CONCLUSION

A DIFFERENT RAPE STORY?

It is of some significance that the “bad guys” in *The World According to Garp* are not only the rapists—the category includes the Ellen Jamesians as well. Pretenders to the role of victim, these are women who cut out their tongues to protest being “raped,” when “what they meant was that they *felt* as if their tongues were gone. In a world of men, they felt as if they had been shut up forever” (539). Lacking the personal experience of rape, they make a mockery of the real Ellen James’s enforced silence: they are about nothing so much as a surplus of representation, excesses beyond the unrepresentable phenomenon of Ellen’s (and Hope’s) suffering. In John Irving’s defense, the tone in which the Ellen Jamesians are represented brings to mind the point made by Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray—in this case in reference to the media but still relevant here: that representations of rape survivors disempower the speech of real rape survivors (Mardorossian 743, n. 1). The Ellen Jamesians instill a sense of injustice—if not rage—in Garp (and one presumes in Irving) because their noisy affectations crowd out the reality of Ellen herself as survivor. Ellen, of course, is necessarily voiceless, but in one way of looking at it, that silence is a clear metaphor for the way she is silenced by the rape culture that has victimized her.

The issue of representing and/or theorizing rape is a vexed one, suggestive of several different problems. To what extent, for example, do representations of rape written/spoken by non-victims cloud the individual experience of the crime? Does the burgeoning discursive field growing around the topic of rape work ironically to exclude from the conversation actual survivors’ retellings of the crimes they have experienced? To what extent would a “true,” firsthand report of rape hold itself apart from that discursive field? What vacuum would allow for this isolation, and yet still keep open the possibility of communication? And why, for this particular crime, does the value of the story impinge as nervously and emotionally as it does on the status of a hypothetical absolute veracity? The simplest answer is the most obvious and the most compelling: women have been
and continue to be raped: “in 1996, a woman was raped every three minutes in this country; seventy-eight percent of them knew their attackers” (from the Bureau of Justice National Victim Center, qtd. in Horvitz 1). Moreover, prosecution of suspected rapists is notoriously ineffectual; the justice system as we know it is seemingly hopelessly biased against accusations of rape and assumes immediately that accusations of rape are false: “[A]rt and criticism share the well-documented bias of rape law, where representations of rape after the event are almost always framed by a masculine perspective premised on men’s fantasies about female sexuality and their fears of false accusation, as well as their codified access to and possession of women’s bodies” (Higgins and Silver 2).

The rape victim’s word is thus positioned to work against the current to maintain its own authority within a system built to discredit it. Given that the stakes are so high, it makes a great deal of sense that many feminist scholars are nervous—at best—about any discussion of the representation of rape. In a section of Signs dedicated to recent feminist theory of rape, Beverly Allen, for example, writes of the difficulty she experiences when entering an academic conversation about rape when she is herself deep in the reality of postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina, and she goes on to discuss instead the value of the type of work that attempts simply to record the narratives of the victims (a genre placed in clear opposition to the theoretical work of those inside the academy). Allen’s concerns are echoed by Carine Mardorossian, who, even in the context of arguing for more theoretical discussion, criticizes a discourse that crosses the line and loses touch with the reality of rape: she critiques what she calls “postmodern” feminism for “analyz[ing] rape victims and the antirape movement by looking at or implying hidden depths and inner meanings lodged within an individualized configuration” (761).

These concerns are legitimate. Representations of rape, even when explicitly condemnatory of the rapist and sympathetic toward the victim, can nonetheless quite easily serve to reinforce the patriarchal status quo, as I hope these chapters have shown. And we have all too long a history, as again I hope these chapters have shown, of deploying “rape” as a textual event or image to signify something other than rape, in the meantime (and by so doing) preserving rape as a structuring component of Western culture. It is far more often the case than not, in fact, I would argue, that rape stories do indeed direct the reader away from the materiality and gender politics of the event and toward “hidden depths” and “inner meanings.” Nonetheless, to cordon off as acceptable only those rape stories grounded in material physical violence, verifiable personal suffering, to some extent perpetuates the traditional tendency to sanctify the silent victim: the more horrific her abuse and the greater her voicelessness, the greater her heights,
or depths, of martyrdom. This is not to say that—in fact, in history, literature, science, and art—rape victims have not been silenced.

What I am rather attempting to point out is that the continued isolation of rape and the rape victim in some extra-linguistic zone—the acceptance of only that language which is beyond the shadow of a doubt purely and truthfully a representation of only the precise physical details of the victim’s personal experience—preserves the binary of passive victim/active subject and reinforces the sense that rape is an inevitable fact. Pure silence/truth or lying representational excess—the relentlessness of the dualism evokes centuries of courtroom decisions. This discursive binary structure highlights the extent to which it is the function of the rape victim within the symbolic contract of compulsory heterosexuality to be without agency and without voice (unless a protective, sympathetic space is carved for her)—even when or perhaps particularly when that fact is bewailed. Sharon Marcus argues that it is thus precisely through treating rape as a “linguistic fact” in turn that we can begin to understand the fact of rape as “subject to change” (388–89): it behooves us to regard “rape not as a fact to be accepted or opposed, tried or avenged, but as a process to be analyzed and undermined as it occurs. [. . . One way to achieve this is to] . . . ask how the violence of rape is enabled by narratives, complexes and institutions which derive their strength not from outright, immutable, unbeatable force but rather from their power to structure our lives as imposing cultural scripts” (389). The project of unveiling the discursive mechanisms of patriarchy is thus in my view well worth the risks it entails. If it is true that the rape narrative is one of the load-carrying beams of patriarchal culture, then it makes sense to evaluate how the structure might be differently constructed.

Janice Haaken makes the case that any theory of sexual violence is “mis-guided if the issues are cast monolithically as a debate between ‘agency’ and ‘victimization’” (785). In the same vein, Donna Haraway attributes the full-scale adoption of that same binary structure by earlier waves of radical feminism to the work of Catharine MacKinnon (in what is perhaps an exaggerated assignment of blame):

Ironically, MacKinnon’s ‘ontology’ constructs a non-subject, a non-being. Another’s desire, not the self’s labour, is the origin of ‘woman.’ . . . Feminist practice is the construction of this form of consciousness; that is, the self-knowledge of a self-who-is-not. . . . MacKinnon’s radical theory of experience is totalizing in the extreme; it does not so much marginalize as obliterate the authority of any other women’s political speech and action. It is a totalization producing what Western patriarchy itself never succeeded in
doing—feminists’ consciousness of the non-existence of women, except as products of men’s desire. (159)

Haaken and Haraway thus both implicitly suggest that a retelling of rape must necessarily find a way out of the binary structure sustained by patriarchy and adopted, at least according to Haraway, by some forms of feminism. That would mean a rejection not only of the totalizing distinction between agent and victim but a deconstruction of the strict differentiation between the discursive and the material. “Ultimately at stake” in this effort, as Ellen Rooney puts it, is the ability to “read the scene of sexual violence” for evidence of a feminine subject defined by more than the sole abilities “to consent or refuse to consent” (92), to be necessarily and “always either already raped or already rapable” (Marcus 386). This would be a struggle, then, over the form of the rape story.

Over the last twenty or thirty years, a great number of writers have risen to this challenge. In a variety of ways, they have self-consciously experimented with narrative (and poetic, for that matter) form in order to show rape in different lights, from different angles. Their narrative experimentation calls to mind Teresa de Lauretis’s directive for theoretical feminism and feminist film practice: “to articulate the relations of the female subject to representation, meaning, and vision, and in so doing to construct the terms of another frame of reference, another measure of desire” (*Alice Doesn’t* 68).

What follows is a brief overview of some of the attempted formulations of “another frame of reference, another measure of desire” through the reclamation and reconstruction of the rape story. The project has involved work with linear plot and narrative time; character construction and narrative voice; readerly placement and point of view; internal narration and external reportage. Themes include the status of the real, the nature of language, the constitution of subjectivity, the questionable inevitability of female masochism, and the redefinition of masculinity to include physical, sexual vulnerability. In all cases, the central concern is to write the “victim,” whatever that might mean, and to consider through her (or him) the (im)possible construction of “another measure of desire.”

One of the most powerful efforts toward dismantling the traditional forms of the rape story has been the reinsertion of the woman’s voice into the narrative. In literary criticism, this has meant a new form of conscious, critical reading, one that deflects the transcendent aura the rape text generates. The aestheticized promise of the transcendental is replaced by mate-
rial, bodily experience, which returns to the text, in theory, some approximation of the psychological trauma undergone by women and repressed by history (Horvitz 2). This is not just a matter of “listening to the silences,” as Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver put it; rereading requires invention—a restoration of rape “to the literal, to the body: restoring, that is, the violence—the physical, sexual violation” (4). Rereading rape also entails, for Higgins and Silver, the identification and flattening of figurative language in an effort to return to the text the materiality of violence and sexuality. The reconstruction does not come easily, and when it is confronted in a finished piece of fiction, as Tanner has noted, the effect can be effectively discomforting. Reading conventions traditionally involve the exploitation of what Laura Tanner terms “the reader’s bodiless status” in order to sanction and “invite a voyeuristic participation in the scene of violence” (x). As a matter of course, the reader is admitted to the titillating scene of violence only after leaving his or her body, as it were, outside the text. By the same token, the reader is shielded from the point of view of the victim, is left safely to objectify the body in pain.

Tanner identifies contemporary fiction that deliberately revises this narrative structure, generally written by women. These are texts which relentlessly “attach the reader to the victim’s tortured body,” relocating the traditional point of view and by so doing “subverting the scopophilic gaze of the reader by turning it inward to focus on the victim’s pain” (x). The subject of reading is thus compelled to identify with the “victim of violation,” who is in turn explicitly constructed as “the object rather than the subject of violence, a human being stripped of agency and mercilessly attached to a physical form that cannot be dissolved at will” (3). The texts Tanner studies that effect this reversal include most centrally novels written by women of color, namely Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*. In both cases, Tanner examines the narrative techniques used to “collapse the distance between disembodied reader” and a victim defined through narrative and historical tradition by her embodiment. The task is not easily accomplished, and the prose struggles against itself to “subvert” its own “distancing conventions” (10). Similarly, as Tanner points out of *The Women of Brewster Place*, the silence of the victim is also presented as a struggle, not a passive necessity. In fact, the scene is loud with the victim’s “voice,” even if externally she is silent; framed by a more traditional narrative structure and point of view, the silence would be available for interpretation—perhaps even for an occasion to muse and to wonder. Perhaps most strikingly, the victim’s experience is not narrated as a coherent whole. Rather, the rape sequence is disjointed and portrays an explicit rift between the mind experiencing pain and the body that has been taken away from the mind’s control; subjectivity is splintered. And as
if in a final reference to and dismissal of the traditional rape narrative, the point of view shifts briefly, after the event, to an external view of the injured woman. Given this chronological placement, the voyeuristic point of view is much more difficult to take. Its insufficiency is clear.

Texts like *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Tracks* thus in several ways respond to Teresa de Lauretis's directive to “articulate the relations of the female subject to representation, meaning, and vision, and in so doing to construct the terms of another frame of reference, another measure of desire” (*Alice Doesn’t* 68). Placing point of view with the rape victim changes the frame of reference at the most basic of narrative levels. Whether that revision constructs another, possibly non-reactive, measure of desire is another question. And in fact, it is precisely that directive to construct “another measure of desire” that remains the central problematic within rape stories written by women in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and there are many, many such texts. To relocate the point of view of a rape story to the victim is still to write a rape story, a model of the inconsequence of the victim's pain and the inevitably secondary nature of female desire and sexuality. In all of the different narrative forms with which contemporary feminist writers experiment, it is that secondary nature of female desire that constitutes the central conflict—or at least one of the central conflicts—of the rape story. A few texts posit qualified success, as does Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Most do not. And although that obstruction can seem insurmountable within the context of the narration of rape, writers nonetheless return to the genre, struggling to articulate a way out from under what can appear to be a rhetorical, cultural checkmate.

Christa Wolf’s *Cassandra* takes up the issue of an “other measure of desire” through the narrative form of retrospective internal monologue. Here again the text places the reader firmly within the point of view of the rape victim. Unlike Naylor, Erdrich, or Walker, however, Wolf barely touches on the material, bodily experience of rape, as central as that event is within the short novel. Instead, she develops a narrative form that focuses our attention on the intellectual and emotional struggles of the main character, a process of growth defined in large part by negativity—by what Cassandra cannot see, articulate, or act upon as a result of being alienated from patriarchal culture. The finality of that alienation is formally highlighted by the narrative frame: the day of her execution. All of the internal struggles within the text, then, necessarily fall within the overarching reality of the death of the female subject. On this day of her execution, the Trojan prophetess Cassandra—doomed by Apollo to be scorned by her people—recalls her life and the stages of internal development that have led her to where she is—resolutely choosing death over escape with Aeneas.
What she has always wanted, the first-person narrator establishes very early on, has always been “[t]o speak with my voice”; this, she claims, is the “ultimate. I did not want anything more, anything different” (4). What the text establishes, however, is that the voice that emerges from her has nothing to do with some core or even individual identity—it is anything but her own. Enforcing an “ultimate estrangement from myself and from everyone,” the voice is an alien “torment” that in a violent parody of childbirth “force[s] its way out of me, through me, dismembering me” (59). Later, in what is rather a reference to rape than childbirth, the voice “had to subdue me before I would breathe a word it suggested” (106). If the voice is not her or hers, however, nor does it express an abstract “truth”; that version of the Cassandra story—that she is doomed to see the future truthfully but never to be believed—is invented by “the enemy,” the Greeks, for whom “there is no alternative but either truth or lies, right or wrong, victory or defeat, friend or enemy, life or death” (106). The voice rather embodies the “smiling vital force” beyond and oblivious to human reason and language, representative of “other realities . . . seeping into our solid-bodied world” (106).

What the voice enables Cassandra to see, unlike those around her, is the intrinsic meaninglessness of “truth” or “right,” a revelation that Cassandra herself struggles against. The voice and its “other realities” threaten the patriarchal “reality” upon which understanding depends. For Cassandra, for example, there is no “tragedy,” a form that assumes a certain order in the universe, an order that coincides with words and with art and which induces a cathartic sense of closure. Similarly, she discovers that there is no Helen of Troy over whom the war is being waged, that “Helen” is the fantasy that makes culture reasonable and legitimizes (violent) action: “In the Helen we invented, we were defending everything that we no longer had. And the more it faded, the more real we had to say it was” (85). As this example suggests, the “solid-bodied world” that provides the only coherence available is thus one that functions in the service of patriarchy and violence; it holds her and her body in contempt. Achilles stands as the representative of the “naked, hideous, male gratification” at the core of “reality.” He is a killer, and he is a rapist, even of the dead: “Achilles the Greek hero desecrates” the dead Amazon, Penthesilia. Yet Aeneas, whom Cassandra loves, is also a hero, and a hero by the standards of the same general culture that names Achilles a hero; it is Aeneas who saves a living memory of Troy’s greatness, founding as he does so an even greater, more patriarchal, more violent civilization. But what Cassandra asserts from the beginning—which in chronological time she discovered only gradually—is that she “cannot love a hero” (138). In spite of and because of the fact that “Aeneas was the reality,” a part of the patriarchal order that defines all
knowable language and order, she feels she cannot escape with him (75). Instead, she chooses her own death.

It is significant that Cassandra herself is raped in the “grave of heroes,” and it is significant that the event is narrated on the second to the last page of the text. In spite of her growing revelation about the unnaturalness of “reality,” as she terms it, she finds that she is nonetheless consigned to it. There are no words, she notes earlier in the text, for those “other realities” that are spoken through her; “[w]e have no name for” them (106). They remain alien to her. Even during the relatively happy period of her life, when she lives amongst the community of women, she finds that they don’t “know any script to write in,” and so the reprieve is only a brief one (133). The framed novel begins and ends on the same note: there is “[n]othing left to describe the world but the language of the past. The language of the present has shriveled to the words that describe this dismal fortress. The language of the future has only one sentence left for me: Today I will be killed” (14). The voice Apollo grants her—by spitting in her mouth when she refuses his sexual advances—dooms her to a knowledge of the meaninglessness and cruel artificiality of the patriarchal order but with no ability to articulate, much less formulate, the “other realities” that might provide an alternative life. Her rape in the grave of heroes by Ajax the Lesser is an anticlimactic punctuation mark, taking up less than two sentences and narrated without emotion or physical description.

In the four essays that Wolf includes in the text Cassandra, she writes about a desire for an “inconspicuous” word (270) and a narrative form that focuses attention on “subjectivity” and away from the “sealed ‘objectivity’” of the Western tradition (287). She celebrates as exemplary the female character “who simply cannot get a grip on her life, cannot give it a form; who simply cannot manage to make her experience into a presentable story, cannot produce it out of herself as an artistic product” (301). The ideal narrative, then, is one that has pretensions neither to accurate representation of an unproblematic external reality nor to expression of a stable extra-linguistic subjectivity or subjective experience. By contrast, Wolf critiques the traditional epic form, “born of the struggles for Patriarchy, . . . by its structure an instrument by which to elaborate and fortify the patriarchy” (296). The relentlessness of the linear plot, “the struggle and victory of the heroes, or their doom,” is “The blood-red thread [of] narrative” (296). Wolf’s description of plot calls to mind Teresa de Lauretis’s revision of Mulvey’s phrase, “sadism demands a story”: “Story demands sadism, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end” (132–33). This is the pattern that Wolf works against, largely through revision and relocation of the climactic rape
scene. As a result, Cassandra lacks the traditional “feel” of a novel: the inevitable progression of linear plot is undermined. The rape comes out of nowhere, from an otherwise unnoteworthy antagonist, caps the nonchronological series of memories, and only in retrospect informs the earlier text. Partly as a result, what would more traditionally be constructed as the metaphoric power of the scene is undermined. Eileen Julien makes the argument that, in the African novels she studies, rape surfaces not as metaphor but as metonymy: “Rape is represented... not as an isolated, gratuitous instance of violence that can be read metaphorically... It is portrayed rather, as the French term viol makes clear, metonymically, as a quintessential act of violence in a context of rampant abuse, both political and sexual” (161). In Cassandra, similarly, the rape is the final and “quintessential” act in a narrative world within which there is no exit—no way to articulate the “other realities” that might supplant the oppression and violence of the patriarchal order. Ironically, then, in form the novel undermines the “blood-red thread” and the transcendent metaphors of patriarchal narrative; in content it stages the death of female subjectivity.

Kathy Acker works more aggressively yet to rid rape of its metaphoric valence. For Acker the effort is relentless, and the fact that she returns to sexual violence with such frequency has made her writing suspect—if not offensive—to many. For Acker, as for Wolf, rape functions metonymically within the text as a “quintessential act of violence in a context of rampant abuse, both political and sexual.” The rapes woven through her narratives are, as is Cassandra’s, anticlimactic—just culminating examples of the constant stream of brutal events that constitute life under patriarchal capitalism. They are narrated in terms blank, coarse, and extreme, as in this example from Great Expectations, chosen more-or-less at random:

The soldiers wake up stand up again tuck in their canvas shirttails suck in cheeks stained by tears dried by the steam from hot train rails rub their sex against the tires, the trucks go down into a dry ford mow down a few rose-bushes, the sap mixes with disembowelled teenagers’ blood on their knives’ metal, the soldiers’ nailed boots cut down uproot nursery plants, a section of RIMA (the other army) climb onto their trucks’ runningboards throw themselves on their females pull out violet rags bloody tampaxes which afterwards the females stick back in their cunts: the soldier’s chest as he’s raping the female crushes the baby stuck in her tits. (8)

Unlike the rape sequences discussed in earlier chapters, however, which similarly locate point of view outside the rape victim, this distance is hardly conducive to titillated voyeurism (referencing one’s tampon, in fact, is
offered in rape prevention workshops as an effective emotional deterrent, at least for acquaintance rape)—nor does it encourage pathos. Transcendent metaphor, as well, has no place in this scene. More the rule than the exception, instances of sexual violence in Acker’s work are constructed as typically harsh features of the world of, in this case, soldiers, interchangeable armies, crushed babies, and murdered children. In fact, Acker’s plots are in large part structured by the metonymic chain of brutal events the protagonist endures. This chain, for Acker, replaces the traditional features that constitute narrative.

Serving to link this distinctive narrative chain is the female protagonist. Victim of rape, abuse, torture, incest, cruelty, slavery, disease, and the medical community, her subjectivity is formulated in and around the inevitable fact of gender violence. “Daddy taught me to live in pain, to know there’s nothing else,” narrates Abhor, protagonist of Empire of the Senseless, through male character Thivai; “I trusted him for this complexity” (10). The matter-of-fact quality of this sort of pronouncement, spoken by a child victim of incest and rape, resembles the flatness with which Acker narrates rape scenes. This blank narrative style of what I will call flat affect, together with the female characters’ resigned acceptance of their abuse—if not masochistic desire for it—suggest that Acker’s protagonists are inescapably complicit in the gender ideology that oppresses them. Abuse, pain, sex, and love become tangled, inextricably, as in this example from Blood and Guts in High School, in which Janey likens sex to abortion: “The orange walls were thick enough to stifle the screams pouring out of the operating room. Having an abortion was obviously just like getting fucked. If we closed our eyes and spread our legs, we’d be taken care of. They stripped us of our clothes. Gave us white sheets to cover our nakedness. Led us back to the pale green room. I love it when men take care of me” (32–33). Katherine Ginn finds in this scene and others like it evidence of one of Acker’s “most striking and consistent features”: “a seemingly total lack of optimism about the potential for popular liberal political movements, particularly radical feminism, to alleviate social ills” (51). Feminist resistance (through abortion rights, for example) is as grounded in the ideology of capitalism as is the incest and rape that occasion its need, in this case.

The helpless complicity of Acker’s female protagonists is always in her work presented as a function of a textual as well as a sexual and gendered order. Thus, the “problem of feminine subjectivity” in Acker, as Karen Brennan puts it, is “a textual, as well as a sexual, one, implicated as it is in the sexual/textual dilemma that positions women as objects of discourse and desire” and men as the subjects (246). Acker’s female characters are born into a world and language in which, with Medusa, they confront a
final brick wall that disallows female “subjectivity” as such: “I’m your desire’s object, dog, because I can’t be the subject” (Don Quixote, 28). Since Acker’s women are thus constituted by a discursive field that in form and content “fully inform[s] the speaking subject even as she speaks,” one might well ask, with Martina Sciolino, “how can one write a revolution to find a space for her own desires when she is already written by patriarchy?” (439). As Don Quixote discovers on her quest to become a knight, she is inhabited by the language of patriarchy, one that constitutes her and yet which nonetheless does not belong to her; she cannot be the subject of this language: “BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE TEXTS WHICH WEREN’T HERS” (58). Hence the attempts of her female protagonists somehow to write a new story are confronted by what Brennan calls “the circularity of cultural discourse,” which makes “real transformation impossible” (267).

In one of the narrative moments typical of Acker when point of view seems to merge with the voice of the author, the narrator of Empire of the Senseless clearly articulates the dilemma: “Ten years ago it seemed possible to destroy language through language: to destroy language which normalizes and controls by cutting that language. Nonsense would attack the empire-making (empirical) empire of language, the prisons of meaning. But this nonsense, since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the normalizing institutions” (134). As in Wolf’s novel, in spite of any suspicion that “solid-bodied reality” is a function of patriarchal discourse, one is nonetheless trapped within it, lacking the words to formulate the “other realities” that seem to offer themselves. Vincent King makes the case that Dorothy Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina also follows this general pattern. Incestuously abused throughout the first eight chapters of the novel, beginning in chapter 9 Bone is overtaken by a desire to survive; a part of that project involves rewriting the rape story of her life. In this effort, however, she is compelled to repeat “the names and stories that make her vulnerable to violence,” thus indelibly reprinting the rape script—along with her passive, victimized role in it—within her emerging subjectivity—this in spite of her understanding that her own stories are in conflict with “the names and stories thrust upon her by others” (124).

In the quotation above from Empire of the Senseless, Acker’s narrator concludes that any attempt to destroy language “simply point[s] back to the normalizing institutions.” The “empire-making” language and reason to which her texts refer, in other words, are grounded in a force either larger than or complicit with patriarchy. “Reason is always,” Acker writes, earlier in Empire, “in the service of the political and economic masters” (12). I make the case earlier (chapter 6) that Acker revises the work of male
authors to reveal that the gender violence folded within heroic narrative is a fantasy of man as a subject-effect, locked in, dreaming his rape dreams in what is a profoundly grave misrecognition of the ideology of late capitalism and his own oppressed role within it. If Acker identifies masculinity as a secondary function of capitalism, however, I would add, she goes further to establish femininity as not only secondary—an effect of power relations larger than herself—but painfully, constantly, and in fact dysfunctionally conscious of that fact, mainly because of the extent to which patriarchal capitalism is inscribed on her body through sexual violence. As Colleen Kennedy puts it, Acker “recognizes that ‘woman’ is a kind of commodity” (177). A product used and exchanged by man, woman is the living (Acker often writes “dead”) fetish whereby he through violence disavows his own lack within the proliferating operations of late capitalism. “How can such objects of use and transaction claim the right to speak and to participate in exchange in general?” Irigaray questions: “Commodities, as we all know, do not take themselves to market on their own” (This Sex 85).

Speaking, however, is something that Acker’s texts do in fact attempt, in spite of the saturation of language and reason, and in spite of the paralyzing recognition of the status of the female self within the rape logic of patriarchal capitalism. In Empire of the Senseless, in a brief passage of explicitly romantic declaration, Acker pits the power of literature against the deadening “reason” of the state “which always homogenizes and reduces”: “Reason is always in the service of the political and economic masters. It is here that literature strikes, at this base, where the concepts and actings of order impose themselves. Literature is that which denounces and slashes apart the repressing machine at the level of the signified. [. . . The German Romantics] . . . tore the subject away from her subjugation to her self, the proper; dislocated you the puppet; cut the threads of meaning; spit at all mirrors which control” (12). The aggressive action of “literature” is described in metaphors of doubling, if not reflection, and the separation of doubled pairs. It would seem, in short, that “literature” drives a rift between the face of power and the human face that receives and incorporates it, in so doing threatening the political and economic “base” of reason. Some significance lies in the fact that Acker herself is perhaps best known—or most criticized—for her own literary doublings, her “plagiarism” of such works as Great Expectations, Huckleberry Finn, Sanctuary, and Neuromancer, to name just a few, and so obviously one might question how these repetitions might function to disrupt a structure she already perceives as doubled.

At the end of Blood and Guts in High School, before what appears to be Janey’s sacrificial death, the narrative introduces the topic of plagiarism:
“End of abstract haze. Now the specific details can begin in the terrible plagiarism of The Screens. The writing is terrible plagiarism because all culture stinks and there's no reason to make new culture-stink” (137). Following “abstract haze” is the concrete of the “terrible plagiarism,” a repetition whose function or at least limitation it is, presumably, to represent the “stink” of a culture given to legitimizing abstraction. After abstraction, perhaps, comes parody. In chapter 6 of this book, I examine Acker’s “plagiarism” of William Gibson’s Neuromancer, making the case that what the recreation draws our attention to is both the grittiness and the artificiality of the sexual violence that disappears smoothly (abstractly?) into Gibson's own slick prose. In Memoriam to Identity, as Sabine Sielke points out, Acker similarly parodies Faulkner's Sanctuary, “disengages Temple's [rape] story from its Southern context” and “spells out Faulkner's subtleties” (141). These parodies denaturalize what is revealed to be ideological. Ellen Friedman makes the case that “the male texts” doubled in Acker's work “represent the limits of language and culture within which the female quester attempts to acquire identity” (243). Lacking a new language—lacking, in fact, any faith that a new language is possible—Acker is left, as is Cassandra, with the old. But a repetition, as Marx shows, is never exact. If the original delimits the boundaries of culture and language, a repetition—and certainly a parody—must in one direction or another diverge from those boundaries. The “stink” must stink differently.

Colleen Kennedy makes the case that parody is active in Acker's texts even when the source is nonspecific. In particular, she argues that Acker deliberately parodies the genre of pornography throughout her work and that she does so in an effort “to prevent the patriarchy from establishing pornography as something other from itself” (181). Patriarchy, presumably, can stare into the still life of pornography without realizing that it gazes into a mirror; Kennedy argues that Acker's texts make this reflection visible. The argument is persuasive: the representations of sexual violence and sadism are so extreme—narrated with typically flat affect—that it is difficult not to read them as deliberate parodies. Arthur Redding, similarly, identifies a certain theatricality in Acker's rape victims—their masochism seems overplayed (301). Again, one might argue, given this premise, that Acker highlights the desperation and masochism of her female characters as a corrective to the female masochism naturalized within the mainstream texts of patriarchy.1

For all its scathingly parodic power, however, Acker's writing, like Wolf’s, stops short of attempting to define de Lauretis’s “other measure of desire,” and certainly eschews committing to any potentially essentialist conception of a “NEW LANGUAGE” (Blood and Guts 96). As Kennedy puts it, “Acker does not believe, naively, that women as women control
something called ‘women’s writing,’” and she resists the temptation to articulate an alternate form of “sense”—“A LANGUAGE THAT MEANS SOMETHING TO ME” (177; Blood and Guts 96). In Blood and Guts in High School, in a narrative move reminiscent of Cassandra, the protagonist—like female subjectivity itself—is killed off just at the point the text seems to move toward revelation.

The voice of revelation, however, continues without her, creating the illusion of a voice after death—a voice that is thus not “real” (the pages are not numbered in this section) and yet clearly is there, in some liminal zone outside the sexual violence of the rest of the novel, in a space designed to evoke an archetypal creation story:

A light came into the world.
Dazzling white light that
makes lightness dazzling burn
ing happiness. Peace. . . .
[. . . .]
. . . Shall we stop being dead
people? Shall we find our way
out of all expectations?

Brennan makes the case that this section, “Acker’s last word, . . . functions . . . to alleviate the darkness of the inevitable death of the female subject. Within this pictorial, highly pastiched space, this voice, which has been figuratively silenced, speaks eloquently” (266). In a move reminiscent of The Waste Land (and in fact, Acker’s work seems often to “plagiarize” The Waste Land), the authority of voice is/is not established in this obliquely suggestive ending; the rain both does and does not come. But the mere suggestion of its presence—even if explicitly denied—is enough to carry away from the novel. The tone overrides, to some extent, that of the rest of the novel. This final tonal shift—ungrounded yet compelling—is typical of Acker’s endings. Don Quixote, for example, “drunk, awoke to the world which lay before me” (207). Abhor, after listening to the graphic story of a rapist member of a motorcycle gang, decides that “I didn’t want to be part of a motorcycle gang” and muses: “I stood there, there in the sunlight, and thought that I didn’t as yet know what I wanted. I now fully knew what I didn’t want and what and whom I hated. That was something. And then I thought that, one day, maybe, there’d be a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn’t just disgust” (Empire 227).

It is this fantastical space of uplift into which Acker ventures—tentatively, and most distinctively in the after-death ending of Blood and Guts
in High School—that in paradoxical ways some feminist writers have claimed as the context for retelling the rape story. Acker’s texts—like Wolf’s, and like those of the writers who explore the embodiment of the rape victim—emphasize the trap of the “real,” even if (perhaps particularly if) the “real” is explicitly defined as the material world experienced through a subjectivity constituted in and through the ideology of patriarchal capitalism. Writers like Lois Gould, Ana Castillo, Angela Carter, and most recently Alice Sebold juxtapose the enforced corporal and mental suffering of the rape victim with a narrative space of fantasy, magic realism, or surrealism. Sebold’s The Lovely Bones, for example, begins where Cassandra and Blood and Guts in High School end, with the death of the female subject: “My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973. In newspaper photos of missing girls from the seventies, most looked like me: white girls with mousy brown hair” (5). Placing administration speak (first name, Susie) side by side with that impossible past tense (“my name was”), the text initiates what will become a disarming, heart-wrenching narrative, told from the first person point of view of the murdered child in heaven, alienated from the life of her family but close to it, watching it. The larger gap, of course, lies between the relentlessly close, first-person description of the rape itself, which falls early on but is referenced often enough to create a solid, dark layer that runs the length of the book, and the safe removal of the narrative now, beyond death.

Brennan argues that the final section of Blood and Guts in High School “functions . . . to alleviate the darkness of the inevitable death of the female subject” (266). Certainly the after-death narrative of Susie Salmon alleviates the darkness of what begins, in this case, as the brutal rape and death of the girl protagonist. Here, quite literally, the “voice, which has been figuratively silenced, speaks eloquently” (266). Silenced by the red cap shoved in her mouth during her rape, and silenced by her death (presumably, in fact, her throat is cut), in heaven Susie’s voice is articulate, sympathetic, almost adult. Yet this voice, predicated on death, is also the voice that expresses the gradual acceptance of alienation and absence of self: “These were the lovely bones that had grown around my absence: the connections—sometimes tenuous, sometimes made at great cost, but often magnificent—that happened after I was gone. . . . The events that my death wrought were merely the bones of a body that would become whole at some unpredictable time in the future. The price of what I came to see as this miraculous body had been my life” (320). What Susie is responding to in this particular passage is the way her family and friends have at last healed from her death and its aftereffects. More than the story of a family’s recovery, however, this is the voice of a female subject articulating the
worth of her own absence. Moreover, the passage above locates the internal climax of the novel—the moment of epiphany—and is written so smoothly that the reader is positioned to receive this development as a positive, if bittersweet, resolution. Thus, this text goes where Wolf’s and Acker’s will not—to a new voice and new reality beyond the death of female subjectivity under patriarchy. Yet where it ends up, in circular fashion, is with the value for the social order of female sacrifice.

Linda Nicholson asks what postmodern approach to language might best suit the needs of feminism. “The answer,” she argues, “is a discourse that recognizes itself as historically situated, as motivated by values and, thus, political interests, and as a human practice without transcendent justification” (80–81). Sebold’s novel is a beautifully written, fabulous emotional reprieve from the close rape narrative, yet in a sense one might suspect that it finally nullifies the female subject in its gambit for the transcendent. Ana Castillo’s *So Far From God* generates the same unease. Again, the novel stages a compelling escape from an unbearably brutal rape—the magic realism of the text allows Caridad a miraculous recovery, a new, transcendentally focused life, and a magical metamorphosis in death. To what extent is Castillo vulnerable, then, like Sebold, to the types of suspicions that Angela Carter confronted throughout her career—that her surreal exaggerations of the status quo, together with her fantastically staged narrative escape routes, constructed a vision of “feminism” that was at best ambiguous? Carter herself was articulate in her own defense. “The point” of her narrative as well as her feminism, she asserted in a 1988 interview, was “the here and now, what we should do now” (in Katsavos).

What the problem of the “here and now” was for Carter, most centrally, was the inescapable and naturalized presence of patriarchal reason and definition. Like Cassandra, Carter saw all around her an old language unfit for the present, certainly unfit for the female subject in the present, for whom the reasonable order, once noticed, became impossible not to feel excluded from: “Something that women know all about is how very difficult it is to enter an old game” (in Katsavos). Unlike Cassandra, however, for whom the “language of the future” can only express the idea that “[t]oday I will be killed,” Carter eventually turns to the surreal as the means to “storm the ideological castle” (*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* 33). The order of patriarchy, for Carter, is embodied in the Minister of Determination in her novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. Wed to the preservation of socially ordered reality in the face of Doctor Hoffman’s “asymmetrical” illusions, the Minister is committed to freezing the mobility of language: “He decided he could only keep a strict control of his actualities by adjusting their names to
agree with them perfectly. So, you understand, that no shadow would fall between the word and the thing described. For the Minister hypothesized [that Doctor Hoffman] worked in that shadowy land between the thinkable and the thing thought of” (194). In the Minister's world “desires do not exist” unless named by the state (207). Doctor Hoffman’s world, on the other hand, is semiotically productive: “reason cannot produce the poetry disorder does” (206). The material world is explicitly secondary to “liberated” desire (33): “For us, the world exists only as a medium in which we execute our desires. Physically, the world itself, the actual world—the real world, if you like—is formed of malleable clay; its metaphysical structure is just as malleable” (35). In the nebulous world of liberated desire, however, sexual violence is oddly central, a fact difficult to resolve in the face of Doctor Hoffman’s explicit rejection of the Minister’s patriarchal world.

Carter did not actually discover surrealism until midway through her career. In her earlier, gothic work, however, she was already at work “trying to find out what certain configurations of imagery in our society, in our culture, really stand for, what they mean, underneath the kind of semi-religious coating that makes people not particularly want to interfere with them” (in Katsavos). In pursuit of this goal, Carter works self-consciously with myth, defined “in the sense that Roland Barthes uses it in Mythologies—ideas, images, stories that we tend to take on trust without thinking what they really mean. . . .” (in Katsavos). As in her later, surreal work, then, Carter undertakes early on “to storm the ideological castle.” She also turns to sexual violence to articulate that confrontation. In The Magic Toyshop, for example, a chilling narrative of three orphans under the control of a diabolic uncle, a toy maker, the climactic scene involves the protagonist’s being forced to play Leda in a puppet show of “Leda and the Swan.” The swan itself is a “grotesque parody,” “nothing like the wild, phallic bird of her imaginings,” and she herself is unexpectedly rendered nameless (“Uncle Philip hissed: ‘Get started, what’s yer name!’”) (165). One of patriarchy’s most alluring mythological stories—the rape of Leda—is rendered visibly depraved in this grotesque repetition (a repetition reminiscent of Acker’s parody). At the same time, and partly as a consequence, the protagonist’s own insubstantial place in the known order is lost. The point of the scene, Carter argues, is that “it turns out that the swan is an artificial construct, a puppet, and, somebody, a man, is putting strings on the puppet” (in Katsavos). The rapist is not a god or beautiful bird but the repulsive puppet of a cruel, fat man; the victim is a scared child. This revelation of the artificiality and patriarchy-serving nature of gender violence, however, is bought at the cost of what reads as a rape scene, with the terrified child protagonist finally lapsing into unconsciousness.
In paradoxical ways, sexual violence remains the price of entry into the liberated desire of Doctor Hoffman’s world as well. In her essay “The Alchemy of the Word,” Carter implies that the sexual violence of her novels is not intrinsic to the surreal. In fact, in this essay Carter associates the surreal with beauty and liberty, with the potential to reason anew: “Surrealist beauty . . . exists as an excitation of the nerves. The experience of the beautiful is, like the experience of desire, an abandonment to vertigo, yet the beautiful does not exist as such. What do exist are images or objects that are enigmatic, marvelously erotic—or juxtapositions of objects, or people, or ideas, that arbitrarily extend our notion of the connections it is possible to make. In a way, the beautiful is put to the service of liberty” (12). In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, beauty is centralized within the “enigmatic,” shape-shifting daughter of Doctor Hoffman. She first appears to Desiderio, the narrator, in dreams as a black swan in a golden collar, singing a death song of “savage, wordless lament” in a “thrilling, erotic contralto” (30). Soon after, she is the exotic male Ambassador, with “luxuriantly glossy hair so black it was purplish,” a “blunt-lipped, sensual mouth,” and around his dark eyes “thick bands of solid gold cosmetic” (32). Throughout the novel she will take on a variety of additional forms, all mysterious and alluring. Yet when the translucently beautiful, shape-shifting character of Albertina comes up against the reality of Desiderio, rape, blood, and/or death are invariably the result. In perverse exaggerations of patriarchal dominance, she is repeatedly raped in her attempts to reach him, as in the horrific example of her gang rape by the entire village of centaurs, which event leaves her “mired with blood” (179).

During the rape of Albertina by the centaurs, Desiderio hears “a voice in my mind” telling him “that I was somehow, all unknowing, the instigator of this horror” (180). In fact this would indeed seem to be the case. The violence within the novel seems tied to the structure of surreal novel framed by a narrator who privileges only “the real,” in the sense Wolf intends—a narrator who finally murders Doctor Hoffman. Desiderio, actually, is himself raped in moments of confrontation with the surreal he cannot accept, and the “exhibits” that introduce him to and block him from Doctor Hoffman’s world are sometimes graphic portraits of female sexual abuse, as in exhibit four, in which “the headless body of a mutilated woman lay in a pool of painted blood . . . The right breast had partially segmented and hung open to reveal two surfaces of meat as bright and false as the plaster sirloins which hang in toy butcher’s shops while her belly was covered with some kind of paint that always contrived to look wet and, from the paint, emerged the handle of an enormous knife which was kept always a-quiver by the action (probably) of a spring” (45–46).
These images of the decimated, brutalized female body recur to mark the boundary Desiderio cannot cross. The highlighted artificiality of the image suggests, however, that—as Albertina discloses to him near the end of the text—what he sees mirrors only what he is, what he is capable of desiring: “You have never yet made love to me because, all the time you have known me, I’ve been maintained in my various appearances only by the power of your desire” (204). The novel closes on his pointless murder of Albertina—which Desiderio commits after “str[iking] her in the face with the heavy flat of my hand” and “pummel[ing] her breasts until they were as blue as her eyelids”—followed by the fifty years of regret that follow (204, 216).

In spite of Albertina’s brutal death, the final line of the novel claims that “unbidden, she comes” (220). Like Sebold (and to some extent like Acker, like Castillo), Carter brings her dead character back, ambiguously suggesting either the power of masculinist fantasy or that female subjectivity lives beyond its violent destruction, returns in different forms, un silenced, finally, by the brutality that would insist on socially controlled actualities and names and by a world where “desires do not exist” unless named by the phallic state. Thus, a profound uncertainty closes the text, an uncertainty that Carter increasingly associated throughout her career with the unstable and unknowable nature of subjectivity. Carter says of the questionable nature of Fevvers from Nights at the Circus: “Part of the point of the novel is that you are kept uncertain. . . . When she is talking about being a new woman and having invented herself, her foster mother keeps on saying it’s not going to be as simple as that” (in Katsavos). So like Acker, Carter decisively rejects an essential woman’s language; the ongoing project of inventing a self involves rather the difficult machinery of the fantastic—the machinery that so disappoints Desiderio because it seems so concrete, so nonmagical. For Carter, surrealism works to represent the self in progress because it involves particularly “complex interrelations of reality and its representations” (in Katsavos). Carter’s statement evokes Judith Butler, who has similarly associated the formation of subjectivity with experimental configurations of reality and representation. “What,” Butler asks, “enables the exposure of the rift between the phantasmatic and the real whereby the real admits itself as phantasmatic? Does this offer the possibility for a repetition that is not fully constrained by the injunction to reconsolidate naturalized identities?” (Gender Trouble 146).

At the same time, Butler notes that “[t]here is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there” (Gender Trouble 145). Discursive experimentation depends upon the figures and forms already established, but in configurations that enable different kinds of repetitions. In Carter’s The Passion of New Eve, the always unfinished nature of subjectivity is embodied in the fantastical transvestism
of the novel, but again the assertion of the impermanence of identity and gender confronts the “tools,” or forms, already established to represent the gendered self: specifically, the polar nature of gender and, again, the seeming inescapability of sexual violence. Thus, the abusive “Evelyn” is violently re-sexed to be a woman, who is then, consequently, raped. Cross-dressing Tristessa, “the perfect man’s woman,” “unbegotten woman who made no concessions to humanity,” is both raped and murdered in horrific acknowledgment of the violence that accompanies the struggle to perform gender: “I thought,” he said, ‘I was immune to rape. I thought that I had become inviolable, like glass, and could only be broken. . . . I was seduced by the notion of a woman’s being, which is negativity. Passivity, the absence of being. To be everything and nothing. To be a pane the sun shines through’” (137). Gender is performed on real bodies; the confrontation, for Carter, is articulated in rape. Yet here, too, as in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman,* in some ways the consequences of that violence are nonetheless, albeit fantastically, bypassed. “All my wounds will magically heal,” Leilah/Lillith claims. “Rape only refreshes my virginity. I am ageless, I will outlive the rocks” (174).

The conclusion of *Rape Stories,* a 1989 documentary on rape and rape trauma, begins: “One day it occurred to me that I would feel a lot better if I got rid of the rapist” (Strosser). Soon after, the rapist is killed and shaved into little pieces to be distributed amongst rape survivors. He is not, however, entirely “got[ten] rid of.” He is rather spread abroad, disseminated amongst a presumably vast number of women. So too will the rape story that defines him outlive him. The documentary thus attests to the potential drawback to the narrative practice of current feminism—resistance through repetition. Wendy Hesford expresses unease with this paradoxical configuration: “the language of rape and dominant structures of gendered subjectivity continue to speak through women’s resistance” (194). If Butler is right that “[t]here is only a taking up of the tools where they lie,” then it is also true that discursive experimentation depends upon established narrative forms and old models for the interrelationships of gender, identity, and sex. Nonetheless, no repetition is exact, the point that Butler finally depends upon. As Elizabeth Grosz asserts, we are all “caught up in modes of self-production; these modes may entwine us in various networks of power, but never do they render us merely passive and compliant” (144).

Change is, in fact, a precondition of history. Consider David Foster Wallace’s haunting “interview” in the second “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men” in the short story collection of the same name. Written in answer to
a faceless female questioner, the voice of the interviewee attempts to wrap yards of language around a rape story—paragraphs and paragraphs of rape myth around what one assumes is the actual rape of a woman the speaker has known. The story he hypothesizes around the body of the female victim grows offensively into the stirring tale of a survivor who has not and will not be undone by the event, who in fact grows existentially in relation to it: “Her idea of herself and what she can live through and survive is bigger now. Enlarged, larger, deeper. She’s stronger than she ever deep-down thought, and now she knows it, she thinks she’s strong in a totally different way . . . . [N]ow she knows more about the human condition and suffering and terror and degradation. I mean, all of us will admit suffering and horror are part of being alive and existing, or at least we all pay lip service to knowing it, the human condition. But now she really knows it” (118). In the face of this celebratory—revelatory—humanist rhetoric, bought at the cost of a woman’s rape, the narrative gradually repositions itself. There is, as it turns out, no traditional story here. No transcendent revelations, in all honesty, are forthcoming. Hardly the tale of “Leda and the Swan” and the knowledge the victim might or might not have “put on” with the god’s power, the story the interviewee finally reveals is that of a man who has been raped with a Jack Daniel’s bottle. The rape myth the story begins with thus ends on the simple fact of the physical vulnerability of the male body. What would this kind of rape mean? the narrator asks. What would the violence have to do with subjectivity? “You don’t automatically have a name,” he argues: “it’s not just something you have, you know” (124). The rape has called masculine identity into question. At the same time, and in ways profoundly connected, the rape is not about “ideas.” He claims: “For you this is all ideas, you think we’re talking about ideas” (120). Rape is rather a meaningless physical event, semiotically absent. “You don’t know shit,” the narrative concludes (124).

As in Thomas Pynchon’s work, the commensurability of penis and phallos is thus called into grave question. Unlike Pynchon, Wallace refuses the now common gesture of returning to images of the raped woman to articulate (and displace) this anxiety; it is rather the blank meaninglessness of the penis to which he draws the reader’s attention. In “Signifying Nothing,” the male narrator is dominated by the suddenly regained “memory” of his father “waggling his dick at me down there one time when I was a little kid” (Brief Interviews with Hideous Men 75). The “event” is as outside language and coherent meaning as it is “weird”:

Part of the total weirdness of the incident of my father waggling his dick at me down there was that, the whole time, he did not say anything (I would have remembered if he said anything), and there was nothing in the memory about what his face looked like, like what
his expression looked like. I do not remember if he even looked at me. All I remember was the dick. The dick, like, claimed all of my attention. He was just sort of waggling it in my face, without saying anything or making any type of comment, shaking it kind of like you do in the can. (Brief Interviews, 75–76)

Obviously wielded as a visible demonstration of paternal power, the penis is in this imagined or remembered event ridiculously ungrounded as such. The organ is flaccid (“He did not have a boner”), associated with excretion rather than sexuality or reproduction (“Like you do in the can”). Its apotheosis, furthermore, is in some senses anticlimactic—it is stripped not only of the aura of the phallus but of any semiotic association at all. That the waggled penis claims all the narrator’s attention thus suggests more a revelation of symbolic bankruptcy and masculine vulnerability than otherwise. “To be exposed as ‘soft’ at the core,” argues Susan Bordo, “is one of the worst things a man can suffer in this culture” (The Male Body 55).

The “weird” threat of the father’s soft penis—the organ that now “signifies nothing”—is echoed throughout Wallace’s work. In “Adult World 1,” the young wife worries compulsively about “[t]he rawness and tenderness and spanked pink of the head of [her husband’s] thingie” (Brief Interviews 161). Sick Puppy, the psychotic main character of “Girl with Curious Hair,” reveals that after having been caught having sex with (in fact, raping) his sister, his father “burn[ed his] penis with his gold lighter from the United States Corp and stated that if I ever touched his little girl again he would burn my penis off with his gold lighter and I had to go to a Dr. and obtain ointment for my burned penis” (Girl with Curious Hair 72). Still abusive, Sick Puppy is nonetheless rendered incapable of coition, just as he is, presumably, alienated from the use of common language. Most often, the spectacle of the vulnerable penis is embedded within a rape story—scenes that in Wallace’s work tend to overturn the dynamics of traditional versions of the narrative. In the final “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men,” although in fact raped, the victim “transfigures” the clichéd stories of “brutal sex slayings” or “grisly discoveries of unidentified remains”; she is “able to hold the focus and penetrate him,” thus “address[ing] the psychotic’s core weakness, his grotesque shyness as it were,” causing him finally to “puk[e] from terror” in the recognition that he is “a hole in the world” (Brief Interviews 310, 293–94, 302, 303, 309, 310).

In Infinite Jest, Wallace’s postmodern epic, the images and actuality of rape turn masochistically inward in an apparent textual attack on masculinity itself. Poor Tony Krause’s withdrawal is imaged in terms suggestive of rape, by the embodiment of time: “Time spread him and entered him roughly and had its way and left him again in the form of endless
gushing liquid shit that he could not flush enough to keep up with” (303). This image of primal abjection is joined to a hallucination of giving birth (to his own death): “he heard someone yelling for someone to Give In, Err, with a hand on his lace belly as he bore down to PUSH and he saw the legs in the stirrups they held would keep spreading until they cracked him open and all the way inside-out on the ceiling and his last worry was that red-handed Poppa could see up his dress, what was hidden” (306). Given the feminized setting, “what was hidden” would seemingly be the lack of penis, which revelation to the father results in the splitting open, the shattering of human/masculine boundary. Significantly, it is in the most explicit moment of human (re)production that the death of masculinity is also articulated. The terror of what might (not) be hidden under the transvestite’s dress is echoed by Steeply’s fear of sitting: “‘Crawling around. The skirt, it makes one sensitive about simply plopping down wherever you wish. Possibility of things . . . crawling up.’ [H]e looked up at Marathe. He appeared sad. ‘I’d never realize’” (530). Thus, in moments of production, recognition, and death, the male genitals become the central, problematic symbol of vulnerability.

What sometimes begins with the appearance of the postmodern recuperation of the masculine prerogative to rape is also, in *Infinite Jest* as in *Interviews with Hideous Men*, reversed. The basic dynamics of the Western rape story—masculine raping agent, feminine rape victim—turn traitorously, masochistically, against the soft, vulnerable body of man himself. What begins as a male-on-male rape, on film, between a male prostitute (“sad beautiful boy” in “hunched, homosubmissive position”) and aging actor Cosgrove Watt (whose “career consisted mostly of regional-market commercials on broadcast television”) ends up the exposure of the “sadistic” Watt to HIV. The bloody violence of the scene, further, refuses an identification of who the final, and thus most potent, aggressor might be. The boy’s repeatedly shouted “Murderer! Murderer!” is unclear in its reference—there is no distinct human agent here; it is the virus itself, existing only to replicate its own proliferating code, which has claimed the final violent authority (944–46). Hal notes how the scene finally removes agency from the human actors: “almost a third of *Accomplice!*’s total length is devoted to the racked repetition of this word [Murderer! ]—way, way longer than is needed for the audience to absorb the twist and all its possible implications and meanings. . . . we end up feeling and thinking not about the characters but about the cartridge itself” (946). The film itself, like the “regional-market commercials” that define Watt, appropriates for itself the role of agent and functions self-reflexively. The phallus—and the penis—have been usurped by the larger system of the film industry.

Similarly, recovering alcoholic/drug addict Don Gately experiences his
own illness and, presumably, death, as a rape. A committed AA member, Gately struggles actively and constantly throughout the novel to turn his will over to a higher power—a god in whom he does not believe and yet who seems in fact to be relieving him of the burden of his disease. His wounded body—figuratively and actually—has been throughout the long narrative the clear secondary function of the monetarily valuable exchange of addictive products, and his recovery has been predicated on the seemingly masochistic relinquishment of his own traditionally masculine prerogative. This commitment he retains to the bitter end, past the point where he experiences “[h]is throat feeling somehow raped,” and past the point where he succumbs to the “roaring” and “unwilled force” of the incomprehensible streams of words that penetrate his consciousness with “ghastly intrusive force”; “the sensation is not only creepy but somehow violating, a sort of lexical rape. Gately begins to consider this hopefully nonrecurring dream . . . unpleasant” (809, 832). The feminine or feminized has no part to bear in this imagined “rape.” The power dynamics boil down to a man seeking to relinquish what self-will he has and an inhuman, incomprehensible field of code. The word “sadism,” Gately reflects, must be pronounced “saddism.” (981). The novel closes, inconclusively but poignantly, when he awakes (or dies) “flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out” (981).

The concluding, inconclusive sadness of *Infinite Jest* bodies forth a subjectivity founded in the refusal of will and the nonerotic acceptance of pain as a vehicle for the instantiation of a new model of the self. Such a stance works against the compulsory hedonism of late, market capitalism, which requires as a general good the constant demand for greater pleasure, finer articulations of identity. This conclusion is thus necessarily not a comfortable one to read, working as it does against ingrown habits of gender, power, and lived capitalism. I would make the case, however, that, like the other texts discussed in this chapter, it raises positive questions about the remaking of self and about an undiscovered political model. There are other implications as well. For most of these authors, the death drive is of provocative central importance in the establishment of a (masculine) subjectivity devoid of consumer, productive, or use value. Alice Jardine, in a sense, is thus proven correct in her surmise that the disappearance from narrative of the “woman-in-effect” signals the problem of “survival” itself (25). The subject—defined generically as white and masculine—is indeed, as it turns out, rendered unthinkable when “there is no more ‘earth’ to press down/repress, to work, to represent, but also and always to desire (for one’s own)”; the “erection of the subject” is, in fact, “disconcerted [, it loses] its elevation and penetration” (Irigaray, *Speculum*, 133). Don Gately’s death(?) silently insists on the question, what now?