The Body of Writing
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AVA recounts the last day of Ava Klein, a thirty-nine-year-old professor of comparative literature, who is dying of a rare cancer. Thus, the recollection of her thoughts, as exemplified in this passage, is often interrupted by medical requests—"Turn over on your side" (8). Here, it is unclear whether a nurse or doctor utters this sentence while Ava thinks of her life; it could also be part of a scene that she remembers, just like she remembers someone beautiful. Or maybe someone used to tell her that she was beautiful. Perhaps one of her lovers would tell her, "There is scarcely a day that goes by that I do not think of you," or Ava may have told her lover so (8). The difficulty of attributing these sentences to a clear context is in line with the narrative's fragmented rendering of key themes that wander through the protagonist's mind—her miscarriage, the books she taught, her lovers and her three husbands, her family's experience of the Holocaust, her travels in Europe, and so forth—on August 15, 1990, the day of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. These thoughts are separated into three sections—morning, afternoon, and night—but the narration is made up of fragmented memo-
ries of Ava’s life, quotes, interviews, and letters that do not form a coherent whole.

According to Maso, what is important is that, in reading AVA, “there are things that are there that would be a common journey. The fact that it is a journey is one of those things; and that it is indeterminate, and simultaneously there seems to be a holding on and a letting go” (personal interview). While AVA may not construct a narrative that logically and linearly builds toward a resolution of the plot, the novel is set up so that each reader will participate in combining the fragments of Ava’s life, and so will go on a journey. Maso qualifies this journey as indeterminate because the text does not dictate a specific progression through the book. This is particularly apparent when AVA’s narrator quotes Rosemarie Waldrop on Edmond Jabès in Epoch: “Shifting voices and constant breaks of mode let silence have its share and allow for a fuller meditative field than is possible in linear narrative or analysis” (184). Therefore, the fragmentation and white breaks of the novel are meant to create an “indeterminate journey,” allowing the reader to meditate simultaneously the possibilities of life and of literature.

Like Ava’s first husband Francesco, Maso “make[s] no apologies for [her text’s] seemingly random format (it is not)” (152). Indeed, the text is not random; it is “seemingly random” in order to challenge our uses of language and narrative patterns. For example, comments on composition in the above excerpt—“forgetting any of the important parts. / How is this for a beginning?”—playfully interrupt the associative thought process of Ava (8). While these remarks may be part of Ava’s composition of her memories, they also figure at the beginning of the book, thereby commenting on its compositional strategies. Indeed, AVA self-consciously acknowledges the artifice of fiction writing by inviting the reader to ponder literary conventions and become “no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (S/Z 4). In presenting Ava’s situation this way, Maso disrupts linguistic and narrative structures and insists on the physicality of the page, which expresses the desires of an erotic body. This approach to writing has often been understood as the development of a feminist mode of storytelling.

Indeed, Maso’s novels use unconventional forms to tell the stories of women in relation to language, art, memory, sexuality, and gender. Ghost Dance (1986) deals with the struggles of Vanessa Turin, as she attempts to recover her family and her past. In The Art Lover (1990), Caroline, a novelist and poet, reflects on the relationship between life and art as she rediscovers New York City after a writing retreat. The novel combines reproductions of pictures and newspaper clippings, as they interrelate with
Caroline’s life, her characters’, as well as that of a friend diagnosed with AIDS. In *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat* (1994), Catherine, a bisexual writer, relates her experiences in France as she goes through various sexual encounters. *Auréole* (1996) is an erotic novel about an American woman coming to terms with her sexuality. *Defiance* (1998) focuses on physics professor Bernadette O’Brien, who is in prison after murdering two students. Awaiting execution, she writes her life story, interrelating her passion for mathematics with childhood stories, sexual fantasies, and reflections on death row. In *Beauty Is Convulsive: The Passion of Frida Kahlo* (2002), Maso investigates Kahlo’s mental and physical struggles. In her novels, Maso’s exploration of female characters through formal innovation relies on “an experience that exists as heat or light, friction, dissolution, as spirit, as body, as a world that overflows the covers of the book, and crosses into a kind of derangement, a kind of urgency, waywardness, need—a pulsing, living, strange thing” (*Rain Taxi*). Maso’s approach to language asks that we reconsider our relationship to words, as they become part of an embodied approach to language and knowledge.

Maso explores this embodied mode in the sonic associations of *AVA*. As Lucia Cordell Getsi notes, “There is something both gravitational and gestational in the way the phrases and lines of the novel—repeating in bits, repeating in wholes or parts, not repeating sometimes—go about their work, in the ways we communicate, which is not the way novels, even other experimental novels, even lyric novels, communicate.” The narrative repeats key phrases—“you are a rare bird,” “Samuel Beckett on a tree,” “We were working on an erotic song cycle.” These iterations create sonic associations, through the repetition, for example, of the name “Ana Julia” and through the linkage of the sound “[a]” found in other nouns in the same page, “Tia Dora,” “mama,” “Blanquita,” and “milagro” (39). Such thematic and sonic variations render bodily fluxes and rhythms, constructing refrains for “songs the blood sings” (59). Hence, the originality Getsi stresses in Maso’s work relies on the way it invites us to a physical engagement with *AVA*. According to Maso, *AVA* is a text concerned with “space, temporal and shape relations, tone and tempo. [Lyrical novels] are sensitive to tensions and pulls, resistances—gatherings and release” (*Break* 33). The reader’s response to such gatherings and releases is physical because, as Barbara Page proposes, “the rhythmic succession of passages induces a condition approaching trance” (Page par. 90). Page refers here to the ways in which Maso’s use of formal devices—repetitions, sonic variations, stress patterns, and fragmentation—does not attempt to represent Ava’s changing condition, but allows the reader to feel it.
This way of expressing Ava’s life renders what Barthes refers to as the “un-sayable” qualities of texts of jouissance. Such texts invite readers to rely on the materiality of language—not on representation—to explore linguistic bliss. For Barthes, blissful texts feature “a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web” (Pleasure 64). This unmaking of the subject is akin to Ava’s “interweaving” identity. Through her “hyphos” (“the tissue and the spider’s web”), Ava “unmakes” herself, and creates a fluid identity (64). Such unmaking occurs when Ava mentions events happening during the Holocaust. Because of the fragmentation and elusiveness of the novel, it may seem as though she confuses her life with those of other women who experienced extermination camps. Her memory of the camps goes back to her family history: Ava is the only child of Philip and Rachel Klein, survivors of Treblinka. Ava mentions that “They were left to the left,” and refers to “Piles of hair” (25, 245). She also recalls Sophie, Rachel’s sister, who was shot, “pleading in front of the great pit for her life”; the death of Sophie’s parents; and that of her homosexual brother Sol (72).

However, when Ava remembers details from her family’s life, she sometimes presents them as if she took part in them. For example, we read, “At the gas chamber, when I was chosen to work there as a barber, some of the women that came in on a transport were from my town” (111). At the end of the novel, Maso “attribute[s] the sources of [the] ‘irresistible music’” of Ava’s “passionate and promiscuous reading,” and she notes that this sentence is taken from Lanzmann’s Shoah. Yet, when we read it without referring to the “sources” page of the novel, we may identify the “I” with Ava (269). Because Maso’s “hope is that [the] notes, at some point, will enhance the reader’s pleasure but in no way interrupt the trance of the text,” we are invited, when we are in this “trance,” to make connections between the porous identities of the characters (269).

According to Barthes, such fluid identities engage “a ‘living contradiction’: a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys [. . .] the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall” (Pleasure 21). Ava embodies this “living contradiction,” as she both celebrates life while dying—repeating “I want to live” and “I am dying”—and takes pleasure in the fragmenting connec-

1. My theoretical choice may appear contradictory to Maso’s project here, as Maso claims to be influenced by Cixous, whom she also quotes throughout AVA. While I do not deny that Cixous’s work has affinities with the novel, I contend that Barthes provides comments on writing in relation to the “un-sayable” that are more useful than Cixous’s, and that allow us to reconsider the relationship between Maso’s and Cixous’s works. In addition, Barthes’s comments bear a resemblance to Maso’s goals in the novel, because in writing AVA, she tried to be “at the reach of the things that can’t really be said” (personal interview).
tions of her mind while her disease partly causes this fragmentation. There is a tension between Ava’s wish to rely on the consistency of her selfhood, to insist on her uniqueness, while also negating it when branching into other women’s lives and enjoying these disruptions of the cohesiveness of her life. For example, she mentions “Shiny hair on the pillow next to me: it was mine and not mine,” and states, “It is and is not my body” (61, 128). As Karen Lee Osborne points out, “Ava’s character is as multiple, fluid, and open-ended as the many separate moments she remembers or imagines.” This implies that while Ava constructs her memories and builds a rendition of her life, she at the same time destroys it. A similar unmaking of Ava occurs when Maso uses the pronoun “she” but does not clearly relate it to a specific person. In turn, “she” stands for Ava, her aunt, her mother, Virginia Woolf, and other influential female figures in Ava’s life, making it impossible to clearly identify who is performing the action. As Maso points out, this lack of centered identity applies directly to the reading experience of AVA.

Maso’s use of a permeable identity for her character interrelates with the fragmentation method, which forces the reader to wander, like Ava, in various contexts:

The attempt in AVA is that narrative motifs might produce a design of images. To interweave motifs through the text by use of recurrences, repetitions, etc., which often act contrapuntally and trigger through theme, rhythm, and other mysterious methods associations in the reader as well as the writer. Often it is the act itself, the association-making process rather than the subject, that is recognizable. (Break 38)

Maso insists on the “association-making process” that enables the depiction of a fluid identity and encourages readers to identify not with a centered character evolving in a specific context but with a more open identity. Here, her goal is close to McElroy’s in presenting a non-thetic subject. Thus, as the study of Plus and AVA reveals, an erotics of language relies on a discontinuous self.

In AVA, this erotic process occurs when the reader feels enmeshed in the weaving of the fragmented remembrance of Ava’s life. Through this immersion in the rhythms and textures of words, readers come closer to the textual medium, losing their sense of self (see figure 7). In the following passage, it is impossible to know whose “bellies” the narrator is talking about or where the scene takes place exactly—“Fourteenth Street” is mentioned earlier, but this is the only location mentioned. We are unable to rely on a conceptualization of what this moment was like and what happened, and we cannot
identify with specific characters. Instead, we focus on the words, their connections, and sounds: the association of the color red with “salsa” and “vermillion” and the play on “up” and “down” force us to concentrate on the sonorities and connotations of words, not just on what they refer to. What “and the word vermillion” really means remains unclear, but the italics call our attention to the way the word itself feels. This attention paid to the linguistic material of the text follows Ava’s “determin[ation] to reshape the world according to the dictates of desire—” (6).

These “dictates of desire” engage textual loss, rapture, discomfort, and shock. The novel does not satisfy the reader’s wish to follow a train of thought by reading a sentence until it ends, nor does it satisfy the reader’s wish to assemble elements of the protagonist’s life into a narration. Maso’s paratactic syntax relies not on customary narrative and grammatical continuity but on fragmentation and polysemy, which, for Ron Silliman, participate in the formation of a “new sentence.” According to him, “new sentences” are crafted so that their connection or independence remains unspecified. This unfixed mode of signification, or what he calls “torquing,” makes meaning relational and unstable because the disjointed fragments, while not subordinated to a larger frame or logic, affect and question each other. In other words, the arrangement of the “new sentence” is not random, and, as the following example shows, the locus of tension between sentences is meaningful:

| Yes, I am positive, he said, that day in the snow. Holding Italian magazines in the street. |
| For some time no one was sure whether or not the war had ended. |
| A pot au feu, in cold weather. By the fire. |
| Breathe. |
| Close up you are exactly like a statue. |
| The child draws the letter A. |
It is impossible to know whether the man in this passage is certain about something or whether he has contracted HIV (see figure 8). We can infer this reference to AIDS since the disease is mentioned earlier. Later on, we discover that Aldo’s lover, Andrew, has “tested positive for the AIDS virus” (200). Aldo’s answer to the question “Are you positive?” is “Yes, I am extremely positive. [. . . ] In fact, I’ve got the first signs—forgetfulness, night sweats” (99). The use of the adverb “extremely” seems to exclude a reference to AIDS, as “extremely positive” is a commonplace collocation. However, Aldo’s allusion to “forgetfulness” and “night sweats” reveals that “extremely” means “terminally” in this case. The delayed inference contributes to the sense of blur the text induces. On page 44, before we can clarify the statement “Yes, I am positive,” we move on to a sentence about the war, and because Ava has mentioned the Gulf War and the Second World War, we are unsure about the context of this statement.

Nevertheless, semantic connections lead us toward a cohesive reading of this passage. “Positive” and “sure” connect semantically. Also, “feu” echoes “fire” in “A pot au feu, in cold weather. By the fire.” These sentences may relate to the first statement in this passage since snow was mentioned, but it is not certain, especially since the “pot au feu,” a traditional French dish, may be associated with Ava’s life in France, which does not logically correlate to the “Italian magazines.” As a result, these clues are only partial, so that it is impossible to draw conclusions from them: one could eat a “pot au feu” or read “Italian magazines” in any country. “Breathe” interrupts the recollection of the fire snapshot, and the next thought, “close up you are exactly like a statue,” describes an unknown character, or it may be a sentence Ava heard about herself. The connection to the child’s activity is left unclear. Hence, the text does not follow an apparent and logical pattern to present Ava’s life; instead it roots our reading in a lack of information and transition. We thus realize that the semantic connections we initially expected to lead us to comprehend the story of Ava only participate in the weaving textures of Maso’s fiction. The organization of information requires that we “fill in the blanks” (43).

The novel’s use of references and direct citations from Lorca, Eliot, Beckett, Boltanski, Goethe, Danto, Woolf, Celan, Blake, Stevens, Sappho, Nin, Wittig, Cixous, O’Hara, Dickinson, Hesse, and others accentuates such blank-filling activity and creates connections between Ava’s life and that of prominent writers. While blurring Ava’s words with those of other writers, Maso also introduces a rupture between these works and hers, thus displacing, subverting, and playing with her references. In doing so, she “reconstruct[s] [. . . , ] critique[s], create[s] a ‘surplus’” (Moraru 21). For
Christian Moraru, “Textual production through ‘inserts,’ intertextual ‘graftings,’ and retellings ironically [...] activates [...] cultural appropriation and reincorporation” (132). In AVA, such “reincorporation” occurs at multiple levels of interpretation: the quotes might be attributed to Ava’s memories of her comparative literature readings; they are also what constructs the remembrance of her life now that her body and consciousness are breaking down. In some ways, they also “reincorporate” Ava’s body, while also comprising the body of the text. As we shall see, this double construction allows readers to focus not only on Ava’s life but also on the interstices between her sentences and other writers’, just as one focuses on a “body where the garment gapes?” (Pleasure 9).

For Barthes, this mode of reading plays with our desire but does not satisfy it, and this leads to jouissance. Hence, our ecstatic state relies not on the fulfillment of our wish to understand Ava’s life but on a lack or loss; it is always fleeting, displaced, empty, and unpredictable (Pleasure 21). In other words, while it may be tempting, at first, to try and reach a cohesive interpretation of the fragmentary novel, we soon realize that this temptation is more important than is the goal of interpreting AVA holistically. As R. M. Berry notes, the fragmented text may seem inaccessible because it may be holistic in Ava’s mind only. On the other hand, we may associate our reading with a puzzle-solving activity, which implies that we have the ability to make sense of the story. Yet, the power of the novel may actually lie in the fact that the fragments cannot be connected in our mind or in Ava’s:

If we say the fragments are connected by or in Ava’s consciousness, we will be interpreting what connects them, not describing it, and saying that they are not connected, that the reader must connect them, only confuses the issue: first, by suggesting that the reader could just do this, as if we knew some way of connecting the fragments of AVA that did not raise the same problems as AVA itself, and second, by suggesting that the reader could not do it, that we knew some way of reading AVA without connecting its fragments. [...] [I]f in order to be complete reading must presuppose a finality impossible of rearrangement, then the reader’s plight is as hopeless as Ava’s. (Berry 124)

Berry exposes the paradoxical situation that Maso’s use of fragments provokes. In underlying the “finality impossible of rearrangement,” he evokes Barthes’s definition of perverse texts, which “are outside of any imaginable finality” (Pleasure 52). However, Berry associates AVA’s finality with
the hopeless situation of its protagonist, and concludes, “no single life will exhaust life; no text will comprehend the meaningful” (124). On the contrary, for Barthes, “flirtatious texts” such as AVA constitute a perverse revealing of information, which leads to an erotic satisfaction (Pleasure 6). While I do not disagree with Berry’s assessment, I contend that there is not only hopelessness but also pleasure coming from the “perverse” organization of AVA.

In Maso’s novel, this organization plays with our desire for direct access to Ava’s life. Momentary dissolutions of meaning require that, instead of assembling moments of her life in order to achieve a larger and more complete story, we focus on bits of life, unfinished stories, elusive leads, and silence. In that sense, the fragmentation of the text comes between our wish for a direct approach to Ava’s story, and, in playing with our wishes, it disperses our desire in another direction—the material medium of the novel. The dissemination of meaning enables the reader to approach the text differently, without focusing on its meaning only, since the latter has obliterated into multiple contexts. Instead, the reader can enjoy a perverse reading, one that plays with the content and medium of the text. The perverse reader usurps the communicative goal of his or her reading and takes pleasure in his or her playful approach to the text.

For Barthes, this mode of reading brings text and body closer: “Does the text have human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body” (Pleasure 17). Barthes’s use of the concept of the anagram implies that, in order to be legible, a text needs a material support or a discursive body. He adds, “the text itself, a diagrammatic and not an imitative structure, can reveal itself in the form of a body, split into fetish objects, into erotic sites” (Pleasure 56). However, just as the everyday uses of our bodies are not erotic, our basic uses of language for daily communication are not blissful. Thus, Barthes insists on associating the erotic qualities of the body with textuality because bodily pleasures associated with physiological needs relate to pornography more than eroticism. What writings of the “inter-dit” explore erotically is not the representation of intercourse but the inexpressibility of bodily passions. Consequently, both the erotic text and the erotic body are bliss materials because they play with desire: they do not represent it or imitate it, but they show it through figuration.

According to Barthes, figuration relies on a linguistic excess that allows the reader to “lea[p] out of the frame” of the story (Pleasure 57). The text, as it avoids representation, which Barthes qualifies as an “embarrassed figuration, encumbered with other meanings than that of desire: a space of alibis,” can access the figuration of Eros (Pleasure 56). In describing and
dissecting the object of desire, representation lacks the fleeting qualities of jouissance. On the other hand, the erotic body and the texts of the “interdit” express these qualities through excess. In other words, the erotic body/text does not tell its blissful experiences, nor does it imitate its desire for it. Instead, it plays with it.\(^2\) In Barthes’s work, playful uses of language rely on the paradoxical role of figuration, which both “figures” and “de-figures.” In revealing the inexpressible, figuration relies on an intermittence of appearance and disappearance; it reveals as much as it obscures.

Barthes clarifies this intermittence in his writing on photography. His use of the photographic media is no incident, as the concept of overexposure relates to the figuration process: when a photograph is overexposed, although it becomes white, it does not represent a void but bears the mark of the light it has caught. This revealing and concealing dynamic in photography illuminates the (de)figuration process in language. Both the literary and photographic media can reveal and obscure through figuration: images are created “thanks to figuration,” but what comes through it, traverses it, is also part of the figuration process. For Barthes, this figuration process takes the reader and the viewer outside the frame of the artwork:

Pornography ordinarily represents the sexual organs, making them into a motionless object [...]. The erotic photograph, on the contrary (and it is its very condition), does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it may very well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me. (Camera 58–59)

According to Barthes, this animation is possible because his experience of the visual is tactile.

Rather than insisting on the distance between the photograph and himself, Barthes proposes to focus on embodied methods of interpretation. To develop this tactile method for reading photography, Barthes relies on the concept of punctum. The punctum is the detail or portion of a photograph that “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces” the viewer (26). The punctum catches the viewer’s attention by accident and “pricks” and “bruises” him or her (43). Barthes’s use of metaphors reveals that the punctum is tactile and induces movement. In that sense, it triggers a

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2. This excess in Barthes’s model resembles Kristeva’s Semiotic. Barthes’s and Kristeva’s works on the sensual uses of language are close, but here Barthes insists on the playful uses of linguistic processes, which can be compared to sexual foreplay, while Kristeva locates the sexual origins of the Semiotic in repressed libidinal drives.
deep corporeal connection with the photographic material. This fusion with the artistic medium allows an erotic approach to art.

In Maso’s text, the punctum lies in the reader’s escape from the representational mode to engage in linguistic foreplay. In other words, the reader does not focus strictly on the message the text conveys but focuses also on the textual material of AVA. He or she comes close to the page of the text, its white space and its plays with the meanings and connotations of words. In that sense, “AVA does not demand interpretation. It demands engagement and enactment and a spiraling up out of the deep shaft of associations into the spacious white markers that weave their silence through syntagmatic canvas and wait for the reader to chime in with a resonance from the well of the paradigmatic, the core (heart) of the self” (Getsi). Thus, the text does not simply deliver a message but absorbs the reader through linguistic excess. Maso explains how her project employs a physical language that calls for such engagement from the reader:

I have tried to get closer to an erotic language, a language that might function more bodily, more physically, more passionately. Enjambment, flux, fragmentation, the elision of the object, the detached clause, the use of arpeggios, a changing of dynamics, dangling participles, various aphasias—the unfinished sentence, or the melting of one sentence into another, the melting of corporeal boundaries, the dissolving of subjective cohesion—these are some of the strategies I have attempted. […] For the most part they were done intuitively as I tried to surrender and enter a sexual reverie on the level of language. (Break 118)

In experimenting with forms, Maso brings her text closer to the workings of an erotic body, one that dissolves and melts with another, and one that longs in desire through “elisions,” detachment, changes, and surprises. Her goal is close to McElroy’s in Plus, as Imp Plus and Ava both take pleasure in the linguistic medium they utilize to express themselves. While both characters use language in an unusual way to express parts of their lives that are unsayable, the causes for such sensual linguistic issues are quite different: Plus relies on the science fiction premise that the brain is detached from its body and grows new limbs through memories, and Ava is remembering her life on her deathbed. However, in both works, the fragments of one’s life and the erotic drives that penetrate language change the narrative and linguistic structures of the novels. Let us consider such instances in AVA (see figure 9). AVA is full of surprises, mixing the poetic mood of the earth’s “blue blanket” with the conversational “Zinnias are always nice” (251). Such
surprises play with our interpretive process and our desire to make sense of the text.

The white space that separates the lines teases us in another way: the rhythms that the white spaces mark are like “orgasm, [ . . . ] like a little death, an escape from ordinary time” (Osborne). In the above passage, each break in the text creates a rhythm of silence that, like orgasm, “disrupts time and disconnects us from words and being” (Osborne). We thus approach “the zone of speechlessness one sometimes enters during sex, the field of silence, the tug of it, the language voids and vacuums, the weird filling in with words” (Break 118). It is through this orgasmic connection to the silence of the text that we come close to Ava in her dying state. Therefore, while one may interpret Ava’s death as a lack of life, in her acceptance of her own disappearance, she exposes the power of the seemingly empty sections of life and writing.

Maso’s use of white spaces expands onto the ostensibly vacant parts of the page. In her insistence on the physicality of the page, Maso exposes a dimension of fiction different from McElroy’s work. Indeed, she invites us to extend our sensual relationships to texts in our engagement with both language and textual materiality. In her novel, textual materiality tackles the issue of inexpressibility, as the white spaces avoid representation (i.e., the moment “when nothing emerges, when nothing leaps out of the frame: of the picture, the book, the screen”) (Barthes Pleasure 57). Maso tackles this “leap out of the frame” in her novel:

You feel at the altar of the un-sayable. [ . . . ] For me, AVA is the book that gets closest to that, because it’s all about the things that I can’t really say

and that I don’t know how to say and that only are said in the ways that
the lines relate to one another. They can be said straightforwardly by read-
ing the thing in whatever way you read it. And for me, in writing it, I could
not write it in any other way. So that kind of reach seemed to me the most
important thing. (personal interview)

In AVA, this “reach” toward the “un-sayable” takes place not only in lan-
guage but also in the use of white space that separates the lines of the text. In
other words, Maso explores the “un-sayable” by allowing the lines to relate
openly so that the un-written text carries, perhaps, the most important text
of the novel. This implies not that the lines themselves are unimportant, but
that their exploration of the “un-sayable” lies in their ability to connect.

Thus, AVA gives access to the “un-sayable” and the “inter-dit” because
it is an in-between text that undertakes the paradox of expressing the inex-
pressible. With the phrase “inter-dit,” Barthes plays on the words “interdit”
(forbidden) and “inter-dit” (said between). The mode of the “inter-dit” is
between two forms of expression: silence and language. This mode is for-
bidden because of its hybrid nature, which implicitly disrupts the accepted
binary structure expressivity relies on. The fleeting aspect of the linguistic
bliss paradoxically relies on a language that materializes experiences and
thoughts that only exist in a displaced and differed mode. Hence, the text
of jouissance is in-between; it relies on the “sayable” through its use of lan-
guage, and challenges the expressibility of language, as it ventures to use
language to convey the “un-sayable.”

Conversely, in trying to represent the unrepresentable, Maso does not
aim at transcendence outside the text, nor is she expressing a mere void.
In AVA, the “un-sayable” manifests, not as a lack of communication, but
instead as an excess of communication. Hence, Maso etches out a narrat-
ive that ruptures closure in its exploration of the “inter-dit” so that her
text “allows the possibility for the most abstract of reflections: The limits
of language” (Berlin). Consider this reflection in the following passage (see
figure 10). The text does not clarify what was meant to be said. The shift
from the restaurant scene to the theme of pregnancy, which introduces a
poetic collage of fertile and fruitful tropes, expresses the “un-sayable” situ-
tion of Ava on her deathbed. She is dying, and the fractured and associativ-
ate mode of recollections attempt to enact her need to stretch out time and hold
on to life. Such moments lead to an “intermittence” that activates an erotic
mechanism. In fragmenting the lines and using the white material of the
text, Maso gives presence to an un-written narrative. In this sense, her text,
as an “inter-dit,” should literally be read between the lines. She explores the
“intermittence,” the in-between material, but does not express “un-sayable” emotions, avoiding representation. Thus, the text exists as much in the lines of words as in the visible seams that enable torquing. As Silliman notes, sentences such as Maso’s “revea[l] that the blank space, between words or sentences, is much more than the 27th letter of the alphabet. [The new sentence] is beginning to explore and articulate just what those hidden capacities might be” (92). This revelation of white expanses reclaims the space that would normally express a break in or the end of a text. Instead of symbolizing such interruption or closure, white spaces introduce a new hierarchy between the materials and frames of fiction: they become “a force, against which the whole must be recovered, or against which the whole can be fractured, dissolved, let go” (Drucker Figuring 140). However, this white force does not negate or alienate the power of words: Maso’s goal is not to destroy narration.

Indeed, Maso explains, “I feel slightly perplexed I must say when I hear AVA is not narrative. I think it just redefines narrative, reformulates it” (Rain Taxi). Because death is the focus and motif of AVA, the question of closure becomes important on a thematic and formal level. In other words, Ava’s struggle to live mirrors the form of the novel, which constantly skirts closure. This evasion elicits a reconsideration of fragmentation and white spaces. In the novel, we read: “Artist’s statement: I certainly admire many narrative and documentary films, but instead of re-creating or reproducing a familiar world it’s been more exciting to collect an odd assortment of images, both scripted and shot from real life” (224). While this statement expresses an opinion about films and narratives, it relates directly to AVA, whose narration also “collects[s] an odd assortment of images, both scripted and shot from real life.” For Maso, this collage technique allows a reformu-
A certain pulsing

lation of narrative conventions and enables her to explore the in-between-ness of narratives—the link between silence and words.

Ava herself explores this connection: “Sing me a wordless song,” she commands (151). She reassures Francesco, “Much is expressed in the interval. Do not worry so much about our silences when they come. I hear you even then,” and states that she “can usually hear where the line is breaking” (248, 136). Her phrasing is paradoxical, since the break of the line is a moment of silence. Hence, in insisting on the paradox of this aural activity, Ava implies that there is more to the silence of the white spaces than just emptiness. A paragraph on Sarraute confirms this interpretation: “the genuine response to art is on an immediate and personal level. It is essentially a wordless conversation between the author and the reader” (61). This statement comments on the “wordless” material of *AVA*. Through the constant disjuncture of thoughts pointing to the white spaces that separate them, the novel calls attention to the discrepancy between words and meaning, and alludes to the “un-sayable” qualities of the text. Indeed, as Robin Silbergleid points out, “Maso’s book is [. . . ] fundamentally about those spaces between, about the relationship between the said and the unsaid, the author and the reader, the pleasure, and the weight of silence” (3).

In drawing attention to the disjunction between syntactical units, the white spaces thus become indices of their material cause, which is to say the page. In that sense, Maso’s use of white spaces in *AVA* compares to the use of white canvas in visual arts, which visual art critics—Barthes, Didi-Huberman, J. M. Bernstein, J. T. Clark, W. J. T. Mitchell, Drucker, and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe—have explored. Visual art critics refer to the part of an artwork that is left blank, that appears in painting, underneath the paint, as reserve. The reserve is particularly important in impressionist or contemporary paintings, as in Cézanne’s or Pollock’s work, where the canvas is not a surface to be merely covered with paint but becomes part of the composition of the painting. In *AVA*, the white spaces, much like a painting’s reserve, are not meant to be covered by words. Instead, they are part of the composition of Ava’s life. The term “reserve” further qualifies the white spaces’ role in the novel, as the word denotes “reticence” and “shyness,” as well as “storage.” The polysemy of the concept of reserve applies to the ways in which Maso uses white spaces because instead of arresting the text, they reveal the materiality of the book, which is usually “stored” by traditional reading techniques. In that sense, the white reserve allows us to reconsider the materiality of writing.3 More specifi-

3. For a detailed study of the relationship between reserve and writing, see Marc
cally, this attention to textual materiality relates to the *pan* in the images Didi-Huberman studies.

Both the *pan* and the white spaces exceed representation. In Vermeer’s *The Lacemaker*, a flow of red paint escapes from the sewing box as a wild tangle of red thread, which “creates a burst of color in the foreground of the work” (251). For Didi-Huberman, the “*pan* of red paint [in Vermeer’s *Lacemaker*] unsettles, even tyrannizes, the representation. For it is imbued, this *pan*, with a singular capacity for expansion and diffusion: it infects, we might even say affects [...] the entire picture” (256). When we see the red stain, we are forced to stop focusing on the scene Vermeer painted because the *pan* of color does not represent anything and does not add an element that fits with the rest of the scene. Instead, it calls attention to its materiality—the color and the grain of the paint. Modernist painters have foregrounded such use of color and grain, the “paint-stuff (pigment),” which in the works of Soutine, for example, reveals that “in art the medium is not a neutral vehicle for the expression of an otherwise immaterial meaning, but rather the very condition for sense-making” (Bernstein 75).

Because this use of paint, like the white space in *AVA*, is not representational, it calls attention to itself as a nondecodable trace. The *pan* and the white space in *AVA* do not “fit” with the represented entities, but they refer to their medium and identify the paradox of their existence. Thus, the “*pan* [... ] imposes itself, in the picture, like an accident of representation—of representation delivered up to the risk of the material paint. It is in this sense that the ‘*pan*’ of paint imposes itself in the picture, simultaneously as accident of representation (Vorstellung) and sovereignty of presentation (Darstellung)” (Didi-Huberman 259–260). As T. J. Clark points out, in Modernist works, such as Cézanne’s, the application of paint that does not fit traditional representational methods, as in the *pan*, “gives glimpses of alternative systems of representation” that “are less interesting in their own right [...] than as repoussoir for the system they still belong to. They are what makes that system visible as such” (165). Hence, these “alternative systems of representation” work against traditional modes of representation: they show their limits and inadequacies. Yet, these nontraditional painting methods also reveal what traditional modes of painting are in the first place: they expose what we took for granted in representational painting. Thus, as W. J. T. Mitchell proposes, instead of concentrating on representation or its negation, it might be more suitable to consider representation as “a multidimensional and heterogeneous terrain, a collage or patchwork quilt

Chénetier’s *Sgraffites, encres & sanguines.*
torn, folded, wrinkled, covered with accidental stains, traces of the bodies it has enfolded" (419). Considering representation this way “would make materially visible the structure of representation as a trace of temporality and exchange, the fragment as mementos, as ‘presents’ re-presented in the ongoing process of assemblage, of stitching in and tearing out” (419). This quilt-like understanding of representation implies that representation is not as much an object as it is “a kind of activity, process, or set of relationships” (420). This conception reveals that “What lies ‘beyond’ representation would thus be found ‘within’ it [. . .] or along its margins” (419). Mitchell’s views are illuminating in the context of Maso’s work because they immerse the traces of materiality and bodies in our relationship to artistic representation.

In this context, in Maso’s “most unusual book,” the white spaces surprise us, as they are not accustomed to fracture lines of prose, but they allow us to find what is “beyond” “within” the novel: white spaces reveal that they constitute, physically, the book that we read, even though we are used to taking the physical page for granted when we focus on the message of novels (AVA 70). Such an interest in what we have taken for granted in prose-writing relates to Maso’s wish to explore “everything that’s been kept out” of literature, “past and present,” echoed in Ava’s request “Don’t leave anything out” (Break 191; AVA 262). The white space, while part of every printed material, has been “kept out” of literature in the form in which Maso uses it. As we will observe in chapter four and chapter five, Cha and Tomasula also explore what has been “kept out of literature” in their uses of textual materiality.

In Maso’s work, the material of the page calls attention to the paradox at work in the relation between Ava’s story and its absence. We accept the white spaces, as we realize that they are the material of the book, but at the same time, we tend to refuse their intrusion since they “resist ‘inclusion’” in the representation of Ava and “resist identification or closure”: they “represent much less than [they] self-present” (Didi-Huberman 268, 271). Because they point out their self-presentation, the white spaces threaten to disintegrate the story. This threat requires that we consider the medium the artist uses and its mode of representation. That is why Didi-Huberman concludes that the *pan* is a “not-yet [. . .] a ‘quasi’-existence of the figure” (269). But this is where the *pan* and the white spaces differ: in AVA, the spaces between words are not pre-word materials, which would imply that they lack something.

A misconception of white space as pre-language often leads readers of Maso’s “intricate and unusual production” to interpret them as a denun-
ciation of the powerlessness of linguistic structures (AVA 139). The silence associated with the white spaces seems to materialize something missing because “silence does not have a grammatical form—we cannot diagram a moment of silence” (Berlin). That is why Monica Berlin claims that the white spaces represent “the healing of silence”: “The textual spacing in AVA, as well as the character’s own attraction toward quiet, implies that muting allows for empowerment of the self and that silence is more true than meaning produced in language.” Berlin’s insistence on the opposition between language and textual spacing implies that the white spaces are simply a void that directs us back to the lack of power of language. Karen Lee Osborne proposes a comparable interpretation of white spaces, for “The novel’s silences evoke its hesitation, its syncopated distrust of words even as it limps toward them.” This understanding of the novel relies on an opposition between the “expressive” words and the white spaces between them, which Osborne interprets as a lack of expressivity. Nicole Cooley compares the white space between lines to cuts between film sequences, a concept that leads her to focus on “the interstices where something appears to be missing,” implying that “the reader must fill the interval of silence.” While I do not disagree that Ava’s fragmented thoughts can relate to cross-cutting montage in film, I do not concur with Cooley’s, Berlin’s, and Osborne’s analyses of the white space as something “missing,” but instead, as I shall argue in this chapter, see it as a figuration of the textual body.

Although the qualities of silence are difficult to grasp, Maso’s exploration of white space should not be mistaken for the indication of a lack. Rather, as Berry points out, what is important is the presence of this seeming disappearance of the text on the page, which is not emptiness. According to Berry, the white spaces reveal the “autonomy, this material subsistence [that] threatens to make every page immaterial, as negligible as earth underfoot” (125). He suggests that the white spaces in AVA are not used primarily as the “spatial equivalent of a break in speech, a breath stop or syntactic division,” as they are used in modern poetry (117). It is important to note that, while Maso’s use of the white page is not comparable to line breaks in modern poetry, it shares affinities with poetic visual experiments, originally put forth by Stéphane Mallarmé in “Un coup de dés.” Unlike Maso, Mallarmé uses not only the space of the page but also the arrangement of letters and typefaces to emulate the movement of the dice. However, the outcome of Mallarmé’s spatial and visual manipulation comes close to the effect of Maso’s white spaces. In both texts, the page is not merely an illustration of the text or the materialization of a syntactic pause. Instead, the reading of such pages relies on “a figural, visual, mode” that comes from “the effect of
language arranged to make a form independent of the grammatical order of the words” (Drucker The Visible 59). As Drucker notes, “figuration belongs properly to the presentational rather than to the representational” (The Visible 59). This implies that, like in Mallarmé’s work, Maso’s white spaces do not represent “an already extant idea” but “bring something into being in its making” (The Visible 59).

Maso’s exploration of “the presentational” and of “the representational” shares a common interest (the exploration of the page as a material object that has to be seen) with other postmodern books such as Federman’s Take It or Leave It and David Markson’s Wittgenstein’s Mistress, where they foreground the character’s speech, or materialize a battle between silence and speech (Berry 117–23). These novels look like AVA in their separation of prose by white space, but these white spaces are dependent upon the narrative: they express the character’s and the narrator’s voice. Even in novels, such as Percival Everett’s Walk Me to the Distance, where line breaks do not resemble those in AVA but present a progressive appropriation of words by white pages, the white space is still symbolic of an extant idea. In Everett’s work, at first, the chapters are very close together, with no page breaks between them. As characters evolve—David Larson adjusts to his new life after serving in the Vietnam War—the white separations between chapters become larger, and toward the end, the chapters are shorter. The book ends with four white pages that make the experience of reading comparable to “the becoming at home and of the western landscape, of adjusting to that wide open sense, of moving from the congestion of having just returned from Vietnam” (Everett, personal interview). Like in Federman’s and Markson’s work, Everett’s page strikes us as present, but unlike Maso’s novel, Walk Me to the Distance uses the page to express its linguistic content.

In AVA, we realize that the blank page is not an expression of linguistic codes, nor is it just the condition of writing. “The spaces between words. Between thoughts. The interval” are re-viewed so that they become part of the figural aspect of the text (AVA 171). Whiteness, in that sense, is a positive space, discernible from nothingness. As Gilbert-Rolfe indicates, while blankness used to be “a condition that [could] only point to a beginning or an end,” “the late twentieth century has available to it the possibility of blankness as an activity, something happening now” (163). He adds that blankness is “neither the absence of expression nor a particular expression, but the possibility of expression in the sense of a presentation of the conditions of expression. This is one sense in which blankness is more easily described as an excess than as an absence in the contemporary situation”
Gilbert-Rolfe’s and Berry’s studies remind us that the white spaces in AVA are not merely places meant for words to whisk across and down the page, nor are they expressing or representing something. They call attention to the possibility of any writing, so that blankness “has become signally characteristic of the surface of all the signs which exclude it with recognizability and narrative, that is, which seek to subsume it within form and formality, shape and protocol, urge and economy” (Gilbert-Rolfe 175). Here, Gilbert-Rolfe suggests that the twentieth century’s use of blankness in visual arts has made visible the white surface that was taken for granted before.

Susan Howe’s writing on the question of white space and materiality in painting and literature is useful here. Inspired by minimalist painters, Howe writes about Ad Reinhart’s black paintings, Malevich’s white on white works, and Rodchenko’s black on black paintings in relation to Ian Hamilton Finlay’s concrete poems. For her, the unsaid page and the unpainted canvas are as expressive as words and paint; the painter’s and writer’s task is to allow whiteness to become part of art. The artists she studies reveal that “to search for infinity inside simplicity will be to find simplicity alive with messages” (“The End of Art” 7). Howe associates the simplicity of minimalist paintings and poems with images of “infinity”: the sea, “the silent voice,” the nothingness that precedes art (“The End of Art” 8). Maso’s use of white space differs from Howe’s interest in nothingness, as in AVA the white space does not express a silence or a void in opposition to the expressive words on it. However, Howe’s consideration of the physical immediacy of the white expanses in poetry and painting as primordial to our relationship to art is useful to reading Maso’s work: Howe explains that our considerations of the meaningful and meaningless are often erroneous. In The Birth-Mark, she focuses on Thomas Shepard’s manuscripts and their eighty-six blank pages followed by “another narrative by the same author” written upside down from the other text (58). Editors have included parts of the second text as “notes,” but excluded the blank pages from the book, which Howe considers a misreading of the white space of Shepard’s work. Howe also indicates that Dickinson’s irregular spacing, also omitted from Dickinson’s published work, is part of the meaning of her text. As Walter Benn Michaels points out, Howe’s commitment to the white page asks important questions about reading and writing: “What do you have to think reading is to think that when you run your eyes over blank pages you are reading them? Or what do you have to think a text is to think that pages without writing are part of it?” (1). If we agree with Howe’s claim that the white expanses of a text are to be read, then whiteness is intrinsic to any reading process, and Maso’s text makes this realization part of the experience of her text. In AVA, the
white spaces invite us to become aware of the surface of the text, that which made it possible:

A page is not a surface onto which a preexisting entity, such as a novel, has been laid, nor is it an agglomeration of particles. A page is the presence of a novel before my presence to it, after its presence to me. This very autonomy, this material subsistence, threatens to make every page immaterial, as negligible as earth underfoot. Maso makes hers matter again, uncovers her page’s presence, by making its space our means, almost our only means, of telling Ava’s life from an agglomeration. (Berry 125)

Like Berry, I insist that the white spaces call attention to the materiality of the novel, and to some extent, comment metafictionally on the nature of writing. Building on his demonstration, I wish to clarify the implications of our recognition of the “material subsistence” of the page. As I hope to show, our acknowledgment of textual materiality calls for a physical engagement with writing, which triggers a reexamination of the importance of the body in reading methodologies. In AVA, Maso’s use of textual materiality calls for an engagement of the erotic body. This engagement is constitutive of a relationship with the text that does not exist merely as an oppositional discourse. While AVA evidently proposes a mode of writing and reading that subverts patriarchal models, framing the novel strictly in a resistant aesthetic would leave aside the positive creation that comes out of AVA’s transformative reading practices.

Indeed, this transformation comes from the breathed white expansions escaping from Ava’s body. As Maso explains, in writing AVA, “this is what literature became for me: music, love, and the body. I cannot keep the body out of my writing; it enters language, transforms the page, imposes its own intelligence. If I have succeeded at all you will hear me breathing” (Break 70). In characterizing her text as a trembling and shuddering one and in exposing its breathing qualities, Maso places our reading in a bodily and erotic realm. This body “trembles and shudders” through the fragments of Ava’s life, making AVA “a living text. One that trembles and shudders. One that yearns. It is filled with ephemeral thoughts, incomplete gestures, revisions, recurrences, and repetitions—precious, disappearing things” (Break 64). The white spaces that bring to life the trembling body are akin to the intermittence of the erotic body that flashes skin, revealing the “the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance” (Pleasure 10). Our relationship to this “appearance-as-disappearance” does not rely on a striptease-like relationship to the body/text: we are not longing for the naked body, nor are we
longing for a total understanding of the thoughts that Ava may be trying to express. Instead, as the text unveils itself as an erotic body, we long for the physical page in our hands.

Barthes compares the unveiling of body and text because both become erotic, not in their nudity or graphic representation of sexuality, but in the cracks, the showing of the skin between clothes, the in-between-ness, and the contrasting texture of the different surfaces: “Is not the most erotic position of a body where the garment gapes? [. . . ] [I]t is intermittence [. . . ] which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing [. . . ]; it is this flash itself which seduces” (Pleasure 9–10). The white spaces compare to this erotic body because, in itself, the page is not an object of desire, just as the naked body is not an object of desire. Yet, when the body goes beyond its daily functions, it acquires an erotic force. The veiling of the body/text triggers perversity because it invites us to focus on its materiality instead of its functions. In AVA, the white spaces become ecstatic because they evade their traditional role: the page, the textual support, gains significance. It is not a mere substance that carries a linguistic message. Instead, it becomes meaningful because the way Maso conveys and organizes information is part of the message of the novel. Maso uses white space to question the role and power of the page as it functions in relation to representation, while at the same time frustrating any attempt to categorize such representation in conventional ways. Thus, she enables us to recognize that texts are more than successions of words and spaces. Like Ava, we “fee[l] form—finally. / A more spacious form. After all this time. / Breathe” (212). Our reading becomes a progressive unveiling of the white pages, discovering “the seduction that is, that has always been language” (227). Because the seduction of the page forces us to go beyond traditional representational techniques and to engage with the material of the book, AVA demands that we adopt embodied reading techniques. Such techniques allow us to come closer to the materiality of the text and discover what is not “visible” to us in other texts: the page.

Hence, while at first it appears that we long for the unified and straightforward story of Ava and interpret the white space as a distraction from our goal, we learn to reexamine the role of the materiality of texts as we keep reading, or “the interaction of physical characteristics [of a text] with its signifying strategies” (Hayles 103). In recognizing what we had suppressed from our reading—that is, the active role of the physical characteristics in the signification of a text—we realize that our desire was in fact for the veiling and unveiling of the white page. In ordinary texts, the page is only desirable as a site of something else, but in reading AVA, we acknowledge the
material support of meaning as central to our reading experience. However, the erotic site of the page does not negate the significance of language. The interdependence of language and silence makes us aware of the page as a medium, hence of the words as medium of this page as well. Maso discloses what has been repressed in novels through her veiling and unveiling of the page and language, the alternation of which creates reading methods akin to sexual foreplay. Because she emphasizes the process and constructed-ness of the medium she is using, she refashions it, while inviting the reader to engage erotically with it.

This engagement with the text enables healing and separation, to use Cixous’s word. Indeed, in the novel, Ava repeatedly recalls Cixous’s wish “to create a language that heals as much as it separates” (52). Cixous calls for an embrace of both poles in écriture féminine. For her, women should attain this paradoxical locus in bodily writing. AVA is an example of such bodily writing, not only through its treatment of language but through its use of white space. As Silbergleid suggests, this paradoxical mode of writing relies on Maso’s use of white spaces: “While Maso’s textual silences appear to condone separation—her fragments literally broken by white space on the page—these textual blanks also enable Maso to move toward a language that heals in AVA, a language that brings together and repairs” (18). Thus, the white spaces stand in-between and express the goal Cixous gives to language. What Maso reveals is that such healing and separateness lie not only in language, as Cixous implies, but also in the material structures of literature that have become unconscious to us. For her, such unconscious structures also rely on the repression of the body from texts. In that sense, she remains indebted to Cixous, as both writers believe that women’s empowerment lies in the exploration of writing, and more precisely in the interrelation of such writing with the body. However, Maso adds the misrecognized power of the materiality of books to Cixous’s emphasis on language’s ability to affect women’s representations of their body.

This emphasis on materiality is important because it clarifies the writing and reading method Cixous calls for in “The Laugh of the Medusa” and “Sorties,” where her description of a bodily text remains abstract. In shifting the focus from a linguistic exploration to a linguistic and material exploration, Maso allows us to experience a bodily text. Such a text requires that we engage in the textual medium, which allows us to practice the feminist bodily methodology Cixous and Maso rely on. In that sense, the attention Maso gives to textual materiality requires new reading and interpretive methods that recognize texts as more than sequences of words and spaces, and readers as physical and intellectual entities. In going beyond
Cixous’s claim about *écriture féminine*, Maso proves that it is necessary to reconceptualize our interpretive tools to take the role of the body in relation to materiality more fully into account. As we shall see in the next chapters, visual materiality calls for a haptic relationship with texts, thereby enabling an erotic fusion of reader and text. This tactile approach to reading is a pleasurable, affirmative production that exists not merely as a subversion of traditional reading methods—though it is also that—but as a powerful positive production of its own.
Some will not know age. No age. Time stops. Time will stop for some. For them especially. Eternal Time. No age.

Standing before hallowed beauty. The beauty because of the loss, the absence, the matter object persists the less, the missing. Beauty left to the imagination. Evoke not the their countenance. Evoke not the beauty, the beauty. Hinted beauty from the inevitable, the dying, the death, the not death.

Standing before hallowed beauty. The beauty. Evoke not because.

Standing face to face with the memory memory. It misses. It’s missing. Still. What is time. No not more. Remains there. Missing nothing. Time, that is. All else. All things else.

All else things other. Subject 1, time. Must answer to time. Some.

Time dictates all else. Except. It makes. All installed in time.