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Embodied Listening: Singer as Feminist Listener in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER IS ONE OF CARSON McCULLERS'S MOST well-known novels, but surprisingly it has not been thoroughly explored in the context of disability studies, despite the fact that McCullers labels John Singer a "deaf mute."¹ McCullers's work is often analyzed through the lens of the grotesque, particularly within the Southern Gothic tradition, which limits the scope of our understanding of Singer's character. Analyzing Singer through the framework of disability studies answers Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's call for new interpretations of prior works, particularly those in which "the grotesque becomes equated with physically disabled characters" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 112), by demonstrating how the "deaf mute" character of Singer is not passive and oppressed but active and able. While scholars have tended to focus on Singer's silence as an indication of his oppression,² in presenting Singer as both deaf and an adept listener, McCullers promotes the perception that disability does not necessarily entail a lack of productivity, quality, or ability. McCullers alludes to this alternative view through the deliberate and ironic use of "Singer," marking the protagonist as a Jewish character but also suggesting he is a talented vocalist or skilled communicator.

Though Singer serves as a listener to all of the major characters—indeed, his acts of listening structure the plot as all the characters seek his counsel and perceived wisdom—focusing on listening when

¹Some scholars, such as Lane, argue that deafness is not a disability, while others, like Garland-Thomson, Nelson, and Davidson, argue the Deaf can be viewed through the lens of disability studies due to societal perceptions of the culture. Padden notes that while intersections between Deaf studies and disability studies exist, they have separate histories and can be viewed as separate disciplines (513).

²In *Reading Embodied Citizenship*, Emily Russell acknowledges that Singer is "made powerful by virtue of his disability" (65), but does not explore Singer as a listener as I do here. Jennifer Murray calls Singer a "careful listener" but does not use listening as a framework for her analysis or build upon this concept (112).

examining the relationship between Singer and Mick foregrounds the gendered dynamics of listening. Garland-Thomson deems combining feminist theory and disability studies a natural fit, claiming that “feminist theory can offer profound insights, methods, and perspectives that would deepen disability studies” (“Integrating” 2). In this essay, I posit that Singer enacts a kind of listening that I define as feminist, since it exhibits feminist principles of egalitarianism, parity, and equality throughout the conversation rather than creating a hierarchy of power between speaker and listener in which the speaker retains the authority.³ During his exchanges with Mick, Singer exhibits feminist listening in spite of being, or even because he is, deaf, coinciding with Russell’s assessment that Singer is “made powerful by virtue of his disability” (65).

Rather than viewing Singer’s disability as a limitation, the residents of the community revere Singer for his perceived wisdom. They believe that his silence is indicative of higher levels of comprehension or understanding, and instead of attempting to “fix” Singer’s deafness (as is standard procedure under the medical model of disability), they seek guidance from him in order to alleviate their own problems. While this southern community holds Singer in high esteem, however, it simultaneously marginalizes and attempts to remediate other characters, especially Mick, for defying social norms. Therefore, this reading of Singer also generates a feminist interpretation of Mick, situating her within feminist disability discourse as figuratively disabled.

The Good, the Bad, and the Grotesque: The Need for Disability Studies

Virginia Spencer Carr’s argument that “throughout [McCuller’s] canon, freakishness is a symbol of a character’s sense of alienation, of his being trapped within a single identity without the possibility of a meaningful connection with anyone else” (*Understanding* 38) illustrates the common treatment of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and other works by McCuller as examples of the grotesque. Russell has identified “two major competing critical genres for the study of disability” before the advent of disability studies, which “were split between the sentimental and the grotesque” (60). “Freaks,” or people exhibiting “stubborn bodily

³See Tannen, Rayner, Baliff, and Ratcliffe. Drawing from their rhetorical theories helps to create a working definition of feminist listening, an active form of listening which grants equal power to the listener and has the added result of empowering the speaker.

forms and behaviors . . . that resist normalizing discourses” (Gleeson-White, *Strange Bodies* 2) have been frequently characterized as grotesque by literary critics like Carr. Several characters within *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, especially John Singer and Mick Kelly, have been labeled freaks or freakish by critics due to their deviation from standard behavior and appearance. But these terms have become problematic, outdated, and pejorative to those within the disability studies community. Sarah Gleeson-White explains that “the term ‘grotesque’ [has been used] as shorthand for the freakish or abnormal” (*Strange Bodies* 3), which implies that anyone who is disabled is “abnormal,” a label that those in the field of disability studies have fought against.

Gleeson-White, Russell, and Melissa Free have engaged in productive dialogue about the utility of the grotesque as a critical lens. Gleeson-White believes the grotesque can move critics “beyond the gloom and doom” that has plagued considerations of McCullers’s work by using Bakhtin’s definition of the grotesque, focusing on the freak as the “site of becoming” (*Strange Bodies* 1, 12). She particularly focuses on McCullers’s adolescent characters, like Mick, as open to this type of interpretation. The understanding of McCullers’s characters as occupying liminal states informs this argument, but turning toward disability studies and away from the grotesque opens up new conversations about characters like Mick. Russell, on the other hand, pushes back against the “wrestling of symbolic control” away from the grotesque to disability studies (61). She raises questions about the nature of the social and medical models of disability, which are at the heart of theory in the field. The social model claims that it is not the individual with the disability who is impaired, but rather the impairment is socially constructed through a systemic limiting of access to those in the disabled community, whereas the medical model insists that a person who is disabled must be fixed or cured in order to adapt to society. Russell wonders, “How can not being able to walk [see, speak, hear] be socially constructed”(10), questioning the separation of the actual body and the discourses surrounding the body in disability studies and advocating for the grotesque’s emphasis on bodies when studying disabled figures in fiction. Russell is right that critics should not ignore bodily difference of disabled characters and how this shapes societal perceptions of the disabled. At the same time, disability studies can provide an ethical model for understanding disabled characters that can correct prior misconceptions and dispel myths of disabled experience in fiction. Free moves in another

direction with her argument in noting that the grotesque and the queer have been associated in prior scholarship, and she employs notions of the grotesque to ascertain the “destructive effects of queer silencing” (426). Describing the grotesque as a “ghost language” that implicitly suggests that homosexual behavior is abnormal, Free criticizes scholarship that has failed to see that the language of the grotesque is being used as “a rejection of homophobic corrosion” (443). Free states that characters like Singer and Mick could be categorized as queer, making them helpful for attempts to separate queer criticism from the grotesque.

Despite Singer’s deafness and Mick’s categorization as freakish by critics, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* has received little attention from disability studies scholars. One explanation for this lack of consideration is the distinction scholars such as Alice Hall draw between literature about disability and disability literature, which “includes only those texts that actively convey a progressive disability politics” (13). *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* falls into the alternate category of “literature about disability,” which doesn’t adopt progressive political positions, for a few reasons: first, as Carr notes, McCullers admits she did not know any deaf person, preferring instead to rely on her own understanding rather than a deaf person’s lived experiences (*The Lonely Hunter* 65).⁴ Susan Harplen explains that “empathy for the disabled is unavailable for most able-bodied persons” like McCullers because the knowledge of their own body’s abilities mediates their perceptions of the disabled (3). Second, McCullers asserts that she intends for Singer to be read as a metaphor or that he serves as “symbolism . . . of man’s isolation to each other and the terrible need to try to communicate” (Savigneau 306). Disability scholars find that such metaphors are stereotypical and problematic, according to Hall, because they reinforce a “tendency for disability to be invoked in literature as an easy metaphorical shortcut: a marker of pity, vulnerability, or less frequently, the heroic” (36). Likewise, Stuart Murray insists that using a stereotypical metaphor about disability, as McCullers claimed to do, has the potential to reinforce ableist conceptions of disability as an absence, and often, in these texts, the

⁴I use the lowercase deaf throughout this essay in regard to Singer following McCullers’s precedent. The use of the uppercase Deaf is typically associated with those who align themselves with the Deaf community rather than the mainstream, whereas the lowercase deaf is typically used to describe the medical condition rather than the culture. So, as someone who has been educated in a school for the Deaf, Singer could potentially choose to use the uppercase to describe himself.

disabled character is used merely as a tool to reveal something about the non-disabled protagonists (249).

Nonetheless, McCullers's depiction of disability in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is worthy of study through the perspective offered by disability studies because of her own identity as a person with disabilities, her decision to make Singer the protagonist, and Singer's agency as a powerful listener. While McCullers was not deaf, she was disabled: she suffered from several bouts of cancer, resulting in the amputation of her leg and crippling pain in her hands throughout her lifetime.⁵ Her own identity and experience with disability may have influenced her portrayal of Singer as an active character at the center rather than the margins of the novel. Lennard J. Davis critiques novelists who use disability to reinforce society's understanding of the heteronormative experience, arguing, "The very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her" (11). Yet *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* situates Singer as the central character, encouraging readers to identify with him on the basis of his position in the text. The fact that McCullers grants Singer this important position could be viewed as a deliberate and political act, creating a space for and inviting non-disabled readers to identify with a disabled protagonist.

Learning to Listen: How the School for the Deaf Impacts Singer's Response

Understanding Singer's character in the historical context of deaf education illustrates how the medical model has limited and alienated disabled people, suggesting they are unfit participants within their communities. This historical approach underscores the need for feminist readings, which reinstate the fitness of disabled individuals. In Singer's case, the failure to recognize him as an active and important character stems from his failure to hear, which is falsely equated with a failure to listen. Removing this false equation makes Singer a case study for redefining listening and expanding the role of disabled persons in southern literature.

⁵See McCullers, *Illumination*; Carr, *The Lonely Hunter*; and Savigneau for further details about her ailments.

The details that McCullers offers regarding Singer's education and background construct him as a rich, complex character who suffers marginalization in a hostile society. This same environment, however, predisposes him to qualities that define an ideal listener. Singer's deafness may seem to call into question his capacity to listen since the common definition of listening is hearing sound. As Hall asserts, though, "'hearing' is much more than a process of registering the presence or absence of sound. Hearing is a cultural process" (86-87). Furthermore, rhetorical and deaf studies scholars alike differentiate between the terms "hearing" and "listening"; the former is receiving auditory stimuli, while the latter is both receiving and trying to understand or process them.⁶ Though Singer is incapable of hearing auditory stimuli, he does have alternate systems of communication, including sign language, lip reading, and nonverbal language, that allow him to communicate with and understand Mick, all skills he acquired during his training at the unnamed school for the Deaf mentioned in the text.

While Singer's educational background is riddled with strife, his story is an example of how cultural institutions can positively influence an individual's capacity for listening. Singer's responses to Mick are influenced by the ways he has been taught to communicate with those within and outside of the deaf community. His experiences while attending a school for the Deaf and the cultural attitude toward deafness during the time period shaped McCullers's depiction of Singer's worldview and taught him the value of listening. Singer has felt the pang of isolation throughout his lifetime. He never knew his family and spent his childhood in a school for the deaf where he "had learned to talk with his hands and to read" (13). Carol A. Padden claims that it was common practice to send deaf children to asylums (509-11), especially among hearing parents who did not know how to communicate with them. According to Eli Clare, "Disability has been soaked in shame, dressed in silence, rooted in isolation" (91), which may explain why Singer's parents abandoned their son, but more broadly, why so many deaf children were discarded or left in institutional care. Institutions for the deaf were both praised and admonished for the ways in which they nurtured and trained their boarders. Institutions provided a community and sanctuary for the deaf, but were also divisive in terms of their

⁶For the rhetorical perspective, see Rayner; Ballif. For a perspective from Deaf studies, see Edwards.

teaching practices. Padden views the schools as a means of bringing deaf children under protective care, noting the value of these institutions lies in the ability for “deaf children [to] meet others like themselves” (510). Likewise, R. A. R. Edwards asserts that those entering institutions were “going from a world in which they were alone and deaf to one in which they joined a Deaf community” (88). Yet the faculty of some schools were not composed of all-deaf instructors, and thus methods for teaching the deaf were varied. While McCullers does not describe the school in depth, evidence suggests that Singer’s instructors were not deaf, and that they practiced controversial treatments for teaching deaf students to speak. Those who subscribed to this method of instruction were known as “oralists,” and the text describes Singer’s training by such instructors: “although he had been deaf since he was an infant, he had not always been a real mute. . . . finally he had been taught to speak” (12-13). Singer claims that at the school he was considered to be very intelligent, citing his intellect as the reason he was instructed in this manner.

An oralist education would have further alienated Singer from society at large as well as those within the Deaf community. Edwards stresses that maintaining the hierarchy of speech over sign language was one way the deaf were made to feel inferior by their hearing counterparts: “By making the acquisition of English, and especially spoken English, the overriding goal of deaf education, oralists succeeded in making those deaf people who could not speak feel like ‘oral failures’” (75). The Deaf community in the nineteenth century hoped that attending school would alleviate “the isolation and ignorance to which their deafness tended to subject them” (Edwards 88). Unfortunately, oralist instruction often had the opposite effect, which Singer likely experienced first-hand at the school that he attended in Chicago: as his mastery over sign language grew and the expectations of his teachers increased, he may have felt isolated from his peers who were not capable of the same mastery. In addition, Singer’s inability to meet his instructors’ expectations may have caused him to feel further isolated from them, too. Edwards asserts, “Those whose deafness could not be cured were encouraged to work hard to pass as hearing, by using speech” (88), as is illustrated by Singer’s instruction. But it was often difficult for the students to make these transitions. Singer “could never become used to speaking with his lips. It was not natural to him, and his tongue felt like a whale in his mouth” (13). While the act of speaking is a strain for Singer, he is further demoralized by the reactions of those he engages in

conversation by using his voice: “From the blank expression on people’s faces to whom he talked in this way he felt that his voice must be like the sound of some animal or that there was something disgusting in his speech” (13). Christopher Krentz highlights the predicament a person like Singer experiences while trying to “pass” as a hearing person: “The deaf person tries but inevitably fails to negotiate the world of sound, and the gap, while often humorous, frequently buttresses the view of hearing people as superior and the deaf as pitiable, self deluded, bitter, or just ridiculous” (239-40). Singer dislikes using his voice because he believes using it makes him pitiable or, to use his words, more like an animal than a human being (13). Singer decides to forsake speaking altogether after he meets Antonopoulos.

Being forced into the oralist method of education is now considered oppressive by a large portion of the Deaf community, who see it as an attempt to destroy their culture; however, during the time period in which the novel is set, this type of education seemed preferable. Edwards claims the oralist approach to education was meant to eventually integrate the deaf into hearing society (184), which makes sense given that Singer leaves the school in Chicago to move to the southern town where he resides at the opening of the novel (13). Successful integration into the hearing community, while seemingly impossible, was a goal for oralists because of the extreme prejudice against the deaf during the time period known as audism: “Like racism and sexism, audism insists that inherent biological factors determine individual traits and capacity” (Lane 364). While a majority of the characters view Singer as a source of fascination, some, like Charles Parker, do seem to be audistic.

The cultural context of the novel sheds light on why audism was such a problem. During World War II, the deaf were rounded up alongside the Jews to be exterminated. Lane notes, “sixteen hundred Deaf people were exterminated in concentration camps in the 1940s; they were considered ‘useless eaters,’ with lives unworthy of being lived” (373). The novel is set during this time period, and Singer is both deaf and a Jew, rendering him doubly susceptible to judgment.⁷ Furthermore, in the United States, in an attempt to prevent others from being born deaf, deaf adults were strongly encouraged to “abandon plans for marriage and reproduction or to submit to voluntary sterilization, and the clamor about Deaf eugenics also led untold numbers of hearing parents to have

⁷See Hershon for an analysis of Singer as a Jewish figure.

their Deaf children sterilized” (Lane 371). Even some of the Deaf themselves did not believe they were equals in society. Edwards points to the diary of a deaf student attending the type of school that Singer was sent to as a child: “I believe that deaf mutes are worth *nearly as much* as speaking people because they have got as much wit. . . . But they are *not* worth more than speaking people who can hear and speak” (83; emphasis added). Singer likely has similar feelings of inadequate self-worth ingrained in him by a predominantly hearing culture.

While most people within the community seem to admire Singer, Charles Parker, Antonapoulos’s cousin, appears to be audistic.⁸ Singer realizes that Parker views Antonapoulos, who is also deaf, as a burden (11), highlighting the idea that deaf people are a drain on society. As a result, Parker sends Antonapoulos to the asylum despite the fact that Singer insists that Antonapoulos remain with him. Antonapoulos’s removal from society into the asylum exemplifies John J. Flournoy’s claim that Deaf people “unfairly suffer ‘rejections and consignments to inferior places’ by hearing people” (Edwards 98). These arrangements were made with no regard for Singer’s feelings despite the fact that Singer had been economically responsible for Antonapoulos, helping him pay rent, bailing him out of jail, and buying him essential items such as food and clothing for more than ten years. Though Parker is Antonapoulos’s family, he views Antonapoulos as a problem to be overcome and the asylum as the only solution. After sending Antonapoulos to the asylum, Parker never attempts to talk to Singer again and even goes out of the way to ignore him. When Antonapoulos dies, Parker does not tell Singer of his passing. Instead, Singer is forced to learn about it from a stranger at the asylum after traveling for several hundred miles to get there, demonstrating that Parker has little to no respect for Singer or his cousin.

Though Parker is the only openly audistic person, Singer is keenly aware of potential prejudice due to his disability, suggesting he had been a victim of such scrutiny before moving to the town. Readers know Singer is attuned to audism because he routinely keeps his hands stuffed into his pockets while out in public. Garland-Thomson asserts, “The

⁸Russell observes that most members of the community are attracted to rather than repelled by Singer despite his difference, as “each aligns disability with other-worldly wisdom and locates in Singer’s physical difference an embodiment of his or her own liminal form” (61).

lively flying hands of signers are a staring occasion for anyone within visual range. Hearing people often stare at signing because sign language seems novel to the unaccustomed eye. So Deaf signers are often starees” (*Staring* 121). Clearly Singer does not wish to be a spectacle, as he chooses to keep his hands “stuffed tight into his pockets” while entertaining his guests, opting to nod or smile “to show his guests that he understood” (110). Keeping his hands forcibly in his pockets is painful for Singer, who acknowledges that his “hands were always ready to shape the words he wished to say” (13). However, he knows that the other characters will not understand the signs and believes his hand movement would be interpreted as freakishness. Hall explains:

Until Linguists such as William C. Stokoe Jr. began to recognise and revalue American Sign Language (ASL) as a language in its own right in the late 1950s and 1960s, assumptions about sign language as a simplified, inferior form of communication abounded. Sign language was equated with “broken English” and, in turn, with “broken intelligence.” (76-77, quoting Brueggemann 123)

Throughout the novel, Singer’s hands remain in his pockets except in the presence of Antonapoulos or when he is using them to write, a more acceptable form of communication with hearing people during the time period.

Singer’s education, despite its inherent flaws, in many ways enables him to become a listener for Mick. He is capable of empathizing with those like Mick who have felt ostracized because he has been a victim of such treatment. His education emphasized dialogical retention, meaning the ability to retain information from prior conversations and to interpret meta-messages, because he had to pay careful attention to his instructor’s lips, body language, and signs in order to respond. Thus, he has a skill for interpreting nonverbal cues, a skill that some members of the hearing population might lack. Because Singer most likely found himself without listeners even among his peer group at school, he has been taught the importance of reciprocity, or the conscious effort to avoid dominating the conversation by taking turns during the exchange of ideas.

Singer as Feminist Listener

In contrast to Mick’s family, Singer listens to her, understands her, and accepts her despite her difference. Singer’s silence allows Mick to

interpret their interactions for herself, and his silence only affirms the preconceived notions Mick has of Singer, enabling her to feel comforted and loved by him in a manner she has not felt from anyone else.⁹ Singer emboldens Mick to share intimate details of her life she has kept secret from others, exhibiting feminist listening skills by maintaining parity between speaker and listener. Mick's development and maturation therefore hinge on her relationship with Singer.

Mick is one of four principal characters whom Singer entertains at his home. She is the youngest to visit him and the only girl with whom he interacts. The fellowship between the two is important given that, as Garland-Thomson explains, "Western thought has long conflated femaleness and disability, understanding both as defective departures from a valued standard" ("Integrating" 6). Thus, feminist critics have linked femaleness to disability. Gleeson-White suggests that adolescent females in particular are cast as deformed or "freakish lesser men" since they have not reached full maturity. While Gleeson-White uses the grotesque to discuss Mick's adolescence, her observations align with Garland-Thomson's use of disability discourse to paint adolescent females as doubly disabled: neither man nor woman yet constrained by social values and cultural norms that demand conformity ("Revisiting" 111).

Mick refuses to conform to societal standards in regard to her appearance and her interests because she considers femininity and womanhood as limitations to her ambitions. Russell claims that Mick has a desire to "encompass and consume masculine success" (95) and points to Mick's decision to discard her party dress for shorts (*Heart* 140) or to write her initials under the names of accomplished men (*Heart* 45) as evidence of the manifestation of her inner aspirations. Yet even Mick seems conscious of the fact that her gender is disabling or limiting the scope of her aspirations, for just as she writes her initials underneath these "great men," she simultaneously writes them underneath the word "PUSSY," which she places in juxtaposition to the other list. Russell asserts that these actions "illustrate her sense of dominant hierarchies" (95) in which females are relegated to the bottom of the list if they appear on

⁹Martin explains that Singer is a "feminine, blank space to be penetrated by meaning" (9). In addition, Russell asserts, "Singer's ability to embody all things to all people depends on the social perception of disabled bodies as outside the limiting norms of modernity" (76).

the list at all. But I argue that Mick suggests she is reduced to and defined by the word “pussy,” similar to a disabled person feeling defined by his or her disability in a society that privileges ableism. My interpretation squares with Martin’s assessment that Mick fears “how she will be treated and expected to behave by society once she has become a fully-grown woman” (10), indicating and reinforcing the idea that women are not limited by their bodies, but that society places limits and regulations upon women due to their bodily difference. What’s more, the theory that society is at fault for limiting the scope of behavior for those whose bodies are deemed outside the norm corresponds with disability studies’ conception of the social model.

While Mick keeps her love for music and traveling a secret from her family, she feels comfortable talking to Singer about them because he listens to her and encourages her pursuits regardless of her gender. For example, Singer buys a radio for his guests as a Christmas present. To Mick, the radio is a sign that Singer has been listening to her dreams to pursue music, which is an example of Singer’s use of dialogic retention, or a demonstration of his ability to listen with intent, retain the information, and translate his knowledge from prior conversation into tangible actions. Furthermore, Mick could view the gift as a truly selfless act given that Singer cannot hear the music himself. Though Mick does not voice any of the aforementioned conclusions aloud, readers know she is extremely grateful for the gift: “Her face was very red and she asked him over and over if it was really his and whether she could listen” (251). When Singer nods his understanding and acquiesces to her request, “she grinned at him,” and “her eyes were wet and she rubbed them with her fists” (251). Mick has likely never received something as expensive or thoughtful before from either her parents or siblings, who are for the most part oblivious to her dreams of being a musician. Mick feels the gift is a sure sign of affection from Singer, and she claims that “She loved him better than anyone in the family” (375-76). The radio intimates to Mick that the feeling is mutual because it is a sign that Singer has listened to her and accepted her. The radio becomes a symbol of a shared intimacy formed through the act of listening.

Mick’s sisters and brothers cause Mick to feel uncomfortable in her own skin and perhaps unloved because she does not dress or act according to gender norms, but Singer appears to accept Mick in spite of what Gleeson-White calls her “freakishness,” or “reluctance to submit to the ideal of womanhood” (“Revisiting” 112). Mick does not feel loved

unconditionally by the members of her family. While playing with her brother George, she asks him “Do you love me?” When he responds, “Sure I love you. Ain’t you my sister?” (376), Mick interprets him to mean that if she were not his sister, he would not love her anymore. In other words, she feels that there is something unlovable about her, and that her family feels the same way. With Singer, however, “It was a different love” (376). For example, Singer puts Mick at ease at a time when she is particularly worried about her clumsiness: “Once when she was excited and caught her shirt-tail in the electric fan he acted in such a kindly way that she was not embarrassed at all” (109). While Hazel, Etta, and Bill seem annoyed by Mick’s presence, Singer doesn’t mind her random visits to his room. He even “let her meddle with his cute little chess men” (109); she would have been scolded for touching one of her siblings’ possessions.

Though Mick feels she cannot confide in family about her life choices, she trusts Singer with her private thoughts, believing he will empathize with her and give her sound advice. When Mick is confronted by her family and persuaded to drop out of school to start working at Woolworth’s ten-cent store, she is clearly conflicted about her “choice” and asks for Singer’s guidance. I use the term “choice” here despite the fact that her family manipulates Mick into making this decision, coercing her into forfeiting her education in favor of earning extra money for the family during a financial crisis (378-81). Mick appears reluctant to accept the job, continually insisting that she just wants to work “during vacation and then go back to school” (381). However, she knows that the reality of situation is that “The job wouldn’t be just for the summer—but for a long time, as long a time as she could see ahead” (381). The looming prospect of working in Woolworth’s limits Mick’s freedom and would potentially hinder her ability to practice music, obtain a degree, or travel to the places of which she dreams. Mick realizes she cannot communicate her concerns about the job to her family, so she turns to Singer, believing he will be the voice of reason: “what he had to tell her would be right—and if he said the job sounded O.K. then she would feel better about it” (382). She is uneasy and reluctant to make a decision, but believes Singer can assist her while keeping her anxiety over the situation between the two of them, demonstrating that she trusts Singer to keep her concerns private. Singer’s isolation and his own need for acceptance allow him to empathize with Mick, as he realizes that “it [is] better to be with any person than to be too long alone” (245). His

statement applies to both of them, as Singer realizes that Mick is also often alone. In providing her the space to speak, he is granting her an audience, which becomes a gift in its own right.

Symbiotic Listening: An Evaluation of Reciprocity between Singer and Mick

Unlike his relationships with the other speaking characters, Singer's interactions with Mick are not one-sided because each makes an effort to understand the other, creating a symbiotic relationship. Their exchanges are an excellent example of reciprocity, a part of the listening process and a component of feminist listening practices. Mick notes, "Talking with him was like a game. Only there was a whole lot more to it than any game" (109). Her words demonstrate the complexity of deciphering meaning during conversations with Singer. Mick is forced to pay close attention to Singer's reactions and facial expressions, but she is one of the only characters seen attempting to "hear" Singer. Edwards explains that the deaf can be understood by the hearing through the "metamorphosis of hearing eyes" (51). Although Mick cannot hear Singer with her ears (becoming, in this instance, figuratively deaf), she still has the capacity to listen to Singer using her other senses. Mick grows accustomed to Singer's movements and believes she is able to tell the difference between when he "hears" her correctly and when he needs further clarification. Mick observes, "He turn[s] his head to one side" when he doesn't understand her (368). Mick also recognizes that Singer reads lips, so she speaks slowly and emphasizes her words: "She repeated the words slowly and waited" for Singer to respond or to indicate his comprehension (382). These are but a few ways Mick makes an effort to ensure Singer hears her.

Readers are aware that Singer has a basic comprehension of Mick's questions and of the conversations she has with him. Singer talks to Mick primarily by nodding, but he also writes to her on his notepad, indicating that, with Mick at least, Singer is listening with the intent to understand, and there is ample evidence to confirm his understanding of their exchanges. For example, Mick asks, "Mister Singer, have you ever lived in a place where it snowed in the winter-time?" and he "nodded yes again and wrote on his pad with his silver pencil" (368). In this case, Mick received a visual and a written response to her question. In addition, though Singer claims he does not understand Mick's

ramblings about music and travel in his letters to Antonopoulos, it is important to gauge the word “understand.” Here he is clearly able to understand what Mick is saying, easily picking out her desire to listen to music and to travel to different places. So, when he uses the term “understand,” it is not in relation to what she is saying but to why she is saying it. Readers know that Singer is attempting to understand Mick in a greater capacity, illustrating his desire to know her on a deeper level. After Mick has been to see Singer many times, “He became so used to [her] lips that he understood each word [she] said. And then after a while he knew what [she] would say before [she] began, because the meaning was always the same” (246). After spending some time with her, he begins to apprehend Mick’s desperation for listeners, and that, like his other guests, she feels misunderstood and unloved by others in the community. Singer’s reaction to Mick’s words and his attempt to understand her beyond the sentence level prove he is an active listener.

Complicating the Myth of “Kill or Cure”: Singer’s Impact as a Listener

Given that Singer commits suicide near the novel’s end, one must ask whether or not Mick and Singer’s relationship was significant. Despite Singer’s physical absence, their relationship continues to flourish in Mick’s memory, which may leave some disability critics questioning whether or not this novel presents a stereotypical ending for a disabled character. Singer’s death is problematic because it seems to reflect the common trope of “kill or cure” that Jay Timothy Dolmage attributes to stories about disability. According to this trope, a “disabled character will either have to be ‘killed or cured’ by the end of any movie or novel in which they appear” because “society views disability as something that must be eradicated in one of these two ways” (39). Dolmage further asserts that the killing of the disabled character is offered as “compensation”—as in the case of Lenny in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*—but that the death might also arise from suicide after the realization that the disabled character cannot be cured (39). In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Singer does commit suicide, but his ultimate choice is attributed to the fact that his beloved roommate and friend, Antonopoulos, has died. Singer proclaims in a letter to his friend that he could not “be alone and without you who understand” (260). While Antonopoulos is also deaf, Singer’s refrain indicates more than a deficit of shared communication as McCullers depicts Singer in conversation

with all the characters and also with other mutes who use sign language, demonstrating that Singer has the ability to be understood by other characters linguistically. Singer also never hints at any desire to be cured of his deafness, nor do any of the other characters express a wish for him to be cured.

Readers realize Singer's use of the term "understand" is meant to indicate not just language but the essence of a person. In this way, his suicide is not unlike other depictions in fictional works of abled friends, relatives, or lovers who commit suicide to be with their deceased loved one. Furthermore, the remaining characters are neither relieved nor compensated by Singer's actions. Rather they feel an immense sense of loss, grief, and turmoil over the act, perhaps none more so than Mick. Despite the potential to read this novel as only demonstrating failed communication and offering no hope for any of the characters involved, at the novel's end, there is still hope for Mick, who, like Singer, has not been forced into the stereotypical kill or cure trope.

Similarly, as previously noted, Mick can be read as figuratively disabled through her status as an adolescent, occupying liminal status as neither man nor woman ("Revisiting" 112-13). While her sister encourages Mick to embrace womanhood, Mick rebels against becoming the idealized southern belle (50). Taking steps in this direction would effectively demonstrate that Mick has been "cured" of her adolescent disfigurement. However, while Mick is seen awkwardly exchanging her shorts for a dress and pantyhose by the novel's end, readers are also given the hope that she will retain her unfettered childhood ambitions with the encouragement of Singer's memory.

The physical presence of her listener is gone, but he still remains in her "inside room," a place within her mind containing all her secret pleasures (195). Though Mick becomes concerned the room is locked to her forever, evidence suggests it remains open. Even before Singer's death, Mick claims that she has been locked out of her inside room, where she can compose her own music and enter these far off places in her imagination (366). Yet readers see a glimpse of it again as Mick starts to imagine a world where she could still have the things she wants, namely, buying a piano and continuing her music lessons. Mick is still capable of imagining a new life for herself, as demonstrated by her daydreaming of a place to put the hypothetical piano, how she would be able to purchase it, and who would be allowed to play it (423). Though her world looks bleak, she dwells on the good that came out of her

relationship with Singer. She focuses on the fact that “she did have Mister Singer’s radio,” a present he had purchased for her even though he could not hear the music himself, a physical reminder that he was listening to her hopes of being a musician (423). The knowledge that Singer had listened to her and that she still had this small piece of him encourages her to think “maybe it would be true about the piano and turn out O.K. Maybe she would get a chance soon” (424). Even in death, Singer encourages Mick to believe in a brighter future.

The reader can see evidence that Singer’s listening has helped Mick gain the confidence to pursue her dreams. At a low moment after work, Mick is contemplating her situation, wondering “what the hell good had it all been—the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense” (424). Rather than lapse into a deeper depression, Mick convinces herself that all her hard work will amount to something eventually, repeating to herself, “And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too. It was some good.” The repetition of the phrase and the exclamation of “All right! O.K!” followed by the finality of the last declarative sentence that it was “Some good” indicate Singer’s legacy as a feminist listener lives on in Mick’s newfound capacity for self-empowerment. In her mind, he is still serving as a feminist listener (424).

Analyzing feminist listening practices between individuals with varied communication abilities enables new interpretations of familiar literary works. Such analysis reveals that McCullers elevates the status of listening through the depiction of John Singer. In his practice of feminist listening, Singer affirms and empowers Mick Kelly. Nevertheless, Singer is by no means a stock character, existing merely to bolster Mick’s confidence. Singer’s unique educational and social history demonstrate that he is a complex character, marginalized by oppressive social forces but resilient in his ability to reconnect through listening. McCullers’s works contain many silent characters who might benefit from such a new perspective, including Private Williams in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, Amelia in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, and the red-haired neighbor in “Court in the West Eighties.” Shifting the focus from silence to listening grants these characters more agency and complicates readings of disability by highlighting how disability can be used as a metaphor for interpreting marginalized characters such as Mick. The prevalence of silent/listening characters throughout her works suggests that McCullers views listening as a powerful form of rhetoric,

a necessary component for sustaining the narrative and staging cultural critique.

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