonition of a violent future without ever being attributed to Powell directly:

> Mrs Glass [one of Srinivas's neighbours] had no great hate either, for that matter. She did, she felt, what she had to, bearing in mind the issued warnings of leaders of opinions and moulders of men. Watch out, they said, for bloodshed, so Mrs Glass went out and about to make sure.[346]

> [T]he only broadcasts were about bloodbaths.[347]

> [C]onceptions dissolved in the chemicals of blood speeches, took on gross forms, and were admitted as decencies in the marketplace.[348]

> Of course they'd all been expecting trouble, those speeches did send the fur flying.[349]

As it is in Powell's speech, in Markandaya's novel agency is always elsewhere, 'speeches' and 'broadcasts' take centre stage, while the 'warnings of leaders of opinions' conjure an undirected threat that hovers on the edges of the text without coming into focus. As with the scenes in India, racism tends to the infinitive, ensuring mobility and continuity by remaining always just out of reach.

At the same time, as with the English soldier, racism as affect does materialise, settling, in this case, on Fred Fletcher. Paralleling Srinivas's relocation from India to London, after the war Fred Fletcher moves to Australia to make a new life. In contrast to Srinivas, however, Fred cannot make the move work. Unable to find a job that matches his sense of self-importance, Fred returns to London and moves his wife and children in with his mother, becoming another version of the 'nowhere man' of the novel's title. With no job, no home, and no prospects,

> [Fred] felt, indeed, that he had been done, though he did not know on whom to pin the blame. One day he found out, from a mate of his who had had it straight from the mouth of his councillor. The blacks were responsible. They came in hordes, occupied all the houses, filled up the hospital beds and their offspring took all the places in schools. A great light burst upon Fred.[350]

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[346] Markandaya (2019), p. 250. At the end of his speech in Birmingham, Powell quotes from the Aeneid: 'Like the Roman, I seem to see "the River Tiber foaming with much blood"'. Powell, p. 289.

[347] Markandaya (2019), p. 263.

[348] Markandaya (2019), pp. 273-274.

[349] Markandaya (2019), p. 298.

[350] Markandaya (2019), p. 202. As Anna Marie Smith writes: 'Powellism constructed an entire chain of associations around the black immigrant – so that the black immigrant appeared to be inextricably linked with

In the manner of a religious conversion Fred receives his truth, a truth he holds to throughout his ensuing crusade. It is a crusade that includes tying Srinivas to a lamppost and covering him with tar and feathers, leaving a dead mouse on his doorstep, and, finally, setting the fire that kills them both. Finding himself nowhere, Fred uses violence to try and create an exclusionary somewhere, a bordered space which would keep Srinivas out. Tracing Fred's conversion, *The Nowhere Man* not only bears witness to the violence that an ideology obsessed with protecting fixed definitions of home, body, and nation makes possible, but also pays close attention to how that ideology works, showing how racializing assemblages define and 'discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans'.[351]

Take, for example, the collection of images and ideas that attach themselves to Fred's winter coat, a garment bought with money stolen from his mother for the 'occasion' of arson:[352]

> And there, on a barrow, in an open-air market, so casually flung he instantly knew it came within the housekeeping, was what he had dreamed of. Scarlet, and gold, with loops, and lanyards, and braid, and a broad white buckskin crossbolt.
>
> It could have been the regimentals of a trooper, touched up by a fanciful theatrical costumer.
>
> Or the livery of some faithful, obsolete retainer.
>
> Or it could well have been the vestments laid, somewhere, sometime, on proud vice-regal shoulders, or so Fred, who had seen pictures and saw visions, became convinced.
>
> It was a bursting, riproaring representative of the Queen that rode home on the bus. But purposeful, and determined, and dedicated solely and totally to the welfare of his people.[353]

Taking the reader on a tour around empire, monarchy, religion, class, and military strength, in place of coherent subjectivity *The Nowhere Man* turns Fred into a proliferating patchwork of images. Reminiscent of *The Passion of New Eve,* there is a dark parody here, a simultaneously comic and menacing mimicry of Britain's international posturing. That mimicry mobilises the images that surround the coat, decoupling them from their original contexts to attach them to a new purpose even as they continue to hold the associations and

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unemployment, inadequate social services, the decline of the British inner cities and so on'. Smith (1994), p. 150.
[351] Weheliye, p. 3.
[352] Markandaya (2019), p. 342.
[353] Markandaya (2019), p. 343.

echoes of their normative use. As a result, Fred's coat reads as both non-sense and common-sense, each position cancelling the other out to draw attention to the contingency of meaning inherent in images of nationalism and empire and the way in which those images circulate to settle in and on white and brown bodies.

In a 1973 lecture, Markandaya argued:

> images are largely what our actions are governed by. They are regulators of our conduct toward each other, and through us they broaden to regulate the conduct of nation to nation.[354]

Later in the same lecture, Markandaya advocates for 'a clean-out of the entire clutter of distorted and distorting imagery with which we have lumbered ourselves'.[355] In *The Nowhere Man*, Markandaya tries for just such a 'clean-out'. As well as mobilising images of empire and nationalism, the novel also takes issue with religious iconography. Fred acquires a 'barbed crown' while hiding in the bushes, an echo of Jesus's crown of thorns. Similarly, Fred 'dribbl[es]' petrol like 'holy water' as he sets the fire.[356] In the background here is Markandaya's 'irritation' with 'the Western coding of Christian as virtuous'.[357] Markandaya refuses that coding by making these religious images mobile, figuring them as contingent rather than as intrinsically meaningful. In doing so, *The Nowhere Man* conjures sense in its neutral form, refusing a transcendent morality in favour of an attention to the actions and events which those images legitimate.

As with the discussion of the English army officer, I am not arguing that Fred is the victim here. Rather, I am highlighting the way in which *The Nowhere Man*'s immanent critique pays attention to *how* the exclusionary dynamic of the Human circulates. Exploring racism in its infinitive form, Markandaya's novel avoids centring the debate on any one individual or event, allowing a deeper, structural dynamic to come into view. That structural dynamic speaks to the historical and spatial mixed-upness of the mid-century, countering easy distinctions between past and present, inside and outside to challenge Human narratives of progress and development. Weheliye, building on an argument Paul Gilroy makes in *Against Race*, describes 'the concentration camp, the colonial outpost, and slave plantation' as 'three

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[354] Dorothy Blair Shimer, 'Sociological Imagery in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya', *World Literature Written in English*, 14. 2 (1975), 357-370 (p. 357).
[355] Shimer, p. 358.
[356] Markandaya (2019), pp. 301, 347.
[357] Garman, p. xvii.

of many relay points in the weave of modern politics'.[358] These 'relay points' are 'neither exceptional nor comparable, but simply relational'.[359] It is that relationality that *The Nowhere Man* explores through the connections it makes between 1920s India and post-war London.

As examples of that relationality, look at the way in which images of fire circulate in *The Nowhere Man*. These images repeat in Dr Radcliffe's stars, Srinivas's fire watching during World War Two, and Mrs Pickering '[b]reathing fire' at the young people who stole her hat.[360] Yet, as the clustering of page numbers in the examples below shows, these images also pick up pace as the novel progresses, intensifying as the text nears its end:

> A 'young Sikh' talking in the 'club for Asian businessmen' discusses increasingly vocal political support for curbs on immigration into Britain, saying '[e]very time they start it gets like a furnace for us'.[361]

> Mrs Fletcher, Srinivas's neighbour, after telling Mrs Pickering about a malicious rumour that claims Srinivas is throwing her out, 'shrank back from those spiky, dangerous sparks that appeared to be emanating, which would burn holes in her skin if they fell, she knew'.[362]

> Fred, sharing the same rumour to raise antipathy towards Srinivas, dares not speak when Mrs Pickering is around, being 'quite afraid of certain incendiary qualities to the woman'.[363]

> After meeting with Dr Radcliffe, '[t]o Srinivas it seemed warmth, charged particles that streamed from the man and lit fires here and there, where they were needed, within the chilled lacunae of his bones'.[364]

> After the attack on Srinivas, Srinivas's friend Abdul ben Ahmedi feels it is 'time for anger. He could feel it kindling in its familiar pit, burning up from embers which had never been extinguished'. In response, his wife, Odile, 'put her arms around the burning man'.[365]

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[358] Weheliye, p. 37.

[359] Weheliye, p. 37. Gili Kliger writes: 'If the Holocaust was the outlier then one could continue to maintain that the arc of moral, scientific, and cultural progress in the West trended upwards, in a linear fashion. But if colonialism was taken into account, then one was forced to concede this trend: Western advances had always coincided with more sinister phenomena; progress was a contradiction, accompanied as it was with practices of barbarism'. Gili Kliger, 'Humanism and the Ends of Empire, 1945–1960', *Modern Intellectual History,* 15. 3 (2018), 773-800 (p. 774).

[360] Markandaya (2019), p. 66.

[361] Markandaya (2019), pp. 215, 216.

[362] Markandaya (2019), p. 259.

[363] Markandaya (2019), p. 263.

[364] Markandaya (2019), p. 271.

[365] Markandaya (2019), p. 307.

> Meanwhile Mrs Fletcher felt 'sick and tired of Fred', the instigator of the attack, and her feelings 'had begun to flare, fiery streamers that reached out from a central ball of fire and excoriated them'.[366]

Alluding to world history, religion, and ritual, these images of fire work on multiple levels, simultaneously figuring as historical markers, metaphors and similes, symbols, omens, and affect to offer the reader a gathering of ideas rather than pointing to a definitive meaning. While Ball describes fire as 'a symbol of ambivalent belonging', drawing attention to the religious significations it holds, my focus here is on the historical and political resonances in these quotations.[367] In the 'furnace' of the first quotation, for example, there are echoes of the Holocaust, echoes made louder by a later discussion between Srinivas and Mrs Pickering. While Srinivas suggests that evil 'burns itself out, eventually', Mrs Pickering responds by saying, 'I don't think the ashes that were left in Germany gave comfort to anybody, do you?'.[368] Folding post-war London into Nazi Germany and Nazi Germany into post-war London, Markandaya bears witness to the realities that a meta-narrative focused on progression overwrites. In doing so, *The Nowhere Man* raises the possibility of an underlying continuity that extends beyond the links between imperial India and post-war London, as well as beyond Powell as the figurehead of racism in mid-century Britain. That continuity is also a feature of the links between the 'incendiary qualities' of Mrs Pickering and the incendiary bombs which killed Srinivas's son, and between the 'charged particles' that come from Dr Radcliffe and those 'charged particles' which drive nuclear fission and so the atomic bomb. The implication is that the racializing assemblages that drove these headline-making events continue to press, with Fred's fire-setting as a materialisation of those dynamics.

Using images as nodal connections, rhizomes that read in multiple directions, *The Nowhere Man* puts history in motion, refusing to grant it stable ground or consistent meaning to again make disturbance the norm rather than the exception. As a critical posthumanist text, *The Nowhere Man* focuses on the mobility of these allusions to bear witness to the way in the Human as a mobile hierarchy conditions the interactions between bodies. At the same time, positioning fire at the intersection of being and becoming, these images speak not just to destruction but also, as Tsing's work suggests, to possibility. Those 'charged particles' that flow from Dr Radcliffe to Srinivas hold both annihilation and affirmation, warming the

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[366] Markandaya (2019), p. 307.
[367] Ball, p. 191
[368] Markandaya (2019), p. 353.

'chilled lacunae of [Srinivas's] bones' even as they carry echoes of the atomic bomb. It is this mix of precarity and potential that I focus on in the next section, reading the novel's attention to enfleshment rather than embodiment as a form of immanent ethics open to alternative 'genres' of the Human.

POSTHUMAN SPACE: BODIES, FLESH, MATTER

This thesis began with a quotation from Alexander Weheliye, and it is to Weheliye that I want to return as this chapter draws to a close. For Weheliye, flesh is not just matter. Found at the 'precarious threshold where the person metamorphoses into the group', flesh opens 'a vestibular gash in the armor of Man' to make way for 'an alternate instantiation of humanity'.[369] As I have already noted, through Spillers, Weheliye argues that flesh 'resists the legal idiom of personhood as property', preventing the Human from taking hold and thus opening the way for 'different genres of the human'.[370] If smooth space is space that ideological 'structures cannot get a grip on', then flesh is similarly smooth, a meeting point between language and matter that in its always-in-motion becoming exceeds a binary dynamic of agent and victim. To be clear, just as smooth space will never 'suffice to save us', Weheliye is 'not making any claims about the desirability of flesh, the unmitigated agency it contains, or how it abolishes the violent political structures at its root'.[371] In line with Markandaya's folded poetics, there is no way outside the racializing assemblages that Weheliye describes, and this is not about replacing 'real oppression' with 'pure becoming'.[372] Rather, this is about recognising how *The Nowhere Man*'s attention to the immanent materiality of flesh allows for the potential of 'different modalit[ies] of existence', modalities which fold the binaries of self and other, inside and outside together to advocate for an immanent ethics grounded in an ontology of material encounter and becoming.[373]

Srinivas's leprosy brings those alternative modalities into view. While there were worries about leprosy in Britain during the mid-century, including a localised riot in 1947 caused by the leaking of a diagnosis in a small town, in-country transmission of the disease was

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[369] Weheliye, pp. 44, 43.
[370] Weheliye, pp. 44, 21.
[371] Weheliye, p. 11.
[372] Colebrook (2022), pp. 380, 381.
[373] Weheliye, p. 112.

extremely rare, with no cases recorded since 1953.[374] How, then, should one read Srinivas's improbable body? Is Markandaya offering readers a metaphor, an allegory, a fairy story, or something else? Critics have tended to figure Srinivas as a victim of the politics prevalent in post-war Britain. Susheila Nasta, for example, argues that 'Srinivas's leprosy both literally and metaphorically becomes a symptom of his position in society after 30 years in England'.[375] In the complex folds of language and matter that coalesce around Srinivas's illness, however, Markandaya seems to question this reading of Srinivas as a victim. On one level, the novel is a testament to the violence that is an inevitable consequence of a paradigm founded on exclusion. Through this lens, Srinivas's leprosy is metaphorical. On another level, however, leprosy literalises the body's openness to its own outside. In other words, leprosy is another form of disruption and disturbance, a way of undoing '[t]he assumption of self-containment' that underpins models of Human subjectivity in favour of 'transformation through encounter'.[376]

Tracing the movement of the word 'leprosy' through the novel highlights these material interdependencies. Although *The Nowhere Man* opens with Srinivas at the doctor's surgery, the first mention of leprosy in the text is as metaphor. Naryan, Srinivas's father, after the failure of his first attempt at rebellion, wonders '[w]hat is happening, to make us look like a copy of human beings? Like lepers […] at the point where flesh becomes sludge'.[377] Later in the novel, Markandaya also has Fred use the term as he hobbles around London on a 'flaming ankle', ruminating on his hatred for Srinivas.[378] 'Never, never, his soul cried, and the word seemed to fork in his mouth so that it tumbled out differently, sometimes as *You will never make me a leper*, and sometimes as *I will never let you forget you are a leper*'.[379] Folded into Naryan's and Fred's metaphorical uses of leprosy are ideas of exile and physical degeneration, as well as a fear of otherness that conflates with fear of disease to demand segregation and separation. In materialising that metaphor in and on Srinivas's body, *The Nowhere Man* actualises his outcast status in a way which seems to position the novel as a

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[374] A.L. Gill, G.V. Gill, and N.J. Beeching, 'Familial Transmission of Leprosy in Post-War Britain: Discrimination and Dissent', *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine,* 101. 5 (2008), 407-413.
[375] Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions about the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 198.
[376] Tsing, p. 28.
[377] Markandaya (2019), p. 155.
[378] Markandaya (2019), p. 327.
[379] Markandaya (2019), p. 329. Emphasis in original.

form of allegorical trauma.[380] The linguistic connections between Naryan and Fred, however, speak to a relationality that breaks the bounds of individual subjectivity and it is this interdependency which leprosy, as another form of disruption and incursion, draws attention to.

Take, as another example of this interdependency, the first time Srinivas discusses his illness with Mrs Pickering. Srinivas initially keeps his diagnosis from her. Rather than accepting treatment, he 'decide[s] to end [his] life' because he cannot see any other way of dealing with his condition. Sharing his decision with Mrs Pickering in a characteristically roundabout way, Srinivas points to the racist graffiti scrawled daily on the billboard opposite his house as evidence of his exclusion:

> 'It is time,' he said simply, 'when one is made to feel unwanted, and liable, as a leper, to be ostracized further, perhaps beyond the limit one can reasonably expect of oneself.'[381]

To be clear, Srinivas is still speaking metaphorically here, his hands covered by the gloves he has used to hide his condition. In response, Mrs Pickering brands the writers of that graffiti '[a] few barren men', asking whether 'one [is] to become a leper to oblige them'.[382] It is at this point that the metaphor of leprosy materialises onto Srinivas's body to the extent that Srinivas 'did not know, became unsure as to whether it [his leprosy] had been imagined to oblige'. Finally, he admits to Mrs Pickering, '"[t]o oblige, no," he stammered. "But, you see, it has happened"'.[383] Through this conflation of real and representation, sign and world, Markandaya sets up a meta-textual commentary on the novel from within. With the passive construction, 'had been imagined', leaving the imaginer unnamed, Markandaya hints at her own absent presence. She is the imaginer here, sidestepping questions of how and why to figure Srinivas's body as an intersection between trauma and politics, simultaneously an enactment of Powell's figuration of immigration as 'a viral infection' and of Srinivas's outcast status in society.[384] The result is a folding of allegory and metaphor into an attention to Srinivas's indeterminate body as flesh, flesh as another no-where space, a space with no defined inside or outside.

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[380] Like Pym's depiction of Marcia discussed in Chapter One, *The Nowhere Man* also resonates with Mitchell and Snyder's description of the disabled body as the 'crutch upon which literary narratives lean'. Mitchell and Snyder, p. 49.
[381] Markandaya (2019), p. 240.
[382] Markandaya (2019), pp. 240-241.
[383] Markandaya (2019), p. 241.
[384] Smith (1994), p. 158.

Although unremarked on by other critics, flesh has an urgent presence in *The Nowhere Man*. Notice, for example, the materiality of the quotations I have used in this chapter. Imperialism is not just problematic in principle, it is reshaping matter, turning 'flesh' into 'sludge' and 'twist[ing]' bodies 'out of shape'. Or remember Srinivas's walk around London and the 'grip and slap of toe and heel upon the glistening flags'. As Srinivas's son Laxman spots smoke coming from the house, he begins to 'push through the crowd, thrusting savagely against flabby bodies and cowering minds'. He 'could have wept',

> [b]ut he carried on, as others would, and some were already attempting, since no amount of marshalling or regimentation of blood, or emotion, or upbringing, or brainwashing, can wholly douse, in everyone, or for all time, the primal leap of human fellow feeling: flesh feeling for flesh.[385]

On the one hand, the narrator's reference to 'the primal leap of human fellow feeling' connects this passage with that attention to the potential for an expansive, egalitarian humanism that runs throughout the novel. On the other hand, that final image of 'flesh feeling for flesh' smooths out the striations of bodies and subjects to open the way for a materiality unbound from the human form. Undoing the binary of self and other, the novel evokes that form of posthuman relationality that Tsing finds in the disturbances that allow the matsutake mushrooms to thrive and that Deleuze describes as a characteristic of his 'whatever' cities. In doing so, *The Nowhere Man* draws attention to the material connections and interdependencies that persist and insist between flesh as matter.

In Markandaya's novel, those connections go beyond the human as a species to figure flesh not as a function of humanity but as a form of shared materiality. In 'One Pair of Eyes', Markandaya writes:

> [t]he gulf between me and the West really opens when I encounter the assumption, here in the West, that the earth was created for man: an assumption that seems to be used, consciously or unconsciously, to justify almost any kind of assault upon the animal kingdom, and upon the systems of the earth itself.[386]

The Nowhere Man challenges that assumption of superiority by giving people, animals, and buildings equal status. For example, a 'little colony' of ladybirds takes up residence in Srinivas's attic window. When Srinivas becomes aware of the fire in his home, it is only after

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[385] Markandaya (2019), p. 368.
[386] Markandaya, p. 30.

'the ladybirds had flown – at least the window frames were empty' that he started 'to see to himself, who was also a living thing'.[387] Another example comes from the 'small grey mouse', with 'entitlements no less than a man', that Srinivas finds on his doorstep.[388] Houses in this novel, as Ruth Maxey points out, are characters too. It is *Chandraprasad,* the house Srinivas's grandfather built, that the Englishman blames for his assault on Vasantha:

> The English man heard [his men laughing], and burned with shame. Not for what he had done, but because he had lost command of himself and his men had seen it. The house, he felt, was responsible. It had worn him down with its totality of plastic resistance and concealed warrens of retreat and resilience.[389]

Blaming the house rather than the people who live in it, the Englishman tries to escape responsibility without ceding agency to Srinivas and his family. Yet, the novel takes apart this distinction between people and place to figure the materiality of buildings as akin to that of bodies. Vasantha, for example, is 'a framework with steel in its structure', while Srinivas and Mrs Pickering 'had been derelict, in a way, when they met'.[390] Again, this is not about overwriting difference with a flawless universalism. Distinctions between house and self persist:

> The two of them, it and he, waxed and waned if not together, at least in some kind of communion. Both were very frail now, leaning, and insubstantial, but clearly girders and bones would continue to support each other as long as need be.[391]

Rather, in a classic posthuman move, *The Nowhere Man* levels distinctions between flesh and matter to posit a post-anthropocentric world, a material interdependence and relationality that stands distinct from both the Human as a paradigm and the human as a species.

It is through this interdependent lens that I read the novel's final words. After Srinivas has died, Mrs Glass tries to comfort Mrs Pickering, telling her, 'You mustn't blame yourself'. '"Blame myself", said Mrs Pickering. "Why should I? I cared for him." And, indeed, that seemed to her to be the core of it'.[392] Contrasting with the tentatively hopeful journeys that close *The Passion of New Eve* and *Quartet in Autumn*, the seeming finality of *The Nowhere*

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[387] Markandaya (2019), p. 365.
[388] Markandaya (2019), pp. 276, 280.
[389] Markandaya (2019), p. 169.
[390] Markandaya (2019), pp. 20, 85.
[391] Markandaya (2019), p. 336.
[392] Markandaya (2019), p. 373.

Man's ending nonetheless works on multiple levels. On one level, the novel is returning to that tension between humanity and the Human that plays out across the text. Landing on the question of care, in the sense of the 'warmth' and compassion of one human being for another, the novel offers that compassion as a response to the violence that marks Srinivas's end.[393] On another level, Srinivas's death speaks to the futility of care and compassion; given the entrenched position of the Human in mid-century Britain, there are limited possibilities for change. On yet another level, I also see a posthuman dimension to *The Nowhere Man*'s sense of what it means to care. Joanna Latimer describes posthuman care as a way of 'being alongside', a form of entanglement and inter-relationality that reimagines distinctions between subject and object.[394] In other words, care becomes an act of immanent materialism, a post-anthropocentric recognition of interdependence and inter-relationality that takes this discussion back to the ideas about collaboration and cooperation that Tsing articulates in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. To be clear, I do not see these readings as mutually exclusive. Folding Human, humanist, and posthuman perspectives together, *The Nowhere Man* allows for both individual culpability and collective encounter, to end with an invocation of that intersection between being and becoming that characterises mid-century fabulation.

CONCLUSION

> Space is not a 'here' in contrast to an 'elsewhere' (home and away), a 'mine' in contrast to 'theirs' (private space), but rather the constantly changing seascape of what is, of which we are only temporary marginal residues.[395]

This chapter has brought *The Nowhere Man* into dialogue with Tsing's work on ecological collaboration and Deleuze's concept of the fold. In doing so, it has shown how Markandaya's novel figures space, including textual space, as 'open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming'. Through that openness, Markandaya reimagines 'nowhere' as non-binary 'no-where'. Where the Human works to stabilise the borders between nations, homes, and bodies, *The Nowhere Man* plays with distinctions between inside and outside to draw attention to the connections between imperial India and post-war London. Exploring those

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[393] Markandaya (2019), p. 56.
[394] Joanna Latimer, 'Being Alongside: Rethinking Relations amongst Different Kinds', *Theory, Culture & Society,* 30. 7-8 (2013), 77-104.
[395] West-Pavlov, p. 242.

connections, Markandaya's novel critiques and reimagines the hierarchical distinctions between nations and bodies that underpin British imperialism and post-war racism. As Markandaya's novel makes clear, hard borders between homes, bodies, and nations exist in theory rather than in practice; for those living in the 'real' world, life is messy, interconnected, and contingent. In the final part of the reading, I focused on Srinivas's improbable body to show how the novel posits a material entanglement grounded in encounter and becoming, a relationality that undoes '[t]he assumption of self-containment' to figure disruption and disturbance as the norm rather than the exception. In the next pair of readings, I find a similar mixed-upness in Spark's *Memento Mori* and Comyns's *The Vet's Daughter*, texts which start where *The Nowhere Man* ends as they explore the relationship between life and death.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE POSTHUMAN AND THE POSTHUMOUS IN MURIEL SPARK'S *MEMENTO MORI* AND BARBARA COMYNS'S *THE VET'S DAUGHTER*

This chapter focuses on Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* (1959) and Barbara Comyns's *The Vet's Daughter* (1959). These novels explore what Elizabeth Povinelli calls 'zones of abandonment', spaces in which death is both imminent, brought close by violence and abuse, and immanent, meaning pervasive and all around.[396] In *Memento Mori*, Spark focuses on old age to explore social and cultural attitudes towards death and dying at the mid-century. In contrast, in *The Vet's Daughter*, seventeen-year-old Alice Rowlands describes her experiences of misogyny, sexual violence, and murder. As critical posthumanist texts, these novels work on two levels, bearing witness to the precarity of bodies defined as other-than-Human while also drawing attention to the limits of agency, reason, and self-determination, those characteristics which define what it means to be Human at the mid-century. Centring on mysteries that they leave unresolved, *Memento Mori* and *The Vet's Daughter* also explore 'different modalities of the Human'. In doing so, they collapse distinctions between agency and victimhood, replacing this binary dynamic with a fluid posthuman ontology that reimagines what counts as life.

THEORISING LIFE AND DEATH

> Most of all the dead, from mortuaries, from under cataracts of rubble, made their anonymous presence – not as today's dead but as yesterday's living – felt through London. Uncounted, they continued to move in shoals through the city day, pervading everything to be seen or heard or felt with their torn-off senses, drawing on this tomorrow they had expected – for death cannot be as sudden as all that. […] The wall between the living and the living became less solid as the wall between the living and the dead thinned.[397]

In *The Heat of the Day* (1948), Elizabeth Bowen characterises London in the autumn of 1940 as a space of both risk and opportunity. While nightly bombing raids make life in the capital

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[396] Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
[397] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (London: Vintage, 1998), pp. 91-92.

insecure, people respond to that insecurity by paying attention to each other in ways they had not done before. In Bowen's words, Londoners react with 'an instinctive movement to break down indifference while there was still time'.[398] It is this openness that leads to the enigmatic relationship between Stella and Robert that sits at the centre of Bowen's novel. Just two years later, though, when that relationship ends, those 'cataracts of rubble' which made the dead and the living immanent to each other have been 'cleaned up, shored up' and a 'new insidious echoless propriety of ruins' has turned that rubble into 'a norm of the scene'.[399] That normalising of ruins turns the 'particular conjunction of life and death' that marked the experience of Londoners during the early days of the blitz into a 'deadening acclimatization', a rebuilding of the wall between the living and the dead that also closes off the living from the living.[400] Refusing that closure, *The Heat of the Day*'s disconcerting, affective prose makes those ruins strange again, blending vulnerability with possibility to evoke that mix of being and becoming that characterises mid-century fabulation.

This chapter explores a similar blend of precarity and potential in Spark's *Memento Mori* and Comyns's *The Vet's Daughter*. Like *The Heat of the Day*, these novels thin the wall between the living and the dead to speak to an historical moment overshadowed by both the repercussions of World War Two and the post-war threat of nuclear annihilation. As Tony Judt's work details, the magnitude of twentieth century loss is extreme: 'about thirty-six and a half million Europeans died between 1939 and 1945 from war-related causes (equivalent to the *total* population of France at the outbreak of war) — a number that does not include deaths from natural causes in those years, nor any estimate of the numbers of children not conceived or born then or later because of the war'.[401] Moving beyond Europe, Gil Elliot's *Twentieth Century Book of the Dead* (1972) puts '[t]he number of man-made deaths in the twentieth century [at] about one hundred million', going on to describe '[t]he scale of' those deaths as 'the central moral as well as material fact of our time'.[402] Whilst coming to terms with these actual fatalities, the post-war world also has to find a way to live with the potential for further destruction in the form of nuclear war. As Doris Lessing writes in 1957:

> We are living at a time which is so dangerous, violent, explosive and precarious that it is in question whether soon there will be people left alive

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[398] Bowen, p. 92.

[399] Bowen, p. 92.

[400] Bowen, p. 92.

[401] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Vintage, 2010), pp. 17-18. Emphasis in original.

[402] Gil Elliot, *Twentieth Century Book of the Dead* (Middlesex: The Pengiun Press, 1972), pp. 1, 6.

to write books and to read them. It is a question of life and death for all of us.[403]

In other words, life and death in mid-century Britain are immanently entangled, forced together by the threat of unprecedented global destruction and the memory of what has gone before. It is this immanent relationship between living and dying that I explore in *Memento Mori* and *The Vet's Daughter*, novels that speak to the significance of Lessing's question for mid-century British fiction. As I show in the readings that follow, these novels 'think with' rather than 'against death' to explore ways of becoming *with* vulnerability and loss.[404]

Centring this chapter on that 'question of life and death' has been conceptually challenging. As Zygmunt Bauman suggests, '[w]e all "know" very well what death is; that is, until we are asked to give a precise account of what we know – to define death as we "understand" it. Then the trouble starts'.[405] From a biological perspective, life and death are the words English uses to make sense of the changes that bodies go through over time. But, while those changes are tangible and have tangible consequences, the significance of death as a concept and a physical inevitability always exceeds that materiality; however poignant and painful the impact of loss, death itself can never be known or defined. As I have drafted and redrafted this introduction, I have struggled with this lack of specificity, finding myself slipping between referents in the search for a suitable critical frame. Eventually, with support from my supervisors, I came to realise that I was focusing too much on independent concepts and not enough on relationality. The texts I explore in this chapter are not interested in life and death as distinct, definable terms or states. As Bowen's image of a thinning wall suggests, it is the *relationship* between living and dying that matters in *Memento Mori* and *The Vet's Daughter*. This chapter focuses on that relationality to explore both the material implications of post-

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[403] Lessing (1957), p. 16. Discussing the impact of the nuclear threat on post-war Britain, Jonathan Hogg describes a pervading sense of what he calls 'nuclearity', meaning a sense of 'powerlessness' created by an acute awareness of 'the limits of democracy and the fragility of the modern project'. Jonathan Hogg, ''The family that feared tomorrow': British Nuclear Culture and Individual Experience in the Late 1950s', *The British Journal for the History of Science,* 45. 4 (2012), 535-549 (p. 546).

[404] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 129. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno write that, '[o]nly when the horror of annihilation is raised fully into consciousness are we placed in the proper relationship to the dead: that of unity with them, since we, like them, are victims of the same conditions and of the same disappointed hope'. While the emotional register of *Memento Mori* and *The Vet's Daughter* is not that of 'disappointed hope', I think there is a sense in which they are exploring the shifts in thinking which a 'unity' with the dead would occasion. As Allan Hepburn writes: 'Mid-century British fiction […] unfolds within the ambiguous space between imminent doom and compromised futurity'. Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 178; Allan Hepburn, 'The Future and the End: Imagining Catastrophe in Mid-Century British Fiction', in *British Literature in Transition, 1940–1960: Postwar,* ed. by Gill Plain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 369-384 (p. 369).

[405] Zygmaunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 2.

war precarity and the conceptual role that distinctions between life and death play in mid-century Britain.

It might seem obvious to say that life and death figures as a key structuring binary in mid-century Britain, but as Philippe Ariès's wide-ranging study of attitudes towards death and dying in Western Europe since the early modern period makes clear, the idea of a hard border between these states is relatively recent. As Ariès's work shows, prior to the twentieth century, death was both more physically present in everyday life and more culturally integrated into what it meant to be human.[406] As Marietta Radomska, Tara Mehrabi, and Nina Lykke suggest, '[d]eath is materialised and becomes meaningful at a particular time, in a particular place and in relation to other processes'.[407] That is to say, rather than signifying a fixed property of bodies or things, the concepts of life and death come into being in relation to politics, society, and culture. For Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke, recognising the instability and therefore the relationality of these terms 'leads to questions not only about the ontology of death and the binary of life and death, but also about human exceptionalism' and 'Western linear temporality'. In this chapter, I show how *Memento Mori* and *The Vet's Daughter* are similarly alert to the conceptual contingency of life and death in the context of the Human as the dominant mid-century paradigm. With distinctions between living and dying reflecting the priorities and principles of any given society, writing about attitudes towards mortality in mid-century Britain means writing about the Human.

From a literary critical perspective, scholars tend to discuss mortality in twentieth-century British fiction in one of three ways. In studies of modernism, the figure of the corpse comes under scrutiny to raise questions about agency and subjectivity. Erin Edwards's *The Modernist Corpse: Posthumanism and the Posthumous* (2018), for example, explores texts by William Faulkner, Mina Loy, and Djuna Barnes to show how the corpse mediates between human and non-human life. Given '[t]he posthumous is literally *post*human in that it follows human life', Edwards asks, might the posthumous help to reimagine 'what counts as

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[406] Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of our Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). The distinction between life and death that this chapter explores is, of course, also culturally contingent. Alternative perspectives on this relationality come from critics such as Vine Deloria Jr and E. Richard Atleo. Kim Tallbear also looks at the intersection of Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives on death in dying in Kim TallBear, 'Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary: A Feminist-Indigenous Reading of Cryopreservation, Interspecies Thinking, and the New Materialisms', in *Cryopolitics: Frozen Life in a Melting World,* ed. by Joanna Radin and Emma Kowal (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), pp. 179-202.

[407] Marietta Radomska, Tara Mehrabi, and Nina Lykke, 'Queer Death Studies: Death, Dying and Mourning from a Queerfeminist Perspective', *Australian Feminist Studies,* 35. 104 (2020), 81-100 (p. 90).

"life'".[408] While this chapter explores similar theoretical terrain in relation to the posthuman, I balance Edwards's materialist approach against the concern with affect that characterises critical engagement with fiction published during World War Two and in the immediate post-war era. In their analyses of post-war fiction's affective dimensions, Sara Wasson, Lisa Mullen, and Thomas S. Davis argue the Gothic is the ideal literary form for writing about the war and its aftermath. As Wasson argues in her work on World War Two literature, rather than 'subsum[ing] loss and death into a neat narrative of healing and survival', Gothic fiction holds open the border between life and death to allow for the complexity of feeling occasioned by events in the first half of the twentieth century.[409] As Lindsay Stonebridge describes in *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-century British Culture*, however, an intellectual preoccupation with 'the malaise of the human condition' soon supersedes this attention to affect.[410] The resulting literary and philosophical engagement with the human condition then turns debates about life and death into questions of morality, predicating responses to those questions on a belief in the sanctity of human life. In the introduction to this thesis, I cited John Wain's view that literature is 'about what it is like to be a human being', that the artist must 'assert the importance of humanity in the teeth of whatever is currently trying to annihilate that importance'.[411] As Marina MacKay suggests in her work on Ian Watt, from this humanist perspective, literary realism becomes 'a means for moral reckoning and social rehabilitation', a way of focusing on life rather than on death.[412] In this chapter, I position mid-century fabulation at the intersection of materiality, affect, and ethics, showing how *Memento Mori* and *The Vet's Daughter* explore the interplay between these three areas of critical interest. Bringing death into the everyday, these novels bear

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[408] Erin E Edwards, *The Modernist Corpse: Posthumanism and the Posthumous* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 3. Ariela Freedman's 2003 work, *Death, Men, and Modernism: Trauma and Narrative in British Fiction from Hardy to Woolf* also focuses on the figure of the corpse in modernist fiction to argue that the male corpse was 'both a symptom and a symbol for the failure of modernity'. Ariela Freedman, *Death, Men, and Modernism: Trauma and Narrative in British Fiction from Hardy to Woolf* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 3.

[409] Wasson, p. 28; Thomas S. Davis, *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

[410] Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 94. In *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism*, Tammy Clewell also focuses on affect to describe a form of 'ongoing mourning' in the work of writers such as Evelyn Waugh, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner. Tammy Clewell, *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 3.

[411] Wain (1957), p. 87.

[412] MacKay (2019a), p. 12. As Stonebridge's later work, *Placeless People: Writing, Rights, and Refugees,* makes clear, it is this assertion of humanity's importance that then underpins critical discussions about the relationship between post-war literature and Human Rights.

witness to the precarity of bodies in mid-century Britain while continuing to question what counts as life.

It is that question of what counts as life that I consider in the next part of this discussion, drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben and Zygmunt Baumann to think about life in relation to the Human. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben brings a political lens to bear on distinctions between life and death at the mid-century. Building on Foucault's biopolitical critique and taking the Holocaust as the paradigmatic example, Agamben explores the theory and practice of sovereign power, describing the ways in which Western politics claims and maintains legitimacy through defining the 'state of exception', effectively policing the border between living and dying. Central to Agamben's argument is the politicisation of the classical distinction between *bios* and *zoe*. *Bios* is politically legitimated life, life as a citizen recognised and sanctioned by the state and lived within the bounds of the *polis*. *Zoe*, in contrast, is 'bare life', that form of life which is excluded from rights and autonomy but which, by being so excluded, comes to define *bios*. As Agamben then describes, contemporary Western societies manipulate that classical frame:

> The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zoē/bios*, exclusion/inclusion. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion.[413]

While the citizenship of *bios* offers legal and political protection, lives lived in a state of exception can be killed 'with impunity', making 'the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die' 'the ultimate expression of sovereignty' in contemporary society.[414]

As well as showing how the Human as an exclusionary paradigm plays out in relation to distinctions between life and death, *Homo Sacer* also articulates the definition of life that underpins the Human at the mid-century. That definition aligns with the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* that Agamben argues is fundamental to post-war European politics. Through this biopolitical lens, life equates to bounded, agential, reasoning subjectivity, with the opposing

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[413] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 12.
[414] Agamben, p. 47; Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture,* 15.1 (2003), 11-40 (p. 11).

term, *zoe* or 'bare life', coming to be associated with victimhood or life without control. As Achille Mbembe argues, reasoned control then becomes key to definitions of what it means to be Human in Western society, to the extent that 'sovereignty [...] rests on the belief that the subject is the master and the controlling author of his or her own meaning'.[415] The result is a conflation of life with agency, a form of mutual dependency in which each term presupposes the presence of the other.

While Agamben's focus is political, social and cultural commentators on death in mid-century Britain describe a similar privileging of agential life within a shifting dynamic of inclusion and exclusion. As Tony Walter summarises:

> The dominant sociological theory of death in contemporary society, classically articulated by Mellor and Shilling (1993), is that death is sequestrated – the organisation and experience of death have become increasingly private, separated from mainstream society. The sequestration thesis resonates with historian Ariès' (1981) notion that twentieth-century death and dying are forbidden or hidden, and with critiques – whether sophisticated or crude – of a 'death denying society' (Becker, 1973) in which death is 'taboo' (Gorer, 1955).[416]

What this means in practice, as Ariés's work details, is that, while 'man-made' death dominates historical and political discussions of the twentieth century, at the societal level death from natural causes disappears from everyday life, with those who are dying confined to hospitals, hospices, and care homes. In *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Bauman explores this process of 'sequestration', describing British post-war culture as seeking solace in medicine and celebrity, discourses which work to overcome death in both physical and ideological terms. In making his case, Bauman also argues for a connection between this apparent inability or unwillingness to confront mortality and the significance of agency, reason, and self-determination for the Human. As an unknowable and unimaginable state, death presents an ideological challenge to that paradigm, threatening not just the individual but also the principles on which the Human relies. As a result, like difference, death figures as a form of non-sense, a challenge to the integrity of the rational, agential Human that must also be tamed.

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[415] Mbembe, p. 13.
[416] Tony Walter, 'The Pervasive Dead', *Mortality,* 24. 4 (2019), 389-404 (p. 389). Walter gives this summary at the beginning of his paper, going on to argue for a twenty-first century shift away from 'sequestration' and towards a closer relationship between the living and the dead, pointing, partly, to the natural burial movement as evidence for this shift.

In contrast to these attempts to hold life and death apart, work in the field of the posthuman takes a more fluid, relational approach. Rather than figuring life and death as mutually exclusive absolutes, posthuman theory understands living and dying as changes in the intensity of matter. As Deleuze describes them, 'intensities' are imperceptible forces that pre-exist language and matter. They are not properties of the world or qualities of things, rather they are 'the becoming of qualities', the prepersonal, fluid dynamism that results from thinking of the world through the lens of pure difference.[417] In a world made up of forces, rather than being fixed properties of individual bodies, life and death become points on a continuum. As such, through a posthuman lens, death is not finitude but a kind of zero intensity for the Human subject as the potential that animates matter flows elsewhere.

The problem with the way in which this concept of intensities features in posthuman theory is the emphasis scholars place on that elsewhere. Rosi Braidotti, for example, one of the most prominent theorists of posthuman vitalism, subsumes death into life, arguing that 'bare life', the 'constitutive vulnerability of the human subject, which sovereign power can kill', is only a limited subset of the potentiality of Life.[418] Life (with a capital 'L'), that which no political intervention can destroy, is distinct from the vulnerable, limited subjectivity of Human life (marked by an uncapitalised 'l'). Redefining Life/*zoe* through Spinoza's concept of *conatus* as 'generative vitality', Braidotti's Life is a productive, affirming force, ever striving but without a specific destination or goal:[419]

> Life is cosmic energy, simultaneously empty chaos and absolute speed or movement. It is impersonal and inhuman in the monstrous, animal sense of radical alterity: *zoe* in all its powers.[420]

In other words, rather than being a hard stop, death becomes part of 'a creative synthesis of flows, energies and perpetual becoming'.[421]

The idea that death marks a change in state rather than a definitive end has already featured in this thesis, appearing in the posthumous influences of Tristessa and Marcia discussed in Chapter One. The issue with this vitalist approach in the context of this chapter, however, is

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[417] Colebrook (2002a), p. 39.
[418] Braidotti (2013), p. 120.
[419] Braidotti (2013), p. 60.
[420] Braidotti (2013), p. 131.
[421] Braidotti (2013), p. 131.

that, rather than thinning the wall between life and death, it privileges one state over the other. Turning attention to what endures rather than what is lost leads to a focus on continuity and futurity, thereby opening the way for the kind of sanitised posthuman beyond I discussed previously. As Monika Rogowska-Stangret suggests in her critique of Braidotti's work, an awareness of 'the *simultaneity* of death and life' is critical in 'protect[ing]' theory from the allure of that beyond.[422] In the context of this chapter, focusing on Life over death risks overwriting or at least downplaying the impact of those violent events that marked the first half of the twentieth century. As much as *Memento Mori* and *The Vet's Daughter* engage with life and death on a conceptual level, these novels are also alert to the material and emotional implications of living and dying in post-war Britain. As a result, I temper Braidotti's attention to the ongoingness of Life with insights from Christina Sharpe's and Elizabeth Povinelli's posthuman-adjacent scholarship, work which offers a model of critique that resonates more strongly with the mixed-upness of mid-century fabulation.

In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* and *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*, Sharpe and Povinelli respectively explore spaces in which the wall between life and death thins, spaces in which death is both imminent, brought close by violence and abuse, and immanent, meaning pervasive and all around. Sharpe interrogates contemporary Black life in America by exploring moments of 'resist[ance], rupture, and disrupt[ion]': 'In the midst of so much death and the fact of Black life as proximate to death', she asks, 'how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death?'.[423] Where Braidotti frames death as 'the inhuman conceptual excess: the unrepresentable, the unthinkable, and the unproductive black hole that we all fear', Sharpe's 'wake work' interrogates that 'we' to explore worlds in which death, far from being unproductive, is an immanent ground of creation, an unavoidable condition of life for those deemed other-than-Human.[424] Povinelli similarly explores lives that are 'insisted from death'. Working with Indigenous people in Australia, Povinelli analyses 'zones of abandonment', spaces 'of oscillation and indeterminacy' deserted by state and society.[425] As Povinelli describes them, these are spaces of low but not zero intensity,

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[422] Monika Rogowska-Stangret, 'Pushing Feminist New Materialist Vitalism to an Extreme: On Bare Death', *Feminist Theory,* 21. 4 (2020), 413-428 (p. 419). Emphasis in original.

[423] Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 13, 17.

[424] Braidotti (2013), p. 131.

[425] Povinelli (2011), p. 10.

holding, as they do, the possibility for new forms of life to emerge. Reimagining these 'abandoned' spaces as zones of 'radical potentiality', Povinelli refuses a binary distinction between agency and victimhood to simultaneously challenge the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion that produces zones of abandonment and value the 'worldings' which these zones make possible.[426]

While there are significant differences in context between the work of Sharpe and Povinelli, both scholars model a form of immanent critique that resonates with the original provocation for this thesis: Weheliye's invitation to explore the ways in which 'humanity has been imagined and lived' by those excluded from the domain of the Human. Exploring what Weheliye terms 'the elsewheres of Man', Sharpe and Povinelli refuse to 'assume the qualities, vitalities, and borders of the catastrophic'.[427] Instead, they explore ways of becoming *with* vulnerability and loss. In so doing, as well as bearing witness to the violence that the Human as an exclusionary paradigm produces, these scholars refuse the distinction between agency and victimhood that adheres to Human definitions of life.[428] The result is an attention to ways of being and knowing outside of the Human, to a mutable, posthuman ontology that figures reality as a fluid blend of precarity and potential.

Like Sharpe and Povinelli, *Memento Mori* and *The Vet's Daughter* are interested in spaces in which the borders between living and dying are not absolute. They bring an immanent lens to bear on these zones of abandonment, thereby undoing fixed distinctions between agency and victimhood and reimagining what counts as life. That reimagining evokes a posthuman ontology, a blend of vulnerability and possibility that is also a blend of being and becoming.

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[426] Povinelli (2011), p. 188; Haraway, p. 10.

[427] Povinelli (2011), p. 152.

[428] Work in the field of the posthuman distinguishes between what Claire Colebrook calls the 'active vitalism' of agential subjectivity, meaning the enacted will of one individual, and the 'passive vitalism' of agency as a flow of forces. Through this posthuman lens, agency becomes plural and relational, 'not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world'. Jane Bennett's work offers perhaps the best-known example of this passive vitalism, finding 'thing-power' in the complex assemblages of contemporary life to extend the potential for agency outside of the human as a species. Although I recognise this shift in definition, in this chapter I use agency to refer to the idea of 'active vitalism', preferring to think about potential and possibility through alternative terms such as becoming and the 'largeness of life'. Colebrook (2014); Barad, p. 141; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

MURIEL SPARK: *MEMENTO MORI*

> The creative act is the development of one possibility to the exclusion of an infinite remainder.[429]

In Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*, when a group of people all aged over seventy start receiving anonymous telephone calls, all hear the same message: 'Remember you must die'. There are plenty of theories as to who or what is responsible: the caller could be criminal, insane, supernatural, or a symptom of mass hysteria. In Spark's reimagining of a detective story, however, while characters obsess over motives and means, no culprit is ever found. The result is a narrative of unfulfilled suspense, a novel in which meaning never quite materialises. *Memento Mori* mobilises discourses of medicine, law, religion, sociology, astrology, history, literature, and literary criticism and so, while the *potential* for meaning overloads the novel, the narrative never quite realises that potential. Each paradigm is flawed, something always seems to be missing or misunderstood and meaning slips away, leaving the reader disconcerted and the critic struggling for purchase. Refusing to resolve the mystery at its centre, *Memento Mori* stays open to the infinite, thinning the wall between the living and the dead to evoke an expansive, egalitarian reality that draws attention to the limits of agency, reason, and self-determination and explores other ways of being and knowing.

Centring on a group of elderly friends and relations, most of whom have known each other for more than fifty years, *Memento Mori* contains three interlinked plotlines: one concerns extortion, one is the unexpected resolution of a disputed inheritance and the third, the focus of this reading, is a series of anonymous and unexplained telephone calls. The calls have already started when the novel opens, with Dame Lettie Colston OBE, a retired 'pioneer penal reformer', receiving her ninth such call on the novel's first page.[430] Each call is the same, the caller verifies the listener, repeats the phrase 'Remember you must die', and then rings off. By the end of the novel, Godfrey Colston (Lettie's brother), Charmian Piper (Godfrey's wife), Alec Warner ('born mischief maker' and gerontological chronicler of his friends' symptoms and diseases), Mabel Pettigrew (Charmian's companion and Godfrey's

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[429] Muriel Spark, 'Handwritten note from Muriel Spark on back of letter from Alan Maclean.', in *Correspondence and Papers of Muriel Spark., Acc.10607.,* (National Library of Scotland Archives and Manuscripts Division., 1959).

[430] Muriel Spark, *Memento Mori* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1984), p. 141.

blackmailer), and at least five other people have received at least one anonymous message.[431] On Dame Lettie's orders, the police call in retired Chief Inspector Mortimer to investigate but he eventually comes to believe that the caller is Death itself, a perspective he shares with Jean Taylor, a resident in the local hospital and, previously, a paid companion to Charmian. With the identity of the anonymous caller still unknown, it is with Jean, 'meditating sometimes confidingly upon Death, the first of the four last things to be ever remembered', that the novel ends.[432]

Critics often describe Spark's work in ways that approach the posthuman. Patricia Waugh, for example, writes about the presence of 'an embodied ontology of plural uniqueness' in Spark's novels, a plurality that sits in opposition to 'a universal One that invisibly eradicates difference'.[433] Bryan Cheyette evokes a similar sense of multiplicity to make the case that 'Spark's quirky and playful voice refuses to be contained by any one doctrine or identity', suggesting instead that '[h]er abiding doubleness, above all, places a sense of history, tradition and the avant-garde next to an irreverent and whimsical sense of the absurdity of all human philosophies and identities'.[434] While the idea of Spark's work as 'whimsical' does not perhaps do justice to the conceptual complexity of *Memento Mori*, my underlying point is that, in its openness, Spark's work evokes the fluidity and multiplicity of posthuman theory. Building on these readings, this chapter adds to existing scholarship on Spark's work by making an explicit connection between the indeterminacy of a posthuman ontology and *Memento Mori*'s refusal to mean.

That indeterminacy is already a concern in critical engagement with Spark's third novel. Allan Pero, for example, draws on the work of Lacan to explore the distinction *Memento Mori* makes between voice and speech. Suggesting that voice is 'a symptom of what is left over from speech, an uncanny object that speech cannot completely master', Pero goes on to argue that that uncanniness parallels the 'anxiety and fascination' that attaches to death itself:

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[431] Spark (1984), p. 183.
[432] Spark (1984), p. 220.
[433] Patricia Waugh, 'Muriel Spark's 'informed air': The Auditory Imagination and the Voices of Fiction', *Textual Practice,* 32. 9 (2018), 1633-1658 (p. 1641).
[434] Bryan Cheyette, 'Spark, Trauma and the Novel', *Textual Practice,* 32. 9 (2018), 1659-1676 (p. 1660). Maroula Joannou's language is perhaps the most explicitly posthuman given she reads Spark in relation to Braidotti's ideas of 'nomadic consciousness'. However, she does so to focus on social and political issues relating to racism and immigration in Spark's short stories rather than to explore the posthuman implications of that critical frame. Maroula Joannou, *Women's Writing, Englishness and National and Cultural Identity: The Mobile Woman and the Migrant Voice, 1938–1962* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 177-185.

'Like the voice, death exceeds our ability to fashion meaning out of it as an event'.[435] Rod Mengham, in contrast, argues that *Memento Mori* is 'about the Cold War way of death', meaning it is a novel that draws comparisons between the war of attrition that characterised the relationship between Eastern and Western Europe in the 1950s and the experience of old age.[436] In making his case, Mengham describes *Memento Mori* as having no 'general thesis' and 'no dominant figure' at its centre.[437] The resulting diffusion creates its own kind of middle ground, somewhere in between 'sameness and difference, "harmony" and "discord", the general and the particular'.[438] As he remarks, *Memento Mori*'s 'narrative open-endedness is not a liberation, but an evacuation, of meaning'.[439] Bringing an explicitly posthuman lens to bear on *Memento Mori*, this chapter finds in Spark's 'open-endedness' a response to the Human as a mid-century paradigm. That response reimagines the terms of post-war debates about the human condition, calling into question the emphasis that post-war British society places on the principles of agency, reason, and self-determination.

In what follows, I begin by exploring the 'open-endedness' of *Memento Mori*'s poetics, showing how Spark's famous 'nevertheless' principle creates an expansive, egalitarian reality, bringing life and death together on equal terms. In the second part of the reading, I consider *Memento Mori* as a critical posthumanist text, showing how the novel plays with the relationship between cause and effect to draw attention to the limits and limitations of the Human. In the third part of the reading, I explore the question of ethics in Spark's fabulative novel, showing how the text figures the hospital space as a zone of abandonment. In doing so, the novel posits an immanent ethics grounded in the idea of a materialist, posthuman becoming.

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[435] Allan Pero, '"Look for one thing and you find another": The Voice and Deduction in Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* ', *Modern Fiction Studies,* 54. 3 (2008), 558-573 (pp. 559, 572, 561).

[436] Rod Mengham, 'The Cold War Way of Death: Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*', in *British Fiction After Modernism* ed. by Lyndsey Stonebridge Marina MacKay (Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2007), pp. 157-165 (p. 164).

[437] Mengham, p. 157.

[438] Mengham, p. 162.

[439] Mengham, p. 164. Similar focuses on the indeterminate in *Memento Mori* can be found in Nicholas Royle's reading of the novel as a metafictional text, and Marina MacKay's argument, made partly with reference to *Memento Mori*, that Spark's novels resist 'consensual and monolithic understandings of what constitutes the real'. A contrasting perspective comes from Allan Hepburn who argues that in *Memento Mori* Spark employs a moralising narrator with 'strong opinions and clear moral attitudes'. That narrator then judges the characters for, among other things, their resort to blackmail and bullying. Nicholas Royle, '*Memento Mori*', in *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction,* ed. by Martin McQuillan (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 189-203; Marina MacKay, 'Muriel Spark and the Meaning of Treason', *Modern Fiction Studies,* 54. 3 (2008), 505-522 (p. 520). Hepburn (2018), p. 164.

In an interview with Sara Frankel in 1987, Muriel Spark famously underlined the importance of factual accuracy in her work:

> And I'm very particular: you know, supposing I said the fifteenth of August, 1952, it was raining, well I do look it up to see if it was raining at that spot on that day. I'm very scrupulous, extremely.[440]

In answer to Frankel's question, 'So you think that level of detail is important?', Spark remarks, 'Yes, because it's authentic. And then within that realist framework I can do what I like with the unreal'.[441] While literary realism focuses only on certain aspects of what is possible, reality, for Spark, encompasses 'absolutely anything and everything that can objectively and/or subjectively be thought or known or imagined to exist, whether past, present, or future, in the mind or outside the mind'.[442] In other words, in Spark's novels reality 'is infinite' and 'simply all'.[443] Putting fact and fabulation (the 'unreal') on the same plane, Spark effectively neutralises distinctions between the two. From a posthuman perspective, actual and virtual meet on equal terms.

To explore that neutrality in *Memento Mori,* in what follows I think about the novel's poetics in relation to Spark's famous 'nevertheless' principle. In an often-quoted piece originally published in the *New Statesman* in 1962, Spark reminisces about growing up in Scotland, describing 'nevertheless' as a distinctively Scottish way of being in the world:

> [I] am reminded how my whole education, in and out of school, seemed even then to pivot around this word. My teachers used it a great deal. All grades of society constructed sentences bridged by 'nevertheless'. It is my own instinct to associate the word, as the core of a thought-pattern, with Edinburgh particularly. I can see the lips of tough elderly women in musquash coats taking tea at McVittie's enunciating this word of final justification, I can see the exact gesture of head and chin and gleam of the eye that accompanied it. The sound was roughly 'niverthelace' and the emphasis was a heartfelt one. I believe myself to be fairly indoctrinated by the habit of thought which calls for this word. In fact I approve of the

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[440] Sara Frankel, 'An Interview with Muriel Spark', *The Partisan Review,* 54. 3 (1987), 443-457 (p. 451).
[441] Frankel, p. 451.
[442] Joseph Hynes, *The Art of the Real: Muriel Spark's Novels* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988), p. 17. In an interview in 1971, Spark forcefully resists the constraints of literary realism: 'I might claim to be the opposite of [the writer and advocate of literary realism] C. P. Snow in every possible way,' Spark explained, 'he thinks he's a realist: I think *I'm* a realist and he's a complete fantasist'. James Bailey, *Muriel Spark's Early Fiction: Literary Subversion and Experiments with Form* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), p. 3. Emphasis in original.
[443] Hynes, pp. 17, 18.

ceremonious accumulation of weather forecasts and barometer readings that pronounce for a fine day, before letting rip on the statement 'nevertheless, it's raining'. I find that much of my literary composition is based on the nevertheless idea. I act upon it. It was on the nevertheless principle that I turned Catholic.[444]

Navigating multiple perspectives to bring conflicting, inconsistent points together, 'nevertheless' allows Spark's prose to stay grounded in the everyday while also acknowledging possibilities outside of that frame. Being both material and intellectual, embodied and imagined, active and reflective, 'nevertheless' gives equal weight to all aspects of experience. Broken down into its constituent parts, never-the-less, hyphenated to emphasise the balancing work that the term does, is a leveller, an equaliser of oppositions that puts real and unreal on the same plane: neither is less.

While critics often reference 'nevertheless' as a clue to Spark's authorial mindset, it is rarer to find the term within textual analysis of Spark's writing. In his biography of Spark, Martin Stannard, for example, emphasises the link with Spark's Catholicism to figure the 'essence' of 'nevertheless' as '[t]he necessity of doubt'.[445] Where the term does feature in discussion of Spark's work, critics tend to emphasise either fact or fiction but not the blending of both perspectives that this reading explores. While Willy Maley foregrounds the openness and potentiality of 'nevertheless' in his discussion of the interconnections between Spark and Derrida, for example, Simon Cooke argues that '[w]e sacrifice much of Spark's satirical and elegiac power if we evacuate objective reality from the equation', arguing that nevertheless speaks to Spark's 'resolute insistence on the "unmitigated fact"'.[446] In contrast to these either/or perspectives, in this reading I show how never-the-less folds Human and posthuman perspectives together, allowing for but also exceeding the real.

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[444] Muriel Spark, 'Edinburgh-born', *The New Statesman*, 10 August 1962, p. 180

[445] Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2009), p. 159. Stannard also discusses the nevertheless principle in relation to Spark's novel *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960). In that article Stannard argues that Spark 'was a walking tape-recorder of disjunctive voices, later cut and choreographed into a kind of musical structure illustrating the nevertheless principle'. Martin Stannard, 'The Crooked Ghost: *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and the Idea of the 'Lyrical'', *Textual Practice,* 32. 9 (2018), 1529-1543 (p. 1540).

[446] Willy Maley, 'Not to Deconstruct? Righting and Deference in *Not to Disturb*', in *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction,* ed. by Martin McQuillan (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 170-188; Simon Cooke, 'Literary Remains: Muriel Spark, Auto/Biography, and the Archive', *Auto/biography Studies,* 36. 1 (2021), 105-137 (p. 14).

Take, for example, a moment in the largely unspoken tussle between Godfrey and Mrs Pettigrew. Mrs Pettigrew is blackmailing Godfrey, threatening to tell his wife, Charmian, about his affairs. Godfrey, in response, is prevaricating about changing his will in Mrs Pettigrew's favour, hoping to find a way out by lying about going to visit his solicitor:

> Mabel Pettigrew thought: I can read him like a book. She had not read a book for over forty years, could never concentrate on reading, but this nevertheless was her thought; and she decided to accompany him to the solicitor.[447]

While this passage begins with Mrs Pettigrew's in-the-moment reaction, the text then stretches out to encompass more than 'forty years' before coming back again to rest in the concrete actuality of the solicitor. Attending to sense in a way that recalls the Mouse's 'dry tail' in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Spark's narrator brings the literal meaning of 'reading' into conjunction with the figurative to effectively nullify both. That the result is neutrality rather than opposition is a point reinforced by the text's lyricism; 'can read him' returns in the mirroring of its three-syllable counterpart, 'could never', knitting the clauses together to offer the reader harmony rather than discord. Reality is both concrete and ethereal, literal and figurative, as the symmetry and balance of the prose gives both senses of reading equal weight. As this passage shows, never-the-less refuses to privilege any single point of view, moving between perspectives to hold all possibilities open.

That openness also has implications for *Memento Mori*'s engagement with the relationship between life and death in post-war Britain. As discussed earlier, in *Mortality, Immortality and other Life Strategies,* Bauman considers the way in which, after the Second World War, British society 'evict[s]' death from everyday life, finding consolation in discourses that work to transcend mortality.[448] Medical discourse, for example, anticipating a transhumanist agenda, turns death into a collection of diseases, each of which, in theory, can be cured:

> The truth that death cannot be escaped 'in the end' is not denied, of course. It cannot be denied; but it could be held off the agenda, elbowed out by another truth: that each *particular* case of death (most importantly, death which threatens the particular person – me; at the particular moment – *now*) can be resisted, postponed, or avoided altogether. Death as such is inevitable; but each concrete instance of death is contingent.[449]

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[447] Spark (1984), p. 156.
[448] Bauman, p. 129.
[449] Bauman, pp. 137-138. Emphasis in original.

Death, it seems, is an avoidable condition, a perspective echoed in *Memento Mori* by Jean Taylor's lament to Lettie Colston:

> I would be glad to be let die in peace. But the doctors would be horrified to hear me say it. They are so proud of their new drugs and new methods of treatment – there is always something new. I sometimes fear, at the present rate of discovery, I shall never die.[450]

Making death the property of individual bodies allows death as a universal truth to be set aside; in its bounded specificity death can be indefinitely postponed. Countering this specificity, Spark's never-the-less poetics folds the particular into the general to undermine the idea that death can be overcome. My point here is that, rather than overtly criticising or challenging the Human, never-the-less holds meaning open to nullify or neutralise this rationalist world view, side-lining the mid-century Human by putting it on an equal footing with other ways of being and knowing.

Take, for example, the specificity of Alec Warner's list of case histories, detailed in the second to last paragraph of the novel:

> Lettie Colston, he recited to himself, comminuted fractures of the skull; Godfrey Colston, hypostatic pneumonia; Charmian Colston, uraemia; Jean Taylor, myocardial degeneration; Tempest Sidebottome, carcinoma of the cervix; Ronald Sidebottome, carcinoma of the bronchus; Guy Leet, arteriosclerosis; Henry Mortimer, coronary thrombosis….[451]

Grounded in a scientific paradigm that dictates 'one does not die, one is *killed* by something', the list of illnesses occludes death as a universal truth, holding it in abeyance and at one remove.[452] In Alec's discursive sense-making, death in its particularity makes death in its generality elusive and unknowable, related rather than experienced, a form of non-sense that the Human, in the guise of scientific rationalism works to overcome. And yet, even as Alec binds death to the individual, this list is also an unbinding, evoking death as a universal truth that speaks to the futility of the search for a cure. Although medicine is working to eradicate disease, people do die, making Alec's list an undoing of science, a marker of medicine's failure to save Lettie, Godfrey, and the others. With the never-the-less principle holding both perspectives open, the novel refuses any hierarchy of meaning, creating a disconcertingly

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[450] Spark (1984), p. 172.
[451] Spark (1984), p. 220.
[452] Bauman, p. 137. Emphasis in original.

neutral space which allows for, but refuses to leave unchallenged, the turning away from mortality that Bauman describes.

In *The Logic of Sense,* Deleuze suggests that death has 'two faces'. Personal or bounded death, also 'my' death or ego-death is the end of a discrete, independent, agential subject. This form of death is a material event, a marked moment of finitude that belongs to an individual person and beyond which that person ceases to exist. Human conceptions of linear temporality and bodily integrity create an irretrievable before and desolate after separated by a definable moment when the Human body becomes a corpse. In contrast, impersonal or unbound death, also 'a' death, is death which is not settled on any one individual, death which is 'incorporeal and infinitive', 'grounded only in itself'.[453] Rather than being mutually exclusive, these two forms of death (and life) blend into one another to the extent that death figures as both becoming *and* finitude. In *Memento Mori*, never-the-less brings these two faces of death together, holding them in balance through the anonymous telephone calls.

One of the reasons that the anonymous calls are so mysterious is that everyone hears the speaker differently. For Guy Leet it is a 'clear boyish voice', for Dame Lettie a 'middle-aged man', for Janet Sidebottome 'a Teddy-boy', for Chief Inspector Mortimer it is a woman's voice, and for Ronald Sidebottome it is a 'man well advanced in years with a cracked and rather shaky voice and a suppliant tone'.[454] On one level, these multiple voices underline the particularity of each subject, the specificity of 'my' death played out as a unique voice for each listener; death sounds different because everyone's death is different. On another level though, these disparate singularities also speak to the impossibility of coherence in a world made up of discrete, self-determining subjects and, in their repetitions and returns, these calls are also an unbinding. As the phrase repeats, the novel figures death as everywhere and nowhere, dissociated from the individual to become 'incorporeal and infinitive, impersonal, [and] grounded only in itself'.[455] As *Memento Mori* recognises, to the Human both these perspectives figure as a threat. In their bounded form, the calls threaten the integrity of individual, sovereign subjects. In their unbound form, those calls threaten the paradigm on which that subjectivity is based.

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[453] Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), p. 151.
[454] Spark (1984), pp. 192, 148.
[455] Deleuze (1990), p. 151.

On one level, then, Spark's novel is exploring socio-cultural attitudes towards death and dying in mid-century Britain; the anonymous voice brings death into the everyday to draw attention to that eviction that Bauman describes.[456] On another level, *Memento Mori* is also engaging with the ideology which underpins that denial. Recognising that death marks the limit of the Human as a paradigm, Spark's novel brings death into the everyday. In doing so, the novel turns attention to the limits of reason, agency, and self-determination. It is this critique that I explore in the next part of the discussion, carrying forward the idea of never-the-less as a balancing and therefore neutralising term to explore *Memento Mori*'s relationship with the Human in more detail.

DEATH AND THE HUMAN

Nina Lykke writes: to the Enlightenment Human, death 'will always somehow appear as an insult and an impending disaster, since it implies a giving up of the core values of this subject, namely sovereignty and control'.[457] In *Memento Mori*, Lettie Colston hears that 'insult' most clearly, centring the calls on herself: 'I am their main objective and victim', she thinks, responding with paranoia and fear. In doing so, she models a form of sense-making grounded in those core values that Lykke describes as fundamental to the Human.[458] In this way, when read through a critical posthumanist lens, Lettie's failure to account for the non-sense that is death is also the Human's failure to account for that mystery. Using the anonymous telephone calls to bring death into the everyday, *Memento Mori* draws attention to the limits of reason and common sense, highlighting the ways in which reality exceeds a Human frame. In what follows, I explore Spark's decentring of the Human, showing how the novel calls rational, self-determining subjectivity into question.

One of the ways in which *Memento Mori* picks up the question of control and self-determination is through a play on the meanings of 'will'. In Jean's words, Lettie 'play[s] a real will-game', pitting her two nephews against each other by frequently rewriting her

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[456] Of relevance here is Percy Mannering's response to Lisa Brooke's funeral. Asking '[c]an we see the ashes?', Percy needs to touch and feel the materiality of Lisa's death because 'though he knew the general axiom that death was everyone's lot he could never realise the particular case'. Spark (1984), p. 21.

[457] Nina Lykke, *Vibrant Death: A Posthuman Phenomenology of Mourning* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 109.

[458] Spark (1984), p. 173. While Lettie looks for a single, identifiable cause and a definitively culpable perpetrator, no one else in the novel makes sense of the calls in quite the same way. Mrs Pettigrew does not just ignore the telephone call she receives, but 'omitted even to keep a mental record of it', while Godfrey Colston 'can't understand', and Alec Warner diagnoses, 'Query: mass-hysteria', and records but does not remember. Spark (1984), pp. 154, 120, 138.

will.[459] Jean's description of Lettie's game as 'real' sets up a contrast between Lettie and Granny Barnacle, a resident of the hospital who 'would send out to Woolworth's for a will-form about once a week', despite having nothing of value to leave.[460] Although Granny Barnacle's wills lead nowhere, one of Lettie's twenty-two wills ends up solving the mystery of Lisa Brooke's rightful heir without even meaning to. In a similar rewriting of intention, while Alec's will states that his work should be destroyed after his death, the fire at his hotel fulfils that prescient note prematurely. Playing with the dissonance between characters' senses of themselves as agential, objective beings and the reality behind that façade, *Memento Mori* makes fun of the idea that anyone can 'will' the future into being. The point here is that, for sovereignty and control to be possible, there needs to be a coherent, definable, linear relationship between cause and effect. Calling that relationship into question, Spark's novel thus invites attention to other ways of being and knowing. As Spark herself says, 'What interests me about time is that I don't think that chronology is causality: I don't think that the cause of things necessarily comes hours, moments, years *before* the event; it could come after, without the person knowing. […] This is not realism you know'.[461] Where realism understands effects as following causes, Spark's distinction between chronology and causality refutes the idea of a knowable universe, setting meaning free from the strictures of common sense to undermine those core values on which the Human relies.

This play with the principle of cause and effect also features in the circumstances that surround Lettie's death. As the telephone calls continue and the gap between Lettie's public bluster and private frailties begins to widen, she becomes increasingly absolute in her accusations and erratic in her behaviour, unable to make sense of the telephone calls in any meaningful way. Eventually, she gets rid of her telephone and starts searching her house for intruders before going to bed. Lettie's maid, Gwen, leaves, 'declar[ing] the house to be haunted and Dame Lettie to be a maniac'.[462] Gwen tells her boyfriend about 'the mad Dame', he tells the story at work, one of the labourers then tells a window cleaner who then tells someone else, and '[s]o it came about that Dame Lettie's house and nocturnal searchings fell under scrutiny'.[463] That scrutiny leads to burglary, which in turn leads to Lettie's murder. Spark's prose in the murder scene is stark. The passage begins with short sentences and

[459] Spark (1984), p. 16.
[460] Spark (1984), p. 16.
[461] Frankel, p. 451. Emphasis in original.
[462] Spark (1984), p. 174.
[463] Spark (1984), p. 176.

simple syntax to mark Lettie's disjointed, just-awake bundle of impressions. The text then opens out to take in the attacker, edging towards emotion with 'nervily' only to return to description and end, chillingly, on the fact of Lettie's age:

> She switched on the light. It was five past two. A man was standing over by her dressing-table, the drawers of which were open and disarranged. He had turned round to face her. Her bedroom door was open. There was a light in the passage and she heard someone else padding along it. She screamed, grabbed her stick, and was attempting to rise from her bed when a man's voice from the passage outside said, 'That's enough, let's go.' The man by the dressing-table hesitated nervily for a moment, then swiftly he was by Lettie's side. She opened wide her mouth and her yellow and brown eyes. He wrenched the stick from the old woman's hand and, with the blunt end of it, battered her to death. It was her eighty-first year.[464]

Focusing on description rather than interpretation, *Memento Mori* refuses to signify, stripping the event of meaning to leave it to the reader to make sense of this sense-less act. In contrast to Lettie's desire to apportion blame for the anonymous telephone calls, *Memento Mori* leaves the responsibility for her death open.[465] Why does Lettie die? Because the intruder lost his nerve? Because she chose to keep a stick by her bed for protection? Because she searches the house at night? Because Gwen talks? Because she reacted to the telephone calls by cutting herself off and making herself vulnerable? Because an anonymous caller chose to play a practical joke? Because Lettie is getting older and feeling more fragile? Because society is breaking down and money and status are no longer the protections they used to be? Or something else? While all these possible reasons hold some form of legitimacy, none of them are *sufficient* to describe what happens; the murmur of never-the-less disrupts the search for any kind of definitive starting point or first cause. In effect, then, answering the question 'why did Lettie die?' is like receiving one of *Memento Mori*'s anonymous telephone calls:

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[464] Spark (1984), p. 179.

[465] Despite the different frames critics apply to discussions of Lettie and her death, implicit in the majority of analyses is a sense that Lettie is somehow complicit in or responsible for her death. Beatriz Lopez's psychological perspective, for example, has Lettie suffering from 'anticipation-neurosis'. Pero, in contrast, is closest to this thesis's reading with his suggestion that 'enraptured by the Siren call of the voice, [Lettie] has long abandoned the safe shores of common sense' in her attempt to 'master Death'. Taking a different approach, Suzanne England and Martha Rusts's sociological analysis argues that Lettie 'willfully embraces a notion of old age as the stage in human life when a person becomes exempt from the rigors and risks of moral give-and-take', cementing an 'already well-established tendency towards avarice, reputed the chief among the vices of the elderly ever since the Middle Ages'. Beatriz Lopez, 'Muriel Spark and the Art of Deception: Constructing Plausibility with the Methods of WWII Black Propaganda', *The Review of English Studies,* 71. 302 (2020), 969–986; Pero, pp. 568, 570; Suzanne E. England and Martha D. Rust, 'Sweet Old Things: Moral Complexities in Old Age in Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*', *Journal of Aging Studies,* 33 (2015), 76-85 (p. 78).

there are many possible responses, but each one says more about the reader than it does about the novel.

By figuring Lettie's death as an event without a definitive cause, *Memento Mori* draws attention to the limits of the Human as a way of understanding the world. The model of singular, self-determining subjectivity that Lettie applies to the telephone calls cannot account for the openness of reality. What alternatives, then, does the novel offer in terms of making sense of these mysterious events? The most obvious counterpart to Lettie's rigid response to the anonymous calls is the vitalism of the ironically named Mortimers. In the context of Spark's novel, this couple are unique in their association with futurity and fertility. Their lives revolve around their garden and their grandchildren, investing in an organic future that goes unreferenced by other characters in the novel. Emmeline, Mortimer's wife, seems almost to disappear into nature, 'opening and closing her mouth like a bird' while feeding her grandson.[466] Mortimer, moreover, is the only character who hears a woman's voice on the telephone, a detail that connects into his reference to eggs in the passage below to link him with the ongoingness of life. Focused on what endures rather than what is lost, Mortimer embodies Braidotti's definition of Life, meaning a 'creative synthesis of flows, energies and perpetual becoming'.[467] It is this idea of death as 'a way of life' that Mortimer articulates in his response to the telephone calls:

> There is no other practise which so intensifies life. Death, when it approaches, ought not to take one by surprise. It should be part of the full expectancy of life. Without an ever-present sense of death life is insipid. You might as well live on the whites of eggs.[468]

The issue here is that by subsuming death into Life, the Mortimers are effectively turning away from the material and emotional implications of dying. As Pero suggests, 'ascribing the voice to Death is itself simply a means of avoiding the uncanny anxiety and fascination provoked by its mysterious presence'.[469] In other words, Mortimer sidesteps uncomfortable truths about death in the same way that Braidotti does.

In the hospital space, *Memento Mori* considers an alternative to this binary distinction between Life and death. As I discuss in the next section, in this zone of abandonment the

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[466] Spark (1984), p. 206.
[467] Braidotti (2013), p. 131.
[468] Spark (1984), pp. 151, 150.
[469] Pero, p. 572.

novel explores the relationship between living and dying through an immanent lens, positing a form of posthuman materiality that blends precarity with potential.

THE HOSPITAL

Although critics overlook the hospital space in discussions of *Memento Mori*, it offers rich material for analysis, functioning as a nexus point for debates about age, gender, class, social mobility, health, and disability in the post-war world. As a precursor to *Quartet in Autumn*, *Memento Mori* explores the relationship between changes in societal structures, the emergence of the NHS, and state responsibility for social care.[470] The hospital scenes in the novel hold post-war shifts in class and social mobility up to scrutiny, bringing together Jean's upper-middle-class employers and the lower-class inhabitants of the ward. Making a connection between Jean and Mrs Pettigrew, partly but not only through Charmian's forgetful renaming of Mabel as Taylor, *Memento Mori* explores the indeterminate status of both women as they navigate lives in-between that of 'lower domestics' and their higher-class employers. The novel hints at this in-betweenness as the new norm by leaving both women alive at the end of the text. There is also a gendered critique on view here. The hospital machinery dubs each of the residents 'Granny', pulling these women into a maternal paradigm regardless of their personal circumstances. Yet, what the novel's narrator emphasises is their status as working women rather than wives, mothers, or grandmothers. While to the hospital staff the women lying next to Jean Taylor are 'Granny', to Spark's narrator they are:

> Miss Jessie Barnacle who had no birth certificate but was put down as eighty-one, and who for forty-eight years had been a newsvendor at Holborn Circus. There was also a Madame Trotsky, a Mrs. Fanny Green, a Miss Doreen Valvona, and five others, all of known and various careers, and of ages ranging from seventy to ninety-three.[471]

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[470] Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs define the social imaginary of the 'third age' as the celebrated freedom and possibility that comes with retirement, a life stage which they suggest only emerged in its own right in the late twentieth century. In contrast, the fourth age is extreme old age, the 'feared' process of bodily deterioration which results in withdrawal from society and dependency on others. Echoing Bauman's analysis of death as a threat to the Human, Gilleard and Higgs argue that to protect itself society delays the fourth age for as long as possible and, when it becomes inevitable, segregates those who experience it from mainstream society. Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs, 'The Fourth Age and the Concept of a 'Social Imaginary': A Theoretical Excursus', *Journal of Aging Studies,* 27. 4 (2013), 368-376.

[471] Spark (1984), p. 15.

Here then are other examples of that 'agile kind of social critique' that James Bailey finds in Spark's novels.[472] In *Memento Mori* that critique registers post-war shifts in conceptions of age, class, and gender, bringing into view trends and movements that only become fully evident decades later.

One of those movements that has particular relevance to this thesis is transhumanism. Writing in 1957, the evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley was one of the first people to use the term transhumanism to describe the 'belief' that '[t]he human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself'.[473] As the Human taken past it biological limits, the transcendent transhuman, prizing reason, agency, health, and longevity, is the ultimate expression of the Human as an aspiration rather than as an immanent being. Appearing recently in the work of Nick Bostrom, this transhuman agenda understands death as the enemy. A version of this transhumanist perspective can be seen in Jean's description of the pride that doctors have in 'their new drugs and new methods of treatment' and in her 'fear' that 'at the present rate of discovery, I shall never die'.[474] Jasbir Puar's account of contemporary biopower argues that 'propagating death is no longer the central concern of the state; staving off death is'.[475] While Puar's focus is on the terrorist 'mandated to live' so they can tell what they know, Spark's novel also highlights the emergence of 'make not-die' as a 'new technique of power' even as the novel does not allow that power to stand unchallenged.[476] Jean's tone of patient forbearance and parental indulgence as she chastises the doctors for trying to keep her alive indefinitely turns those doctors into children playing with new toys. Pride and excitement rather than morality, politics, or profit is driving progress here. The result is a reframing of science as personal achievement rather than greater good and a stripping back of the self-importance of a paradigm which prefers investment in the future to engagement with the present.

Focusing on that present, in Jean's ongoing exchanges with Lettie, decisions about 'make-live' or 'make-die' become matters of perspective rooted in the immediacy of the moment.

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[472] Bailey, p. 5.
[473] Julian Huxley, 'Transhumanism', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 8. (1968), 73-76 (p. 76).
[474] Spark (1984), p. 172.
[475] Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 32.
[476] Puar (2007), p. 157; Elizabeth Stephens and Karin Sellberg, 'The Somatechnics of Breath: Trans Life at this Moment in History: An Interview with Susan Stryker', *Australian Feminist Studies,* 34. 99 (2019), 107-119 (p. 117).

On one occasion, Lettie visits Jean shortly after the arrival of a group of high need 'geriatric' patients onto the ward. Feeling unsettled by the telephone calls, Lettie says she is 'not up to these decrepit women' and 'wonders, really, what is the purpose of keeping them alive at the country's expense'. Yet, when Jean positions herself as one of these women, Lettie's perspective shifts and, looking more closely, she finds 'nothing one could complain of in them'.[477] In his discussion of Spark's second novel, *Robinson* (1958), Michael Giffin identifies a 'Kantian critique' in Spark's work, a 'postmetaphysical commentary on the twentieth century condition'. That commentary argues that 'the manifestation of *logos* as pure reason, in the modern or postmodern world, is intrinsically insecure and fear-based'.[478] *Memento Mori* similarly finds emotion at the root of medical and biopolitical decision making, a position exemplified by the doctor's excitement about a new toy or the fear and paranoia that Lettie brings into the room. Setting aside the idea that there is a transcendent good at the core of medical practice, Spark's novel stages an encounter with the complexity of life and death decision making from within the spaces most impacted by those decisions. The result is an immanent ethics rooted in *praxis* rather than *logos,* an attention to the world as it exists in the here and now rather than a morality which takes its authority from the idea of a definitive, transcendent good.

Memento Mori's attention to the materiality of the hospital space and the bodies that inhabit it reinforces the immediacy of the novel's immanent ethics. On the one hand, the hospital sets up a confrontation between the reader and the bodily changes that old age entails. From the 'far-away flute' voice of 100-year-old Granny Bean, through Granny Roberts's, 'small hearing fixture', to Jean's incontinence, the hospital is a space in which bodies are changing.[479] Figuring the hospital space as a space of 'radical potentiality', the novel draws attention to what those changes makes possible. While, as discussed in Chapter One, old age proves the coherent, agential subject to be an illusion, the hospital is not a space of deficit, these are not victims of their age, and the focus is not on mourning the loss of subjectivity. Rather, *Memento Mori* turns attention to what becomes possible once that illusion of agential sovereignty has been set aside. I am thinking here, for example, of Granny Barnacle interpreting for Granny Trotsky, Granny Valvona, who 'had the best eyes in the ward',

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[477] Spark (1984), pp. 172, 173.
[478] Michael Giffin, 'Framing the Human Condition: The Existential Dilemma in Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* and Muriel Spark's *Robinson* ', *Heythrop Journal,* 48. 5 (2007), 713-741 (p. 740).
[479] Spark (1984), pp. 216, 116.

reading for the others and the way in which, after Granny Barnacle dies, '[t]he ward lay till morning still and soundless, breathing like one body instead of eleven'.[480] Putting aside the Human as an independently bodied subject, the hospital space evokes a posthuman materialism, a becoming *with* that figures the women as other-than-Human rather than less-than-Human. Refusing to compare these aging bodies to Human standards of embodiment and rational subjectivity, Spark's emotion-less narrator avoids 'assum[ing] the qualities, vitalities, and borders of the catastrophic' and so avoids casting these women as victims. Instead, the novel enacts an immanent critique that focuses on what is, not what was, or what might have been. That immanent reality blends vulnerability with possibility without privileging either perspective.

This chapter has developed existing critical connections between Spark's work and the posthuman, exploring the ways in which *Memento Mori*'s egalitarian 'never-the-less' poetics decentres the Human as both *praxis* and paradigm to make space for other ways of being and knowing. As a critical posthumanist text, Spark's novel understands the threat that death poses to the Human, staging an encounter between Lettie Colston as the archetypal agential, self-determining subject and that form of 'absolute other[ness]' that mid-century society works so hard to overcome.[481] From an ontological perspective, Spark's novel also recognises that death signals an outside to the Human, an 'elsewhere' that the hospital space evokes. Attending to that zone of abandonment suggests that, for Spark, writing about a version of reality that is 'simply all', the posthuman is a given, a way of being in the world that, no matter how obscured by the Human, is always present. As such, *Memento Mori*'s immanent critique refuses the seductive doxa of the beyond to turn attention to the posthuman as a condition of the everyday.

It is with that immanent, everyday version of the posthuman that *Memento Mori* ends. As the narrator's 'never-the-less' ellipsis transforms Alec's list of illnesses and accidents into Jean's religious meditations, faith becomes a form of affect, a way of unbinding death from the

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[480] Spark (1984), pp. 18, 116.
[481] Bauman, p. 2.

agential body to replace the specificity of curable disease with the openness of death as a universal truth:

> Lettie Colston, he recited to himself, comminuted fractures of the skull; Godfrey Colston, hypostatic pneumonia; Charmian Colston, uraemia; Jean Taylor, myocardial degeneration; Tempest Sidebottome, carcinoma of the cervix; Ronald Sidebottome, carcinoma of the bronchus; Guy Leet, arterio-sclerosis; Henry Mortimer, coronary thrombosis….
>
> Miss Valvona went to her rest. Many of the grannies followed her. Jean Taylor lingered for a time, employing her pain to magnify the Lord, and meditating sometimes confidingly upon Death, the first of the Four Last Things to be ever remembered.[482]

Claire Colebrook describes '[a]ffectivity [as] a way of thinking of life without a recourse to meaning'.[483] In other words, while the Human coalesces around the meaning-making of the autonomous subject, affectivity allows for a diffusion and dispersal of meaning outside the bounds of that subject. The shift in tone between the novel's two final paragraphs, with the prose slowing down to linger just as Jean does, marks that movement from the specificity of the subject to the diffusion of affect. The passive syntax in the novel's final words leaves an absent subject hovering on the edges of the text, turning away from the details of Alec's list to evoke an affective orientation towards death in its unbound form.[484]

By ending with this blending of being and becoming, *Memento Mori* speaks to what Colebrook describes as 'the problem of the living being as such':

> on the one hand the bounded organism whose world is always *its* world (a world of meaning); and on the other hand a pure thinking that is not limited by any determination, limit or fixity other than the pure imperative *to live*. On the one hand the comforts of self-enclosed meaning and on the other the dream of pure and unimpeded becoming.[485]

The 'problem' here is that neither option (bound nor unbound) is feasible on its own. To survive, the bounded organism must have contact with the world outside itself, staying 'open to the needs of life'. Yet, 'too open', life as 'pure and unimpeded becoming' ceases to have

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[482] Spark (1984), p. 220.
[483] Claire Colebrook, *Deleuze and the Meaning of Life* (London: Continuum Books, 2010), p. 32.
[484] Spark converted to Catholicism in 1954, three years before publishing her first novel. The relationship of Spark's work to her faith was often the focus for early critics, with scholars making connections to other Catholic writers from the period such as Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. For Hynes, there is nothing contradictory in Spark's version of reality as 'simply all' and her religious faith: 'Her psychology is, then, religious, but that observation should alert us to concrete-abstract vastness rather than confine to any notion of religion as parochial pettifoggery'. Hynes, p. 36.
[485] Colebrook (2010), p. 39, 38. Emphasis in original.

meaning, becoming a virus intent only on replication.[486] In *Memento Mori*, on the one hand, the bounded, rational subject, for whom death is always 'my' death, experiences mortality as unknowable non-sense, a preventable condition that medicine should be able to cure. The result is Alec's scientific rationalism and Lettie's paranoia. On the other hand, unbinding death from this rationalist subject, the novel figures 'a' death as a form of affect, intangible but not immaterial, plural, and indeterminate. Spark's egalitarian never-the-less poetics makes separating these two perspectives impossible. Holding bounded being and unbound becoming in balance, *Memento Mori* privileges neither.

As I show in the next part of this chapter, Comyns's *The Vet's Daughter* similarly focuses on the relationship between being and becoming. Whereas Spark's novel explores social and cultural perspectives on mortality in mid-century Britain, Comyns's novel delivers a structural critique of misogyny and sexual violence. What joins the two texts together is their attention to fear as a marker of the Human.

BARBARA COMYNS: *THE VET'S DAUGHTER*

> So she stopped working to make sense of things – we don't always realise it, but it's hard work we do almost every waking moment, building our thoughts and memories and actions around time, things that happened yesterday, and things that are happening right now, and what's coming tomorrow, layering all of that simultaneously and holding it in balance.[487]

Like the third sister in Helen Oyeyemi's retelling of the Bluebeard myth, *The Vet's Daughter* refuses to do the 'hard work' of sense-making. In Comyns's novel there is no transcendent, meaning-making subject to 'build', 'layer', and 'hold' sense together and, as with *Memento Mori*, the reader is left struggling for purchase. It was that enigmatic refusal to mean that first drew me to this novel and gave me the idea for this thesis. Researching mid-century fiction for an MA module, I found an unexpected synergy between my response to Comyns's unnerving fiction and the estrangement I experienced when reading posthuman theory. How

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[486] Colebrook (2010), p. 39.

[487] Helen Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 230. Oyeyemi frequently cites Comyns as an influence on her work, praising, for example, the 'photo-realistic modernity' of Comyns's style and the shifts in perception her novels make possible. Tom Gatti, 'Helen Oyeyemi: "My favourite stories leave me looking like a shocked face emoji"', The New Statesman, (2022) <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/goldsmiths-prize/2022/10/helen-oyeyemi-interview-goldsmiths-prize> [Accessed 9th January 2024]

is it, I wondered, that both *The Vet's Daughter* and ideas of the posthuman make the everyday such a disconcerting place to be? In what follows, as I explore possible answers to that question, I avoid moderating or mitigating Comyns's non-sense; *The Vet's Daughter* is not a problem to be solved. Indeed, Deleuze argues that 'a problem [can only be] productive if it *does not* have an evident answer, or if it has an element of impossibility'.[488] These productive problems figure as 'a series of tensions that must be met with a constructive act – something like a way of living with the problem, rather than solving it'.[489] In what follows, I consider ways of 'liv[ing] with the problem' of *The Vet's Daughter,* bringing the novel into dialogue with Nina Lykke's work on mourning and with ideas about the Gothic as a posthuman form to explore its critical posthumanist examination of power as well as its attention to 'different modalities of the human'.

Set in nineteenth century London, *The Vet's Daughter*'s first-person narrator is seventeen-year-old Alice Rowlands. Caring for an ever-changing menagerie of animals, Alice lives with her mother and father, the vet of the novel's title, in a run-down house on the edges of Clapham and Battersea. Alice's father is an avaricious man who uses violence and coercion to dominate Alice and her mother. When Alice's mother dies, possibly killed by her father, her father's new girlfriend, Rosa, moves in three weeks later. While Mrs Churchill, their cleaner and housekeeper, and Henry Peebles (Blinkers), her father's locum, try to look after Alice, Rosa's interest is more sinister. She engineers an encounter between Alice and Cuthbert, a doorman in the local hotel, that ends in Alice's attempted rape. Having escaped to Mrs Churchill's house, Alice spends the night on her sofa only to wake up in the early hours to find herself 'floating' up to the ceiling.[490] Disconcerted, but keeping her levitation to herself, Alice moves to Hampshire to act as companion to Blinkers's mother, only to be forced back to London when kindly Mrs Peebles dies by suicide, having drowned herself in a lake. Alice has continued to practice floating and faced with her father's drunken violence on her return, she reacts by rising to the ceiling:

> One moment I was lying on the floor by Father's dreadful, shining black boots, and the next I was rising from the ground quite straight above Father, my feet pointing to the door and my head to the window.[491]

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[488] Colebrook (2002a), p. 52. Emphasis in original.
[489] Williams (2003), p. 57.
[490] Barbara Comyns, *The Vet's Daughter* (London: Virago Press, 1988), p. 81.
[491] Comyns (1988), p. 168.

Tempted by the money-making potential of his daughter's unusual ability, Father sets up a performance on Clapham Common and demands Alice floats for the crowd. The spectacle results in a stampede and the novel ends with an extract from a newspaper report detailing the deaths of both Alice and Rosa.

As this summary suggests, *The Vet's Daughter* presents readers with two mysterious phenomena: Alice's levitation and the impossibility of posthumous narration. These two mysteries, the novel's foreboding atmosphere, damaged and haunted environments, and pervasive threat of sexual violence evoke a sense of the Gothic. Like this thesis, Gothic writing is concerned with exposing the volatility of supposedly stable borders to create the space to ask, 'what if'. What if Humans are not as independent, autonomous, and rational as they claim to be? What if the borders between Human and nonhuman are porous? What if agential subjectivity is an illusion and 'we' are not in control? As Gothic fiction explores the possibilities that these questions bring into view, 'the apparent safety of the post-Enlightenment world', the security and rationality offered by the Human, falters amid fears of invasion by the 'other'.[492] That is to say, fear marks the presence of the Human in Gothic fiction, signalling recognition of the threat that collapsing borders presents to the bounded, singular, agential subject and to the hierarchical paradigm that subject embodies. While Comyns's novel plays with a range of Gothic tropes, it is the porous border between life and death and the fear that porousness engenders that is at the core of its Gothic sensibility. Comyns explores the way in which fear moves across and between bodies to both critique the limits of the Human as a way of understanding the world and to draw attention to ways of being and knowing outside of that paradigm.

Critical engagement with Comyns's work is extremely limited. Where critics do discuss her canon, they tend to focus on Comyns's portrayals of misogyny and sexual violence, bringing a feminist frame to bear on her work.[493] Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, for example, describe

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[492] Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 1.
[493] There are strong parallels between the writing careers and critical discussions of Pym and Comyns. Like Pym, Comyns had an enforced break in her publishing career, struggling to find a publisher between 1967 and her 'rediscovery' in 1985. Also, like Pym, commentators often reference Comyns's relationship with a more famous male literary champion, in Comyns's case Graham Greene. Just as Paula Byrne's recent biography of Pym marks growing interest in her work there is also a forthcoming biography of Comyns by Avril Horner. That biography is scheduled for release in March 2024 and, together with a small number of recent newspaper and magazine articles, and a reprint of some of Comyns's novels, marks the beginnings of renewed interest in Comyns's canon. That renewal that parallels recent interest in Pym's work by drawing on a feminist lens for support. Avril Horner, 'The Legend and the Crazy Novelist: Graham Greene's role in Barbara Comyns's

The Vet's Daughter as 'Feminist Gothic', arguing that Comyns sets her fourth novel towards the end of the nineteenth century 'perhaps to make the point that many women's lives in the 1950s remained unchanged since the late Victorian period'.[494] Building on that critique, Nick Turner traces Comyns's feminist perspective through her first three novels: *Sisters by a River* (1947), *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths* (1950), and *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* (1954). The best known of these novels, *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths,* explores experiences from Comyns's early first marriage to detail both the bleakness and absurdity of urban poverty, housing insecurity, and young motherhood in 1930s London. Arguing that that text 'undo[es] assumptions of marriage as closure' to portray 'domestic space' 'in a way that challenges the heteronormative status quo', Turner figures Comyns's work as 'social realism about women as victims'.[495]

In this chapter, I build on these discussions of Comyns's work as social critique to read *The Vet's Daughter* as a novel that also engages with the Human as the ideological substructure of mid-century Britain. I begin by analysing *The Vet's Daughter*'s poetics, showing how the immanence of Comyns's prose fractures and fragments bounded, agential subjectivity in favour of what Lykke calls the 'mourning 'I''. In the second part of the reading, I look at that structural critique of the Human in detail to suggest that the novel's Gothicism has both a Human and a posthuman form. In the Human form, the thinning of the wall between life and death provokes fear, as it did for Dame Lettie, a reaction that *The Vet's Daughter* uses to explore the ways in which power ebbs and flows. In its posthuman form, in contrast, Comyns's Gothicism is fear-less. Rather than worrying about the intrusion of death into life, the posthuman Gothic understands the border between these two states as inherently porous and so nothing to be concerned about. To look at these two Gothic forms in relation to each other, I draw on the trope of the zombie, a cultural figure that also shifts in meaning when considered through a Human or posthuman lens. In the closing section, I focus on the mystery of Alice's levitation, reading that mystery as an 'immanent miracle'. Reimagining the relationship between agency and victimhood, *The Vet's Daughter*'s immanent critique of

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Writing Career', *The TLS,* (5 February 2021); Lucy Scholes, 'Re-Covered: Barbara Comyns', *The Paris Review* (14 July 2021) <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2021/07/14/re-covered-barbara-comyns/> [accessed 20th January 2024].

[494] Horner and Zlosnik (2005), p. 106.

[495] Nick Turner, 'Barbara Comyns and New Directions in Women's Writing', in *British Women's Writing, 1930 to 1960: Between the Waves,* ed. by Sue Kennedy and Jane Thomas (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 197-212 (pp. 203, 200, 206).

misogyny and sexual violence draws attention to that blend of vulnerability and possibility that characterises life in 'the elsewheres of Man'.

WRITING THE MOURNING 'I'

Comyns's prose style is one of the most distinctive aspects of her fiction. That style is typically characterised by short sentences, straightforward syntax, and the simple past tense. In terms of content, Comyns's straightforward prose tends to focus on description over interpretation, privileging fragments and details over reasoned meta-narrative. Highlighting the impressionistic style of Comyns's writing, Turner describes her prose as evoking a 'childlike hyper-honesty' and, for Horner and Zlosnik, the directness of Comyns's language similarly evokes 'the child's unclouded vision and candour'.[496] While I agree that there is an artlessness and naivety to Alice's narrative voice in *The Vet's Daughter*, I wonder whether the comparator 'childlike' does justice to the ontological implications of Comyns's fabulative text. Take, as an example, the opening paragraph of the novel:

> A man with small eyes and a ginger moustache came and spoke to me when I was thinking of something else. Together we walked down a street that was lined with privet hedges. He told me his wife belonged to the Plymouth Brethren, and I said I was sorry because that is what he seemed to need me to say and I saw he was a poor broken-down sort of creature. If he had been a horse, he would have most likely worn knee-caps. We came to a great red railway arch that crossed the road like a heavy rainbow; and near this arch there was a vet's house with a lamp outside.[497]

In these first sentences, Alice emphasises the minutiae of the man's appearance, his eyes and his moustache, to break down this already 'broken-down sort of creature' into his constituent parts. The reader never finds out what 'else' Alice was thinking and while the details of the Plymouth Brethren and the lamp outside the house bring elements of the scene into sharp focus, the description never quite fills in the centre to coalesce into a coherent whole. Reacting in the moment to the man's need, Alice's 'I' offers no objective examination of her experience. Refusing to do the 'hard work' of sense-making, the novel's narrative 'I' favours

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[496] Turner, p. 212; Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, '*Skin Chairs* and other Domestic Horrors: Barbara Comyns and the Female Gothic Tradition', *Gothic Studies,* 6. 1 (2004), 90-102 (p. 91).

[497] Comyns (1988), p. 1. Intriguingly, this 'man with the ginger moustache' appears to be one of the last people Alice ever sees as she tries to keep floating at the end of the novel: 'Suddenly I saw a man with a ginger moustache staring at me with a terrified expression on his face. I tried to smile at him because I felt he needed pity, poor man – and I'd seen him before. But in a moment he was pushed to the ground, the advancing crowd falling over his body'. Although the novel never makes this explicit, the inference is that this man is the third person to die on the common, the 'man so far unidentified' referred to in the police report with which the text ends. Comyns (1988), pp. 188, 189.

the diffuse immanence of a posthuman becoming rather than the centred, coherent transcendence of the Human subject. Instead of that coherent, mediating 'I', the narrative roots itself in the moment, with the oxymoron of 'heavy rainbow', for example, hinting at significance but never resolving into meaning.

As well as being a feature of the novel's prose style, this refusal to mean also characterises *The Vet's Daughter*'s stilted structure. With its short, disconnected chapters, Comyns's novel jumps between events without accounting for or explaining those abrupt shifts. Take, for example, the detail that dangles at the end of the chapter in which Mother dies: 'During the morning a man came to measure Mother for her coffin. It was the same man we had sent away two days before'.[498] As well as the textual play on 'morning/mourning', there is an implicit judgement on Father's callousness here, a judgement that the text wraps into Alice's painful confrontation with a world that carries on regardless of her loss. But Alice never overtly articulates her pain. With the next chapter beginning '[t]hey buried Mother three days later', it is the world that persists with Alice's immediate grief and the last three days left unrecorded.[499] Similarly, the chapter which describes Mrs Peebles's suicide ends with Alice thinking, 'I wondered if she was folded up in the water when they found her, or lying flat and at rest'.[500] Alice's question, exemplifying the contrast between the traumatic events of the novel and the disarming directness of the prose, remains unanswered, with the next chapter beginning, 'Blinkers took me home'.[501] Similar disconnects in plot and affect feature across the novel at the ends of paragraphs as well as chapters. The details of these chapter and paragraph endings feel significant. But the novel leaves that significance unexplored, inviting readers to make connections but moving on without further comment or resolution.

Rather than thinking of this refusal to cohere as a kind of childish immaturity, I want to suggest that Comyns is evoking what Lykke calls the 'mourning 'I'', an opening to the fluidity of the posthuman that comes into being through grief. As she describes in *Vibrant Death: A Posthuman Phenomenology of Mourning* (2021), a work which weaves together poetry, photos, prose, and theory, this mourning 'I' has 'wider and more open horizons' than the sovereign 'I', 'mov[ing] in multiple, non-unitary and rhizomatic directions, governed by

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[498] Comyns (1988), p. 39.
[499] Comyns (1988), p. 40.
[500] Comyns (1988), p. 163.
[501] Comyns (1988), p. 164.

intuitions and emerging intensities more than by so-called rational thought'.[502] Slipping out of phase with everyday life, the mourning 'I' confronts the fragmented and fractured nature of reality, a reality in which the lost loved one is both absent and present at the same time. For Lykke, metonymy best fits with the mourning 'I's' attention to this absent presence. As the opposite of metaphor, metonymy, meaning the substitution of a property or associated object for the thing itself, is 'a trope that explores touch and contiguity rather than looking for resemblances and comparisons'.[503] In contrast to metaphor's preoccupation with representation, metonymy focuses on direct experience, on an immanent world in which '[l]ife is not some ineffable presence that is then re-presented' but instead is the accumulation of sensation.[504] In effect, '[w]hile the metaphorical writing style […] installs a boundary between the poetic world and explanatory schemes outside of it', metonymy allows for a somatic wandering without the need for a centring, coherent subject position.[505]

To see that metonymic style at work in *The Vet's Daughter* look, for example, at a passage just after Mother dies:

> Everywhere in the house there were sad little reminders – a limp string shopping-bag hanging from the kitchen door; a fortune-telling book in the dresser-drawer; a fern in the dining-room window that had died from neglect since she had ceased to tend it; and one small black glove mixed up with the string she used to save – little things like that were everywhere.[506]

These 'little things', the glove, the book, and the fern, function metonymically as, to the grieving Alice, they all stand for Mother. On the one hand, filtered through Alice's grief these objects become empty and useless; the limpness of the shopping bag and the single glove also signal Alice's own sense of detached futility, confronted 'everywhere' by death. On the other hand, speaking to the always-becoming of posthuman death, even after Mother has died those objects, the fern, shopping-bag, and glove, are still lively, which is why they spark Alice's grief. Thus, Alice experiences her mother as both absent and present; Mother the agential subject is absent while Mother, 'dissolved into molecularity', remains present in all her 'little things'.[507] That presence both amplifies Alice's grief and opens the novel to 'distributed

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[502] Lykke, p. 109.
[503] Lykke, p. 204.
[504] Colebrook (2010), p. 83.
[505] Lykke, p. 204.
[506] Comyns (1988), p. 42.
[507] Lykke, p. 18. As Deleuze argues in his essay 'Immanence, A Life': 'we shouldn't enclose life in the single moment when individual life confronts universal death. *A* life is everywhere, in all the moments that a given

death, i.e. death beyond the bounded body of the individual'.[508] Death cannot be finitude as Mother persists and insists in these 'metamorphosing material remains'.[509]

Bringing Lykke's work into dialogue with *The Vet's Daughter*, reframes the novel's fractures and fragmentations as a form of metonymy. Rather than a linear narrative that builds to resolution, *The Vet's Daughter* presents readers with a series of unexplained and unexplainable moments. With subjectivity in the novel fragmented and diffuse, those moments never organise themselves into meaning. The result is another narrative of unfulfilled suspense, a story in which meaning, coherence, and signification never quite materialise. As part of that turn to non-sense, the novel thins the wall between life and death, using Alice's grief to fold these two states into each other while also inviting attention to life in its unbound form. As I discuss in the next section, as a critical posthumanist text, *The Vet's Daughter* develops that idea of a porous border between life and death to critique Human conceptions of agency, victimhood, and hierarchy.

A POSTHUMAN GOTHIC

To think through the implications of *The Vet's Daughter*'s reimagining of the relationship between life and death, in what follows I want to draw on the trope of the zombie. In doing so, I am not suggesting that Comyns is referencing popular zombie fiction in her work. What I am suggesting is that tracing the zombie in its various incarnations through Comyns's novel brings into view, firstly, that novel's multi-layered, structural engagement with the way the Human works and, secondly, its posthuman ontology. I start by tracing the movement of fear across the text, showing how Comyns uses the microcosm of the household to highlight the vulnerability of bodies deemed other-than-Human. In the second part of the discussion, I show how the posthumous nature of Comyns's narrative sets fear aside to open to the indeterminacy of the posthuman Gothic.

The zombie's influence on contemporary popular culture and fiction comes in three overlapping iterations: first, the Haitian zombie, a figure 'resonant with the categories of

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living subject goes through and that are measured by given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized in subjects and objects'. Deleuze (2001), p. 29. Emphasis in original.

[508] Lykke, p. 210.

[509] Lykke, p. 18.

slave and slave rebellion'; second, the mid-century American filmic zombie that can 'stand for capitalist drone (*Dawn of the Dead*) and Communist sympathizer (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), and, increasingly, viral contamination (*28 Days Later*)'; and, thirdly, the contemporary zombie, figured as life immersed in technology, low culture, or drugs.[510] Regardless of the cause or the context, the zombie works as a foil to the Human by effectively dying twice, once in its loss of agency and once in its loss of life. Without either agency or life, the zombie becomes the epitome of 'depersonalization', the 'formerly familiar figure who has been wiped blank'.[511] Whether that blankness is the effect of Haitian voodoo, alien invasion, mutating viruses, environmental disaster, addictive technology, or trauma, the one constant is that we 'know a zombie when [we] see one' because of what it has lost:[512]

> the absence of some metaphysical quality of their essential selves. This may be the soul, the mind, the will, or, in some cases, the personality. But every zombie experiences a loss of something essential that previous to zombification defined it as human. Usually this entails a loss of volition, though not always.[513]

In other words, breaking the Human down into constituent parts to speak to a biopolitical distinction between *zoe* and *bios,* the zombie teaches that it is not enough to walk, bodies must walk with volition to be Human.

At the beginning of *The Vet's Daughter,* Alice describes her mother in terms suggestive of what Nick Muntean calls the 'trauma zombie', a 'muted, dazed state' in which people are 'unable to maintain a coherent identity'.[514] A 'trauma zombie' is medically alive but has lost that form of agency that marks Human subjectivity. Witness Alice's first description of her mother:

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[510] Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, 'A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism', *Boundary 2,* 35. 1 (2008), 85-108 (pp. 87-88).

[511] Sarah Juliet Lauro, 'Afterword', in *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human,* ed. by Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), pp. 231-236 (p. 232).

[512] Peter Dendle, *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia* (Jefferson, North Carolina: Macfarland & Company, Inc., 2001), p. 100.

[513] Kevin Boon, 'And the Dead Shall Rise', in *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human,* ed. by Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), pp. 5-8 (p. 7).

[514] Nick Muntean, 'Nuclear Death and Radical Hope in *Dawn of the Dead* and *On The Beach*', in *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human,* ed. by Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), pp. 81-97 (p. 82). Mother is also an example of what Sherryl Vint terms 'abject posthumanism', the 'monstrousness of bare life detached from the protections of the subject-citizen', 'most evident in the reconfiguration of zombies from the living-dead to the infected-living'. Sherryl Vint, 'Abject Posthumanism: Neoliberalism, Biopolitics, and Zombies', in *Zombie Theory: A Reader,* ed. by Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 171-182 (pp. 178, 172).

> In the brown hall my mother was standing; and she looked at me with her sad eyes half-covered by their heavy lids, but did not speak. She just stood there. Her bones were small and her shoulders sloped; her teeth were not straight either; so, if she had been a dog, my father would have destroyed her.[515]

Alice catches Mother in the middle of a state that seems to have no beginning or end. Frozen by the past continuous tense and further isolated by 'just', Mother steps out of time and space to haunt rather than inhabit the house. Speechless, Mother's eerie silence also carries the weight of association between 'voice' and volition. There is no agency here, only reaction as, responding to a question from Alice about cabbage for lunch, Mother 'looked scared and scuttled towards the kitchen, holding up her little hands like kitten's paws'.[516] Mother has 'always [been] afraid of' Father, taking the brunt of his cruelty and violence.[517] Mother's teeth are not straight, for example, because early in her marriage Father 'kicked [her] in the face', afterwards trying to buy her forgiveness with a 'big fur muff'.[518] Hollowed out and listless the portrayal of Mother speaks to the distinction between bodily death and agential death. From this perspective, Alice's father figures as the feared Other to deliver a judgement on male violence, misogyny, and the extremes of patriarchal control.

Yet, as well as that feminist critique, *The Vet's Daughter* also offers readers a biopolitical critique in which Mother, rather than Father, figures as the feared 'other'. In the quotations above, described as more animal than Human, Mother comes to stand for *zoe* or 'bare life', existing in a state of exception and living a life that has no recognisable political or economic value. As discussed earlier, while the citizenship of *bios* offers legal and political protection, lives lived in a state of exception can be killed 'with impunity' making 'the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die', 'the ultimate expression of sovereignty' in contemporary society.[519] As a result, when Mother becomes ill, Father can enact that definition of Human sovereignty to euthanise Mother with impunity, 'giv[ing] [her] something to put her to sleep, just as he put the animals to sleep that the vivisectionist did not need for his experiments'.[520]

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[515] Comyns (1988), pp. 1-2.
[516] Comyns (1988), p. 2.
[517] Comyns (1988), p. 24.
[518] Comyns (1988), p. 25.
[519] Agamben, p. 47; Mbembe, p. 11.
[520] Comyns (1988), pp. 38-9

While drawing on a similar frame to Agamben, *The Vet's Daughter* inflects its critique by suggesting that the driving force behind Father's exercise of sovereignty is financial rather than political. Monetary value is the determining factor in whether the animals in Father's care live or die. Rather than euthanising them as his clients have asked him to do, Father sells the 'laughing' puppy and 'the kind tabby cat with its kittens' to the vivisectionist for financial gain.[521] As Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee describes it, necrocapitalism practices 'accumulation by dispossession', subjugating 'bare life' to raising capital and *The Vet's Daughter* recognises this capitalist ethic.[522] Witness the frequent references to animal bodies repurposed as household conveniences: the door 'propped open by a horse's hoof without a horse joined to it' and a 'rug made from a skinned Great Dane dog', for example.[523] With these ornaments holding echoes of former lives to keep the novel's necrocapitalist critique in view, Comyns positions Father as both personally responsible for the violence that creates Mother's abjection and a paradigmatic exemplar of sovereign power exercising the right to kill (his wife) and the right to keep alive (the animals he sells rather than euthanises). Reproducing a macro-level necrocapitalist critique in the microcosm of the household, *The Vet's Daughter* bears witness to the bodily demands of a capitalist ethic that invests power in the Human hierarchy.[524]

However, as Comyns's novel unfolds, and the zombie returns, it becomes clear that that hierarchy is not static and that an either-or distinction between Mother as 'bare life' and Father as agential *bios* is too simplistic. Agamben describes the state of exception as a 'Möbius strip', 'not so much a spatiotemporal suspension as a complex topological figure in which not only the exception and the rule but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside, pass through one another'.[525] The point is that, rather than being the property of individual bodies, the hierarchy is mobile. And it is that mobility that *The Vet's Daughter* recognises in the text's final, neat role reversal with Father taking Mother's place as the 'trauma zombie'. He ends the novel 'seriously ill', unable to give any information to the police after the stampede on Clapham Common. That reversal begins with Mother, in classic

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[521] Comyns (1988), p. 6.
[522] Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee, 'Necrocapitalism', *Organization Studies,* 29. 12 (2008), 1541-1563 (p. 1548).
[523] Comyns (1988), pp. 3, 2.
[524] Comyns's powerfully enigmatic *The Skin Chairs* (1962) offers a similar critique. As the title suggests, that novel uses the disconcerting image of a pair of chairs made from skin to critique both histories of colonialism and the ongoing impact of the hierarchical power dynamic that made those histories possible.
[525] Agamben, p. 28.

zombie fashion, continuing to walk, haunting Father by appearing in front of him when he mistakes Alice for Mother:

> His voice fell and his eyes weren't looking at me any more. He was talking to someone else. 'I never stinted you, although you were less to me than a housekeeper. I could have turned you out for your deceit and sickly ways, but I let you stay here as Mrs Rowlands, although I loathed the sight of you and your finicky daughter. Now you are dead, and it's better for us both. You were rotting away with a filthy disease; you are better dead, I tell you. I never stinted you; it was you that stinted yourself. I gave you a fine coffin. What more do you want? It is your paper-white daughter ....'My father did not notice when I left the room.[526]

As well as guilt over his culpability in Mother's death, there is fear in Father's reaction here, a fear that tracks back to Father's refusal to enter Mother's room when she was dying because he was 'frightened of her illness'.[527] As a living corpse, measured for her coffin even before she is dead, Mother becomes the Gothic incursion of all that Father and the Human fears: 'the vulnerability of the flesh' and 'the dissolution of consciousness'.[528] That same fear returns in Father's response to Alice's corpse-like levitation. As she moves around 'feet first' with her hands 'neatly folded' on her chest, she looks down on Father to see him 'kneeling on the floor, almost as if he were praying. His eyes had rolled back so far that they were all white, with no pupils showing, and he was drooling at the mouth'.[529] Mother's fear of Father has morphed into Father's fear of Mother to underline the mobility of the exclusionary Human as a paradigm.

On one level, I am making two fairly straightforward points here: that Father's own avarice and greed creates the conditions for his undoing and that, in identifying Father with sovereign power, *The Vet's Daughter* is going beyond a psychological critique of individual motivations to make a broader point about capitalism and the way that the Human as a hierarchical paradigm works. The key to that broader point is the way in which fear plays out across the novel. Fear is what binds Mother and Father together and what sets Alice apart. When Alice's fear disappears at the end of the text, it signals a shift in Comyns's unique blend of humour and horror from the Human into the posthuman Gothic. The posthuman Gothic, as defined by Anya Heise-von der Lippe, is a genre which, rather than asking *what if*

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[526] Comyns (1988), p. 98.
[527] Comyns (1988), p. 17.
[528] Lauro and Embrey (2008), p. 101.
[529] Comyns (1988), pp. 111, 146, 169.

the borders between life and death, Human and nonhuman are porous, understands these states as necessarily implicated in each other, permanently contingent and co-present rather than leaking through a border, however porous.[530] There is, then, no need to fear the incursion of death into life. Signalling the presence of this posthuman Gothic, as she dies, Alice affirms that 'for the first time in my life I was not afraid'.[531] Putting fear aside, Alice strips death of its Human meaning, enabling that fear-less, posthuman Gothic to emerge, a genre which, intrigued by death but not afraid of it, opens to vistas outside of the Human.

To consider that posthuman Gothic in more detail, I end this part of the discussion by drawing on another iteration of the zombie trope. In their 'Zombie Manifesto', Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry rename the zombie as zombii to distinguish between normative cultural conceptions of the undead and the ontological shift that marks this posthuman form of the undead. The zombie, as commonly understood, materialises Human fear of death with '[t]he vulnerability of the flesh' and 'the dissolution of consciousness' taking shape in 'the monstrous hyperbolic of the zombie as living corpse'.[532] The Human fears the corpse because it is evidence that '[n]either God nor science can protect us against the abject, which will haunt us'.[533] It is that fear of the abject corpse that is at the root of Father's fear of Mother. As Lykke argues, there is nothing within the corpse or the body that is inherently frightening, it is the way the Human makes sense of that materiality that induces fear. In other words, religion and science 'produce the corpse as abject' to 'cast the ghosts, believed to emerge from it, as always-already scary, threatening or downright evil'.[534] Driven by this fear of difference the Human Gothic demands resolution and the restoration of the boundary between life and death. In contrast, the posthuman zombii, refusing resolution and catharsis, reimagines life and death 'together, differently'.[535] As Lauro and Embry describe:

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[530] Anya Heise-von der Lippe, 'Introduction: Post/human/Gothic', in *Posthuman Gothic,* ed. by Anya Heise-von der Lippe (Wales: University of Wales Press, 2017), pp. 1-18. Heise-von der Lippe's definition develops Michael Sean Bolton's earlier distinction between the posthuman and the postmodern Gothic. Where the postmodern Gothic explores fears about an apocalypse produced by, for example, 'monstrous technologies', [t]he source of dread in the posthuman Gothic lies not in the fear of our demise but in the uncertainty of what we will become and what will be left of us after the change'. In other words, there is a turning inwards associated with the posthuman Gothic that distinguishes it from that of the postmodern. Michael Sean Bolton, 'Monstrous Machinery: Defining Posthuman Gothic', *Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies,* 1. 1 (2014), 1-15 (pp. 2, 3).

[531] Comyns (1988), p. 189. Alice's lack of fear recalls Marcia's dying 'smile' in *Quartet in Autumn*. In both novels, the emotional register shifts readers away from the idea that death is inherently frightening.

[532] Lauro and Embrey (2008), p. 101.

[533] Lykke, p. 83.

[534] Lykke, p. 83.

[535] Williams, p. 53.

> The kind of dialectic the zombii incarnates is not one that strives for resolution; […] the zombie, by its very definition, is anticatharsis, antiresolution: it proposes no third term reconciling the subject/object split, the lacuna between life and death. The zombie is opposition held irrevocably in tension. […] it takes the subject and nonsubject, and makes these terms obsolete because it is inherently both at once. The zombii's lack of consciousness does not make it pure object but rather opens up the possibility of a negation of the subject/object divide. It is not, like the cyborg, a hybrid, nor is it like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's schizophrenic, a multiplicity; rather, the zombii is a paradox that disrupts the entire system.[536]

Being anti-catharsis and anti-resolution, the posthuman zombii holds in one form what, to the Human, would be incompatible states. Like Schrödinger's cat, discussed in Chapter One, because the zombii is both alive and dead it is also indeterminately neither, existing in an entangled state with the viewer. As such, that zombii evokes a prepersonal bodying, a form of becoming that 'disrupts the entire system' by refusing to resolve into any definitive state of being.

Paralleling the indeterminacy of the posthuman zombii, *The Vet's Daughter* ends with Alice both dead, given she narrates the text and tells her story, and alive, given the report in the newspaper article which closes the novel. Leaving the question of Alice's aliveness undetermined, *The Vet's Daughter* avoids defining her solely as a victim. Read through a biopolitical lens, the novel's ending implies that, for those deemed not fully Human, agency and life are mutually exclusive; it is only by giving up her life that agency becomes available to Alice, she can only 'speak' after she is dead. Yet, as the discussion of Father's plight at the end of the novel suggests, victimhood is slippery in *The Vet's Daughter* and that slipperiness returns in the indeterminacy of Alice's zombii form. Upending the victim narrative, *The Vet's Daughter* has Alice avoiding death as finitude by continuing Life as text, holding both positions open on equal terms. Deliberately anti-catharsis and anti-resolution and always in flux, Comyns's zombii is not a static, passive victim signifying for the Human. Instead, Alice as zombii is radically, unsettlingly unrelated to common-sense conceptions of life and death, a simultaneous incarnation of bounded being and unbounded becoming.

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[536] Lauro and Embrey (2008), p. 94.

In the final part of the reading, I build on this mix of being and becoming to consider the mystery of Alice's levitation, showing how the novel plays with language and sense to further complicate the distinction between victimhood and agency.

<div align="center">IMMANENT MIRACLES</div>

In *Vibrant Death*, Lykke describes the way that, as she grieves, she experiences striking and unexpected moments of synergy between her dead beloved and herself. One such moment is finding two exceptionally rare pearls in an oyster caught in the coastal area in which Lykke scattered her partner's ashes. Lykke figures this event as an 'immanent miracle', 'defined as a transcorporeal assemblage of multiple human and non-human actants coalescing to produce an intensely affective event involving a multitude of immanent co-becomings'.[537] Immanent miracles are unique, unexpected, unlikely, and unexplainable moments made visible through the mourning 'I'. Lykke argues that it is possible to live with the idea of the kind of 'radically open-ended' world in which immanent miracles happen without 'hav[ing] to resort to divine intervention or other kinds of transcendent agencies to make sense of such events'.[538] In other words, it is possible to imagine a world in which there is no causal agent responsible for the miracle. While miracles do depend on a subject position for their recognition, that subject is not a Human one, but rather an entangled, vibrant mix of matter, materiality, and mourning.

It is as an 'immanent miracle' that I read Alice's floating, linking the work on agency from the preceding section to the idea of always-in-motion bodying from Chapter One through a return to a discussion of sense. In what follows, rather than being concerned with the interplay of common-sense and non-sense, I focus on what Colebrook calls the 'potentiality of sense'.[539] While common sense rests on a shared construction of the world and non-sense plays with that construction to undermine it, sense in its neutral form is the ground of experience, a space in which language and bodies meet. Deleuze conceives of sense as 'a surface that is neither the body itself, nor the idea expressed. This surface of sense lies between the nature of bodies and their relations, and the languages that express those relations'.[540] Sense makes it possible for bodies and language to relate to each other, it is a

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[537] Lykke, p. 158.
[538] Lykke, p. 173.
[539] Colebrook (2010), p. 95.
[540] Colebrook (2010), p. 95.

'condition of possibility', but sense does not in itself give bodies or language meaning.[541] While common sense entails fixed points of interpretation and non-sense plays with those fixed points, thinking of sense, and so matter and language, as neutral allows for the kind of moment-to-moment becoming that underpins Lykke's miracle.

Typically, critics trying to make sense of Alice's floating look for a cause. Horner and Zlosnik, for example, link Alice's levitation to the trauma of the attempted rape that comes before the levitation. Either Alice experiences a kind of 'psychological dissociation, developed as a survival tactic or coping mechanism' or, more 'lyrically', Alice floats in a metaphorical sense, 'transcend[ing] the horrors of mental cruelty through an act that is sublimely defiant of everyday reality'.[542] Whether 'dissociating' or 'defying', it seems Alice acts only in relation to Cuthbert and Rosa; their attempts to coerce Alice into a relationship produce Alice's response. The issue here is that this critical focus on Cuthbert and Rosa restricts Alice to the role of victim and seems at odds with the tone of the novel and with the fearlessness I discussed earlier. Thinking of the event through Lykke's work as an 'immanent miracle' sets aside this search for a first cause, inviting attention to 'how' rather than 'why' Alice floats. Colebrook argues that to understand the relationship between sense and bodies from a posthuman perspective,

> one cannot begin from the bounded organism and then consider the sense it makes of its world; such a point of view begins from a constituted body and does not explain how that body emerges from a potentiality for orientation – a sense – that enables both bodies and meaning systems.[543]

In other words, to ask what causes Alice to float is to start in the wrong place, reasoning forwards from the assumption of an already 'constituted body' without asking how that body became constituted. Lykke's 'immanent miracle' speaks to this posthuman transposition. Lykke is not arguing that she, as sovereign subject, bestows meaning on the pearl. Instead, she describes the pearl as an event rather than a static object, a form of matter engaged in a co-becoming that is interdependent with Lykke's own becoming. Alice's floating similarly strips both language and bodies of their fixed reference points, literally, as her body relates to space differently, but also in the sense of refusing common-sense meaning. Instead, the novel

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[541] Colebrook (2010), p. 94.
[542] Horner and Zlosnik (2005), p. 108.
[543] Colebrook (2010), p. 94.

approaches sense in its neutral form, offering readers a moment-to-moment bodying that is unconstrained by any predetermined relationality.

To explore that bodying in more detail, I want to consider Alice's own reactions, showing how, even though her floating remains unexplained, she is not afraid of her talent and she herself never asks why. The first time Alice floats she is sleeping on Mrs Churchill's sofa having found sanctuary there after Cuthbert's attempted rape. Worried about breaking things when near the ceiling, once Alice returns to the couch she is 'not afraid, but very calm and peaceful'.[544] She floats again after moving to live with Mrs Peebles, finding the experience 'puzzling' and initially keeping it a secret, thinking '[p]erhaps it was something that often happened to people but was never mentioned, like piles'.[545] Having asked Mrs Peebles if she had 'ever heard of anyone floating about their rooms', and being told about Joseph of Cupertino and the 'society gentleman', she decides:

> It was quite plain that some people floated – not everyone, about as many as were left-handed, perhaps – but it was peculiar and not a thing to boast about, just something to keep to yourself and practise when no one was about. I wondered if it could occur in the daytime, or outside. It would be wonderful to float in a wood among birds if one didn't bump into the trees and become entangled in their branches.[546]

After trying the experiment, she realises that she 'could float when [she] wanted to; it wasn't a dream or an illness. [She] really could levitate [herself]'.[547] It seems that her body and its unexpected skill does not frighten her. Floating may be a public embarrassment, made shameful by Nicholas's reaction, '[h]is face looked white and dreadful, with an expression almost as if he thought me vile and infamous', but it is not in and of itself a problem, it might even, in an echo of the tone and style of Carroll's Alice, 'be rather nice when one became used to it'.[548] Emulating both a corpse, in that when she floats she keeps her hands 'neatly folded' on her chest and moves around 'feet first', and a new-born as she learns how to control her limbs, Alice's levitation turns her into another form of the posthuman zombii.[549] Both dead and alive and so definitively neither, Alice inhabits the tension between these two states without fear; floating, like death, is nothing to be afraid of.

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[544] Comyns (1988), p. 81.
[545] Comyns (1988), p. 121.
[546] Comyns (1988), pp. 147, 148.
[547] Comyns (1988), p. 152.
[548] Comyns (1988), pp. 159, 121.
[549] Comyns (1988), pp. 111, 146.

That connection between *The Vet's Daughter* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* invites attention to the way in which the *word* 'floating' creates the conditions for Alice's levitations. Alice's mother is the first to use 'floating' when reminiscing about growing up in rural Wales:

> I've missed them so much all these years, the hills and mountains. The sun would disappear behind them so suddenly, and the clouds would become entangled in their peaks. […] Dark brown moss grew in the mere by the farm; and once I saw a little child floating on the surface. She was dead, but I wasn't afraid because she looked so pure floating there, with her eyes open and her blue pinafore gently moving. It was Flora, a little girl who had been missing for three days.[550]

For Mother, death offers Flora purity, freeing her from violence and violation and leaving her suspended in the innocence of childhood. In an echo of Braidotti's turn to Life, nature becomes the animating force that keeps the 'blue pinafore gently moving'; death in the Human sense is nothing to fear because nothing ever really disappears, it merely changes in form. Alice then appropriates the word 'floating' after Mother has died. Alice has just returned home on a Sunday evening after a dress fitting with her friend Lucy. Seeing to the beef and carrots for their evening meal,

> [Alice] added more water, and balls of dough to make dumplings. The dumplings swelled up huge and danced in the boiling gravy, and the kitchen was filled with steam. Water poured down the windows like rain inside out. […] [I]t was as if floods had come, and everywhere there was water very grey and silvery, and I seemed to be floating above it. I came to a mountain made of very dark water; but, when I reached the top, it was a water garden where everything sparkled.[551]

It turns out that Alice had fallen over and 'knocked [her] head on a coal scuttle' so that the 'unbelievably beautiful' water garden with its 'fountains and trees and flowers' becomes explainable as an hallucination.[552] Yet, in the context of Alice's later levitation, it also seems that the word 'floating' passes from mother to daughter to bring together connotations of death, fantasy, and peace. I am not suggesting that language is causal here. I am also not arguing for a purely linguistic deconstruction of this text, a position countered by Alice's own empiricism and the somatic nature of the novel. Alice roots her experience in actuality,

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[550] Comyns (1988), pp. 30-31.
[551] Comyns (1988), p. 69.
[552] Comyns (1988), pp. 70, 69.

knowing that she really did float and it wasn't a dream 'because the blankets were still on the floor and [she] saw the gas mantle was broken and the chalky powder was still on [her] hands'.[553] Rather, my point is that *The Vet's Daughter* forces the reader to consider a complex, interrelated world with infinite possibilities for sense. As the novel fractures the coherence of constituted subjectivity, words begin to skip across settings, people, and places, becoming embodied in disconcerting ways. Whatever the trigger, Alice's floating is more than cause and effect, it is a complex assemblage of language and matter, a becoming *with* that unbinds sense from the constraints of the bounded organism.

As this discussion suggests, by setting aside the search for cause and effect, effectively figuring Alice's floating as a form of 'immanent miracle', a unique, unexpected, unlikely, and unexplainable event without a direct cause, *The Vet's Daughter* bears witness to the precarity of bodies without putting limits on what those bodies can do. Like Spark, Comyns refuses to 'assume the qualities, vitalities, and borders of the catastrophic'. Instead, *The Vet's Daughter* posits an everyday posthumanism in which precarity blends with potential, and being with becoming.

In *Liberalism and Human Suffering: Materialist Reflections on Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics,* Asma Abbas distinguishes between suffering and victimhood, arguing that liberalism only recognises suffering when the sufferer enacts the role of 'agency-impaired' subject.[554] 'The only way a person's suffering can enter the domain of visibility', Abbas writes, 'is if the suffering is represented as injury or harm, if the sufferer is a victim, and if the victim can tell a story of her victimhood'.[555] I am drawing attention to Abbas's work here to address Turner's argument that 'in some form' all of Comyns's novels are 'social realism about women as victims'. As powerful as Comyns's portrayal of misogyny and sexual violence is, *The Vet's Daughter* also plays with what it means to be a victim, exploring the kind of 'radically open-ended' world in which life and death, agent and victim are not mutually exclusive terms. As a critical posthumanist text, the novel goes beyond gender-

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[553] Comyns (1988), p. 81.
[554] Asma Abbas, *Liberalism and Human Suffering: Materialist Reflections on Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 33.
[555] Abbas, p. 41.

based critique to offer readers a structural account of the Human as a mobile hierarchy, a continually shifting dynamic of inclusion and exclusion that moves across and between bodies but is not bound to them. From an ontological perspective, *The Vet's Daughter* crafts a poetics out of fracture and fragmentation to set aside the coherence of bounded, sovereign subjectivity, preferring the indeterminacy and diffusion of what Lykke calls the mourning 'I'. Practicing the kind of immanent critique that sets aside the question of 'why', *The Vet's Daughter* holds meaning open to balance a fear of death and dying against the fearlessness of the posthuman Gothic.

As well as speaking to both the stylistic mixed-upness of mid-century fiction and the questions which fabulation asks of the Human as a dominant paradigm, *The Vet's Daughter* also returns to an issue touched on at the end of Chapter Two, that of the relationship between human and nonhuman animals. While I have shown how mid-century fiction challenges the dominance of the Human as a way of understanding the world, I have focused mainly on texts in which the human as a species continues to hold the centre ground. The two exceptions are *The Vet's Daughter* and *The Nowhere Man*, both novels which call into question hierarchical distinctions between animal and human. Vanessa Ashall writes about contemporary veterinary work as a form of posthuman *praxis.* In a recent article, for example, she argues that society tasks veterinary practitioners with holding stable the border between animal and human.[556] In doing so, veterinary workers become acutely aware of the contingent nature of that border, the way in which it requires work to hold it in place. *The Vet's Daughter* similarly draws attention to the constructed nature of the border between animal and human. With the Human as a mobile hierarchy, Mother's becoming animal, for example, is a function of Father's aggression and the hierarchy of being that he imposes rather than any absolute distinction between the human and the animal. The same applies for those animal bodies repurposed as household conveniences. Thus, the novel offers readers a sense of the animal as a relationality, a category that the Human itself brings into being. Taken together, *The Nowhere Man* and *The Vet's Daughter* suggest that, while critiquing the Human as a paradigm, post-war novels are also calling that species-level distinction between animal and human into question.

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[556] Vanessa Ashall, 'The Good Death and Discovering a Posthuman Medical Practice', *Interconnections: Journal of Posthumanism,* 2. 2 (2023), 90-98.

This chapter has focused on two mid-century texts which bring the living and the dead 'together, differently'.[557] With the Human holding life and death apart, *Memento Mori* and *The Vet's Daughter* focus on spaces in which death is both imminent, brought close by age and abuse, and immanent, meaning pervasive and all around. The result, in Spark's novel, is a critique of social and cultural attitudes towards death and dying in mid-century Britain, a critique that draws attention to the limits and limitations of the Human as a way of making sense of the world. In *The Vet's Daughter*, Comyns explores the exercise of power, bearing witness to misogyny, sexual violence, and murder. In terms of their poetics and the locus of their critiques, these two novels offer strong contrasts. Where *Memento Mori*'s never-the-less expands, *The Vet's Daughter*'s mourning 'I' fractures and contracts. What the two novels share, however, is a fabulative interest in non-sense, a refusal to mean that, like *The Heat of the Day*, makes the everyday strange. That strangeness allows these texts to not just critique those 'core values' of 'sovereignty and control' that underpin post-war society but also to consider 'different modalities of the human'. Through an attention to the intersection of materiality, affect, and ethics, *Memento Mori* and *The Vet's Daughter* undo distinctions between agency and victimhood to blend vulnerability with possibility. In doing so, these texts posit an expansive, materially interdependent posthuman ontology as a condition of the everyday.

From its title and epigraph, through Charmian sorting 'her thoughts into alphabetical order' because 'Godfrey had told her [it] was better than no order at all', Alec's obsessive note taking, to Jean's final meditations, *Memento Mori* is a novel about different ways to remember.[558] The text begins with an act of remembering which is also an act of forgetting. Referencing the Cold War, *Memento Mori* both grounds itself in its historical moment and sets that moment aside:

> Dame Lettie Colston refilled her fountain pen and continued her letter:
>
> One of these days I hope you will write as brilliantly on a happier theme. In these days of cold war I do feel we should soar above the murk & smog & get into the clear crystal.[559]

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[557] Williams, p. 53.
[558] Spark (1984), p.10.
[559] Spark (1984), p. 9.

Seemingly obeying Lettie's injunction to 'soar above', the novel loops back through the last fifty years while taking no account of the global events it finds there. Sidestepping the more obvious historical markers of the first half of the twentieth century, the dates that Jean references are those that relate to Charmian's affair with Guy Leet, and her own affair with Alec Warner. 1918 is the year Lisa Brooke gets married not the year that World War One ends. And, although bombed-out buildings form the backdrop to Mrs Pettigrew's search for Godfrey and the reader learns that Eric's 'psychological history' is the reason he is turned down by the military, the only medal in the novel is Sister Lucy's 'service medal', worn to impress the media.[560] There is a point here about the contingency of history and the constructed nature of any overarching meta-narrative; what matters on a global scale is not what individuals remember. But that apparent forgetting is also a re-remembering as those events continue to press, hinted at by the ruins in which Mrs Pettigrew hides from Godfrey. In other words, while *Memento Mori* unbinds history from the specificity of dates and times, that history never disappears, continuing in a sense of the past that is intuited rather than analysed, felt rather than tracked through cause and effect.[561]

In this way, although absent from the body of the novel, the global conflicts that delimit the twentieth century return in the text's images of war and battle and warnings about the dangers of forgetting. Jean morphs those conflicts into the fight against death, telling Lettie, '[b]eing over seventy is like being engaged in a war. All our friends are going or gone and we survive amongst the dead and the dying as on a battlefield'.[562] In the ominous tolling rhythm of Jean's prose – dead / dying / going / gone – aging and the violent history of the twentieth century slip into each other to become affective conditions of encounter. With never-the-less allowing *Memento Mori* to present multiple narratives, none of which are compatible but all of which are equal, the dominance of history and shared memory dissipates to demand a

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[560] Spark (1984), pp. 197, 216.
[561] History is a key theme in critical engagement with Spark's work. Marina MacKay, for example, one of the first critics to read Spark's novels through an historical lens, uncovers lingering post-war anxieties about security, subversion, and betrayal in *Memento Mori,* as well as in a number of other of Spark's texts. Rod Mengham's discussion of the relationship between *Memento Mori* and the Cold War and Amy Woodbury Tease's analysis of the novel's relationship to media culture also explore the novel in its historical context. Taken together, these discussions support what Mengham refers to as Spark's 'period-sense', a relationship with the historical moment that is felt as much as known, sensed rather than understood. Mackay (2008); Mengham, p. 160; Amy Woodbury Tease, 'Call and Answer: Muriel Spark and Media Culture', *Modern Fiction Studies,* 62. 1 (2016), 70-91.
[562] Spark (1984), p. 37.

personal and affective response to those memories. Witness the narrator's description of a forgotten event that underpins Jean and Lettie's relationship:

> It was the old enmity about Miss Taylor's love affair in 1907 which in fact Dame Lettie had forgotten—had dangerously forgotten; so that she retained in her mind a vague fascinating enmity for Jean Taylor without any salutary definition.[563]

The novel never makes it clear why Lettie's forgetting is 'dangerous', perhaps because it leads her to ignore Jean's advice, setting her on a course of action that ends with Lettie's murder. But perhaps danger here signals a more general warning about forgetting in the context of a post-war world, a world that seems more interested in looking forwards rather than back as evidenced by the chairman of the hospital board who believes that '[b]y the middle-sixties everything will be easier'.[564] In this way, history becomes what it was in *The Nowhere Man*, a 'fog' that 'hovers over' the characters in the novel becoming 'the condition of their possible encounters'.

In 'The Time of Planetary Memory', Claire Colebrook argues that the Human comes into being through memory. At the level of the individual, 'to exist in any meaningful or personal manner, to be able to say 'I', or to be a subject is to have a past that defines who one is, and a future that either promises fulfilment or threatens betrayal'.[565] At a paradigmatic level, the Human works in the same way, with any potential future figured as either the 'fulfilment' or 'betrayal' of the past. It is through this lens of progression and regression, for example, that Horner and Zlosnik read *The Vet's Daughter*, suggesting that Comyns sets the novel in the past to draw attention to a lack of progress in relation to women's rights. Bringing *The Vet's Daughter* into relation with *Memento Mori,* however, opens the way for an alternative reading of Comyns's novel. Rather than focusing on narratives of linear progression or figuring history as the direct cause of the present, *Memento Mori* evokes an immanent, relational ontology exemplified by the kind of affective meditation that Jean practices as the novel ends. In effect, Spark's text leaves meaning open, refusing any overarching meta-narrative in favour of an always-in-motion becoming *with*. Lauren Berlant writes: '[w]hatever else it is, and however one enters it, the historical present—as an impasse, a thick

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[563] Spark (1984), p. 40.
[564] Spark (1984), p. 111.
[565] Claire Colebrook, 'The Time of Planetary Memory', *Textual Practice,* 31. 5 (2017), 1017-1024 (p. 1022). *Memento Mori* considers this kind of memory-less present when a group of high need 'geriatric' patients join the hospital ward part way through the novel. These women are unnamed and, unlike the other women in the hospital, they have no backstories; their pasts disappear along with their memories.

moment of ongoingness, a situation that can absorb many genres without having one itself—is a middle without boundaries, edges, a shape. It is experienced in transitions and transactions'.[566] This 'middle without boundaries' is what I find in *Memento Mori,* a way of thinking with and about the mid-century that is immanent, diffuse, and affective, a re-remembering that is intrinsically linked to a specific time and place as well as being open to every time and place. From this perspective, Comyns's historical setting speaks to the mid-century not as a failure of progress, a betrayal of the Human, but as the ongoingness of the past in the present. That ongoingness undoes the hegemony of memory as a common-sense meta-narrative to speak to the fabulative relationship with the past that characterises all the texts in this thesis.

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[566] Berlant, p. 200.

CONCLUSION

> More generally, it's not beginnings and ends that count, but middles.
> Things and thoughts advance or grow out from the middle, and that's where
> you have to get to work, that's where everything unfolds.[567]

Middles, by definition, are relational spaces, spaces in which hierarchies and binaries give way to the potential and possibilities of the in-between. This thesis has thought about middles in both temporal and conceptual terms. Focusing on novels from the middle of the twentieth century, I have found in post-war fiction a form of fabulative middle writing that plays with the relationship between language, reality, and ethics. In the context of what Greif calls the 'crisis of man', that fabulative play draws attention to the limits and limitations of the Human as a way of understanding the world. On the one hand, anticipating a critical posthumanist perspective, the texts I have explored in this thesis make connections between mid-century misogyny, racism, violence, and the hierarchical, exclusionary Human as a social and political paradigm. On the other hand, these novels also subvert and reimagine that paradigm, highlighting the ongoing presence of an alternative ontological frame, a fluid, always-in-motion becoming grounded in indeterminacy and encounter understood in this thesis as the posthuman.

In Chapter One, I explored a posthuman ontology in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and Barbara Pym's *Quartet in Autumn*. In doing so, I showed how these texts critique and reimagine hierarchies of embodied difference. In my reading of *The Passion of New Eve*, I suggested that, rather than figuring male and female as mutually exclusive terms, Carter's novel reimagines two sexes as *n* sexes. The result is a non-sense sexuality that evokes a posthuman bodying, meaning a material becoming that figures matter as always-in-motion potential. I explored a similar fluidity in my reading of *Quartet in Autumn*, showing how Pym's multi-voiced, multi-dimensional reality makes what is, and what might be, equally real. In terms of the poetics of both Pym and Carter, parody and humour are key. In my reading of *Quartet in Autumn*, I showed how Pym balances the seriousness of the Human against meaning-less non-sense to figure fixed categories of difference as absurd. At the end of that chapter, I discussed Pym's evocation of the hyper-Human, meaning a form of becoming grounded in the principles of self-actualisation and personal fulfilment. Making a

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[567] Deleuze (1995), p. 161.

connection between the journeys that close both *The Passion of New Eve* and *Quartet in Autumn*, I suggested that these texts draw attention to the difficulty of holding space for a posthuman ontology in the here and now.

In Chapter Two, I explored Kamala Markandaya's reimagining of the borders between nations, homes, and bodies in *The Nowhere Man*. Bringing the novel into dialogue with Deleuze's concept of the fold, I showed how Markandaya's folded poetics plays with distinctions between inside and outside. Understanding space as 'open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming', the novel makes connections between the exercise of power in imperial India and post-war London. Finding an affective, subject-less version of the Human at work in both locations, the novel uses that mobile hierarchy to draw attention to the contingency of those definitions of Britishness that underpin post-war racism and xenophobia. In the final part of my reading, I suggested that alongside its critique of the violence inherent in work to stabilise borders and boundaries, *The Nowhere Man* also explores a posthuman ontology grounded in encounter and becoming. That relationality undoes fixed distinctions between bodies to figure disruption and disturbance as the norm rather than the exception.

In Chapter Three, I looked at the relationship between life and death in Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* and Barbara Comyns's *The Vet's Daughter*. These two novels focus on spaces in which death is both imminent, brought close by age and abuse, and immanent, meaning pervasive and all around. In Spark's novel, that immanence results in a critique of social and cultural attitudes towards death and dying in mid-century Britain. In *The Vet's Daughter*, Comyns focuses on structural power dynamics, making connections between misogyny, sexual violence, murder, and the Human. Both texts revolve around unsolved mysteries, mysteries which call the principles of agency, reason, and self-determination into question. Thinning the wall between life and death, these texts reimagine what it means to be a victim, blending vulnerability with possibility to evoke an expansive, materially interdependent posthuman ontology as a condition of the everyday.

Taken together, these readings model an approach to mid-century British fiction that brings discussions of style and genre together with literary critical approaches that focus on the human condition. Fabulation has been key to this mixing of critical perspectives. As a way of understanding the concerns of mid-century fiction, fabulation brings into view connections

between language, reality, and ethics that cut across existing critical frames. Through parody, folding, fracture, never-the-less, and might-have-been, the novels I analyse in this thesis hold meaning open, implicating readers in the indeterminate, messy middles they describe. That middle writing connects fabulation with what Elizabeth Povinelli calls immanent critique, meaning an attentiveness to the inconsistencies, intricacies, and possibilities of the world as the writer experiences it. Sceptical of overarching meta-narratives and fixed points of difference, these texts explore the tensions and contradictions of mid-century British society from within.

The lens I have brought to bear on these fabulative concerns is that of the posthuman. Drawing on the work of a range of posthuman and posthuman adjacent scholars, including Alexander Weheliye, Gilles Deleuze, Claire Colebrook, Kara Keeling, Erin Manning, Elizabeth Povinelli, Anna Tsing, and Christina Sharpe, this thesis has brought together a set of critical tools through which to explore the intricacies and indeterminacies of mid-century fiction. Key concepts have included the distinction between bounded being and unbound becoming, the way in which sense mediates between words and things, and the idea that an always-in-motion bodying can counter the fixity of 'the body'. Through working with these tools and ideas, this thesis has reassessed the significance of texts, such as *The Vet's Daughter, The Nowhere Man*, and *Quartet in Autumn*, currently treated as peripheral to the mid-century as a literary moment. It has also resituated *The Passion of New Eve* and *Memento Mori*, texts which, although well researched, are rarely explored in relation to the question of what it means to be human and, in the case of *The Passion of New Eve*, not usually considered in discussions of mid-century fiction.

This thesis began with the question that Alexander Weheliye poses in *Habeas Viscus*: 'what different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?'. Responding to Weheliye's provocation, my research focuses on texts concerned with these 'elsewheres of Man', texts which are attentive to lives lived in the margins of the Human. In those margins, these novels find a fluid posthuman ontology, a blend of being and becoming characterised by indeterminacy, fluidity, and mutability. From this ontological perspective, the posthuman references a way of being in the world that is independent of developments in technology or science. Rather than being an aspirational replacement for the Human, the posthuman in these texts is an expansive,

fluid, affective form of becoming that is always present in the here and now. That the posthuman is a condition of the everyday is critical to my reading of these texts. Just as fabulation is not solely a function of mid-century fiction, so the posthuman is not solely a function of life *in extremis*. Similarly, while a turn to the posthuman is a radical political act in the context of a post-war emphasis on Enlightenment values, the posthuman as a way of being in the world is not solely a function of the mid-century moment. In other words, as well as drawing attention to the presence and significance of the posthuman in mid-century fiction, this thesis's critical approach has relevance outside of that frame.

While it is difficult to know how to bring a thesis about middles to an end, touching on the wider significance of my work offers one way of drawing the discussion to a close that is in keeping with the openness of the texts I have explored. Although my research has focused on a group of novels that interrogate similar issues, any of the works by the authors I have discussed would lend themselves to a posthuman critique.[568] Other novels published during the mid-century would also benefit from being brought into relation with the posthuman as a critical frame. I am thinking here of texts as diverse as George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar* (1959), Elspeth Davie's *Providings* (1965), V. S. Naipaul's *Mimic Men* (1967), Stella Gibbons's *Starlight* (1967), and Shelagh Delaney's *Sweetly Sings the Donkey* (1968). I am also thinking of writers such as Maureen Duffy, Brigid Brophy, Elizabeth Taylor, Iris Murdoch, Emma Tennant, and Shena MacKay. For these texts and authors, the benefits of a posthuman approach are twofold. Firstly, a posthuman lens brings overlooked writers, such as Duffy and MacKay, into current critical

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[568] The synergies across the five novels in this thesis also suggest other productive combinations of texts from the same authors. *The Nowhere Man*, *Quartet in Autumn*, and *Memento Mori*, for example, all explore queer family groups to ask what community means in the context of post-war Britain. It is a question that runs throughout the canons of Pym and Spark. In the work of Carter and Comyns, issues relating to childhood come to the fore. I am thinking here not just of the ending of *The Passion of New Eve* and the young protagonist of *The Vet's Daughter,* but also of the connections between other novels by these two authors. There are similarities between the dystopian childhoods portrayed in Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and Comyns's *The Juniper Tree* (1985), for example, as well as between the varied fortunes of the two sisters, Victoria and Blanche, in *A Touch of Mistletoe* (1967), and Dora and Nora Chance in Carter's *Wise Children* (1991). A second point of intersection comes from Pym's 'might-have-been' moments as a counterpoint to Spark's never-the-less poetics. I was initially surprised by the synergies between these writers but the more I read, the more I saw connections between their work. In Pym's *Less than Angels* (1955), for example, Catherine Oliphant sits and types while her anthropologist boyfriend travels to Africa. In Spark's *The Comforters* (1957), Caroline Rose also sits and types as she hears her own words spoken back to her. While there are significant differences between these two texts, I wonder about the relationship between Catherine and Caroline, a naming which echoes the similarity between Letty and Lettie. There are also synergies between Comyns's *The Skin Chairs* (1964), a novel that offers readers a complex, materialist critique of race in post-imperial Britain, Pym's *Excellent Women* (1952), a novel set against the backdrop of post-war bombsites, and *The Nowhere Man*. These are all novels interested in the relationship between the symbolic triad of home, nation, and body.

conversations, situating their work in relation to mid-century debates about what it means to be human. Secondly, the posthuman makes it possible to bring work together across critical boundaries, inviting analysis of, for example, the work of V. S. Naipaul with the work of Keith Waterhouse. As disparate as Waterhouse's *Billy Liar* (1959) and Naipaul's *Mimic Men* (1967) are, these texts share a willingness to scrutinise the Human in its mid-century form together with an openness to other ways of being and knowing.

As well as resituating overlooked writers and texts, this thesis's posthuman analysis also supports the ongoing reappraisal of the mid-century as a literary moment. Recent work by scholars such as Marina MacKay, Kaye Mitchell, Lyndsey Stonebridge, Carole Sweeney, Patricia Waugh, and Nonia Williams has shifted discussions of post-war literature away from the 'twin peaks' of modernism and postmodernism, opening the mid-century to a greater range of historical, social, political, and stylistic analysis and interpretation.[569] This thesis continues that project, adding to the critical conversation by highlighting the entangled relationship between the period covered by this thesis and the contemporary moment.

The presence of the term 'fabulation' in both mid-century literary criticism and twenty-first century critical theory was one of the starting points for my research. Exploring that point of connection, this thesis has shown how post-war fiction and posthuman theory respond in similar ways to those exclusions and hierarchies on which the Human relies. And yet, the mixings that this thesis has explored suggest a relationship that goes beyond a set of shared social, cultural, and political concerns. I have already drawn attention to the presence of fabulative fiction in twenty-first century British literature, using epigraphs from novels by Ali Smith and Helen Oyeyemi, partly because these writers reference the influence that Spark, Carter, and Comyns have on their work, and partly because that influence is evident in their use of language and form. The fabulation of Smith and Oyeyemi speaks to the ongoingness of the mid-century, to the way in which this complex, indeterminate, and fluid literary moment continues to unfold. That ongoingness means that the mixed-upness of the mid-century is also the mixed-upness of the contemporary moment; past and present become *with* each other as the question of what it means to be human continues to press.

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[569] Hanson and Watkins, p. 2.

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