

THE POLITICS OF FAMILY IN THE 1990s
POSTMODERN FICTION OF KATHY ACKER,
WILLIAM GADDIS, AND ROBERT COOVER

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

**TOTAL OF 10 PAGES ONLY
MAY BE XEROXED**

(Without Author's Permission)

FERGUS E. O'BRIEN

**The Politics of Family in the 1990s Postmodern Fiction of Kathy Acker, William
Gaddis, and Robert Coover**

by

Fergus E. O'Brien

**A thesis submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctorate of Philosophy**

**Department of English Language and Literature
Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador**

February 2006

St. John's

Newfoundland



Library and
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-19626-7

Our file Notre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-19626-7

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.


Canada

for Cheryl, always

Abstract

This dissertation explores representative postmodern novels by Kathy Acker (*My Mother: Demonology*), William Gaddis (*A Frolic of His Own*), and Robert Coover (*John's Wife*) for their highly political portraits of family in contemporary America. With a theoretical grounding in the ideas of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, this study seeks to address the ongoing debate between individual agency and family commitment in the work of three artists often accused of amorality in their writing. In contrast, I offer readings of the novels sympathetic to the ethical potential they offer for contemporary readers. It is my thesis that Acker, Gaddis, and Coover, rather than concentrate on the extremes of either liberal or communitarian theories, are aware of the presence of tenuous boundaries separating the two, leading to a more political interpretation of identity based loosely on citizenship as an articulatory principle for social commitment. Moreover, the postmodern offerings of Acker, Gaddis, and Coover, suggest alternative ways of exploring the family crisis issue. More than simply aesthetic portraits, each writer employs uncertain ontological and epistemological patterns in order to offer alternative moral possibilities for individual agency and family commitment. All three writers, in one way or another, interrogate rationalist notions of identity (both individual and collective) allowing readers to see the problems inherent in traditional theories of agency and commitment.

Abstrait

Cette thèse examine les oeuvres postmodernes de Kathy Acker (*My Mother: Demonology*), William Gaddis (*A Frolic of His Own*), et Robert Coover (*John's Wife*) et leurs représentations politiques de la famille en Amérique contemporaine. Avec des bases théoriques dans les idées d'Ernesto Laclau et Chantal Mouffe, cette étude cherche à aborder la discussion interrompue entre l'action personnelle et l'engagement familial dans les oeuvres de trois auteurs souvent accusés d'écriture amoralisée. Par contraste, je présente des interprétations de ces romans favorables aux possibilités éthiques qu'ils offrent aux lecteurs d'aujourd'hui. C'est ma thèse qu'Acker, Gaddis et Coover, plutôt que de concentrer sur les extrêmes des théories soit libérales soit communautariennes, sont conscients de la présence des limites floues qui divisent les deux, menant à une interprétation d'identité plus politique, basée librement sur la citoyenneté comme principe articulatoire pour responsabilité sociale. De plus, les écritures postmodernes de Acker, Gaddis et Coover suggèrent d'autres moyens d'examiner la question des crises familiales de cette époque. Plutôt que de présenter simplement des portraits esthétiques, chaque auteur emploie les modèles ontologiques et épistémologiques qui ne sont pas absolus, afin d'offrir des possibilités morales différentes que choix personnelle et responsabilité sociale. Les trois auteurs, chacun à sa façon, remettent en question les idées d'identité rationaliste (individuelles et collectives), laissant voir les lecteurs les problèmes qui rattachent aux théories traditionnelles de choix et de responsabilité.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Jerry Varsava, Dr. Tamas Dobozy, and Dr. Bradley Clissold for their service as primary supervisors throughout the storied history of my dissertation. I would especially like to thank Dr. Clissold for his cogent readings of the chapters, his sound guidance, and his timely encouragement. I would also like to thank the librarians at Memorial University, especially Susan Kearsey and the Distance Plus team, for sending resources across the province and across the country over the last several years. Gratitude and appreciation also go to the staff of librarians at the University of British Columbia who graciously allowed me to utilize their resources as a visiting student. I am grateful to my parents, Peggy and Paul, and my in-laws, Marilyn and Sandy, for their continued support. Most of all, I thank my wife, Cheryl, for her patience and support throughout the years. I am truly proud of her and cannot begin to thank her enough.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
Chapter One: Fiction and the State of Family:	
America in Moral Crisis?	1
<i>Part One: The Theory</i>	6
<i>Part Two: The Fiction</i>	36
Chapter Two: Redoing Childhood	
in Kathy Acker's <i>My Mother Demonology</i>	73
<i>Part One: Acker's Fiction</i>	74
<i>Part Two: The Limitations of Liberty</i>	81
<i>Part Three: (Auto)biography, Intertextuality,</i> <i>and the Discursive Subject</i>	89
<i>Part Four: Redoing Childhood</i>	118
Chapter Three: Articulations of Family	
in William Gaddis's <i>A Frolic of His Own</i>	126
<i>Part One: Gaddis and Frolic</i>	127
<i>Part Two: Allusion and Family</i>	140
<i>Part Three: Contemporary Theory and the Politics of Family</i>	169
Chapter Four: "All life's an artifice": Family and Commitment	
in Robert Coover's <i>John's Wife</i>	189
<i>Part One: Family and the Reception of Wife</i>	191
<i>Part Two: Ontological Boundaries</i> <i>and Epistemological Questioning in Wife</i>	214
<i>Part Three: Postmodern Morality</i> <i>and the Politics of Commitment</i>	233
Conclusion	249
Works Cited	253

Chapter One: Fiction and the State of Family: America in Moral Crisis?

The complicated fictions of Kathy Acker (*My Mother: Demonology*),¹ William Gaddis (*A Frolic of His Own*),² and Robert Coover (*John's Wife*)³ pose more questions than they answer. With complex ontological and epistemological patterns, each writer explores what it is like to live in a fragmented postmodern world. Although all three novelists have been criticized for their seemingly amoral descriptions of contemporary society, complete with individualism, greed, and hedonistic desire, each writer is interested in more than an aesthetic rendering of a chaotic universe. In a manner generally considered atypical of postmodern writing, these writers illuminate the tension between individual agency and social commitment in a postmodern world. In particular, each paradoxically explores the liberal need for personal choice in levels of family commitment at the same time as they acknowledge the more conservative or communitarian viewpoint that family facilitates in the creation of identity.⁴ Yet, the fictions concerned advocate more than a simple polemical examination of liberal and communitarian theories of commitment. My intention is to bring into conjunction the works of Acker, Gaddis, and Coover with the post-Marxist infused democratic liberalism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in order to offer a more political reading of family commitment that not only interrogates the rationalist, “pregiven fixity” of categories such as *the individual* and *the family*, but points to the political and temporary nature of all social relations. The theories of Laclau and Mouffe also help to clarify the existence of multiple terrains of antagonism on which

¹ Kathy Acker. *My Mother: Demonology*. New York: Grove, 1993. Hereafter shortened to *Mother*.

² William Gaddis. *A Frolic of His Own*. New York: Poseidon, 1994. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. Hereafter shortened to *Frolic*. I cite from the Simon and Schuster edition.

³ Robert Coover. *John's Wife*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. Hereafter shortened to *Wife*.

⁴ The conservative trend in these novels is often overlooked.

categories such as family are articulated (*Return of the Political* 76).⁵ Rather than point to a solution in the controversy of individual freedom versus social commitment, Acker, Gaddis, and Coover prefer provisional and multiple identities as well as “social spaces.” As such, family is an “*essential* non-fixity” and commitment to family is temporarily binding; yet, it is binding nonetheless (*Return* 76).

My first chapter serves as both an introduction to the theoretical issues as well as a preliminary analysis of the portraits of equality and liberty in the three novels. I delve into the theories of agency and commitment as put forth by liberals and communitarians before outlining Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical framework as the major thrust of my examination. Laclau and Mouffe forward an ethico-political theory of commitment based on temporary subjects and a concept of citizenship with a basis in temporarily articulated identity. In the second part of this chapter I offer my anti-foundational analysis of liberty and equality in *Mother*, *Frolic*, and *Wife*, indicating the presence of a more discursive notion of identity and commitment as furthered by Laclau and Mouffe.

My second chapter locates Acker’s portrait of family within those institutions and determinisms that act as limitations of individual agency. Although Acker attempts to escape these limitations through her patented multi-perspectivism and an intersection of biography, autobiography, and intertextuality, she fails. By examining Acker’s notion of re-dreaming and re-imagining formative experiences, however, I offer a positive reading of *Mother* which explores the possibility of re-articulating identity through personal agency rather than living with the limitations of such social constructs as family and gender.

⁵ Chantal Mouffe. *Return of the Political*. London: Verso, 1993. Hereafter shortened to *Return*.

My third chapter takes up the ethical potentialities of Gaddis's *Frolic*. After examining the limitations of the thematic possibilities of traditional and ironic allusion in the novel, I turn to narrative ethics and an ethics of care as possible terrains for Gaddis's message of commitment. Finding these two terrains ineffective, and without disregarding the importance of tradition and idealism at work in the novel, I offer a reading of *Frolic* sympathetic to Gaddis's portrait of family as a filling of empty signifiers through re-articulations of personal and collective identity. Ultimately, I look at the way Gaddis's characters explore the multiple meanings of their positions as family members in order to forward a much more agonistic understanding of family commitment.

Finally, my last chapter considers the porous ontological, epistemological, and ethical boundaries explored by Coover's *Wife*. In this chapter, I outline how Coover's examination of liberty and family commitment engages intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships involving the self, the family, and the community at large. Although his fiction is frequently considered aesthetic and, consequently, amoral, I employ the theories of Laclau and Mouffe to offer a political articulation of familial roles and groupings in *Wife*. These articulations of family have a basis in loose notions of love and commitment and reveal to Coover's readers the possibility of familial commitment outside the typically fixed boundaries of nuclear and extended family structures.

Although Laclau and Mouffe draw a great deal of their theoretical framework from poststructuralist theory, I must stress that my analysis of *Mother*, *Frolic*, and *Wife* does not completely rely upon a dislocation of the subject. Viewed through the lenses of Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism, the social identities at work in these novels become more than the perfectible phenomena both liberal and communitarian discourses suggest.

These identities become empty signifiers to be defined and redefined by antagonistic discourse. Furthermore, because they are cognizant of the work of both traditional and contemporary discourses, authors like Acker, Gaddis, and Coover offer more democratic possibilities for family studies than those bounded by either a completely open or a completely closed subjectivity.

A cursory glance at the American fiction published in the last thirty years, in particular fiction labelled “postmodern,” indicates a growing tension between individual agency and social commitment in contemporary America. Focusing on topics such as divorce, illegitimacy, abortion, incest, and the declining nuclear family structure, the works of William Burroughs, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Donald Barthelme, among many others, demonstrate how what Christopher Lasch calls the “me generation” has penetrated contemporary American literature. Lasch contends:

There is no shortage of first-rate writers, but they satisfy themselves too easily with the repetition of stock themes that are no longer shocking or even mildly disconcerting: the impossibility of an objective understanding of events, the impossibility of moral discriminations in an age of atrocities, the impossibility of writing fiction in a world in which everything is possible and newspaper headlines outstrip the writer’s imagination. The best writing today has the effect of removing history from the realm of moral judgments. (*Minimal Self* 152)

Lasch suggests that these writers have given up the effort to “master reality” and have blotted out the external world, finding it difficult “to write about anything except the difficulty of writing” (150). They have forsaken the writer’s obligation to find moral “meaning or substance” (159) in the world beyond the self, even seeing the self as “no

more a sheer fact than its surroundings” (134). Such a depressing outlook does not bode well for dealing with social issues like the waning levels of familial attachment.

Certainly, not all writers considered postmodern have a completely bleak outlook on the possibilities of social commitment in an increasingly individualistic world. Writers like Don DeLillo, Louise Erdrich, and Leslie Marmon Silko, although very different in terms of stylistics and thematics, all point to alternatives to contemporary anomie. DeLillo’s *White Noise* is a prime example of family commitment despite the fragmentation of traditional family structure. In a perplexing portrait of family structure and roles (the Gladney household is complicated by multiple marriages and different degrees of stepchildren), a solid case can and has been made for the presence of a traditional “suburban domesticity” and “a touch of residual fifties mythology” in the novel (Ferraro 19). Likewise, Erdrich’s *The Beet Queen* is cosmetically negative in its portrait of family; yet, some read it as a portrait of adaptability.⁶ Erdrich’s characters explore the borders of family systems while searching for acceptance and direction. In characters like Karl and Mary Adare, *The Beet Queen* insinuates the individual’s power to break free of biological bloodlines while creating lasting family-like connections with other individuals in the community. Even Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, a novel criticized by Richard Rorty among other liberals for its dramatization of Eurocentric individualism at its worst, suggests possibility in communal commitment.⁷ Even though “there are few marriages in this novel, and neither love nor contractual fidelity between partners,” the novel does end with the possibility of a return to a native, communal lifestyle that appreciates social commitment above individualism (St. Clair 147).

⁶ See Gary Storhoff’s “Family Systems in Louise Erdrich’s *The Beet Queen*.”

⁷ For Rorty’s criticism of Silko’s novel see his *Achieving Our Country*.

DeLillo, Erdrich, and Silko all agree that Americans have become more self-involved and, as a result, social commitment, in particular commitment to traditional concepts of family, is on the decline. In response, they all offer alternatives of family commitment to combat rising levels of individualism. Both DeLillo and Erdrich turn to alternative family systems of choice. DeLillo demonstrates how a number of broken families can come together to reform a traditional, nuclear family; Erdrich shows how traditional values of family commitment can still take place within a group of people filling familial roles in an imaginary family. Silko suggests a return to the Native American way of life with community and family intertwined. The problem with these suggestions is that they still imply the only way to deal with failed commitment is to favour some traditional or quasi-traditional format of identity and obligation. A thorough examination of recent social theory suggests that such proposals may be problematic in light of the intricacies of identity and commitment in a postmodern world.

Part One: The Theory

History

The family crisis of rising individualism and waning commitment, according to Lasch, harkens back to the late nineteenth-century and the onset of industrialization. “[I]n fact,” notes Lasch, “the family has been slowly coming apart for more than a hundred years” (*Haven in a Heartless World* xx).⁸ During the Great Depression, sociologist Ernest Mowrer laments, “[n]o problem in modern life so challenges the attention of thoughtful students of society as does the family crisis” (qtd. in Cheal 37). In 1979, in “Images of

⁸ Christopher Lasch. *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged*. New York: Basic, 1977. Hereafter shortened to *Haven*.

the American Family, Then and Now,” John Demos notes that “[t]he sense of [family] crisis is hardly new; with some allowance for periodic ebb and flow, it seems an inescapable undercurrent of our modern life and consciousness” (44). As recently as 1999, in his *The Great Disruption*, social economist Francis Fukuyama observes that since the transformation of Western democracies to information-based economies, levels of commitment to family life have declined to the point that the social institution of the nuclear family has “diminished in importance in virtually all modernizing societies” (37). In this period of *great disruption* (1960s to 1990s), “marriages and births” are declining, “divorce [has] soared,” and “out-of-wedlock childbearing [has come] to affect one out of every three children born in the United States”(4). Fukuyama presents solid statistical evidence to support that, on the cusp of the twenty-first-century, the dissolution of the nuclear family as a social institution is eminent. Furthermore, for Fukuyama, Lasch, and like-minded theorists, no feasible alternatives to the interpersonal obligations within traditional nuclear families have been offered.

Liberty and Family

Much of the problem surrounding the crisis in family commitment comes from a fundamental disagreement regarding the category of the subject and his/her degrees of liberty within the family or any other social construct. The term *liberty*, however, is far from innocuous. It has several possible interpretations relying on differing concepts of the individual subject. The two interpretations of liberty I will be examining have been described by Isaiah Berlin as *negative* and *positive* liberty (4). For Berlin, negative liberty requires the absence of something, i.e., coercion or restraints, while positive liberty requires the presence of something, i.e., self-mastery, self-control, or self-

actualization. Whereas positive liberty involves a teleological movement towards a cognitive understanding of the self whereby an individual comes to realize his/her true nature (whatever that may be), negative liberty does not require any end goals beyond an individual or collective's immediate preferences. Clearly represented in the liberal philosophy of John Rawls in his *Theory of Justice*,⁹ negative liberty submits that, "[e]ach person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override" and it is this inviolability that cements a rational foundation for society (3). For Rawls and other deontological liberals, each individual is entitled to a degree of *freedom from enforced restrictions*, such as obligatory family commitment, even if these restrictions are in the best interests of the individual. For liberals, an individual who does not have the freedom to formulate and re-formulate a life plan is not truly *free*. Rawls believes "no life goes better by being led from the outside according to values the person does not endorse" (Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* 216). In liberal ideology, what is best for an individual does not necessarily make his/her life better; rather it is the *choice* made by the individual that makes life worth living.

Deontological liberals like Rawls also fear that forms of justice that do not support negative liberty may degenerate into an *ends justifies the means* situation which can be costly for the civil rights and liberties of minority groups. Liberals assert: "human values are so irreducibly plural that they cannot be reconciled in the form of a substantive common good" (Smith 118-19). When citizens with differing conceptions of the good life compete for limited resources, the supplementary public morality (state) must be as neutral as possible. Otherwise, those individuals whose ideals of the good life differ from the majority will suffer. Rawls concludes that since "there is no one aim by reference to

⁹ John Rawls. *Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971. Hereafter shortened to *Justice*.

which all of our choices can reasonably be made,” individuals must have the autonomy to formulate and reformulate personal agendas (491). Owing to the presence of a multitude of micropolitical interests in American society, individuals must be respected as ends in themselves, able to make decisions based on the interests they feel most important. A “common good” philosophy such as utilitarianism ignores individual liberty.

The notion of negative liberty provides an appropriate starting point for discussions of family and commitment. Liberal philosophies are often at odds with the family because of their focus on individual rights and negative liberties. Social contract philosophers have always had difficulty reconciling individual autonomy with the obligations of the “first community” of the family, and Rawls is no exception. In fact, Rawls admits that “in a broader inquiry the institution of the family might be questioned, and other arrangements might indeed prove the preferable” (405). Of course, Rawls finds the monogamous nuclear family a popular institution in late twentieth-century American society, and he does not disregard the possibility that most citizens may choose to form nuclear families with private notions of the good life. He merely fears that such beliefs may come at the expense of individual rights within the home or even spill over into the public realm. Rawls fears that those individuals who find that *moral obligations* are *automatically* derived from within the family may force their beliefs on other family members, or attempt to coerce members of the community into thinking the same way. As I will demonstrate in my discussion of Rawls’s difference principle, Rawls, like all liberals, requires an element of choice to be present in order for any moral obligations to hold.

In response to liberalism, communitarians argue that the concept of negative is problematic. Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, one of the most comprehensive and compelling arguments against liberalism, examines how Rawls forwards an ontologically false view of an unencumbered self.¹⁰ For Sandel, and other communitarians, in order for Rawls's theory of a foundational, rights-bearing individual to hold, there must be an identifiable self behind every action but not tied to any ends or attributes. There must be a carrier, an identifiable "I," who possesses the notions of freedom and liberty of which Rawls so eloquently speaks. Of the unencumbered self, Sandel writes:

The priority of the self over its ends means that I am not merely the passive receptacle of the accumulated aims, attributes, and purposes thrown up by experience, not simply a product of the vagaries of circumstance, but always, irreducibly, an active, willing agent, distinguishable from my surroundings, and capable of choice.(19)

For communitarians like Sandel, the liberal view of self is ontologically impossible because it is ahistorical in conception. It goes beyond an individual's perceptions of his/her true self. In reality, individuals cannot comprehend a self that is disconnected from its ends or commitments outside history. Sandel's view of the self, therefore, is more "situated," embedded in the communities around it. It is not always identifiable from its actions or ends. Individuals, communitarian rhetoric reminds us, are members of

¹⁰ Michael Sandel. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1982. Hereafter shortened to *Limits*.

“found” communities such as families, nations, and/or tribes in addition to their “chosen” associations. These found associations are instrumental in identity formation and maintenance.

Consequently, Sandel’s interpretation of liberty mirrors Berlin’s concept of *positive liberty*, a concept of freedom frequently attributed to individuals as members of groups and found communities. Communitarians like Sandel criticize liberals for placing too much emphasis on a freedom from obstacles, resulting in an empty concept of choice for choice’s sake. In contrast, communitarians believe liberty often requires the presence of a belief in self-realization, guiding a subject to achieve a fundamental goal(s) in the teleological sense. Positive liberty requires an individual or group to take control of his/her/its situation, through either self-determination or self-mastery. An individual or group possessive of positive liberty takes a cooperative role in forming his/her/its identity over time and must have a capacity for “agency in the cognitive sense” (152). In discussing positive liberty and the family, Charles Taylor, another noted communitarian, observes that family is a necessary communal space for the development of the individual. For Taylor, “it is clear that men must live in families. . . and that they continue to need them to express an important part of their humanity” (“Atomism” 42). Furthermore, it is clear that since the social space of the family helps situate the individual and lead him/her on the road to self-discovery, the individual has a certain obligation to his/her family of birth.

In a western world defined by liberal individualism, part of one’s positive development as an individual must come from the divisions between public and private life. Although originally a liberal concept instituted in order to protect the public realm

from private concerns, the tension between public and private has been adopted by the bulk of communitarian studies, (*Habits of the Heart*, *The Good Society*, *Haven*, and *Disruption* to name a few) because liberal tendencies have begun to infiltrate the life of the family.¹¹ Writers like Christopher Lasch hope to demonstrate that “the contemporary family is the product of human agency, not of abstract social ‘forces’” and, as such, is open to revision (*Haven* xx). Communitarians like Lasch seek a return to the democratic America Alexis de Tocqueville found in the early nineteenth-century. One might expect that the growing individualism would have an adverse effect on both society and family, but de Tocqueville sees it differently. According to de Tocqueville, the American bourgeois family is made stronger by a democracy that, “loosens social ties . . . [but]. . . tightens natural ones. At the same time as it separates citizens, it brings kindred closer together” (589). In the democratic family, “children are perfectly equal, and consequently independent” (588). As a result, “the affectionate and frank intimacy of childhood easily takes root among them” (588). Unlike liberals who may be open to new forms of family, or Marxists, who see family as a function of economic logic, communitarians see the bourgeois nuclear family as an affirmative “product of human agency” which has yet to be bettered (*Haven* xx). Communitarians believe that by protecting the bourgeois nuclear family, societies can help individuals benefit in the public sphere. As Sandel suggests, the nuclear family provides an excellent paradigm for social commitment. Where Rawls sees a negative sense of coercion in many family structures, communitarians see the family as helping to develop a sense of self-knowledge with the help of the wall separating the inner circle of the family and the

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama. *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order*. New York: The Free P, 1999. Hereafter shortened to *Disruption*.

heartless world of society. The sense of liberty fostered by the family situation at least provides a feeling of shared community amongst individuals who might not find connection in the highly individualized public world.

Equality and Family

Universal Reason

Just as both liberal and communitarian rhetorics emphasize individual agency in discussing family commitment, they both stress equality as well. Liberal interpretations of equality find a basis in an Enlightenment ideal of justice. In *Justice*, Rawls employs a situation called the *original position*, a hypothetical covenant agreed to by hypothetical individuals, that helps to determine the most appropriate principles of justice and commitment for society (11). The parties to Rawls's hypothetical contract find themselves behind an imaginary "veil of ignorance" (11) and as such are unbiased. Relevant features of birth, such as social status, natural abilities and assets, intelligence, race, and gender, are unknown to the parties. Rawls seeks equality through a transcendent or universal notion of justice, emphasizing the parties are "mutually disinterested" in any idea of the common good and that their only interest is in making sure that any interests they may choose are not "sacrificed to the others" (112). The parties to the original position are also assumed to be rational and reasonable individuals (112). As rational individuals, they will not suffer from irrational emotions as envy, shame, or humiliation, and their decisions to want as much primary social goods as possible will not be influenced by fear of how they will look to others when the veil is lifted.¹² Furthermore, if every party to the original position is reasonable, as Rawls

¹²By primary social goods Rawls means such things as "rights, liberties . . . opportunities . . . income and wealth" (54).

assumes, they will all emphasize equality in developing the principles of justice.

Granted, Rawls's parties are not actual individuals, complete with biases and flaws, yet the conclusions he reaches are sound given many contemporary notions of fairness and equality.

Although often chastised for his adherence to strict rationality, Rawls finds in this universal reason an opportunity for compassion in the form of distributive justice. As members of a society the parties to the original position are aware of the needs of others. Although they do not know what values or conceptions of the good life they may hold, they do know that the formulations they will possess will frequently conflict with the aims of others. Unlike strict libertarians, Rawls believes that members of a synchronic (lateral) community will feel morally responsible for their contemporaries simply because it will be in their best interests to do so. As such, any conception of justice they agree to will acknowledge the need to help those who are disadvantaged. As members of a diachronic (vertical) community, the parties to the original position will also recognize obligation to future generations (112). Rawls further explains that the parties are "heads of families . . . [with] . . . a desire to further the well-being of at least their more immediate descendants" (111). He assumes that the parties will agree "to principles subject to the constraint that they wish all preceding generations to have followed" (111).

From the principles of justice that Rawls believes rationally follow from his stipulations, it is clear that the distribution of primary goods must acknowledge the equality of *results* as opposed to *opportunity*. Socially minded distributive theories such as Rawls's focus on the end result when determining justice, not the opportunity given each individual. Certain affirmative action legislations for hiring, for example, follow a

similar framework in that they force institutions to consider the result of their hiring practices rather than simply the equal opportunity of everyone to apply for a job. At their basic level, Rawls's principles of justice read as follows:

The first [principle] requires equality in the assignment of basic rights and duties, while the second holds that social and economic inequalities, for example inequalities of wealth and authority, are just *only if* they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society. (13; my emphasis)

In other words, equality is the most important principle of justice for Rawls, but inequality is acceptable if the entire society benefits. A distribution of wealth that favours a researcher, for example, may benefit society in that it provides incentive for said researcher to find a cure for a particularly deadly disease. It is more from the second principle, labelled “the difference principle,” that liberal theories get their distributive and compassionate bent (65). This principle permits inequalities in the distribution of social primary goods only if it supports the disadvantaged. Unlike conservative “trickle-down” theories (both traditional and contemporary), justice as fairness specifies that inequalities are only justified if any “attempt to eliminate these inequalities would so interfere with the social system and the operations of the economy that in the long run . . . the opportunities of the disadvantaged would be even more limited” (265). In other words, the only inequalities Rawls approves of help the disadvantaged, even if they initially seem to favour the advantaged. Rawls rationalizes the difference principle by the fact that the possession of certain social goods and natural abilities at birth is random.

Consequently, since no one deserves the social and natural advantages s/he possesses at birth, they are communal property.¹³

Because Rawls affords such prominence to equality, any association of more than one individual (such as the family) “may be a barrier to equal chances between individuals” (265). Rawls concedes that family, being a circumstance of birth and not of choice, can be a detriment to a child’s opportunities and motivations: “[e]ven the willingness to make an effort, to try, and so to be deserving in the ordinary sense,” advises Rawls, “is itself dependent upon happy family and social circumstances” (64). Finally, Rawls notes that the family oriented traditions of nepotism and primogeniture are anathema to equality of opportunity and fairness of distribution in a larger sense (264-5). These traditions are coercive in the sense that they allow successful families to keep control of power and money. Ultimately, “The principle of fair opportunity,” admits Rawls, “can only be imperfectly carried out, at least as long as some form of the family exists” (64).

However, it is as a promoter of equality and universal reason that Rawls ultimately finds purpose in the family. Despite its impediments to freedom and equality, Rawls does not dismiss family and family commitment (as does Plato) from his well-ordered society.¹⁴ For Rawls, family commitment is important, not because it has always been important, or because commitment to bloodlines is inherently ethical, but because the institution of the monogamous family cultivates justice as fairness through distinct

¹³ Robert Nozick and other libertarians have, for good reason, criticized Rawls for this reasoning. The absence of desert does not necessarily mean that every individual’s natural advantages now belong to the community.

¹⁴ By a well-ordered society, Rawls means one in which “(1) everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice, and (2) the basic institutions generally satisfy and are generally known to satisfy these principles” (4).

stages of psychological development.¹⁵ A young child is “motivated. . . by certain instincts and desires” as well as strict “self-interest” and is thus unable to rationalize or empathize (406). Family, therefore, no matter what form, must act in the same manner as the hypothetical “veil of ignorance,” committing itself to helping to develop a child’s rationality and empathy. During the stages of a child’s moral development, it is incumbent upon authority figures to promote attitudes and feelings in a child that will make that child a functional member of a well-ordered, liberal society. By helping a child realize his/her worth as a person, parents prepare the child for associations outside the home. Once a child demonstrates an understanding of his/her role within the home, s/he can apply this knowledge to groupings outside the home. The most important thing an individual can take from a family association is the “development of the intellectual skills required to regard things from a variety of points of view and to think of these together as aspects of one system of cooperation” (410). In order for family commitment to be successful in a liberal society, therefore, family must help to develop a larger morality of association “in which the members of society view one another as equals, as friends and associates, joined together in a system of cooperation known to be for the advantage of all” (413).

Shared Understandings and Complex Equality

In deontological, or rights-based liberalism, a universal equality must prevail, one that acknowledges the equal rights of each individual. Conversely, communitarian theory

¹⁵ Rawls cites Jean Piaget, among others, to categorize three stages of human development: morality of authority, morality of association, and morality of principles. The first stage refers to the earliest stage of moral development in which children learn the precepts of a well-ordered society. The second stage, morality of association, refers to the stage in which the individual learns “the moral standards appropriate to the individual’s role in the various associations to which he belongs” (*Justice* 409). Finally, the morality of principles refers to the stage of moral development whereby an individual gains an attachment to “highest-order principles themselves, so that just as during the earlier phase of the morality of association he may want to be a good sport. . . he now wishes to be a just person” (414).

forwards a more empirical equality based in “shared understandings” (Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, xiv).¹⁶ Walzer feels that liberal rationales of equality amongst individuals ignore both history and community. More than universal reason, it has been history, contingency, and deliberation that have helped to develop the modern day liberal personality. The self-determining individual of liberal ideology is a product of real world conversations, practices, and understandings. Taylor agrees with Walzer, suggesting that liberalism

fails to take account of the degree to which the free individual with his own goals and aspirations, whose just rewards it is trying to protect, is himself only possible within a certain kind of civilization; that it took a long development of certain institutions and practices, of the rule of law, of rules of equal respect, of habits of common deliberation, of common association, of cultural development, and so on, to produce the modern individual. (*Sources of the Self* 309)

For Taylor, the liberal attempt to find a universal equality of the individual outside the boundaries of history and community ignores the very construction of the concept of “individual” by these external determinisms.

Equality for communitarians is conditioned and bounded. Walzer’s *Spheres* comes closest to outlining the view of equality held by most communitarian advocates. Walzer believes that equal justice is relative to the historical community and a balance is necessary whereby each social good, for example birthright, money, education, or divine grace, serves to balance the power of the other goods as much as possible. Differences need not be quashed, as long as domination does not cross the lines separating social

¹⁶ Michael Walzer. *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*. New York: Basic Books, 1983. Hereafter shortened to *Spheres*.

spheres. In *Spheres*, Walzer advocates a “complex equality.” Kymlicka describes this type of distribution as one that “seeks to ensure that inequalities in one ‘sphere,’ wealth for example, do not permeate other spheres such as political power” (*Contemporary Political Philosophy* 211). A rich man, therefore, should not be permitted to buy political power in Walzer’s ideal society.

What Walzer’s concepts mean for family commitment and the concept of equality is that the family sphere is separate from the public spheres and, as such, should be immune from its justice. Walzer is not advocating a complete closed-door policy on what happens in the private setting; but he is advocating a different form of justice from the liberal individualism of the public spheres. It is to the tradition of commitment in bourgeois nuclear families that communitarians often turn to explain connection outside of a universal rationalistic justice. Parents and children rarely turn to universal notions of justice when solving disputes in the family. As each is aware of the tradition of family commitment, disputes are often contingently negotiated, resolved with love and understanding, not principles of justice and votes. In fact, it is in the bourgeois nuclear family that many communitarians find their model for community in general. Socio-ethical philosophers like Richard Bellah, Lasch, and Sandel all emphasize love in communal relationships. In *Limits*, Sandel condemns liberal justice for creating an adversarial atmosphere in society and submits that the bourgeois nuclear family provides a more than adequate alternative to justice. For Sandel, a “more or less ideal family situation” is one in which love prevails and “the circumstances of justice” are relatively secondary (33); in fact, any emphasis on justice in a family situation often leads to more conflict. In the family, a “spirit of generosity” (33) reigns, and the “questions of what I get

and what I am due do not loom large” (33). Sandel believes that just as measured judicial practice within the family would rob it of its tone of “spontaneous affection,” the same type of justice robs society of feelings of fraternity and mutual respect (33). Similarly, Fukuyama takes Sandel’s explanation further, explaining that a liberal form of equality is one of the major reasons that family commitment has been deteriorating across America. In the *End of History and the Last Man*, he notes:

[But] families don’t really work if they are based on liberal principles, that is, if their members regard them as they would a joint stock company, formed for their utility rather than being based on ties of duty and love. Raising children or making marriage work through a lifetime requires personal sacrifices that are irrational, if looked at from a cost-benefit calculus. For the true benefits of strong family life frequently do not accrue to those bearing the heaviest obligations, but are transmitted across generations. (324)

As Fukuyama makes clear, in order for family to work in the traditional sense that communitarians, and indeed many liberals still see it, it must look to some separate form of equality and justice or abandon these terms altogether. Liberal equality, for communitarians, remains an unnecessary, remedial virtue if models of spontaneous love and respect prevail. Of course, models of spontaneous love do not always prevail and in cases of irreconcilable differences, family members should accept universal rationalistic justice. The goal of communitarian theory is to keep these cases to a minimum and always to look for ways to solve disputes by looking to a teleological goal accepted by all family members.

Family and the Political Subject

(Ir)reconcilable Differences?

Although the liberal and communitarian concepts of liberty and equality differ as they pertain to family commitment, much has been made of the fact that their differences are skin deep. It has become increasingly difficult to locate thinkers accurately along the boundary between left and right. Communitarians such as Taylor, Walzer, and Sandel have accepted the need for individual rights in a community while liberals like Rawls have qualified their theories to make them less ahistorical. On the one hand, liberals like Will Kymlicka argue that communitarian criticisms of liberal theory are “based on false oppositions and straw-man arguments,” and, in the end, many communitarians (Taylor and Walzer in particular) are “committed to protecting the rights of women and minorities to question traditional practices” like those of family commitment (*Contemporary Political Philosophy* 270). On the other hand, Ann Bousfield makes a cogent and well-argued case for the fact that liberals are merely conservatives in sheep’s clothing. In *The Relationship Between Liberalism and Conservatism*, Bousfield contends:

It is only through reversion to conservative ideas of the priority of practice over theory and the defence of existing orders that liberalism can defend its core values. It is only by utilizing these arguments, which were developed by conservatives to defend the remnants of the older tradition on which liberalism was founded, that liberal values ultimately can be defended. (178)

Despite its constant attempts to remain neutral and rational, liberal theory cannot reconcile itself to a position outside the cave of experience. Rawls’s *original position* is

not only impractical, it is impossible. Liberalism can never be totally neutral. In its attempts to become an organizing principle rather than a political theory, liberalism neglects to see that it has an agenda of its own in which individual rights trump those of the community. Furthermore, as Rawls's discussion of family demonstrates, liberals often employ traditional institutions in an effort to further idealistic agendas.

Postmodern liberals such as Richard Rorty certainly come closer to solving the conflict between liberty and equality. In texts like *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*,¹⁷ "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," and *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty proposes a "liberal utopia" developed through his "liberal ironist," a character who partitions his/her existence between public and private. The liberal ironist lives publicly as a liberal and privately as a conservative. For Rorty, the communitarians and the conservatives are correct to suggest that history, contingency, and experience help form individuals. Under this description, an immoral act is merely "the sort of thing we don't do," especially when "rights" are at stake (*Contingency* 59). "Rights," after all, are constructs of society, not a priori possessions. On the other hand, Rorty is in agreement with the liberals as to which principles of justice *should* govern society. For Rorty, liberal readings of equality and liberty determine those things that societies do or do not do.

Although Rorty makes important inroads into advancing a more political notion of self and familial obligation, he misses the mark in crucial areas. His attempt to marry liberal and communitarian ideals certainly acknowledges the fragile nature of social identity, but his "Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism" still follows liberalism and communitarianism in suggesting "a privileged point of access to 'the truth'" (*Hegemony*

¹⁷ Richard Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988. Hereafter shortened to *Contingency*.

and *Socialist Strategy* 192).¹⁸ All three philosophies rely on social foundations in their theories. Just as communitarianism finds a social foundation in the community and liberalism finds the same in the individual, postmodern bourgeois liberalism locates a social foundation in the boundary between public and private. Neither philosophy engages the danger in such foundations. Rorty suggests that in private life individuals create themselves in any imaginative way possible, while in public life they seek “a just and free society . . . causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged” (*Contingency* xiv). This distinct boundary between the private life of the individual and the family and the public forum of politics prevents Rorty’s genre of postmodern liberalism from truly dealing with some of the patterns of oppression within traditional moralities of familial obligation. Rorty leaves himself open to feminist critique involving the oppression of women within the home as well as additional social critique involving such things as the mistreatment of children. Sometimes public morality needs to influence private action. On the other hand, issues Rorty might relegate to the private realm such as race, religion, and gender, often do, and perhaps should influence decisions made in the public realm. Decisions to join a pro-choice group or vote against a religiously biased law are decisions that might begin with concepts taught within the family, but this does not de-legitimize these choices.

Overdetermination of the Social in Laclau and Mouffe

The controversy caused by negative and positive interpretations of liberty in questioning family commitment is best answered by examining the views of identity developed by Laclau and Mouffe (both individually and collectively). Working from a strangely

¹⁸ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Social Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack. London: Verso, 1985. Hereafter shortened to *Hegemony*.

eclectic group of influences, Laclau and Mouffe put forth a concept of subjectivity that considers the contributions of liberalism and communitarianism.¹⁹ This concept of subjectivity attempts to speak to as many forms of social domination as possible. As post-Marxists, they first deconstruct classic Marxism, questioning social subjectivity and renouncing “the conception of ‘society’ as a founding totality of its partial processes” (*Hegemony* 95). Laclau and Mouffe believe “[s]ociety’ is not a valid object of discourse” and any concept of society that sees “a sutured and self-defined totality” must necessarily be mistaken (111). Based on what they label “the logic of overdetermination,” Laclau and Mouffe further the view that the “truth” of social formations like family and society is overdetermined by a multiple of forces, be they economic, cultural, linguistic, or biological. Furthermore, the constant intersection of partially fixed social formations in a politically charged atmosphere means, “neither fixity nor absolute non-fixity is possible” in the terrain of social discourse (111). For Laclau and Mouffe,

every identity is overdetermined inasmuch as all literality appears as constitutively subverted and exceeded; far from there being an essentialist *totalization*, or a no less essentialist *separation* among objects, the presence of some objects in the others prevents any of their identities from being fixed. (104)

In terms of this study of family commitment, therefore, Laclau and Mouffe would see the concept of family as being overdetermined and commitment to such concept as being temporary, depending upon individuals and context. Family is not the best example of a bounded, private entity for escape from the outside world (as Fukuyama and Sandel

¹⁹ Laclau and Mouffe list Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Karl Marx, Ferdinand de Saussure, Louis Althusser, and Antonio Gramsci, amongst their many influences.

imply), neither is it simply a functional grouping for the creation of liberal citizens (as Rawls suggests). For Laclau and Mouffe, “family,” like “society,” is an empty signifier filled by a signified. Different subjects view family in different ways and see the boundaries separating family, individual, and community in contradictory manners. Furthermore, the boundary dividing public and private relied upon by Rorty is also tenuous. As Laclau and Mouffe admit, “[w]hat we are witnessing is a . . . proliferation of radically new and different political spaces” (181). Determinisms previously seen as part of the private sphere have recently become public. Gender, religion, sexuality, and other antagonisms have become part of a public politics. Any examination of family commitment, therefore, must acknowledge the myriads of forms and provisional fixations that family might take whether for survival, functionality, or any other possible purpose. It is also necessary to consider a possible break of the constructed boundary between public and private, even if only on a temporary level.

Articulations and Nodal Points

In determining the moral obligation to family with Laclau and Mouffe in mind, it is important to move beyond the overdetermination of the social, to the category of the individual subject. When discussing family commitment, both communitarians and liberals believe they are dealing with the ethical obligations of individuals formed in different ways. For Rawls, all individual subjects are inherently rational beings able to step outside their situations and, even though family constructs may aid in the development of a liberal mentality, individuals have no moral obligations to family beyond treating family members as members of society as a whole. For Sandel, all individual subjects are partially formed by surrounding communities yet they have a

positive liberty to act toward reaching a goal of self-awareness. Because surrounding communities have a hand in partially forming individuals, Sandel's subjects owe certain obligations to these communities. Laclau and Mouffe find important points made by both liberal and communitarian philosophies. They are much like Sandel in their belief that "[t]he history of the subject is the history of his/her identifications" (*Return* 76).

Individuals are not the free-choosing subjects of liberal ideologies. For Laclau and Mouffe, many determinisms limit liberty. Individuals are born into certain situations and who they become depends upon their *structural positions*, i.e., determinisms such as class, gender, race, and sexuality, which are beyond the individual's control but affect how this person reacts in social situations. Anna Marie Smith gives a cogent explanation of structural positions in her discussion of Laclau and Mouffe:

Consider, for example, a white heterosexual bourgeois woman, living in a social formation characterized by highly stabilized structural hierarchies and yet a relative openness with respect to the availability of different interpretative frameworks. Her racialized, gendered, sexual and class structural positions are in this case largely determined by the social formations into which she is "thrown," and it is largely her structural positions, rather than her free will, that shape her life chances. (59)²⁰

The subject in Smith's example is determined in many ways by the structural positions thrust upon her by birth and economic situation and whether she likes it or not, they shape her choices in life. As a woman, for example, she is subjected to certain degrees of

²⁰ Smith's *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary* is the first overview of the important contributions of the two political philosophers who served as Smith's Ph.D. advisors at the University of Essex. If, at times, I refer to Smith as a source rather than the primary material, it is because her work clarifies some of the more difficult concepts.

sexism. At the same time, she is not subject to the same discriminations as women of color or of alternative sexualities. She may choose to support different causes, but she cannot change the way structural positions within certain social formations such as bourgeois capitalist societies affect her life.

Like Rawls, however, Laclau and Mouffe believe that individual subjects do have choices in how they react to their structural positions; consequently, individuals do act through *subject positions*. A subject position refers to a voluntary position “through which an individual interprets and responds to her structural positions within a social formation” (Smith 58). Individuals have more of a choice as to whether they become mothers, environmentalists, animal lovers, or Catholics. In Smith’s example,

the ways in which [the subject] lives her structural positions, will tend to be somewhat more vulnerable to political intervention and even the accidents of personal circumstance. That same individual could live her structural positions through subject positions such as liberal anti-racist Catholicism; socialist environmentalism or neo-conservative anti-feminism. (59)

Smith’s example demonstrates that although an individual subject cannot step outside of structural positions like race or gender, s/he still finds ways to step outside to make choices that Rawls might deem rational and unencumbered. A complex relationship between chosen subject positions, found structural positions, learned and inherited positions, and the political climate in which s/he lives, therefore, determines how a person reacts to any given situation.

Because they believe in the temporality and the plurality of the subject, the most important concept for Laclau and Mouffe in discussing identity (both individual and

social) is *articulation*. Laclau and Mouffe define articulation as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result” (105). For Laclau and Mouffe, “articulation is a practice, and not the name of a given relational complex” (93). Identities are provisional articulations in which a temporary subject (bearer of structural and subject positions) interacts with another temporary subject or social formation such that s/he presents him/her/itself as an “object of discourse” (in both the linguistic and non-linguistic senses) on a political terrain (*Hegemony* 108).²¹ Every articulation involves traces of past articulations and becomes influential in any future articulations involving the impermanent subjects involved. The concept of articulation is derived from Saussurean linguistics and the fact that language “‘articulates’ reality” (qtd. in Smith 85). Just as language is a system of differences in which each sign expresses itself based on its difference from another sign, so social interaction is a system of differences in which provisional subjects differentiate themselves from other temporary subjects. Articulations within family, therefore, refer to the practices whereby subjects like husband, wife, son, and daughter are temporarily sutured in a chain of difference--one differentiated from another. Articulations of identity are constructed against a temporary “constitutive outside” or “other.” As an identity, “mother” is temporarily sutured against the *outside* or *other* “father,” while “family” articulates itself against an outside concept of “individual” or “society.” Whereas Saussure assumes a closed system of differences, Laclau and Mouffe do not. By making subjectivity plural and provisional, Laclau and Mouffe offer more interactive, democratic possibilities.

²¹ Discourse in the non-linguistic sense might include choices of body language, facial expressions, and clothing.

The apparent absence of sutured subjects or identities in the theories of Laclau and Mouffe is both impractical and relativistic and, consequently, the subject of some criticism. Making use of Lacanian psychoanalysis, therefore, Laclau and Mouffe introduce the concept of *nodal points* or *points de capiton* to deal with the problem (112).

²² Nodal points are the “partial fixations” of meaning necessary for discursive purposes (112). Laclau and Mouffe explain:

Even in order to differ, to subvert meaning, there has to be *a* meaning. If the social does not manage to fix itself in the intelligible and instituted forms of a *society*, the social only exists, however, as an effort to construct that impossible object. Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, *nodal points*. (112)

Unlike liberals, who do not admit to having a political agenda, Laclau and Mouffe are cognizant of the fact that a denial of meaning is still a meaning. Their answer to this dilemma is that meaning is negative in the sense that it occurs as difference, for example, a *tree* is not a *cat*. That said, positive meaning is possible in the form of sutures or articulated points of meaning which “arrest the flow of differences” on a partial and temporary level (112). Though these sutures are impermanent and partial, they are very real in the political, discursive sense. As mentioned above, “mother” and other family related signifiers, are temporarily sutured subjects; yet, the articulations of these positions against an outside source certainly seem positive. Likewise, “family” is sutured in a real way for groups of agents facing an outside pressure. The major difference between these

²² Laclau and Mouffe employ sewing as a trope for identity using terms like “sutured” and “points de capiton” which translates roughly to “upholstery buttons” and/or “quilting points.”

sutured nodal points and pre-existing totalities is that the nodal points of which Laclau and Mouffe speak are open to re-interpretation and re-suturing as the political climate changes. Recent interpretations of family, for example, risk re-articulation in the face of the political controversies created by same-sex marriages and childrearing.

Hegemony and the Logics of Equality and Difference

Although Laclau and Mouffe present a detailed examination of the constructed nature of the “subject,” their notions require certain circumstances for the articulation of identity. In order to locate family commitment in fiction, it is necessary to locate articulations of “individual” and “family” as temporary subjects as well as the conditions surrounding these articulations. Articulation, for Laclau and Mouffe, lies in their creative reading of “hegemony” as developed through their joint undertaking, *Hegemony*. The main goal of *Hegemony* is to locate a democratic theory of hegemony that incorporates theories of liberal pluralism, conservative traditionalism, and radical politics into a project for a New Left. Recognizing classic Marxism’s failure to deal with the micropolitical agendas of gender, religion, sexuality, and race (among others), Laclau and Mouffe begin their study with an extensive analysis of the tradition of hegemony as concept. The first three chapters of their work amount to a detailed analysis of the history of the term from Lenin to Gramsci. According to Gramsci, hegemony involves the interconnection of force and consent in a politically charged situation. In *Prison Notebooks* he writes: “[t]he methodological criterion on which our own study must be based is the following: that the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’” (*Prison Notebooks* 57). Simply put, Gramsci’s hegemony involves distinctly bounded (articulated) sides in constant struggle to gain and

hold control within a consistent framework. In Gramsci's interpretation, the political climate is transparent in its delimitation of a "we" versus "them" struggle. In terms of any political struggle involving family commitment, therefore, Gramsci would suggest that those who favour a negative sense of individual liberty constantly battle against those favouring a positive sense of liberty.

In light of their temporarily articulated individual subject, Laclau and Mouffe's concept of hegemony needs to be more complicated. Hegemony, for them, is informed by an ontological and territorial temporality not found in Gramsci. For Laclau and Mouffe, "[t]o construct the concept of hegemony therefore involves not a simple speculative effort within a coherent context, but a more complex strategic movement requiring negotiation among mutually contradictory discursive surfaces" (*Hegemony* 93). Unlike the classic models of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe's model is not as enduring. It is temporary and partial. Articulations in hegemonic situations are always open to democratic re-articulation. The hegemonic activities of force and consent, therefore, become, at the same time, more difficult to pinpoint yet more rewarding from a democratic perspective. They also take place on different discursive terrains with antagonisms such as gender, race, and religion operating within each articulated side of a hegemonic relation. Although the presence of a multitude of terrains and antagonisms raises the issue of relativism, Laclau and Mouffe are careful to stipulate that radical democratic liberalism should not promote inequality.

It is through their concept of hegemony that Laclau and Mouffe develop their differences from both liberals and communitarians in their preference for antagonism in defining liberty and equality. In liberalism, for example, the negative liberty of the

individual and the equality of all individuals are both foundational. In communitarianism, the positive liberty of the individual and the complex equality of the many spheres of society are foundational. For Laclau and Mouffe, however, no identities are permanently sutured or foundational, therefore concepts like liberty and equality act as social logics in the antagonistic sense. Rather than search for a lost totality governed by negative liberty or complex equality, Laclau and Mouffe advise that such a totality ignores the necessarily antagonistic working of political logics. Mouffe warns, an “evasion of the political could, I believe, jeopardize the hard-won conquests of the democratic revolution” (*Return* 3). For Laclau and Mouffe, foundational identities ignore the specificity, the temporality, indeed the antagonistic nature of identity in its political sense. Since identity is temporary and relational, conflict and antagonism are unavoidable elements of social discourse and, therefore, dimensions “inherent to every society” (3). Decisions made in terms of temporarily sutured identities are often questioned when the identities themselves are re-evaluated. Laclau and Mouffe, therefore, prefer to examine liberty and equality as warring social logics rather than foundations for consensus. Labelled the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference, equality and liberty are very much at work in Laclau and Mouffe’s political terrain.

According to Smith, the logic of equivalence operates in a similar manner to Gramsci’s logic of hegemony to create a temporarily unified subject. She explains, “[w]hen social forces tend to become organized in terms of an antagonistic relation between two great chains of equivalence, we can describe that form as the logic of equivalence” (89). For Laclau and Mouffe, chains of equivalence (temporarily sutured groups of smaller interest groups) are common phenomenon in the world of political

discourse. Feminists, socialists, and environmentalists, for example, can form a provisional chain of equivalence in order to fight an undemocratic law favouring big businesses. Despite their different agendas, all sides can come together to face a common enemy. Although thinking about democracy in terms of the logic of equivalence is practical in a pluralistic society, Laclau and Mouffe are also conscious of another logic at work in the politics of identity. Chains of equivalence can never eliminate difference, nor should they. Within each subgroup mentioned above, for example, one might find several minor groups arguing political agendas. Liberal feminists might argue for equal treatment with men based on a universal concept of negative liberty. Conservative feminists might proffer an ethics of care, viewing men and women as essentially different. Within each political terrain, therefore, the logic of difference (liberty) often works against the logic of equivalence (equality). If the logic of difference wins out and different social factions cannot agree to come together against a greater enemy, the hegemonic situation cannot be altered.

Citizenship and Family

The conceptions of family commitment proffered by liberalism and communitarianism both have a basis in bounded identities and a distinction between public and private life. In the liberal conception, the family is the private realm of morality for each individual citizen. A neutral, liberal government respects the rights of each individual citizen to live her/his private life in any manner as long as individuals follow the limited rules of social engagement. Family structure and obligations can vary, but the best possible scenario for liberals is one in which a family raises a child to be a liberal citizen, respectful of the rights of others. Once an individual becomes a liberal citizen, the obligations and family

ties are met and the individuals involved have no more obligations toward each other than they might have toward any other liberal citizen—unless, of course, they choose otherwise. The communitarian conception of family aligns family with the private life where a citizen can escape the excessive individualism of the liberal world and where s/he can develop a sense of self with the help of his/her family members. Mindful of the need for a “haven” in a world devoid of serious connection, communitarians argue for a return to the values of the tight-knit bourgeois family.

The dislocation of the subject in the theories of Laclau and Mouffe certainly makes any discussion of family commitment difficult. A consequence of the relational and articulatory qualities of identity and the political blurring of the public/private distinction in the theories of Laclau and Mouffe is that discussions of family and commitment are also ambiguous. Family can refer to a group of subject positions through which an agent might interpret his/her structural positions. Subject positions such as “father,” “mother,” “son,” or “daughter” can affect how a subject reacts when faced with a situation of oppression and/or commitment. As temporary subjects of discourse, families can be the combined articulations of several provisionally formed subjects. Subjects not related by birth, in other words, can interact and articulate themselves as a family in the face of a constitutive such as the state or the community (as Erdrich’s characters do in *The Beet Queen*). The blurring of the boundaries of public and private can also set up family as a changing entity constantly in contact with a larger discursive terrain.

In the final instance, family commitment is linked to the concept of citizenship forwarded by Laclau and Mouffe. Although Laclau and Mouffe do not offer an explicit

concept of family commitment, the view of citizenship they advance indicates how postmodern subjects can come to understand their familial connections by keeping a political notion of the subject in mind. Of citizenship, Mouffe writes:

Citizenship is neither one distinct identity among others, as it is in liberalism, nor the dominant identity that overrides all others, as it is in civic republicanism [communitarianism]. Instead, it is an articulating principle that affects the different subject positions of the social agent while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances and for the respect of individual liberty. (*Return* 84)

Rather than locate citizenship as an identity in its own right, Mouffe acknowledges that all subjects are politically constructed and thus citizenship becomes the articulating position behind all partially sutured subjects. Mouffe's statement that "every definition of a 'we' implies the delimitation of a 'frontier' and the designation of a 'them,'" indicates that the formation of any subject, whether individual or collective like the "family," is the consequence of a political act (2). Individual subjects employ the principle of citizenship to partially fix their all of their identities, both individual and collective. Consequently, families can be formed through the provisional construction of a chain of equivalence among like subjects to deal with a constitutive outside. In one instance, a biological family may come together to fight against the bulldozing of an ancestral home. In a very different case, feminists and socialists might form a public chain of equivalence through the articulating notion of family commitment in order to engage a capitalist society's patriarchal preference for the bourgeois family structure. As a result, family commitment becomes purely political, at the whim of hegemonic forces within society as well as the individual subjects involved. Rather than criticize the

impossibility of a foundationally sutured subject called “family” with a set of moral imperatives for action and commitment, it is important to celebrate the democratization of discussions of family commitment that the theories of Laclau and Mouffe provide. Through unorthodox structure, content, and style, the postmodern fictions of Acker, Gaddis, and Coover demonstrate the positive possibilities of Laclau and Mouffe’s ideas in their portraits of individuals in conflict with themselves, their families, and their communities.

Part Two: The Fiction

Postmodernism

Cultural criticism reveals three important trends in postmodern discourse. The first is perhaps less a trend than a disavowal of postmodernism as a new movement. In his essay “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” Jürgen Habermas identifies the aesthetic movement labelled “postmodernism” as no more than an extension of modernism, the aesthetic of an incomplete modernity project begun in the Enlightenment. Characterized by a concern for rationality, objectivity, and a knowable self, modernity makes use of dialectic to move forward toward its ultimate goal of reconciling science, morality, and art in an eternal, universal truth. Ultimately, Habermas sees the aesthetic of postmodernism as simply part of modernity’s attempts to answer questions regarding its goal.

Along similar theoretical lines, Fredric Jameson implicates Marxist theory in his teleological examination of postmodernism’s role in the movement towards a classless society. In works such as *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*,²³

²³ Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991. Hereafter shortened to *Postmodernism*.

and *The Seeds of Time*, Jameson argues that postmodernism is the cultural logic of a later stage of capitalism (multinational capitalism to be precise). Although he recognizes a weakening in public historicity and, among other traits, a new depthlessness in contemporary theory and culture, Jameson finds this to be a consequence of late capitalist society. Unlike Habermas, however, Jameson believes the postmodern to be, like the modern, an era in itself, and possessive of individual characteristics, conditions, and boundaries. Of the relationship between the modern and the postmodern, therefore, Jameson characterizes it as more “rupture” than “continuity.” For Jameson, this rupture takes place in the 1950’s. The adaptation of Jameson’s perspective to postmodern literature suggests that any view void of a respect for the historicity of the postmodern ignores fundamental differences in the make up and cultural function of literature beginning to take place in the latter half of the twentieth-century. Such fundamental differences as the effacement of the boundaries dividing high and low culture as well as the concomitant defacement of grand narratives found in postmodern forms indicate an obvious historical rupture for Jameson.

Yet, for the purposes of my study, I employ the theories of more literary sources such as Ihab Hassan and Brian McHale, both of whom have considerable experience dealing with twentieth-century literature and, more specifically, with adumbrating the oppositional features of modernist and postmodernist literature. To begin with, both Hassan and McHale admit to similarities in postmodernist and modernist poetics. As Hassan puts it, the two “are not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall” (309). He explains:

history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable in time past, time present, and time future. We are all, I suspect, a little Victorian, Modern, and Postmodern at once. And an author may, in his or her own lifetime, easily write both a modernist and a postmodernist work. (309)

For McHale and Hassan, as for Jameson, however, there is a benefit of assuming a rupture separating modernism and postmodernism, if only for the purposes of a temporary categorization. The problem for Hassan and McHale, is that Jameson and others do not realize that “a ‘period’ is generally not a period at all; it is rather both a diachronic and synchronic construct” (309). As such, the rupture between postmodernism and modernism is not a permanent, historical rupture since literary history, according to Hans-Robert Jauss in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, contains both horizontal (diachronic) as well as vertical (synchronic) strains (32). Furthermore, the temporary nature of the rupture allows for the possibility that, according to McHale, “depending upon which questions we ask of the text, and the position from which we interrogate it” determinisms of postmodern and modernism may differ over time (6). As such, the teleology of those programmes offered by Habermas and Jameson are set aside in the criticism of McHale and Hassan.

Despite the many controversies encountered in situating the *postmodern* across temporal and disciplinary boundaries such as those between literature, architecture, and music, there is some agreement as to its characteristics.²⁴ As McHale points out, “[c]atalogues of postmodernist features are typically organized in terms of oppositions with features of modernist poetics” (7). Most critics, for example, highlight

²⁴ Theorists such as Charles Jencks (*The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* and *What is Postmodernism?*) and Clement Greenberg (*Art and Culture: Critical Essays*) make viable suggestions as to the postmodern condition yet they tend to focus on architecture and art.

postmodernism's emphasis on surface as opposed to modernism's depth. Literary critics, for example, see a decline in intricate characters, plots, or discourses. For most postmodernist critics the surface is as or more important as the depth in art, literature, and other related areas. Along with the surface of postmodern art forms, postmodern critics point to the fragmentation of form, narrative, and subject as major aspects of postmodernism. Postmodern pieces are often open, focusing on a lack of objectivity in the world as well as a de-centering of the subject (both individual and collective). As such, postmodernism sees a merging of high and low culture, without any indication as to which is more important. Habermas and like-minded critics might argue that characteristics such as those mentioned are all indicative of modernism; yet, it is in the accentuation of such characteristics that postmodern art typically thrives. Where modernism offers the work of art as a solution to the fragmentation of the world, postmodernism offers exhaustion and silence. In place of the modernist expansion of the individual's perspectives, for example, postmodernism offers a de-centering of the individual "in which the individual is only a locus of transindividual singularities and intensities" (Johnston 187). Finally, the postmodern is highlighted by an emphasis on black humor. Postmodern art forms employ pastiche, or what Fredric Jameson calls "blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs" (*Postmodernism* 65) providing absurd caricatures of people and a "world gone awry" without commentary (Johnston 187). Often, these art forms are anti-mimetic in the classic sense that they do not proscribe an antidote to fragmentation, irrationality, and immorality in general. Rather than suggest the presence of a universal or even a particular morality, postmodern art forms either discount moral interpretations or leave them up to the readers.

Although seemingly “piecemeal and unintegrated,” heterogeneous if you will, the many catalogues of postmodernism offered by critics like David Lodge, Hassan, and Douwe Fokkema do have what McHale calls an organizing “dominant” (7). For McHale, all the rubrics, strategies, oppositions, and conventions utilized to differentiate postmodernism from modernism come down to the difference between those texts that have as the controlling component the idea of epistemology (modernism) and those controlled by ontology (postmodernism). McHale writes:

modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as those mentioned by Dick Higgins in my epigraph: “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?” Other typical modernist questions might be added: What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? And so on. (9)

By contrast, postmodernist fictions look to more ontological questions. Again McHale elucidates:

postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls “post-cognitive”: “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, and how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What

happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (10)

By using the above “dominants” of epistemological and ontological questioning, McHale is able to tie together most of the descriptors of twentieth-century fiction and open the way for categorizing said fiction with much more accuracy. In terms of the presence of both epistemological and ontological question in a text, McHale is not unrealistic either. He is perfectly aware that one cannot ask one type of question without also, at some point asking the other. He is also aware that “epistemological questions entail ontological questions and vice versa” (11). For McHale, it is more a question of which type of questions “ought to be asked *first* of a particular text” (11).

The Novels

I have chosen *Mother*, *Frolic*, and *Wife*, for my study of family commitment for several reasons. These novels are difficult works that require ontological questioning first. All published in the 1990s, these novels deal with fragmentation of character and narrative, and all three offer the possibility of the existence of order and disorder within the same literary space. As such, they are excellent choices for dealing with a complicated issue like familial obligation. I have also chosen these particular works because they provide both male and female perspectives of an issue, like familial commitment, involving both genders. Most importantly, I have chosen *Mother*, *Frolic*, and *Wife* because the receptions of each work indicate that many readers are unable to see beyond the descriptive qualities of the texts to their prescriptive possibilities. All three

authors have been regularly open to the charge of anti-mimeticism because of their linguistic innovations, stylistic confusions, and lack of moral message in their works. Critics have labelled all three novels as simply descriptive of atomistic living in late twentieth-century America. Those critics who do praise the novels find them reactionary and anti-establishment, offering little in the way of constructive possibilities for commitment in the future. I hope to change this view of the novels involved.

From the late nineteenth-century and the popularity of realism to the mid twentieth-century popularity of modernist techniques, the initial impulse when confronting any fiction is to approach it in a prescriptive manner. For the most part, however, postmodern fictions offer little in the way of surface morality. They are descriptive rather than prescriptive. Moreover, postmodern novels are often specific and localized, rarely panoptic. Novels like Acker's *Mother*, Gaddis's *Frolic*, and Coover's *Wife* do not offer the same moralistic suggestions as the socially prescriptive modernist novels of the past, like *The Big Money*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, or *Invisible Man*. Unlike these "bigger" social novels of the early to mid twentieth-century, postmodern novels focus more on art and less on morality. They examine specific problems in minute detail. Postmodern fictions mirror those fictions that Ludmilla, a character in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* desires:

The novel I would most like to read at this moment . . . should have as its driving force only the desire to narrate, to pile stories upon stories, *without trying to impose a philosophy of life on you*, simply allowing you to observe its own growth, like a tree, an entangling, as if of branches and leaves . . . (92; my emphasis)

The novels of Acker, Coover, and Gaddis, on some level, all epitomize the anti-mimetic, chaotic portrait of postmodern fiction. Acker, for example, has had a longstanding reputation for creating confusing, often offensive fiction. With *Mother*, Acker tackles the real life relationship of Georges Bataille (surrealist novelist, philosopher, and cultural critic) and Colette “Laure” Peignot (poet), telling a story of the tension between love and isolation.²⁵ A modernist reading of the novel might see *Mother* as a female protagonist’s attempt to find “herself” through her experiences at boarding school and university where she encounters ambiguous characters and impulses. More than a straightforward bildungsroman, *Mother* complicates morality with confusions of narration, structure, and message that never really get resolved. As Welch Everman suggests, *Mother* is “a novel of first-person narratives embedded in first-person narratives” (“ABAB: Acker, Bataille, Argento, Brontë”). In one of the novel’s epigraphs, Acker’s initial narrator outlines her mother’s (Laure’s) struggles with love before passing off the narrative voice with the lines “[m]y Mother spoke” (3). Subsequently, readers face the frequently daunting task of catching narrative voice in a sea of male and female characters. For most of the narrative, Acker’s initial narrator defers narration, becoming secondary to other voices such as those of her mother, a character named Beatrice, George Bush Sr., Cathy and Heathcliff (of *Wuthering Heights*), and her father. Although there is a central narrative voice, that voice often gets confusing. Readers must follow changes in the narrator’s identity and person. The novel’s narrative structure is also problematic as it is a mélange of dream sequences, letters and personal remembrances, and several appropriated texts from Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* to Bataille’s *My*

²⁵ Peignot was born Colette Laure Lucienne Peignot, and often went by the name Laure in her writing and amongst friends. For the purposes of clarity, I use the surname “Peignot” to differentiate the historical author from Acker’s fictional protagonist.

Mother to Dario Argento's film *Suspiria*. Finally, social morality is more than questionable in *Mother* as Acker's characters live in a world of sex, piracy, witchcraft, and general debauchery. An artist burns his daughter to create realistic paintings, a politician rapes his daughter to exercise patriarchal control, and several young girls marry for social status rather than love. Acker's readers must reorganize narrative structure in search of a moral judgment that never really materializes.

Unlike Acker, Gaddis is oft touted as a high-modernist and his novels do provide a discernable plot, with some work by the readers. *Frolic*, for example, depicts the legal system run amuck in America. The novel follows the foibles of Oscar Crease, a college history instructor and part-time playwright whose civil war drama, *Once at Antietam*, is plagiarized and made into a blockbuster hit. Oscar sues the movie company for damages and goes through several different attorneys and contradictory arguments before he finally wins his case. Of course, in an irony typical of Gaddis's fiction, Oscar is forced to pay back more money than he is owed, and by novel's end, he faces a plagiarism suit of his own launched by Eugene O'Neill's estate for his piracy of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Oscar may be the novel's main protagonist, but his is certainly not the only legal concern; in fact, Gaddis peoples his novel with characters, like Oscar, who need to be taken seriously and have chosen the legal system as a sanctioned rationality to fix their fragmented selves. In other cases, Oscar's girlfriend, Lily, sues over faulty breast implants while a family friend, Trish, simultaneously sues for both foetal endangerment and the right to terminate her pregnancy. Other characters sue over the wrongful death of loved ones, both human and canine, while, in one hilarious instance, Oscar attempts to sue himself when he hotwires his car and it drives over him. Finally, an ongoing case

pitting the Episcopal Church against *Pepsi-Cola* over anagrams and brand name rights frames the novel in true Dickensian fashion. Similar to Dickens's infamous Jarndyce v Jarndyce suit in *Bleak House*, or Joseph K's case in Kafka's *The Trial*, this long legal battle case carries on in the background of the novel, never reaching a decision and wreaking havoc on Oscar's family. Oscar's brother-in-law Harry is lead counsel for the defense and the case drives him to addiction (painkillers and alcohol) and death (drunk driving).

Every character in Gaddis's novel acts litigiously, involving him/herself in at least one legal suit. No one comes out unscathed. Yet Gaddis's critique is complicated. As with that of *Mother*, the narration is often confusing as Gaddis makes little effort to define his speakers, and his characters often plagiarize from others. Gaddis's narrative structure is also perplexing, as sections of pastiche from Crease's play, as well as legal depositions and decisions litter the novel, all in an effort to present readers with the means to judge Oscar's case (and others) and see the legal system in action. Gaddis writes his own depositions and decisions for both sides of many of the novel's cases and readers, as symbolic jurors decide how they *should* feel about the moralities involved. When characters like Oscar win their cases, for example, it is rarely clear why they win, and they often win at the expense of monetary and emotional turmoil.

Like *Frolic*, Coover's *Wife* offers a microcosm of America – this time through small town life. The novel is structured around several community-based incidents (a bachelor party, a wedding, and a Pioneers Day barbeque) in the life of John, the novel's protagonist, a man with “money, family, power, good health, high regard, many friends” who lives “as though this were somehow his destiny and his due” (7). Coover's narrative follows the

lives and desires of numerous characters and families living in close proximity. As with Acker's novel (and Gaddis's in some ways), Coover's *Wife* takes love as one of its major themes, but the tension between agency and connection, love and solitude, is again tenuous in Coover's world. More so even than Acker and Gaddis, Coover's fiction questions human morality through a narrative structure that mirrors Calvino's perfect novel, a novel with a "desire to narrate, to pile stories upon stories, without trying to impose a philosophy of life on you" (92). Coover fills his novel with selfish characters and comments little on the debauchery in its modern day Sodom and Gomorrah. In Coover's perverse adaptation of *Our Town*, grown men rape their daughters, women have abortions, and both extramarital affairs and sexual fantasies are the norm. Coover's characters are hard to like, and, readers leave John's town just as they found it, with little justice distributed for despicable deeds.

Negative Liberty, Family, and Fiction

Though frequently chaotic and morally ambiguous, postmodern fictions like *Mother*, *Frolic*, and *Wife* are not the completely immoral, self-centered fictions that conservative critics such as Gerald Graff, John Aldridge, and John Gardner have castigated in their criticisms of postmodern writing. Although the portraits of family commitment in the lives of the novels' characters are frequently negative, a closer look evinces the opportunity for a great deal of morally salutary discourse. As Hassan implies in his examination of postmodernism, postmodern fictions often play with the notion of order and disorder, allowing both to exist within the narrative space of the fiction. By first questioning the notion of order through the concepts of liberty and equality already

discussed, it is possible to further a more political reading of postmodern fiction and the moralities of familial obligation in the novels in question.

As outlined in the theory section of my dissertation, the notion of liberty carries two very different meanings. The first and more recently influential sense of the term liberty is its *negative* sense. Briefly restated, the negative sense of liberty refers to the individual's freedom from coercion. The importance of negative liberty in the family is revealed in the novels of Acker, Coover, and Gaddis through both their positive descriptions of negative liberty as well as their malevolent depictions of individuals who employ fundamentalist notions of a common, familial good to take advantage of individual family members.

Acker takes up the problem of the common good trumping the individual's rights in several different instances throughout *Mother*. The theme itself is set up in one of Acker's telling epigraphs:

After Hatuey, a fifteenth-century Indian insurrectionist, had been fixed to the stake, his Spanish captors extended him the choice of converting to Christianity and ascending to Heaven or going unrepentantly to Hell. Gathering that his executioners expected to go to Heaven, Hatuey chose the other. (*Mother* n.p.)

Here Acker effectively sketches the individual's refusal to conform. Hatuey finds himself in an impossible situation: conform and die only to live in eternity with the very sadistic captors who had him killed, or remain stalwart and hope for a better afterlife. More to the point, the situation is ironic in that Hatuey's captors use un-Christian methods in order to impose a Christian belief system. Similarly, at one time or another, each of the novel's female identities are confronted with what Rawls sees as the coercive

nature of traditional family values. Laure, for example, concedes, “[m]y parents, my educators, and my society had taught me I was powerless and needed either parents or a man to survive” (10), while George Bush’s daughter confesses, “I felt pleasure when Bush raped me. . . I want to know why I didn’t kill him” (169). Despite her father’s unforgivable treatment of her, she still feels something for him. In Acker’s reconstruction of *Wuthering Heights* Cathy exclaims, “[t]he inside of the family is a maze whose entrances and exits are lost to those caught in its entrails. The family is foul; garbage lies in its streets” (122). In other words, the family as a system is suffocating and inhibiting to the individual. Cathy sheds light on this realization when she claims that only marriage and family life make one normal to the rest of society. She admits:

I need to get married. Heathcliff and I don’t belong in the normal world, whose name is *society*—we don’t even know whether we’re male or female. And. But, unlike Heathcliff, I can pass for normal; I want the money and moral position that normalcy brings. . . I need to get married to get my certificate. (131)

Through Cathy, Acker argues that the lack of love in many families results from unrealistic societal conventions. As Bronte made clear, Cathy loves Heathcliff, but it is through Edgar that she gains social status and respect.

Even more serious for Acker is the emotional control that family exerts over individuals. Her section on George Bush as a child molester, for example, demonstrates how familial pressures are both emotionally and politically suggestive. Using his own daughter to exert patriarchal control over all women, Bush prays:

“What I wish most is that my dead daughter becomes pregnant.

“There will be no abortions.

“May her child look exactly like her so that every time she will look or peer at this brat—she has to look at her own brat—she will see every scratch every purple pulsating pimple every bit of rotting flesh every gorge and abyss in the skin every fester every cancer: may my daughter have borne life only so that every minute she will be confronted by every characteristic that she detests: herself.

“May my daughter go beyond death into the realm of self-hate. (174)

Acker’s vivid portraits of George Bush as the raping, incestuous father illustrate the ways that masculinity and power have become synonymous with pro-life movements. For Acker, the political movements preaching “**BAN ABORTION**” are interested in more than saving the lives of defenseless foetuses or keeping the family intact (38). For them, the issue is control over women’s bodies. Through systems of family values based in guilt and the defense of the family, political institutions impede a woman’s personal development by forcing her to bear and care for children. Throughout her novel, therefore, Acker champions individual liberty through typical male references, such as pirates who “dwell in freedom” (151), and motorcycles, which as symbols of the personal “pirate ship” (229) represent vehicles to “give [her] back the freedom” she has lost as a woman in a patriarchal world (221).

Wife similarly features criticisms of the repressive nature of traditional family values and boundaries through the characters of Mitch, Opal, and Duwayne. A despicable man, Mitch laments, “[i]t was a fucking shame the way families were falling apart these days,” while at the same time justifying adultery as long as it is outside the community’s boundaries. As the narrator informs us, “taking your trade out of town,

sowing wild oats in distant fields, keeping hair pie off the local menu,” are all acceptable examples of “family values, which he [Mitch] vigorously championed and rigorously (more or less rigorously) adhered to” (87). John’s mother, Opal, although considerably more polite than his father, seconds Mitch’s disappointment with “[t]hese children today,” who have “no rules, no boundaries at all” (114). Of more concern to the liberal reader are Opal’s views on sins of the father being passed to the son. The narrator tells us:

She sighed. . . and nodded politely at the young police officer who had tipped his hat at her, passing by on the park path. One of John’s school friends probably. Oh yes, the one whose father. . . A disturbed family, as was true of so many of the poor. One wondered if it was wise to make policemen out of them. (137)

Although concerned with Otis and his abusive past, Opal demonstrates how people often hold family histories against individuals without giving them the chance to prove themselves. More than that, Opal raises the notion that authority is the provenance of the rich—of those who maintain social structures.

Still, Coover’s most despicable characters are those who commit atrocities in the name of a higher good. Floyd, the town’s Sunday school teacher, is “an ignorant redneck with some familiarity with the Bible” (108) who had spent some time in prison “where he’d picked up his Bible knowledge and honed his cardplaying” (109). A serial killer armed with Christian teachings and a violent attitude, Floyd has traveled the country killing prostitutes, homosexuals, and atheists all in the name of the common good. Coover’s readers may be disgusted by Floyd’s actions, but it is Duwayne who represents

the true villain in *Wife* precisely because his transgressions (of a similar magnitude) are committed against family. Duwayne demonstrates knowledge of Christian ideology but only employs it in the sexual assault of his daughter Pauline—at least Floyd teaches Sunday school! Of Pauline’s memories of her sexual initiation Coover writes:

[W]hile for Pauline it was her Daddy Duwayne in his cidery jacket, unbuckling his old jeans and rumbling, “C’mere now, you little harlot, let’s see what we can do about knockin’ down that wicked ole wall of Jericho!” She was seven years old and thought that Cherry-Go might be an icecream flavor.(41)

Duwayne’s constant molestations permanently damage his daughter. She becomes a grossly overweight giant of a woman, literally consuming everything in her path in an attempt to fill the void left by the absence of personal liberty in her life. As Coover admits, “[w]hen it came to romance, that old true-love lottery, Pauline had drawn the short straw,” but incest is more than just bad luck for Pauline (36). Pauline’s treatment at the hands of her father makes her unable to love herself and, subsequently, unable to recognize love from others. Her inability to respond to Otis’s affection is a prime example.

Finally, it is during one of the countless argumentative episodes in *Wife* that readers learn the tenuous boundary between negative liberty and family obligation. In one of the novel’s many heated discourses, Veronica instigates a debate over the “abortion issue” (179). John, the host of the party, offers the popular liberal response when he suggests, “[o]f course anyone who wants an abortion should have one. Why not? Women can do whatever the hell they want with their bodies, who’s to tell them otherwise?” (179). Mitch, a conservative family man, strongly disagrees. “It’s not an

issue, it's a crime," Mitch responds, "[p]eople have to be responsible for their actions" (179). Of course, the observant reader may be the only party guest, with the exception of Veronica, privy to the irony of the situation – Mitch is the father of her aborted fetus and her abortion quite possibly saved Mitch's marriage. Although her abortion may have seemed like a failure to take responsibility for her actions, Veronica actually saves Mitch's family life by covering up his escapades. Through Veronica's actions and John's support, Coover is able to emphasize how an individual's claim for negative liberty does not always preclude a more positive sense of liberty and a commitment to, rather than against, the family dynamic.

Like Acker and Coover, Gaddis is mainly concerned with the oppressive nature of traditional notions of familial commitment. In his opinion on the Wayne Fickert case in *Frolic*, Judge Crease questions the issue of responsibility in the accidental drowning death of a boy taking part in a baptism ceremony. In attempting to decide whether the boy in question was able to accept responsibility in his own drowning, Crease opines:

Given the facts of a situation containing elements of duress, in other words of various pressures from family, friends and the community which a minor finds himself unable to resist, he has in effect been given a choice of evils by the defendant [as well as his family], and while his conduct may indicate his consent, the facts in the situation may persuade us otherwise. Consequently, the court here instructs the jury to find that the decedent will be found not to have assumed the risk, or to have relieved the defendant of the duty to protect him.

(375)

In the case at hand, an argument could be made that the boy readily entered into the baptism and, as such, took responsibility for his own actions; yet, according to Crease, the presence of negative liberty is questionable. Crease believes the boy in question was forced to accept the necessity of a baptism and, even though he was twelve years old and, according to all involved, excited about his new faith, he could not truly accept his own responsibility since the communities around him improperly pressured him.

In similar fashion, Gaddis examines the pressures of family through the characters of Harry and Oscar. Although both characters seem to possess negative liberty in their freedom to make their own decisions, Gaddis suggests that fatherly pressures have coerced them, preventing them from acting as free individuals. Both are the sons of pragmatic, successful fathers and both have felt the burdens of success their entire lives. Harry's father is a shrewd businessperson with questionable practices who does what he must to succeed. Oscar's father is a Federal Judge who teaches him there is a right way to do things, according to the laws of the land. Both fathers expect their sons to follow their advice and both sons disappoint their fathers with the results. In a serious criticism of the dangers of paternal pressures, Harry comforts Oscar on the Judge's death exclaiming:

—They're all fathers! Never got to see me graduate even then I felt like somehow I'd let him down, never saw me make partner and I felt like I could never make it up to him till I finally realized I could never be afraid of disappointing him again, only of disappointing myself I'd been freed! Free to win or lose, drop out and fail throw the whole thing over if I think it's what I should do right now, run for president or hang for murder you've been liberated!

hands on both shoulders bent over him now almost shaking him —you're free!

All those years of being on trial, of fear of disappointment and betrayal and
being judged he's dead Oscar! The Judge is dead! (428)

Harry certainly hopes that he and Oscar are now psychologically free from fatherly control, but Gaddis implies the psychological damage is too much for either to handle. Oscar comes to see justice as what is "right for him" while Harry develops a liberal justice to combat his father's pragmatism. Neither are able to find the middle ground. Oscar's inability to come to terms with his father's influence pushes him into reclusivity and a reversion to childhood. As for Harry, the psychological trauma of his inability to reconcile his father's justice with his own leads to his death, possibly from suicide. Christina reminds readers, "[i]t's simply what's right . . . that's what killed him" (462).

Even while Gaddis condemns those who abuse their negative freedoms, he still implies the necessity for negative liberty in family law. Among its dozens of legal suits, *Frolic* considers the right of a woman (Trish) to terminate her pregnancy. Despite the clear disdain that Gaddis demonstrates for the character in question (she is suing for the right to abort her foetus while simultaneously suing a hospital for foetal endangerment), he is painfully aware of the arguments against legislations on reproduction. As Christina explains in a crude but effective manner, "she came in for that amniosomething, centesis, that test they give pregnant women our age to make sure the baby won't be born with one leg or eight thumbs" (41). Trish may be a despicable character, but she is also an older woman and the possibility of her baby having birth defects needs to be considered. Furthermore, the fact that this danger is mentioned suggests Gaddis's support for abortion because a mother should have a choice whether or not to accept a baby with birth defects.

It is obvious that Gaddis finds certain negative liberties provide reasonable limitations to traditional notions of family commitment.

Positive Liberty, Family, and Fiction

With a penchant for localism and fragmentation, postmodern fiction disapproves of grand narrative approaches to individual obligation. *Mother*, *Frolic*, and *Wife* all appear overly concerned with liberty and personal autonomy as evidenced by both the stylistics and thematics of the novels. Acker, for example, through her narrative voice assumes different identities attempting to see beyond oppression and enforced identity.

Throughout his meticulous depositions and decisions, Gaddis demonstrates that one of the jobs of the legal system is to protect civil rights and individual agency. Finally, Coover's explicit portraits of child abuse demonstrate his concern with any philosophy that believes what happens in the home should stay in the home. Despite their focus on a negative interpretation of liberty as freedom from coercion, these novels do not deny the fact that positive liberty, or the freedom to fulfill one's potential with the help of found communities, is at work in the lives of their characters. Although their characters are often criticized for being greedy and individualistic, the authors still suggest the need for individuals to reach a potential, something that is not possible without the parts played by family and other social communities. Furthermore, these novels occasionally hint at moral obligations to these social connections.

Acker's vivid descriptions of masturbation, incest, and sexual intercourse may not accord with a communitarian rhetoric, but Acker is not necessarily anti-family. Acker's main concern is with those family situations in which a child does not feel the independence and strength of affection Tocqueville celebrates. For Acker, Laure is

unable to escape the memory of her baser instincts and connections. “The aim of this book,” Laure admits, “is only to relate the experience of freeing myself from a state of painful torpor. I am freeing myself and for a prouder attitude” (258). She admits not only that her previous sense of self (the one given to her by society) is one of inertia, but also that she begins her quest in an effort to achieve a meaningful sense of self. According to Acker, then, this individualized quest is made necessary by Laure’s family’s inability to aid in her quest for self-realization.

When asked whether he feels his novel *JR* is an indictment of family and of “social values and human relationships in general” (Abádi-Nagy 67), Gaddis responds:

It is insofar as it is very much about the absence of the family. We know nothing about his father. All that we know about his mother is that she’s a nurse, who keeps odd hours because of her work. He has no past, in other words, and so he’s obliged to invent himself, not in terms of a father, a mother and a family but in terms of what he sees around him. (67)

Unlike *JR*, *Frolic* gives readers plenty of information about parents and parent-offspring relationships. Still, many of the characters in *Frolic* also have to invent themselves. Although Harry and Christina seem happily married and Oscar and Christina seem amiable enough as stepsiblings, at no time in the novel do readers encounter a positive parental-offspring connection. In fact, the novel is filled with adult children with child-like inadequacies.

Oscar’s relationship with his father centers a novel haunted by failed family commitments. Although both Oscar and Judge Crease loom large in the novel, they never speak and Oscar’s inability to please his father constantly distresses him. It is clear

that the Judge means his childhood lessons to prepare Oscar for the outside world, but horrible memories of failing to meet his father's approval haunt Oscar's adult interactions. Oscar's legal suits are attempts to reconnect with Judge Crease and a more situated, familial existence, and they illustrate the lengths to which he will go in a bid for paternal respect. The final straw for Oscar comes when he learns that his father has written the appeal in his case merely out of respect for the law, not out of love for his son. Unable to cope with this final rejection, Oscar reverts to a childhood state, tickling Christina until she loses her breath.

Not one to be too cynical, Gaddis offers a solution worthy of a communitarian in Oscar's positive relationship with his grandfather. Judge Crease Sr. treats Oscar with respect and, at an early age, Oscar becomes fonder of his grandfather than of his father. Christina recalls:

Because he'd have died before he'd have taken a penny changing his grandfather's money from one suit to the other but now he'd watch his chance to go through the seat cushions in that big chair in the library where Father sat when he read his papers, I mean think about it. Because his grandfather was the first friend he ever had. (44)

By developing a feeling of mutual respect with his grandson, Thomas Crease creates a sense of positive liberty in Oscar and is perhaps the only encouraging influence on his formative years. Sure he lies to Oscar about his family legacy, but the myth he creates of a respectable life lived by rational justice is at least mildly helpful to Oscar. It is the caustic, purely pragmatic relationship Oscar has with his father that causes the controversy and psychological damage in the novel.

Early in *Wife* the narrator recalls a bandstand speech given by Maynard Sr., in which he speaks of “the town as their common mother, the town limits as their loving embrace” and compares “the crisscrossed grid of the streets to the quilting of a mattress” on which, he says, they are “all one big loving family” (15). Elsewhere in the novel, Barnaby reminiscences about how the town “[u]sed to be one big family” but now “[n]eighbours and strangers [are] the same thing” and “[l]ocks on all the doors” and “[b]urglar alarm systems” have become the norm (243). Although Maynard Sr.’s speech and the beginning few sections about love set up the importance of family in *Wife*, most of the actual families in the novel epitomize the disorganized structures that communitarians criticize. Characters divorce at the drop of a hat and the novel is packed with extra-marital affairs, murdered spouses, and abused children. Adults spend most of their time trying to further their own interests (both financial and sexual); consequently, the children in Coover’s novel have free reign in the town, spending all their time at the mall, experimenting with sex, and speeding about town in sports cars. Just as in *Frolic*, there are few positive interactions among children and parents in *Wife*. In fact, as evidenced by Mikey’s dumb shows at the Pioneers Day Barbeques, children in the novel are merely little adults. Mikey mimics everyone from Gordon, the perverted photographer, to Alf, the town’s gynaecologist. Although most of the adults take the gibes in good humour, it is only Kate the librarian who realizes that the parodies serve to “focus the attention in a way that everyday realities of existence cannot” (29). Since there are no positive characters to teach the kids how to be children, they spend their time emulating the suspect actions of the adults around them.

Despite these negative portraits, the driving force behind Coover's novel is still, as Kate recognizes, communal. Her ability to see the "collective effervescence"(172-3) of the town's gatherings and the traditions behind John's shopping malls, which she calls "simple communal gathering places for scattered populations the way the old farm towns were," demonstrate her abilities to see the trace of ritual, community, and tradition in the disorder of Coover's town (113). Though readers may feel all is lost for the children of the town, Kate's character reminds them that "it's scary for everybody to imagine getting turned into something entirely different from what we think we are, even if we don't much like what we are, just as it would frighten us to have the world we live in change its basic rules in incomprehensible ways all of a sudden" (224-5). In other words, just as it took so long for liberal individualist values to establish hegemony, it will take some time for Coover's kids to "tinker a bit with the details" of the narratives into which they were born (138). For Coover, and for Kate, vestiges of conservative philosophies remain alive and influential in the world despite the fact that many of the adult influences in the town seem to have forgotten their responsibilities.

Finally, Coover's Veronica is the most captivating character when considering the conflict between freedom and familial obligation. As mentioned earlier, Veronica is a pro-choice supporter. Despite her cogent arguments for the fact that abortion can help save families as well as the lives of young women, she is unable to escape her own decision to ask Alf, the town gynaecologist, for "that dreadful favor" (147). Veronica is confronted by her choice through dreams and visions. In these scenes, "all the guilt and pain . . . [comes] rushing back and [makes] her scream again: 'No! I didn't mean it!'" (241). In Shakespearean fashion, Veronica's guilt is piqued by a dumb show performed

at John's barbeque where John's son Mikey, dressed as a doctor, mock-delivers Veronica's other son Maynard. Unable to handle the sight of her son being reborn, Veronica breaks down. Mikey's dumb show sends her "out alone into the dark unfriendly night in search of her, well, her son, so to speak, her bad-penny Second John: slimy, hideous, mindless, but pathetic, too, utterly helpless, needing her, his only mom" (372). Obsessed with the safety of "Second John," Veronica searches the town catching glimpses of him at a bar where he takes on the persona of father Mitch, smoking a cigar and brandishing a firearm, saying "[y]ou're a real pal, Ma! Whaddaya say we sow a few wild oats here and teach these bums a lesson in family values?" (373). Ultimately, Veronica is unable to come to grips with the decision she has made, even though she has made it for apparently intelligent reasons. Although she has a rational expectation of negative liberty and a right not to carry an unwed child to term, she still feels the pull of connection to her child and to her obligation as a mother (both subject positions affecting her sense of freedom from restraint). Veronica's violent hallucinations of the aborted Second John only further the idea that she has somehow ignored her responsibilities in helping the child reach his potential. She feels both sorry for the child and mortified by what she has done.

Equality, Family, and Fiction

As I have previously demonstrated, Rawlsian liberalism is mainly concerned with individual rights within a well-ordered society. Rawls bases his theories on a universal rationality by which he believes every rational being, given the chance, would choose the same guidelines for a society. Although Rawls is concerned with the individual, he is still able to incorporate some socialist tendencies into his theories of equality. For Rawls,

individuals do not *deserve* to be born with those character traits society finds useful or useless and they do not *deserve* to be born into certain types of families; therefore, a well-ordered society must acknowledge some degree of redistribution in order to be just. Redistribution must be based on equality of results and not equality of opportunity. This redistribution Rawls labels the distributive principle and it is through smoothly functioning family commitment that each individual learns to be a part of a distributive society.

Acker's novels are difficult to reconcile with liberal rationality in any form. Acker's fiction is often tactile and blunt, of this world and not of some idealistic realm. Nevertheless, in an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, Acker confesses: "[i]f you scratch hard, you find that I'm a humanist in some weird way" (17). Acker has always been concerned with the matter of distributive justice in western societies, and her novels mirror Rawlsian redistributive theories in many ways. In *Mother*, Acker reveals her liberal concerns by criticizing class systems and inequalities in contemporary democracies. Acker's acerbic tone and biting condemnations point the way to more liberal conceptions of family and society. In terms of the family, Acker pays particular focus to the moral indoctrination of children into this class system with her narratives of Laure's home life. Recalling a childhood memory, Laure confesses:

I remembered how Mother calls her [the maid] "the girl" and talks about her in the third person even when Henrietta's in the same room. Whereas if I show the slightest disrespect to any of my parent's friends, I'm severely punished. I see that I'm being trained to want only the girls who come from the wealthiest

and most socially powerful families as my friends . . . The world outside me that's human seems to be formed by economics, hierarchy, and class.

I'm anything but free. . . Eight years old, I was no longer human. (12)

Acker is obviously concerned that the dissemination of anti-liberal ideals begins with the bourgeois family (a concern she shares with Rawls who believes that certain forms of the family perpetuate discrimination through such practices as nepotism and primogeniture). Furthermore, Acker's reconstruction of *Wuthering Heights* reveals how families can often be cruel to outsiders. With his father's death, Hindley banishes Heathcliff and forces him to "[remain] outside the family" (119). Finally, Acker is also aware that families can be detrimental to the civil rights of individuals, especially women. Female identities within Acker's novels are required to play certain roles within the family setting. Acker believes, with Rawls, that an important function of any family setting should be the "development of the intellectual skills required to regard things from a variety of points of view" (Rawls 410). This explains her use of multi-narration in most of her novels.

Similar to Rawls and Acker, Gaddis finds one of the culprits for social anomie to be a failed bourgeois family. As I have already explained, during the early stages of development, authority figures promote attitudes and feelings in a child that will make that child a functional member of a well-ordered, liberal society. In Gaddis's America, families have not lived up to their responsibilities. Oscar's father, for example, in attempting to teach him the ways of the world, is derelict in his duties to prepare him for a compassionate lifestyle. By not leading through example, Judge Crease forces his son into a selfish existence whereby his only concern becomes gaining the love and respect of

his father. Even Christina, the voice of compassion in Gaddis's novel, displays an ingrown elitism and lack of compassion for people she does not know. Echoing her stepfather, Christina believes, there are two types of people in the world, "one of them gives and one of them takes" (17). Although Christina often makes excuses for the rude and insensitive behaviour of her friends and family, urging others to "see their good side," she believes that both poor Southerners like the people of Tatamount and the rich Northerners like her friends and family deserve what they get (41).

Ultimately, with Rawls, Gaddis finds that commitment within the family develops a larger morality of association "in which the members of society view one another as equals" (413). Gaddis's assortment of individuals coming and going at the house on Long Island are initially selfish and uncaring. Although Gaddis is realistic about the connections they make, his novel does suggest that these characters do begin to consider the liberties of others. Christina, for example, begins to feel for her brother and gets more and more concerned about his legal trials. Where once she found his suits foolish and unnecessary, she gradually begins to get involved. She also comes to care for Oscar's girlfriend, Lily, who has had more bad luck than she can handle and gradually reveals herself as more than a money-grabbing opportunist. Finally, despite his intense self-centeredness, Oscar comes to realize the pain Christina has suffered over the loss of her husband and tries all he can to alleviate her worries. Certainly, Gaddis gives readers little positive commitment to go on, but he does show possibilities in the way characters begin to feel sympathy for and commitment to one another through a quasi-family system.

Adherence to the rational compassion of the difference principle is also glaringly absent from the world of *Wife*. Very few characters in Coover's novel are compassionate in Rawls's sense. Mitch, John's father, and one of the most conservative and least likeable characters in the novel, represents for Coover the overall lack of compassion for the townspeople as a group. The narrator tells us:

Mitch's personal ethic, which he shared with most in town, was that the world, the only one around, the one they all lived and competed in, was a business world where wealth was synonymous with virtue and poverty was either a case of genetic bad luck (which was what charity was for) or of criminal weakness of character (poorhouses and jails). (292)

Mitch obviously believes in the notion of equality of opportunity over equality of results. A social Darwinist he believes that fairness means fairness of opportunity and that in any competition, the strongest will survive. Unlike Rawls, who believes that individuals do not deserve their advantages and opportunities in any absolute sense, Mitch believes that bad breaks are a result of poor genetics, laziness, and/or criminality. Mitch is vocal about these ideas and becomes one of the novel's truly despicable characters.

A self-described compassionate man, Coover's John is much like his father in that he is too pragmatic to be compassionate. According to the narrator, John's "basic principle" is that "Caring too much for another is a bad investment" (411-12). For John,

Compassion, in effect, [is] what [is] left over when the game was easy: a generous party, a timely job or a business trip, a tax deductible gift. It [is] a bonus at Christmastime for his employees, even if he planned to fire them. A

visit to the bedside of a guy you'd hit, flowers for the wedding of a rejected lover. Sometimes just a thoughtful phonecall, or a slap on the butt. (100)

Unable to sense the true meaning of liberal compassion, John believes it to be ancillary to life and competition. Compassion, for John, does not involve equality at all and even his family is not immune from his pragmatics. Compassion for his father-in-law consists of "[t]hree rooms and a bath in a retirement community" (100) even though Barnaby helped him get his start in real estate and built most of the town John calls home.

Only John's wife displays any compassion for compassion's sake in Coover's novel. Described by Gordon as the "intrinsic indwelling truth of the town, its very suchness, so to speak" (8), and by Ellsworth as "the very paragon of compassion, grace, and civic virtue," John's wife represents idealistic virtues for everyone in the novel (412). She is a woman "loved by all no less than John [is] by all esteemed" (412). When Veronica suffers from visions of her aborted son, it is John's wife who "[tells] her something very important, so important Veronica [stops] crying" (241). When Gretchen attacks Lenny with her cane, John's wife magically appears to comfort him and hold "a cold compress to his forehead" (302). More important to my study of family, by way of tautology, John's wife is "John's wife." As such, she represents the strongest tie John has with any respect for compassion, commitment, or even tradition in its positive sense. She provides a familial grounding and source of compassion for John, keeping him from turning into his nihilistic frat brother Bruce. As compassionate as she may be, John's wife is frequently absent from the novel. She is a nameless, shapeless, "a thereness that was not there" (73). As a result, she is unable to promote any lasting feelings of compassion in her own family. Her daughter becomes an egotistical criminal (she steals

a car and smokes drugs), while her son becomes the hit of the town barbeques, imitating adults to the amusement of most and the embarrassment of his victims. Certainly John's wife has the opportunity and wherewithal to make change in her family and the community, but as Lorraine suggests of her frequent absences, "were John's wife here, things would be different, but they couldn't be different because this was the real world and this was how things were, so she couldn't be here" (299).

Shared Understandings, Complex Equality, Family, and Fiction

As I mentioned earlier, equality for communitarians is both *conditioned* and *bounded*. It is conditioned, not on the equality of every individual in the liberal sense, but on the shared understandings of the found communities such as family, tribe, and town. These understandings have their basis in traditions that Taylor and others properly demonstrate have taken centuries to develop. Equality is bounded in the sense that most communitarians practice a "complex" form of equality as outlined by Walzer. In its complex sense, equality differs within each sphere of existence. Walzer shrewdly furthers a theoretical form of equality that does not allow an individual to use advantages gained in one sphere (economics) in a second sphere (politics). What these characteristics mean for the family is that equality within the family is separate from that of society and founded on love rather than justice (a model that Sandel suggests might serve society as well).

At a first glance, the communitarian ideals expressed in the novels of Coover, Acker, and Gaddis seem to be tongue in cheek. Coover's description of Otis, the town sheriff, loyal guardian, and "battling bulwark" of high school football days, for example, resonates with down home tradition and backwoods conservatism (24). Otis is a man of

“the community” (9) and he sees this community as “a closed system, no less fixed by custom and routine than by its boundaries on the map” (9). Otis, like Barnaby and others in the town, believes in the tradition of Walzer’s “shared understandings” and the closed system of complex equality. On the other hand, despite its rampant individualism and backwoods traditionalism, Coover’s novel acknowledges positive tradition, both communal and familial. Constructed around ritualistic events such as community barbeques and weddings, *Wife* represents the civic religion of small town America. Consequently, Coover makes a connection with the communitarian ideal of communal and familial love through characters such as Otis. Like the commercial movies that Kate enjoys because they “reset the basic patterns,” Otis keeps the order in a town perpetually teetering on the edge of chaos (224). Moreover, Otis symbolizes that part of the town tied to loyalty and love (242). Although he has loved John’s wife since she taught him to dance at a high school party, out of a sense of loyalty to John, the town, and traditional family values in general, he has kept this love a secret. He feels morally obligated to honour those forces that have helped him reach his potential as an individual.

From the outset, Acker’s protagonist feels oppressed by the traditions of her found communities of family, religion, culture, city, and country. Describing the liberal bourgeois family, Laure writes, “[m]y mother wanted to command me to the point that I no longer existed. My father was so gentle, he didn’t exist. I remained uneducated or wild because I was imprisoned by my mother and had no father” (10). For Acker, family merely functions to create the right type of citizen for a certain type of society. Armed with the belief that “[m]orality and moral judgments protect us only from fear” (7), therefore, Laure embarks, as “an orphan” (9), on a quest “to cast off [her] past” (14) and

to destroy “everything including [herself]” (10). In novels like *Pussy: King of the Pirates*²⁶ and *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula: Some Lives of Murderesses*,²⁷ Acker investigates the shared traditions of witches and pirates as she explores new narratives beyond those of the found variety. Like the main identities in these novels, Laure is able to realize the true freedom and liberty by stepping outside of common cultural narratives. Faced with the strength of societal norms, however, Laure is frequently marred by her attempts to denigrate the value of family, love, and shared understandings. As her quest to free herself from the chains of tradition nears a close, she admits to B, “[d]ay by day, my life is becoming a little more empty, breaking apart like a corpse decomposing herself under my own eyes” (258-9). Obviously critical of liberal tradition and family, Acker cannot but recognize the necessary role each plays in the identity quests of her protagonists. For Acker, self-determination comes at the expense of connections.

In Gaddis’s novel, Christina represents the positive image of family commitment, bounded from society and based on love. As do most of Gaddis’s characters, Christina has her questionable characteristics. She is a classist, a regionalist, and a racist. Her xenophobia is rooted in her belief in family values and the family as a haven of love and respect to be protected at all costs. Not a rational individual in the Rawlsian sense, Christina does not believe that “what is right” can involve going against family commitment. When discussing Harry’s law firm’s case against Oscar, Christina asks, “what about us Harry, a conspiracy against the public my God we’re your family! Protecting yourself, protecting your friend Sam, protecting Swyne & Dour and your

²⁶ Kathy Acker. *Pussy: King of the Pirates*. New York: Grove, 1996.

²⁷ Kathy Acker. *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*. New York: Vanishing Rotating Triangle P, 1975. Hereafter shortened to *Tarantula*.

whole ridiculous self regulating white shoe conspiracy against your own family” (279). Christina seems to believe that respect for tradition and family should override both career and societal obligations.

More than advocating the boundary between public and private, society and the family, Christina (like John’s wife) represents familial love. Through Christina, Gaddis points to a more natural notion of family commitment. Often associated with calmness and “serenity” in the novel, Christina demonstrates a natural ethic of love and care for Oscar, Harry, and Lily (371). She often cooks for the other three and shows empathy for their troubles, with little or no concern for her own (she does, after all, lose a husband and a step-father as well as suffer at the hands of her two selfish sisters-in-law). Christina’s representation of a more serene view of family results from her realization that she lives in a chaotic environment. She worries because Harry is over-worked and her concern for Oscar is clearly shown when she echoes a distressed mother’s words, “[y]ou can’t wait for them to learn to walk, the minute they learn there’s not a minute’s peace” (301). Despite her early distrust of Oscar’s girlfriend (as an outsider), Christina grows to worry about Lily, offering to pay for surgery to rectify botched breast implants. Finally, Christina believes family members owe each other something and should respect each other’s wishes. When her stepfather dies, for example, she opines:

It’s a simple estate it’s a perfectly simple will, we’re the joint beneficiaries we always took that for granted didn’t we? And I mean you of all people, the way you’ve felt about Father talking about him standing by you and all the rest of it shouldn’t you be the very first one to respect his wishes? let him go like he wanted to instead of some Viking funeral and God knows what else? (410)

Despite her stepfather's poor treatment of Oscar, Christina attempts to keep the natural order of family commitment by advising Oscar not to turn his father's funeral into a public spectacle. Christina's concern, though admirable, is infrequently mirrored in Gaddis's chaotic novel.

Fiction and the Politics of Family

As I have demonstrated through my initial discussions of Acker, Coover, and Gaddis, the three novelists, in varying degrees, analyze the tension between liberal and communitarian concepts of liberty and equality as they pertain to the family. All three make viable cases for contradictory philosophies, at times denigrating the stifling qualities of family commitment while elsewhere insisting on the inability of the individual to escape found communities like the family. With the anti-essentialist, post-Marxist, and poststructuralist theories of Laclau and Mouffe in mind, however, one can make a case for the logics of equality and liberty at play simultaneously in *Mother*, *Frolic*, and *Wife*. It is my thesis that Acker, Gaddis, and Coover, rather than concentrating on the extremes of either liberal or communitarian theories, are aware of the presence of tenuous boundaries separating the two, leading to a more political interpretation of identity based loosely on citizenship as an articulatory principle for social commitment.

My study joins those of Jerry Varsava (*Contingent Meanings*), Jay Clayton (*The Pleasures of Babel*), Nicola Pitchford (*Tactical Readings*) as well as Ricardo Miguel Alfonso's collection (*Powerless Fictions?*) in attempting to find positive ethical constructs in postmodern fiction so often commended for aesthetics above statement. Along the lines of Laclau and Mouffe, *Mother*, *Frolic*, and *Wife* interrogate notions of

family commitment through the dislocation of the subject and its re-articulation through a discursive interaction with other subjects and traditions. As I will demonstrate in the next three chapters of my study, the postmodern offerings of Acker, Gaddis, and Coover, suggest alternative ways of looking at the family crisis issue. More than simply aesthetic portraits, each writer employs uncertain ontological and epistemological patterns in order to offer alternative moral possibilities for individual agency and family commitment. All three writers, in one way or another, interrogate rationalist notions of identity (both individual and collective) allowing readers to see the problems inherent in traditional theories of commitment.

In my examination of *Mother*, I analyze Acker's use of extensive intertextuality and memories/dreams in order to offer a flexible image of identity and commitment and a porous boundary between the present and the past. Acker's portraits of the many limitations of liberty lead her to employ a multitude of narrative voices in order to express the dislocation of the subject before rendering the possibility of partially sutured points of meaning. Rather than a completed experience in the past, childhood, for Acker, is accessible as a constant terrain for articulations of the self and re-examination of commitment. By returning to childhood, Acker's Laure hopes to re-imagine identity. Although sometimes violently crass, Laure sees beyond traditional rationalism and is able to make social and familial connection despite the limitations of her society. Like Acker, Gaddis makes use of considerable referencing to history, tradition, literature, and culture in an effort to forward the importance of the past in determining the present. For both writers, it is important to acknowledge the absence of any point outside of tradition from which to create an ideal of commitment. Yet, like Acker, Gaddis also has difficulty with

the limitations on the individual by over zealous interpretations of the past. Consequently, he employs a great deal of ironic allusion in order keep parochial interpretations of tradition in check. In my examination of *Frolic*, I look at how Gaddis implies an articulated notion of identity by employing an antagonistic concept of the social. Gaddis's characters often re-articulate their identities by periodically filling empty signifiers like "wife," "father," and "mother." As such, Gaddis forwards a temporary, more democratic conception of family commitment through the partial fixation of individual identities and the combined articulation of temporarily sutured subjects. Finally, I look at Robert Coover's political portrait of family as offered in *Wife*. Cognizant of a world in flux, Coover, forwards a discursive concept of commitment typified by his examination of intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships involving the self, the family, and the community at large. By exploring the tenuous ontological and epistemological boundaries in Coover's novel, I demonstrate how Coover points the way to temporary and partial articulations of family based in love and commitment. Like Acker and Gaddis, Coover's exploration of family commitment begins with a dislocation of the subject and ends with the political articulation of familial roles and groupings.

Chapter Two: Redoing Childhood in Kathy Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*

Kathy Acker's novels may not be the best place to look for portraits of the tension between individual agency and family commitment. In the tradition of outlaw writers like Burroughs, Jean Genet, and Bataille,²⁸ Acker certainly speaks to the importance of individual freedom. She peoples novels such as *Blood and Guts in High School*,²⁹ *Don Quixote*,³⁰ and *Great Expectations*,³¹ with ethically dubious and self-destructive characters, such as sadomasochists, nymphomaniacs, drug dealers, pirates, and prostitutes, who take every personal liberty imaginable. Unfortunately, these characters are frequently unconnected to family and when they do speak of such connections it is with disapproval and disgust. For Acker, family is a part of a larger programme of socialization in the form of social institutions (church, state, and family) and social determinisms (gender and class) that thwart individual desire. Yet, a consideration of her later fiction, in particular *Mother*, demonstrates that although a call for liberty from socialization is still a major part of Acker's work, she recognizes the place of social commitments like the family in the individual's make-up. Through a combination of intertextuality and memories/dreams, Acker's *Mother* forwards a more flexible and discursive vision of identity, allowing for provisional and partial instances of commitment. *Mother* explores the possibility of getting beyond rational epistemologies through the irrational notion of re-dreaming in order to re-articulate identity and commitment. Although she attempts to do so through secondary texts, it is ultimately

²⁸ Acker situates herself within the lineage of these writers although she doesn't consider the tradition avant-garde as some critics do. According to Acker, the similarities between the aforementioned writers and her are a concern with "areas of the mind which are not rational" (McCaffery, "An Interview with Kathy Acker" 20).

²⁹ Kathy Acker. *Blood and Guts in High School*. New York: Grove, 1978. Hereafter shortened to *Blood*.

³⁰ Kathy Acker. *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream*. New York: Grove, 1986. Hereafter shortened to *Quixote*.

³¹ Kathy Acker. *Great Expectations*. New York: Grove P, 1983. Hereafter shortened to *Great*.

through dreams that Acker's protagonist is able to reinvent herself and get beyond the essentialist indoctrination of her childhood.

Part One: Acker's Fiction

Acker's novels are unsettling, visceral, and pornographic—not for the faint of heart. Her writing is immediate, her diction crass, and her description blunt and it is not a surprise that the popular reception of Acker's work since the 1970s has been decidedly negative. Acker has been the “whipping girl” of both feminist groups and “morality police” from Berlin to London to New York. As Martina Sciolino states of Acker's work, “her ‘plots’ lead through recognitions that many of us desire to avoid” (253). Reviews of Acker's fiction frequently point to its graphic sexual content and to Acker's penchant for the intimate details of her characters' bodily functions. All of this might be excusable if Acker's work had any discernible ethical implications. Like that of most postmodernists, her work is localized, not universalized, what reviewers like Anne Haverty call a “self-indulgent . . . tedious . . . dumping-ground for its author's many random musings and aphorisms” (554). Michiko Kakutani's review of Acker's oeuvre echoes these sentiments: “The language is nervous and skewed; the authorial stance, adversarial and abrasive; the worldview, cynical verging on the nihilistic” (qtd. in Lyman D20).³² Void of any universalized message, Acker's novels are anti-mimetic (in the classic sense of Plato and Aristotle) and do not appear to offer her readers any advice regarding coping with real world difficulties.

³² Acker admits she is “not working from a moralistic or ideological tradition” (Friedman, “A Conversation with Kathy Acker”).

In addition to its linguistic and thematic issues, Acker's fiction has also been criticized for its innovative stylistics (what some would call "postmodern," others "adolescent") and structural techniques. In fact, the bulk of the criticism of Acker's novels points to this radical textuality. Readers of Acker's work do not have an easy task; even Acker herself admits to not understanding why "anyone" would read her fiction, labelling it "the most unreadable stuff" (McCaffery, "An Interview with Kathy Acker" 26). According to Robert Lort, although *Blood* was initially "banned in Germany on the basis that it was considered harmful to minors. . . [because of the] incestual and sado-masochistic elements of the novel," the court's decision was based on other factors ("In Memoriam to Kathy Acker: A Deleuze and Guattarian Approach"). Lort goes on to explain:

[W]hat seemed to equally frustrate and disconcert the censors to the point of shock was the novel's supposed inability to make sense; the incorrect grammar, the drawings, the typography, the fragments in Persian, the indiscernibility between dream and reality and the overall incoherence of the narrative. ("In Memoriam to Kathy Acker: A Deleuze and Guattarian Approach")

In *Blood*, as well as in many of her other works, Acker also employs varying degrees of pastiche, frequently juxtaposing dream sequences, political speeches, childhood memories, letters, journals, and pictures with myths, legends, and literary references. Although such textual collage and innovation leads to positive comparisons with successful conceptual artists like Robert Rauschenberg, whose art opens the door for his viewer "to create an experience," in Acker's case it results in controversy more often than not (Everman, "ABAB: Acker, Bataille, Argento, Bronte"). More so than the

structural oddities of Acker's fiction, the narrative voice of her texts is the main source of reader confusion. As Martina Sciolino admits, "[a] single protagonist allows an author to develop narrative unity through point-of-view, but Acker never uses this organizational device" (257). Acker's protagonists resemble many postmodern characters in that little is really known about them; they "exchange identities with the ease of snakes shedding their skins" (qtd. in Lyman D20). In novels like *Expectations*, for example, Acker makes use of multiple narrative voices and protagonists pilfered from texts such as *Story of O*, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and, of course, Dickens's *Great Expectations*. The novel introduces Peter as the apparent protagonist. In the next paragraph, the narrative turns to the memories of a young female who has lost her mother before returning to Peter and an epistolary exchange with a girl named Rosa. The second part of the novel is focused first on Sarah, and then on a conversation involving Sarah and Clifford, before the names are removed and readers cannot tell who is speaking anymore. The narrative changes in gender and person lead to a schizophrenic effect in which readers cannot identify with any one character since identity itself is in a constant state of flux.

A further criticism of Acker's work focuses primarily on her plagiarisms and borrowings.³³ The traditional reader of Acker's novels finds guiltless piracy of canonical texts such as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and Cervantes's *Don Quixote* among many others and questions the presence of any real "individual talent," to use T.S. Eliot's phrase ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 761). Acker's *Don Quixote*, for example, is a woman who has just had an abortion and is now

³³ Acker underwent intense public scrutiny for her borrowing of material from Harold Robbins's *The Pirate* for one of her novels and was forced to make a public apology.

in search of “possessionless love,” beyond the social codes of capitalistic society (*Quixote* 24). The possibility presents itself for Acker to appropriate the language of one of the preeminent texts of courtly love for a feminist audience; conversely, as she freely admits in an interview with Ellen Friedman, her intentions are less noble. “I had the actual copy of *Don Quixote*,” says Acker, “and as a kind of joke, simply made the change from male to female to see what would happen” (“A Conversation with Kathy Acker”).³⁴ Rather than pay homage to the literary tradition of her predecessors, or employ them to engage conflicting moral viewpoints, Acker appears to show little respect for cultural masterpieces, defacing her reference texts and committing what Sciolino calls “purposeful plagiarism” (249).³⁵ More often than not, Acker’s treatment of her references follows this illicit trend.

One expects such criticisms from popular readers unfamiliar with postmodern paradigms or anti-paradigms; yet, one would expect the reception of Acker’s work within the academy to be more sympathetic. After all, morally suspect material, collage, and narrative innovation have been mainstays of the modern and postmodern literary scenes for much of the twentieth century. Writers as diverse as James Joyce, Barthelme, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. have all experimented with the novel and its formulae and all have gained acceptance within the hallowed halls of academia. Although Acker is beginning to gain respect in academic forums, contemporary academic critics have been, and continue to be, more ruthless in their criticism of her work than that of her male postmodern counterparts. Marc Chénétier adopts a fiercely negative position on Acker’s

³⁴ Acker confesses that she was actually reading *Don Quixote* while waiting for an abortion at a New York clinic.

³⁵ Sciolino explains that “purposeful plagiarism. . . exploits the distance between the author’s signature and the work” and “does not acknowledge debt” (249).

work in his celebrated *Beyond Suspicion: New American Fiction Since 1960*, the most extensive overview of contemporary American fiction to date. Chénétier notes:

[I]t is my contention that Kathy Acker (*Don Quixote*, *Great Expectations*) does not deliver on the promises of her shameless appropriations of the great novelistic myths any more fully than on those of the provocative and slipshod program of her “punk” fictions. . . . Both gratuitously aggressive and ferociously mythological, Kathy Acker’s novels are fashionable, modish attacks; they are equivalent to what, in his time, Tom Wolfe might have christened “mau-mauing” or “radical chic.” To hound the mythical past in so unrelenting and unconvincing a manner is to declare oneself a “punk” indeed: No Future. Literary, that is. (161)

Even those critics confident of Acker’s abilities as a novelist feel her fiction frequently falls short of any effective transmission of message. Tom Leclair, fellow novelist and critically acknowledged champion of the encyclopedic and erudite writers like Gaddis, Joseph Heller, and Thomas Pynchon, denounces Acker’s efforts, describing *Quixote* as “much too frequently composed of banal language, the stilted and formulaic high-school passion I thought Ms. Acker had disposed of in ‘Blood and Guts’[sic]” (“The Lord of La Mancha and Her Abortion” 10). Leclair states that Acker is unable to “separate trash compactor from the trash” and, perhaps because of his penchant for the maximalists of his day, claims she “does not manage with a craft equal to her cultural range” (10).

In her later years, a realization of the political possibilities of language has turned Acker’s writing in a new direction—a direction that I would argue opens up a more

positive agenda in Acker's work in terms of the tension between liberty and commitment.

In her interview with Rickels, Acker describes her new, post-*Quixote*, philosophy:

For me, deconstruction was used up as a writing technique. That was the first time in my life that I started looking at narrative—that [*Blood*] came together as a narrative really amused me. I've never been interested in creating *anything*. I turned to narrative when there was nothing else to turn to; there had to be something more than taking apart constructions. I was coming out of a funny kind of nihilism.(62)

Acker's emergence from nihilism is evident in recent novels such as *Empire of the Senseless*³⁶ and *Mother*.³⁷ These novels are all conceived with some reminiscence of possibility, some hope for the future. In these novels, Acker turns to myth as a possible point of subversion in a patriarchal world. *Empire*, for example, follows an exact three-part structure in which Acker first imagines a world "defined by the Oedipal taboo" and then tries to describe a society that is defined by any other myth. To accomplish this, she turns to writers like Jean Genet and Pierre Guyotat as sources ("A Few Notes on Two of My Books" 35). Granted, by the final section of the novel Acker comes to the realization that "it is impossible to have, to live in a hypothetical, not utopian but perhaps freer, society if one does not actually inhabit such a world" (35). Despite her failure, Acker does find "hints of possibility" in *Empire* and continues to do so in her novels to come (36).

³⁶ Kathy Acker. *Empire of the Senseless*. New York: Grove P, 1988. Hereafter shortened to *Empire*.

³⁷ The criticism of Acker tends towards these divisions in her work, but there are exceptions. In his "Quest for Love and the Writing of Female Desire in Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote*," Richard Walsh notes of *Quixote*, "[Acker's] persistence contradicts the apparent nihilism of her findings," insinuating that Acker's search for a positive agenda begins before *Empire* (149).

It is in *Mother* that Acker makes her most successful argument for individual liberty without denying either the possibility or the necessity of social and/or family commitment. Like most of Acker's novels, *Mother* is structurally confusing, refusing to follow what Acker, in an interview with Lotringer, labels a "bourgeois story-line" (23). The novel is broken into two large sections—*Into That Belly of Hell Whose Name Is the United States* and *Out (In the Form of Healing)*—and smaller subsections which baffle readers, regularly changing topics and setting brief divisions against brilliant, multi-page rants. The novel is composed of disparate scenes or "tableaux" in which groups of characters play out scenarios, often without any apparent connection to the other scenes of the novel. Each section loosely follows distinctive themes and the novel demonstrates Acker's frequent concern with the broader themes of politics, education, childhood, and family. In my exegesis of *Mother*, however, I focus primarily on the secondary texts in Acker's novel. Through the "parental" influence of the collective mission of Peignot and Bataille, as well as many other references, Acker furthers an impermanent, constructivist notion of identity. With the failure of the new narrative myths of *Empire*, Acker then turns to non-rational worlds beyond language, in particular the world of dreams, suggesting the possibility of salvaging social commitment by de-territorializing childhood. Acker's idea of a discursive, as opposed to a periodized, childhood is responsive to the possibility of a social formation in which "we can all talk to each other" as individuals and are not simply "separate from [a] community" (Bratton, "A Conversation with Kathy Acker"). It is somewhere between personal agency and social commitment, therefore, that Acker's agenda for family in a postmodern world can be found.

Part Two: The Limitations of Liberty

Of particular interest to my study is the way Acker attempts to articulate a new formula of identity and commitment despite the older, restrictive social institutions of church, state, and nuclear family, as well as their base determinants of class and gender.

Together these institutions and determinants prevent the liberation of the individual.

Although they often operate under cover of a liberal democracy and claim to have both the individual's and society's better good in mind, these phenomena gradually suppress natural inclinations and emotions, directing "individual and group thought. . . action . . . values and goals in Western society" (Friedman, "'Now Eat Your Mind': An Introduction to the Works of Kathy Acker" 40).

From the beginning, readers are aware that Acker is concerned with religion as a controlling, ostensibly absolutist influence in a bourgeois society. Some of the most explicit passages of her protagonist's childhood, as well as some of the passages of the other references, point to religion as one of the strongest, most horrifying myths in the novel. I quote a lengthy passage from Acker's first chapter to demonstrate the fear and repression religion promotes:

Religion:

Days and nights all there was was a sordid and fearful childhood. Morality wore the habit of religion. Mortal sin or the Saint of Sunday and the Ashes of Wednesday kept on judging me. Thus condemnation and repression crushed me even before I was born. Childhood was stolen from children.

Never enough can be said, muttered and snarled, when one has been born into anger. THEIR criminal hands took hold of my fate. HER umbilical cord strangled me dropping me out of her. All I desired was everything.

Listen to the children. All children come red out of the womb because their mothers know God.

The night's replete with their cries: unceasing flagellated howls that are broken by the sound of a window slammed shut. Harsh and drooling screams die inside lips that are muzzled. We who're about to be suffocated throw our murmurs and screeches, our names, into a hole; that hole is everywhere. They laugh waterfalls of scorn down on us. If any speech comes out of us, it appears as nonsense; when adults answered me, I puked. My few cries, like dead leaves tumbled by winds, climbed out of my body and vaporized. (8-9)

Equating religion with the only morality, Acker demonstrates how a child can be “suffocated” and taught to repress desire at an early age (9). In attempts to force children to commit to God and religion, religious representatives “*laugh waterfalls of scorn*” (9) down on them and scare them with the dangers of “[m]ortal sin” and the spectres of a vengeful God (9). Although she offers no elaborate discussion of her relationship with religious figures, Laure does occasionally mention her mother’s priest and the fact that her mother reveres him. Laure comes to recognize the hypocrisy of a religion that claims to protect children from evil, yet in reality is merely “*a screen behind which the religious shields [him/herself] from suffering, death, and life*” (17). Rather than seek its protection from the realities of natural inclination, Laure vows to “no longer care about religion” (3). “[N]o religion” she avers, “is my stability and surety” (13). In response to her

tormented childhood, Laure finds comfort in the belief that “*curiosity has to be more powerful than fear*” (11).

Acker’s concern with the domineering powers of the church is paralleled by her concern with its secular counterpart—the state. In a section of the fifth chapter entitled “On the Relationship Between State and Religion,” the two are brought together. Initially, Laure appears to be concerned with the power of church over state. Described as “[t]he head of this monastery” with a daily habit of discussing “the affairs of the state, privately, with an emissary from the Pope,” George Bush, Sr. complains that he is required to give the Vatican “a one-third cut of everything that pass[es] through [his] hands” (159). Later in the section, however, it is evident that Laure fears the state (with Bush as figurehead) as much as the church. In his effort to ensure that the Pope “doesn’t own everything in this country,” Bush confronts the Pope’s Cardinal, demonstrating his hegemonic control (159). When asked about his abuse of his daughter, Bush threatens, “[t]he monk who last took my daughter’s name in vain disappeared” (160). Refusing to obey the Vatican’s rules, Bush acknowledges his advantage over the Pope who must answer to a higher power. As a secular leader, Bush “simply wants what he wants and does what he must do in order to get it” (160).

Just as it limits the liberty of individuals, the state also creates new foci for its citizens. Acker’s first chapter ends with Laure’s description of the political machine of the present American landscape. Acker writes:

So now there’s going to be a war! Hey! Finally something exciting’s going to happen! The United States’s coming back to life! The government of the United States is realizing that someone’s angry about something or other and’s

descending to offer its people a target for their bilious bitterness. O emotionless sentimental and sedentary people, because your government's a democracy and responsible to you, it is giving you a whole race to detest, a nation on which to spit, a religion to damn, everything you've ever wanted. You're incontestably superior to men who wear dresses. (17-18)

Acker, like Mouffe, is aware that citizens have their desires shaped for them when countries construct a "constitutive outside" or a nationalist "we/them relation" (*Return 2*). Rhetoric of this nature aids in collective identity construction by telling citizens what they are, based on what they are not—the "other." The constructed relation also determines commitment. As a part of the "us" side, citizens owe allegiance to the state and desire the destruction of its enemy, the way parishioners owe allegiance to the Church against the powers of Satan.

Finally, and most importantly for my study, the family plays a leading role in stifling natural desires by determining individual allegiances. In *Mother*, the concept of family commitment is tied directly to those of political and religious commitment. In one sense, family serves as a metaphor for social obligation in the public realm. Like Sandel, Taylor, and communitarians of their sort, Acker acknowledges the power that "family commitment" can have in social rhetoric. For Acker, though, this power is destructive and limiting. According to Peter Wollen, Acker's "[s]ociety is a macro-family of powerful rulers and powerless subjects, terrorising and terrorised, driving and driven mad - an extreme projection of the psychotic family, and its values, across the whole landscape of inter-personal relations" ("Don't be afraid to copy it out"). When family is employed as an organizing trope for bourgeois society, the liberties of individuals are

often ignored. It is no accident, for example, that Acker's George Bush, Sr. battles the Pope, or Holy Father, for "parental" control over the "household" of Acker's society (159).

In addition to seeing family as a metaphor for social relations, Wollen admits that, in Acker's novels, "the origin of the heroine's sexual confusion and bitterness is always to be found in the nuclear family" ("Don't be afraid to copy it out"). Acker's Laure is particularly critical of the bourgeois family construct. She is distrustful of traditional concepts of family commitment like those possessed by both communitarians and liberals because they are part of the "phallic myth" that has controlled society since the industrial age and the beginning of the nuclear family. As social myths, both the liberal and communitarian concepts of family require an external limitation on the self since the nuclear family is often the first line of socialization between individuals and the more powerful unions of church and state.

Mother's questionable kinships attack traditional family ties through portraits of excessive parental control and child abuse, be it physical, sexual, or emotional. In Acker's novels, mothers and fathers manage their children by forcing them to conform to accepted social mores for their own good and for the common good of society. What *Mother* criticizes most is the irony of parents acting on natural desires in order to force children to ignore the same desires. In his new political role, for example, Bush demonstrates his political prowess and the importance of social conformity by raping his daughter and besmirching her reputation. He decrees that there will be no abortion in order that his daughter must face the shame of her actions indefinitely. He excuses his actions by laying blame on the "physical world" (173) of the flesh and the "underworld"

of “fantasies dreams desire sexuality” (174)—the very world he wishes to suppress in his daughter, and by extension, the American public.

In addition to the parental abuse rampant in Acker’s novel, the mores of Laure’s society frequently include a circular insistence upon marriage as the only way out of familial abuse. In *Mother*’s first chapter, Laure spends much of her time describing her mother’s controlling nature and her own attempts to “escape her” (9). Yet, Laure finds that within the confines of a bourgeois society, “she need[s] a man” in order to do so (10). “I [can’t] escape my family,” she confesses, “because I still didn’t know a man who [will] help me” (13). Through her mother’s influence, Laure learns that a woman’s main aspiration in life should be the “possibility of a rich or ‘decent’ marriage” (206). Similarly, in the fourth chapter, Laure explores the societal insistence on marriage by turning to what proves to be the most influential of the novel’s “family texts,”

Wuthering Heights. Encountering the appropriated sections of Bronte’s novel, Laure follows Cathy and Heathcliff and the pressures they feel to ignore their natural desires. With her brother Hindley serving as her paternal figure, Cathy understands she has limited choices. She can remain an outcast at the margins (on the moors with stepbrother Heathcliff) or return to the “foul” family (society) and become “lost in its entrails” (122). Despite her eternal love for Heathcliff, Cathy confesses that she has agreed to marry Edgar for the simple reason that she and Heathcliff are “freaks,” and “marriage in this society render[s] anything acceptable” (132). Since Heathcliff is not a rich man, Cathy must “entertain society” and marry a man she does not love (140).

Below the superstructural social institutions of Acker’s *Mother*, baser oppressive forces are also at work. As a Marxist-feminist, Acker has always been interested in the

powers of gender and class to act as limitations on desire, or what Laclau and Mouffe call “structural positions” within the larger confines of “social, cultural, political and economic systems” (Smith 59). Although the social institutions of church, state, and family may control individual agency, gender and class determine the degree of hegemony an individual might wield within each institution. Furthermore, as restrictions, gender and class are seemingly impossible to alter, offering little chance for individuals to get beyond their situations of birth.³⁸

Class is particularly visible as a limitation within the public world. Money talks in the New York of Laure’s childhood and throughout many of *Mother’s* scenes and textual appropriations. As an adolescent, Laure attends a high-class finishing school where “even the teachers had to be able to afford to teach” (183) and no one “ever mentioned pain” (33). Here Laure is told to imitate the “filthy rich” (183) girls and is sent to “speech class” in order to mask a “low class” Brooklyn accent (196). The purpose of these alterations is, of course, to marry into money. Cathy and Heathcliff must also deal with the privilege of the upper classes. According to Cathy, it is only “by means of marriage to a rich person” like Edgar that she and Heathcliff will be acknowledged “as normal” (132). Without money and stature, the two are social pariahs. Elsewhere in the novel, Beatrice’s story about New York identifies the de facto reality that lower class status begets lower class treatment. Of the lower class neighbourhoods, Beatrice explains:

The poorer each neighborhood, the more garbage, like shit, piles up in that neighborhood. The poorer the neighborhood, the less frequently garbage

³⁸ Of course, recent texts such as Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* and *Gender Trouble* problematize gender’s essentiality, but as I demonstrate later in this chapter, Acker is aware of the possibilities raised by essentialist readings of gender.

collectors, considered half-homeless, visit that neighborhood. Cops never visit those who are poor, unless they're dead. (89)

On the other side of the coin, characters like Laure's mother, George Bush, Sr., and the Mayor of New York do not fear punishment for atrocities they may commit because they have class privilege. Laure's mother steals food, not because she is a criminal, but because it doesn't "occur to her that she might have to pay" (9). Bush uses economic and political position to his advantage since, as he tells the Cardinal, "The free market rules religion" and the rules of morality are simply based on economic class, not mutual respect amongst human beings (160). Finally, the actions of Beatrice's father and the Mayor of New York demonstrate the great lengths to which higher class and economic influence permit an individual to do what s/he wants. In turning New York into "the City of Art," the mayor commissions a painting of New York from Beatrice's father. Turning to the horror of his daughter's possible death as inspiration, Beatrice's father requests the burning of an innocent girl in a limousine for his subject. The mayor offers up any number of possibilities from cheap girls to prisoners to Puerto Ricans, but eventually accepts the need for Beatrice to die. "Do what you have to do," quips the mayor, "I want the painting" (109). Although Beatrice survives in the end, and her father commits suicide from grief, both he and the mayor escape public retribution in the name of art because of the class privilege and power they wield.

Certainly, Acker's concerns as a Marxist lead her to acknowledge class as an influential restraint in society, but according to Svetlana Mintcheva, in an article entitled "To Speak with the Voices of Other," gender is the primal source of oppression in the novel. It is because of her gender that Laure feels she needs a man to define her position

in society. By the end of her finishing school education, Laure learns that even if she doesn't marry well, she must at least keep up the possibility of a "decent marriage" by "attending a top college" (206). If she has to fall back on her education to become a "top-flight scientist or lawyer," however, Laure knows that it is because she is too "evil" (206). Furthermore, Mintcheva argues that even if Laure ignores pressure to marry and consciously experiments with the boundaries of desire and social limitation, her gender prevents her getting beyond the "objectively existing economic power structures" of capitalistic society (279). In returning to the animalistic delights of the flesh, Laure must still confront her biological needs. She depends upon the conventions of a capitalist economy to meet these biological needs (she can't forage for berries her entire life). Since capitalism is phallogentric, in the sense that it is both male-centred and male-generated, Laure's gender is the primary restriction preventing her from expressing desire and crossing the boundary into the sacred in this society.

Part Three: (Auto)biography, Intertextuality, and the Discursive Subject

There are two dangers in the above analyses of the novel. To begin, it is important not to mistake Acker's criticisms of the base and superstructural perceptions of bourgeois society for an essentialist position. Though *Mother* does impugn fundamentally oppressive institutions, a level of spirituality and a genuinely religious sensibility is at work in the novel. Likewise, Acker is not entirely critical of politics and political commitment. Laure's quest is, after all, an attempt to find a political paradigm with a greater degree of individual freedom to express natural desires. As I state in my first chapter, *Mother* champions individual liberty. Laure praises the pirates who "dwell in

freedom” (151) and finds relief in her motorcycles that “give [her] back the freedom” she has lost as a woman in a patriarchal world (221). More importantly, a close analysis of Acker’s portraits of family commitment illustrates that she is not completely critical of biological kinship. She is more concerned with how society affects these relationships. In bourgeois society, the ideal, understanding parent is often co-opted by the wants and needs of the society as a whole. In *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*,³⁹ for example, Acker highlights the familial connection with society in the following manner:

My father willed to rape me because in that he didn’t want me to think for myself because he didn’t think for himself. My father isn’t my real father. This is a fact. I want a man. I don’t want this man this stepfather who has killed off the man I love. I have no way of getting the man I love who is my real father.

(215-16)

Similarly, Laure criticizes her real parents for controlling her at home and for not helping her to avoid the control of superstructural institutions. Laure’s need to escape family does not arise “because [she] hate[s] them” (10). She does not dispute her parents’ love; she merely finds her mother wants “to command” her and her father is “so gentle” he doesn’t “exist” (10). Her mother wants her to conform to societal norms and her father does not have the strength to help her resist.

The second danger involves Mintcheva’s reading of Acker’s fiction. Mintcheva is correct to assume that behind Acker’s criticisms of religion, state, and family lies a criticism of the base determinants of class and gender. Acker is frequently critical of the confines of the phallogentric capitalist system and she admits she is drawn to Laure’s quest because she “looked consciously as a woman” (Rickels 61). Yet when Mintcheva

³⁹ Kathy Acker. *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*. London: Pan Books, 1984.

suggests that Acker is only interested in dismantling the “economic power structure” that prevents female subjects from achieving their goals, she oversimplifies Acker’s reading of social formations. For Mintcheva, Acker’s Laure is on a “quest for a positive program” (274) that eventually ends in failure and “indifference” because her gender and class prevent her from claiming “control over her identity” (275). Through its narrative complication, *Mother* demonstrates that social formations, such as bourgeois society, are “overdetermined,” but in a post-Marxist sense (Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony* 97).⁴⁰ As Laclau and Mouffe suggest, the level of hegemony displayed by the agents within each social identity is determined by a number of different “structural positions,” of which class, gender, race, religion, nationality, and family background, are but a few. In fact, within each of these determinants there are nuances and conflicts. When Laure goes to finishing school, for example, she discovers a unique situation in which all her fellow students are girls and they all come from money. Consequently, the girls categorize themselves further under the following groupings: the “good girls,” the “girls from families who weren’t filthy rich,” the “girls who weren’t ‘pure white’,” and “the solitary female whose father was a democrat” (183). Each girl’s influence, and her identity within the larger social formation, is determined by a combination of money, race, family background, and political affiliation. Furthermore, Laure admits that, from week to week, a new girl is bullied for any number of inane reasons that the girls could invent. If identities were easily determined depending upon gender or class, or even the value of each of the individual’s structural positions in any given situation, a straightforward

⁴⁰ The difference between the post-Marxist sense of overdetermination and the Marxist sense as developed by Louis Althusser and others is that Laclau and Mouffe do not find economics as the primary determinant. For Laclau and Mouffe, Marxist notions of overdetermination, like Althusser’s, are still totalizing.

interpretation of hegemony would still be possible in Acker's novel and in the lived world. However, there is neither a singular nor a permanent causality of oppression that, if righted, would offer individual liberty.

Because of Acker's demonstration of the overdetermination of oppression, it is important to speak to her attempts at finding personal liberty for her protagonist before questioning the possibility of family commitment in a postmodern world. In order to cast off the limitations of liberty she finds in the world, Acker turns to a combination of sources as possible guides through which to articulate new identity positions for her protagonist. Since the 1970s, Acker has made use of textual appropriation as a literary technique. In most of her novels, Acker appropriates movies, novels, and poetry in order to determine the political underpinnings of the literary and cultural fictions that have helped to create social moralities as well as apparent individual identities. Predictably, appropriation as writing technique figures greatly in *Mother*. Acker expects her readers to have some knowledge of high and low culture as well as the works and/or lives of both popular and obscure artists. To varying degrees, the novel demands knowledge of philosophy, psychology, filmmaking, literature, literary theory, religion, language, mythology, and popular culture, resulting in perhaps the most erudite and demanding of Acker's fictions. Acker quotes the poetry of Paul Celan and Peignot. She appropriates the works of dissimilar novelists Brontë and Pauline Reage and borrows from the films of Argento and Luis Buñuel. She paraphrases Japanese legends and histories of witchcraft. On a larger scale, Acker wrestles with the ideas not only of Bataille, but of diverse thinkers such as Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous. Certainly the borrowings and citations in Acker's text connect her ideas

to the central themes and relations of the cited texts. *Mother*, however, is much more than a high-modernist text in need of a gloss just as Laure is more than a gender-specific, economically limited individual attempting to fight her way through her structural positionings. In interacting with and altering the texts in question, Laure tries to reinvent her own identity and momentarily step out of those social formations, like family, that have controlled her. By intermingling with the characters in the texts, Laure lives new subject positions and articulates new identities, further demonstrating the discursive nature of identity.

In the tradition of *The Portrait of an Eye* trilogy (*Tarantula*, *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac*,⁴¹ and *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*),⁴² *Mother* initially turns to the biographies of historically based characters to explore identity. Acker's use of biographical information, however, does more than shed new light on the lives and texts of *Mother*'s historically based characters. In fact, Acker is able to claim the almost "parental" influence historical figures like Bataille and Peignot have played in helping to form and reform her own identity.

In an interview with Lawrence Rickels, Acker explains that *Mother* began with her fascination with the avant-garde political revolutionaries of "two generations ago" (61). More specifically, Acker cites her attraction to the works of philosopher/novelist Bataille and revolutionary poet Peignot, both founding members of the anarchist group *Acéphale*, a secret Nietzschean society that explored eroticism and sacrifice. Both Bataille and Peignot are interested in alternative epistemologies based in sexuality and desire rather than rationality. Distrustful of the topical democratic and post-Leninist

⁴¹ Kathy Acker. *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac!: Imagining*. San Francisco: Empty Elevator Shaft P, 1974.

⁴² Kathy Acker. *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*. New York: TVRT, 1975.

paradigms, Bataille and Peignot are obsessed with questioning the boundaries between bourgeois individuals and the limits of communal groupings like nationality, bloodline, and religious affiliation typically recognized as “found” (61). Infused with the philosophical and political concerns of both figures, Acker’s *Mother* is a tribute to the lovers (both individually and collectively) who turn to “myth and sacrifice to come up with a new ground for a social model” (61). Although she has written of Bataille and Peignot before, Acker’s *Mother* best captures the socio-political possibilities of their works.

Peignot and Narrative Voice

Mother begins in a confusion of narrative identity. In one of the novel’s two epigraphs, an unidentified narrator addresses the readers:

My mother began to love at the same moment in her life that she began to search for who she was. This was the moment she met my father. Since my mother felt that she had to be alone in order to find out who she was and might be, she kept abandoning and returning to love.

My mother spoke: (3)

Two characters are introduced, a mother and a child, and, judging by the colon that closes the epigraph, it appears the initial narrator hands the narration of the novel over to his/her mother.⁴³ The first chapter of Acker’s novel, however, presents a difficulty in the consistency of its narrative voice. Entitled *My Mother*, and recounted in the first-person, the chapter begins with the first-person narrative line: “I’m in love with red” (7). Immediately, interesting questions regarding narration are raised. Who is the “I” of the

⁴³ For the purposes of clarification, I will use the terms “initial narrator” and “primary narrator” to distinguish child from mother (Laure).

first line of Acker's novel? Are readers to assume that the first-person possessive "[m]y" of the chapter's title refers to the mother of the initial narrator, or has a new character (mother's mother) been introduced? More to the point, is the title of the first chapter to be read subsequent to the colon ending the epigraph or is the first line of the chapter the first line of the narrator's mother's dialogue?

The answers to these questions come from a comparison of the narrator's personal details with Peignot's biography. A reader informed of the facts of Peignot's life as they appear in *Laure: the Collected Writings* will easily recognize the particulars of her biography in Acker's first chapter.⁴⁴ The narrator mentions Paul Rendier, Wartburg, Bourénine, and B (Bataille), all of whom are linked historically to Peignot.⁴⁵ A close structural analysis of Acker's first chapter actually reveals that the biographical details are taken directly from Bataille's "Laure's Life" which appears as an appendix to *Laure*. Acker's narrator even discloses portions of biographical information about herself in the same order and manner as Bataille does of Laure. Of utmost importance to this study is the fact that Acker's narrator details Peignot's early life, including her relationship with her mother and the horrific priest who, readers of *Laure* will recall, sexually assaulted Peignot and her sister.⁴⁶ Laure's break from her family in a search for "a community that wasn't hateful and boring, one of intellectuals" is the same break Peignot made from her own oppressive family situation (14).

⁴⁴ Collette Peignot. *Laure: The Collected Writings*. Trans. Jeanine Herman. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995. Hereafter shortened to *Laure*.

⁴⁵ Rendier and B (Bataille) are self-explanatory. Herman identifies Wartberg as "the German sadist Eduard Trautner" and Bourénine as "Boris Souvarine" (*Laure* vii).

⁴⁶ When confronted by her daughter with the truth, Peignot's mother exclaimed that "priests are sacred" and accused Laure of having a "heart of stone" ("Story of a Little Girl" 26). This same priest is immortalized in Bataille's *L'Abbé C*.

In addition to the biographical passages, Acker connects her narrator with Peignot through the poet's own words. Peignot begins her "Story of a Little Girl," a collection of assorted memories from her childhood, with the following passage:

A child's eyes pierce the night.

The sleepwalker, in a long white nightshirt, illuminates the darkened corners where she kneels, mumbling in her sleep before the crucifix and the Virgin Mary. Holy pictures cover the walls, the sleeper submits to all the genuflections and then slips between her sheets. Abandoned to less real phantoms who also have all rights over me, my room once again assumes the heavy immobility of premature nightmare.

Terror rises among four walls like wind on the sea. (3)

After a brief introduction to her birth and childhood situation, Acker's narrator declares:

I wrote: *The child's eyes pierce the night. I'm a sleep walker trying to clear away the shadows, but when sound asleep, kneel in front of their crucifix and Virgin.*

Holy images covered every wall of my parents' house.

Their house had the immobility of a nightmare.

The first color I knew was that of horror. (8)

Not only does the passage closely resemble Peignot's material, the inclusion of the term "I wrote" before the paraphrase/appropriation of Peignot's text equates the narrator of *Mother* with the author of "Story of a Little Girl." Throughout this first chapter of the novel, in fact, Acker reproduces many other, much longer, passages from Peignot's story. In most of these passages, Acker's Laure employs Peignot's exact wording (or

closely paraphrases it) to demonstrate moral outrage at social inequalities. In one incident, the narrator confronts a chambermaid with her growing awareness of class distinction (12) and later recounts how her mother tries to control her social life by criticizing everyone she meets “as being ‘nouveau riche’ or ‘not pious enough’” (11; author’s emphasis). Although not exact in their replication, these incidents certainly recreate the spirit of Peignot’s original narrative.

A final indication that the historical Peignot is the basis for Acker’s narrator is Acker’s reproduction of the love letters from Peignot to Bataille.⁴⁷ Acker has been interested in Peignot’s writings for many years and translations of these same letters to Georges have appeared (in alternate forms) in works such as “Translations of the Diaries of Laure the Schoolgirl.” The letters are collected in *Laure* and Acker translates them from the original French.⁴⁸ For those readers aware of the fact that the letters are revamped versions of Peignot’s correspondences, the most logical answer to the queries regarding narration, therefore, is that the main narrator of Acker’s novel is a fictional version of Peignot. The initial narrator, then, is the imaginary child of Peignot and Bataille. Although she does not play a large part in the narrative itself, she does occasionally intrude on the text. Parenthetical remarks such as “(I think that Mother was still with Bourénine, but I don’t know for sure)” suggest that the initial narrator is examining her mother’s collected writings and composing the text for readers (22).⁴⁹ Chapter titles such as *Letters From My Mother to My Father* certainly support this reading.

⁴⁷ All letters are from Laure to Bataille except the letter addressed “(to someone other than B)” (*Mother* 264) which is borrowed from a letter addressed to Michel Leiris (*Laure* 154).

⁴⁸ The first and only English translation appeared in 1995, two years after *Mother* was first published.

⁴⁹ Because of the penchant for metafiction in many postmodern novels, I would suggest that the original narrator is the historical author claiming to be the imaginary daughter of the French lovers.

Acker and Peignot: (Auto)biography and the Constructed Self

It is not surprising that Acker chooses Peignot as the model for her protagonist. Acker herself has noted that she and Peignot have many of “the same [political] preoccupations” (Rickels 61). As a socio-political figure, Peignot was “very involved in the intellectual life of the twenties and thirties,” an era that has interested Acker for some time (Sahely 41). Peignot was a “committed revolutionary” championing many political causes close to her heart (41). Spurred by her leftist politics, she spent time in Russia in the 1930s living with peasants before traveling to Spain to support the Popular Front in 1936 (*Laure* ix). As Sahely notes, Peignot was not only a central figure in *Acéphale* “it was at her request that Bataille founded this Nietzschean secret society dedicated to the search for modern forms of community and the sacred” and it was upon her death that the society folded (Sahely 41). Like Peignot, Acker was drawn to the Marxist communities of her youth. As a student at Brandeis University, Acker was inspired by the Marxist cultural theories of Herbert Marcuse and eventually followed Marcuse to the west coast to do graduate work in literature while honing her theoretical skills at the University of California at San Diego.⁵⁰ Much of the literary criticism of Acker’s work, in fact, focuses on her Marxist roots.

Yet, there is something deeper, beyond politics, in Acker’s attraction to Peignot. The circumstances of Acker’s and Peignot’s lives were very similar. Biographical information tells readers that Acker was born into an upscale family in New York and had difficulty coming to terms with her bourgeois childhood. Acker’s mother often mentally abused her, blaming her for her father’s departure. At an early age she left her family, finding solace in the New York avant-garde community (Guttridge, “Kathy

⁵⁰ Interestingly enough, Roman Jakobson also tutored Acker while she attended Brandeis.

Acker”). In his depiction of his aunt’s childhood, Jérôme Peignot relates that Peignot also had trouble accepting the circumstances of her birth. “This Catholic and bourgeois family’s ideas were so contrary to her,” he writes, “she felt she had been denied by them even before her birth” (278). Like Acker, Peignot had a caustic relationship with her mother (the abusive sections of the first chapter of *Mother* are actually reproductions of the emotional and physical abuse Peignot received at the hands of her mother and her priest) and she too broke with her family, finding solace in a group of avant-garde artists.

Finding such a close connection with Peignot, Acker uses the intersection of Peignot’s biography and her own autobiography to explore an alternative identity or *constructed self*, outside societal constructs like the family. The biographical connections between Acker and Peignot are emphasized when the narrator momentarily takes on the author’s persona even as she attempts to hold up her own historical guise. Early in the first chapter Laure reminisces, “I was born on October 6, 1945, in Brooklyn, New York. My parents were rich, but not of the purest class” (8). According to Bataille’s brief biography of Peignot, she was indeed born on October 6th, but 1903 and in Paris (235).⁵¹ It was Acker who was born around 1945 in Brooklyn, New York.⁵² Later, describing her sojourn to a boarding school as a teenager, Acker’s Laure recalls:

I hadn’t wanted to go to school in the first place. My mother made me do it so she could be alone with her new husband. I told her to her face, while he was standing with her, that he had married her only for her money. They both denied that.

⁵¹ In her “Preface” to *Laure*, Herman gives October 8th as Peignot’s date of birth, but since additional evidence supports Acker’s use of Bataille’s biography I quote his date.

⁵² I say around 1945 because there is little agreement over Acker’s actual birth date.

So I was forced to attend boarding school.

Memories do not obey the law of linear time. (41)

Not only do memories fail to obey linear time for the protagonist, but autobiography and biography fail to obey historical fact within the world of the novel. From biographical information about Peignot and Acker, readers know that it was Acker who attended boarding school at the behest of her mother and stepfather. Peignot did not have a stepfather, nor did she attend boarding school. Acker confuses the issue further when her narrator returns from boarding school only to be further rejected by her parents who are to take “their summer in Algeria, like all the rich Parisians” (43). Doesn’t Laure claim to be an American, born in Brooklyn? Identifications persist as Laure gives readings, rides motorcycles, and talks about bodybuilding, all of which recall interests close to Acker’s heart.

The use of autobiographical material within a literary work is certainly not an invention of Acker’s. William Faulkner hid biographical information in his imaginary world of Yoknapatapha County while poets such as W. H. Auden and Sylvia Plath have been known to confess personal sins in the veiled lines of their poetry. Acker’s use of autobiographical material is much more complex. She is not simply utilizing biographical material for fictional purposes. Of her early use of biography, she tells Lotringer:

I became very interested in the model of schizophrenia. I wanted to explore the use of the word I, that’s the only thing I wanted to do. So I placed very direct autobiographical, just diary material, right next to fake diary material. I tried to figure out who I wasn’t and I went to texts of murderesses. I just changed them

into the first person, really not caring if the writing was good or bad, and put the fake first person next to the true first person. And then continue [sic] this to see what would happen. (“Devoured by Myths” 7)

By the end of these experiments, Acker admits she could not differentiate the real from the false “I” (7). The same thing happens in *Mother*. By the end of the novel, Acker and Peignot have combined. However, whereas the Acker of *The Portrait of an Eye* trilogy is admittedly naïve in many ways, the Acker of *Mother* is aware that all identities are both true and false. “If there is a self,” Acker declares, “it’s probably the world. All is real” (“A Few Notes on Two of My Books” 33). While Acker is unable to locate “the self” within these early works, what she gains from her experimentation is an appreciation for the power of language and “how politics and language come together” in discourse to create identities (“Devoured by Myths” 4). “When you’re writing,” explains Acker, “you aren’t using language (with all its problematics) to ‘express identity’ . . . language doesn’t *express* anything, it *creates*, it makes, it creates something that didn’t exist before. . . . And if you’re making rather than expressing, then identity isn’t a problem” (McCaffery, “The Path of Abjection” 23). By conflating Peignot’s biography with her own autobiography, Acker fully explores the tension between a situated and a constructed notion of self. Acker’s Laure, as a temporary intersection between author and subject, is a perfect example of how identity takes place on a number of different terrains. She is Acker and Peignot, author and subject, daughter and mother all at the same time.

Bataille, Transgression, and the Bourgeois Self

The presence of Bataille as a biographical character in *Mother* is much more subdued—perhaps because Acker identifies herself more with the female Peignot than her male

counterpart. Bataille (or B as he is called in the text) appears only briefly as an interactive character. Sections entitled “I Return to B” and “B Spoke:” are both taken directly from the same section of Bataille’s “Le Coupable: Found Fragments on Laure” (*Laure* 260-1).⁵³ For the most part, however, B mainly appears as a topic of Laure’s memories and dreams as well as the recipient of her love letters. As the recipient of these letters, B takes on the role of the initial narrator’s father (or at least adoptive father). Throughout the chapter entitled “Letters from My Mother to my Father,” for example, the initial narrator makes comments about her mother and father such as “Mother didn’t want to live with my father,” drawing the picture of a family relationship involving her/himself and the two lovers (27). Acker’s narrator constantly interrupts letters from Laure to B in order to comment on her own lineage: “I never had a father. This isn’t correct because, science says, every animal has a father. I never knew my father, which fact, for me, is the same as not having a father. . . . I’m writing about my father, whom I never knew” (26). Again, just as Acker accepts Peignot as a mother figure, she accepts Bataille as a father figure since, as Guttridge tells us, “[h]er [Acker’s] father, Donald Lehman, left her mother, Clare, when she was three months pregnant with Kathy” (“Kathy Acker”).

Although Bataille’s biography plays an important part in Acker’s novel given his symbolic role as father to the novel’s narrator, it is the paternalistic influence of his literature, philosophy, and criticism that is most important to the novel and to this study in particular. In novels like *The Story of an Eye* and *L’Abbe C*, and critical works like *Literature and Evil* and *Eroticism*, Bataille explores extreme contraventions of established moralities. His work abounds with transgression in the form of violence,

⁵³ These fragments are translated in the appendixes of Herman’s *Laure*.

crime, consumption, and eroticism. Acker's writing follows the same lineage. Of course the idea of transgression is found in Peignot's letters and writings, but in Bataille Acker finds a power and "virility" missing from Peignot's work (Mintcheva 275). Acker's translations of Peignot's letters and writings, after all, are not exact. As Mintcheva points out, Acker rewrites Peignot's work to include elements of Bataille's violence and decay. Where Peignot writes: "[d]espite my handwriting due to poor materials, it's been a long time since I've been so certain—so assured" (*Laure* 142), Acker's Laure counters with: "[d]espite my profound and continuing fascination with decadence and decay, with where dead humans lose their bones, I'm more stable than I've been in a very long time" (*Mother* 247).⁵⁴ Although Acker identifies strongly with Peignot, it is the influence of Bataille's ideas that most helps Acker's Laure in her struggle for alternative identities and political paradigms.

In many ways, *Mother* emulates the specific elements of Bataille's posthumously published novel, *My Mother*.⁵⁵ Bataille's novel, like Acker's, explores the strange nuances of family interaction. The main protagonist, Pierre, despises his father as "a loathsome individual" whom he believes emotionally abuses Hélène, his pure and innocent mother (*My Mother* 28). Pierre takes any opportunity to disobey his father, even considering the priesthood out of disrespect for his father's anti-clerical opinions. *My Mother* opens with Pierre's memories of his parents fighting and of his father's frequent trips to Nice where Pierre is sure he has "the time of his life" (28). With his father's sudden death, Pierre's life changes unexpectedly. An admittedly jubilant Pierre

⁵⁴ See Mintcheva's "To Speak with the Voices of Others" for a detailed look at the differences between Acker's Laure and the historical Peignot.

⁵⁵ Georges Bataille. *My Mother*. In *My Mother Madame Edwarda The Dead Man*. Trans. Austryn Wainhouse. London: Marion Boyars, 2003. 21-134.

I first attempted to dissipate my anxiety by deciding to fuck and be fucked only when there could be no personal involvement. I traveled on trains, like a sailor, and made love with men I encountered on those trains.

My attempt failed. Friends said about me, “She’s on her way to dying young.” But I wanted, more than most people, to live, because just being alive wasn’t enough for me. Wildness or curiosity about my own body was showing itself as beauty. (16-17)

Here, Laure reveals a growing penchant for sexual debauchery that liberates her from her parents (who symbolize social indoctrination) and carries her through Acker’s narrative. She later takes part in orgies at her brother’s house, and at finishing school she explores her sexuality through her lesbian relationship with Isabelle in addition to bouts of intense masturbation. To the untrained eye, in fact, Acker’s novel is simply about her narrator’s obsessive need to be “animal” (21)

Like H  l  ne, Acker’s narrator does not simply transgress limits for the sake of personal liberty. She appears to search for a community, a world where she feels part of a larger whole. “I knew that I belonged to the community of artists or freaks,” she explains, “not because the anger in me was unbearable but because my overpowering wish to give myself away wasn’t socially acceptable” (15). Sounding very much like H  l  ne, she spouts aphorisms like “[c]onjunction with the entirety of the universe is one way to avoid suffering” (11).⁵⁶ This search for community is exemplified in Acker’s monastery scene where, as a monk engaged in indiscretions with another monk, Laure confesses:

⁵⁶ Like his anti-philosophical mentor, Nietzsche, Bataille makes use of the aphorism in order to critique foundational philosophy.

I don't have any idea how it happened, but I found myself lying on top of him. Like tentacles made of rabbit fur, my legs curled around his stronger, hairier ones. Just as warmth began to seep into my body just below my skin, like milk, I whispered to him that I never wanted to be without him again. Then my mouth turned around his tongue: I stopped living in anything but present time. He stroked me gently, as if I was a child.

And so I opened. Still surrounded by wool, his stiffened thing thrust into me, all of me there and open, kept thrusting into me until this devil was making me come again and again; Antichrist made me a continual orgasm. (151)

Finding herself taken in completely by the almost religious experience of her sexual indiscretion, Laure forgoes the world of abstract religion for a more concrete, present religion of the body. "I've never known that religion was like this," she exclaims, "[y]ou monks have just woven a spell over my body: from now on, I have no interest in anything but the body" (152).

Acker's obsession with Bataille also explains the fact that *Wuthering Heights* is also a major borrowed text for *Mother*. In fact, *Mother*'s social criticisms mirror those in Bataille's analysis of *Wuthering Heights*. In his analysis of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Bataille sees childhood as the "fundamental theme" of the novel (*Literature and Evil* 5). A novel conspicuously devoid of any extended parental involvement, *Wuthering Heights* follows the relationship of two children left to their own accord to experience life and test boundaries. Of Cathy and Heathcliff's relationship, Bataille writes:

The two children spent their time racing wildly on the heath. They abandoned themselves, untrammelled by any restraint or convention other than a taboo on

games of sensuality. But, in their innocence, they placed their indestructible love for one another on another level, and indeed perhaps this love can be reduced to the refusal to give up an infantile freedom which had not been amended by the laws of society or of conventional politeness. They led their wild life, outside the world, in the most elementary conditions, and it is these conditions which Emily Brontë made tangible – the basic conditions of poetry, of a spontaneous poetry before which both children refused to stop. (6)

As *Wuthering Heights* demonstrates, “the rational world of calculation cannot bear” the irrational desire of childhood (9). Consequently, Heathcliff and Cathy are forced to either change or remain outcasts. Cathy chooses the “[g]ood” of “the adult world” while Heathcliff chooses the “[e]vil” of “childhood” (5-8). Although Heathcliff becomes demonic and cruel to all around him, the beauty of *Wuthering Heights*, for Bataille, is still found in the children’s early relationship and their initial refusal to respond to “reasonable adult conventions which are advantageous to the community” (6).

Mother similarly criticizes society’s limitations on desire through a foray into the beginning of these limitations in childhood. For Acker, as for Bataille and Brontë, the boundary between adulthood and childhood is the most defining moment in an individual’s life. Much is made in *Mother* of the fact that children are gradually “destroyed” (185) by the rational world which, as Laure confesses, “*turns around the grave of the holes in the garden of childhood*” (10). Laure’s relationship with her parents is unacceptable in her mind, even though they prepare her for the world outside the family. In the final chapter, entitled *Redoing Childhood: The Beginning of the History of Dreams*, Laure, realizing that she has been running from “that pain named

childhood, like you flush a huge shit down the toilet” (34), discovers the source of her pain by going “back to [her] real childhood” (180). “My first memory of having a memory or of consciousness,” says Laure, “began with the day that I entered school” (181).

As with Cathy and Heathcliff (and all children for that matter), it is socialization both within and outside of the family unit that begins Laure’s indoctrination. Laure systematically recalls the painful stages of her intellectual, emotional, and social development in which she encounters many of Bataille’s “reasonable adult conventions” (9). She learns to recognize the social rules of class and difference when she is immediately “ordered” by her mother and her mother’s priest to “woo” the “good girls” (*Mother* 182). She is forced to socialize when Mrs. Burpface bans her from the library and teaches her to accept her punishment since her teachers know “what is best for [her]” (199). She learns how to “social climb” (202) and “marry a very rich old man” (205). In retrospect, Laure realizes that she and her fellow classmates are “being groomed and tethered” toward “some secret end” (190). In her most poignant passage, she summarizes the relationship between education, childhood, and identity in the following manner:

Education, or the repetition and internalization of set models and the childhood seen through the lens of this education are false. Not just the models taught in class, but all perceptual models turned absolute. For instance, when I was a child, I didn’t actually know either St. Pierre or Burpface, yet I defined myself, predicated my identity on how they saw me and how I perceived how they saw me. . . since the identity I was taught is fake, childhood is a fake. (201)

Laure realizes that external factors of categorization and indoctrination have led her to forgo her personal desires and accept the recognized social model and her place within it.

Basically, Acker's work is a literary expression of Bataille's larger philosophy. "Men are swayed by two simultaneous emotions," Bataille explains, "they are driven away by terror and drawn by an awed fascination" (*Eroticism* 58). For Bataille, there are two arenas of interaction, *the profane* (accepted world of taboos) and *the sacred* (forbidden world of transgression). Bataille's world of taboos is a world of ethical limits surrounding acts of consumption, criminality, sexuality, or violence. Formulated by a community, in many cases a religion or a state, these limits forbid human beings from performing acts they are physically capable of performing. Bataille avers:

The taboo gives a negative definition of the sacred [forbidden] object and inspires us with awe on the religious plane. Carried to extremes that feeling becomes one of devotion and adoration. The gods who incarnate this sacred essence put fear into the hearts of those who reverence them, yet men do reverence them nonetheless. (58)

Bataille is agonizingly aware of the need for taboo for a society to survive; yet, while on the one hand individuals feel compelled to refrain from committing forbidden acts because they are socially disruptive, on the other hand they still desire to commit such acts. In fact, Bataille believes that when the individual transgresses taboo, s/he enters a spiritual realm. In this realm of the sacred, human beings actually bring themselves closer to a natural, animalistic state, beyond the bourgeois self. In his *Literature and Evil*, Bataille outlines the importance of transgression by using sexual indiscretion as an example. "The basis of sexual effusion," writes Bataille, "is the negation of the isolation

of the ego which only experiences ecstasy by exceeding itself, by surpassing itself in the embrace in which the being loses its solitude” (4). In Bataille’s philosophy, sexual transgression leads to a momentary merging of egos. Both Bataille’s heroine and Acker’s Laure acknowledge religious experiences when sexual taboos are transgressed. Bataille also insists that human beings, as animals, naturally desire the freedom that comes with the loss of self. As Acker’s Laure explains of this desire, “I’m always destroying everything including myself, which is what I want to do” (10). Unfortunately, access to the sacred through transgression is fleeting and can only become complete in death—a return to the natural state of being. Until then, any worthy social paradigm must acknowledge the individual’s paradoxical struggle with the conflicting impulses of the profane and the sacred.

Alternative Identities

Biography and autobiography are certainly important literary devices for Acker’s complicated portrait of identity and commitment. As evidenced by Bataille’s role in the novel, however, an examination of biography and autobiography must be combined with an analysis of the novel’s other intertextual references to effectively assess Laure’s search for alternative identities outside of societal constructs like the family.

A cursory examination of the novel’s appropriations reveals Acker’s purpose to be a politically charged deconstruction of the metalanguages that have defined her protagonist. In the first chapter, Laure describes her situation and the Bataillean task she is about to undergo. Paraphrasing Peignot’s description of the same task from “Story of a Young Girl,” Acker’s Laure explains:

From now on I'm going to decide for myself and live according to my decisions—decisions out of desire. I'll always look . . . like a sailor who carries his huge cock in his hand. . . . I'll travel and travel by reading. I won't read in order to become more intelligent, but so that I can see as clearly as possible that there's too much lying and hypocrisy in this world. (17)

Laure's decision to "travel by reading" is, first, a decision to deconstruct the texts she cites and expose essentializing hypocrisies as she encounters them. When Laure misquotes Freud, for example, suggesting that, "[a]ccording to Freud, a fetish for a woman is one means by which she can deny she's lacking a dick," she implies that Freud has not unearthed irrefutable truths, as much as *created* a metanarrative around which societies of the twentieth-century have organized themselves (95). When she quotes *Wuthering Heights*, she clearly outlines the underlying determinants of gender and class, learned in the family, which limit the childish desires of Brontë's characters. Furthermore, Acker's appropriation of Argento's *Suspiria* effectively points to the oppressive qualities of education and rather than those of witchcraft and individuality. Although Argento's film may condemn witchcraft, Acker's rewrite points more to the direct connection between freedom and witchcraft.

An examination of narrative voice in conjunction with the novel's intertextual complexity reveals more than an attempt to deconstruct hypocrisies in male-centered texts. Although Acker is certainly employing a fictional representation of Peignot (complete with altered plagiarisms) as her primary narrator and literary mother, there are many other important narrative voices in the text. Each textual appropriation (both obvious and hidden) adds complexity to *Mother's* narration. In *Mother's* third chapter, a

chapter dedicated to Argento, for example, Acker's Laure takes on the persona of Argento's Banyon. Although Laure may not be Banyon, she does take on some of her qualities through her experiences. The chapter begins with Laure going back to school at the University of Basel following a break up with Bataille, but the Argento aficionado soon recognizes Acker's appropriation of narrative when Laure arrives at the Basel airport, battles the rain "falling in buckets," and hails a taxi to take her to the University (34). *Mother* proceeds to follow the storyline of *Suspiria* rather closely, complete with lifted scenes such as the scene where a bat enters the protagonist's bedroom (lifted by Acker in the section "A Bat and I Become Friends") and characters like the piano player and the school directress Mrs. Selby, the "handsome woman in her late forties" with "a bun imprisoned black hair" (49). Like *Suspiria*, *Clit City* confronts readers with deception and witchcraft (the school has been built on the grounds of a school of witchcraft that continues to operate under the guise of a dance school).

As I have said, the individual borrowings are more complicated than they might first appear. Although Acker's reading of Argento's film criticizes the place of education and religion as socializing forces in Western society, Acker does not simply reinvent the narrative in the sense that Jean Rhys reinvents the madwoman in the attic with *The Wide Sargasso Sea* or J. M. Coetzee rewrites *Robinson Crusoe* with *Foe*. For Acker, *Mother's* borrowed texts are complicated mazes through which Laure travels, momentarily changing her identity to fit the text. The more texts Acker introduces, the more Laure fragments, playing the parts of other characters in her search for identity. Still, Laure never leaves the narrative completely as her disembodied voice haunts the text(s), holding on to past identifications and memories. When the historical Laure

appears to have left the narrative of *Clit City*, she returns through recalled dreams about parties and intrusive asides such as: “I’m pretty strong because B used to lift weights” (35) and “[w]here’s B with the screw” (65; 66). She even interrupts the main narrative with an inserted text of “*Two Girls*” that originally appears in *Laure* under the title “*Fragments and Outlines of Erotic Texts*,” thus bringing the historical Peignot back into the mix of identification (64). In “Murder,” a subsection of *Clit City*, the narrative voice actually appears as an amalgam of identities in a short time frame. Acker writes:

A woman returns to her school.

A private school like mine.

I had wandered away from the others to the lavatories. The sound of Baudelaire still in my ears. An odor hung inside the cubicle. . . . A tenderness defined my hairs. I leaned over the bowl.

My best friend came into the toilet.

“Kiss me on the mouth.”

“No. It’s too soon.”

I hadn’t wanted to go to school in the first place. My mother made me do it so she could be alone with her new husband. I told her to her face, while he was standing with her, that he had married her only for her money. They both denied that.

So I was forced to attend boarding school.

Memories do not obey the law of linear time.

Through the bars I saw the headmistress, her hair in the mandatory bun, enter and welcome me to the institution. (41)

The section begins with the borrowing of Argento's opening scene from *Suspiria* in which the protagonist arrives at school to find "a red door open and a girl who looked like [her] race past" (41). The protagonist then becomes someone who "returns to school," rather than begins at a new institution like Banyon. This new identity is, in fact a character from "Radley Metzger's film of the book *Therese and Isabelle*" (41). As she does periodically, throughout this section, Acker's protagonist takes on the persona of a first-time lesbian encountering a friend at boarding school. Later in the passage, however, the readers are reminded of Acker's own biography and the fact that she was forced to attend boarding school at her mother's insistence. Finally, the protagonist returns to Banyon's circumstances and her encounter with the headmistress at her new school of dance. Ultimately, this passage demonstrates that identity, for Acker, is porous and constructed since the narrative force of *Mother* takes on many different voices all at the one time.

Acker's narrative complexity is given more unexpected twists in the *Wuthering Heights* section of the novel. Here, the voices of Cathy and Heathcliff are introduced as seemingly innocuous, narrating characters. With the addition of Laure, therefore, there are at least three narrators in the chapter. Sections narrated by Cathy and Heathcliff begin with "Cathy says" and "Heathcliff says" respectively, while those narrated by Laure have no indicator save the title of each section. Each character tells part of the *Wuthering Heights* chronicle while Laure offers an amalgam of narrative sections. For the most part, Laure acts as an interpreter, interjecting herself into the dialogue and filling in the blanks for readers. At times she even identifies herself directly with Cathy asking questions such as: "[w]as she, like me, scared of men?" (120). The confusion begins

when Laure actually becomes Cathy in a section entitled “Story: The Beginning of the World.” Laure narrates, “[I]isten. I, Cathy, am dreaming that sex which is the witch’s den” (124). Laure even equates herself with the historical author in this chapter, discussing a dream of poetry readings and bodybuilding. “I dreamt I was in heaven” notes the narrator (Laure or possibly the historical Acker it is unclear), “[b]ut I had no business being there, so I ran back to Wuthering Heights [sic] (this place) (loneliness) (this state of *human*) (this impossibility named *hell*). I know that here is happiness” (136). Ultimately, the confusion of identities as well as the confusion of terrains (the narrator equates the novel *Wuthering Heights* with a state of being, loneliness), demonstrates how Acker’s novel continues to explore alternative identities and realities. Acker’s narrator is not an essential subject and literature is not a closed book, but a discursive terrain for self-exploration.

Even more confusion arises in sections involving Heathcliff, as the narrative formula continues to derail. At times, Heathcliff is obviously the speaker even though the obligatory “Heathcliff says” introduction is missing from the section (130; 142). In addition, the third-person narrated section entitled “Heathcliff’s Story of the Rich House” omits any mention of Heathcliff as character or narrator. Again, the only explanation for the confusion in narrative voice is that Laure has somehow identified herself with, and momentarily become Heathcliff. Two textual passages support this explanation. The first passage is the conclusion to the previous chapter and, in part, an introduction to the chapter under discussion:

I was now more alone than I had been before returning to school. In or due to this loneliness, B was more me than me. Since I could no longer see anything in

this state, I decided that I had to destroy my obsession. Obsession. The only way to do this, destroy my deepest being, it seemed, would be to become a man.

The name of that man is Heathcliff. (116)

Before the fourth chapter even begins Laure has slipped into Heathcliff's skin in order to "destroy her obsession" for B.⁵⁷ The second example appears in the final section of the fourth chapter. Here readers learn that Acker's text of *Wuthering Heights* is based as much on the movie as it is on the text of the novel.⁵⁸ Laure explains, "I was sitting in a theatre, watching a movie named *Wuthering Heights*" (146). The importance of the film version is that the scene, which Laure retells and entitles "Heathcliff's Story of the Rich House," is in fact a scene in which Heathcliff watches the action through a window which, like a movie screen, frames the action for him. Readers can assume that Laure's decision to recount Heathcliff's viewing of the scene in the third-person connects her directly with Heathcliff as viewer of the scenario in the Linton household. Acker also connects readers to the story as viewers of Laure viewing Heathcliff viewing the Linton house. Finally, Laure's narration is actually plagiarized from Bataille's "Le Coupable: Found Fragments on Laure" where Bataille writes: "I've just come out of the Helder where I saw *Wuthering Heights*: Heathcliff living with Cathy's ghost—how I wanted to live with Laure's ghost" (*Laure* 260). Again, terrains of exploration are widened with the identifications made between reader, Bataille, Peignot, the fictional Laure, and Heathcliff. Rather than attempt to attribute the dialogue to one or the other, Acker wants

⁵⁷ This passage points directly to Brontë's text in which Cathy avers "I am Heathcliff" (82) and "he's more myself than I" (80).

⁵⁸ For the purposes of this dissertation I assume Acker is speaking of the William Wyler version of *Wuthering Heights* released in 1939 and starring Merle Oberon, Laurence Olivier, and David Niven. I make this assumption based on Bataille's referencing of the film in *Laure*.

her readers to acknowledge the varied levels of identification to be made in any communication.

It is evident that the complexities of Acker's protagonist and her textual identifications demonstrate deeper levels to Acker's criticism of bourgeois society. The essentialist identification of the bourgeois individual subject is itself artificial. It relies upon a fixed and stable notion of subjectivity. When Acker's narrator changes personae, gender, or age, she interrogates what Mouffe calls "the rationalist conception of the subject" and points to a *multiple subjectivity* in which an individual's identity is a temporary articulation of his/her many identifications depending upon situation, experience, and even emotion (*Return* 76). Acker, like Mouffe, refuses to "hold on to an image of the unitary subject as the ultimate source of intelligibility of its actions" and, as such, Laure changes from page to page, from memory to memory, from dream to dream, from context to context, from narrative point of view to narrative point of view (12). For Acker, Laure is not a complete subject in the sense of the stable individual described by communitarianism or by liberalism, she is simply "the history of [her] identifications," subject to change at a moment's notice depending upon her relationship with other incomplete subjects (76). Laure's identity is only partially articulated, and, as a result, Acker promotes an intrapersonal diversity implying that Laure's social dilemmas (like her family life) are more like temporary intersections of a provisional subject with those external forces it encounters on a day-to-day basis. Through her interactions with subjects—texts, characters, or temporary social formations—Laure learns that identity, both individual and collective, is the result of discourse and not essence. Identity is never *sutured*, but always partially fixed and open to alteration. "In

my search in myself,” admits Laure, “I found nothing” (*Mother* 267). There is, of course, nothing there only endless identifications.

Part Four: Redoing Childhood

Language

There remains the question of Laure’s success. Do the novel’s intricacies of identity succeed in presenting an alternative way of speaking to social commitment, be it to family, church, state, or other superstructural formations, or do they simply unveil the shortcomings of the present political and philosophical paradigms? Is Laure’s project achievable within the constraints of a capitalistic paradigm?⁵⁹ Can Laure step out of her oppressive situation and find liberty and commitment at the same time?

In responding to these questions, consider for a moment, Laclau and Mouffe’s examination of the difference between structural positions and subject positions as outlined in my first chapter. If, in fact, structural positions are “largely determined by the social formations into which [a person is] thrown” and “subject positions . . . tend to be somewhat more vulnerable to political intervention and even the accidents of personal circumstance,” then the achievement of alternative complexities of commitment is both impossible and possible at the same time (Smith 59). They are impossible for Acker since language has the power to prevent any resistance to the patriarchal culture of capitalist society. Like most postmodern fiction, Acker’s work has always implied that political hegemony is disseminated through language. Laure has a constant infatuation with the prison of language and it is through language that she learns the limitations of

⁵⁹ After all, Acker has attempted this before and failed. After *Empire*, she admits, “[y]ou can’t get to a place, to a society, that isn’t constructed according to the phallus. You’re stuck with a lot of loneliness” (“A Conversation with Kathy Acker”).

her society and her structural positions.⁶⁰ Under the guise of George Bush, Sr.'s daughter, Laure admits, "[f]or us, there is no language in this male world," claiming the impossibility of liberty for women or any other subjects wishing to get beyond the limitations of society (168). In her description of the Chinese women at the School of Dance, Laure furthers that communication within society must be done within the phallogentric rules concluding that "[l]ife doesn't exist inside language: too bad for me" (253). Paraphrasing Kristeva, Laure notes:

In China, when a woman doesn't believe in God, she, like everyone else, validates her existence by believing in man. It all amounts to the same. The only way that she can escape this kind of structure (this society, this community, this language) is to make her own. But then she'd be outside society, or nonexistent. (80)

Laure concludes that in order to be truly free, she must get "[o]utside the Law, which is language" (253) for there is "[n]o new world without a new language" (224). The creation of a new language is easier said than done as one cannot communicate the need for, and rules of, a new language without the help of the present linguistic system.

Memories and Dreams

Unlike Acker's earlier novels, and despite the criticism offered by Mintcheva and others, I would argue *Mother* does not end in failure and impossibility. It is no accident that Acker's novel is divided into two parts: "Into That Belly of Hell Whose Name Is the United States" and "Out (In the Form of Healing)." Though language may well be the

⁶⁰ Of sexual difference and her introduction to language, for example, Laure explains, "[w]e knew that the older teacher was a lesbian, though none of us knew what a lesbian was. Lesbian, our first word, meant *something bad*" (*Mother* 197).

final deterrent to liberty within a phallogentric society, Laure's goal "to be invisible and without language" (21) appears to be met in the novel's final section. In her last gasp, Laure meets "a reflection of [her] face before the creation of the world" (268) and, thus, I would argue, returns to "the beginning of this world where there isn't any language" (206). In this pre-linguistic condition Laure's success, as fleeting as it may appear, is reached with the help of alternative rationalities, through which Laure redresses the wrongs of her childhood by using the liberty offered her through the intersection of memory and dreams.

Much of *Mother* is told in recollection. Except for Laure's letters, the bulk of the novel is narrated in the past tense. As I acknowledge above, the first and last chapters of the novel are largely composed of Laure's memories of her childhood family life and the beginnings of her social involvements at school. In these sections, Laure methodically deciphers the circumstances of her past in attempts to find herself and, as she tells B, "explain our present" (248). For the most part, the recollections suffice in establishing Laure's personal influences from schoolteachers to lovers like Bataille; but her memories alone do not reveal her identity in any singular way. In fact, they cause her great internal conflict by presenting two opposing notions of identity. In remembering the restrictions and limitations felt at the hands of her structural positions, Laure often recalls wanting to get beyond them, to liberate herself from their grasp. In this manner, her memories direct her toward an unencumbered notion of the self, characterized by negative liberty. Through her many recollections, however, Laure gains a brief understanding of the beginnings of her commitments to her family, her nation, or her religion. She begins to see where she came from and who has influenced her as an individual. Laure confesses:

I tried everything to lose myself, to get rid of memory, to resemble whom I don't resemble, to end. . . . Sometimes when I encountered myself, I was so strange that "I" had to be criminal—all the time I was totally polite . . . I tried to give my life away and life came back, gushed into its sources, the stream, the storm, into the full of noon, triumphant, and stayed there hidden, like a lightning stain. (266)

For all her efforts to exterminate her recollections of the past, Laure is unable to make a clean break from her connections. She often laments being "totally" (199) and "absolutely alone," separated from those around her because she does not want to be part of their communities (247). This realization implies a sense of a situated self, exemplified by a sense of positive liberty and connection.

Despite the internal conflict her recollections cause, they are helpful to Laure in one way. It is through an intersection of memories and dreams that Laure finds a freedom beyond rationality in which to renew levels of social commitment. In describing her writing process for *Mother*, Acker tells Rickels:

Dreaming became a technique for deciding the next move in the writing. I don't know how, I started dreaming about what I had just written that day. I started dreaming what I was writing. I used this as a writing technique. What would happen (it's especially clear in the *Wuthering Heights* section) is that I would rewrite, appropriate, plagiarize, whatever—copy (slash-and-gash method) *Wuthering Heights* and that night I would have a dream, and the dream would be about *Wuthering Heights*. I started letting the dream decide where the narrative was going. So *Wuthering Heights* changed as I dreamed it. I didn't interpret the dream. . . . I would leave the dream alone and use it to interpret the text. (62)

Just as an intricate pattern of dreams constructs the narrative of the *Wuthering Heights* section of the novel, dreams play a major role in the other sections of *Mother*. The narrative voices of the novel often disseminate the storyline through dreams or discussions of dreams in chapters bearing titles like *Dreaming Politics* and *Redoing Childhood: The Beginning of the History of Dreams* and subsections with titles like “A Dream of Young Girls and “The Underside of Dream.”

Acker’s use of dreams as a narrative strategy points to a larger purpose for dreams within the work. As Laure exclaims, “*dreams aren’t fake*” (201). Dreams offer her a device for dealing with the oppressive limitations of her past. After dreaming about her school life, Laure asserts: “when I was a child, I didn’t actually know either St. Pierre or Burpface, yet I defined myself, predicated my identity on how they saw me and how I perceived how they saw me” (201). Through dreaming, Laure learns that “all perceptual models made and turned absolute” are “false” for Laure (201). More than simply giving Laure the ability to pinpoint the social limitations in her childhood, dreams offer a solution for the present by allowing her to alter her memories of reality. When Laure discusses her memories of boarding school, for example, she describes a time of confinement and sterility:

At another edge, *directly opposite the principal’s office*, an ornate marble staircase, which only the oldest of us were allowed to use, rose to upper regions. Regions neither of heaven nor of hell, as yet, for the school was Jewish. Rather, regions made up of labyrinths. These second and third floors of halls winding into halls and back again. Whose sole possessions, electric light bulbs, were only ornaments, for the light came from their red coloration, which smelled of

menstrual blood. Off corridors that seemed unable to become straight lay classrooms, small, carved out of wood. (188)

In contrast, to these memories, however, she finds the world of dreams helps her reconstruct this memory so that “the rooms that lined labyrinths held magic” (188).

Laure continues to realize the power of her dreams during a dream in which she sets out looking for Hans. Though she gets waylaid, she says: “I remembered to think about Hans. As soon as I had the thought now I’m able to go to Hans, he walked into the hospital schoolroom and held me in his arms” (193).

Although Laure’s entry into the texts of others gives her temporary and multiple identities, it is her dreams (as texts) that truly offer her de-territorialized spaces of possibility, removed from their historical context, in which to live out her present desires and look forward to new levels of commitment. With her newfound realization, Laure destroys the “architecture” of her childhood “by dream in which learning is a journey” (193). Acker’s novel proffers a new childhood that is not a “phase or phrase everyone has to get beyond rather than stuck on . . . but . . . a channel that is always there, ready to be tuned or turned into” whenever necessary (Rickels 61). By using dream to de-territorialize childhood, Acker widens the possibilities for interaction between articulated subjects. Acker is aware that the external forces of social institutions and determinisms limit individual desire and liberty, but she also understands the liberating possibilities offered by non-rational languages like those of dreams. For Acker, “dream is that which is most sacred in human and/or beast” (215), and, as such, it is a device capable of offering individuals access to both Bataille’s sacred realm and the realm of nature which “can only be spoken of in a dream” (250). Despite all her wallowing in abjection, Laure

finally comes out of her depression in the end of the novel and it is her dreams that permit her to do this by returning her to a state of nature. Closely paraphrasing a letter from Peignot to Leiris, Laure exalts:

It's time to quit this play. It's time to completely hold my life in my own hands, to be alone in the desert, the place of stones, to be there as *me* and no longer as someone who hardly resembles me.

To be me, I must turn to dreaming.

My sight is clear; I'm not drunk. . . I'm not going to be broken like this. I've got my childhood back. I have found my childhood, in pavement and leaves, in the stable earth and in water. (265)

Basically, it is also through re-dreaming her memories that Laure is able to reconfigure her past and articulate new identities and social commitments outside of the limiting, traditional concepts of church, family, and state. Not only does Acker follow Laclau and Mouffe in abandoning "the abstract universalism of the Enlightenment, the essentialist conception of a social totality, and the myth of a unitary subject," she also abandons the epistemological reality of the bourgeois world (*Return* 21). Like Peignot, Acker acknowledges, "everything in each of us is in flux and we are well aware of it" (*Laure* 139). Because of this instability, many readers of *Mother* question all identities (both individual and collective) in the novel as well as the governing epistemology of rationalism. Nonetheless, in all of its disturbing confusion, in its messages of multiple subjectivities and multiple rationalities, *Mother* offers up a positive solution in Laure's final realization that she can periodically re-originate before the socialized limitations of

the Western world. It is in its discursive possibility of re-dreaming one's desires and identities, through mutable forms, that *Mother* suggests a new liberating agenda for commitment in the postmodern world. With "a political commitment to not abandoning one's dreams," therefore, "even when dreams assume or are forced to assume the most abject and nightmarish FORMS of horror," *Mother* goes beyond the nihilism of much of Acker's previous fiction and dwells in possibility (Pfohl, "Stolen Childhoods Redreamed").

Chapter Three: Articulations of Family in William Gaddis's *A Frolic of His Own*

On its surface, Gaddis's *Frolic* is part of a long lineage of American literature that criticizes the hegemony of individualistic discourse within the American family.

Gaddis's portrait of the Crease family, an upper-middle class family haunted by Civil War secrets, as well as his portraits of related families throughout the novel, reveals social situations rife with falsity and greed; characters are often more concerned with their civil liberties than with the needs of their families (both chosen and found).

Gaddis's plethora of literary, historical, and cultural references (among others) can easily be employed to make a case for such a didactic reading of *Frolic*. In fact, many of Gaddis's references champion the importance of shared understandings and commitment above individual agency. Consequently, many neo-conservative critics of Gaddis's work propose a traditionalist, satirical motivation behind the novel.

Gaddis's moralizing in *Frolic*, however, is not as easy to determine as one might think. Gregory Comnes and other critics of Gaddis's work believe Gaddis's novels further a more contemporary interpretation of agency and commitment with a basis in contingency, narrative ethics, and maternalistic theory. Although Comnes correctly ascertains that *Frolic*'s morality is contingent, he still relies upon an essentialist interpretation of linguistic signifiers like "individual," "family," and other related terms. In contrast, Gaddis's *Frolic* actually proves a perfect example of the "constitutive role of antagonism in social life" (Mouffe, *Return* 2). With Laclau and Mouffe, Gaddis believes that morality is provisional and, as such, tradition, class, and shared understandings as they relate to family commitment, though important, are often confusing. Furthermore, an analysis of the novel's portrait of individual agency and family commitment

demonstrates that social rationalities like family are fashioned by complex power relations involving a number of discourses and partially articulated identities. In the end, *Frolic* endorses a democratic notion of family commitment without promoting relativism.

Part One: Gaddis and Frolic

Reception of Gaddis's Fiction

In order to discuss family commitment in *Frolic*, it is first helpful to scrutinize the common trends of interpretation of Gaddis's fiction by its initial reviewers and subsequent critics. No stranger to the American literary community, Gaddis and his novels have been the topic of much discussion since the publication of *The Recognitions* in 1955.⁶¹ A less than prolific writer, Gaddis has enjoyed a mixed reception despite four well-crafted novels and a posthumously published novella. Gaddis has amassed an assortment of awards and fellowships over the years,⁶² and yet despite a small degree of online buzz his popular reputation has not flourished. "Time has never been kind to the novelist William Gaddis" (52), notes Malcolm Jones Jr., while Eileen Battersby affectionately calls Gaddis, "[t]he writer who has become famous for not being as famous as he should be" (11).

The reception of his first novel, *The Recognitions*, which took him seven years to write and was published when he was 32 years old, "was a humbling one" for the writer

⁶¹ William Gaddis. *The Recognitions*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1955. New York: Penguin, 1993. I cite from the Penguin edition here.

⁶² In addition to the aforementioned *National Book Award* (1976, 1994), Gaddis has been awarded a *National Institute of Arts and Letters Grant* (1963), two *National Foundation for the Arts Grants* (1976, 1974), a *Guggenheim Fellowship* (1981), the *MacArthur Foundation Fellowship* (1982), a *Rockefeller Foundation Grant*, the *Lannan Literary Award For Lifetime Achievement* (1993), and the *National Book Critic's Circle Award* (1995). Gaddis was elected to the *American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters* in 1989 accepting the Mary McCarthy Chair, and he was given the *Edith Wharton Citation of Merit* as New York State Author from 1993-95.

(“The Art of Fiction CI: William Gaddis” 58). “When I finished it,” he tells Eileen Battersby, “I thought well, I guess this will change the world. It didn’t. Nothing happened. I was shocked, angry, hurt, surprised. It took me a long time to come to terms with the fact that no, I had not become famous” (11). “[P]ut it this way,” Gaddis further laments, “I am on the record saying that I thought I would win the Nobel Prize” (11). *The Recognitions* did not garner Gaddis the fame and success he had hoped for and it became the topic of much criticism. Patterned on the Faust myth and referencing countless religious and secular texts from the *Clementine Recognition* to T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” the novel employs motifs of authenticity and forgery to reveal the falsity of human nature and the unoriginality of the arts. Much to the chagrin of its initial readership, however, the novel is crammed with “unclear plot lines; unpunctuated dialogue; arcane references to occult, pagan, and Christian practices,” all of which intimidate (Leverence 32). *The Recognitions* has been criticized, for, among other sins, being too “‘ambitious,’ ‘erudite,’ ‘long’ [and] ‘negative’” (Green 1). Gaddis has been taken to task for trying too hard to write a masterpiece of modern fiction (à la Joyce), being undisciplined in his writing, and having a parochial view of humanity and the modern world. Despite the efforts of a few positive readers, including Jack Green whose *fire the bastards* [sic] lambastes the novel’s unprofessional reviewers as well as its publishers for unsatisfactory advertising, the novel would remain in obscurity until the late 1970’s (Green 1).⁶³

Gaddis’s second novel, *J R*, received a marginally better reception than *The Recognitions* even though its style is more difficult to master than that of its

⁶³ According to Green, two of the novel’s fifty-five reviews were “adequate” (1).

predecessor.⁶⁴ *J R* was positively reviewed by Aldridge (who had praised *The Recognitions*), as well as by fellow novelists Thomas Leclair, Gilbert Sorrentino, and William Gass, among others and was awarded the *National Book Award* for 1976.⁶⁵ Although the award did make it easier for Gaddis “to win [other] major grants, endowments and awards that allowed him to write virtually full-time” (Dempsey, “William Gaddis: Life and Work”), it did “little to promote sales or shelf recognition”; *J R* still faced a negative readership (Birkerts 27).⁶⁶ According to John Kuehl and Steven Moore,

There were, of course, a few reviews Jack Green would have excoriated: reviewing *J R* in a jumble of other books for the *Hudson Review* (which had panned *The Recognitions*), William H. Pritchard brazenly admitted he did not even finish the book, then, not surprisingly, proceeded to misname an important character. Pearl K. Bell, in the *New Leader* (which Green had taken to task for not even bothering to review Gaddis’s first novel), began with literary cocktail party chitchat and seldom rose above that level: clearly unsympathetic to the novel, she gave the reader a jaundiced, misleading view based on her inability to comprehend it. The *New Leader* should have followed the *New Republic*’s lead: after Alfred Kazin’s incompetent review in their 6 December 1975 issue, they turned the novel over to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, who produced a splendid review for their 7 February 1976 issue. George Steiner pronounced the novel

⁶⁴ William Gaddis. *J R*. New York: Knopf, 1975. New York: Penguin, 1985. I cite from the Penguin edition here.

⁶⁵ I say “somewhat of a surprise” since Gaddis’s friend and supporter, William Gass, was one of the two judges for the award (the other was Mary McCarthy).

⁶⁶ According to John Swartz, “Gaddis recalls once getting a royalty check for \$4.35 from ‘J.R.’ [sic]” (C2).

“unreadable,” then he proceeded to give a reading of it, apparently untroubled by the contradiction. (*In Recognition of William Gaddis*, “Introduction”14-15)

The difficulties with *J R* are manifold. On one level, it retains *The Recognitions*’s penchant for obscurantism and chaos. Like *The Recognitions*, *J R* is a deeply allusive novel, referencing mythology, literature, economics, and philosophy (among other disciplines). To make matters worse, *J R* is a 700+ page experiment written almost entirely in dialogue; consequently, readers are confused by the lack of tags to identify speakers as characters enter rooms, interrupt the action, and confuse the dialogue (in fact, characters’s voices often interrupt conversations from another room). Television commercials play in the background while newspaper reviews and classified advertisements interrupt the narrative in the form of inserted texts. Add to this the constant presence of the telephone as one of Gaddis’s structural devices and *J R* exemplifies the confusion of communication in a postmodern era. Gaddis’s novel requires readers both to identify characters involved in a conversation as well as place them in the room, on the phone, or on the other end of the receiver. Finally, as a result of its erudition and innovative narrative style, *J R* has gained a reputation as being a purposefully confusing novel void of any moral focus. Gaddis’s protagonist, after all, is an eleven-year-old business wunderkind (J R Vansant) who innocently embodies Calvin Coolidge’s critical statement: “[a]fter all, the chief business of the American people is business” (Bittering, “The Business of America is Business?”). Character relationships rarely go beyond business and, as Gardner points out, although Gaddis’s efforts to satirize American business mentality may be “a worthy enough ambition . . . he fails to pull it off” (“Big Deals”).

Because Gaddis's obscurantism and narrative style had kept him from receiving the same widespread praise and monetary success as colleagues Joseph Heller and E.L. Doctorow and others had enjoyed, he made an effort to capture a wider audience with his third novel. *Carpenter's Gothic* was a great deal shorter than his first two offerings and seemed destined to be his most popular.⁶⁷ With *Gothic*, Gaddis admits he had different novelistic concerns from the first two novels. In a rare *Paris Review* interview from 1986, he tells Abádi-Nagy:

In *Carpenter's Gothic* the problems were largely of style and technique and form. I wanted to write a shorter book, one which observes the unities of time and place to the point that everything, even though it expands into the world, takes place in one house, and a country house at that, with a small number of characters, in a short span of time. It became really largely an exercise in style and technique. (60)

Gothic did enjoy more success than the previous two novels, and as Peter Dempsey points out, it "marked Gaddis's entry into the book-buying public's consciousness" ("William Gaddis: Life and Work"). Selling more copies than the first two novels, *Gothic* occasioned the immediate re-release of *The Recognitions* and *J R* as Penguin Modern Classics. In fact, the author's attempt to make his work more accessible resulted in a much more evenly distributed reception of the novel. Ironically enough, *Gothic* was the first of Gaddis's novels to be described as "thin and deliberately superficial" (Rafferty 496). Whereas Gaddis's first two novels suffered poor receptions because of their

⁶⁷ William Gaddis. *Carpenter's Gothic*. New York: Viking, 1985. New York: Penguin, 1986. Hereafter shortened to *Gothic*. I cite from the Viking edition here.

confusion and erudition, his third novel was labelled, by some, too easy.⁶⁸ Critics such as Gregory Comnes, Steven Moore, and Peter Wolfe, among others, however, have recognized the complexities of *Gothic* in comparing the novel with its predecessors.⁶⁹ Although *Gothic* is not as erudite as *The Recognitions* or *J R* (partly because of its length), and despite the fact that it conforms to the “strict Aristotelian unities,” it is far from an easy read (“*Carpenter’s Gothic*; or, *The Ambiguities*” 106). A “patchwork of conceits, borrowings, and deceptions,” *Gothic* employs conventions of:

the Gothic novel, the apocalypse, the romance (in all senses), and the metafictional meditation, along with the elements of Greek tragedy, Dickensian social satire, the colonial novel, the political thriller, documentary realism, the contemporary Vietnam veteran’s story, and what Roy R. Male calls ‘cloistral fiction.’ (106)

More so than its borrowings of convention, *Gothic*’s thematic material makes for a confusing read. The novel’s central message, according to Moore, is the conflict “between revealed truth” and “acquired knowledge” (104). As such, *Gothic* is a novel that “raises questions for which there are no distinct answers, and one that counters absolutes with ambiguities” (101).

Surprisingly, Gaddis was again awarded the *National Book Award* in 1994 for his final novel, *Frolic*. Although there were reviewers who found *Frolic* “clear and easy to follow” (Friedman 24), or “accessible” (Birkerts 27; Dirda 10; Calve 39) or even “lazy” (Jones 52), for the most part, many reviewers did not recommend Gaddis’s novel to their

⁶⁸ One is tempted to pass this comment off as a consequence of higher expectation rather than ease of understanding.

⁶⁹ See Comnes’s chapter on *Gothic* in *The Ethics of Indeterminacy in the Novels of William Gaddis*, Moore’s “*Carpenter’s Gothic*; or, *The Ambiguities*,” and Wolfe’s chapter on the novel in *A Vision of His Own: The Mind and Art of William Gaddis*.

readers.⁷⁰ The reception of *Frolic* sees the novel labelled with the sins of its predecessors. Like all of Gaddis's previous fictions, *Frolic* makes use of a maelstrom of allusions, creating havoc for unsuspecting readers. *Frolic* is "something like listening to a life insurance salesman and biblical prophet—one who knows world literature forward and backward—interpret your wildest dreams" (Amdahl 42). The novel's structure (which mimics that of *J R* in many ways) is also chaotic. Carl MacDougall writes:

Blink and you'll find yourself in mid-flashback, unaware of how you got there. Blink again ("And so she turned now to her guest over tea and coffee cups...") and you'll miss an indication—the "now"—that you've returned from the flashback to the novel's present. There are no chapter divisions and few page breaks to clue the reader in to shifts of time and place. (19)

Further confusing the structure are the inserted documents, briefs, depositions, opinions, and excerpts from a play described as "ghastly" (Bergin 25), "tiresome" (Kakutani C20), "lousy" (Jones 52), "dull" (Bradbury 12), and even "perverse" (Towers 22). In terms of narrative voice, *Frolic* is labelled "claustrophobic-inducing" by Sven Birkets who further warns, "[n]ot only is there no reprieve from talk, not only does the whole work unfold in the same few rooms, but the nature of the narrative itself is deeply, if not profoundly cyclical" (17). As a result of this confusing dialogue and sparse narration, *Frolic* suffers from sparse characterization. Rather than develop full characters to which readers can relate, Gaddis develops thin characters that seem to have no depth of understanding of the world and are "in a continuous state of becoming" (Kakutani C20). These characters simply serve as "voice boxes, appliances for the generation of spoken material" (Birkets

⁷⁰ For a more in-depth reception study of Gaddis's *Frolic*, see Fergus O'Brien's unpublished *Dismissing Charges: A Study of the Reception of William S. Gaddis's Frolic of His Own* [sic].

18). Even those readers, like Richard Eder, who are modestly forgiving of Gaddis's fiction, inform their readers that Christina is "the only fully human character" (3). Finally, as a result of its structural and narrative ambiguity, *Frolic* is thematically confusing. It is not the first time Gaddis lets "the reader do his work for him" and many argue that Gaddis's expectations are too high, resulting in a confusing message (Gurley E6). "Mr. Gaddis," notes Kakutani of *The New York Times*,

seems to suggest, the reader is supposed to make order out of disorder, discern the patterns among repetitions, ellipses and digressions. . . . As a result of this highly oblique approach, Mr. [sic] provocative vision of modern society is purchased at a price, the price of hard work and frequent weariness on the part of the reader. (C 20)

Whether they praise or denigrate the novels, most readers of Gaddis's fiction find it difficult to discern any salutary message from Gaddis's work. Those that praise the novels for their postmodern tendencies find little need for morality in a contingent universe, while those that denigrate the postmodern elements of the novels do so specifically because they cannot find a moral justification behind Gaddis's work. That said, a close analysis of *Frolic* in particular reveals a definite concern for the ethical tension between individual agency and family commitment in a postmodern world.

Frolic

Despite his confusing texts, Gaddis offers the contemporary reader more than many of his postmodern counterparts. With a little work, Gaddis's novels do offer a discernible plot through the jungle of dialogue and, consequently, an opportunity to attribute a clear message to the fiction. Broadly speaking, *Frolic* is a commentary on contemporary

mores of commitment (in particular those of family) presented through the litigious nature of late twentieth-century America. It is a portrait of the American legal system, the people who get caught up in the excitement of litigation, and the effects of this intersection on social and family commitment. Although the initial explanation for the novel's plethora of law suits may be pure greed, Gaddis suggests that money is just a "yardstick . . . the only common reference people have for making other people take them as seriously as they take themselves" (*Frolic* 13). More often than not, characters in Gaddis's world wish family members would take them seriously. Many of the novel's lawsuits therefore question appropriate levels of family commitment and obligation, and even those that do not explore the negative effects the legal system has on the family.

A summary of the novel's legal cases, both minor and major, provides the bare bones of the novel's family relationships. Almost all of the characters in the novel are involved in some legal suit, and, when they are not, they talk about possible suits. In minor cases, Lily sues both her ex-husband for forcing her to get breast implants (that turn out to be faulty), and a Reverend for convincing her estranged parents to leave their fortune to his congregation. Trish, a rich socialite, sues anyone that enters her life, but it is her family-related court battles that most interest readers. She fights her ex-husband over custody of their son because neither one of them wants the commitment. She simultaneously sues one man for foetal endangerment while bringing a case for the right to have an abortion against the father of her child, suggesting she doesn't know where individual liberty ends and commitment begins. Like Lily, she contests her estranged mother's will, questioning her right to leave money and valuables to a maid rather than to blood relatives. Although it is rarely clear which of these suits she wins, Trish does seem

to come out smelling of roses. Of course, readers cannot help but think her luck will eventually run out.⁷¹

More so than the minor cases throughout *Frolic*, the major cases point to a concern with social and family commitment. The aptly named “Pop and Glow” case between the Episcopal Church and Pepsi Cola hovers over the novel like a ghost. Demonstrating the alarming extent to which money trumps traditional ideals in contemporary America, this case highlights Gaddis’s satirical bent on the law and its affects on family. Similar to the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case of Dickens’s *Bleak House*, a “scarecrow of a suit [that] has . . . become so complicated, that no man alive knows what it means,” the “Pop and Glow” takes several twists and turns (*Bleak House* 3). A case initially based on name infringement (PEPSICOLA/EPISCOPAL), the suit has spanned a decade and throughout the novel seems no nearer a resolution than when it started. Harry Lutz, lead counsel for the defense, has been on the case the entire time and it has slowly eaten away at his sanity, consuming his every waking thought. Though Harry knows these cases are not uncomplicated, an idealistic sense of justice has nagged him since the beginning of his corporate career (despite his father’s pragmatism and business sense) and he is unable to shrug off the concept of justice as being what is “right” (340). Consequently, Harry’s inability to take “a few shortcuts” in the “Pop and Glow” case prevents him from “living like a human being” (340). The resultant effect of Harry’s involvement in the case is that his recent marriage to Christina and his relationship with his and her family suffer drastic implications. Harry’s obligations have been co-opted by his employer and he becomes “married to his job” in the sense of the well-known cliché.

⁷¹ The aural connection between Trish’s last name, Hemsley, and that of Leona Helmsley, socialite, hotelier, and convicted tax fraud implies that Trish will not continue to be successful.

Distant and aloof, Harry begins to drink heavily and take painkillers for a toothache rather than take time off to consult a dentist. Although the case is nearing settlement at the time of Harry's mysterious death, he knows that, as with most cases of its kind, nothing is really solved and the damage to his family obligations may never be repaired.

The novel's protagonist, Oscar Crease, a college history instructor, civil war buff, and amateur playwright, is also involved in many law suits (both major and minor in the novel) related to his search for familial admiration. *Frolic's* central concern is with the alleged plagiarism of Oscar Crease's civil war play (*Once at Antietam*), a family epic based on the supposed experiences of his grandfather, a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and a man much trusted and respected by Oscar in his childhood years. Although only submitted for publication once (to a television network), Oscar's play resurfaces thirteen years later as the storyline of the blockbuster movie, *The Blood in the Red, White, and Blue*, much to Oscar's displeasure. In an effort to protect the family memory and win the respect of his estranged father, Oscar sues Erebus Entertainment for general, special, and punitive damages, citing as reasons plagiarism and theft of idea (apparently, the "idea" is Judge Crease, Sr.'s civil war experiences). He also requests an injunction against the exhibition of the film,

unless and until he is credited on a separate card in letters no smaller than those accorded the film's producer and director and of no shorter duration on the screen with his original role in its creation, an accounting, interest, costs, and reasonable attorney's fees. (158)

Yet, Oscar's suit is not without confusion. Many complications confound issues of justice and fairness. Oscar is offered a two hundred thousand dollar settlement (the

probable price of an unsolicited script), but refuses to accept because he wants the publicity of a victory to show his father how committed he is to the family name. Oscar's lawyer, Mr. Basie, is then revealed as a fraud who has earned a law degree through correspondence from his prison cell and has never passed the New York State Bar Exam. Nevertheless, Basie knows the Upper Court likes to overturn the Lower and sets a trap for the movie company's attorneys. Although he loses the first case and disappears (assumedly returned to jail), Oscar's father notices Basie's trap and anonymously writes the appeal that overturns the original decision. Oscar wins his case, but because of the injunction and the ancillary costs of making the film, he ends up with less than the original offered settlement. In fact, he is lucky that he doesn't owe the movie company money since, as sister Christina ironically points out, "[i]f they'd based your award on actual damages and profits you'd have twenty percent of nothing wouldn't you? You'd have a fifth of minus eighteen million is that what you want? you'd owe them three and a half million dollars" (466). Because of the celebrity surrounding the blockbuster movie and Oscar's suit, both Oscar and Erebus also face a suit launched by Eugene O'Neill's estate for plagiarism of O'Neill's civil war play, *Mourning Becomes Electra*. To make matters worse, Oscar fails to obtain the one thing he was hoping to get from the venture—his father's approval. Caring only about the law, Judge Crease doesn't show up or send anyone to contest Oscar's monetary settlement.

Certainly more knowledgeable about the law and its intricacies than any other character in the novel, Judge Crease is no less concerned with being taken seriously, especially when issues of his family are at stake. Like Harry and Oscar, Crease lives in his father's shadow. Although jealous of his father's rise to Supreme Court Justice,

Judge Crease's involvement in the novel's legal world is also an attempt to rewrite family history. Spurred on by the historical conflict consuming his father and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Crease follows Holmes in his decisions, finding his own father's legal philosophies to be too idealistic. In *Frolic*, Judge Crease, as a presiding adjudicator, plays a major role in two lawsuits complete with their counter suits and appeals. Although Crease's decisions in both cases demonstrate his support of the law over any idealistic notion of social obligation, it is his participation in the Fickert case that best demonstrates his feelings on family obligation.

The Fickert case involves the accidental drowning of a young lad (Wayne Fickert) in the course of his baptism in the Pee Dee River by Reverend Elton Ude. Earl Fickert, the child's father, brings the civil suit against Reverend Ude and asks for damages. In an intricate, well thought-out argument, Judge Crease assesses the boy's requisite capacity to make a free decision (whether or not he was unduly coerced by friends, family, or congregation), his worth to the congregation, and his worth to his family and father specifically. Judge Crease decides that the Reverend is partly responsible as God's representative, but he gradually lets Ude off the hook. Looking to the laws of the day and their strict application rather than any idealistic notion of commitment, Crease finds the boy is worth a combination of his future earnings (an amount that, based on past earnings and observed potential, adds up to nothing), his funeral expenses (already covered by the congregation), and his clothes (purchased for the ceremony and worth \$18.76). Crease's award of \$18.76 plus one dollar for punitive damages to the boy's father causes more calls for his impeachment since he gives a boy's life and the family's loss so little value (379).

When confronted with the extremely litigious nature of Gaddis's America and the apparent absence of feeling for others (especially family members) in this novel, *Frolic*'s readers cannot help but ask "why?" What is the point of Gaddis's novel? Is *Frolic* merely descriptive of hegemonic individualism and a society run amuck? If not, does Gaddis offer any motivations for the characters' actions or any solutions for remedying social and familial ills? The answers to these questions are most probably found in the novel's networks of allusion interwoven throughout the novel's legal cases, narrative, and dialogue.

Part Two: Allusion and Family

Traditional Explanation

As demonstrated in my second chapter, contemporary theory encourages extensive literary interpretation through the proliferation of intertextuality. Theorists like Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, and others teach that new texts like Acker's *Mother* act as intersection points of other already written texts. Michael Riffaterre, for example, believes that the reader's role should be to find the intertexts that make up the text studied. He writes, "[t]he intertext leaves an indelible trace in the text, a formal constant which plays the role of an imperative for reading, and which governs the decoding of the message" ("La Trace de l'intertexte" 5).⁷² In other words, "each literary text guides the reader towards its own intertexts" (Morgan 262).

Although the term allusion is similar to intertextuality in that it refers to an author's referencing of a previous text, the term has been traditionally employed as a method of strengthening a text's message. Authors use extensive allusion in order to

⁷² The translation of Riffaterre comes from Thaïs Morgan's "The Space of Intertextuality."

“show . . . knowledge of the tradition in which [they have] operated, and also the new possibilities [they have seen] in [their] particular redistribution of those traditional formal elements” (Hutcheon 235). According to Elaine B. Safer, writers like Cotton Mather “[develop] a sense of a legendary past” to which readers can relate (25-26). These writers use allusions to illustrate or augment their messages by pointing to a previous text with similar themes, motifs, or storylines. They typically assume a reader already knows the text(s) alluded to and, as such, can immediately recognize the connection. If not, readers are encouraged to prospect ancient literature for themes and references with which to better understand the primary text. A cursory examination of Gaddis’s fiction and its accompanying literary criticism indicates the possibility that Gaddis novels, like those traditional works of Mather and other, stand on their own. Rather than see them as intersection points for other texts, most readers focus on how the secondary sources bolster Gaddis’s own message. Consequently, in my examination of *Frolic* I employ the term allusion rather than intertextuality.

Because of *Frolic*’s extensive erudition, readers of the novel face a daunting task when attempting to connect the author’s allusions to his message of family commitment and personal agency. When confronted with a possible allusion, readers have a decision to make:

Will they continue to read, obeying the culminative narrative and linguistic pressure to proceed? Or will they stop, investigate the alternative, the contiguous or simultaneous echoing reference, and then, perhaps, integrate *that* into their reading and interpreting as they proceed? (Hutcheon 235)

Gaddis utilizes various methods of allusion including character names, titles of works, acknowledged quotations, unacknowledged quotations, brief descriptions, and indirect references. His methods are at times obvious, often oblique. In some cases the allusions refer to specific texts or incidents while elsewhere they refer to general practices and social issues. Since Gaddis alludes to too many sources to mention without giving an in-depth gloss of the novel, I will keep my discussion focused on those sources that pertain to issues of individual agency and family or social commitment and, in particular, to the idea of tradition as it pertains to these issues.⁷³

A common type of allusion found in *Frolic* is of a religious/philosophical nature. Especially through Oscar and his legal suits, Gaddis frequently quotes the Bible as well as the views of disparate philosophers such as Aristotle, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Plato, and Montaigne, all of whom deal in some way with the tension between individual agency and social or family commitment as it pertains to justice. In terms of Gaddis's biblical references, most tend to point to the commitment people owe to God as Father. Early in *Frolic*, Judge Crease foreshadows the issues of family resentment and stress that will arise in the novel when he quotes a portion of Matthew in which Jesus gives directions to his disciples, saying he has come ““not to send peace, but a sword”” (38). A consideration of the rest of the passage indicates, however, that Gaddis's use of the quote is not naive:

I came to set sons against their fathers, daughters against their mothers, daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law; a man's worst enemies will be the members of his own family.

⁷³ For a more comprehensive look at the allusions in *Frolic* see my *Dismissing Charges* as well as the online annotation provided by www.williamgaddis.org.

Whoever loves his father or mother more than me is not fit to be my disciple.
Whoever does not take up his cross and follow in my steps is not fit to be my
disciple. Whoever tries to gain his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his life
for my sake will gain it. (Matthew 10: 34-39)

From this passage, readers sense that Crease is aware of a larger sense of justice and obligation above family. The fact that Crease also cites Matthew 6: 19-21 when giving his opinion on the Fickert case suggests that he bows to a higher court since the boy is “unconcerned with laying up treasures on earth but rather in heaven” (379). In both instances, however, readers realize that Crease is simply passing the buck. He is not really a religious man. In the first case he actually employs the quote to describe the purpose of the artist in society, not of God in the world. In the second case, he implies that although he does not necessarily disagree with the importance of justice and commitment on a higher level, he simply does not believe it is under his purview to cross the line dividing heaven and earth in his judgement.

Gaddis’s philosophical referencing also explores individual agency and commitment. According to Oscar, Montaigne “says it’s a hard task to be always the same man. . . there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and other people” (474). Consequently, Oscar is able to use Montaigne’s philosophy to sue himself based on the level of commitment he owes himself. Though only a brief reference in the novel, Montaigne’s dilemma sets the mood for the discursive struggle between identity and commitment that pervades *Frolic*, especially the inserted texts of Oscar’s play and the legal documents concerning it. Plato, for example, is also a major contributor to ideals of justice and commitment in the novel, because he believes in a

world of ideals. Oscar's play is largely based on Plato's dialogues, with characters like Thomas and Kane arguing about justice by plagiarizing whole passages from *The Republic* such as "I say that justice is nothing but the advantage of the stronger" (191) and "we hear of the next world, how justice is going to be done to those who have done wrong here" (190). Mostly through the character of Kane (Oscar's Socrates), Oscar pays "homage" to Plato who represents the idealistic version of personality (195). For Plato, there are pre-existing ideas of justice, commitment, and liberty in the world and it is society's duty to try to understand them. Any association whether, it be family, community, or state, must work toward instilling these ideals in individuals. In terms of family commitment, like Rawls and other deontological liberals, Plato believes that the nuclear family may not necessarily be the best format for socialization, not because it ignores individual liberties, but because socialization might better be served in a communal atmosphere based on ideals of justice and truth. In his ideal republic, Plato suggests, "women should be all of them wives in common of all [the] men, and that no woman should live with any man privately, and that their children too should be common, and the parent should not know his own offspring nor the child its parent" (*Republic* V.457). Not adverse to families, per se, Plato simply looks for the best way to fulfil ideals of justice in the community.

Like Plato, Aristotle is a major influence on Oscar's play. Characters like the Major often spout Aristotelian philosophy in explaining the South's reasons for secession and making excuses for the natural state of slavery. In an argument with Kane, the Major exhorts: "Aristotle, he was the Greek philosopher, I can show you somewhere what he had to say about natural slaves. That there's some just naturally meant to be slaves" (90).

When Kane responds that “colour” should not “decide” the issue and that “every Greek knew the threat of enslavement . . . on the day he set off to war” (91), the Major is unconvinced. He simply uses this argument to complain about how the slaves the South is now protecting are weak, “[n]ot the ones with the courage to fight off slavers, or smart enough to escape them” (91). For the Major, the fact that these slaves are descendents of weaker Africans justifies Aristotle’s theory that slavery is natural. Of course, in the broader spectrum of Aristotle’s philosophy, slavery plays a big role in the establishment of the family (*oikos*) and the state (*polis*). Unlike Plato, Aristotle believes that the nuclear household complete with husband, wife, children, and slaves is a natural phenomenon since it is “established according to nature for the satisfaction of daily needs” (*Politics* I.ii.1252b9). Aristotle finds this natural association to be the beginning of a chain of associations ending in the natural association of the state. Just as Rawls appears to get his ideas from Plato, it is obvious that communitarians like Sandel and Taylor follow closely Aristotle’s rhetoric.

Finally, Rousseau is the third major philosophical influence on Oscar and his play in general. Readers learn early in the novel that Oscar has been writing a monograph on Rousseau and his play is riddled with references to Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. Allusions to Rousseau’s beliefs in the ““supreme guidance of the will of the people”” (81), “the noble savage” (72), and the idea of “absolute freedom” point to a commitment to liberty different from Montaigne, Plato, and Aristotle (351). Although Oscar doesn’t specifically mention Rousseau’s views on family commitment, it is interesting to see that he holds a view similar to Plato in some ways and to Aristotle in others. Like Aristotle, he believes in the natural household construct. For Rousseau, “[t]he oldest of all

societies, and the only natural one, is that of the family” (50). On the other hand, like Plato, Rousseau believes the family outlives its usefulness when it ceases to be about liberty:

children remain tied to their father by nature only so long as they need him for their preservation. As soon as this need ends, the natural bond is dissolved.

Once the children are freed from the obedience they owe their father, and the father is freed from his responsibilities towards them, both parties equally regain their independence. If they continue to remain united, it is no longer nature, but their own choice, which unites them; and the family as such is kept in being only by agreement. (50)

For Rousseau, then, family commitment begins as a natural phenomenon, but becomes more of a practical idea than an idealistic notion. Despite all the focus on Rousseau in Oscar’s philosophy, he cannot truly commit to Rousseau’s notion of family and liberty nor grasp the transitory nature of the family relationship as it appears in Rousseau’s philosophy. Oscar’s constant fight to please his father and the expectations he places on his father point to this gap in Oscar’s thinking.

In line with the philosophical allusions prevalent in *Frolic*, Gaddis offers historical and legal allusions as well. The two are related in that some of the historical references come from landmark legal decisions, but mostly because they all contain an element of antagonism in that they refer to battles or legal cases involving combative sides. Again, the most important historical references in Gaddis’s novel come in Oscar’s play and the film that plagiarizes this play. Here readers find many references to the American Civil War, a war fought for the personal liberty of all Americans and,

therefore, a war instrumental in the creation of modern day America. Moreover, Gaddis's focus on the Civil War—a war in which brothers fought brothers and fathers—indicates a deeper concern with how the war affects families. The references to the many battles such as Shiloh (297, 309), Manassas (126), Seven Days (123), Richmond (83, 143), and Balls Bluff (83, 397, 413, 417) are all indicative of lives lost and families torn apart for the sake of commitment to a greater social cause. Gaddis mentions Generals Jackson (83, 84, 140, 443), Lee (140, 143, 417, 418), and McClellan (140, 416, 418), and their parts in the war, but perhaps most interesting in terms of family commitment is the mention of General Hooker (52, 416, 417). Oscar first mentions Hooker when talking about his students' reaction to American history when he notes, “[t]alk about the Civil War they think Longstreet is an address in New Jersey and you can imagine the ribald fun they have with Hooker” (52). Although his reference is seemingly innocuous, Oscar misses the significance of the fact that the term “hooker,” in its contemporary usage, owes its popularity (though not its beginnings) to the General and his practice of allowing his men to entertain prostitutes (affectionately called “Hooker’s Girls”) at the barracks. More than just a scandal, Hooker’s practice can be read as part of a larger critique of how the casualties of the American Civil War include family values as well.

Gaddis's novel also points to how the American Civil War tears individuals apart. He is forthcoming about how some of the characters in Oscar's play have been affected by the violence. Individuals like Thomas, for example, often find themselves moving from South to North and back again, and, therefore, at odds with which side to support. Although Thomas initially fights for the South, he eventually moves to the North to take over a factory left him in a family will. In order to move to the North he hires a

substitute to fight in his stead. When conscripted by the Northern army, he does the same thing. Wracked with guilt over his inability to re-enter the fray, he is haunted by horrible nightmares of the two substitutes killing each other. He actually sees the war as a personal battle more than anything. He tells Kane:

I don't even...know myself anymore. On the battlefield, when I suddenly knew that the man I saw coming up against me, my opposite in every way...that he was not my enemy, but death, that we were fighting together...And since then, now...it's like meeting myself down some dark street, waylaid round a corner and thrown to the pavement, and left to fight myself off! (144-45)

Like Montaigne, Thomas is caught between two notions of self and the commitment he owes to both sides of his personality. Early references to his character, for example, indicate his father had him "reading Rousseau" (81), and he went about trying to help "Rousseau's noble savage" (82). When he comes back from the war, he has changed considerably, and he becomes more Aristotelian in his logic. When he finds out that William has set John Israel (Thomas's slave) free, he treats John Israel as property asking, "[w]hy didn't you set Henry off, your own boy instead of mine?" (93).

Closely connected with the historical references in *Frolic* are the legal allusions. Gaddis cites actual case law he has researched in the "84 volume set of American Jurisprudence" (Swartz 2) in order to substantiate *Frolic*'s inserted legal texts (29-38, 157-61, 164-208, 251-9, 349-64, 373-9). Gaddis is able to make use of case histories with the ease of a judge preparing a decision. He cites legal case histories to support all decisions so readers can see the legal world at work in *Frolic*. Though extremely plentiful and somewhat difficult to categorize, the most important legal issues in the

novel pertain to the tension between an individual's personal liberty and his/her commitment to a social group such as family. The novel's title is actually a legal term referring to the level of responsibility an employee holds to his/her employer as well as the obligation the employer has in the event that an employee has gone on "a frolic of his own" and acted outside the parameters of his/her job description. Elsewhere, Gaddis cites terms such as "curator bonis" (252) and "guardian ad litem" (252), which refer to persons appointed by the court to manage interests of an individual who cannot manage by him/herself. Gaddis also uses terms like "per stripes" which comes from the Latin for "by family" and refers to the distribution of an estate after a death (162). While more contemporary cases such as *Roe v Wade* are mentioned in order to foreground ideals of personal liberty in contemporary America, legal battles between Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Judge Learned Hand, and Oscar's great-grandfather also help to indicate the importance of antagonism within the legal system as issues of personal agency arise throughout history. Whereas Hand and Crease, Sr. believe in a more idealistic notion of justice, Holmes believes "it is [his] job to apply the law" (251).

Gaddis is undoubtedly an avid reader as *Frolic* abounds with allusions to literature in the form of Greek and Roman mythology; classical literature; European and American poetry, fiction, and drama; and literary criticism among other genres and nationalities. Among other sources, *Frolic* references Homer (91, 324), James Joyce (87, 227), William Shakespeare (18, 31, 85, 161, 171, 176, 178-79, 254, 285, 365, 472), John Keats (23, 33, 37, 361), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (236-37, 255, 284-85, 372, 467, 472, 496, 508-09), Eugene O'Neil (186-87), and Robert Frost (425)—not to mention the countless allusions to characters in each of Gaddis's previous novels. Just as the

references to Montaigne, Plato, Aristotle, and Rousseau tend to drive the philosophical discourse of the novel, the references to O'Neill and Longfellow are most important in terms of literary tradition and issues of liberty and family commitment in *Frolic*.

Although only mentioned a few times throughout the novel, Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* plays a pivotal role in Oscar's lawsuit. Ostensibly a play about family relationships, secrets, and the boundaries of the self, *Mourning Becomes Electra* depicts the life of the Manon family during the Civil War. Briefly, the play centres on the exploits of Orin Manon, a man beset with contradictory sides to his nature. Before he goes to war, he feels an almost unnatural kinship with his mother and a hatred for his father, but when he returns to the homestead to find his mother has committed adultery and killed his father, his allegiances change. Spurred on by his sister (Lavinia) he revenges his mother's act by killing her lover and driving her to suicide. Orin then travels the world with his sister in attempts to assuage his guilt, only to find his fate lies in returning home to face his deeds. Feeling a kinship with Lavinia and no one else, Orin proposes they solidify their guilt through an incestuous relationship. Spurned by his sister, Orin kills himself in despair and Lavinia lives out her life alone in the family homestead.

According to the deposition in Oscar's suit and the suit filed by O'Neill's estate, Oscar's *Once at Antietam* plagiarizes dialogue and storyline from O'Neill's play. The character of Thomas resembles Orin in many ways. Thomas's feeling of a split identity as revealed in the speech quoted above, for example, is almost a direct plagiarism of Orin's speech in O'Neill's play where he says, "I had a queer feeling that war meant murdering the same man over and over, and that in the end I would discover the man was

myself!” (305). Madhar Pai outlines several more commonalities in the deposition for Oscar’s suit:

The Civil War is just ended and the character Orin returns home, wounded. His father, General Manon, comments “I’ve made a man of him. He did one of the bravest things I’ve seen in the war. He was wounded in the head . . . a close shave, but it turned out only a scratch.” Now here is the second scene we have the Major, in *Once at Antietam*, (sic) speaking of his son in law. “The battle we fought them up at Ball’s Bluff? Thomas distinguished himself up there, in a company under my command. He’s made us proud to have him in the family here.” (187)

With further explorations of similarities involving other characters and settings, Madhar Pai makes a solid case for Oscar’s plagiarism of *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

Surprisingly enough, Madhar Pai’s intent is not to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Oscar has plagiarized O’Neill’s work. In fact, it is just the opposite. He actually wants to show that “similarities can occur without copying” and “that expression [of a copyrighted text] is what is protected by law” (189). Judging from the portions of Oscar’s text provided, Madhar Pai does show that even though Oscar copies passages and lines from any number of sources (including *Mourning Becomes Electra*), his play is original. A close examination of the family relationships, for example, in the two plays in question demonstrates that Oscar’s play does not reproduce the O’Neill text as much as Gaddis himself does in *Frolic*. Unlike Oscar’s serious reproduction of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Gaddis’s allusion is done tongue-in-cheek. Gaddis’s story takes place in an isolated homestead, but it is the bustle of big city development that scares Oscar,

not a Civil War. Oscar also has a scar like Orin and Thomas. Conversely, Oscar sustains his injury in a less than noble fashion while attempting to hotwire his car. It is Oscar, not Thomas, who cannot get over his mother's death and, consequently, cannot form a lasting relationship with a woman other than his own sister. His attempts to do so are with women like Lily, many years his junior and his intellectual inferior, yet Oscar's constant attention to Lily's breasts point to his search for a mother figure. Oscar also resembles Orin and Thomas as he quotes Montaigne to explain the duty he owes to himself (474). Again, his citation of philosophy has nothing to do with serious issues like the Civil War, but with minor issues like suing himself. Finally, it is Oscar and Christina who are trapped in the family homestead like the Lavinia and Orin of O'Neill's play.

Perhaps the most substantive, yet puzzling literary allusion in *Frolic* is also directly related to an examination of family relationships. Gaddis makes a substantial connection between the characters in his novel and those in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha." References to Longfellow's poem may only appear in the later stages of *Frolic*, yet Oscar's favourite childhood poem becomes an important source of thematic and narrative information. To summarize briefly, Longfellow's Hiawatha is the son of the powerful Mudjekeewis (personified as the West Wind) and the beautiful Wenonah (who dies in childbirth). Nokomis raises Hiawatha by the shores of Gitchee Gumee (Lake Superior) and grows up to be a highly respected man among his people. Hiawatha also becomes friend and protector to many of the animals in the forest such as Kahgahgee (raven), Kayoshk (sea gull), and Adjidaumo (squirrel), all of whom revere and respect him. An epic poem, Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha" tells of Hiawatha's feats, which include the building of a birch bark canoe that moves without

paddles and which he uses to help him defeat Mishe-Nahma, the King of all Fishes. Hiawatha also fasts for seven days and nights for the common good of his people. During his fast he questions why his people must live a nomadic lifestyle, following their food where it takes them. Mondamin, a supernatural being, visits Hiawatha and tells him he must wrestle nightly with Mondamin if his entreaties are to be answered. When he finally defeats Mondamin, Hiawatha brings maize to his people, allowing them to live a more sedentary existence. In a final example of his great power and intelligence, Hiawatha (despite Nokomis's objections) confronts his father and they wrestle ferociously, battling to a draw. Hiawatha gains his father's respect and admiration, and, consequently, his promise to share his kingdom with Hiawatha when death draws near.

Since it is a favourite of Oscar's, Gaddis makes several references to Longfellow's poem in *Frolic*. Early in the narrative, Christina and Oscar often mention objects and characters such as Hiawatha's "Magic Mittens" or "Minjekahwun" (285-86, 304, 372-73) in addition to Wenonah, Minnehaha (Laughing Water), Nokomis, Hiawatha, Kahgahgee, Kayoshk, and Adjidaumo, all of whom play major roles in Longfellow's poem. As the narrative progresses, however, Gaddis reverts to superimposing Longfellow's poem into the novel. Describing Oscar peering longingly into his fish tank, Gaddis writes:

Neither the red scream of sunset blazing upon the icebound pond nor the thunderous purple of its risings on a landscape blown immense through leafless trees off toward the ocean where in flocks the wild goose Wawa where Kahgahgee king of ravens with his band of black marauders, or where the Kayoshk, the seagulls, rose with clamour from their nests among the marshes

and the Mama, the woodpecker seated high among the branches of the melancholy pine tree past the margins of the pond neither rose Ugudwash, the sunfish, nor the yellow perch the Sahwa like a sunbeam in the water banished here, with wind and wave, day and night and time itself from the domain of the discus by the daylight halide lamp, silent pump and power filter, temperature and pH balance and the system of aeration, fed on silverside and flake food, vitamins and krill and beef heart in a patent spinach mixture to restore their pep and lustre spitting black worms from the feeder when a crew of new arrivals (live delivery guaranteed, air freight collect at thirty dollars) brought a Chinese algae eater, khuli loach and male beta, two black mollies and four neons and a pair of black skirt tetra cruising through the new laid fronds of the Madagascar lace plant. (496)

There is no indicator that Oscar, Christina, or anyone else has read the above passage aloud. Rather, the heroic characters and events of Longfellow's poem appear to be seeping into Gaddis's novel through Oscar's daydreams. Oscar's memories of the poem and visual recognition of the natural similarities of his own land and the natural images of "Song of Hiawatha" indicate that Oscar becomes more inclined to escape into the dream world of Longfellow's poetry than face his own life and family issues. More than anything, Oscar's escape into Longfellow's poetry signifies important parallels between Oscar's relationship with his father and Hiawatha's relationship with Mudjeckewis. Both Oscar and Hiawatha are forced to deal with strong, overbearing fathers, with the power and will to destroy those around them. Both have lost their mothers and both have been

raised by secondary matronly figures (Hiawatha by Nokomis and Oscar by Christina's mother).

Problems with Traditional Interpretation of Allusion

Although traditional interpretations of allusion in *Frolic* indicate that Gaddis may have a positive sense of morality in mind (either pro-agency or pro-commitment), the mining of *Frolic* for allusive connections to tradition often leaves readers confused. Gaddis is not always clear as to the rationale of his references as they sometimes seem to contradict one another. He frequently juxtaposes sources that promote individual agency with those that endorse social and family commitment. In terms of the philosophical references, the presence of the theories of many disparate philosophers muddies the waters of Oscar's play. Although these philosophers add a level of sophistication to *Once at Antietam*, as Basie demonstrates, the play gets confusing with all "these characters getting up there making speeches at each other" (111). Readers begin to feel the same way about the novel as well, questioning how such contradictory notions of agency and commitment can be reconciled. Moreover, the references are more satirical than serious. Characters like the Major and Thomas are poor exemplars for Aristotle and Rousseau. Likewise, Madhar Pai reduces Kane, Oscar's Socrates, to a "peddler," selling "his pots and pans" all over "that desolate landscape" (323). Similarly, the novel's legal citations may add sophistication to Gaddis's texts, but it must be remembered that many of the cases have a comical vein to them. Gaddis's use of "curator bonis" and "guardian ad litem," for example, both pertain to the guardianship of a dog (252). Furthermore, Judge Crease's in-depth analysis of the legal issues surrounding the death of Wayne Fickert foolishly

blames God for the boys' drowning but cites the inability to find his "residence within the legal district" as just cause for a dismissal of culpability (377).

Finally, as with the novel's other references, those to "Song of Hiawatha" serve a less than traditional purpose. Gaddis often mentions characters and objects from the poem in a comical fashion. In one of the novel's court cases, "an enterprising glover in San Francisco" requests the pelt of James B's dog Spot in order to make "a prototype for a line to be marketed as 'Hiawatha's Magic Mittens' labelled [sic] 'Genuine Simulated Spotskin® Wear 'Em With The Furside Outside'" (255). Elsewhere, Gaddis places Longfellow's noble Minnehaha (Hiawatha's wife) in sexually explicit scenes with Hiawatha on the riverbank, turning the heroic tale into a scene from a blockbuster movie (508). Finally, Oscar's Gitche Gumee is initially a pond behind his house that was the setting for his childhood fantasies of bravery and adventure. Later, the references to Gitche Gumee are reduced to a man-made aquarium into which Oscar stares for hours on end, symbolizing his overall inability to take action and stand up to his father. Although water, as an element, can symbolize freedom and agency, as it does for the courageous Hiawatha, for Oscar it comes to symbolize confinement and control at the hands of his father.

Oscar, therefore, is no Hiawatha by any stretch of the imagination. He is more of an anti-hero, unwilling to gain the respect of his peers and unable to gain the respect of his family. He is incapable of sacrificing himself for others. Readers cannot fathom a self-absorbed Oscar fasting for seven days and seven nights in order to help his community. Oscar's main occupation, after all, is eating and drinking. Oscar's attempts

to gain his father's respect are also nowhere near as heroic as Hiawatha's. As a child, Oscar's birch bark canoe turns over and sinks. According to Christina:

---it was all just too heartbreaking, by the shining Big-Sea-Water where a tall and stately birch tree once had rustled in the breezes, where he'd cleft its bark asunder just beneath the lowest branches, just above the roots he'd cut it down the trunk from top to bottom, stripped away the bark unbroken from the birch canoe he'd made there puffed with pride at his achievement turning turtle when he'd launched it, filled with terror when his father saw the great birch torn and naked till its sap came oozing outward and the swift Cheemaun for sailing floating upside down and sideways through the reeds and tangled beach grass come to rest there in the mud ---and it should have been a warning that you could never please Father. (236-7)

Rather than catch his father's attention with his play and lawsuits, Oscar simply embarrasses the family and besmirches the Crease name. Oscar's father attends a screening of the plagiarized version of Oscar's play and walks out in disgust before the end. When informed of this by Judge Crease's clerk, Oscar wonders if it is because his "Father was upset with me for exploiting the family and Grandfather if he thought I wrote the script like it said in the newspaper" (433). What Oscar doesn't realize, until it is too late, is that he has been "lied to all [his] life" about his family history (485, 486, 487). The Judge knows that the Crease family history is suspect and Oscar's childish attempts to get his father's love only draw attention to the questionable morality of Judge Crease Sr., Oscar's great-grandfather. Finally, unlike Hiawatha, who outlives his childhood, Oscar remains in a juvenile state. He reverts to playing piano pieces he learned as a

child, and, in the novel's final scene, he jumps out to scare his sister and tickle her until she "can't breathe" (509). Where Hiawatha grows to love and respect Nokomis and stand up to his father, Oscar is unable to get beyond his mother's death and can never truly confront Judge Crease. He cannot even call him on the phone or "simply sit down and write him a letter" to explain himself or ask for help (286). Unfortunately, Oscar misses his chance "to prove his courage by the old man" and his father dies, pushing Oscar over the emotional edge (508).

Ironic Allusion, Tradition, and Family

All in all, Gaddis's allusions appear to weaken, rather than strengthen, the novel's possibility of reaching a desirable moral conclusion. The ideals represented by the sources alluded to in *Frolic* are frequently satirized by the novel's contemporary society. In the modernist tradition of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce, therefore, Gaddis appears to exploit allusion more as contrast than as enhancement, employing a technique Safer has dubbed "ironic allusiveness" (73). In her study of *The Recognitions*, Safer notes:

Gaddis alludes to earlier literature in order to show an ironic contrast with the precepts of his era. He returns to literary depictions of traditional beliefs and behaviour from earlier centuries to show--by contrast--the superficialities of twentieth-century America. (113)

Safer mentions Gaddis's references to transcendental writers like Emerson, religious writers like Clement, and dramatists like Goethe to demonstrate this point. In *Frolic*, readers find the same innovative use of allusion. Furthermore, by juxtaposing the works of established writers like Stephen Crane with topical references to such things as

“haemorrhoid and false teeth commercials,” Gaddis implies that the drawing of lines between high and low culture has become less important (45). By revealing the tentative boundary between high and low culture, Gaddis demonstrates how the values of contemporary American society are more individualistic and self-interested. It is easy to see from examples such as Oscar’s failure to take responsibility for running over himself, and Trish’s suits over concrete items like tennis bracelets and fur coats, that Gaddis’s characters are selfish. However, Oscar’s serious citation of Emerson’s *Ode (Inscribed to W. H. Channing)* effectively demonstrates Gaddis’s satirical bent. Although one of the most selfish characters in *Frolic*, Oscar explains, “things are in the saddle and ride mankind” (300).

According to critics like Elaine Safer, Christopher Knight, and Miriam Fuchs, Gaddis employs ironic allusion to demonstrate the appropriate way of acting in a morally charged situation by showing the absurdity of acting unjustly. In contrasting contemporary values with traditional beliefs, Gaddis creates what Steven Weisenburger calls “generative” satire, or a “rationalist discourse launched against the exemplars of folly and vice, to rectify them according to norms of good behavior and right thinking” (1). This employment of ironic allusion (often employed as a modernist rubric) must be taken up before I can evaluate the possibility of a postmodern reading of *Frolic*.

In his 1923 review of Joyce’s *Ulysses* entitled “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” T. S. Eliot outlines the importance of Joyce’s work to what would be a new movement in literature throughout the world. Eliot writes:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others

must pursue after him. . . . It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. . . . Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art. . . . And only those who have won their own discipline in secret and without aid, in a world which offers very little assistance to that end, can be of any use in furthering this advance. (123-24)

Like the communitarians of the late twentieth-century, Eliot and his contemporaries, in particular Pound and Joyce, found the world to be one of chaos and confusion, one in which people had lost touch with their childhood communities and influences and had, as a result, found themselves wandering aimlessly without direction.⁷⁴ In poems like “The Waste Land” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot follows the lives of characters who have found their lives listless and without meaning. Of the characters in “The Waste Land,” Miriam Fuchs notes, “[t]he lives of these people are, by necessity, an ongoing charade because they have renounced or lost track of their beginnings. Without this knowledge, they have no future and no opportunities for authentic growth” (45). Likewise, in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot gives the picture of a man unable to connect with humanity through action or commitment. Prufrock’s description of himself is less than noble:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,

⁷⁴ Most of Lasch’s sociological criticism acknowledges an affinity for the modernist literature of the early to mid twentieth-century.

Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous---
Almost, at times, the Fool. (111-19)

Through their denial of found communities of family, community, or tribe, the characters of “The Waste Land” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” effectively “castrate their own maturation”(Fuchs 46). For Eliot and other modernists, therefore, effective literature must contain an element of “conformity between the old and the new” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 762). Elsewhere, in the “East Coker” section of “Four Quartets,” Eliot implies that the past and the present need to be reconnected. “There is only the fight to recover what has been lost,” writes Eliot, “[a]nd found and lost again and again” (“East Coker” V.15-16). The modernist practice of allusion focuses on acknowledging the importance of literary predecessors even if it means contrasting the values of these predecessors with the values of contemporary societies. According to Eliot, any “poet [or writer] who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 762). By demonstrating the importance of tradition in his/her own work, the responsible artist assists readers in recognizing the importance of his/her own found communities of tradition, family, or culture in moving forward in an ever-changing world.

Although Eliot’s poetry figures more predominately in *The Recognitions* and *J R* than it does in *Frolic* (there are only three obvious references to Eliot here), its spirit

looms over the novel, especially through Gaddis's portrait of family as it pertains to communities based on bloodline and tradition. Individual characters in the novel break from these connections to their detriment. Even though characters often claim the importance of found ties, their true motives are questionable; in most cases these claims are selfish gambits. In trying to protect the family interests, for example, both Christina and Oscar assert neither Harry (Christina's husband) nor Lily (Oscar's girlfriend) deserves consideration because they don't "look like anyone in the family" (22). Trish uses the same excuse when explaining why she wrestled her mother's fortune from her maid. She protests, "I mean my God Teen it's not as though she were a blood relative or anything, I only wanted justice didn't I?" (315). Finally, when Oscar is told the Judge's clerk has been named executor of the will, he complains, "he's not even part of the family, he drinks and..." (409). Oscar knows that being part of the family has nothing to do with the legalities of the will; he simply thinks he should be the executor.

Rather than practice what they preach, most of Gaddis's characters demonstrate the breakdown of the traditional family unit. Characters in all of Gaddis's novels, *Frolic* included, "are alienated from their parents" (Wolfe, *A Vision of His Own* 257), and even those who actually lose family members do not grieve, "at least in our presence" (261). Unable to identify a need for family in their lives (except when it benefits them personally), characters like Trish, Harry, Christina, Lily, and Oscar, turn inward, craving "self-validation" that, for most, can only come from money (258). "[B]ereft of guidelines furnished by family bonds," Wolfe laments, "they search for their own" (258) creating only "portent and panic" (257). The ultimate result of this loss of "both the personal and

the cultural past” is that “Gaddis’ [sic] characters also sacrifice the future” (Strehle Klemtner 126).

Trish Hemsley is perhaps the most selfish and immoral character in Gaddis’s novel. She has no respect for tradition or authority and demonstrates this disrespect by suing the Church and taking advantage of the legal system every chance she gets. She is a classist of the highest degree who treats Lily like the maid and her slightly poorer friend, Christina, with little regard. In her typical greedy fashion, Trish involves herself in lawsuits over items from her mother’s will, and, even though her mother felt it appropriate to leave money and possessions to her housekeeper and the Church, Trish sues for her right to these possessions. Even when she appears to be liberal in her relationship with the subaltern Madhar Pai, Trish is merely looking out for herself. Her true notion of “keeping things in the family,” after all, has nothing to do with commitment and protection of family, but with protection of her own interests (312). Her involvement with Madhar Pai is simply an attempt to get a lawyer in the family so “he won’t send you these ridiculous bills and then sue you like mine always do” (16).

In terms of her family, Trish has been estranged from them, especially her mother, for years and, though she shows no remorse on her mother’s death, seen from a neo-conservative point of view it is not hard to understand why her broken familial relationships could explain her actions. Although the reasons for Trish’s break from her family are unclear, the results are obvious. Trish is unable to make any lasting connections of her own. Each time Trish re-enters the narrative, she has a different husband or boyfriend. Even though at novel’s end she is remarried to Bunker (her on-again, off-again husband), this is a marriage of convenience that won’t last. Furthermore,

Trish's treatment of her children, Deedee and T J, both of whom she claims to care for, is certainly less than matronly. Her connection with Deedee amounts to little more than buying Deedee's way out of trouble, and, of course, she fights her ex-husband in court in order to avoid custody of T J (in front of whom she has attempted suicide at least once). If this isn't enough, the actions of Trish's children (Deedee drives recklessly and T J is gay) foretell the inevitable death of the family line in the near future. As one of the novel's least likeable characters, Trish is certainly exemplary of the pattern of corrupt behaviour that arises when family and tradition take a backseat to atomism.

In contrast to Trish, Harry Lutz is one of the more honest and likeable characters in the novel. As his obituary tells us, Harry has pursued a number of idealistic dreams such as becoming a poet, a priest, and a lawyer "inspired by a growing sense of injustice" (459). Because of his "consuming interest in poetry, which his father condemned as an unprofitable vocation for 'sissies,'" Lutz has also walked away from his family and his father's business (459). Unable to find easy answers to complex questions, and pressured by the memories of his father's business success, Harry gradually loses sight of his idealism and settles for a successful career in corporate law and a posh lifestyle (symbolized by his attraction to cars and fast driving).⁷⁵ Nevertheless, something does not sit well with Harry. As Knight explains, Lutz "knows that he has given in to something that he does not believe in" (223). Conflicted by his nagging sense of a Rawlsian social justice and disturbed by those who, like Madhar Pai, would "rather win than be right," Harry cannot deal with the corporate world where money trumps right and

⁷⁵ According to Wolfe, Gaddis is a "believer in slow, civilized process," and, consequently, he "has already joined speed, particularly in a moving car, to danger and death" (269). Like Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Gaddis's *Frollic* makes a great deal of careless driving as indicative of both personal and societal carelessness: Harry has two car accidents, Oscar runs over himself, and Lily cuts off a driver on the freeway causing a devastating accident.

justice is deferred (339). Succumbing to excessive drink and pain medication, Harry dies, predictably, in a horrible car accident.

Likewise, a rejection of tradition and family commitment negatively affects the characters of the Crease household—Oscar, Christina, and Lily. Like the “[t]he Long Island house,” which Jonathan Raban notes, “is . . . an incongruous genteel survivor from another age . . . in desperate need of the attentions,” the family relationships of the characters within are in need of much repair (165). Christina comes from a broken home and has had to deal with an unsympathetic, frequently absent father figure. “You could never please Father” (236-37), she tells Harry on one occasion, and, on another, “he was the most, one of the most selfish men who ever lived, the law was the only thing that was alive for him people were just its pawns look at us” (425). When Lily compares Judge Crease to her own father, Christina warns, “your mealy-mouthed Daddy and Oscar’s father are about as alike as night and day, and the day Judge Crease forgives and forgets you’ll know the moon is made of green cheese” (287). Although Christina often fights to keep her family together, her words and actions often demonstrate the opposite. She frequently claims her rights as Harry’s wife and expects him to help Oscar because he’s “family,” even though she has never really made an effort to befriend her own in-laws (279). She fights with Harry’s sisters and refers to his father as a “cutthroat operator” (459). When all is said and done, Christina sees her married life deteriorate as Harry becomes more and more involved with his work (and possibly with Lily) and she spends more and more time in the country (279).⁷⁶ Upon Harry’s death, Christina does little

⁷⁶ The beading of Lily’s forehead in her last scene with Harry recalls the same “erotic symbol” that appears when she excitedly drives home from the airport and when she has sex with Oscar near the end of the novel (Wolfe 269). Gaddis also makes use of this symbol in *Gothic* on numerous occasions.

grieving, appearing more concerned with Harry's life insurance policy and keeping his sisters away from her condominium.

Although not a member of the Crease family, Lily is Oscar's girlfriend and she spends a great deal of time at the Crease house. Estranged from her parents because of an ill-advised and consequently broken marriage to a Jewish man named Al, Lily often admits to wanting to repair the broken familial relationship. She wonders aloud:

when Daddy knows how sorry I am that I did these things I shouldn't have done? and these things he thought I should do and I didn't? That it was all my fault, these mistakes I made and how sorry I am that I got him upset and I don't deserve him to pity me, and I can ask Mama to talk to him and help me out because I know deep down how he loves me and always wanted me to have the best so he won't stay mad at me, he'll forgive and forget. (286-7)

Yet, Lily's family situation fares no better than Christina's does. Though Lily spends most of her time trying to mend broken family ties, her efforts are tainted by her attempts to inherit the family fortune. She is initially jealous because her parents have left the family fortune in her brother's name. She is further incensed when she finds out that her parents intend to leave their fortune to Reverend Bobby Ude's church. Overcome with greed, she threatens "to kill" the Reverend rather than speak to him about her parents' wishes and the future good of her family in heaven (447).

But it is Oscar who is, as Basie suggests, the "man at the end of his rope" in this *family* novel (112). Truly, Oscar's "maturation" has been "castrate [d] by his failed/broken relationship with his father" (Fuchs 46). Whereas Trish, Harry, Christina, and Lily are able to make moderate headway into the adult world (as small as that

progress may be), Oscar's growth is completely stilted. A frugal man who prefers "reusing old things to buying new ones," Oscar holds on to old items and old ideas, living in a mess of a house cluttered by remnants of his childhood (Wolfe, *A Vision of His Own* 274). He can't even bring himself to throw away postcards, junk mail, or used envelopes. As a result, important issues like mortgage payments are lost in the clutter of the Crease household. In order to highlight Oscar's inability to live in the present, Gaddis constantly places Oscar in childish situations. Much is made of Oscar's childish penchant for being "careful about what's his and what's [Christina's]" (*Frolic* 42), and when he purchases a pair of Hiawatha's Magic Mittens, Christina warns him that he's "not six years old any more" (372). On other occasions, Oscar is described as "a schoolboy on his way to a funeral" (425), "a three year old" (306), and "a child" (308, 467). He drives around in a wheelchair with a horn that goes "toot! toot! toot!" (106), and, upon his recovery from his accident, Christina laments, "[y]ou can't wait for them to learn to walk, the minute they learn there's not a minute's peace you wish they'd never . . ." (301). Although these are mere indicators of Oscar's juvenile behavior and selfish personality, Gaddis makes it more than clear that Oscar's growth is arrested and regressive. He returns to playing piano (something Christina admits they used to do as children), looking at his aquarium, and carrying around the small birch bark canoe that he had made as a child. By the novel's conclusion, Oscar has reverted to urinating over the balcony (497) and jumping out from behind doors to tickle his sister (509). Rather than move forward into an unknown world and possibly explore different ideals of family, Oscar chooses to retreat, indicative of contemporary culture's tendency "to favour regressive solutions instead of 'evolutionary' solutions" (Lasch, *Minimal Self* 185).

In a curious way, the relationships of family members in the novel also mirror the actions of the animal kingdom as it comes via the interjections of Oscar's television nature shows. One show's announcer posits, "members of one's own species might make the most nutritious meals. . . . When the food supply runs out and the only ones around are your own species, why go hungry?" (490-91). References to species such as tiger salamanders, three-spine sticklebacks, acorn woodpeckers, Australian red-back spiders, and burying beetles, all of whom have cannibalistic tendencies. When extended to *Frolic's* human animals, these cannibalistic tendencies further a negative portrait of family commitment in the novel (490-92). At times, Oscar, Judge Crease, Lily, and others demonstrate a willingness to ignore family ties in the course of their efforts towards personal survival in a chaotic world. Gaddis extends the analogy by referencing George Fitzhugh's *Cannibals All: or Slaves Without Masters*, a pro-slavery treatise from 1857. Though not suggesting a return to slavery, Gaddis does set up a possible explanation for the loss of tradition and family in contemporary societies. Fitzhugh's text (often used in concert with Aristotle's philosophies on slavery) is an argument for a Southern agrarian lifestyle that, though based in slavery, relies on the proper treatment of all human beings. In contrast to the coldness of the Northern industrial economy in which each person is worth only what s/he can produce, an agrarian economy recognizes tradition and family as natural and integral to a successful society. As Peter Wolfe points out, Fitzhugh's message "rests on assumptions that safeguard family members from being killed and attacked by each other in times of hardship" (*A Vision of His Own* 263). According to Fitzhugh, "[t]he Negro slaves of the South are the happiest and, in some sense, the freest people in the world. The children and the aged and the infirm work not

at all, and yet have all the comforts and necessities of life provided for them” (18). Gaddis’s employment of Fitzhugh as a reference raises many eyebrows, and rightly so. Fitzhugh naively assumes that most slave owners treat their slaves with dignity and respect. Yet, in terms of his message regarding tradition and family, it can be safely assumed that Gaddis is able to separate the wheat from the chaff. As shown in the above references, the analogy between human beings in a capitalistic society and other members of the animal kingdom rings true. As communitarians like Fukuyama have pointed out, statistics on crime, homelessness, and other social maladies in late capitalistic America help bolster this argument.⁷⁷ With the hegemony of individualism in capitalistic societies, people feel less inclined to respect the rights or the misfortunes of others. Just as Fitzhugh warns of the dangers of individualism, Gaddis implies that families have become less committed to each other as individual members are forced to fend for themselves.

Part Three: Contemporary Theory and the Politics of Family

Narrative Ethics

The discussion to this point certainly indicates a neo-conservative bent to Gaddis’s novel. But is *Frolic*, and Gaddis’s work in general, mere nostalgic satire? Are readers to infer from Gaddis’s work that contemporary America has strayed from effective, traditional methods of commitment in its constant pursuit of the protection of private liberties? Are the civil liberties being protected by the American legal system becoming more comical and dangerous at the same time? Fukuyama, Sandel, and other communitarians believe, like Aristotle, that reason indicates that society has already found the most natural

⁷⁷ For a detailed look at Fukuyama’s argument, see *Disruption*.

scenarios for social living (both communal and familial), and as Gaddis points out, contemporary American society has moved away from these social scenarios toward more destructive lifestyles.

On closer inspection, Gaddis's messages regarding many of the novel's social issues are not unambiguous. Gaddis's views on the legal system, after all, are far from absolute. Peter Wolfe perceptively indicates that *Frolic* "both attacks our legal system and affirms the necessity of the law" ("Law and Order" 5B). According to Wolfe, Gaddis is "eminently fair" to lawyers, suggesting they are like "detectives, dentists or welfare workers; people only come to them reluctantly and in times of need, when they're unlikely to show their best sides" (5B). Some of the lawyers profit in Gaddis's novel, but many do not. Harry dies. Mr. Madhar Pai falls into disrepute with his firm and ends up teaching at a private school. Mr. Basie, presumably, ends up back in prison. Dolores Flaherty and Roger Flaherty suggest that "the frolic benefits no one but the lawyers who collect the fees," but when characters like Lily, Trish, and Oscar refuse to pay their fees there can be little benefit (20).

More importantly for my study, Gaddis's message regarding family commitment is far more confusing than a communitarian reading of his work might suggest. From the beginning, *Frolic*, more so than Gaddis's previous novels, is clearly about family and family issues. As if foreshadowing the difficulty, in terms of the cannibalistic tendencies mentioned above, that "family" will bring to his reader and his characters, Gaddis begins the novel with the following epigraph from Thoreau's letter to Emerson: "[w]hat you seek in vain for, half your life, one day you come full upon, all the family at dinner. You seek it like a dream, and as soon as you find it you become its prey" (np). Although

characters may seek a tranquil, family life, from the first scene of the novel Gaddis demonstrates a contradictory image of family life; it is both sought after and dangerous. Setting the mood with an unidentified opera of “true love defying family hatred . . . a tale of family ties and superstition” playing on the hospital’s overhead speakers, Gaddis throws his readers into the middle of several different family conflicts (15). Readers learn of Oscar’s resentment of his father for marrying his mother and taking possession of the house that “belonged to [her]” (15). Gaddis introduces Lily’s parents’ decision to put all their money in “her brother’s hands” and about her “mess of a divorce and her mess of a family” (15). Gaddis also demonstrates the tension separating Harry and Christina as Harry keeps looking at his watch as they visit Oscar in the hospital. Christina will become increasingly more concerned with Harry’s focus on his job at the expense of showing “a little family concern” (14). Finally, Christina and Oscar argue over the possibility of their significant others getting money from a future sale of the house. Christina even defends Harry only minutes after admonishing him. The contradictions about family commitment abound.

In the first chapter of my dissertation, and in sections above, I examined how a neo-conservative notion of family values, as proffered by communitarian literature, implies the importance of, among other things, history and tradition, shared understandings, and the boundary between public and private. Although Gaddis’s novel can be read as a criticism of liberal society’s lack of family values, the novel’s promotion of a communitarian value system is not always credible. The importance of history and tradition, for example, is questioned when Oscar learns that they can both be based on a lie. When he reads the family correspondences, Oscar learns that the family tradition he

has upheld to date is false, and that the facts of his family history shed new negative light on his great-grandfather as well as his grandfather.⁷⁸ Thinking that a lazy and conniving great-granduncle has robbed him of his family fortune, Oscar learns that it was his great-grandfather who was morally questionable. Realizing that he has built his own value system around a false past, and that he has been “lied to all [his] life,” Oscar is devastated (485, 486, 487). Gaddis’s inference here is that too much concentration on narratives of tradition prevents individuals from recognizing the constructed nature of history as well as the occasional need for change in value systems. This doesn’t mean that individuals cannot be committed to larger communities of family or nation, but simply that the commitment and the degree of commitment do not have to be permanent.

Elsewhere in Oscar’s play, Gaddis raises the dangers of “shared understandings” of the common good by exploring the dubious connection between family and class that a communitarian notion of family favours. Through the character of the Major, who has “satisfaction with all that is familiar,” Gaddis demonstrates that family and tradition enable a degree of hierarchy and, consequently, inequality (75). Describing Thomas to Kane, the Major implies that there is a certain hierarchy involving money and family in the South. “He’s made us proud to have him in the family here” (83), brags the Major of Thomas: “[h]e’s from a fine family himself, of course, but it’s not a Southern family, strictly speaking” (83). The implication here is that the Major accepts Thomas because of his family money, but that Southern family money trumps all. The ideals of the major

⁷⁸ Judge Crease Sr. had, perhaps unwittingly since his mother probably lied to him, lied to Oscar about the facts of his family history. Oscar was lead to believe that his great-granduncle had cheated his great-grandfather out of a family fortune and sent him away to Europe to die “as a diplomatic flunkey in the embassy job” (486). At the end of the novel, he finds out that his great-grandfather was actually a “charming, weak, careless dandy,” and his brother got him the job “as a last resort” (485-6).

are antiquated since he is a character in a Civil War play, yet the comments and actions of Christina, Madhar Pai, and Trish imply how notions of shared understanding cannot exist as long as there is a connection between economic class and family in the contemporary world of *Frolic*. Christina blames all of the chaos surrounding Lily on her “mess of a family” (15). For most of the novel, Christina treats Lily like a maid, cementing her belief that Lily’s family background has led to her lower class value. Like Christina, Trish believes that class implies moral value and that bloodlines indicate morality. In discussing her daughter’s car wreck, Trish implies it would “take five generations” of garnishing wages from the other claimant’s family to pay out a law suit and, in the end, the family would most certainly try to lay the blame elsewhere (321). After all, claims Trish, the “rich are always lied to” (321). Finally, Madhar Pai indicates that the relationship between class and family goes both ways. He claims that the wealthy take to each other just like family members. He demonstrates a kinship with Oscar when he explains of his offer of settlement, “tried to clean things up considering your sister and Trishy, all in the family so to speak but your people turned it down” (317). Because Trish and Christina are both relatively wealthy, Madhar Pai is making the claim that they come from a similar family and therefore, he (as Trish’s boyfriend), owes a duty of protection to Oscar (Christina’s brother).

Frolic also questions the communitarian boundary of protection dividing the private and the public. In certain instances, characters like Christina or even Judge Crease demonstrate the need for family members to show compassion for each other and to protect each other from the perils of the outside world. Christina often shows concern for Harry’s welfare and she spends a great deal of time at the country house to ensure

Oscar's recuperation. Likewise, as I mention in my first chapter, Judge Crease declares that Wayne Fickert's family owed him a degree of protection from the congregation and the pressures of baptism (375). Although Crease lays most of the blame for the unfortunate drowning on the Reverend, he also strongly condemns the boy's family, amongst other groups, for failing to look after the boy's interests and protect him from a hazardous situation. If it weren't for outside pressures and a lack of familial compassion, perhaps young Fickert may not have felt obligated to be baptized in a potentially dangerous river. While these characters imply the need for compassion amongst family members, readers question the cost of such protection. The judge appears to protect his own family against an outraged public by writing an appeal for Oscar's case. Although the act is protective on its face, it turns out the judge is merely protecting the law and his personal interests. An additional negative publicity about the family will certainly hurt Crease's chances at a Supreme Court nomination. In like manner, Christina's pleas for Harry to protect the interests of his brother-in-law are suspect. Although Christina did not marry Harry simply to get "one [a lawyer] right in the family," she is especially upset with him when he defends his firm and the legal profession (16). When she finds out about Basie being a fraud, she attacks Harry crying, "I said what about us Harry, a conspiracy against the public my God we're your family! Protecting yourself, protecting your friend Sam, protecting Swyne and Dour and your whole ridiculous self regulating white shoe conspiracy against your own family" (279). Although Christina feels Harry has forsaken the family, she fails to acknowledge that Harry more than meets his obligations to Oscar. Harry advises Oscar against suing, he finds Oscar a law firm that he can afford, he attempts to explain the issues involved, and he even offers to try and

“straighten things out” when things go horribly badly for Oscar (279). Despite Harry’s best efforts, Oscar continues to get himself involved in asinine cases, and both he and Christina expect Harry to help Oscar fight these battles. Through Harry’s mistreatment, Gaddis questions the limits of family responsibility and the indebtedness family members owe to each other.

Gregory Comnes refers to a similar confusion in *Frolic* when he examines the author’s portraits of idealism and legal realism as terrains for negotiating the “excluded muddle” of contemporary life (27). In examining the idealistic side of *Frolic*, Comnes takes up Gaddis’s use of Oscar Crease as artist. Like Wyatt Gwyon from *The Recognitions*, Thomas Eigen and Edward Bast from *J R*, and McCandless from *Gothic*, Oscar Crease sees his responsibility as being to represent a natural, absolute law (in his case the law of justice) underlying the universe. Like all of Gaddis’s previous artists, Oscar is a credulous failure. He is convinced that there exists an underlying ideal of justice to the universe and he feels his play, by pointing to such great philosophers as Plato, Camus, Rousseau, and Aristotle, demonstrates how an individual can attain justice by simply employing reason. As Comnes points out, however, Oscar’s concept of the world, just like his play, is “but a quaint anachronism” (“The Law of the Excluded Muddle” 30). Even Oscar himself seems to realize that the world does not operate based on such idealism anymore. Oscar’s fascination with the violence of his nature shows juxtaposed against the violence of the evening news channels indicates that he subconsciously realizes that an idealistic philosophy can no longer “express the courage to live in a contingent world when the ground of expression no longer exists” (20). The unavailability of violence and conflict prevents the success of idealistic philosophies. In

fact, by novel's end, Oscar even realizes that the truth of his great-grandfather's memory requires him to re-examine the idealism he inherited from his grandfather. Of his learned idealism, Oscar exclaims, "I've been lied to all my life . . . [I]t's just a farce" (485).

Where idealism fails to provide a means to negotiate the chaos of American society, the law presents itself as a distinct possibility because it is regulated by traditional practice. Although often misread as a critic of the legal system and its drawbacks, Gaddis has admitted, "Quite contrary to the received opinion of legal language as purposefully obfuscatory I had come to admire its tortuous (no pun intended) struggles for precision and contingency" ("Letter to Peter Friedman"). Where the artist fails in his concentration on idealism, the legal expert succeeds in attempting to keep up with alterations in "shared understandings." Perhaps the most enjoyable sections of Gaddis's novel are those decisions handed down by Judge Crease, whose "legal realism" (as Comnes calls it) attempts to provide order to the chaos of contemporary America. Following the lead of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Judge Crease painstakingly accounts for each detail of a case examining the laws at the time and applying them to the issues involved. Crease, like Holmes, believes his job is to "'apply the law'" not some ideal sense of justice (*Frolic* 251). As such, Crease acknowledges the fact that the law can and does require interpretation. In his opinion for the case of James B., Infant v Village of Tatamount et al, for example, Crease uses an out-dated law to explain the nature of the law in the following manner:

By 'an act of God' the law denotes a natural and inevitable phenomenon occurring beyond human origin and intervention. It is that simple, and the high tension natural discharge of electricity in the atmosphere known as lightning

must clearly qualify to head such a list. ‘But just as the clavicle in the cat only tells us of the existence of some earlier creature to which a collarbone was useful, precedents survive in the law long after the use they once served is at an end and the reason for them has been forgotten. The result of following them must often be failure and confusion from the merely logical point of view.’

(*Frolic* 258)

As Crease points out, the law must acknowledge itself as malleable. It does not represent an unchanging, absolutist concept of justice, but rather a “serviceable fiction, constrained by language and variously administered by men of varying competence” (Comnes, “The Law of the Excluded Muddle” 33). As the mess of legal proceedings and overturned cases in Gaddis’s novel demonstrates, the law does not so much reward those who tell the “truth” as it remunerates those gifted in rhetoric. Characters like Basie and Madhar Pai, for example, win their cases (when they do win) not because they have appealed to the truth of the matter, but because they have presented the best argument within the limits of the present legal confines. For the purposes of my argument, this malleability of law also suggests that there is evolutionary flexibility in all human institutions. Flexibility in the law, therefore, indicates a need for a concomitant flexibility in the family.

Like the artist, the legal realist still fails to provide an adequate response to how one might live in a chaotic universe. As Comnes points out, “[g]enerally the novel insists that the expressed ideas of common law are largely irrelevant to the novel’s catalogue of mean-spirited greed and a madness for absolutes” (33). Although extremely critical of absolutists like Oscar as well as religious fundamentalists like the Reverends Ude, Senator Bilk, and the people of Tatamount, *Frolic* acknowledges that absolutism is “an

essential of the human condition” (*Frolic* 328). In a related instance, Comnes cites the scope of the law within *Frolic* as a problem. The law is “about questions that do have answers” (*Frolic* 398). Consequently, those questions asked by art and other forms of idealism are dismissed from the courtroom as Judge Crease’s decisions demonstrate. Most importantly, as it attempts to favour the real over the ideal, the law finds itself destabilized by the linguistic vehicle through which it articulates itself. As Harry indicates, Judge Crease, and by extension the common law in general, is always trying to “rescue the language” it has created to “protect itself” from the general public (251). The “highly rhetorical and self referential nature of legal language,” notes Comnes, “privileges its use to a select few who rigorously study its intricacies” (“The Law of the Excluded Muddle” 33). Oscar’s exchange with Basie over his complaint against Erebus Entertainment demonstrates this privilege:

--[Oscar] Is this all? Where’s the rest of it. Where’s my grandfather.

--Get to those details later Oscar, all we want now’s a complaint they can’t claim is defective on its face when they cite grounds for dismissal and you lose before you begin.

--Well it all sounds muddy and repetitious. If you can explain it as we go along maybe I can help you cut down some of these tedious lines where you keep repeating yourself and save some money. (*Frolic* 158)

As Oscar demonstrates, the language of the law becomes confusing and repetitive to the layperson and only those who know the law can understand both its intricacies and its logic. In attempting to shut others out and save itself from the idealistic language of art

and religion, therefore, legal realism loses “sight of the very humanity” it is meant to protect (34).

The failure of art and the law to provide a way out of chaos leads Comnes to the notion of Carol Gilligan’s “ethic of care” (37).⁷⁹ Gilligan’s ethic of care responds to masculine programs like religion, liberalism, and legal realism with an ethic that “cannot be confined to a set of rules and list of duties” (37). For Gilligan, an ethic of care is a feminine ethic stressing “personal involvement and intuitive understanding rather than logical conformity” and resulting in a “preference for improvisation” (38). Characters like Basie, who does not always follow absolute rules of action or legal realism in order to make a decision, are very aware of the contingent nature of the universe and the need to improvise.⁸⁰ Of Basie, Comnes notes he is “not only the improvisational artist/lawyer but the one person in the novel who, instead of treating him as a means to an end, actually helps Oscar” (38). Madhar Pai demonstrates this to Oscar when they meet after the deposition:

That’s our friend Basie isn’t it? freed himself of these illusions of absolutes? takes the name Basie because he likes the swing of it even if it was someone else’s with more claim as its essence, the courage to live in a contingent universe, to accept a relative world, he’s thrown out those Christian fictions that got his forebears through slavery, helped retain their humanity and turn it into the strength to survive the ones who’d used it to subjugate them, to accept

⁷⁹ For similar theories, see Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* and Jean Bethke Elshtain’s “On ‘The Family Crisis.’”

⁸⁰ Comnes acknowledges that Basie is male, but he suggests “the fact that Basie is both black and an ex-convict qualifies him for the status of the ‘other’” implied by Gilligan’s theories (38).

misery in this world for peace and equality in some imaginary next one. (*Frolic* 331)

Not only does Basie have the improvisational aspect of the ethics of care mastered, but also he truly represents the spirit of caring for another human being. On a couple of occasions, Christina notes that Basie is more than a lawyer; he is a “friend” (368, 491). Basie goes above and beyond the call of duty. He shows interest in Christina by researching a topic that she had mentioned in conversation (the Ainu, a Japanese race on the edge of extinction).⁸¹ He reads Oscar’s play and takes the time to explain the legal issues involved in the case, specifically how he is going to argue the case and why they will win:

--Plan to win, win or lose. See I’m telling you we’ve got a real strong case here, win in the lower court and fight their appeal or lose and fight it out on our appeal I’m telling you, won’t go into the legal niceties of it they call them but the long view, taking the long view they win all pleased with themselves and we’ll take them in the higher court win or lose, we’ll take them on appeal. (234)

More than any of the attorneys in the novel, he is willing to explain the legal language to his clients and help them understand how to approach the legal system. Of course, Basie’s sympathetic attitude could be explained by the fact that he is not really a lawyer. He is an ex-con who has not passed the New York State Bar Exam. More than this, by the end of the novel he has disappeared. Nevertheless, Comnes offers Basie as an

⁸¹ Christina first mentions the Ainu in a conversation about a trip she and Harry made to Japan (106). Remembering her interest in the native peoples of Japan, Basie brings a “piece in the paper on your hairy Ainu” out to Christina the next time he visits the Crease household (235). Moreover, Gaddis’s allusion to the Ainu adds to the negative concept of family as it appears in the novel. The original inhabitants of Japan, the Ainu were treated like slaves by the Samurai even though, as Basie explains, the “samurai are really descended right down from [the] old hairy Ainu” (235).

example of how to live in an increasingly disorganized world. “Doing the ‘world’s work,’” avers Comnes, “means finding the courage to express care, within the constraints imposed by chance, rather than attempting to transcend its unswerving punctuality” (“The Law of the Excluded Muddle” 39).

Family and Articulations of Identity

Gaddis’s *Frolic* is far from a positive examination of family in contemporary society.

Most of the family relationships are caustic and, while several characters in the novel die, there are no births and no reconciliations. One is hard pressed to find a bright light in Gaddis’s world. While Comnes certainly provides a solution that criticizes the idealism of liberalism as well as the inequality of legal realism (those unequipped to handle the law cannot participate), by employing Gilligan’s ethic of care, Comnes supports “a set of values based on the experience of women *as* women, that is, their experience of motherhood and care exercised in the private realm of the family” (Mouffe, *Return* 79).

Even if readers accept Basie’s subaltern status as a parallel to motherhood, Comnes still unwittingly pushes a value system of “love, care, the recognition of needs and friendship” as established through the frequently unfair parent/child relationship (*Return* 79).

Moreover, Basie’s absence at the novel’s end indicates the ultimate failure of such a philosophy. Most problematically, Comnes still relies on a rationalist concept of subjectivity. Comnes’s examination of the progress or lack of progress of Gaddis’s characters indicates an essentialist approach to Gaddis’s fiction. As a result, his exegesis makes encompassing claims about Oscar as *the artist*, Judge Crease as *the legal realist*, and Basie as *the caring improvisationalist* in order to uncover a message of contingent commitment in *Frolic*. Comnes fails to recognize the impermanence of these signifiers.

Frolic actually promotes a political ideal of the social. In *Return of the Political*, Mouffe observes that “every identity is relational and . . . the condition of existence of every identity is the affirmation of a difference, the determination of an ‘other’ that is going to play the role of a ‘constitutive outside’” (*Return* 2). As a result, identities do not have an essential quality about them; they are articulated in conflict with outside antagonisms. Furthermore, referents used to indicate these identities are more like “floating signifiers” than final signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony* 171). Take, for example, Christina’s identity as Harry’s wife. Each time Christina uses the signified “wife,” she believes she is using an essential term. She believes that her position as Harry’s wife is solidified and that, as a wife, she is guaranteed certain privileges as well as the occasional obligation. She believes she has an understanding with the other party to the conversation as to the meaning of the term. She first uses the term when talking to Harry on the telephone after Madhar Pai and Trish tell her that Harry has been in a car accident. Although Harry says he didn’t want to “upset” her, Christina chastises him claiming, “[m]y God Harry I’m your wife aren’t I? Those two silly people babbling we thought you knew while I stood there like a fool telling me there’s not a scratch on the car I mean you could have been lying in the hospital with a broken neck, how was it supposed to make me look?” (337). Christina will later ask the same question when she complains about Harry to Oscar: “I mean you’d think he could simply pick up the phone and tell me what’s going on, I am his wife aren’t I?” (436). In both these cases, Christina appears more concerned not to look embarrassed in front of others when the topic of her spouse arises. Rather than professions of love, her claims about being Harry’s wife are claims to know everything about him or to be privileged in discussing him. Although

apparently selfish in nature, these claims are valid articulations of what it means to be a “wife” in terms of how she should act when her husband is injured or ill. Most cultural traditions suggest a spouse (husband or wife) should know everything about his/her significant other and should be an expert on his/her whereabouts and/or practices. The implication is that communication lines between spouses should always be open. In another instance, Christina employs the term in order to ensure that she is the most important thing in Harry’s life, above even his principles. When Harry complains about those who take short cuts, Christina suggests;

If you stopped thinking so much about being right maybe you could get off this Episcopal merrygoround they’ve got you on, living on pills and drink while they drag expert witnesses on stress management into court for running old ladies off the road and we could both start living like human beings again, I mean I am your wife after all aren’t I. (340)

Again, Christina takes a stance against any viewpoint that might disparage her because her husband values his principles over her happiness. In this instance, a “wife” is someone that a “husband” values above and beyond his principles. Not one to be predictable, Christina also uses the term to claim her right to protect Harry’s wishes and memory. In a phone call with Masha, Harry’s sister, Christina claims her right to cremate Harry’s body as per his request. Masha, questioning Christina’s motives, has already discussed the cremation with Harry’s boss, Bill Peyton, thus bringing a fourth party into a seemingly simple act. Incensed, Christina exclaims,

Well God damn it Masha he [Bill Peyton] has no business discussing that with you! You don’t know a damn thing about Harry’s health or his...because I made

the decision! It's what he wanted and I made the decision my God I'm his wife aren't I? It was his...no I have not seen the paper and I don't like the implication that I...of course he had one, of course I've seen it we drew it up together and...why! What do they think is in it! Tell Leo [Masha's husband] and your father they can read it when it's probated and it becomes a public document everybody can read it. (457)

Here Christina's stance as Harry's wife is made in opposition to a similar stance made by a sister, a brother-in-law, and a father claiming the same right and is, as such, political. Even though she has already demonstrated she doesn't know everything about Harry, the strength of her convictions as "his wife" and the woman who knows his wishes is hegemonic.

In her final use of the term "wife," Christina truly demonstrates the precarious nature of the relationship between the signified and signifier as demonstrated in *Frolic*. Although Harry's death is ruled accidental, Christina is unable to claim the insurance money since Harry's law firm has been paying the premiums. When confronted with the staggering news, Christina's reply is, "[w]hat do you mean absorbed by the firm! I'm his wife his, I'm his widow aren't I. He told me he had a half a million dollar life insurance policy and I'm..." (506). Although Harry had attempted to explain things to her, it is only now that Christina begins to understand that the signified "wife" as she has been using it is not a universalist claim. She has been using the term "I" to fill the signifier "wife" which has many different meanings depending upon context. Rather than acknowledge the possibility that she temporarily articulates herself as "wife" depending upon the conflict, Christina appears to interpret the term as an all-inclusive signifier by

which she gets what she wants when it comes to Harry as well as his estate. It is only when she attempts to equate the term “wife” with a “beneficiary” status, however, that Christina finally learns that the firm has just as much of a claim to being Harry’s “wife” or “beneficiary”—even more so since the firm paid the premiums. The fact that Christina was married to Harry makes no difference in terms of the beneficiary policy. In fact, as demonstrated by the young lawyer who explains this to Christina, it doesn’t matter whether the firm treats him as a family member or not. Mistaking Harry for another lawyer, the young attorney exclaims, “that’s not the Harry I knew” (506). Regardless of the lack of sympathy the firm might feel for Harry’s loss, they are still able to articulate themselves, over Christina, as Harry’s “beneficiary” in the event of his death.

Although Christina’s realization may be distressing, it is important for Gaddis as it outlines what Mouffe calls “the necessity of the political and the impossibility of a world without antagonism” (*Return* 4). Her decision to throw the “manila folder” containing the last act of Oscar’s play into the “blue flame” of the fireplace indicates an act of antagonism, an act of power (509). Fed up with the lawsuits and the family squabbles, Christina symbolically takes a stand by destroying a legal file. She has realized that she needs to present herself as an object of discourse, to take a stand as a temporarily articulated subject. Learning from her confrontations with Harry’s family and his law firm as well as with Oscar and his legal suits, Christina takes matters into her own hands by symbolically destroying those legal suits (Harry’s and Oscar’s) that have caused her difficulty. Above everything, her actions demonstrate a willingness to take matters into her own hands rather than sit around the Crease household locking herself in traditional concepts of family and obligation. Likewise, Lily makes similar realizations

by taking it upon herself to “articulate” her presence against those who oppose her. After spending a great deal of time fighting unjust treatment at the hands of her mother and father, Reverend Bobby Ude, her ex-husband Kevin, and Dr. Kissinger (the doctor who botched her breast implant surgery), Lily joins Christina in the realization of the politics of the social. As she returns from the airport with Oscar, she becomes increasingly angry at what she has been through, and, symbolically, she also takes matters into her own hands by asserting herself on the highway. Of the situation Gaddis writes, “[w]ith Al [Lily’s ex-husband] out there in the woods trying to shoot down that shit Kevin screwing my girlfriend from long lines look at him! This bastard behind me he keeps trying to pass me look at him! her hands on the wheel white across the knuckles –bastard look at him. Snap your seatbelt” (456). Lily ultimately takes control and, as Gaddis indicates, “the image coming up behind them veered from sight and was gone in a shearing crash” (456). Lily is also the first one to burn most of Oscar’s and Harry’s papers, taking a stance against the corruptive past. More importantly, she takes a stand against the insurance adjuster who tries to get Oscar to drop the case that begins Gaddis’s *Frolic*. When Oscar appears to be giving into the adjuster who offers to return to the office to check out the possibility of a larger settlement once Oscar signs off on a small one, Lily exclaims:

--You can discuss it right here. I mean I’m not talking about some voluntary contribution I’m talking about the doctor bills and the hospital and the therapist and his lost income, what about his lost income, I’m talking about the whole thing and that chair over there too or all you’ll take back to your office is your hat and your ass. (478)

Through forceful language and argument, Lily is able to get Oscar a settlement that involves medical and dental care as well as loss of earnings totaling three thousand dollars monthly for an accident he caused himself.

Although apparently counter productive to establishing ties of family commitment, the articulation of nodal points of identity is important to Gaddis's portrait of family in that it allows for the possibility that different individuals can temporarily articulate family roles and commitments. As I have already suggested, to the outsider looking in, the family relationships in the novel are confusing to say the least, but there is good reason for this. These relationships are not meant to be entirely fixed or essential. As proof, outsiders often misinterpret the familial relationships of the main characters, calling the essentialities or the originals behind the copies into question. Basie presumes Harry is Oscar's cousin (perhaps because Harry is concerned about Oscar, and Basie believes bloodline to be stronger than marriage ties). Christina and Oscar are often confused as husband and wife (possibly because they spend so much time together and fight so much with one another). Lily is predictably confused with Oscar's daughter since they are so far apart in age and rarely have any close contact except when Lily wants something. In fact, at one point, Oscar is confused with his own father, highlighting Oscar's wish to be something other than he is (he lets his beard grow, wears his father's suit, and smokes his father's old cigars). Although they add to the disorder of the novel, these confusions also draw attention to the possibilities of *Frolic*. Neither functionalist nor relativist, *Frolic* merely promotes temporarily articulated social relationships. Sometimes characters act like brother and sister, sometimes husband and wife, sometimes father and daughter. It all depends upon what they need at the time.

In her warnings against attempts to articulate a true feminism, Mouffe cautions, “we must be aware of the fact that . . . feminist goals can be constructed in many different ways, according to the multiplicity of discourses in which they can be framed: Marxist, liberal, conservative, radical separatist, radical democratic, and so on” (*Return* 88). By providing a more democratic terrain for feminist values, Mouffe acknowledges that traditional value systems such as those of communitarians cannot simply be overshadowed by liberal idealism if true equality is to be reached. In a like manner, *Frolic*’s exploration of the confusion of contemporary life, of the boundaries between the signified and the signifier, between identity and identification, warns readers to be open to multiple articulations of identity as well as to traditional value systems. For Gaddis, as for Laclau and Mouffe, “there is no point of view external to all tradition from which one can offer a universalist judgment” (Smith 15). Gaddis employs ironic allusion and an “ethics of care” to further a morality of social commitment. In the end, however, Gaddis does not promote a purely liberal ideal of family nor denigrate communitarian expressions of commitment. By giving characters like Lily and Christina (and Oscar if he chooses) the opportunity to get out from behind oppressive articulations of family, he simply proffers the importance of a partially-fixed notion of the subject which extends the possibilities for newer articulations of family.

**Chapter Four: “All life’s an artifice”: Family and Commitment in Robert
Coover’s *John’s Wife*.**

Rife with paradox and ambiguity, Coover’s writing confuses more ethical issues than it solves. As I demonstrate in my introductory chapter, Coover’s characters often contradict themselves and readers have a hard time determining where they stand on such matters as liberty and equality. Consequently, readers have difficulty determining where Coover stands on related issues like that of individual liberty and family commitment. As a postmodernist, Coover is troubled by culturally reified systems and compulsory institutions (of which the traditional nuclear family is one of many). Like Acker and Gaddis, he regularly questions the function of systems that impede personal liberty in the name of a hegemonic common good. In his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*, he examines revelatory religion at work in small town America.⁸² *Brunists* tells the story of Giovanni Bruno, the rather unstable sole survivor of a freak mine accident that has claimed the lives of ninety-seven people. Given to visions and revelations, Bruno is hailed as a prophet by some of the townspeople and, with the help of an overzealous press, the cult rises to international popularity. More specifically, Coover’s novel engages the hypocrisies of the cult members as well as the crazed behaviour of some of the town’s more “rational” citizens as the cult members gather above the mine (at the Mount of Redemption) for an impending apocalypse as only Coover can create. Coover also demonstrates the dangers that civic religion and nationalism pose to personal liberty in works like *A Political Fable* and, more importantly, *The Public Burning*, where he follows the early years of Richard Nixon and his part in the execution of Julius and Ethel

⁸² Robert Coover. *The Origin of the Brunists*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1966. Hereafter shortened to *Brunists*.

Rosenberg.⁸³ In one of the most notorious novels of the 1970s, Coover explores the controversial conviction of two communist sympathizers based on insubstantial evidence and a country in fear. Through a combination of extensive historical referencing, linguistic play, and biting parody, Coover explores how the dominant political powers of America could have so easily redefined terms like “liberty” and “equality” to suit their own purposes.

As a corpus, however, Coover’s works do not simply criticize the function of systems. Critics like Ricardo Miguel-Alphonso and Vincent D. Balitas, for example, are correct in their assertions that one of Coover’s main goals is to deconstruct accepted notions of history. Likewise, Jackson Cope makes important observations in his exploration of Coover’s parodies of literary systems and forms in works like *Pricksongs and Descants*⁸⁴ and *Spanking the Maid*.⁸⁵ Even Thomas Kennedy’s assertion that Coover’s work expands “the walls of the house of fiction to contain vastly greater aspects of the reality in which we live” (9) is not without great merit. Although Coover’s work may question the artificial nature of systems and the boundaries necessary for their justification, it is important to remember that he does admit to the necessity of artifice. In this chapter I investigate the ethico-political implications of Coover’s fiction in order to examine how fictional ontological boundaries within the self, between the self and the family, and between the family and the community, as well as how epistemological frameworks, like rationality, empiricism, and intuitionism affect the tension between liberty and familial commitment in *Wife*. In discussing Coover’s portrait of small town

⁸³ Robert Coover. *The Public Burning*. New York: Viking, 1977. Hereafter shortened to *Public*.

⁸⁴ Robert Coover. *Pricksongs and Descants*. New York: New American Library, 1969. Hereafter shortened to *Pricksongs*.

⁸⁵ Robert Coover. *Spanking the Maid*. New York: Grove, 1982. Hereafter shortened to *Maid*.

living, I then examine how Laclau and Mouffe's politicised notions of identity and commitment point to a more discursive notion of commitment in Coover's novel. The novel's portrait of intense conflict and identity in flux epitomizes the political nature of the relationships between and within the individual, the family, and the community, eventually pointing the way to the possibility of temporary and partial "family" articulations based in love and commitment.

Part One: Family and the Reception of Wife

As I demonstrate in my first chapter, the tension between personal liberty and equality, when it pertains to the family and the individual's obligations, is a tentative one. For Rawls and the deontological liberals, the individual subject represents the most important link in the moral chain. Primarily, life is made better by the individual's freedom from coercion and thus by his/her right "to form, revise, and rationally pursue his/her own definition of the good" (Mouffe, *Return* 61). In liberal ideology, the individual is permitted a considerable measure of freedom from the restrictions of family, state, or nation. The individual's freedom to choose is encroached upon only by an acceptable level of obligation, demonstrated by Rawls's notion of distributive justice, whereby each individual would, given the choice and appropriate circumstances, reasonably choose a situation favouring a greater good. This level of obligation enables deontological liberals to restore a reasonable level of equality amongst individuals given obvious inequalities resulting from birth or circumstance. Consequently, for liberals, the good of the group or society can rarely encroach upon the good of the individual. This does not mean that liberals do not favour a distinction separating private from public, or that they do not

believe in obligations to family members, but simply that the only moral obligations the individual has to members of his/her family (beyond those of his/her own choice) involve promoting equality and reason and helping members to attain a certain level of acceptable equality within liberal society.

For Sandel, Taylor, and like-minded communitarian apologists, the liberals forward a falsely ahistorical sense of an “unencumbered self” existing outside of his/her commitments and attachments. In contrast, communitarians forward a more situated self embedded in his/her connections to found communities of family, tribe, or nation. As a result, communitarians believe that the individual is indistinguishable from his/her connections and/or ends and that s/he is constituted or created by said relations.

Although communitarians such as Lasch, Fukuyama, and Walzer, are more liberal-minded in forwarding a compartmentalized distinction dividing spheres of existence such as family, politics, and economics, even these thinkers believe the private life of the bourgeois nuclear family should promote connection over individuality. Within the family, individuals achieve a cogent sense of self through personal discovery. This personal discovery requires not only a realization of the essential role connections like family make in one’s life, but a resultant moral obligation to these connections.

As I also show in the first chapter of my dissertation, Coover’s position on the tension between liberty and equality in terms of familial obligation is not entirely clear. At times Coover appears to favour liberal philosophies and the protection of the individual against the family unit, while at other times he seems threatened by an absolutist liberal attitude. This confusion is hard to explain. The novel’s complexities of style and form often prevent a larger discussion of thematic concerns. Perhaps this

explains the modest critical response to Coover's post-1990 fiction in general.⁸⁶ A close examination of a cross section of reviews for *Wife* along with a cursory overview of both the novel and some of Coover's early fiction demonstrates that readers of *Wife* stand in two distinct groups: those who condemn it as a complex and amoral novel, and those who praise it as either a relatively traditional novel or a postmodern vision of reality.⁸⁷

Although each group fails to capture the sophistication of Coover's ethico-political stance, they both make important contributions to an examination of Coover's beliefs on morality and the tension between individual agency and familial obligation.

Negative Readings

The most obvious criticism of *Wife* is that it is unnecessarily confusing and incomprehensible as a harmonious unit. Unimpressed with Coover's offering, negative critics point to the author's "overburdened sentences" and "serpentine, eccentrically punctuated prose" which "often tip[s] over readability" (Limsky 5D) and ignores the rules of grammar and syntax. Coover's avoidance of common punctuation techniques and his subordinated thoughts, according to Brad Leithauser, results in a "freewheeling flow of observations" and "mountainous, page-spanning paragraphs and avalanching, run-on sentences" that fail in any attempt to replicate "fruitful variations on the American vernacular" (7). In his final analysis, Leithauser contends, "the prose has the tatterdemalion feel of something hooked together by commas, tacked together by

⁸⁶ Among the articles and /or monographs dealing with Coover's latest works are: Barbara Bond's "Postmodern Mannerism: An Examination of Robert Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice*," Judith Seaboyer's "Robert Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice*: An Anatomy of a Talking Book," and Sünje Redies's "Return with New Complexities: Robert Coover's *Briar Rose*." Save for Brian Evanson's *Understanding Robert Coover* (a monograph that outlines each of Coover's offerings) and a few dissertations, there have been no other academic studies of Coover's post-1990 fiction.

⁸⁷ With the exception of Brian Evanson's brief overview in *Understanding Robert Coover*, the extent of the criticism published to date on *Wife* amounts to a dozen or so essay reviews from American and British newspapers and periodicals as well as Internet sites.

periods” and, consequently, “it feels overworked: too much fuss, not enough fineness”

(7). A typical example of Coover’s parenthetical asides and uncontrolled prose comes in Coover’s description of the differences separating men from women:

Thus the men of the town revealed themselves through their longings, Otis, Maynard, Floyd, and all the others. Women, too, Lorraine, Marge, Veronica, Beatrice, but in a different way: they were holding something together out here in this vast emptiness, themselves perhaps. The men were more audacious, risked more in their fantasies, as though they perceived this as a birthright. Death was the province of women, and wisdom, and paradox--garbage left them by the men perhaps, but useful to them as they plotted out the terms of their survival after the cataclysm. Men ventured, but women prepared the field, spreading their skirts out over what ground they could hold (Lollie’s image; her friend Marge, whom Waldo called Mad Marge, rarely wore skirts, saw it differently). The attention of John’s wife, however momentary and enigmatic, was one of the laurels the town’s men competed for, while the women, contrarily, often felt threatened by John’s wife, yet protected by her at the same time. (19)

Coover’s style is undeniably halting as he adds commas, colons, and semi-colons, seemingly at random. The passage begins as an omniscient communiqué of how men are more likely to explore the boundaries dividing reality and dream while women are more grounded in the here and now and acceptant of “death” and “paradox” as facts of life in an often inexplicable world. Yet, the passage eventually turns into one of Lorraine’s personal observations. As such, readers learn about Lorraine’s friend Marge and her

habits of not wearing skirts. The information will, of course, be useful to readers in gradually composing a character description of Marge as a 1970s feminist, but for the moment it is tangential to Coover's overall point.

Coover's confusing stylistics lead to a related concern with the author's complex focalization. As a narrative, *Wife* is filtered through the experiences of several characters with no one character's views taking precedence. Readers must follow over fifty characters, the details of their lives, and the web of their relations. As Drew Limsky points out, *Wife*

serves up . . . details so generously, so promiscuously – for example, the book burdens us with the names of dozens of characters from A to Z and back again – that it becomes impossible to sort out who or what is of greater or lesser importance and so the novel quickly devolves into an extended brainteaser, ostensibly worthwhile for its language alone. (5D)

Of course, other authors employ many characters in their fictions, and following a large cast of individuals should not be too taxing for intelligent readers, but those readers critical of Coover's novel find it impossible to determine who says what to whom, whether focalizations are dream or reality, as well as the temporal setting of each encounter or possible encounter. Coover offers his readers little or no help.⁸⁸

Complex focalization, meandering prose, and lengthy parenthetical remarks are not the only barriers to determining morality in *Wife*. *Wife*'s formal disorder is also problematic. Even readers like Michael Harris, Mel Gossow, and Chad Galts, who give

⁸⁸ Interestingly enough, however, as my analysis of the stories in *Pricksongs* will demonstrate, the narrative voice of *Wife* is not that complicated. *Wife* employs a third-person omniscient narrator who focalizes the novel through the eyes of the novel's many characters. It is the number of characters that causes much of the confusion; Coover actually keeps the narrative voice rather simple when compared to some of his shorter fictions such as "Morris in Chains" and "Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl."

positive reviews of the novel, caution that the readers' experience of *Wife* will not be an easy one. Harris aptly compares the act of reading the novel to "being sucked down into a whirlpool" (3E), while Mel Gussow warns, "[i]t is easy for the unwary to become lost in Coover country" (Gussow 13). With no chapter breaks and no sustained character or plot description, the novel is unsurprisingly "filled with closely guarded secrets" (13). "Coover declines to offer a helping hand," warns Galts, "you're on your own" ("Happily Ever What?"). *Wife* explodes traditional narrative structure; it is episodic, not chronological, and consists of a multitude of narrative strands of "free association" (Harris 3E). The novel's many episodes do not follow a comprehensive chronological order—readers find the phrase "John lived happily ever after," after all, in the novel's opening paragraph (7). "We get a piece of an event, then another piece, then its connection to another event, and so on, assembling the story as we go," and, consequently, the novel appears highly unorganized (Harris 3E). Coover's description of John's wedding, for example, begins simply enough, with a description of the event:

A remarkable event, that wedding, the best the town had seen in years and nothing like it in the nearly two decades since. As one might expect, of course, when Mitch's son married the builder's daughter, so dazzlingly beautiful on the day, people said the sight of her made their eyes smart. (*Wife* 20)

In describing the festivities and the many memorable moments, Coover soon jumps to the antics of Daphne's "most recent husband, old Stu" (21), who, married to Winnie at the time, flirted with Daphne and ended up with her hand "on the throttle" and her tongue "in his ear" (22). A picture of Daphne and Stu taken at the wedding becomes the connecting point for Coover's next association as he describes the town photographer, Gordon, and

his friend Ellsworth who both attended—Gordon taking pictures and Ellsworth writing poetry for the happy couple. Finally, the topic of Ellsworth’s poetry moves Coover away from the wedding and onto the topic of writing and art in general. All this in a manner of four pages.

Of course, Coover has done this before and critics of *Wife* believe that Coover’s earlier attempts are more successful and that readers need not bother with this lesser replica. Short story collections like *Pricksongs* (1969) as well as novels like *The Universal Baseball Association, J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968), have already introduced contemporary readers to Coover’s style and form. Furthermore, these texts did so at a time when postmodern fiction was just becoming popular. Although he admits Coover has had some “happy triumphs,” Leithauser implies the author’s fiction has become predictable and repetitive, relying on “slapstick” humour, stylistic play, and his “long and venturesome career” to carry him through (7). Leithauser sums up his review of Coover’s novel, saying:

If, *John’s Wife* initially feels like a harum-scarum party, it winds up evoking the heat and the fetor of a locker room. Mr. Coover simply lets his aging frat boys yammer on too long, especially about their triumphs with women. Any man who regularly spends time in a gym knows what it is to be made an unwilling eavesdropper to some blowhard as he eagerly recounts his “exploits” to his friends. Whether Mr. Coover’s fictional creations are meant to be amusing clowns or satirical targets or the subjects of harrowing exposé ultimately doesn’t matter all that much. (7)

Like the men in his locker room, Coover has told similar stories before, in the same manner, and *Wife* offers nothing new. Limsky furthers this argument by using Coover's short story "The Babysitter" as a comparison:

To Coover, writing is only about performance. . . . It's all a game to Coover, a trick, (and not a new trick either – "The Babysitter" appeared in Coover's 1969 collection, *Pricksongs and Descants*), and we're the foolish and deluded spectators who attempt to buy into, albeit temporarily, the goings-on not only of *John's Wife*, but of any imaginative work. (5D)

Referring to Coover's penchant for metafiction in his early career, Limsky equates *Wife* with an old linguistic gambit on Coover's part and, as such, not worth the effort.

In general, the major criticisms of Coover's work (as with most postmodernists) are representative of the humanist view of art pioneered by Matthew Arnold and championed by contemporary critics like Gardner and Graff. Both Gardner and Graff criticize postmodernist fictions for their penchant for play over message. In *On Moral Fiction*, Gardner writes:

The traditional view is that art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it. . . . That art which tends towards destruction, the art of nihilists, cynics, and merdistes, is not properly art at all. Art is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy. (5-6)

For Gardner and others, writers have a responsibility "to confront man with an image of his moral choices" (Bigsby, *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition* 3).

Postmodernists like Coover, Acker, and Gaddis, on the other hand, spend too much time playing with language and not enough making any commentary on the world around

them. Language, for them, is no longer a medium of communication but an end in itself. For postmodernist writers, “[t]he imagination. . . no longer presses back against the real, since reality has been exposed as no more than a series of competing fictions, experiences shaped by language and perceived through prismatic roles” (Bigsby, *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition* 3).

The result of Coover’s accentuation of language, style, and form, therefore, is that *Wife* lacks “content” (Limsky 5D). “If I emphasize style over content,” confesses Leithauser, “it’s because any sizable claims for the book must lie in its presentation; the plot is a rambling, reiterated and squalid affair” (7). At first glance, this criticism is hard to believe as the novel sports a throng of characters and a complexity of detail rivaling any encyclopaedic novel of the twentieth-century. *Wife* is packed with the carnivalesque excitement of drunken barbeques, stag parties, forest fires, and high-speed car chases, all keeping readers’ attentions for over four hundred pages. Moreover, as Leithauser admits, Coover’s details are impressive: “Mr. Coover clearly has been amassing a personal lexicon of ribaldry; the book might serve as a kind of off-color thesaurus, in which the look and function of what used to be called our private parts are got up in indefatigably fresh nomenclature” (7). The issue for the critics of *Wife* is not, however, that the novel is empty of any storyline or even “information,” but that it doesn’t contain any sustainable moral reward for readers’ efforts (Limsky 5D). Delilah Jones Shapiro notes:

At first the disparateness of the voices is confusing. The author dispenses the thoughts of almost every character in town on any one given subject all at once (for example, how each one of them lost their virginity or, as the title indicates, how each is somehow obsessed with the wife of the town’s wealthiest, most

powerful and most depraved citizen, John). It's hard just keeping all the names (and nicknames) straight. But after a while, you get used to it. You begin to follow the who's who. It starts to get interesting. *It threatens to be about something.* (5D; my emphasis)

Yet, in the end, Shapiro is disappointed with the novel, as it falls short of her expectations. Rather than reach a satisfactory conclusion, Shapiro asserts that the novel is not really about anything in particular. She remarks:

A difficult and uneven work, *Wife* ultimately frustrates for its failure to arrive at a destination. As one character [Kate] observes, "... everything we try to grasp becomes something else." And this is quite true, both in the world of the characters and of the book overall. (5D)

The only thing Coover's novel seems to be about is a libertarian philosophy gone awry. Coover doesn't seem to give his readers a faint glimmer of ethical prescription through positive role models. Although a fan of the novel, Chad Galts acknowledges, "*John's Wife* will reaffirm a misanthrope's low opinion of human nature" and "it will give a rough Windexing to anyone else's rose-colored glasses" ("Happily Ever What?"). Portraying *Wife* as "[c]old-hearted" and "too sour to be funny," Drew Limsky avers, "Coover's distaste for the reader is matched by his scorn for his petty, loutish characters and everything they do" (5D). Coover's novel, after all, is more like "a gathering of souses, pornographers, druggies, thieves, pedophiles, procuresses, sadomasochists, voyeurs, necropheliacs, murderers and even mall builders," all of whom are "people you wouldn't normally want to meet" and for whom "Mr. Coover himself doesn't seem to feel any special warmth or respect" (Leithauser 7). Again, even those with a certain

affinity for Coover's writing find that in the "otherwise ever-changing universe" that is Coover's fictional world, "goodness and virtue remain elusive" (Shapiro 5D). Despite the title character's metaphysical potential, by novel's end, "there is no goodness left . . . only smut, and the cessation of words" (Shapiro 5D). Although Coover raises the possibility that someone like John's wife can save the people of his ethically questionable town, he fails to explore the latent possibilities of his own creations (as do fellow postmodern writers like Pynchon or Vonnegut, Jr.). As Leithauser protests:

Surely there's a lovely book to be written about a circle of small-town mediocrities who are smitten, and intermittently ennobled, by a beautiful woman who is – bless her heart – a cipher. But that's a book rooted in sympathy and compassion, and Mr. Coover has chosen instead to regard his characters with condescension. (7)

In terms of family commitment, therefore, humanist readers of *Wife* find nothing more than despicable characters with no concern for family members. The most serious offences of the novel are all family related. Extra-marital affairs like those that take place at Dutch's motel lead to even more serious crimes like assault and murder. Rape and child abuse are common crimes throughout the novel as elders and siblings are constantly abusing children. Coover even deals with the dangers of abortion in his depiction of Veronica's dreams and hallucinations of her aborted foetus. Sure, many of the crimes Coover's characters engage in are "innocent," from flirting to public drunkenness to distant stalking; yet, in these innocent attempts to fulfill fantasies and desires, adults ignore their children, or set bad examples for them. As a result, kids like Clarissa, Jennifer, and Philip, at some time or another, engage in dangerous activities like smoking

drugs, having sex, and driving fast cars. All are victims of violence as a result of adult-like behaviour. Clarissa crashes her father's car. Jennifer is abducted by Bruce and subsequently turned out as a hooker. Philip is sexually abused by Daphne and Rex as well as by Nevada.

In Coover's novel, many of those characters that expound communitarian value systems are also morally suspect. In the beginning of the novel readers learn of Maynard Sr.'s bandstand speech comparing the town to "one big loving family" (15), but they later learn that though an excellent orator, former Mayor, and pillar of the community, he is also secretly guilty of incest and rape. Although Coover's novel does not dedicate substantial time to Maynard Sr.'s sins, the careful reader will find reference to his crime in Coover's recounting of each character's memories of sex. Of Opal's memory, Coover simply writes, "Opal her brother's whisper not to tell" (41). Likewise, Mitch's "family values" speech indicating the dangers pro-choice arguments present to family and community value systems reeks of hypocrisy. Although vehemently outspoken against abortion, Mitch is unaware that Veronica may have saved his marriage by getting an abortion years ago when she found herself pregnant and unmarried. Thinking more of Mitch than herself, Veronica made a brave decision that literally comes back to haunt her later in life. Beyond the irony of Mitch's reproach of Veronica is the comedic fact that his views on strong family ties amount to nothing more than leaving the town's physical boundaries or "sowing wild oats in distant fields" (87).

Humanistic readers find that Coover's novel fails precisely because the author does not take a stand on any issue. His depiction of a libertarian lifestyle has the opportunity for satire, but the novel is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Rather than

seeking “to improve life” (*On Moral Fiction* 5) as Gardner advises, Coover’s work “tends toward destruction” and debasement (6). Even when he raises the possibility of moral vision, it is frequently through the hypocritical rhetoric of one of the novel’s morally debased characters. Humanistic critics of the novel find it almost impossible to tell how the author feels about such issues as family obligation and personal liberty, probably because the author himself has not decided. The issue becomes, therefore, whether the absence of any stated opinions on liberty and commitment prevent Coover’s novel from taking any moral stand on family values in postmodern America. An analysis of more positive readings of his fiction demonstrates that Coover still believes in the need for systems of morality; he just believes people need to be careful of placing too much emphasis on the permanence of these systems.

Positive Readings

Traditional Interpretation

Interestingly enough, a portion of the positive reception of *Wife* also tends to be humanistic in nature. The tendency amongst some readers is to overlook the novel’s postmodern tendencies, or at least look beyond them to its more traditional elements. Brian Evanson, for example, theorizes that the more ambitious Coover works, such as *Brunists*, *Gerald’s Party*, and *Wife*, all follow more or less traditional designs.⁸⁹ “All of these books move in a relatively linear manner,” writes Evanson, “[t]hey have a definitive beginning and end (even if that ending is in one case circular). They employ, to a greater or lesser degree, elements of realistic fiction, offering relatively developed characters and a forward (though at times digressive) motion” (18). Even though each novel introduces an element of “the fantastic” in order to disrupt “the realistic narrative,”

⁸⁹ Robert Coover. *Gerald’s Party*. New York: Plume, 1987. Hereafter shortened to *Party*.

by novel's end the status quo has been restored (18). In *Wife*, for example, the first sections of the novel introduce the characters and their relationships. Readers learn background information about the participants such as marital status and occupation. The middle sections present a rising action in the present (as well as connected events in the past that inform on the present). The final sections introduce the fantastic, but they also contain climax and resolution. The cataclysm (complete with the elements of the fantastic) reaches a conclusion and the town returns to normal with some characters gone and a few new ones arrived. The result of the more traditional structure in these novels is that they may also lend themselves to a traditional moral reading. In his reading of *Wife*, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt locates "some tiny portion of tradition" in a work "not nearly as mechanically repetitive or self-indulgent as so much of his [Coover's] previous fiction" (18C). Lehmann-Haupt believes Coover "has compromised his insistence that post-modern fiction completely reinvent reality," implying that Coover's moral vision in *Wife* is as easy to find as the moral vision of more traditional writers (18C). Citing Kate's suicide note to husband Oxford in which she admits to being able to express her love "only by inflicting grief" upon him, Lehmann-Haupt finds a moral centre in the novel's keen use of paradox to express harmony in a confusing world (18C). "If it is possible anywhere to grieve with joy" (*Wife* 416) notes Lehmann-Haupt, "then Mr. Coover's cheerfully psychotic world is the place for it" (18C).

Readers of Coover's opus will find (like Evanson and Lehmann-Haupt) that Coover has made subtle changes in structure and style and, as a result, his trickeries have become less egregious. In terms of formal complexity, the stories gathered in

Pricksongs, for example, are actually more challenging and frustrating than *Wife*.⁹⁰ In works like “The Babysitter” and “The Elevator,” Coover presents readers with many “mutually exclusive. . . and contending plots” from which it is impossible to choose (Varsava 111). “The Babysitter” begins innocently enough with a babysitter showing up at the Tucker’s household, but the story follows any possible sequence of events. In some sections, Coover follows the possible scenarios surrounding the babysitter’s adventures with the Tucker’s children (Jimmy, Bitsy, and an unnamed infant). The babysitter deals with the children not wanting to go to bed or get in the tub, and, in one scenario, actually shakes the infant until she doesn’t make a sound. In other sections the babysitter’s boyfriend, Jack, and his friend Mark, talk about going over to rape her, an event that readers see played out in a number of different ways by story’s end. In still other sections, Mr. Tucker comes home early to seduce the babysitter or talks about the possibility at a party in a drunken stupor. At times he interacts with the girl, at other times he watches through the window. In all, readers are faced with sparsely drawn characters and a total of 107 “variations of the fantasies, fears, anxieties, wish fulfilments, drunken blurs, crimes, sins, tragedies, and omissions of a suburban Saturday night” (Kennedy 64).

“The Elevator” also offers a multitude of readings in an unusual sequence. Some of the story’s sections are realistic, some fantastic. In this story the protagonist, Martin, stops on each of the fifteen floors of a building on his way to work. In the story’s

⁹⁰ Although I am dealing with a recent novel, my use of *Pricksongs* as a comparison in this argument is justified by Linsky’s use of “The Babysitter” as a precursor to the complexities of *Wife*. As a collection, *Pricksongs* also introduces the readers to Coover’s postmodernist writing. It is as much a theoretical treatise on Coover’s philosophical views regarding fiction, as it is a collection of short stories. I will look later at some of Coover’s other concerns (*Public* and *Spanking the Maid*, for example) in order to better demonstrate what *Wife* adds to the Coover canon.

different scenarios, Coover explores the interrelationships between Martin and co-workers (Carruther) as well as the female elevator operator. In some sections, Martin is embarrassed by Carruther and ignored by the operator. In other sections (told in third person indicating Martin is watching himself), he confronts Carruther and knocks him out. In other scenarios, Martin acts as a saviour to the operator when the cable breaks, taking the brunt of the fall and protecting her on the way down. In yet another situation, he acts as an omniscient being able to control the elevator's fate and the destiny of those around him. Like almost all of the other stories in *Pricksongs*, "The Elevator" with its structural confusion, "refuse[s] to give the narrative satisfaction that readers have come to expect" (Evanson 17).

More than simply the linear structure and sequence of its story, *Wife* is also much more traditional in narrative form from the fictions of *Pricksongs* in that it is narrated from the relatively common third-person omniscient point of view despite being focalized through many characters. Conversely, the short stories of *Pricksongs* explore a multitude of perspectives. Stories like "Scene for 'Winter'" and "The Leper's Helix" (both included in a section of *Pricksongs* entitled "The Sentient Lens") employ the seldom used second-person plural narrative voice. The scenes of both fictions are cinematic in nature employing an objective "camera eye lens" as a narrative force. These stories are less told than viewed from the collective point of view of the readers and the narrator. In works like "Morris in Chains" and "Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl," Coover actually uses a multitude of narrative voices and perspectives within singular narratives. The story of a shepherd hunted by the modern establishment for, of all things, raising sheep, "Morris in Chains" is told from the combined point of view of an

unidentified narrator reporting on behalf of the city's urbanologists (first-person collective) and the interior monologue of Morris the shepherd (first-person). The reporter's voice is relatively formal and detached in tone and Morris's voice is "colloquial . . . half American backwoods, half British countryside"; yet, the combination of the different first-person narratives in this story still leaves readers with a feeling of unreliability since there is no omniscient voice (Kennedy 24). Both the reporter and Morris are biased: one for reason and system, the other for nature and chaos. "Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl," the story of a "love square" involving a man, his wife, his daughter, and a guest at their cottage, is told from both a third-person narrative stance as well as second-person viewpoint. The third-person narrator tells the tale of Carl's erotic interactions with Swede's wife and daughter as well as his fishing trip with Swede (mostly in the past tense). The second-person narrative voice employs "you" as subject in order to emphasize Carl's feelings as an outsider to the family and the island (mostly in the present tense). Consequently, this focal point is both personal and impersonal. At times, the narrative voice is even confused as the third-person narrative voice appears to narrate present tense sections or the second-person narrative voice seems to refer to the readers rather than Carl.

Although the stories in *Pricksongs* change perspectives from main protagonists, to minor characters, to extra-textual perspectives, this multi-perspectivism is not particularly innovative in twentieth-century fiction. In fact, these fictions are very reminiscent of modernist works by Henry Miller, John Dos Passos or Faulkner. Coover's texts, however, are more in line with the postmodernist texts of Barth, Barthelme, and Vonnegut, Jr., which concern themselves with writing as process and with the artificiality

of the text as construct. More than anything, the stories of *Pricksongs* parody fiction in general by breaking the traditional façade separating reader from author. Coover does this by having his narrator address readers, not as fictional narrator, but as “historical author” and creator of the text (Varsava 111).

In works like “The Magic Poker” and “Klee Dead,” Coover’s readers become strangely aware of his fiction as artifice. Coover’s narrator in “The Magic Poker” immediately claims creator status over the idyllic scenario of the text beginning: “I wander the island, inventing it” (27). He admits to creating the island, the characters, and anything of interest in the story, including the magic poker itself. In comedic style, the narrator draws attention to the fact that the narrative is not an imitation of reality, but rather the author’s creation of another reality itself. Of the guest cabin, for example, he writes:

I arrange the guest cabin. I rot the porch and tatter the screen door and infest the walls. I tear out the light switches, gut the mattresses, smash the windows, and shit on the bathroom floor. I rust the pipes, kick in the papered walls, unhinge the doors. Really, there’s nothing to it. In fact, it’s a pleasure. (22)

In his tearing down of the cabin, the narrator parallels his power over fiction in general. He (as author of the text) can control what happens. The same goes for “Klee Dead,” a story that begins with the death of the title character, and takes readers through confusing paces with unnecessary characters and unsatisfactory conclusions all in attempts to explain Klee’s death. Of the main character’s demise, the author/narrator writes:

As for Wilbur Klee, I’ve not much more to say about him either, you’ll be glad to know, just this: that he jumped from a high place and is now dead. I think you

can take my word for it. The proof is, as it were, here in the pudding. Need I tell you from *what* high place? Your questions, friend, are foolish, disease of the western mind. On the other hand, if you wish to assume a cause-and-effect relationship—that he is dead *because* he jumped from a high place—well, you are free to do so, I confess it has occurred to me more than once and has colored my whole narration. (106)

Again, as in “The Magic Poker,” Coover’s narrative persona ruptures linearity, cause and effect, and reality itself. By placing him/herself within the narrative and developing a relationship with the readers, Coover’s narrator breaks down ontological boundaries between art and reality. Of course, ever the trickster, Coover does not always give the impression that only the author creates meaning. He wonders aloud about the caretaker’s son in “The Magic Poker,” whether it “was not he who invented me” (27). Likewise, in “Klee Dead,” Coover’s persona claims ignorance of the storyline and can only offer readers tickets to the circus (tickets he admits to offering the city clerk in order to get more information about Klee) as payment for his inept story. In the end, though, the main concern of these stories is still the artificiality of fiction.

A portion of *Wife* definitely attends to the same matters. A major subplot of the novel is dedicated to Ellsworth and his novel in progress, *The Artist and His Model*. While composing his novel Ellsworth is confronted by an intruder into the text (the Stalker) who has “cross[ed] some impossible barrier against the author’s determined will” and “threaten[ed] to destroy it [the novel] from within” and sully the Artist’s “wise and eloquent quest for beauty” (185). Ellsworth begins to see the Stalker throughout the novel, and then elsewhere in newspaper articles and old pictures. Like the

narrators in “Klee Dead” and “The Magic Poker,” the Stalker has gained control of the fiction from within, and there is nothing Ellsworth can do about it. Ellsworth ends up burning his novel, and perhaps even has something to do with the forest fire in the town. Despite the destruction of the novel, the Model from Ellsworth’s story remains alive in the *Wife*’s last section. Coover’s novel ends with the Model, alone with no forest and no Artist. Consequently, Coover leaves his readers inside the story within a story that is Ellsworth’s novel. Unlike the stories of *Pricksongs*, the major focus of *Wife* is not simply the constructed nature of art as it is in the shorter fictions. There is no authorial intervention in the novel itself, only in the story within the story (an important distinction). As such, the issue of art as construct is simply a part of a larger issue. Even though the novel may conclude with readers trapped “within the story,” like the Model in Ellsworth’s novel who “persisted in her search in spite of all that had happened, tracing and retracing her steps,” the readers of *Wife* find their way out (*Wife* 428). *Wife*’s structure is, after all, palindromic in nature. The final phrase, “a man was there. Once...” (428), mirrors the first, “Once there was a man” (7). With this circularity, Coover lets his readers out of the novel within a novel and back into the original text. More importantly, the circularity points to larger possibilities of renewal in life even after apocalyptic disasters like the one that closes Coover’s novel. Readers’ satisfaction in finishing *Wife* is at least higher than their fulfilment in finishing a story like “The Hat Trick” where they are confronted with the frustrating final message, “THIS ACT IS CONCLUDED THE MANAGEMENT REGRETS THERE WILL BE NO REFUND” (256).

Postmodern Interpretation

The implication that *Wife*, in contrast to Coover's early work, is somehow traditional and thus lends itself more easily to a moral reading is promising, yet still somewhat parochial. Coover's early fiction unquestionably has a complex style and form, but to ignore the same tendencies in *Wife* is to do an injustice to the novel. The negative humanists make a strong point. To imply that *Wife* is realistic in form and style or that it contains "some tiny portion of tradition" runs the risk of suggesting an ease of interpretation for a very complex novel (Lehmann-Haupt 18C). As demonstrated by the examination of the conflicting issues of liberty and equality developed in my first chapter, this is inaccurate. Defenders who acknowledge the novel's difficulties while proffering a postmodern morality in Coover's work take a more pragmatic approach to *Wife*. Like it or not, it is one of Coover's more complicated and open novels. These readers view the novel with a contemporary outlook agreeing that the change in attitude toward language in the twentieth-century as demonstrated by Coover's style "has greatly broadened our conception of language" (Bigsby 11). Rather than criticize or ignore the confusion of style, therefore, critics like Harris, Gussow, Galts and others respond positively to Coover's efforts, applauding the artistic genius that goes into each Coover novel and relishing the event that is a reading (and subsequent re-reading) of a work like *Wife*. Galts commends "the brilliance and lucidity of Coover's prose" ("Happily Ever What?"). Even Evanson, a more traditional reader, praises the "linguistic verve" (2) of Coover's work, calling the novel "a virtuoso performance, one that stretches the limits of narrative" (220). Like the style of *Party*, one of Coover's earlier novels, the style of *Wife* advocates a new possibility for contemporary fiction, namely the prospect for mimesis.⁹¹ For

⁹¹ According to Mel Gussow, the title of *Wife* "is intended to parallel *Gerald's Party*. . . [a] novel that is not generally listed as one of his [Coover's] successes but that is a personal favorite" (13).

postmodern commentators, then, the confusions caused by style, form, and message may be simply descriptive in nature, expressive of living in a confusing, often chaotic universe, but they also make for a truly realistic (in its non-traditional sense) experience. Coover involves his readers in the confusion of his novel, welcoming them into its chaos.

Of the concomitant confusion of character in *Wife*, Harris counsels Coover's readers to be patient, advising:

Characters flash by—first just a name, mentioned casually; then, in succeeding revolutions and revelations, a fuller and fuller portrait; then views of that character through the eyes of other characters; then actions that seem out of character; as we understood him or her. Did we miss something? we wonder.

Never mind; he or she will come spinning our way again. (3E)

Just as the style is characteristic of real-world interaction, the method of character depiction mirrors that of the lived-world. Individuals often learn about people in bits and pieces, through tangential discussions and overheard conversations. Opinions of others are always being formed and reformed. Coover's novel, therefore, simply supplies adequate information on all of the characters (save John's wife who is an enigma for the first part of the novel and disappears in the second part) so that provisional character sketches can be constructed. Moreover, Coover's refusal to focus on one particular character points to the possibility that "[t]he real protagonist in this sprawling, ambitious, sinister, loving, and wonderful book is the small town itself" (Landry E03).⁹²

In terms of the novel's focalization, *Wife* may be difficult to follow, but the point of view does more than confuse readers. By allowing "[t]he musings of one character

⁹² Evanson makes a similar claim about *Brunists*: "the novel has so many varied voices, so many fleshed-out and developed characters, that it might be more accurate to think of the town itself as the protagonist" (30).

[to] lead into those of another,” Coover accomplishes two goals (Galts, “Happily Ever What?”). First, it is realistic to assume tangential narration and multiple focalizations. After all, the events of the novel’s world are certainly experienced differently by different characters. Coover does his best to demonstrate how as many characters as possible react to the events of the story in order to create more possible interpretations. Second, Galts believes this technique helps drive “the book in tight circles around two main events – a stag party and a Pioneer’s [sic] Day picnic” (“Happily Ever What?”). In other words, Coover’s complex narrative voice is an aesthetic device. It aids in creating a circular plot, based on contrasting physical and temporal settings, that “travels inward through the minds” of Coover’s characters “rather than forward through time” in a linear fashion (Galts, “Happily Ever What?”). The novel may appear “plotless,” but this is only because the connections within the narrative do not appear to follow a traditional formula.

In the end, acknowledging a more open reading of *Wife* does not prevent a moral reading of the novel’s family commitments. Galts explains:

Perhaps this book’s finest accomplishment . . . is its insistence on forcing the reader to confront moral questions normally kept under lock and key. The author neither condemns nor praises his characters’ betrayals, violence, and sexual perversion. This is reading not as recreation but as work; you struggle to make sense out of where you are, how you got there, and how you might get out. (“Happily Ever What?”)

Like Gaddis’s *Frolic*, *Wife* can be read as a “degenerative satire” (Weisenburger 1) in that it criticizes “good-ol-boy mores” without handing readers the answer to their moral

quandaries (Harris 3E). Although the people in Coover's small town often subscribe to traditional, conservative family values, they often do so for selfish reasons. Coover may not present a viable alternative to this traditionalism, but he certainly criticizes its provincial nature. In fact, as I have suggested in my first chapter, the novel explores the threats of both absolutist liberal and communitarian thought. As Galts suggests, the novel's moral message, is, like its title character, ambiguous. What is apparent to many optimistic readers is that *Wife* is not about any one character and his/her vision of morality nor is it centred on any one moral vision. As such, *Wife* is a "story of the power of flux to disrupt memory, community and desire" and hidden amongst the flux and confusion of Coover's small town portrait is merely the possibility of moral vision (Harris 3E). Although the story may be confusing this does not "detract from the riches of philosophy. . .and social criticism that Coover has deeply seeded throughout this book" and *Wife* "will gain resonance with each re-reading" (Landry 3E).

Part Two: Ontological Boundaries and Epistemological Questioning in Wife

Ontology and Commitment

Examples of the type of postmodern commentary offered by Galts and others are common in more sophisticated examinations of Coover's moral vision such as those of Richardo Miguel-Alphonso and Thomas E. Kennedy. In "Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* and the Ethics of Historical Understanding," Miguel-Alfonso's praises *Public* as "a critique of the dominant ideology of the United States during the 1950s" and as an exploration of "history, otherness and the intersection between them" (23). For Miguel-Alfonso the main force behind *Public* is "to examine the assumptions of historical

knowledge by thematizing the interchange between aesthetics and politics” (23). As such, Coover criticizes the epistemic need for objectivity of history, art, and morality in an otherwise chaotic world. Like Miguel-Alfonso, Thomas Kennedy indicates that Coover has a more open epistemology than that of strict empiricism or absolute rationalism. In *Robert Coover: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Kennedy questions the charges of anti-mimeticism launched against Coover arguing that Coover’s writing is more realistic than that of his more traditional contemporaries. For Kennedy, “Coover’s stories are multi-formed vehicles of ‘reality’ that encompass varying ‘realities’” (9). “He takes the reader out of the narrow confines of fictional realism,” explains Kennedy, “expanding the walls of the house of fiction to contain vastly greater aspects of the reality in which we live” (9).

Like Miguel-Alfonso and Kennedy, Galts and others offer a typical postmodern reading of a postmodern novel. The absence of morality claimed by the humanist critics of these fictions is countered with a “new realism” characterized by a multitude of moralities. Although properly liberal in their tolerance of different interpretations, postmodern apologists do not always have a full appreciation for Coover’s moral vision in that they still see Coover as simply aesthetically and politically reactionary. “Coover’s concern is not to provide alternatives,” writes Miguel Alfonso, and “the novel [*Public*] does not suggest any way out of the pitfalls pointed out” (23). Likewise, Galts’s reading leaves all moral vision up to the readers and, therefore, smacks of a relativism Coover himself would deny. Galts’s claim that “The author neither condemns nor praises his characters’ betrayals, violence, and sexual perversion,” for example, leaves the author with nothing important to say (“Happily Ever What?”).

A better place to start in discussing postmodern morality in *Wife* is with a brief analysis of what makes the novel postmodern in the first place. Returning to McHale's distinction mentioned in my first chapter, the main difference between modernism and postmodernism, though difficult to pinpoint, is simply one of dominant focus. For McHale, the dominant focus of postmodern texts is ontological. Postmodernist texts ask ontological questions of the text itself, the world of the text, or the world outside the text. These fictions ask questions such as:

What kinds of world are there, and how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (10)

I have already demonstrated how Coover's early works like the stories of *Pricksongs* lead readers to question the very nature of the text and its physical boundaries before ever considering epistemological issues. As a result, most academic studies of *Pricksongs* stick to the ontological bent of the stories. A close examination of *Wife* demonstrates that, despite the traditionalist readings offered by Lehman-Haupt, Evanson, and all the negative reviewers of the text, the novel is first and foremost concerned with questioning ontological boundaries such as those separating past from present, reality from fantasy, and art from nature. More importantly, *Wife* asks questions pertaining to the nature of the self and social groupings such as the family and the community. Before asking epistemological questions such as "How do people come to know about family obligation?" or moral questions such as "On what level ought individuals to be

committed to families above themselves?” these ontological boundaries need to be explored.

For an exploration of individual agency and family commitment, it is important first to acknowledge both intrapersonal and interpersonal ontological boundaries as they appear in the novel. As does Acker and Gaddis, Coover explores the intrapersonal boundary within the individual or between possible selves. In terms of intrapersonal boundaries, many characters struggle with multiple identities. Affectionately known as Hard Yard for the size of his genitals, Harvard explores his own personal boundaries dividing genders as he becomes a cross dresser despite having a reputation as a lady’s man. Likewise, Otis struggles with his identity as “guardian warrior” (9) and his “lifelong obsession with order and disorder” (424) only to recognize the possibility that “this turbulent, radiant, and tender world . . . knew . . . no such distinction” (424). Even John recognizes the possibility of the duality of self in his realization that Bruce is “in reality another side of himself,” a side he cannot “bring himself to embrace” (336).

The best example of how Coover explores how the ontological boundary within the self creates conflict in family issues is through his depiction of Cornell’s struggle with his confusing memories of childhood and his present commitments as a father and a husband. Readers get strange, often conflicting glimpses of Corny. A normal child, aside from his trigger-happy member, Corny remembers fondly his life in the small town, “back when his family was all together” (236). He remembers enjoying “being taken around by his big brothers, playing with his sister, being read to by his mom. . . [and] playing with games and toys” (236). The next thing he remembers his brother has died and he is in Paris with his brother’s ex-girlfriend who has just committed suicide. Afraid

because he cannot speak the language and cannot help her, Corny runs into a subway tunnel only to travel through a strange doorway and return to a life in his hometown, married to a woman he doesn't know and strapped with a brood of children he doesn't recognize. Still feeling very much like a child himself, Corny, unable to live up to his commitments, becomes "little more than a peripheral nuisance to the family" (65). He spends countless hours playing video games and reading magazines at his father's store while his wife, Gretchen, supports the family and his father takes care of the children.

Corny's major concern, apart from playing games, is to "get his mixed-up life sorted out" (239). In fact, Corny expends most of his energy looking for the door separating worlds that seems to have carried him back and forth between France and America. It is only when he is reunited with Pauline (his childhood love) that he reaches an epiphany about the narrative of his life:

Cornell had been thinking about his escape from Yale's girlfriend's apartment after, well, after what had happened to her, and how his whole life since then seemed like a single thread: through those scary streets, down into the ground below, then through the dark stinking maze of tunnels and sewers, up the metal stairs, out the door at the top, into a life with that clubfooted lady that was, somehow, already underway. . . . That thread of his life, he sensed. . . . was now being knotted, he didn't know why, but it was all coming round full circle, and he was sure he would find at last the door that he'd been looking for, solving the mystery of life and freeing himself from the sensation of there being not just one of him but two. (344-5)

The notion that he has two selves appeases Corny and, whether accurate or not, it is his only explanation for the chaos that has plagued his mental and emotional life. Pleased with his findings, Cornell tries to circumvent this duality by attempting to keep his second self, “the mixed-up married one” from taking control. He soon learns that he cannot focus completely on one version of his personality and he crosses back over the boundary between selves, ending up back at the drugstore with Gretchen, bearing no recollection of his earlier realization (345).

A second ontological threshold explored in the novel that relates directly to family and familial obligation is the interpersonal threshold between private and public. The novel’s dominant trope of building or construction explores this boundary best. Three of the main male characters of the novel are builders by trade, if not by vision. John, the most popular and powerful denizen of Coover’s small town, is “a builder” of epic proportions. The owner of the local hardware store as well as a number of businesses, John is always building or renovating something from cabins to shopping malls to civic centres. John’s father, Mitch, and his father-in-law, Barnaby, are also tradesmen of good reputation who, as carpenters and town planners, helped to create the town as it has stood for years. As Coover makes it very clear throughout the novel, however, these three men have very different ideas as to what it means to be a builder and these ideas are indicative of different viewpoints regarding public and private and subsequent family commitments.

“Old Barnaby,” Coover’s narrator tells the readers, “was a builder famous for his solid constructions, most of the best houses in town had been built by him” (53-4). With a reputation for workmanship and pride, Barnaby builds edifices that stand the test of time. Yet, Barnaby’s pride in his work is not just a pride for pride’s sake. He sees

construction as a higher calling with a distinct purpose. As such, he has a particular “vision of a builder’s place in his community” (115). Confiding in Mitch early in their careers, Barnaby elucidates the importance of the new park they have built:

One day, Mitch . . . something important will happen here on this piece of land, something that will bring all our townsfolk together in fellowship and prosperity, and meanwhile we have to protect it, keep it green and free from careless development and out-of-town speculators until that day when its true homegrown purpose will be manifest. (294)

Although not a strict communitarian in the sense of Sandel and Taylor, through his words and deeds, Barnaby frequently demonstrates a liberal-communitarian vision. In particular, Barnaby is respectful of the theory of social obligation expounded by thinkers such as Walzer (*Spheres*) and Lasch (*Haven*). Walzer’s theory of social obligation has its basis in ontological boundaries separating different spheres of existence. These spheres, for Walzer, include the family, the community, the political sphere, and the economic sphere. For Walzer, even if people cannot touch the boundaries between each sphere, they accept that they are there based on “shared understandings” of what is right and wrong, real and constructed (xiv). Like Walzer, Barnaby also believes that even if individuals cannot see the boundaries dividing spheres, they know they are there and must respect them. As a builder, Barnaby feels both privileged and responsible for making creations (houses, parks, and towns) that are symbolic of these boundaries and the spheres they represent. Just as he builds the park and protects it from “out-of-towners,” (294), Barnaby builds “solid family homes of indisputable quality” (290), homes that are “[s]anctuaries of the family” (242).

Although seemingly quite similar, especially in age and espoused attitude, Barnaby and Mitch differ fundamentally in terms of their views of the boundaries between spheres of existence. Coover sums up the differences in attitudes in his lengthy, yet important description of their project to re-plan the town. Of the project, Coover writes:

Thus when Barnaby, home on leave, told Mitch about his plans to develop the town around a new city park, the old one being a mere square block in front of City hall and surrounded by business, making expansion of it impractical, Mitch set about buying up some of the rundown properties Barnaby had pointed out to him, surprising the owners with his generous offers, but knowing full well that the city, through Opal's relatives, would pay him twice that when the park was built. And did. And he even got the old park in a tradeoff when they ran out of money, the most valuable piece of undeveloped real estate in town, demonstrating his generosity and public spirit (for which he was widely applauded) by moving the bandstand, statue of the Old Pioneer, and historic flagpole to the new park at his own expense, setting the statue on a new rugged stone plinth. The reshaping of the town around the new park was a phenomenal achievement. Only a war hero could have pulled it off. The whole community was reoriented, away from the dwindling creek and long-gone early settlements (even the Old Pioneer's gaze was turned), toward its slummier back side which was totally refashioned in Barnaby's image, upgraded almost overnight into the most desirable properties in town, though Barnaby, taking only his construction earnings, owned none of it. (292)

Although both men talk of family values and their respect for community pride, there are major differences in their philosophies. Barnaby's decision to take "only his construction earnings" demonstrates that, like Walzer, he believes benefits from one sphere should not carry into another sphere (292). As a builder, Barnaby does not mind gaining financially from the fruits of his labour, but he believes that he should not attempt to gain financially from his philosophical vision as well. Mitch, on the other hand, is more selfish in his attitudes, displaying an uncanny ability to "read [the] business world at a glance and act without hesitation" (292). He "sells" Barnaby's vision to the town, knowing people will buy into it, and then benefits financially from the sale of the new properties. He does not truly respect the boundaries separating spheres and he uses philosophical ideas like "family values" and "community pride" as catch phrases in order to further his economic needs even to the point of marrying "plain straightlaced Opal" for her money, creating a family out of economic need rather than love (292). Perhaps Mitch's most telling abuse of the boundaries between spheres comes at the dedication of John's new civic centre, built on the grounds of Barnaby's park. Despite Barnaby's tireless fight to save his creation from progress, John is able to steamroll the park and build a new civic centre that will most certainly draw out-of-towners and the like to the sheltered town. John even dedicates the civic centre to his father-in-law and Mitch gives a speech claiming the new civic centre as the manifestation of Barnaby's vision of what would one day happen on the land. According to Mitch, Barnaby's "dream [had] come true!" (294).

Like his father, John is very different from Barnaby. Although Coover constantly discusses John's resume as a builder, he is quick to remind readers that his buildings do

not last. In describing John's beginnings as a builder, and the subsequent differences between his work and Barnaby's, Coover writes:

John's first constructions had been high school and college theatre sets: fantasy structures thrown up and knocked down in a day, and sufficient unto it, as the saying went, constructions Barnaby would never even acknowledge as such. Barnaby's first was his own home, a classic picture to this day in books on twentieth-century American architecture, books John scoffed at as the purblind trivia of academic twinkies who wouldn't know which end of the hammer to pick up. (110)

Where Barnaby, who is "slow and too expensive," builds structures that last, John is more in step with "the throwaway times" (54). John builds "whole developments, his own an art of most for least, quick, cheap, and functional, disdaining the vain illusions of perpetuity" (54). Furthermore, despite the large expense of some of his ventures, John is, like his father, a perceptive businessperson who knows how to get what he wants and is equipped with the sense to recognize an opportunity and the acumen to use those around him to help him realize this opportunity. Even when his back appears to be against the wall (as when Barnaby and Maynard II have conspired to wrestle financial control of the town from him), John is able to protect his investments and his creations.

As for his views on ontological boundaries, John believes that they are constructed rather than recognizable through human reason. One of the novel's most powerful images, following the controlling trope of construction, is the image of the Old Pioneer Hotel after John attempts a demolition. All that is left standing is "the big front door, completely in tact, columns, architrave, and all. Majestic. Inviting. But opening

out onto nothing” (264). The unexpected result of John’s actions, according to Kate, is to draw attention to the falsity or artificial nature of all thresholds. Of the symbolic incident Kate avers that John makes the townspeople aware of the fact that, “[m]ostly we build walls . . .to separate the inner from the outer, the private from the public, the sacrosanct from the common, the known from the unknown. Doors are put in the walls to ceremonialize the crossing from one into another” (264). The door, for Kate, is a “magical threshold” and what John does is “strip the door of all illusions, reminding us that all magic [is] nothing but sleight of hand, and thresholds [are] mere artifices in the middle of nowhere” (264). John’s realization of the artificiality of ontological boundaries makes him like the “Olympish” city planners of Ellsworth’s play. He constructs everything around him, especially his own boundaries between public and private (46). Likewise, his marriage, like his father’s marriage, is very much a business transaction. He marries Barnaby’s daughter for the advantages he can gain from her father’s successes combined with his own father’s holdings. John thinks of his wife and kids simply as “political and social assets” that he estimates “once a year by means of Trevor’s tax returns and Gordon’s family portraits” (10). In the end, John’s success in the community comes from his ability to see the constructed nature of ontological boundaries and to make them work for him.

Epistemology and Commitment

Coover’s portrait of constructed ontological boundaries highlights the tension between individual liberty and family commitment throughout the novel. Unable to pinpoint the exact demarcations within the self as well as between public and private, many of Coover’s characters are unable to commit to others in any lasting, moral way. Returning

to McHale's theorizing on postmodern fiction, he believes ontological questions "ought to be asked *first*" of a postmodern text and he acknowledges the impossibility of asking ontological questions without also asking epistemological ones (11). The two are not mutually exclusive. Now that I have dealt with the relevant ontological issues in *Wife*, I can begin to analyze the relevant epistemological concerns. Although Coover explores many epistemological issues, the most important one relates to how characters gain knowledge of the world around them and their place in it. Coover's exploration of this issue leads him to several possibilities including universal reason, shared experiences, and intuition.

Perhaps the best place to begin an examination of Coover's epistemological inquiries into knowledge of the world and the self is with universal reason. Not by accident, the character that most epitomizes this viewpoint is Oxford, Kate's husband and the "town rationalist" (38). The closest thing in Coover's novel to a pure liberal in the Rawlsian sense, Oxford's "sole desire [is] simply that the world be at least as reasonable as he [is]" (96). Oxford expects each person to abide by rules of conduct such as those suggested in Rawls's *Justice*, and as a result, is quite upset when people fail to do so. Although noble in his reasoning and certainly compassionate in his dealings with others, Oxford's rationalism (symbolized by his myopia) is a "certain recipe for despair" (96). Knowledgeable of the dangers of relying upon universal reason as an epistemological framework, Oxford's confidante, Alf, advises:

Human reason is an evolutionary deformity, my friend, an aberrant mutation, a miserable freak. Don't trust it. The life force itself is savage and mindless.

Ruthless. Like a trapped beast. Believe me, I witness its stupid cruelty every

day. And in its ruthlessness, it engenders monsters, human reason just one of its grotesque miscreations. Just thinking about it, Oxford, is enough to make you shit your britches. The brain thinking about itself: better than a damned enema. (96)

It is through his dysfunctional family situation that Oxford's rationalism suffers the most irreconcilable damage. He suffers the pain of many losses such as the suicide of his wife Kate and the death of his son Yale in the war. These losses are particularly hard for Oxford to manage because of the irrationality of their circumstances. He must also deal with a homosexual daughter (Columbia) who is having an affair with his daughter-in-law (Gretchen), a cross-dressing son (Harvard), and, of course, his undiagnosed schizophrenic son (Cornell).⁹³ A man with "no clear second wish when the only wish he ever wished for did not come true" (96), Oxford's "family's slow decline" leaves him a husk of a man (39).

Surprisingly enough, Oxford's daughter-in-law, Gretchen, whom Coover labels "the very emblem of that deformity Oxford's dream of reason had become," saves him (97). Physically deformed in several ways (half-blind with a gimp leg), Gretchen marries Oxford's troubled son and does what she can to keep his feet on solid ground. She takes over the pharmacy (something all of his children had failed to do). She also befriends Columbia, Oxford's lonely daughter, helping to alleviate her loneliness. More than this, Gretchen provides Oxford with the grandchildren that give his life new meaning. In the time following his wife's death, Oxford has both grieved his loss and struggled with

⁹³ It is no accident that Oxford, no doubt named after the university, has named his children after sites of higher epistemology. Just as he has followed the rationalism of his namesake, he expects his children to do the same. Furthermore, the fact that each child bears irrational characteristics or deformities of some sort implies that their own namesakes are corrupt in their elitist rationalities.

Kate's explanation left in her suicide note. Through his new life as a grandfather, Oxford begins to see the importance of joy in grief and even begins to understand Kate's irrational decision to take her own life.

Early in the novel, Barnaby remembers when his young daughter (John's wife) performed in one of Ellsworth's Pioneers Day pageants dedicated to the town's city planners and builders. He recollects how proud he felt as she spoke Ellsworth's lines about the town: "[h]ere in Reason's beauteous grove we stand, / Its glory being: *'Twas made by human hand!*'"(46). Like Walzer, Barnaby believes that human reason is not a priori in the sense of Rawls's universal reason. Barnaby sees reason rather, as a by-product of "shared experiences." These experiences tell about the world around the individual's place in it. For Barnaby, his part in physically constructing the town and its boundaries, in particular the construction of family homes with "solid foundations . . . you could trust" has always been based on a notion of commitment to family and community that all people in the town share (242). Despite Barnaby's noble beliefs, his family life, like Oxford's begins to fall apart. Audrey, Barnaby's wife and John's mother-in-law, signs over her portion of the estate to John in her will. With his wife's portion of the estate, John controls two-thirds of the finances after Audrey's death. Readers can't help but be sympathetic when they see Barnaby widowed, demented, and confined to an old age home while he watches his son-in-law take control of his financial estate and destroy his vision of the community.

But, does the fact that readers feel sympathy for Barnaby mean that Coover endorses an epistemological vision based solely on shared understandings of such issues as family commitment? Is Coover implying a moral position by generating pathos

through Barnaby's tragic circumstances? Certainly, Coover's fictions have more in common with conservative, as opposed to liberal epistemologies. Coover's linguistic play and structural innovation alone indicate his displeasure with the a priori absolute. Furthermore, in outlining his personal philosophy of human experiences, Coover admits that knowledge is constructed based on experiences:

Men live by fictions. They have to. Life's too complicated, we just can't handle all the input, we have to isolate little bits and make reasonable stories out of them. Of course, that's an artificial act and therefore, you might say, "artistic." But I would say the impulse was from necessity. (McCaffery, "Robert Coover on His Own and Other Fictions: An Interview" 50)

For Coover, human beings could not live without at least believing in certain reasonable ontological boundaries such as the ones suggested by Barnaby and Walzer. The difference separating the communitarian vision and Coover's is found in Coover's healthy respect for the dangers that communitarian philosophies pose. Coover explains that people must be careful to remember that the boundaries created by the fictions humans live by are "merely artifices" and thus "always in some ways false, or at best incomplete" (McCaffery, "Robert Coover on His Own and Other Fictions: An Interview" 50). According to Coover, "There are always other plots, other settings, other interpretations" (50). Although Coover appreciates the need for shared understandings, he constantly illuminates ontological confusion as an effective way of keeping these understandings from becoming dogmatic, something communitarians often forget. In an interview with Christopher Bigsby, Coover explicates his own vision:

[I]t's something I seem always to be coming back to, the way our fictions get pushed into dogmas, invested with a force of reality, a sense of literal truth, that they were never meant to have. These fictions, these imaginative ways of grasping the universe, can't be imposed on people, they can only be shared.

("Robert Coover" 84)

The problem with shared understandings, therefore, is they often get pushed on people at the expense of other shared understandings.

A focused analysis of the novel shows evidence of Coover's fear as Barnaby begins to change. Although about the same age as Mitch, Barnaby suffers a much quicker decline in physical and mental health. Convinced of the conspiracies against him, especially from his own family members, he lashes out at those closest to him. He chastises Opal (thinking she is his dead wife Audrey) for changing her will and cheating on him. In the scuffle that ensues, Barnaby shoots the gun off several times and finally accuses his wife of cheating on him with his rival only to have Mitch show up and steal "his damned wife, right from under his nose" just like "they'd taken everything else" (347).

Seeing his wife as commodity is only one indication of Barnaby's decline. Realizing he "might even alienate his daughter" who is "all he ha[s] left in this world save his builder's pride," Barnaby steps over his own values of family commitment by contriving a plan to overthrow John's business empire with the help of John's own family (cousin Maynard II). In order to orchestrate his plan, Barnaby even invites out-of-towners into his community to help him trick John with some backhanded wheeling and dealing. Of course, even Barnaby cannot beat John at his own game and the plan leaves

him “crushed and embittered” even further (117). Perhaps the most telling indication that Coover wants readers to reconsider some of Barnaby’s epistemological notions is that there is something fundamentally wrong with Barnaby’s refusal to progress. Even his initial vision of community is itself based on progress from earlier days. His idea to move the city centre away from the river and around the park is a progressive move that he convinces the community to adopt. In refusing to see the same possibility of progress in John’s new vision, therefore, Barnaby is guilty of dogmatising his own vision to the point that it is no longer a necessary artifice, but an absolute vision of what the community must be. Even Barnaby himself comes to this sad realization when he accepts that “people didn’t have families in the old way anymore. If they ever did. Just an illusion maybe, a mere veneer. Look at his own. A damned catastrophe” (242). He begins to see that common ideals of such things as “family” and “community” are not as solid as he had once thought. This insight is more than Barnaby can take. As the narrator laments, “[f]iguring out the real world made you want to kill yourself—in fact, come to think of it, he’d meant to” (242).

With the failure of both Oxford’s rationalism and Barnaby’s communitarianism, readers of *Wife* are bound to look elsewhere for epistemological explanations. The most likely possibility given in the novel is a form of intuitionism whereby characters employ epiphanies and/or instincts to access knowledge. Almost every character in the novel has a major revelation of some sort and each character’s moment of awakening has something to do with seeing the world and his/her place in it clearly. Otis, for example, has several epiphanies that can only be described as “holy vision[s]” (92) regarding his relationship with Pauline and his personal struggle with “order and disorder” (424). After

one of his trysts with Pauline, John's wife and a "committee of housewives" confront him as he exits the trailer (92). Feeling guilty for taking advantage of a young girl, Otis promises "the Virgin never to see Pauline again" (92). Otis sees Pauline and the Virgin together again, late in the novel, when he comes to the realization that there is no boundary between order and disorder. In a moment of revelation, Otis sees the Virgin's face superimposed on a photograph, behind "Pauline's twinkling pubes" (425).

Likewise, Corny has the revelation about his dual self mentioned above, in which he realizes he can pass through doors into different selves. Even Reverend Lenny has several revelations that he uses as subject matter for his sermons. Intuitionists like nineteenth-century philosopher Henri Bergson believe that people gain access to knowledge by acknowledging that they live more in time than in space access. In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson emphasizes the need to be aware that the incidents of individual lives, past, present, and future, are all accessible, through memory. As such, with every experience at the ready for subconscious perusal, people are able to have instinctual and intuitive responses to the world around them and gain absolute knowledge about their places in it. This notion of non-linear time is an important aspect of Coover's novel, both thematically and structurally. Many characters are aware that memory allows them to see "past and present all interwoven and dissolving into one another" (352).

Although most characters in the novel have revelations, this is not evidence of Coover's support of intuitionism as epistemological explanation. The intuitive revelations made by Coover's characters are only fleeting, not absolute. Too many times in the novel, a loss of knowledge and a return to a previous state of ignorance follows an epiphany. Coover's representative of intuitive knowledge is, of course, John's wife.

Nameless and ethereal, she travels through the story as object to each character's epistemological desires. She provides the answer to each character's epistemological questions and, as such, represents "the intrinsic indwelling truth of the town, its very suchness, so to speak" (8). Although few people can really describe her, "[s]he always seem[s] to be at the very heart of things in town" (73). She is "unchanging, the very image of constancy" (76). She is also frequently present at the epiphanies when people see the world as it should be. For Otis, it is the initial meeting with John's wife outside Pauline's trailer that introduces him to the Virgin Mary and the guilt of his actions. For Reverend Lenny, John's wife represents the transcendental concept of Christian love, and it is during his rendezvous with her in John's bedroom that he comes to the realization that "[w]e are meaningful . . . only in our oneness to each other" (304). To Rex, the mechanic, who catches a glimpse "up John's wife's skirt" in the auto shop, she represents the American dream in which he gets old Stu's dealership and John's wife as a prize (142).

But of course, as Coover is determined to remind us, John's wife is "unknowable" (73). When Lenny comes to his revelation, John's wife lifts "her dress up over her head" and disappears (304). As soon as he thinks he has everything figured out, Lenny is left alone with only a "puddle of clothes" to remind him of her presence (304). Likewise, Rex wakes from his daydream feeling "deflated" and "[l]ike a loser again" (142). Even Veronica, who struggles with the hallucinatory vision of her unborn fetus, is unable to remember why or how John's wife helps her. Crazy from the battle with her unborn child, Veronica is unable to process what has happened when John's wife comforts her:

Then John's wife told her something very important, so important Veronica stopped crying and carrying on and just watched, stunned, as the woman disappeared down the street, pushing the shopping cart with Ronnie's unborn son in it. But when she woke, she could not remember what it was John's wife had said. She lay there with her eyes closed, listening to Maynard's bubbly wheezing beside her, trying to remember. It was so important! (241-2)

Even her own family has a hard time pinning her down. For John, she is "[a]n abstraction, absent, not yet a nuisance" (42). He doesn't love her, but he doesn't completely disregard her either. Her daughter, Clarissa, can't explain the effect her mother has on her life. "She didn't actually do anything," Clarissa recalls, "but she just kept getting in the way" (74). John's wife is also present when her father, Barnaby, realizes that suicide is his only solution. She is the one who tells him the gun is in the bathroom, but with her immanent disappearance, Barnaby cannot remember why he went in there to begin with nor whether or not "his daughter [was] just here" (243). The most telling problem with intuition as epistemological strategy is that for a great deal of the novel, John's wife completely disappears. No matter how frequently characters catch a glimpse of her and see the possibility of true knowledge in her presence, she remains a snapshot taken out of focus. The failure of John's wife to attain a consistent form thereby dismisses any attempt to assume family commitment through intuition.

Part Three: Postmodern Morality and the Politics of Commitment

Readers of *Wife* and other Coover fictions get more than a passing feeling that, as Kate the librarian opines, "[a]ll life's an artifice. . . . We are born into the stories made by

others, we tinker a bit with the details, and then we die” (138). With the constant confusion of ontological boundaries and the “grotesque miscreations” of epistemological frameworks such as universal reason, shared understandings, and intuitionism, the novel is mired in nihilistic chaos (96). There is scant opportunity for a traditional discussion of moral message in Coover’s world and, consequently, little opportunity to discuss positive portraits of family commitment. The key to uncovering Coover’s moral potentialities, however, is in remembering that morality, for Coover, is always both *social* and *temporary*. In his “Gender Relations and the Ways of Paradox in Coover’s *Spanking the Maid*,” for example, Jerry Varsava explores a seldom-analyzed novella for the possibility of moral prescription. Varsava acknowledges the presence of parody in *Spanking the Maid*, but it is a parody “ultimately rooted in human behaviour and human attitudes and not merely in literature or ‘literariness’” (110). Coover’s fiction, according to Varsava, illuminates “the foibles of classical strategies of pattern making, both in narrative fiction and epistemological thought” (110). Where Varsava differs from most critics is in his recognition of both a reactionary movement as well as a practical morality in Coover’s work. For Varsava, *Spanking the Maid* “shows that world views—notably as they relate to gender relations—are dependent on social customs” and that these customs are subject to change (110). Through confusions of ontological boundaries and epistemological frameworks, Coover’s works and the works of like-minded postmodernists, highlight the fact that “knowledge is a social practice” and as such, provisional (110). It is this acceptance of temporary morality in Coover’s work that paves the way for an ethico-political discussion of individual liberty and family obligation in *Wife*.

The theories of Laclau and Mouffe provide some guidance for an exploration of the moral potentialities in the novel. Both together and separately, Laclau and Mouffe have criticized the moralities offered by liberal and communitarian philosophers for ignoring realities of ontological and epistemological confusion in their attempts to deal with moral issues such as individual agency and commitment. Liberal theories are problematic because, through their insistence upon the primacy of the individual, they “specify the contours of social agency in advance” (Smith 151). When dealing with subjectivity, Laclau and Mouffe believe individuals must first acknowledge the arbitrariness and temporality of identity (something all three writers in my study express). Furthermore, if identities are arbitrary and impermanent, Laclau and Mouffe believe that moralities must be closer to the shared understandings of the communitarians. Communitarians, however, although they allow for a much more malleable notion of self, often become as dogmatic in their philosophy through their ignorance of civil rights at the behest of a teleological common good. The problem with both theories, for Laclau and Mouffe, is the absence of conflict and antagonism on both the subjective and inter-subjective levels. By forwarding a more political notion of morality based in antagonism and resulting in temporary articulations of shared morality, Laclau and Mouffe hope to avoid the pitfalls of both liberalism and communitarianism. Of course, such a theory raises the spectres of voluntarism and relativism, but Laclau and Mouffe simply suggest that identity and morality do exist, just not in a pre-discursive state. Identities are partially articulated through the intersection of subject positions, structural positions, and context. As a result, “[n]o one is perfectly free to construct the frameworks through which she lives her structural positionings. . . . [s]ubversive political practices must

always wage a complex and sophisticated game of appropriation and redefinition” (Smith 157-5).

For their discursive morality, Laclau and Mouffe focus mainly on the re-articulation of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. As I mention in my first chapter, Gramsci’s conception of hegemony refers to the rule of one party by another, one idea by another (*Prison Notebooks* 57). Gramsci’s hegemonic situation begins with an “organic crisis” whereby the existing political imaginary is challenged by any number of competing forces. The dominance of one discourse over other discourses requires links with past and present institutions, as well as the ability to develop new institutions. Initially represented as a practical myth, the emerging discourse embodies a negotiated antagonism into its rule/dominance, ultimately presenting itself as natural order rather than as the dominant choice.

Gramsci’s hegemonic strategy rules the overall moral climate in *Wife*. Although there is no evidence of an organic crisis in the beginning of the novel, there is more than an implication that such a crisis has already taken place and a winner named. The novel seems to favour a libertarian philosophy of personal agency with a pragmatic notion of commitment (especially family commitment) over moralities offered by such discourses as communitarianism and, on a smaller level, a feminist liberalism (as portrayed through Marge). More precisely, *Wife* supports Gramsci’s “centaur” or two-pronged theory in which both “domination” and “intellectual and moral leadership” define hegemony (*Prison Notebooks* 57). In terms of domination, Coover’s novel portrays individuals (complete with their own belief systems) butting heads with the power going to the strongest. In most cases, the strongest is John. With all of his financial interests, John

has many connections and is able to use them to control those who come up against him. With the exception of Bruce and his unrestrained nihilism, nothing scares John. He is envied and feared; consequently, the people of the community make it easy for him to get what he wants. As Coover indicates early in the narrative:

He got always, as if a rule unto himself, more or less what he dreamt of. Perhaps John dreamt wiser dreams, asking from others only what he knew they could give, or taking from them only what he knew they could not refuse him: a kind of magic formula by which John prospered and took his considerable pleasure.

(39)

Yet, John's power in the town is not simply based on domination. John realizes that control also requires a certain degree of what Gramsci labels "intellectual and moral leadership" or "organized consent" (*Prison Notebooks* 57). John's barbeques keep him connected to traditional ways. His decision to name the new Civic Centre after his father-in-law, even though Barnaby disapproves of it, also ensures people view him as a man respectful of tradition. Rather than concentrate on the past, however, John also acknowledges new movements in attempts to gain support. He makes sure to keep up with the times by supporting Veronica's freedom of choice. Ultimately, this politicking makes John the lifeblood of the town to the point that when he is absent, "its communal pulse slow[s]" (268). He is mentor to the town's sheriff, Otis, and as such, he doesn't have to pay his parking tickets. The townspeople trust him to hire and fire employees for their concerns such as the church and the golf course. Eventually, John establishes a functional relationship between himself and the townsfolk as a group. He brings

businesses and economic growth to the town and they, through their weakness as well as their consent, give him power to make all the important decisions.

Of course, readers know that most of John's actions, like those of the ruling libertarian discourse he represents, are functional, not moral. John operates democratically when in reality he shows no respect for such a discourse. Coover tells his readers:

[T]he democratic point of view was never one that appealed to John very much, though he paid lip service to it and found it profitable. John felt at one with the universe and the universe was not democratic, it was an uninhibited exhibition of colliding forces, of which a bruising game of football was only the barest echo, but an echo at least, which was why he loved it and the less refereeing the better, a good fuck likewise. Democracy was a sad little human defense mechanism for the inherently powerless against the powerful, a pipedream and a failure for the most part, instigated by fear and perpetrated by pissants like his cousin Maynard. Or that butch buttinski Marge. It sought to diffuse, curb, and redistribute power, but it did not, as John knew full well and to his daily increase, succeed. It was a joke. (67)

The democratic laws of the town, like the rules of the many organized sports John excelled at as a teenager, favour those with power more than those without it. Although he may be morally nihilistic, John knows that he is better off living in a democratic society in which the rules of the game empower those who made up the game in the first place. In the rare case where things don't go his way, John also knows that the rules of the game can be altered.

The result of the dominance of John's moral value system is that the novel's portrait of family commitment tends to favour John's functional, pragmatic view. Like his father, John gives lip service to "family values" but only when it suits his interests. He "builds" himself a family and takes care of them, even if he doesn't have a particularly loving nature. He uses family members the way he would use anyone else and the only value he attributes to them is as possessions since he built the family himself. His relationship with his wife is based on finances and the fact that every other man in town covets her so he may as well have her, while his relationship with his kids appears nonexistent (possibly because they cannot do anything for him yet). Of course, since libertarianism prevails in this small prairie town, John's functional attitude toward family commitment is also popular. Pragmatism, not love, is the basis for most family relationships. Veronica, for example, marries Maynard for safety. Even Gordon uses his mother and his wife (Pauline) in his quest for beauty and truth. He takes degrading pictures of his mother in a sickened state, "framing armpit, chin, and nostrils, one shrunk breast" (123). He takes many photographs of Pauline, "mostly huge blowups that turned her body into a kind of vast rolling landscape," foreshadowing her growing obesity late in the novel (125). All these photographs are part of Gordon's quasi-artistic efforts to find something intangible in the grotesque.

But there is more to Coover's novel than a simple celebration of hegemonic pragmatism and a functional view of commitment. From looking again at John, it is easy to see how readers might think he is the anti-hero of Coover's novel. He is a survivor. No matter what happens in the town, he is successful. For John, life is a game and he plays it well. He instinctually recognizes when to push for his own liberty and when to

focus on family and community. He is equally aware that, because of the artificial nature of ontology, epistemology, and morality, the only thing he can do is charge forward and, as Henry David Thoreau suggests, live life deliberately. The problem is that Coover in the end, or should I say from the beginning, plays games with his readers. John is too perfect. Just as John's wife represents the unknown, the incomprehensible, the transcendental, John represents the unbelievable. Coover's biggest laugh on his readers is actually his first—"[o]nce, there was a man named John" (7). It is no accident that John is the knightly figure in a postmodern fairytale who lives happily ever after. With the ability to see several moves ahead and keep people happy while taking advantage of them at the same time, John is, as Coover writes, "often satisfied" and "all his wishes [come] true" (7). Because of the complexities of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships demonstrated in Coover's novel, it is only a character constantly on top of his/her game that can be completely successful. The ontological and epistemological nightmare that is Coover's novel implies that a complete, sutured social morality (symbolized in the success of a single character) is unrealistic.

In one of Coover's many philosophical asides, Trevor, the town's accountant, recalls the political ravings of an economics professor he had in university who "held that the central principle of all human interaction was simple raw power" (256). Trevor remembers that all of the professor's lectures had something to do with power as the basis "not merely of community order, but also of religious faith, science, and the search for truth, and of course of love, friendship, marriage, and family" (256). The professor's beliefs on power and hegemony may resemble Gramsci's but the implication here and elsewhere in the novel is that hegemony is more than simply a situation of conflict of

opposing sides whereby the victor holds moral and political power indefinitely. For Coover, hegemonic situations favour Laclau and Mouffe's version more so than the strict domination of Gramsci's theories. Rather than a conflict between "two systems of fully constituted differences" in a "general field of discursivity," Laclau and Mouffe see hegemony in a much more ambiguous light (*Hegemony* 135). The theory of hegemony proffered by Laclau and Mouffe is more open, transitory, and partial. Laclau and Mouffe explain that a hegemonic practice,

must therefore be the exteriority existing between subject positions located within certain discursive formations and 'elements' which have no precise discursive articulation. It is this ambiguity which makes possible articulation as a practice instituting nodal points which partially fix the meaning of the social in an organized system of differences. (135)

In other words, rather than accept a foundational notion of morality as determined by the party in power, Laclau and Mouffe forward a more politically radical notion of morality characterized by the antagonistic nature of any social situation and the unending, yet impossible, search for sutured subjectivity.

As Galts suggests in his review of the novel, *Wife* does not make any claim to the truth of any over-reaching morality, narration, or myth. Coover's novel is about conflict, above all else. Although the novel begins and ends in an orderly fashion, chaos interrupts the lives of the characters in the form of hellish dreams, violent memories, and hallucinations. Even when the town returns to order, readers get the sense that renewed conflict and chaos is not far off. With the addition of new residents, Garth and Imogen, the town, where "weekend golf [is] de rigueur. . .[and] not much else ever happened"

(409), threatens to re-ignite when Imogen has an affair with Kevin, claiming “my husband will kill you if he finds out”(411). Combined with the circularity of Coover’s final section on Ellsworth’s novel, Imogen’s affair definitely indicates renewed conflict on the horizon.

Without actually making a claim to natural morality, Coover’s novel does have a great deal to say about the nature of the tension between agency and commitment whether it be among members of a family or community. It is Kate who most eloquently brings out the nature of commitment in Coover’s novel and as such she is the closest thing to a main consciousness of the novel. Kate outlines Coover’s personal beliefs most clearly (at least those stated beliefs found in his interviews). She puts into words the artificial nature of boundaries as seen through John’s demolition of the old Pioneer Hotel. More importantly, she also articulates the necessity for constructed boundaries in another one of her many insightful speeches. In response to Oxford’s criticism of the “antirationalist advocacy of faith in antiquated belief-systems as a means of problem solving” implicit in horror movies, Kate opines:

We like to think, even when we’re being reasonable, Oxford, that there are fixed boundaries—to our bodies, our essential being, our homes and families, our towns and nations—it’s how we know or think we know we have a self. But maybe it’s all a mad delusion, maybe there are no boundaries and no selves either, our conscious life just a way of hiding the real truth from us because, simply, it’s too much to live with. (225)

As intuitive readers of *Wife* discover, Kate is far from the nihilistic personality that characters like Bruce embody. Although boundaries may represent pure “artifice” and

reality may be closer to chaos than anything else, these boundaries allow people to come to terms with the ontological, epistemological, and moral confusion of the world around them, even if only momentarily (138). As Coover tells Bigsby:

I doubt we could function at all without fictionalizing in some way, without making up something about the world, falsifying it with a name, or names, that allow us to operate in it. But the world changes, or our perceptions of it or our needs in it change, and new fictions come from it. Fiction then . . . has, as I see it, a double purpose. On the one hand it draws into itself what seem to be the truths of the world at any given moment, and on the other it struggles against falsehoods, dogmas, confusions, all the old debris of the dead fictions—and this struggle itself is self-revealing in ways that remain important across the ages.

(“Robert Coover” 86)

Through Kate, Coover, like Acker (and Bataille before her), admits that the crossing between these boundaries can be “a fulfilment and a delight” as well as “a frightening transgression” (264). Kate, then, is Coover’s spokesperson in the novel, relaying the paradox of a chaotic reality in need of short-term schematic order.

Kate also makes two important contributions to the novel’s notion of social commitment. First, Kate acknowledges the importance of the tension between tradition and a world in flux. She often remarks on the importance of ritual, for example, taking note of many of John’s gatherings and the significance they pose to the community. These events, for Kate, are as effective in “configuring the town’s present” as they are in celebrating “the past” (28). As Kate recognizes of John’s wedding, “great ingatherings of this kind did indeed confirm the community’s traditional view of itself, but confirmation

[is] also a kind of transformation: this town, unchanging, would never be the same again” (21). As evidenced by John’s later transformation of the town’s physical environs, Kate’s observation is undeniably enlightening. Kate also supports the social possibilities of change in her philosophy on John’s shopping malls. For Kate, shopping malls are “a throwback to the village past” and, though different in magnitude, “simple communal gathering places for scattered populations the way the old farm towns were . . . a place for barter and exchange, for the transmission of news and ideas, for ceremony and for courting and for friendly competition” (113). Kate sees malls as “holy places” in the sense that they provide much more than business opportunities (113). At John’s malls, “moral lessons” are “provided by merchant-priests and their security guard-sextons” (113). Ultimately, a visit to the mall is a “spiritual experience” (113).

A second and equally important contribution Kate makes to the experience of the novel is through her discussions of love. Although Coover does not moralize social commitment and the family in any obvious way, Kate’s opinions on the importance of love indicate the importance of commitment in human relationships. For Kate, love is “the source code” and she constantly tries to impress this upon her family members and anyone else who will listen (99). In one of the first encounters with Kate, readers learn:

Kate the town librarian, referring to this sweet-joy/wild-woe power of love to overwhelm, delight, and then undo, liked to say that humankind’s apprehensions of the divine and of the diabolical were equally love’s delusions, while goodness, truth, and beauty, without love, were fantasies, idle fictions of a mind turned in on itself and meaningful as chicken scratchings. That is to say, Kate,

assenting but without illusions, also believed, much loved herself so long as she lived, in love. (14)

Of course, as Coover demonstrates through his description of each character's notion of love, defining love is not as easy as one might think. Ultimately, for Coover, love appears to represent an element of the intangible that must help fill what Laclau and Mouffe call empty signifiers like "goodness," "truth," or "beauty," and even those apparently more concrete signifiers like "society," "democracy," or "family." Some characters believe and some disbelieve, some are hurt by and some uplifted by it. However love affects a character's life, Coover believes it is important. As he says in an interview, "Eros powers the universe and you ignore it at your own peril. . . . It is not necessarily something humane and rational or even attractive, but it is a force not to be denied. My policy is sceptical surrender" (Iftexharudin 90).

When combined with Laclau's and Mouffe's theories of identity in flux, the notions of love and change are very important to *Wife* and no more important than in Coover's vision of family commitment. Perhaps the best example of commitment and change in the novel comes through Coover's discussions of Gordon's family portraits that are esteemed by all in town. Of the portraits, Coover writes:

There was hardly a household in town without at least one of his photographs, the only thing on most of their walls, buffets, or pianos resembling original art, and all the record most had of family history. Of course, Gordon was good at them as at everything else in what others called his job: they were sharply focussed, majestically lit, elegantly composed, ultimately flattering. They were even, for occasions so inherently formal, unusually expensive, something one

might not have expected, knowing Gordon, a notoriously timid and solitary man, severe even and cold. Weird some said. No “Hey there sourpuss watch the little say cheese birdie” from Gordon. But no matter how banal the occasion, he was determined to get each composition just right and his broad pantomimic gestures as he tacked and bobbed behind his lights and camera, demonstrating the attitudes he wished his subjects to assume as they posed there on his little curtained stage, always brought a kind of theatrical gaiety to the otherwise awkward occasion. They loved him suddenly, not knowing why, nor did he understand this either. (25)

Staged and framed, Gordon’s photographs offer false perpetual illusions or fictional visuals of good times. They enable customers to capture their families as if they were sutured identities, unchanging and perfect. Ultimately, they offer customers the opportunity to measure themselves and their families from year to year, as John does through his tax returns. They are symbolic of the perfection Oxford longs for in his attempts to prevent his family’s slow decline—thus explaining Coover’s description of the meeting between Pauline and Oxford in which she notices he is “gripping the lapels of his white jacket in a pose she recognized from the family photo out front” (37)

In the larger scheme of the novel, the portraits become part of Gordon’s quasi-artistic quest for beauty and truth, a quest in which, as mentioned above, he takes pictures of his wife, mother, and John’s wife in every situation hoping for just a glimpse of some transcendental sign. Strangely enough, it is Mikey, John’s young son who draws attention to the inanity of Gordon’s quest, by parodying the photographer’s behaviour at the barbeques, “organizing ‘family portraits’ with broad ludicrous gestures” and “chasing

his mother about with his peculiar apparatus, click-click-clicking away as though demonically possessed” (26).⁹⁴ Coover’s narrator puts Mikey’s parody into perspective by mimicking Kate, “who, had she still been alive at the time of little Mikey’s miming of the town photographer at John’s Pioneers Day barbeque that summer, might have remarked on the way that parody and performance focus the attention in a way that the everyday realities of existence cannot” (29).

The main issue that Mikey’s parody raises is that Gordon’s mission, and by association his photographs, does not recognize imperfection. Knowing what they know about the family histories of the characters in Coover’s novel, readers can see that the staged portraits hide such horrors as Maynard’s rape of his sister, Duwayne’s rape of his daughter and possible murder of his wife and child, as well as all the imperfections in Oxford’s clan. With the many instances of rape, incest, and confinement peppering Coover’s novel, there is little doubt that Coover recognizes the problems that the social commitment symbolized by the family portraits can cause for individual liberty. Yet, Coover is not merely implying that family situations are all confining, imperfect, and false. Turning again to Kate, readers can see that the importance of Coover’s references to family portraits also lies in their temporality. Frozen and unchanging, Gordon’s family photographs are void of the conflict and antagonism that Coover as well as Laclau and Mouffe recognize are very much part of social commitment. More than simply living “in love,” Kate acknowledges the need to love transformation (14). “Wise love,” Kate tells her friend Opal, “loves only the unchanging. But to love only the changeless and the eternal, Opal, is to love with a cold heart” (84). Coover’s novel, therefore, is not absent

⁹⁴ Of more than passing interest here is the fact that Bruce takes part in the parodied portraits with Jennifer, a fourteen year-old whom he will later abduct and leave to fend for herself in the big city, as his wife (27).

of family commitment in a moral sense, but it is simply cognizant of the fact that it is easy to love something (family) or someone (family member) that doesn't change, but harder, and more compassionate, to recognize change, accept grief, and still love.

Although people may find it easier to think of identities in a sutured manner, using terms like "individual" and "family," Coover, like Laclau and Mouffe, prefers to think of these identities as open, without any definitive structure, and in a continuous state of transformation on a political terrain rife with conflict and antagonism. "Families" like those recreated by Oxford, Cornell, Gretchen, the children, and Columbia, are new articulations of commitment characteristic of a world in flux.

Conclusion

A joint consideration of the terms “politics” and “family” recalls rhetoric from the American political scene of the twentieth and early twenty-first-centuries. Politicians from both political parties such as former Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (“The Moynihan Report” and *Family and Nation*) and former Republican Vice-President Dan Quayle (*The American Family: Discovering the Values that Make Us Strong*), have written and spoken at length over the years about the effects that “family values” have had on the American landscape. More recently, present Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton (*It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us*) and Rick Santorum (*It Takes a Family: Conservatism and the Common Good*), have exchanged written and verbal jibes over the importance of family commitment and individual agency in future plans for public policy. As evident from the titles of their books, Clinton supports a liberal philosophy in which the individual is the building block of society and the “village” or social structure and is responsible for respecting the rights and freedoms of as many individuals as possible. Supporting social programs, Clinton implies that the government’s role in the lives of its citizens should be protective in nature. Conversely, like some of his conservative colleagues, Santorum believes the family, not the individual, is the building block of society. He proposes a return to traditional family values in a country overrun with incidents of divorce, abortion, homosexuality, and other social ills. For Santorum, although alternative family structures have worked in the past, the “traditional” nuclear family is not only natural, but it has also proven itself to be the most effective structure for building an efficient social framework.

As evidenced by my discussions of Acker's *Mother*, Gaddis's *Frolic*, and Coover's *Wife*, postmodern fictions of the late twentieth-century frequently do not bring a resolution to this debate. Specific and localized in nature, these works are frequently open in terms of axiology, and, as such, fail either to praise contemporary individualism or to offer prescriptions for dealing with the breakdown of traditional familial settings and responsibilities in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century America. Characterized by fragmented narratology, unstable ontologies, and complicated epistemologies, *Mother*, *Frolic*, and *Wife*, like most postmodern texts, leave many traditional readers unsatisfied. Filled with linguistic play and aesthetic innovation, these fictions, at times, question the very existence of the bounded subjects on which both liberal and communitarian philosophies (symbolized by the views of Clinton and Santorum respectively) are based. In fact, as my dissertation demonstrates, these novels question the rigidity of many traditionally accepted boundaries such as those between individuals and family, family and community, community and state, public and private, heaven and hell, and sacred and profane. Through an exploration of the dislocated subject (both individual and collective), *Mother*, *Frolic*, and *Wife* imply, to many traditional readers, a nihilistic philosophy in which morality and commitment are not only relative, but completely constructed and, possibly, completely unnecessary or absent.

Traditional readers, however, often overlook the prescriptive potentialities that postmodern fictions like *Mother*, *Frolic*, and *Wife* tender to discussions of such moral issues as the tension between individual agency and family commitment. Seeing these

texts as either descriptive or critical of a chaotic world, they do not see the possibilities Acker, Gaddis, and Coover present for dealing with the chaos of a fragmentary existence. Through their open epistemologies, the postmodern fictions I examine appear to deconstruct both liberal and communitarian philosophies by pointing out the obvious problems with both. All three novels keenly indicate the limitations a conservative viewpoint like communitarianism can have on individual liberties. Pointing to religion, politics, class, and gender, among other well-known limitations to individual agency, these writers criticize traditional frameworks of subjectivity and commitment. Likewise, Gaddis and Coover point to the problems with overly liberal societies in which individual rights trump the common good, while Acker questions the ability of the individual to break completely from found communities such as family. In many of the positive instances of family commitment in the novels, the communitarian sense of “positive liberty” is integral. In the end, each novel appears to present arguments for contradictory sides, absolving the authors from taking any moral stand.

A consideration of *Mother*, *Frolic*, and *Wife* from the point of view of Laclau’s and Mouffe’s philosophies, especially their jointly authored *Hegemony* and Mouffe’s *Return*, reveals that these postmodern fictions are constructive as well as destructive. In pointing out the limitations of more traditional social theories like liberalism and communitarianism, Acker, Gaddis, and Coover join Laclau and Mouffe in presenting a “politics of the family” based, not on bounded subjectivity, but on the antagonistic relationship between alternative possibilities for family commitment in a constantly changing postmodern world. Although they proffer an arbitrary concept of identity and commitment, they do so simply because they believe identity is not pre-discursive, not

because it cannot be constructed and sutured for a period of time. As a political concept, therefore, identity relies upon an articulatory similar to Mouffe's concept of citizenship whereby an individual subject, complete with obligations, is articulated against an outside, partially articulated subject. By exploring the many tenuous boundaries in the lived world, Acker, Gaddis, and Coover present a more democratic notion of subjectivity whereby identity is articulated through different terrains (dream world or hallucination), through different traditions (literary, legal, or historical), or through hegemonic struggles pitting both longstanding and informally constructed discourses against one another in an antagonistic confrontation. It is through this newly articulated, democratic articulation of identity that social constructs like the family complete with attendant levels of agency and commitment are partially and temporarily constructed and yet made changeable.

Works Cited

- Abádi-Nagy, Zoltán. "The Art of Fiction CI: William Gaddis." *Paris Review* 105 (Winter 1987): 54-89.
- Acker, Kathy. *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*. New York: TVRT, 1975.
- . *Blood and Guts in High School*. New York: Grove, 1978.
- . *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*. New York: Vanishing Rotating Triangle P, 1975.
- . *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream*. New York: Grove, 1986.
- . *Empire of the Senseless*. New York: Grove P, 1988.
- . "A Few Notes on Two of My Books." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 9.3 (Fall 1989): 31-36.
- . *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.
- . *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac!: Imagining*. San Francisco: Empty Elevator Shaft P, 1974.
- . *In Memoriam to Identity*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990.
- . *Kathy Goes to Haiti*. Toronto: Rumor, 1978.
- . *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*. London: Pan Books, 1984.
- . *My Mother: Demonology*. New York: Pantheon, 1993.
- . *Pussy: King of the Pirates*. New York: Grove, 1996.
- . "Translations of the Diaries of Laure the Schoolgirl." *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991. 104-13.

- Aldridge, John. *The American Novel and the Way We Live Now*. New York: Oxford UP, 1983.
- Alfonso, Richardo Miguel. "Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* and the Ethics of Historical Understanding." *International Fiction Review* 23.1 (1996): 16-24.
- Amdahl, Gary. "Courting Lawyers and Whores." Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *Hungry Mind Review* (Spring 1994): 34+.
- Ames, Christopher. "Coover's Comedy of Conflicting Codes." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 31.2 (Winter 1990): 85-99.
- Applefield, David. "Interview, 1986." Interview with Robert Coover. *Robert Coover: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Ed. Thomas E. Kennedy. New York: Twayne, 1992. 112-118.
- Aristotle. *The Politics*. Trans. T. A. Sinclair. New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1986.
- Avineri, Shlomo and Avner De-Shalit, eds. *Communitarianism and Individualism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Balitas, Vincent D. "Historical Consciousness in the Novels of Robert Coover." *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny* 28.3 (1981): 369-79.
- Bass, Thomas Alden. "An Encounter with Robert Coover." *Antioch Review* 40.3 (Summer 1982): 287-302.
- Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism*. Trans. Mary Dalwood. London: Marion Boyars, 1962.
- . *Literature and Evil*. Trans. Alastair Hamilton. 1957. London: Calder and Boyars, 1973.
- . *My Mother*. In *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, and The Dead Man*. Trans. Austryn Wainhouse. London: Marion Boyars, 2003. 21-134.

- Battersby, Eileen. "The Elusive Interviewee." Interview with William Gaddis. *The Irish Times* 30 June 1994, city ed., news features sec.: 11. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 1 Jan. 1996.
- Bellah, Robert et al. *The Good Society*. New York: Knopf, 1991.
- . *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Harper and Row, 1986.
- Bergin, Kathye Self. "Rhetoric Clogs Satire of Legal Profession." Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *The Houston Chronicle* 27 Mar. 1994, star ed., zest sec.: 25. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 1 Jan. 1996.
- Bergson, Henri. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. Montana: Kessinger Publishing Company, 1996.
- Berlin, Isaiah. *Four Essays on Liberty*. London: Oxford UP, 1969.
- Bigsby, Christopher and Heide Ziegler, eds. *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition*. London: Junction, 1982.
- . "Robert Coover." Interview by Christopher Bigsby. *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition*. Eds. Christopher Bigsby and Heide Ziegler. London: Junction, 1982. 79-92.
- Birkerts, Sven. "Down by Law." Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *The New Republic* 7 Feb. 1994: 27-30.
- Bittinger, Cindy. "The Business of America is Business?" *Calvin Coolidge: 30th President of the United States*. 3 Oct. 2004.
<http://www.calvin-coolidge.org/pages/history/research/ccmf/bitt02.html>.
- Bond, Barbara. "Postmodern Mannerism: An Examination of Robert Coover's *Pinocchio*

in Venice.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 45.3 (Spring 2004): 273-92.

Bousfield, Ann. *The Relationship Between Liberalism and Conservatism: Parasitic, Competitive or Symbolic?* Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999.

Bradbury, Malcolm, Jr. Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *Times Literary Supplement* 2 Dec. 1994: 12. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 1 Jan. 1996.

Bratton, Benjamin. “A Conversation with Kathy Acker.” *Kathy Acker*. 15 Aug. 2004. http://proxy.arts.uci.edu/~nideffer/_SPEED_/1.1/acker.html.

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. 1847. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989.

Calve, Joseph. “Bleaker House.” Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *The Connecticut Law Tribune* 7 Mar. 1994, lex loci, sec.: 39. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 1 Jan. 1996.

Calvino, Italo. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Trans. William Weaver. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

Cheal, David J. *Family and the State of Theory*. London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1991.

Chénétier, Marc. *Beyond Suspicion: New American Fiction Since 1960*. Trans. Elizabeth A. Houlding. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996.

Clayton, Jay. *The Pleasures of Babel*. New York: Oxford UP, 199.

Comnes, Gregory. *The Ethics of Indeterminacy in the Novels of William Gaddis*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1994.

---. “The Law of the Excluded Muddle: The Ethics of Indeterminacy in *A Frolic of His Own*.” *Powerless Fictions?: Ethics, Cultural Critique, and American Fiction in*

the Age of Postmodernism. Ed. Ricardo Miguel Alfonso. Amsterdam: Rodolpi,
1996. 25-40.

Coover, Robert. *Briar Rose*. New York: Grove P, 1996.

---. *Gerald's Party*. New York: Plume, 1987.

---. *John's Wife*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

---. *The Origin of the Brunists*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1966.

---. *Pinocchio in Venice*. New York: Linden; Simon and Schuster, 1991.

---. *A Political Fable*. New York: Viking, 1980.

---. *Pricksongs and Descants*. New York: New American Library, 1969.

---. *The Public Burning*. New York: Viking, 1977.

---. *Spanking the Maid*. New York: Grove, 1982.

---. *A Theological Position: Plays*. New York: Dutton, 1972.

---. *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc.: J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* New York:
Random House, 1968.

---. *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?* New York: Linden;
Simon and Schuster, 1987.

Cope, Jackson I. *Robert Coover's Fictions*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986.

Couturier, Maurice. "A Coover Bibliography." *Delta* 28 (June 1989): 141-49.

---. "Gerald's Party or A Rose's Wake." *Delta* 28 (June 1989): 97-116.

DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. New York: Viking, 1985.

Demos, John. "Images of the American Family, Then and Now." *Changing Images of
the Family*. Eds. Virginia Tufte and Barbara Myerhoff. New Haven: Yale UP,
1979. 43-60.

Dempsey, "William Gaddis: Life and Work." *The Gaddis Annotations* 3

Oct. 2004. <http://www.williamgaddis.org/life&work/shtml>.

Dirda, Michael. "Caught in the Web of Worlds." Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by

William Gaddis. *Book World* 23 Jan. 1994: 1.

Eder, Richard. "Trial by Ordeal." Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis.

Newsday 9 Jan. 1994, all eds., fanfare sec.: 35.

Eliot, T. S. "Four Quartets." London: Faber and Faber, 1959.

---. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Critical Theory Since Plato*. Ed.

Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992. 761-64.

---. "Ulysses, Order, and Myth." *Forms of Modern Fiction: Essays Collected in Honor*

of Joseph Warren Beach. Ed. William Van O'Connor. Bloomington: Indiana

UP, 1964.

---. *The Wasteland and Other Writings*. Introduction by Mary Karr. New York: The

Modern Library, 2001.

Elshtain, Jean Bethke. "On 'The Family Crisis'." *Democracy* (Winter 1983): 137-39.

Erdrich, Louise. *The Beet Queen*. New York: Bantam Books, 1987.

Evanson, Brian. *Understanding Robert Coover*. Columbia, South Carolina: U of South

Carolina P, 2003.

Everman, Welch. "ABAB: Acker, Bataille, Argento, Brontë." *KATHY ACKER*. 3 Sept.

2004. <http://acker.thehub.com.au/>.

Ferraro, Thomas J. "Whole Families Shopping at Night." *New Essays on White Noise*.

Ed. Frank Lentricchia. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. 15-38.

- Flaherty, Delores, and Roger Flaherty. "Gaddis Lays Waste to Our Legal System." Rev. Of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *Chicago Sun-Times* 15 Jan. 1995, late ed.: 20. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 1 Jan. 1996.
- Friedman, Ellen G. "A Conversation with Kathy Acker." *Dalkey Archive Press: An Interview with Kathy Acker*. 2 Sept. 2004.
http://www.centerforbookculture.org/interviews/interview_acker.html.
- . "'Now Eat Your Mind': An Introduction to the Works of Kathy Acker." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 9.3 (Fall 1989): 37-49.
- Friedman, Vanessa. Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *Entertainment Weekly* 11 Feb. 1994: 51. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 1 Jan. 1996.
- Fuchs, Miriam. "*il miglior fabbro*": Gaddis's Debt to T. S. Eliot." *William Gaddis*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004. 43-56.
- Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free P, 1992.
- . *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order*. New York: The Free P, 1999.
- Gaddis, William. *Carpenter's Gothic*. New York: Viking, 1985.
- . *Frolic of His Own*. New York: Poseidon P, 1994.
- . *JR*. 1975. New York: Penguin, 1985.
- . Letter to Peter Friedman. 30 July 1993. *The Gaddis Annotations*. 10 Oct. 2004.
<http://www.williamgaddis.org/frolic/index.shtml>.
- . *Recognitions*. 1955. New York: Penguin, 1993.
- Gado, Frank, ed. *First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing*. Schenectady: Union College P, 1973.

- . "Robert Coover." Interview. *First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing*.
Ed. Frank Gado. Schenectady: Union College P, 1973. 142-59.
- Galts, Chad. "Happily Ever What?" Rev. of *John's Wife*, by Robert Coover. *Brown Alumni Magazine* 21 Mar. 2005.
<http://www.brownalumnimagazine.com/storydetail.cfm?ID=613>.
- Gardner, John. "Big Deals." Rev. of *J R*, by William Gaddis. *The Gaddis Annotations*.
5 Oct. 2004. <http://www.williamgaddis.org/jr/jrreviewgardneryrb.shtml>.
- . *On Moral Fiction*. New York: Basic, 1978.
- Gass, William. Introduction to *The Recognitions*, by William Gaddis. New York:
Penguin, 1993.
- Gass, William and Lorin Cuoco, eds. *The Writer in Politics*. Carbondale, Il: Southern
Illinois UP, 1996.
- Gordon, Lois. *Robert Coover: The Universal Fictionmaking Process*. Carbondale:
Southern Illinois UP, 1983.
- Graff, Gerald. *Literature Against Itself*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Prison Notebooks*. Trans. Joseph A Buttigieg and Antonio Callari.
Ed. Joseph A Buttigieg. New York: Columbia UP, 1992.
- Green, Jack. [Pseud.] *fire the bastards*. (sic) Ed. Steven Moore. Normal, Illinois:
Dalkey Archive P, 1992.
- Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon P, 1961.
- Gurley, George. "A Writer's Life." *The Kansas City Star* 15 Nov. 1994, metro ed.: E6.
Online. Lexis/Nexis. 1 Jan. 1996.

- Gussow, Mel. "A Writer Who Delights in Layers of Complexity." *New York Times* 1 June 1996, late ed., sec. 1: 13. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 20 Mar. 2005.
- Gutman, Amy. "Communitarian Critics of Liberalism." *Communitarianism and Individualism*. Eds. Shlomo Avineri and Avner De-Shalit. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. 120-136.
- Guttridge, Peter. "Kathy Acker." Obituary for Kathy Acker. *The Independent* 3 Dec. 1997: 21. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 1 Sept. 2004.
- Habermas, Jürgen. "Modernity v Postmodernity." *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 3-14.
- Harris, Michael. "Magical Realism in Small Town America." Rev. of *John's Wife*, by Robert Coover. *Los Angeles Times*. 22 Apr. 1996, home ed.: E3. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 21 Mar. 2005.
- Hassan, Ihab. "The Culture of Postmodernism." *Modernism: Challenges and Perspectives*. Eds. Monique Chefdor, Richard Quinones, and Albert Wachtel. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1986.
- Haverty, Anne. "In the (k)night-time." Rev. of *Don Quixote*, by Kathy Acker. *Times Literary Supplement* 23 May 1986: 554.
- Herman, Jeanine, ed. and trans. *Laure: The Collected Writings*. By Colette Peignot. 1977. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995
- . "Preface." *Laure: The Collected Writings*. By Colette Peignot. Trans. Jeanine Herman. 1977. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995. vii-ix.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "Literary Borrowing . . . and Stealing: Plagiarism, Sources, Influences, and Intertexts." *English Studies in Canada* 12.2 (1986): 229-39.

- Iftekharudin, Farhat. "Interview with Robert Coover." *Short Story* 1.2 (1993): 89-94.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.
- . *The Seeds of Time*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. Timothy Bahti. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982.
- Jencks, Charles. *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1987.
- . *What is Post-Modernism?* London: Alchemy Editions, 1996.
- Johnston, John. *Carnival of Repetition: Gaddis's The Recognitions and Postmodern Theory*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990.
- Jones, Malcolm, Jr. "A Legal Lampoon Loses on Appeal." Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *Newsweek* 17 Jan. 1994: 52.
- Kakutani, Michiko. "Plagiarism as the Metaphor for a Litigious Era." Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *The New York Times* 4 Jan. 1994, late ed.: C20.
- Kennedy, Thomas E. Ed. *Robert Coover: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1992.
- Klemtnner, Susan Strehle. "'For a Very Small Audience': The Fiction of William Gaddis." *William Gaddis*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004. 17-30.
- Knight, Christopher J. *Hints & Guesses: William Gaddis's Fiction of Longing*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1997.
- Kuehl, John, and Steven Moore, eds. *In Recognition of William Gaddis*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse UP, 1984.

- Kymlicka, Will. *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.
- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Social Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack. London: Verso, 1985.
- Landry, Peter. "Behind the Picket Fences." Rev. of *John's Wife*, by Robert Coover. *Philadelphia Inquirer* 2 June 1996: E3. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 20 Mar. 2005.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1978.
- . *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged*. New York: Basic, 1977.
- . *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1984.
- LeClair, Thomas. "The Lord of La Mancha and Her Abortion." Rev. of *Don Quixote*, by Kathy Acker. *New York Times Book Review* 20 Nov. 1986: 10.
- . "Robert Coover, *The Public Burning*, and the Art of Excess." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 23.3 (Spring 1982): 5-28.
- LeClair, Thomas and Larry McCaffery, eds. *Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Novelists*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1983.
- Lee, L. L. "Robert Coover's Moral Vision: *Pricksongs & Descants*." *Studies in Short Fiction* 23.1 (Winter 1986): 63-69.
- Lehmann-Haupt, Christopher. "One Town's Mad Crush on an Unknowable Woman." Rev. of *John's Wife*, by Robert Coover. *New York Times* 1 Apr. 1996, late ed.,: C18. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 20 Mar. 2005.

- Leithauser, Brad. "Capturer of Hearts." Rev. of *John's Wife*, by Robert Coover. *New York Times* 7 Apr. 1996, late ed., sec. 7: 7. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 20 Mar. 2005.
- Lentricchia, Frank, ed. *New Essays on White Noise*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Leverence, John. "Gaddis Anagnorisis." *In Recognition of William Gaddis*. Eds. John Kuehl and Steven Moore. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse UP, 1984. 32-45.
- Linsky, Drew. "Coover's 'John's Wife': Postmodern Redux." Rev. of *John's Wife*, by Robert Coover. *The Baltimore Sun* 28 Apr. 1996, final ed.,: D5. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 20 Mar. 2005.
- Lort, Robert. "In Memoriam to Kathy Acker: A Deleuze and Guattarian Approach." *KATHY ACKER*. 28 Aug. 2004. <http://acker.thehub.com.au/ackademy/lort.htm>.
- Lotringer, Sylvère. "Devoured by Myths." Interview with Kathy Acker. *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991. 1-24.
- Lyman, Rick. "Kathy Acker." Obituary for Kathy Acker. *New York Times* 3 Dec. 1997, late ed.: D20. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 1 Sept. 2004.
- MacDougal, Carl. "Rescued by Element of Farce." Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *The Herald* [Glasgow] 11 June 1994: 17. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 1 Jan. 1996.
- McCaffery, Larry. "As Guilty as the Rest of Them: An Interview with Robert Coover." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 42.1 (Fall 2000): 115-125.
- . "An Interview with Kathy Acker." *Mississippi Review* 20.1-2 (1991): 83-97.

- . "An Interview with Robert Coover." Interview by Larry McCaffery. *Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Novelists*. Eds. Thomas LeClair and Larry McCaffery. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1983. 63-78.
- . *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William Gass*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1982.
- . "The Path of Abjection: An Interview with Kathy Acker." *Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors*. Ed. Larry McCaffery. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996. 14-35.
- . "Robert Coover on His Own and Other Fictions: An Interview." *Genre* 14 (1981): 45-63.
- . *Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
- Mintcheva, Svetlana. "To Speak with the Voices of Others: Kathy Acker and the Avant-Garde." *He Said, She Says: An RSVP to the Male Text*. Ed. Mica Howe. Madison, NJ: Associated UP, 2001. 267-86.
- Moore, Steven. "Carpenter's Gothic; or, The Ambiguities." *William Gaddis*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004. 101-126.
- Morgan, Thäis. "Is There an Intertext in This Text? Literary and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intertextuality." *American Journal of Semiotics* 3.4 (1985): 1-40.
- Mouffe, Chantal. *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso, 1993.
- Nozick, Robert. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books, 1974.

- O'Brien, Fergus. *Dismissing Charges: A Study of the Reception of William Gaddis's A Frolic of His Own*. Unpublished Masters Thesis. Memorial University. 1996.
- O'Neill, Eugene. "Mourning Becomes Electra." *The Complete Text of Eugene O'Neill's Greatest Plays*. New York: Vintage Books, 1958.
- Peignot, Colette. *Laure: The Collected Writings*. Trans. and ed. Jeanine Herman. 1977. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995.
- Peignot, Jérôme. "My Diagonal Mother." *Laure: The Collected Writings*. By Colette Peignot. Trans. and ed. Jeanine Herman. 1977. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995. 275-314.
- Pfohl, Steven. "Stolen Childhoods Redreamed." Rev. of *My Mother: Demonology* by Kathy Acker. *Ctheory.net*. 10 Aug. 2004.
http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=10.
- Pitchford, Nicola. *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated UP, 2002.
- Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. A.D. Lindsay. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1980.
- Raban, Jonathan. "At Home in Babel." *William Gaddis*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004. 163-72.
- Rafferty, Terrence. "Postmodern Maladies." Rev. of *Carpenter's Gothic*, by William Gaddis. *The Dallas Morning News* 13 Mar. 1994: 8J. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 1 Jan. 1996.
- Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.
- . *A Theory of Justice*. 1971. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999.

- Redies, Sünje. "Return with New Complexities: Robert Coover's *Briar Rose*." *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies* 18.1 (2004): 9-27.
- Rickels, Laurence A. "Body Bildung." *Artform* (Feb. 1994): 61-63, 103-4.
- Riffaterre, Michael. "La Trace de l'intertexte." *La Pensée* 215 (1980): 4-18.
- Rorty, Richard. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1998.
- . *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988.
- . "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism." *Hermeneutics and Praxis*. Ed. Robert Hollinger. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1985. 214-21.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. Trans. Maurice Cranston. 1968. New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1988.
- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Boston: Beacon P, 1995.
- Safer, Elaine B. "Ironical Allusiveness and Satire in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*." *William Gaddis*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004. 71-100.
- Sahely, Nadia. "The Laure-Georges Bataille Exchange: Celebrating the Dissymmetry of the Couple in Interwar French Thought." *Cincinnati Romance Review* 15 (1996): 41-49.
- Sandel, Michael J. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1982.
- Sciolino, Martina. "The 'Mutilating Body' and the Decomposing Text: Recovery in

- Kathy Acker's *Great Expectations*." *Textual Bodies: Changing Boundaries of Literary Representation*. Ed. Lori Hope Lefkovitz. Albany, New York: State U of New York P, 1997. 245-66.
- Seaboyer, Judith. "Robert Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice*: Anatomy of a Talking Book." *Venetian Views, Venetian Blinds: English Fantasies of Venice*. Eds. Manfred Pfister and Barbara Schaff. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 1999. 237-55.
- Shapiro, Delilah Jones. "Inside America." Rev. of *John's Wife*, by Robert Coover. *St. Petersburg Times* 21 Apr. 1996, sec. D: 5. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 21 Mar. 2005.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Almanac of the Dead*. New York: Penguin, 1992.
- Smith, Anna Marie. *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- St. Clair, Janet. "Death of Love / Love of Death: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*." *MELUS* 21.2 (Summer 1996): 141-56.
- Storhoff, Gary. "Family Systems in Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 39.4 (Summer 1998): 341-52.
- Suspiria*. Screenplay by Dario Argento. Dir. Dario Argento. Perf. Jessica Harper and Joan Bennet. VHS. Seda, 1977.
- Swartz, John. "America's Greatest Novelist?" Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *Washington Post* 3 Feb. 1994: C1-2.
- Taylor, Charles. "Atomism." *Communitarianism and Individualism*. Eds. Shlomo Avineri and Avner De-Shalit. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. 29-50.

- . *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Trans. George Lawrence. Ed. J. P. Mayer. New York: Doubleday, 1969.
- Towers, Robert. "No Justice, Only the Law." Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *The New York Times Book Review* 9 Jan. 1994: 1+.
- Tufte, Virginia and Myerhoff Barbara, eds. *Changing Images of the Family*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Varsava, Jerry A. *Contingent Meanings: Postmodern Fiction, Mimesis, and the Reader*. Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1990.
- Wainhouse, Austryn, trans. *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, and The Dead Man*. London: Marion Boyars, 2003.
- Walsh, Richard. "The Quest for Love and the Writing of Female Desire in Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 32.3 (Spring 1991): 149-68.
- Walzer, Michael. *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*. New York: Basic, 1983.
- Weisenburger, Steven. *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel 1930-80*. Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 1995.
- Wolfe, Peter. "Law and Order, Justice for None." Rev. of *A Frolic of His Own*, by William Gaddis. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 16 Jan. 1994, five star edition, sec. B: 5. Online. Lexis/Nexis. 1 Jan. 1996.
- . *A Vision of His Own: The Mind and Art of William Gaddis*. Madison, New

Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1997.

Wollen, Peter. "Don't be afraid to copy it out." 3 Sept. 2004. *KATHY ACKER*.

<http://acker.thehub.com.au/ackademy/wollen.html>.

Wuthering Heights. Screenplay by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. Dir. William Wyler. Perf. Merle Oberon, Laurence Olivier, and David Niven. Prod. Samuel Goldwyn. VHS. United Artists, 1939.





