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‘Abjection hurts’:
Race, class, gender, and the demand for a contemporary reworking of the Kristevan abject

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, as outlined in *Powers of Horror* (1980), through the lens of contemporary American literature, considering the potential problems with the Kristevan abject and the ways in which contemporary work focused on race, class, and gender highlight its limitations as a model for analysis. Occupied with ideas of embodied abjection, disgust, and depersonification, this thesis focuses on texts by Toni Morrison, Jesmyn Ward, Jenny Zhang, David Wojnarowicz, and Darcie Steinke, considering the ways in which they all, thematically, link to abjection, and yet remain outwith the scope of traditional Kristevan analysis. Drawing on work in Black studies, queer studies, and particularly from Imogen Tyler's ideas of social abjection, this thesis does not attempt to negate the power of abjection studies completely, but rather to highlight the need for a revitalised understanding of the abject, one which incorporates these fields of study, if it is to act as a meaningful tool for the analysis of contemporary writing.

CONTENTS

Introduction

Imogen Tyler's pronouncement that 'abjection hurts' is the driving force behind this thesis. Taking inspiration from Tyler's argument, which focuses on abjection as an embodied experience rather than a theoretical concept, this thesis will examine contemporary literary depictions of embodied abjection and interrogate the limits of Julia Kristeva's model of abjection as a tool for analysis.[1] This is carried out through an analysis of five primary texts, presented as case studies which highlight the need for a more contemporary, intersectional form of abjection theory. This thesis opens with a review of Kristeva's conception of abjection, and continues into a critical look at the relationships between abjection and race; abjection and class; and abjection and sexuality and gender, the three overarching themes with which this study and its primary texts are concerned.[2]

This project will analyse the following contemporary texts: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), and Jenny Zhang's *Sour Heart* (2017) in the first chapter, on abjection and race, and David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives* (1991) and Darcey Steinke's *Suicide Blonde* (1992) in the second chapter, on abjection, gender, and sexuality. Ultimately, this thesis is concerned with engaging with these themes on an intersectional level: although it has been separated into categorised chapters, this is simply to allow space to outline the critical links between abjection theory and each of the core themes individually, before looking at them as a holistic whole. The case studies on the texts themselves will go on to show the ways in which these texts build a bridge between race, gender and sexuality studies — with issues of class and the working class body politic linking all of them explicitly — and how abjection studies can provide a valuable lens for analysis of social marginalisation more widely. The contemporary period here is broadly defined: with publication dates ranging between 1970 and 2017, the texts studied in this thesis encompass the 50 year period just

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[1] Imogen Tyler, 'Against Abjection', *Feminist Theory*, 2009, 10.1, pp.77-98, p.81.
[2] Sexuality and gender, while both deserving of individual analysis as themes, are so intrinsically linked within the two texts studied in this chapter that I have combined them to enable a clearer reading process.

before publication of Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1980) up until the present day. This offers a wider scope to explore the ways in which these themes are and have remained prevalent from the time of *Powers of Horror*'s publication until now. As such, this helps to outline the limitations of Kristeva's theory by pointing to potential holes, while also making clear that these are not only new concerns, but ongoing ones.

While each case study section works to highlight thematic links to abjection theory, they are also all connected by a common preoccupation with the felt effects of being *made abject,* and so, they provide fertile ground for analysis of abjection as an embodied experience, as argued by Tyler. However, while her work is centred around sociology, as I will outline in more depth later, this thesis is focused on literary depictions of abjection. It was important to select primary texts which, although outwith the traditional criteria of non-fiction or auto-fiction, speak back to each author's identity position within society; as such, the novels, in turn, incorporate aspects of real world issues relating to race, gender, sexuality, and class. Each of these authors utilise their literary work as a form through which to highlight and critique political and societal issues around identity positions, and abjection is a helpful methodology through which to unpack and analyse these depictions. With this in mind, each of the primary texts at hand, although written in different forms — including outwardly 'traditional' fiction, short story, and experimental memoir — have close connections to the lived experiences of the authors themselves. This is not to say that these texts are straightforward autobiography, but rather that they utilise a form that Ocean Vuong, questioned on the autobiographical elements of his own novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, articulates as an '[animation of] a sort of parallel possibility from my own life… the foundation is true'.[3]

Across the board, all of the texts studied here have this kind of "true" — as in rooted in the author's own identity position — foundation. The first text, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,* is one of the examples Vuong cites when discussing this form of

[3] Ocean Vuong in conversation with Tommy Orange, City Arts & Lectures, 2020 <https://www.cityarts.net/event/ocean-vuong/> [Accessed: 01/12/2021].

near-autobiographical writing, a style which he calls ‘a great project of American fiction’.[4] Morrison herself, in the foreword to the novel, echoes this, calling the text her attempt to ‘dramatize’ an example of ‘racial self-loathing,’ inspired by a conversation had in her childhood; in this way, the novel can seem more accurately described as parable than as fiction.[5] Ward’s novel, *Salvage the Bones* similarly incorporates elements from Ward’s own life: set in Bois Sauvage, which Ward calls ‘the fictional twin’ of her own home town of DeLisle, it is centred around the immediate lead up to and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which Ward also experienced.[6] Zhang’s *Sour Heart,* a collection of short stories, features multiple different families, but the common thread — a focus on young Chinese girls who immigrated to the US at a young age, usually with a younger brother — are mirrored in the author’s own life and experience. *Close to the Knives,* David Wojnarowicz’s formally experimental text, is more explicitly linked to life-writing in the author’s positioning of the text as a memoir, and although this project will later query this categorization, Wojnarowicz’s accounts of the embodied experience of being a queer, HIV+ man are true to life. The final text, Darcey Steinke’s *Suicide Blonde,* is similar to Ward’s in that it appears to be traditional fiction, but the author has also spoken in interviews about her connections to the text, stating that she considers herself to be the protagonist, Jesse, ‘a little bit’, while their shared experience as the daughter of a minister informs both many of Jesse’s references in the text, as well as Steinke’s repeated use of religious imagery.[7]

The aim of this project is to utilise these texts as case studies and, in doing so, turn the analytical eye onto abjection theory itself. Tyler’s work on abjection is crucial to the framework of this thesis, however, she is far from the only contemporary critic currently contributing to new iterations of abjection studies: she joins the likes of Darieck Scott, Rina Arya, and Nicholas Chare, who have both

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Lisa Allardice, ‘Jesmyn Ward: ‘Black girls are silenced, misunderstood and underestimated’, *The Guardian,* 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/11/jesmyn-ward-home-mississippi-living-with-addiction-poverty-racism> [Accessed: 19/12/21].
[7] Mia Funke, ‘Darcey Steinke Interviewed by Mia Funke’, *The Creative Process,* 2016 <https://www.creativeprocess.info/interviews-4/2016/7/7/darcey-steinke> [Accessed: 16/10/21].

published contemporary books revisiting abjection theory, with Scott focusing specifically on race and sexuality, and Frances Pheasant-Kelly and Zuzana Kovar, who have recently published books looking at the idea of specific spaces as abject.[8] *The New Abject* (2020), an anthology of short stories written in response to Kristeva, and Aaron Kerner's upcoming *Abject Pleasures in the Cinematic* (2023) also shows the ongoing importance and interest in abject themes in contemporary literature and film.[9] In this vein, by considering the limitations of the Kristevan abject — and demonstrating that there is a demand for an updated, intersectional theory by showcasing that contemporary literature is still concerned with matters of the abject — this thesis argues that abjection theory is a necessary tool for literary analysis, but requires evolution in scope in order to meaningfully engage with ideas of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

[8] Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection,* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).; Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation,* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).; Rina Arya & Nicholas Chare, *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).; Frances Pheasant-Kelly, *Abject Spaces in American Cinema,* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).; Zuzana Kovar, *Architecture in Abjection*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).
[9] Sarah Eyre & Ra Page, *The New Abject*, (Manchester: Comma Press, 2020).; Aaron Kerner, *Abject Pleasures in the Cinematic,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

Chapter One:

‘Abjection hurts’: A critical review of the Kristevan abject

Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject is situated at the core of this project, which will use her concept of abjection as a lens through which to examine depictions of the personal body and the body politic in a series of contemporary texts. However, before applying her arguments to my analysis, the first aim of this project is to consider the Kristevan abject on its own merit. This thesis posits that Kristeva’s theory, while a valuable articulation of abjection as a concept, is not a wholly satisfying analytical tool for contemporary literature, and the broader notions of contemporary culture which they reflect. Preoccupied with an outdated, essentialist view of gender and unengaged with the relationship between abjection, race and class, it has limiting gaps, mainly in its disregard of the experience of being or becoming an object of abjection. In its examination of these limitations, this thesis will utilise a series of primary texts as case studies, considering the ways in which they reveal the limitations of the Kristevan abject as an analytical tool with regards to works centred around race, gender, sexuality, and class. However, in this critique, my aim is not to disregard or disvalue her work completely, but rather, to build upon it by highlighting the areas in which it can be meaningfully developed. In particular, this thesis will incorporate ideas from contemporary race and gender theory and focus on the working class body politic, examining the ways in which these bodies are stripped of their subjectivity and *made* abject under patriarchal, capitalist structures. Therefore, before looking towards a new evolution of the abject, first I will set the foundations of this project by outlining Kristeva’s definition of the abject as it is described in her seminal work, *Powers of Horror.*

The Kristevan abject

Kristeva defines the abject as those repulsive transgressions which have the power to cross the border between the Self and ‘the place where I am not,’ or, the

Other.[10] To understand the abject — defined as that which 'does not respect borders' — we must first consider the multiple meanings of the term 'border,' which Kristeva describes as the protective barrier between where 'I' am and where 'I am not'.[11] Firstly, there is the bodily border: the physical threshold between the internal and the external. While Kristeva classifies physical elements which are expelled from the body, such as 'urine, blood, sperm, excrement,' as abject, she is quick to note that the abject is not caused by a 'lack of cleanliness or health'.[12] It is not a perceived dirtiness which makes these elements abject, but rather, their abjectness is rooted in their distinctly liminal nature; because of the way in which they are expelled through the body from the internal to the external, they exist in a dual state whereby they are simultaneously *of* the body and *not* of the body. As such, their existence disturbs the physical border, rendering them manifestations of the abject. Kristeva goes on to say that the abject is caused by that which 'disturbs identity, system, order… borders, positions, rules'.[13] We can see the way in which it troubles identity by exploring the personal border: the boundary between the Self and the Other. It is through this border that we understand and define the 'I'. In this context, we can understand the border as an outline, the imagined line drawn around the Self in order to define it. However, borders are also understood as the barrier which keeps the outside out, rather than just penning the inside in. The border, then, acts as the outline of the Self. However, the Self is not defined by what is contained by the border, but by what is outside of it: it is not defined by what it *is*, but by what it is *not.* It is only by comprehending what is Other that we are able to comprehend the Self. The result of this is that it is through the Othering of another that the subject is able to exist. This is succinctly articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal text, *The Second Sex:* 'it is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One.'[14] Just as the body provides the border between the corporeal Self and the external world, this imagined border provides the

[10] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.3-4.
[11] Ibid., p.4.; Ibid., p.3-4.
[12] Ibid., p.53.; Ibid., p.4.
[13] Ibid., p.4.
[14] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), p.26.

definition of the Self, declaring what is 'I' and what is Other. By defying this boundary, the abject is a constant source of disturbance to our sense of subjectivity.

As well as this, Kristeva also argues that abjection disrespects a third kind of border: the social border of 'system, order… rules'.[15] She classifies 'the traitor, the liar, the criminal' as actors of social abjection, claiming that 'crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject' because of the way in which it crosses the border between lawful and unlawful, right and wrong.[16] However, she argues that amorality or disrespect for the law is not abject in itself, but that abjection is 'immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady… a hatred that smiles… a friend who stabs you.'[17] Abjection, then, is actively immoral, not passively amoral; it knows the border between good and bad and willfully crosses back and forth between the two, able to play both the 'good' friend and 'bad' attacker. The social border is not just a lawful border, though. In *The Monstrous Feminine*, a contemporary response to Kristeva's work which, although focused on film, is still pertinent here, Barbara Creed argues that the social border also acts as the definer of social roles: 'the monstrous [or, in Kristeva's words, the abject] is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not'.[18] While Creed is looking at gender specifically here, we can utilise this argument across a broader spectrum of externally determined social roles, including class and racial constructs. According to this thinking, those who disregard, disobey, or disrupt their social roles become abject, an argument which will be central to my textual analysis within this project. Across all three of these borders, the most intense manifestation of the abject is the corpse. Kristeva argues that 'corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live,' and the corpse, as the ultimate 'place where I am not,' disturbs all forms of borders: the physical, as the most extreme form of bodily defilement; the personal, as the symbol of what was once but is no longer the Self; and the social, as the antithesis of order, that which exists beyond the powers of rules, roles and

[15] Kristeva, p.4.
[16] Ibid. p.4.
[17] Ibid., p.4.
[18] Barbara Creed, 'Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection', *Screen,* 27.1 (1987), pp.44-70, p.48.

system.[19] The corpse is ‘a border that has encroached upon everything’.[20] However, the abject is not an evil to be destroyed, but rather a discomfort which must be tolerated. When we expel the abject and cast it into the realm of Other, it reaffirms and defines our borders — physical, personal, and social — making it a necessary tool for Self-definition.

Another key figure of the abject in Kristeva’s account is that of the archaic, abject mother:

> This is precisely where we encounter the rituals of defilement and their derivatives, which, based on the feeling of abjection and all converging on the maternal, attempt to symbolize the other threat to the subject: that of being swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being. The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother.[21]

For Kristeva, the mother represents the threat of abjection for both child and mother. In Creed’s words, ‘the maternal body becomes a site of conflicting desires,’ one which troubles the border of Self/Other.[22] The child, grown inside the mother’s body and then expelled, breaks the physical border, representing a figure that still recalls the original maternal body but yet is something completely separate and independent. Crucially, though, Kristeva highlights the disturbance the maternal relationship has on the personal border: as a ‘dual relationship,’ one in which the definition between Subject (the child) and Other (the mother) is harder to distinguish, the child constantly fears ‘his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother’.[23] Important to note — and an aspect of the theory which I will go on to challenge in this project — is Kristeva’s assertion that the child is always the Subject in this

[19] Ibid., p.4.; , p.3.
[20] Ibid., p.3.
[21] Ibid., p.64.
[22] Creed, p.49.
[23] Kristeva, p.64.

relationship, the one who must '[separate] oneself from the phantasmatic power of the mother'.[24] This argument suggests that the mother requires the child to authenticate her identity, while the child does not require the mother in order to self-define, and rather, must actively expel the mother in order to become fully autonomous. The consequence of this action is that 'the mother will turn into an abject,' a threatening, consuming absence which tries to regain subjectivity by swallowing that of the child.[25] To refer back to Creed's terminology, the maternal body is the site of this conflict, but for Kristeva, it is also the source of it. The violence of expulsion, both by giving birth and by being actively rejected by the child, is figured upon the maternal body, which is made abject and must suffer the consequences of this depersonification.

Although her account of abjection can often seem negative, occupied with threats to identity, discomfort and disgust, Kristeva also claims that abjection is a necessary component of what she calls 'jouissance'. Jouissance, meaning fulfilment or completion (and, more literally, orgasm), implies a sense of cathartic relief, but also a kind of excess, something which exists beyond or outside the point of completion; it is, in a way, *more* than enough. In order to achieve it, Kristeva argues that 'jouissance demands an *abjection* from which identity becomes absent.'[26] To achieve jouissance, then, we must overrule our instinctive personal and physical revulsion towards the abject by acknowledging our own essential abjectness. Then, 'the moment when revelation bursts forth': the realisation that by accepting the fact that the abject is a necessary element of existence and offers opportunity for self-definition and agency by way of its transgressive powers, one can, supposedly, experience the cathartic fulfilment of jouissance.[27] Ultimately, this form of acceptance of abjection requires a moment of obliteration of Selfhood, achieved by going beyond or outwith the Self. The question of how this kind of obliteration of Self is embodied in action recurs throughout this project, which looks at both its potential for actual destruction — in the section on *The Bluest Eye* — as well as its potential for a form

[24] Ibid., p.100.
[25] Ibid., p.13.
[26] Ibid., p.54.
[27] Ibid., p.9.

of transgression that seems closer to the Kristevan model of jouissance, which is interrogated in the section on *Suicide Blonde.* The sections on *Salvage the Bones, Sour Heart,* and *Close to the Knives* are occupied, instead, with modes of resistance against abjection, rather than forms of succumbing to it, with jouissance or otherwise.

Abject misogyny

Having considered the main components of Kristeva's account, I will now highlight some of the theoretical work I will use to bolster my critical reworking of the abject, focusing specifically on Imogen Tyler's response to Kristeva. While Tyler has criticised Kristeva's lack of consideration towards the reality of abjection as a lived experience in sociological terms, particularly with regards to her concept of the 'abject mother' and underlying misogyny, this readdressing of abjection has not been explored in terms of literary analysis specifically. In keeping with Tyler's consideration of the embodied effects of theory in real life, I would argue that attitudes, behaviours, and opinions are also learned and assimilated through the media we consume: just as literature can reflect life, so can it model ways of seeing and understanding the world. The texts I have chosen to explore in this project comment on the bodily experience of being made abject in a way that is rooted in reality, through de-personifying forms of real world oppression. Kristeva's theory of the abject, preoccupied with outmoded understandings of psychological disembodiment, is unable to satisfyingly explore the relationship between abjection and class, race, sexuality, and non-essentialist, heteronormative gender. Such contemporary texts, which examine the ways in which people on the borders of capitalist, patriarchal structures are forced into becoming abject scapegoats, require a literary theory which can meet them at their own level. In order to analyse literature which reflects our own period, we must develop our theories so that they can meaningfully engage with the demands for understanding.

To borrow from Donna Haraway, 'theory is not about matters distant from the lived body; quite the opposite. Theory is anything but disembodied'.[28] Arguably, Kristeva's theory, while inextricably linked to and concerned with the body, remains oddly disembodied in scope and tone. We can see this clearly in her description of the abject mother, who is dismissed as a vessel of the abject, a de-personified Other, defined by their body's reproductive capabilities rather than any semblance of personhood. In her blistering criticism of Kristeva's abject mother figure, Tyler asserts that 'the fundamental premise of the Kristevan abject is that there is and can be no maternal subject'.[29] Her lack of engagement with the female embodied experience is perhaps less surprising when we consider the ways in which the arguments laid forth in *Powers of Horror* often appear to be primarily concerned with men and heteronormative masculinity. This is particularly visible in Kristeva's commitment to Freud and Lacan, as well as her choices of authors, which include male writers Proust, Céline, Artaud and Borges, for her case studies. By utilising abjection theory as a lens focused on feminine and queer bodies, this project moves away from this male-dominated focus. In Kristeva's work, the mother is classed as 'the maternal body,' a significant choice of language which signifies that she is thinking not of a mother — as in, a woman, a person, a Subject — but a theoretical space or vehicle, wholly distanced from real life.[30] It is this disregard for lived experience and misogynistic depersonification of mothers that Tyler picks apart in her essay, arguing that we must consider the risks of 'cementing phantasies of the maternal as necessarily abject and think about what impact this figuration of the maternal has on those subsequently interpellated as that abject.'[31] Theory does not exist in a void; in Tyler's words, 'abjection hurts'.[32] She goes on to highlight the dangers of Kristeva's theory and its callous — and privileged, as I will argue later — disinterest in the ways in which 'abjection has effects on real bodies':

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[28] Donna Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others' in *Cultural Studies,* ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.299.
[29] Tyler, 'Against Abjection', p.81.
[30] Kristeva, p.14.
[31] Tyler, 2009, p.85.
[32] Ibid., p.90.

> Abjection, as any dictionary definition states, describes not only the action of casting down but the condition of one cast down, that is the condition of being abject. *Abjection is not just a psychic process but a social experience*. Disgust reactions, hate speech, acts of physical violence and the dehumanizing effects of law are integral to processes of abjection.[33]

Kristeva's initial formulation of her theory fails to acknowledge the external social pressures and motivations which shape abjection as an experience rather than a theoretical concept . This lack of accounting for instances such as 'disgust reactions, hate speech, acts of physical violence, and the dehumanizing effects of law' — as well as patriarchal systems and class and racial discrimination, as I will go on to discuss — is a troublingly problematic hole in her theory. In my analysis of my primary texts, I will examine the ways in which these social factors affect abjection and our comprehension of it. Although I am examining literary rather than sociological case studies, Tyler's assertion that abjection exists not just as theory but as a lived experience, as 'the condition of being abject', remains at the heart of this project. While disparaging of critical works in which Kristeva's theory is 'accepted and reproduced almost without question,' she agrees that the Kristevan abject is nonetheless a worthy 'interpretative lens'.[34] Tyler declares a call to action for a new evolution of abjection, arguing that the 'analysing [of] cultural texts are central to the subsequent development of abject criticism,' a demand which spans not just her field of sociology but literary studies too, as that which reflects the lived experience.[35] In response, I intend to highlight the need to evolve a contemporary, embodied theory of abjection which can then be used as a suitable and satisfying 'interpretative lens' within literature.[36]

Within this realm of detachment from reality that is problematically woven across Kristeva's account of abjection, one of the main points of contention that this project raises is the misogynistic account of gender within *Powers of Horror,* which

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[33] Tyler, 2009, p.90.; Tyler, 2009, p.87. Emphasis here is my own.
[34] Tyler, 2009, p.79.; Tyler, 2009, p.80.
[35] Tyler, 2009, p.80.
[36] Tyler, 2009, p.80.

can be tackled by looking specifically at the body made abject. As the body is the site of our subjectivity, the outline which contains the Self, the abject is primarily experienced through corporeal repulsion towards that which is simultaneously of the Self and resolutely Other: excrement, bodily fluids, the corpse. Since the abject is primarily manifested through the body, then subjectivity is necessarily linked to the body, too. Taking my lead from Debra Ferreday's argument that it is 'through the body that marginalized subjects speak,' this thesis will interrogate the ways in which abjection is figured upon the body and the implications of being made bodily abject.[37]

Through Tyler's criticism of the abject mother, we can notice the troublingly misogynistic roots of Kristeva's depiction of women. Notably, her accounts of the maternal relationship focus on the mother/son dynamic — 'what he has swallowed up instead of maternal love is an emptiness, or rather a maternal hatred' — thus upholding sexist definitions of the male Subject to the female Other.[38] As well as being harmful towards the mother, as I have outlined earlier, this also leaves the question of the mother/daughter relationship unasked and unanswered. We are left to wonder whether it would operate the same way, with the female child scrambling to escape the consuming mother in the same way as the male child does, or whether the fact that the female child has the same potential for reproduction as the mother does would alter the dynamic. Equally, this dynamic is predicated on a presumption of heterosexuality, limiting its ability to engage with non-heteronormative relationships. Since Kristeva's examination of the mother/male child relationship follows distinctly Freudian traditions, with part of the threat of the abject mother rooted in her capability for castration — as in, by re-consuming the male child, she would not only destroy his identity, but his maleness too — it seems unlikely that the mother/female child relationship would follow the same dynamic. I will explore the abject mother/daughter relationship in more detail in the case studies on *Sour Heart* and *Suicide Blonde,* however, the sheer omission of this route of consideration is emblematic of a pervading sense of misogyny in *Powers of Horror.* Similarly troubling

[37] Debra Ferreday, 'Anorexia and Abjection: A Review Essay', *Body & Society,* 2012, Vol. 18.2, 139-155, p.140.
[38] Kristeva, p.6.

is the assumption that the abject figure is inherently female; within this framework, the mother is always the abject figure, never the child, despite the fact that, having been physically bonded during pregnancy, they both have equally weakened borders of differentiation. Arguably, the child could have equal, if not more, desire for non-differentiation and re-assimilation as the mother, particularly when considering the child has known nothing but the mother while the mother has pre-birth lived experience. While this may mean that women have a larger capacity for jouissance, it is worth questioning whether this is a worthy enough argument to justify the misogyny of deeming women objects of revulsion. Jouissance as a concept becomes problematic when we think of it as a kind of cathartic "reward" for accepting oneself as de-personified Other. According to Tyler's argument, to accept feminist readings of Kristeva which assert that abjection allows space for empowerment is to accept a disembodied reading without regard to how, for example, real life mothers might feel at being defined as objects of frightening disgust, and, in turn, how others might then treat them, if this is the way they are understood. When viewed in this context, jouissance as a valid form of catharsis or joy also seems flawed when one considers the experience one must live in order to experience it fleetingly. While this is not an attempt to dismiss Kristeva's work as necessarily misogynistic, considered in this light, it is impossible to ignore the lack of engagement with embodied female experience. Women are figured as abject bodies rather than people, when they are considered at all, and there is a prevailing habit of relying on outdated philosophies of men as Subject and women as Other spanning across *Powers of Horror.* Although this does serve to highlight the misogyny of figuring motherhood as abject, it does not offer an alternative, or crucially, a more empathetic and embodied, reading. As such, Kristeva's account, as Tyler has argued, cannot be held up as a singular feminist theory when analysing literature, particularly in the case of this thesis where five of the six primary texts feature a female subject as the protagonist. Having identified these holes, the logical conclusion is to combine Kristeva's account of the abject with additional theoretical work on gender and sexuality, thus making it a more competent tool with which to scrutinise contemporary narratives.

The neoliberal abject

Tyler's critical response to Kristeva is also particularly influential in interrogating the relationship — or lack thereof — between abjection and class, most clearly articulated in her book, *Revolting Subjects,* in which she outlines her concept of 'social abjection':

> I develop *social abjection* as a theoretical resource that enables us to consider states of exclusion from multiple perspectives, including the perspective of those who are 'obliged to inhabit the impossible edges of modernity', those border zones within the state, in which the overwhelming imperative is not transgression, but survival. What the conceptual paradigm of social abjection reveals is that if state power relies on the production of abject subjects to constitute itself and draw its borders, the state is also that which it abjects.[39]

Firstly, it is important to note Tyler's argument that, within these 'border zones', the '[primary] imperative is not transgression, but survival'.[40] This echoes a sentiment in her earlier essay, *Against Abjection,* in which she argues that a new form of abjection requires 'a critical shift from the current feminist preoccupation with the 'transgressive potentiality' of 'encounters with the abject''.[41] Critical of the idea that abjection holds 'subjective potential', Tyler draws attention to the degree of privilege required to embrace or choose abjectification in a bid for empowered transgression, an analysis of the Kristevan abject that has been frequently referred to by contemporary feminist scholars.[42] As I have outlined earlier, this disembodied approach to abjection not only limits the field of meaningful analysis but ignorantly refuses to engage with the realities of experience; once again, I would like to invoke Tyler's assertion that 'abjection hurts'.[43] Social abjection, then, moves away from this

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[39] Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain,* (London: Zed Books, 2013), p.4.
[40] Tyler, 2013, p.4.
[41] Tyler, 2009, p.77-78.
[42] Ibid., p.78.
[43] Ibid., 2009, p.90.

preoccupation with freedom through transgression, looking instead at the ways in which abjection is used as an oppressive tool to suppress freedom.

In Kristeva's account, abjection is 'not only an external menace,' which we revolt against, but something 'that may menace us from the inside'.[44] We can think of it then as something personally produced, a personal reaction which we experience internally: 'while the aversive affects… appear to emanate from the revolting qualities of the thing that provoked the response, in actuality the subject is always already the source of her own abjection'.[45] However, at the heart of social abjection as a concept is the idea that, in order to be a socially abject figure, one must be actively *made* abject by the state. Crucial to this analysis is Tyler's use of the word 'production', suggesting that these abject subjects are actively produced by the state, as opposed to experiencing a passive or personal sense of abjection, as it is described in Kristeva's account.[46] In *Revolting Subjects,* Tyler highlights the fact that, most commonly, it is working class and migrant people who are deemed socially abject. By pushing these subjects to the fringes, they become manifestations of a border, allowing the state to then use these border-people to 'draw its borders': in other words, the state defines itself as not-abject by defining what is-abject.[47] Consequently, the abjectification of certain peoples is a necessary act of self-preservation for the state, which cannot be defined as hegemonic without the existence of a contrasting non-hegemonic population, mirroring the personal Subject/Other relationship described in Kristeva's theory but on a larger, social level. Tyler's work, then, focuses on the experience of being made socially abject, and the effects of this on those who are exiled to the borders and 'states of exclusion'.[48]

Tyler goes on to describe these abject Others as the 'border subjects of the neoliberal body politic - those whose lives are deemed worthless or expendable'.[49] In

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[44] Elaine Hoffman Baruch, 'Interview with Elaine Hoffman Baruch on Feminism in the United States and France (1980)' in *The Portable Kristeva,* ed. Kelly Oliver, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp.371-382, p.374
[45] Tyler, 2013, p.29.
[46] Ibid., p.4.
[47] Ibid., p.4.
[48] Ibid., p.4.
[49] Ibid., p.10.

thinking of the state as a neoliberal hegemony, the idea of productivity comes to the foreground again: the 'worthless or expendable' subjects are those who are not 'productive' or who resist producing for the benefit of the state, for example, poor people, people on benefits, homeless people.[50] Since they are not productive within the state, they are figured as what Henri A. Giroux refers to as 'disposable life': relegated to the borders, where they do not serve the state actively, and so are 'disposable'.[51] However, by way of their position as the oppositional Other to the Subject state, they still contribute to its existence. As such, they remain a discomfiting presence, becoming manifestations of the abject which disturb. If we think of border-people as the collective Other, and those within the societal mainstream as the collective Subject, we can see the way this relationship replicates that which one has with more obviously abject elements, like excrement or vomit. Those on the border, although made resolutely Other through this process, are still too closely connected to the Subject for there to be a comfortable distinction; clearly still people, it is too easy for the Subject to see themselves in the Other, a disturbance which only drives a more intense disgust reaction, in a bid at self-differentiation and self-protection.

To maintain this practice of exclusion, Tyler, influenced by Mary Douglas, argues that this form of disgust reaction is employed and amplified by the state as an ideological tool:

> Disgust reactions are always anchored to wider social beliefs and structures of taboo. In [Douglas'] account, disgust functions to affirm the boundaries of the social body (the body politic) through the (actual or symbolic) expulsion of what are collectively agreed to be polluting objects, practices or persons. Thus, an awareness of dirt - that is, of something or someone 'being dirty' - reveals the social norms and rules in operation in a given social or cultural context.[52]

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[50] Tyler, 2013, p.10.
[51] Henri Giroux, 'Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class and the Biopolitics of Disposability', *College Literature,* 2006, Vol.33(3), pp.176-196, p.174-175.
[52] Tyler, 2013, p.22.

Border-people, then, are depicted by the state as ‘dirty’, as outsiders, thus enveloping those within the hegemonic structure with a sense of insidership and the suggestion that those within that community are “clean”, quashing instincts of rebellion. Kristeva’s abject is clearly influenced by Douglas’ concept of dirt, and the striking resemblance is particularly evident in the descriptive language that they both use. For example, Douglas says that ‘reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death,’ while Kristeva states that abjection is that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ and that ‘my body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border’ which abjection crosses.[53] The abject is that which causes disgust, and disgust is the tool through which we abjectify. The crucial difference — and it is this difference that is pertinent to Tyler’s idea of social abjection — is that, for Kristeva, abjection is organic, and for Douglas, dirt is constructed: ‘there is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder’.[54] As Tyler goes on to highlight, for Douglas, ‘there is no ‘natural dirt’,’ rather, our ideas of what constitutes dirtiness ‘corresponds with prevailing belief systems, and involves community-wide complicity’.[55] In this way, ‘disgust reactions are always contingent and relational, revealing less about the disgusted individual, or the thing deemed disgusting, than about the culture in which disgust is experienced and performed.’[56] By constructing belief systems in which certain characteristics are ‘dirty’, the neoliberal state can then develop a form of institutionalised disgust which pushes certain subjects to the borders. This thesis will look at the ways in which this form of disgust politics is employed as a tool to abjectify certain characters within my primary texts. In particular, I will look at the depictions of working class subjects — as is focused on in Tyler’s account — but also utilise her theories of social abjection as a lens through which to view gender and race as criteria for abjectification.

[53] Kristeva, p.4.; Ibid., p.3.; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p.16.
[54] Ibid., p.12.
[55] Tyler, 2013, p.23.
[56] Ibid., p.23.

Racialised abjection

Abjection — rooted as it is in repulsion, fear, hatred of the Other — would seem a clear theoretical tool for investigating racism. However, in *Powers of Horror,* Kristeva neglects to interrogate this line of inquiry. Anti-semitism is discussed during her study of Céline, but race, and specifically non-white people, are mentioned only as part of a Black slave centred metaphor meant to depict fascism more generally.[57] Despite this omission, there is scope to utilise abjection as an analytical tool within race studies and, in particular, in examining depictions of race and racism in literature. Derek Hook's essay, 'Racism as abjection: A psychoanalytic conceptualisation for a post-apartheid South Africa', provides an integral overview of the ways in which abjection may be utilised as a mode of interpreting racism as an affective and reactive phenomena. Although it outwardly appears to be centred around psychoanalysis and a specific time period, Hook's critical engagement with abjection has a much broader scope than just the topic at hand in this article, and is key to establishing the connection between abjection and race that I will go on to explore in this thesis. According to Hook, one of the critical aspects of abjection theory which makes it so useful for understanding the ways in which racism is perpetrated is the fact that 'the abject, for Kristeva, possesses no intrinsic objecthood.'[58] As outlined earlier, abjection is 'non-being', something which resists tangible understanding and is defined by its indefinibility as anything other than an experience.[59] This means that abjection theory understands that a kind of hate like racism, which is not specifically centred around an individual, requires 'no definitive or singular object in order to be so generatively and so widely spread. There is no one single feature, rather multiple shifting elements of, to take Franz Fanon's example, 'blackness', each of which comes to be abjectionable for the white racist.'[60] This undefined quality that qualifies abjection as such a useful tool for race studies also applies to its value in the study

[57] Kristeva uses an analogy of false freedom promised to a slave as a metaphor to define facism. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p.24-25.
[58] Hook, p.688.
[59] Kristeva, p.67.
[60] Hook, p.688.

of gender and class, which similarly encompass the kind of shifting and widespread hate that Hook outlines.

However, at the crux of his argument is the understanding that abjection operates on multiple levels, and that 'the reactions of abjection are at the same time bodily, psychical, and symbolic,' a three-pronged understanding which reiterates my earlier outline of abjection's three borders (bodily, personal, and social).[61] As such, he argues, Kristeva's abjection is able to tackle the multi-layered nature of racism, 'a phenomenon which is as *physical* as it is political, *affective* as it is discursive, *subjective* as it is ideological.'[62] Firstly, with regards to the body, he suggests:

> [Abjection] is also a theory of the corporeality of human experience, which is to say that it provides a basis from which we may understand something of the embodied nature of racism. By this, to reiterate, I mean to allude to the virtual omnipresence of the body in racism, that is, to racism as mode of reactivity that has been routed through the dreads, aversions, and 'nausea' of the body.'[63]

To consider racism is, necessarily, to consider the body. In an analysis of Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me,* Coates' meditation on being Black in the United States, Homi K. Bhabha comments that 'the protagonist of the narrative is neither the subjectivity of personhood, nor the identity of the citizen, but repeatedly and relentlessly the body — the Black body, which, of course, immediately implicates the white body and interpolates the otherness of the body itself'.[64] This insight can be understood and applied to a wider range of subjects than just this named novel. The idea of the Black body as narrator rings true to Hook's argument that the body is omnipresent within racism, that is to say, that racist motivations are necessarily linked to the body which they react to. This preoccupation with non-white people as

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[61] Derek Hook, 'Racism as abjection: A psychoanalytic conceptualisation for a post-apartheid South Africa', *South African Journal of Psychology,* 2003, 34.4, pp.672-703, p.687.
[62] Ibid., p.672.
[63] Ibid., p.685.
[64] Homi K. Bhabha, 'Writing the void: Homi K. Bhabha on language, identity, and migration', *Artforum International,* 2016, Vol.54(10), pp.302-422, p.302.

'Other' is explored time and again in several of my primary texts. Even when white people are not present, this sense of Otherness prevails, suggesting an internalised form of racism which I will look at more thoroughly in my analyses of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sour Heart*, in particular.

Secondly, Hook refers to 'the racism of personal identity'.[65] To comprehend this, he asserts, we must first understand that abjection is *affective*: 'both impact and reflex, visceral reaction and active response, abjection, it should be remembered, is always activity, action, as much as it is initial disgust, abhorrence. It is not sentiment alone.'[66] Once more: 'abjection hurts'.[67] This argument serves as a reminder that our reactions to the abject are not always physical (for example, bodily expulsion like vomiting) but can be emotional or psychical, too. Hook suggests that this idea of abjection allows us to examine 'those instances of racism lying beneath discursive consciousness, such as (often unintended) patterns of racial avoidance, aversion and discomfort'.[68] However, that is not to say that affective reactions, although not necessarily physical or bodily, are not active or violent in their own right. In fact, it is at this level that we can observe 'racism as its most affective, irrational and imaginative; anxieties of contact, the fear of physical proximity of the racial other, phobias of contamination, and so on'.[69] These actions are intrinsically abject, Hook suggests, because they are rooted within and motivated by fear of border-disruption: 'I react with loathing as means of restoring the boundary between self and other'.[70] As Bhabha pointed out, observation of the Black body necessarily recalls the white body, and so, for the racist, considering a body which is different yet similar to their own — and thus troubling to the boundary of the Self — results in a fear of losing their Self and a hatred towards that which disturbs this Selfhood. In Hook's words, 'in abject we have something like a force-field of identity, one in which two particularly potent sets of affect — hate and fear — exist in combination'.[71] It is important to

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[65] Hook, p.694.
[66] Ibid., p.686.
[67] Tyler, 2009, p.90.
[68] Ibid., p.693
[69] Ibid., p.693.
[70] Ibid., p.686.
[71] Ibid., p.687.

highlight Hook's assertion here that, at the core of abjection, are these two twin pillars of hate and fear. Establishing these affects as central to the experience of abjection — and in turn, the experience of being made abject — harks back to my argument that abjection belongs to and must be analysed within the realm of the Real. In recognising hate and fear as driving motivations of abjectification, we must recognise that these affects have active, violent effects; consequently, it becomes obvious that this is an experience which carries real life, not just theoretical, weight. With this in mind, Hook suggests that abjection, as a tool to understand racism, can offer 'some grasp on what often seems the most difficult quality of racism to understand: the sheer and unswayable irrationality of the fear and of the hatred directed at the 'racial other'.'[72]

Thirdly, Hook argues that abjection offers an insight into 'the symbolic racism of social and discursive structures'.[73] This element of the argument ties together and offers a motivation for the bodily and psychical affects of racism. Drawing on Kristeva's discussion of anti-Semitism, Hooks makes clear that:

> 'What or who are considered to be abject is not consistent across history… various political and discursive systems exploit the processes and dynamics of abjection for their own gain. Abjection, in other words, is not merely the underside of an ideological system, that which 'comes before' or underwrites a set of ideological social constructions, it is also a pivotal component thereof.[74]

We can take this to mean that racism is not a natural or organic occurrence. 'Although abjection is forcefully consolidated at the most primal levels of bodily and ego distinction, it may equally be motivated from the 'top down',' Hook notes.[75] Although certainly pertinent in this study of race and abjection, this distinction is also crucial to understanding abjection more generally. To briefly return to Kristeva's

[72] Hook, p.687.
[73] Ibid., p.694.
[74] Ibid., p.693-694.
[75] Ibid., p.694.

assertion that abjection is that which 'disturbs identity, system, order,' Hook's argument offers further clarification; the experience of feeling abjection may be natural, but the people, things, and experiences which cause abjection must be *made* abject.[76] In other words, there must be 'identity, system, order' for it to disturb, and those phenomena are produced at institutional levels. Crucially, 'although the processes, reactions and affectivity of abjection may be said to exist prior to the intervention of social and symbolic meaning… they may nevertheless come to be informed by these terms.'[77] This is best articulated by Mary Douglas: 'dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder'.[78] We can use this logic to understand abjection — no one thing or person represents 'absolute abject' — but also when considering racism in this context. Racism then, although manifested in the bodily and psychical affectations outlined above, is not produced bodily or psychically, but ideologically within 'social and discursive structures'.[79] The danger of mobilising a community to abjectify others within it is that 'the social construction of the racial other.... [may] come to be supported by the emotional 'logic' of a process that is far less rational, and far more psychically potent in nature'.[80] By institutionalising prejudiced 'systems, orders', those outwith the order become abjectified. By abjectifying them on a societal scale, individuals within the community come to experience them as abject, in other words, as threats towards the existence of their Self within the order, and so a primal fear and hatred of the Other is perpetuated. This line of thinking returns us to Imogen Tyler's concept of social abjection, making clear the link between how women, working class, and non-white people are *made* forcibly abject.

It is this result of being made racially abject that I will analyse in my subsequent chapters on *The Bluest Eye, Salvage the Bones* and *Sour Heart.* Taking into consideration Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry, in which the colonised 'consciously absorbs the "reformed" image as a mask, that is, as means to preserve

[76] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p.4.
[77] Hooks, p.694-695.
[78] Douglas, p.12.
[79] Hook, p.964.
[80] Ibid., p.964-965.

and conceal his/her inward difference from the colonizer,' I will use these chapters to question whether, in these circumstances, it is always subversive, as Bhabha asserts, or potentially more harmful, as a form of self-abjectification.[81] This investigation will be key to my thesis as a whole, as I consider whether the act of being made abject must always be perpetrated by one unto the Other, or, as a result of internalisation, those who are deemed Other may begin to abjectify themselves. To carry out this line of questioning, I will return to Hook's assertion that abjection is driven by fear and hate, but adding to this a third affect: shame. Referring to Jill Matus' argument that 'if anger helps to maintain distinctions between what belongs to the self and what must be kept outside it, shame disturbs those distinctions by distorting responsibility and encouraging self-blame,' I will consider whether shame can be seen as a consequence of internalising abjectification.[82] This is explored explicitly in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as internalised racism, but, as I will argue, is also evident in different forms in other texts.

[81] Shima Peimanfard & Fazel Asadi Amjad, 'Othering Each Other: Mimicry, Ambivalence and Abjection in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*', *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature,* 2018, 7.4, pp.115-120, p.115

[82] Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p.45.

Chapter Two:

Case Studies in Racialised Abjection

This chapter comprises three sections, with each focused on one particular text. Each text is utilised as a case study, through which a particular limitation of the Kristevan abject can be highlighted and considered. The first section, on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,* is concerned with the idea of being *made* abject, as an embodied experience rather than theoretical concept. While this section is specifically focused on how this kind of abjectification relates to race, the idea of being made abject, by discrimination and marginalisation more widely, will go on to inform the rest of the thesis as a whole. The concept provides the main connecting thread interlinking all of the five texts analysed within this project, all of which are, fundamentally, engaged with the ways in which abjection is figured within the body. The second section, on Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones,* progresses these ideas by considering the ways in which these forms of abjectification, as explored in the first section, can be resisted, arguing for the power of being witnessed as a potential tool against dehumanisation. Witnessing, as a tool for agency, will become a recurring theme in this project, most notably in the later sections on *Sour Heart* and *Close to the Knives.*

While these first two sections can be viewed almost as companion pieces, with their similar focus on young, pregnant African American girls and their communities, the third section, on Jenny Zhang's *Sour Heart,* moves away slightly, in order to consider the ways race and abjection intersect specifically within the immigrant narrative. This section will look at the way in which Otherness has multiple signifiers — in this case, race, language, and food, but alternative ways in which one can be "clocked" as Other will be revisited in later sections on *Close to the Knives* and *Suicide Blonde* — and the fluidity of borders around identity. While immigrant narratives are a stalwart in classic and contemporary American fiction, *Sour Heart*'s form as a short story collection is particularly interesting to this project, which frequently returns to ideas of community amidst abjectification, while Zhang's interest in the girl-body as a site of abjection made manifest provides a crucial link between

earlier sections on *The Bluest Eye* and *Salvage the Bones* with later sections on *Suicide Blonde* primarily, but also with the section on *Close to the Knives.*[83]

[83] Key contemporary texts on the immigrant experience include Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015), both of which won the Pulitzer Prize.

‘The damage done was total’:
The Bluest Eye and the experience of being made abject

‘No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly,’ writes Toni Morrison of the Breedloves, the damaged family at the heart of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*.[84] ‘They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance,’ Morrison writes, illuminating the suffocating sense of condemnation surrounding them from both the media and their own peers.[85] The effects of such intense internalisation of ugliness is at the core of the novel, in which Morrison offers up the Breedlove’s youngest daughter, Pecola — who is raped and impregnated by her father before ultimately going mad — as a sacrificial symbol of the horrors of internalised and institutionalised racism. Although there is already substantial criticism about Morrison’s work, given her standing as a key figure within contemporary literature, her depiction of the abused scapegoat Pecola is crucial to understanding the multiple strands of abjection that this thesis is occupied with.[86] The text, and this character specifically, will act as a touchstone for all later analysis; the novel’s position as an essential player in creating the framework for this thesis justifies its further analysis here. Despite the wealth of criticism already in existence, by positioning it within this much broader context alongside newer and less obviously linked texts, this thesis hopes to add some new ideas to existing Morrison scholarship. This chapter seeks to show how *The Bluest Eye* — despite exploring undeniably abject themes such as incest — remains partially outwith the scope of Kristeva’s theorisation of abjection as it stands, due to its lack of engagement with race, as I have outlined earlier. While the Kristevan abject is a useful lens for analysing the text, as a critical framework, it requires enrichment from additional critical work on race studies in order to engage with the novel on a deeper level. By examining the ways in which racism is intrinsically connected to the actions of

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[84] Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye,* (London: Vintage Digital, 2014), l.504.
[85] Morrison, 2014, l.504.
[86] This chapter will go on to reference multiple literary articles on Morrison’s novels, but there are also several collections focused on her work, including: *Toni Morrison: Paradise, Love, A Mercy* edited by Lucille P. Fultz, Jan Furman’s *Toni Morrison’s Fiction*, and *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison* by Tessa Roynon, to give an idea of the scope of literary criticism on her work.

abjection, this analysis looks to formulate a more contemporary form of abjection theory which operates intersectionality with critical race studies.

For Pecola — neglected by her family, rejected by her Black peers, and deemed unworthy of even the gaze of the local white shopkeeper — everything comes down to one question: '"how do you get someone to love you?"'.[87] The answer, she decides, is to have blue eyes. Blue eyes represent beauty to Pecola, who is convinced that 'if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different'.[88] Not only that, but she believes they would also act as protection, causing others, and specifically her parents, to behave differently, thinking that 'we mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'.[89] Of course, blue eyes also imply whiteness, which, for Pecola, means a kind of story book happiness, emulated by her beloved Shirley Temple and the Dick and Jane primer stories that Morrison uses as chapter headings. In this desire for a fantastical racial transformation, Emy Koopman suggests that *The Bluest Eye* can be read as a literary companion to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks,* arguing that both texts give an 'account of the inferiority complex suffered by colonized individuals in (post)colonial societies… [and] the desire among oppressed people to comply with the hegemonic ideal of their "oppressors"': to become white.'[90] This comparison rings true, particularly when considering Fanon's condemnation of this desire 'as a pathological reaction to an oppressive situation'; key here is his focus on this desire as a *reaction,* caused by external pressure and abuse, rather than mental illness or personal want. Morrison's depiction of Pecola's final decline into madness reflects this, careful as it is to highlight the ways in which she is pushed to a point of personal disintegration by the actions of others. In his work on mimicry, Homi Bhabha picks up on Fanon's argument; however, while Fanon considers the desire for whiteness a reaction towards oppression, rather than a resistance against it, Bhabha claims that it allows space for subversion of colonial power, arguing that the 'white mask' can

[87] Morrison, 2014, l.446.
[88] Ibid., 2014, l.594.
[89] Ibid., 2014, l.612.
[90] Emy Koopman, 'Incestuous rape, abjection, and the colonization of psychic space in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing,* 2013, Vol.49(3), pp.303-315, p.305.

operate as a way for the colonised to hide and preserve their true self from the coloniser. This argument assumes a certain degree of self-awareness, however, and does not take into account the effects of a self-hatred sustained in bad faith on one's ability to act out such resistance. It is precisely those without the power to resist, those who are unable to enact the kind of subversion that Bhabha endorses, that Morrison homes in on. In the foreword to *The Bluest Eye*, she notes that 'I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female.'[91] Bhabha's mimic resists abjection by refusing to blur the lines between the I and the other; although they don the mask of the coloniser for protection, they do not lose sight of their true Self beneath, nor do they forget the superficiality of the character of Other they portray. For Pecola, her compulsive attempts at mimicry lead to a sustained self-hatred which is lifted only once she has become mad and commits to a delusion of having magical blue eyes, losing any sense of Self in the process and becoming a figure of pure abjection.

Literary form as abject

While Koopman makes a case for all colonised subjects in post-colonial societies as abject figures, there is an additional dimension to Pecola's abjectification. Drawing on Kristeva's assertion that 'from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master,' Koopman argues that the colonised become objects of the abject as they 'constantly [bring] the imperial self into question'.[92] However, Pecola does not only challenge the identity of the white oppressor, but is a symbol of abject repulsion for her Black family and community, too. Before delving into the details of her final abjectification, we must first consider the events that lead to this end. To do so, Morrison depicts not only Pecola's own early life, but the lives of her parents and several members of the community, offering a glimpse into the workings of both generational and societal trauma. Various literary forms are utilised to explore these stories and unite them into a whole, each of which adds to the confluence of oppression upon Pecola. Firstly, there is the use of two

[91] Morrison, 2014, l.71.
[92] Kristeva, 1982, p.2.; Koopman, p.304.

kinds of framings. The novel begins with a passage co-opted from the Dick and Jane stories of the Elson-Gray Readers, a series of primers used from 1930-1965 to help teach children how to read. It begins, ‘here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy,’ and in its first iteration, is printed exactly as in the original primer text.[93] In the next paragraph, it is repeated, but without capitalisation or punctuation. In the third paragraph, it deteriorates further, losing any spaces between words and with compressed line spacing. Throughout the novel, sections of the degenerated version reappear as chapter headings, as in the Breedlove’s introductory chapter, which is titled:

> HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWHITEITHASAREDDOORITISVERYPRETTYITISVERYPRETTYPRETTYPRETTYP[94]

With Dick and Jane symbolising the idyllic — and necessarily white — American nuclear family, Morrison’s crippling of the ordered text foreshadows the disintegration of Pecola’s own fantasy, but also serves to disrupt the existence of such texts in the first place. In her essay, Debra T. Werrlein suggests that the ‘Dick and Jane primers not only posit the literary "masterplot" in *The Bluest Eye*; as textbooks in America's public schools, Morrison suggests they posit a national masterplot that defines Americanness within the parameters of innocent white middle-class childhood.’[95] Pecola does not lose access to the Dick and Jane dream as her life crumbles; rather, it was never available to her in the first place. The perpetuation of an unachievable life is just one of the ways in which Black children are taught not only that their lives are worth less than those of white children, but that their lives are not valid from the start; in Werrlein’s words, these primers ‘participated in a national illiteracy campaign that systematically disenfranchised young Black Americans, especially young Black girls.’[96] The corruption of the text into an unreadable mass positions it as an object of abjection: Morrison’s disruption physically destroys the ‘system, rules, order’ of the

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[93] Morrison, 2014, l.92.
[94] Ibid., 2014, l.448.
[95] Debra T. Werrlein, ‘Not so Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*’, *MELUS,* 2005, 30.4, pp.53-72, p.56.
[96] Werrlein, p.62.

text itself, grammatically, and figuratively, in terms of what it represents.[97] This forces us to contend with the question of how one can adhere to the 'order' of Dick and Jane when they are necessarily placed outwith it, made abject in their 'disorder', an issue Morrison protests against by the disordering of the words. The second framing in the text is Morrison's use of Claudia, one of Pecola's classmates, as the narrator. While the text is narrated from two perspectives — Claudia's, and that of an omniscient narrator who takes over in the chapters centred on characters other than Pecola — we begin the novel with Claudia's narration, and it is she who tells the majority of Pecola's story. Claudia and her sister Frieda are also Black, but benefit from the kind of supportive family that Pecola lacks, and maintain a strong sense of Self which helps them avoid succumbing to the kind of self-hating neuroses that plague her. The foremost example of this is when Claudia admits that she hates Shirley Temple and 'destroyed white baby dolls,' fuelled by a desire 'to discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, "Awwwww," but not for me?'.[98] Even though she confesses that she 'learned much later to worship [Shirley Temple],' she retains the self-awareness to know that 'the change was adjustment without improvement'.[99] Her acquiescence to the cult of Shirley Temple is, unlike Pecola's aspirational adoration, much closer to Bhabha's mimicry; she learns to accept the white mask, but she does not offer up her Self in exchange. The use of both of these devices — the Dick and Jane stories and Claudia's narration — serve to highlight Pecola's Otherness from the outset. Her life, for the reader, is always viewed in comparison to theirs. She never achieves the idyllic white happiness of Dick and Jane, nor does she get to experience the sense of agency and selfhood that Claudia and her sister have.

Claudia's life is not the only additional story we gain insight into. Although I am unable to analyse all of the substories in depth here, the fact that the novel utilises a community of stories to tell Pecola's is vital to understanding her fate as the abject scapegoat of the town. This use of community storytelling is also clearly linked to both *Sour Heart* and *Close to the Knives,* texts in which this kind of multi-narrative

[97] Kristeva, 1982, p.4.
[98] Morrison, 2014, l.297.
[99] Ibid., 2014, l.303.

form — abject in its refusal to individualise, as well as in its dismantling of borders — is particularly explicit, as I will analyse in the later sections focused on these texts. To briefly contextualise the sections of *The Bluest Eye* which this thesis does not cover, the two additional substories focus on two peripheral characters, Geraldine and Soaphead Church, who both experience a revulsion towards their own Blackness, which they attempt to distance themselves from in their own ways. Pecola, poor, Black, and vulnerable, becomes a manifestation of their own revulsions. While the details of their stories are not necessarily crucial to this analysis, their presence in the novel serves to exemplify the magnitude of the oppressive hatred which is piled upon Pecola, while also acting as examples of the different forms internalised racism may take. Morrison also includes chapters on the childhoods of Pecola's parents, Pauline and Cholly. While both offer background on the development of their behaviour towards Pecola, Pauline's story is particularly pertinent to this study, as it looks to uncover the root of the Breedlove's preoccupation with ugliness.

Beauty/ugliness as a racialised binary

Pauline is neglected and lonely as a child, paranoid about a foot injury that prevents her playing with other children. Upon meeting Cholly, she moves from the South to the North, where her 'country ways' leave her 'uncomfortable with the few Black women she met,' who look down on her for not straightening her hair.[100] Although she tries to change her appearance, Morrison notes that 'the sad thing was that Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favourable glances her way.'[101] She begins to visit the cinema alone, where these self-doubts multiply:

> Along with the idea of romantic love, [at the cinema] she was introduced to another— physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap… She was never able, after her

[100] Morrison, 2014, l.1494.; Ibid., 2014, l.1511.
[101] Ibid., 2014, l.1527.

> education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen.[102]

Pauline's ideas of beauty become associated with Jean Harlow, just like Pecola's are with Shirley Temple, and so become entangled with whiteness, too. She even begins to style her hair like Harlow's. When a tooth falls out at the cinema, however, she takes it as a sign of doom: 'There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone… Look like I just didn't care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly.'[103] She figures ugliness as a fact, and resigns herself to the idea that she will never be able to counteract it. Once she accepts herself as ugly, she tells us that her 'meanness got worse. I wanted my tooth back.'[104] Without her tooth, marked as ugly, she gives up joy and shoulders a sense of unworthiness, something which she fosters in Pecola, who she denounces as ugly from the moment of birth: 'Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.'[105] Morrison makes it clear that Pauline's understanding of beauty is warped towards whiteness, 'absorbed in full from the silver screen'.[106] This rings true to Ela Przybylo and Sara Rodrigues' take on the development of ugliness:

> Ugliness is inherently relational. There is no such thing as an "ugly body" in the sense that ugliness is not a property of bodies… Operating relationally, we are marked as ugly or we experience ourselves as ugly through a metrics of hierarchical comparison and evaluation of bodies. Ugliness is most often used pejoratively and against disenfranchised groups and individuals, and it is used to communicate not simply a quality among others but a moral failing, an absence of value in the predominant social order.[107]

This theoretical background is key to understanding Pauline's reaction: the loss of

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[102] Ibid., 2014, l.1572-1577.
[103] Ibid., 2014, l.1578.
[104] Ibid., 2014, l.1578.
[105] Ibid., 2014, l.1612.
[106] Ibid., 2014, l.1577.
[107] Ela Przybylo and Sara Rodrigues, *On the Politics of Ugliness,* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), p.16.

her tooth does not represent her becoming ugly, but represents her failure to assimilate with the women of the community and her sense of valuelessness. That 'ugliness' is loaded with moral weight is at the heart of the issue, as it is understood as 'shorthand for worthless, undesirable, undeserving'.[108] When images of happiness are necessarily images of beauty, as they are in the scenes Pauline consumes at the cinema, ugliness becomes a marker for unhappiness, or more meaningfully, being unworthy of happiness. When the beautiful are always the Subjects — of films, in books like Dick and Jane — the ugly are positioned as the Other, as that which the beautiful define themselves as not: to be ugly is to be abject. But while Pecola constantly strains against ugliness, turning her hatred of it inwards, Pauline turns it outward, allowing it to foster hatred towards Cholly and abjectify Pecola. While Pauline does not suffer the same fate as Pecola, Jane S. Bakerman argues that this sense of ugliness is the reason why Pauline 'cannot give [her] children a sense of self, for [she has] none of [her] own'.[109] Przybylo and Rodrigues go on to explain that 'thinking about abjection, disgust, and revolt is less about thinking about ugliness than it is about visceral reactions to ugliness,' suggesting that ideals of beauty and ugliness are ways of 'maintaining social relations and social margins'.[110] In this way, we can think of ugliness as a political tool, used to socially abjectify those outwith the margins; in this context, Black women and girls.

Pecola as the abject scapegoat

Following a childhood rife with self-hatred, perpetuated and encouraged by a community which abjectifies her by laying its own self-hatred at her feet, Pecola, having lost her Self to madness and delusion, becomes the town's martyr. As Werrlein points out, 'the protagonist of each subplot participates in Pecola's oppression,' a building of pressure which is made all the more tangible by Morrison's innovative use of multiple narrative form.[111] Werrlein goes on to argue that 'as these characters variously label, degrade, and define Pecola's body so as to disavow the

[108] Przybylo & Rodrigues, p.12.
[109] Jane S Bakerman, 'Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison', *American Literature,* 52.4, 1981, pp.541-563, p.544.
[110] Przybylo & Rodrigues, p.5.
[111] Werrlein, p.69.

realities of racism in their own lives, Morrison suggests that they mirror the work of a nation that ironically invests in the ideology of childhood innocence at the expense of its children.'[112] Following this metaphor, we can argue that Pecola herself is figured as a symbol of the state of the nation. While this line of thought is well supported by the novel, which situates Pecola's oppressive community as representative of an oppressive society at large, some critics view Pecola's descent into madness as a personal affliction, as opposed to forced destruction, a stance which troubles. Elizabeth B House claims that 'the tale's plot culminates in Cholly's rape of his daughter, but its theme deals with reasons for Pecola's rejection of herself,' however, to describe Pecola's madness as a result of her 'rejection of herself' does not quite ring true.[113] Keith E. Byerman also follows this train of thought, claiming that, in her madness, Pecola is produced by 'a social situation so distorted by the myth of whiteness… that she creates a self-contained reality'.[114] In keeping with Tyler's theory of social abjection, and Werrlein's explanation of the larger metaphor at work in *The Bluest Eye,* I would argue that the idea of Pecola rejecting herself is too active; Pecola's selfhood is gradually chipped away at by the abjectification of those around her, who utilise her as a vehicle of rejection. Ultimately, while Pecola is produced by an undoubtedly racist society, it also produces the madness she succumbs to. Her abjectification is not created by her, nor does she 'self-contain' it; it is regularly and consistently enforced by those around her for their own means. By positioning Pecola as the manifestation of pure abjection, they are able to claim themselves as non-abject in comparison:

> All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed... All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness

[112] Werrlein, p.69.
[113] Elizabeth B. House, 'The "Sweet Life" in Toni Morrison's Fiction'. *American Literature,* 1984, 56.2, pp.181-202, p.182.
[114] Keith E. Byerman, 'Intense Behaviours: The Use of the Grotesque in *The Bluest Eye* and *Eva's Man*', *CLA Journal,* 25.4, pp.447-457, p.448.

> made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength.[115]

Byerman goes on to suggest that we can see her as 'a grotesque Messiah; she gives the world not grace but the illusion of relief from intolerable circumstances. She is sacrificed so that others may live with the perversions of society.'[116] Her complete immersion in self-hatred mirrors the self-hate which the townspeople repress within themselves, figuring her as a reflection of those around her rather than an independent subject. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's description of Pecola as a 'scapegoat' is a helpful term for understanding what it means to be made abject, but it also suggests purpose: to be a scapegoat is still, nonetheless, a state of being. However, this purpose does not serve the Self: it only serves those who would define themselves against you. In this way, Pecola is the ultimate abject Other, functioning as the town's own version of Dorian Gray's portrait, a pool into which they can drown their own self-hate. Morrison herself admits that in Pecola, she 'chose a unique situation, not a representative one'.[117] The monstrousness of Pecola's tragedy is not designed for relatability, but to operate as a cautionary tale, illuminating the psychic destruction wrought by racist ideals. By showing us the most extreme example of social abjection, we can see its true dangers.

It cannot be denied that it is only once she succumbs to madness that Pecola experiences some form of relief. Byerman claims that the novel ends with Pecola talking to herself in the mirror, but that can be contended. The penultimate chapter, which is the first one which Pecola herself narrates, is made up of a conversation she has with an unidentified figure about her 'blue eyes', which, in her delusion, she believes she now has:

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[115] Morrison, 2014, l.2673.
[116] Keith E. Byerman, 'Intense Behaviours: The Use of the Grotesque in *The Bluest Eye* and *Eva's Man*', *CLA Journal,* 25.4, pp.447-457, p.452.
[117] Morrison, 2014, l.2705.

What did you stop [going to school] for?

They made me.

Who made you?

I don't know. After that first day at school when I had my blue eyes. Well, the next day they had Mrs. Breedlove come out. Now I don't go anymore...

Why didn't I know you before?

You didn't need me before…

I was so lonely for friends. And you were right here. Right before my eyes.

No, honey. Right after your eyes.[118]

This chapter is the first to allow us entry into Pecola's mind, and so, rather than diminish this conversation to talking in the mirror, it is surely a richer vein of analysis to consider it from her perspective. While the sense of the figure being imaginary is undeniable — Pecola herself even acknowledges that she wonders if Mrs Breedlove 'even sees you… she almost walks right over you' — the idea of Pecola simply talking to herself seems an oversimplification, even if it does adhere to the idea of a split self.[119] At this point, she is pregnant with her father's baby, a fact which she refuses to acknowledge, along with his multiple rapes. Nevertheless, even in her fractured state, she cannot completely deny that there is a change within her; however, instead of accepting her pregnancy, she claims this change to be her new blue eyes. It is because of her blue eyes that she had to leave school, that her mother 'look away from me all of the time'.[120] We can conflate these two physical changes, then, and argue that her delusion of blue eyes represents her pregnancy. Following along this thread, we can view this imaginary friend as a manifestation of her unborn baby, who only appeared 'right after your eyes,' or once she became pregnant.[121] By identifying this figure as a manifestation of the unborn baby, this argument also exemplifies the kind of split self that Byerman refers to, but follows up

[118] Ibid., 2014, l.2527.; Ibid., 2014, l.2513.
[119] Ibid., 2014, l.2542.
[120] Ibid., 2014, l.2500.
[121] Ibid., 2014, l.2541.

on the clues of the text more meaningfully. It also engages with the abject in a much more complex manner: the unborn baby is necessarily abject, it exists wholly within a liminal, boundaryless space, and is both of her but not her. This theory is strengthened by the fact that this 'friend' goes away when she miscarries. Although Pecola has a 'voice' here for the first time, the splitting of the Self in this conversation proves that she has been so irretrievably crippled by her depersonification into the abject Other that she cannot conceive of herself as a whole: 'the damage done was total'.[122]

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison presents an account of the dangers of abjectification. While this text is specifically centred around the effects of racism as an abjectifying force, it also provides a clear portrayal of the harmful depersonifying effects of abjection. Pecola's role as town scapegoat illuminates the urge that people, and society more widely, have to deny their own abject tendencies by forcing them onto the Other, while also showing us exactly what it feels like to be that Other. If we understand *The Bluest Eye* as a case study in being made abject, and what this experience looks like in practice, then all later references to abjectification can be understood through this example. While analysis on later texts will look at different forms of abjectification, and ultimately, forms of resistance towards such abjectification, Morrison's novel acts as a key touchstone upon which the rest of this thesis will build.

[122] Ibid., 2014, l.2663.

‘Make them know’:
Abjectification and the demand to be witnessed in *Salvage the Bones*

In her 2016 interview with Jesmyn Ward, Anna Hartnell argues that the crucial difference between Ward and Toni Morrison — whom Ward refers to as an influence — is the concept of ‘a redemptive horizon’.[123] Looking specifically at Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* and Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in both this chapter and the last, I posit that, in this case it is Ward’s novel which offers the potential for redemption, rather than Morrison’s. While the texts are linked by their focus on themes of disrupted girlhood, abjectification, and teenage pregnancy, the key difference is seen in the culmination of these pregnancies: by way of self-discovery, Esch Batiste, Ward’s fifteen-year-old protagonist, presents the possibility for empowerment and agency despite abjectification, while Morrison’s Pecola succumbs to the depersonifying effects of being made abject. Utilising Sinéad Moynihan’s concept of literary recycling as a theoretical framework, I argue that Ward’s novel offers a rewriting of these communal themes, reconfiguring them in such a way that suggests that the trauma of being made abject can be escaped if one is truly witnessed by one’s community. Crucially, Ward suggests that the demand to be witnessed can be utilised as a tool against the depersonification that occurs when one is forced into abjection; she does not position abjection itself as holding the potential for agency. This idea — while not within the scope of Kristeva’s theory of the abject or early feminist adopters of her work, as I have outlined in earlier chapters — is in clear conversation with Imogen Tyler’s concept of social abjection and offers a natural next step onwards from my analysis of *The Bluest Eye.*

Firstly, it is necessary to look into Hartnell’s concept of ‘a redemptive horizon’:

> The idea of “America,” the dream of a meritocratic society where the conditions of your birth need not determine your destiny, sustains the prophetic economy of the jeremiad, even in the work of a writer like Toni

[123] Anna Hartnell, ‘When Cars Become Churches: Jesmyn Ward’s Disenchanted America’, *Journal of American Studies,* 2016, Vol.50(1), pp.205-218, p.210.

> Morrison, who has been so instrumental in reminding contemporary America of the horrors of slavery and its afterlife. Jesmyn Ward's work signals a new departure in this context, whereby hopes for redemption give way to a theme for a less idealistic, more pragmatic, age: survival.[124]

Comparing Ward's *Salvage the Bones,* which follows a Black family in the fictional Mississippi town of Bois Sauvage in the twelve days leading up to, during, and immediately following Hurricane Katrina, with Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,* however, seems to suggest a flaw in this argument.[125] Take, for example, the final lines of each novel. *The Bluest Eye,* which concludes with Claudia lamenting Pecola Breedlove's forced descent into madness, ends: 'At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late.'[126] *Salvage the Bones* closes on the day after Hurricane Katrina swept through Bois Sauvage, amongst the rubble of the Batiste's former home, as they wait for their lost dog China to return. The teenage narrator, Esch, having finally admitted her pregnancy to her family, says: 'China will bark and call me sister. In the star-suffocated sky, there is a great waiting silence. She will know that I am a mother.'[127] Redemption, whether we understand it as an act of saving, of absolution, or of regaining, ultimately requires change to be enacted. Of these two endings, Ward's, while set amidst destruction and inarguable suffering, has much more of a sense of this kind of horizon. Change, here, is inevitable; they are merely 'waiting' for its arrival.[128] For Morrison's Pecola, however, 'it's much, much, much too late for change': as she states earlier, 'the damage done was total.'[129] Regardless, Hartnell's argument that there is a key difference between Morrison and Ward still stands: Esch does survive, while Pecola, in the destruction of her personhood, does not. I would argue, however, that this difference between *The Bluest Eye* and *Salvage the Bones* is rooted in the ways in which the two protagonists respond to abjectification. While the process of being

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[124] Hartnell, p.210.
[125] There is an argument to be made for a potential 'redemptive horizon' in some of Morrison's other novels, however, for the purpose and limited scope of this thesis, I am considering *The Bluest Eye* specifically and exclusively.
[126] Morrison, *The Bluest Eye,* l.2680.
[127] Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones,* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), p.258.
[128] Ward, *Salvage the Bones,* p.258.
[129] Morrison, l.2680; Ibid., l.2663.

made abject pushes Pecola into mental illness, Esch defies abjectification by demanding that her Subjecthood be witnessed. The need to 'make them know' is a recurring sentiment in *Salvage the Bones,* and one which massively contributes to Esch's sense of agency and self, ultimately acting as a weapon against abjectification. This offensive tactic helps her to resist succumbing to the depersonification of being made abject, as Pecola does.[130]

Literary recycling and abject waste

This idea of power existing within the act of being witnessed runs through Morrison's work, alongside the work of many other canonical Black women writers, before coming to fruition in *Salvage the Bones.*[131] To consider this line of comparison in more depth, I am borrowing from Sinéad Moynihan's theory of 'recycling', which looks at the ways in which Ward utilises rewriting in the novel. In an essay which posits *Salvage the Bones* as a retelling of *As I Lay Dying,* Moynihan coins the term 'recycling,' which she describes as 'a more politically engaged model of rewriting… a term with connotations of resolute social engagement and looking outward and forward, as opposed to the potentially solipsistic and retrospective textual worlds with which rewriting tends to be concerned.'[132] To unpack this idea, Moynihan suggests that recycling is particularly relevant to works focused on those who are 'consign[ed] to the category of waste' by neoliberal discourses.[133] This sentiment is rooted in Henry Giroux's theory of 'the biopolitics of disposability,' which asserts that Hurricane Katrina unveiled a 'systematic assault on the welfare state' by neoliberal policies, which sought to 'remove or make invisible those individuals and groups who are either seen as a drain' or who disrupt 'the neoconservative dream of an American empire.'[134] There is a clear link between Giroux's argument and Tyler's work on the

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[130] Ward, *Salvage the Bones,* p.171.
[131] For the purpose of clarity, this chapter focuses on the relationship between Ward and Morrison, however, there is a clear argument to be made for Ward's literary references to key Black women writers including Alice Walker and Gayl Jones, as well as works like Sapphire's *Push* and Julie Dash's film, *Daughters of the Dusk*.
[132] Sinéad Moynihan, 'From Disposability to Recycling: William Faulkner and the New Politics of Rewriting in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*', *Studies in the Novel,* 2015, Vol.47(4), pp.550-567, p.551.
[133] Moynihan, p.551.
[134] Giroux, 'Reading Hurricane Katrina', p.174-175.

socially abject, with both theories positioning the neoliberal other — non-white, non-wealthy, non-"productive" — as disruptive to the neoconservative status quo, and so exiled to the borders of society, or made 'invisible' through abjectification. In this context, the poor, Black Batiste family and especially Esch, who, as a Black teenage mother, is 'according to neoliberal logic… exemplary of a "mismanaged life,"' are defined as waste; or, in Esch's own words, 'human debris in the middle of all of the rest of it'.[135] Although Moynihan does not explicitly refer to abjection or Kristeva, the language she uses is explicitly linked to abject theory: 'waste', 'improper', and 'blurs the boundary,' all terms she uses to describe the actions and treatment of Esch, clearly recall the Kristevan abject.[136] Esch, who describes herself as 'small, dark: invisible,' can be understood as a manifestation of social abjection: poor, Black, female, young, and soon to be a teenage single mother, she is emblematic of a non-life, living outwith the borders of neoliberal acceptance and order.[137] For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to consider what literary recycling means in the context of abjection. Moynihan defines recycling as an act in which 'an object is reused for a purpose different from its original function,' however, she is clear that this need not be seen as a downgrading of the original function. Instead, it offers a route towards progressing the next object it is transformed into, as seen in the way Ward utilises the literary and cultural capital of Faulkner to draw the Batiste family, subjects who would be considered traditionally 'non-literary' within the white canon, into equal standing.[138] Moynihan's idea can only be strengthened by viewing it alongside abjection theory. There is a definite sense of disorder, an abject quality, in altering the original function of something, and yet, it is difficult to see the transformative nature of recycling as anything other than positive. Recycling, then, can be seen to belong to the realm of the abject, as intrinsically tied to abjection as it is to waste and disorder, and yet its potential for transformation allows it to become a subversive act, one which accepts the abjection of a discarded object and transforms it into something with purpose.

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[135] Moynihan, p.555.; Ward, p.237.
[136] Moynihan, p.563.; Ibid., p.565.
[137] Ward, p.28.
[138] Moynihan, p.564.

While Moynihan's interest in the novel's connections to Faulkner are not pertinent to this study, her theory can also be used to analyse Ward's 'recycling' of the themes present in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye.* In multiple moments, *Salvage the Bones* seems to speak back to this text; while Pecola was 'always alone,' Esch is so used to being surrounded by her brothers and their male friends that her home 'felt strange when they weren't there, as empty as a fish tank, dry of water and fish, but filled with rocks and fake coral'.[139] The crowds of boys are The Pit's natural inhabitants, the 'water and fish,' comforting in their familiarity and sense of belonging, while a lack of them has the same sense of uncanniness that 'fake' replicas do.[140] While Pecola is consistently hurt by almost all of the men she meets, including her abusive father, a brother who abandons her, and a violent peer, Esch is protected and loved by the men of her family, and devoted to her brothers: 'where my brothers go, I follow.'[141] Moynihan suggests that Ward's characterisation of the Batiste family, in which 'cooperation and empathy rather than atomization and selfishness are the distinguishing features' can 'be read as a strategy of resistance to the pathologizing of the Black family — albeit without romanticizing their struggles'.[142] In this case, we can consider this as an active rewriting of Morrison's Breedlove family. At the start of *The Bluest Eye,* Cholly Breedlove sets fire to their home, and the family is physically 'atomized': 'Mrs Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for; the boy, Sammy, was with some other family; and Pecola was to stay with us. Cholly was in jail.'[143] The Pit, on the other hand, is not just a central base for the Batistes, but for extended family too, in the form of the boys who congregate there. The Breedloves also exemplify the kind of selfishness Moynihan refers to: Sammy, Pecola's brother, 'never took her' on his multiple escape runs from the home; her mother, Pauline, is too engrossed in her own self-hatred to care for Pecola, preferring the white child of her employers, and refuses to believe her when she confesses her father's rapes; Cholly, her father, spends all of the family's money on alcohol for himself, and rapes Pecola twice in a subconscious bid to assure himself of his own power.[144] By

[139] Morrison, l.1161.; Ward, p.10.
[140] Ibid., p.10.
[141] Ibid., p.53.
[142] Moynihan, p.557.
[143] Ibid., p.557.; Morrison, l.244.
[144] Ibid., l.601.

describing the various traumas of Pauline and Cholly's childhoods, Morrison outlines the ways in which their self-hatred and pervading sense of their own abject ugliness has left them unable to love or empathise with Pecola, culminating in their various abuses towards her. In contrast, empathy is a constant hum in *Salvage the Bones.* When Esch confronts Manny, the father of her unborn baby, and is rebuked, she silently returns to her brothers, isolated in the knowledge of her pain. However, Skeeter, with whom she has a particularly deep relationship, reaches out: 'it is as if he is touching the sadness in me with his hand'.[145] Ward makes it clear here that Esch, even in the moments where she feels as though she is alone, is always cared for and supported by an unspoken love and connection. Later, she tells Big Henry that her baby 'doesn't have a daddy,' to which he replies: "This baby got plenty daddies."'[146] In these moments, Ward emphasises the scope of Esch's support system — which includes her biological family as well as adopted family, like Big Henry — and their refusal to discard her to the realm of waste and the isolation of abjection. This support is critically absent from Pecola's life, and provides a key example of Ward's recycling: teenage pregnancy is not rewritten as painless, but the unmitigated tragedy is cast aside in favour of an alternative narrative.

The act of witnessing

Clearly the theme of Black teenage pregnancy is the most crucial link between the two texts, and the most obvious example of Ward's rewriting. While pregnancy is the final blow to Pecola's identity, resulting in the complete destruction of her sanity, Esch's pregnancy, although troubled, eventually results in a newfound sense of empowerment and clarity surrounding her own identity.[147] Ward takes the trope and repurposes it, utilising it as a tool of agency rather than depersonification. The most important instance of recycling is found in Ward's reclamation of the act of witnessing. In *The Bluest Eye,* Pecola, in her madness, is denied a witness: 'Every

[145] Ward, p.147.
[146] Ibid., p.254.
[147] There are more in depth comparisons to be made between *Salvage the Bones* and such seminal Black women's writing like *The Color Purple* and *Corregidora*, however, such analysis is limited here.

time I look at somebody, they look off.'[148] Claudia notes that the town 'tried to see her without looking at her… we avoided Pecola Breedlove— forever.'[149] As outlined in the previous chapter, Pecola is confined to the role of abject scapegoat, and in her state of abjection, holds up a mirror to the townspeople's own abjection. Rather than face this painful reflection, the townspeople refuse to witness her in a bid to avoid admitting their own abject nature. In refusing to see her, they invalidate her personhood, casting her out as an object of revulsion. Where Pecola is denied the validation of being known, Esch is able to find empowerment in being witnessed as a Subject. This stands to suggest that demanding the right to be 'known' can be utilised as a weapon against the depersonification of being made abject; by insisting that your Self is witnessed, and so affirmed by being witnessed, it becomes impossible to be estranged as Other. To be clear, however, this is not meant as an attempt to concur with feminist criticism which posits abjection as empowering on its own merit — Tyler has established the flaws in this argument in her essay, 'Against Abjection' — but rather to outline a mode of resistance against being forcefully *made* abject. Tyler's argument that 'criticism on the subversive potential of 'abject parody' fails to address either the troubling premises of Kristeva's theory or the social consequences of living as a body that is identified as maternal and abject' is key to understanding this: Esch, in her demands to be 'known', is not attempting to lean into her abjection, but rather forcing others to witness her Subjecthood.[150] In doing so, it becomes impossible to discard her as fully abject Other, as was done to Pecola. However, the crucial aspect between the two girls is not just in their personal desires — Pecola wants to 'be known' just as much as Esch does — but in the response from those around them; one cannot be known without another to know them. In this, Ward presents a fascinating solution to Tyler's account of being made abject: she reminds us that if being witnessed in your Subjecthood is a weapon against abjectification, it is not a weapon which can be wielded alone. Esch's 'people' are a necessary part of her survival, and her agency is preserved not by being alone, like Pecola, but by being supported by a community.[151]

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[148] Morrison, *The Bluest Eye,* l.2494.
[149] Ibid., l.2663.
[150] Tyler, 'Against Abjection', p.78.
[151] Ward, p.150.

It is important to note, however, that it is not until the end of the novel that Esch truly taps into this sense of agency; up until that point, Ward shows her grappling with forms of abjection that trouble her identity. One of the main ways that Esch's shaky sense of self is illustrated is through her frequent identification with animals. In her interview with Hartnell, Ward says that, during her writing process, she 'would think about what are the metaphors what [Esch] would see… what is informing what she's seeing, giving her context for what she's seeing'.[152] Isolated within the Pit, their home in the woods, Esch's world is dominated by animals and nature, and so her metaphors are rooted within these contexts: Big Henry is 'graceful as a heron,' Junior is 'forever the puppy weaned too soon,' Randall and Skeetah hunch 'like birds, feathers ruffled against the bad wind,' while her pregnant stomach is 'solid as a squash,' a 'melon… ripe: intent on bearing seed'.[153] Christopher W. Clark notes that 'the characters' identities are merged with those of animals, much like derogatory cultural stereotypes that paint African Americans as non-human, or animalistic, in character,' however, we can view Ward's utilisation of this trope as another form of recycling, subverting racist stereotypes by 'overturning and investigating these figurations of animality and savagery'.[154] On a similar note, Holly Cade Brown points out that when Skeetah refers to man and dog as 'equal,' Ward resists 'the social allegory in which comparing a human to a dog inherently reduces the former's status'.[155] This reflects my earlier arguments on recycling as something which can simultaneously boost the next interaction without reducing the capital of the last, suggesting that Ward is constantly thinking about relationships — between one work and another, between people, between people and animals — in a way that refuses to ascribe to binaries. This itself has abject themes, as an outlook situated within the liminal zone which exists in the push and pull of relationship dynamics. The kind of racial subversion Clark references is seen again in Ward's depiction of the Pit. Described as a 'refuse-laden yard' full of 'detritus' — 'pieces of engines' a rusted

[152] Hartnell, p.212.
[153] Ward, p.120.; Ibid., p.89.; Ibid., p.232.; Ibid., p.57.; Ibid., p.102.
[154] Christopher W. Clark, "What Comes to the Surface: Storms, Bodies and Community in Jesmyn Ward's Salvage the Bones," Mississippi Quarterly, 2015, Vol.68(3-4), pp.341-358, p.349.
[155] Ward, p.29.; Holly Cade Brown, 'Figuring Giorgio Agamben's "Bare Life" in the Post-Katrina Works of Jesmyn Ward and Kara Walker', Journal of American Studies, Cambridge, 15.1, 2017, pp.1-19, p.8.

refrigerator, an old washing machine' — it is painted as a kind of graveyard of things which they have tried to salvage, but have been unable to.[156] The lack of purpose and order of things left to rust and rot has clear abject qualities, as does its isolated state, distanced from not only neighbours, but markers of neoliberal 'civilization' like supermarkets. However, later in the novel, Ward flips its position when Esch says 'we live in the black heart of Bois Sauvage, and [the white farmer] lives out away in the pale arteries'.[157] Where her previous descriptions allow us to assume that the Pit, isolated and marred by disuse, is a border-space, exiled from the civilised centre, this assertion subverts that. Instead, the Pit is 'the black heart' while the clear, fertile ground of the white farmer is the border-space.[158] Brown notes that the novel represents those 'that have been positioned outside the boundaries of state protection,' an idea reflected in multiple critical works on *Salvage the Bones'* portrayal of Hurricane Katrina. While the Batistes clearly represent the Black population neglected by the state in the aftermath of Katrina, Ward's positioning of the Pit as the 'black heart,' brings assumptions about Black spaces as 'other' into question, and can be viewed as a defiant reproach to the kind of social abjection such state abandonment enacts.[159]

Animal imagery and identification

As the only 'other girl on the Pit,' Skeetah's dog, China, becomes Esch's main point of comparison, and so, the most obvious example of her animal identification is seen in her persistent reflections on the connections between herself, her mother, who died in childbirth, and China. The opening sees China birthing her first litter as Esch watches: 'China's turned on herself. If I didn't know, I would think she was trying to eat her paws'.[160] Posed like the ouroboros, China is immediately positioned as a symbol of both creation and destruction, a trained fighting dog who is now 'giving like she once took away'.[161] This, in turn, links her to Esch's mother, with Esch's narration

[156] Ward, p.18.; Ibid., p.89.
[157] Ibid., p.97.
[158] Ibid., p.97
[159] Brown, p.2.
[160] Ward, p.1.
[161] Ibid., p.1.

intersplicing memories of her mother dying after giving birth to her younger brother with her observations of China's labour. Motherhood, then, is intrinsically linked to death for Esch, setting the tone for her struggles to accept her own pregnancy. However, it is not just physical death that motherhood represents, but a death of the self; when Esch imagines her baby, 'who gives me that name as if it is mine: *Mama,*' she imagines a loss of identity.[162] In this idea of pregnancy as disruptive to identity, *Salvage the Bones* charts a noticeably Kristevan argument, suggesting that in the 'dual relationship' between mother and child, only one Subject can survive.[163] However, while Kristeva's argument is focused on the child as the subject who fears their 'identity sinking irretrievably into the mother,' here, it is the mother who fears losing her identity to the child, an issue which Kristeva's theory does not account for.[164] As Tyler argues, in Kristeva's work, the mother 'cannot exist as a subject in her own right, but only as the subject's perpetual other'.[165] Esch's insistence that she be witnessed, and her state as a subject be known, directly points to this hole in Kristeva's theory while also showing a potential route for resisting her assumption that to be a mother is necessarily to be abject. Indeed, if we accept the argument that, in Ward's work, resistance to abjection requires a supporting relationship with others, then motherhood can provide a way to regain agency *despite* abjection, rather than necessitate a loss of subjectivity.

By examining *Salvage the Bones* alongside *The Bluest Eye,* we see that Pecola's fate need not be the fate of all. Where Morrison's protagonist struggled under the weight of being made abject, in Esch, Ward offers an alternative. By recycling these issues and creating a new story, Ward presents a clear model for resisting the depersonification of being made abject, suggesting that there is power in community, and that the act of being witnessed can be utilised as a tool for agency and thus a weapon against being made abject. This focus on community, and the ways it can operate within the realm of the abject while simultaneously offering a route to resistance and agency, will be further explored in the following section on

[162] Ward, p.219.
[163] Kristeva, p.64.
[164] Ibid., p.64.
[165] Tyler, 'Against Abjection', p.85-86.

Sour Heart. This section will build upon the themes outlined so far, particularly focusing on the abject permeability of communities, and how this abject nature must be accepted if the power of community is to be experienced.

‘My baby tongue’:
M/Other tongues, immigration and eroding borders in *Sour Heart*

Speaking on her debut short story collection, *Sour Heart,* Jenny Zhang comments on the motivation behind her collection of stories showcasing the experiences of a community of Chinese immigrants in the US:

> I didn’t want to give into a white American gaze that wants these stories about immigrants hating themselves. I wanted to show families that love each other. The burden is not that they want to be white, or that they wish they didn’t have families with such unreasonable expectations for them. The burden is coming from a family that loves each other too much. I didn’t want to show these Chinese immigrants as outsiders. In their world, they’re insiders.[166]

This section will focus on this outsider/insider dichotomy, or, in Kristevan terminology, the relationship between the Subject/Other. It will refer back to previous analysis on race and Otherhood as outlined in the sections on *The Bluest Eye* and *Salvage the Bones,* but with a specific focus on the immigrant experience.[167] *Sour Heart* is comprised of seven short stories, each told in first person narration by a young, first generation Chinese-American female protagonist and centred, for the most part, around family. Each story has a different narrator, but they are broadly similar in expression and experience, operating as, what Jia Tolentino refers to as, ‘mutually exclusive versions of each other’.[168] For the various narrators of *Sour Heart,* their Otherness has multiple identifiers — primarily, race, language, and food — and this section will look at the ways in which Zhang explores the impact of such identifiers on her young protagonists. It also pays particular attention to the abject qualities of ‘a family that loves each other too much,’ investigating the ways in which such

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[166] Monika Zaleska, ‘Jenny Zhang: “I Didn’t Want to Give in to the White American Gaze”, *Literary Hub,* 2017. https://bit.ly/3yu7Ln8 [Accessed: 04/05/2021].
[167] While Pecola and Esch experience a sense of Othering by way of racial difference, they never struggle with their identity as American or with an ability to operate within the American model of being; indeed, it is arguably this very connection to the hegemonic White American centre that makes their Othering on the basis of something as unchangeable as skin colour so painful.
[168] Jia Tolentino, ‘Jenny Zhang’s Obscene, Beautiful, Moving Story Collection, “Sour Heart”, *The New Yorker,* 2017, https://bit.ly/3f4NIUV [Accessed: 06/05/2021].

interdependent relationships erode and reconstruct borders around identity, both personal and cultural. Abjection, in these narratives, becomes a space in which Zhang's families can resist acculturation by redrawing their own borders.

Abject language and 'family talk'

'To my nainai, yeye, haobu, gonggong — I am always trying to reach you in my baby tongue,' writes Zhang in the acknowledgements to *Sour Heart.*[169] This idea of the 'baby tongue' recurs throughout the collection, in which none of the child protagonists remember how to speak fluent Chinese, despite knowing they once could. She goes on to credit her parents and brother, 'who speak to me in the finest, most private of tongues'.[170] Language, here, is not fixed; Zhang does not conceptualise it along the binary lines of Chinese/English. Instead, it is the various 'tongues' we use that are of interest: private, public, baby, mother, none of which fully obey the language rules of either English or Chinese. Fellow Chinese American author Amy Tan has also written on the matter of tongues, noting that while she has described her mother's English 'as "broken" or "fractured",' in fact, 'to me, my mother's English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It's my mother tongue.'[171] Tan calls this 'family talk', a useful term for the private tongue which Zhang mentions, arguing that 'the language spoken in the family, especially in immigrant families which are more insular, plays a large role in shaping the language of the child.'[172] This sentiment is echoed by Vietnamese-American writer Ocean Vuong, reflecting on his 'third, fourth grade level' grasp of the Vietnamese language, learned from his mother who was forced to stop school due to the Vietnam War. When he later tries to learn more advanced Vietnamese, he discovers a disconnect: 'when I started to use certain words with my family members, they'd say, "well, what is that? What's that word?" And I realized I don't want to learn anymore… Vietnamese is the only thing I have left with them. Every new word I know in Vietnamese is one word further from

[169] Jenny Zhang, *Sour Heart*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), p.301.
[170] Ibid., p.301.
[171] Amy Tan, 'Mother Tongue', *Stamford,* 2006, Vol.56 (4), pp.20-23, p.21.; Ibid., p.20.
[172] Ibid., p.21.

them.'[173] It is not knowledge of Vietnamese, in an official context, that connects him to his family; instead, they have formed their own family talk, created from their own common knowledge. In a later story, one of Zhang's protagonists comments, 'my first year in America, no matter what language I used, I was always wrong.'[174] Family talk, then — not a language-proper but an unconstrained, fully verbal tongue, without the limitations or imposed order of language rules like grammar and pronunciation — provides a way to communicate without the fear of being wrong.

Analysed through a Kristevan lens, this kind of family talk has all of the characteristics of the abject: something without 'identity, system, order,' something which is 'in-between' and 'ambiguous'.[175] In her Nobel lecture, Toni Morrison argues that 'official' language is 'censored and censoring', rooted in 'exclusivity and dominance', which means that it 'thwarts the intellect, stalls conscience, suppresses human potential' as it cannot 'form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences.'[176] Zhang's text conveys a lack of deference to official language, both figuratively within the text — in which the characters engage with each other through unofficial family talk — and formally, in her rejection of classic novelistic or grammatical form: in choosing short stories over the novel, frequently favouring a run-on, stream of consciousness-style sentence structure, and non-traditional, colloquial grammar such as multiple exclamation marks, her attitude towards form recalls Morrison's similarly abject grammatic subversion in *The Bluest Eye*. Unofficial language, displayed in this way, may well be abject in its liminal, disordered nature, but according to Morrison's argument, this can also be a source of power. By rejecting official language, Zhang is able to surpass its limitations and offer an alternative, one which allows for the potential of new ideas, and, crucially, the telling of another, non-canonical, non-white story. This transgressive power within abjection can be seen in the way in which family talk is depicted as a place of comfort, a place of deeper and unlimited understanding, a space in which the family

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[173] Ocean Vuong in conversation with Tommy Orange, City Arts & Lectures, 2020 <https://www.cityarts.net/event/ocean-vuong/> [Accessed: 01/12/2021].
[174] Zhang, *Sour Heart,* p.204.
[175] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p.4.
[176] Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 1993, NobelPrize.org, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/> [Accessed: 20/12/2021].

are connected by a tongue that holds meaning only to one another, not only in Zhang's work but in Tan and Vuong's, as well. This experience does not hold the same negative connotations generally associated with abjection — dread, disturbance, uncanniness — but instead, is something which positively affects their lives and fosters community. Nonetheless, the abject qualities persevere, particularly when we consider the ways in which such a private and interdependent language may blur the borders of individual identity in 'a family that loves each other too much'.[177] I would posit that the crucial difference here is rooted in the form abjection takes. Zhang's families — different in each story, but generally consisting of widely similar relationships — are, for the most part, disinterested in the external world. Their relationships are intense and codependent, operating as an ecosystem of intermingled Selves in the family home. However, despite existing within this realm of the abject, they are not preoccupied with the experience of being *made* abject in the way that the Breedloves are, for example. They cultivate this abject family community themselves; instead of attempting to blend into the American centre which they are outcast from, they have chosen to build their own borders. In one story, the family's neighbours approach them with protest: 'We're West Indians, they said. Tell your kids that. My father came home confused by the entire interaction, but later my mom and I figured they must have been referring to those asshole Korean kids.'[178] In this moment, Zhang highlights the way in which, for immigrant families, to be Other is simultaneously to be the same. Rather than attempt to tackle this form of depersonifying abjectification, Zhang's families choose to find solace within abjection, carving out a small space in which they can utilise its subversive qualities for their own comfort.

While the private tongue acts as a glue, language can also cause issues for Zhang's protagonists. One of the most striking examples comes in 'Our Mothers Before Them'. The longest story in the collection, it switches between Annie's first-person narration as her uncle comes to visit her family from China, and the story of her mother and uncle's childhood during the Cultural Revolution. At a party,

[177] Zaleska, 2017.
[178] Zhang, *Sour Heart,* p.5.

Annie's parents sing a Chinese duet on the karaoke machine, and Zhang transcribes the lyrics as translated into English by Annie: '*"You and I are like [__ __] birds."*'[179] The use of blanks highlights the gaps in her knowledge, and later she says of the song 'It was a Chinese that was somewhere between the Chinese I understood and used with my parents and a Chinese that I only heard during the big CCTV Chinese New Year's all-day gala'.[180] Like Vuong, she speaks Chinese only with a 'baby tongue', noting that she cannot remember her early life in China, and the Chinese that she does understand consists of the family talk between them, rather than formal or 'proper' Chinese. After the arrival of her uncle, Annie's mother begins to break away from family talk: 'more and more she used words I didn't understand.'[181] While her uncle's time with them is a positive experience, it also highlights the fragility of the familial ecosystem; when he arrives, unsettling the dynamic, family talk is no longer a satisfactory language. Her mother's use of more formal Chinese, which Annie cannot understand, disrupts the systems they have in place, creating a new border whereby Annie is Othered from her own family.

In her review of the collection, Emily LaBarge picks up on this additional layer of isolation, noting that 'questions of language and how to translate experience recur, embodied by narrators who are acutely aware of occupying a space – physical, cultural and linguistic – in between English and Chinese, neither of which rings as a truly native tongue.'[182] For Zhang's children of immigrant families, language is a two-sided border: they are Othered from their parents because they cannot speak fluent Chinese, but their parents are equally Othered from them because they cannot speak fluent English. Family-talk, then, provides an alternative safe space: 'at home, we spoke in Chinese. None of us knew how often and how badly the other made mistakes in English. None of us knew the other's humiliations.'[183] Although abject by nature, it is the very abject properties of family talk — liminality, ambiguity, improper and so free from the constraints of language 'proper' — that make it a site of comfort

[179] Zhang, *Sour Heart,* p.124.
[180] Ibid., p.123.
[181] Ibid., p.129.
[182] Emily LaBarge, 'Sour Heart by Jenny Zhang review - from China to the US', *The Guardian,* 2017, https://bit.ly/2QBojZr [Accessed: 02/05/2021].
[183] Zhang, *Sour Heart,* l.2875.

and, ultimately, a way to subvert the constraints of forced identity borders. However, it is not without limitations. Lisa Dunick, writing on Tan's use of talk-story, or oral storytelling, suggests that it can signify 'a distinct aspect of loss,' in that it is most frequently utilised by those who, by way of immigration, have suffered an 'erosion or loss of their cultural memories.'[184] She goes on to argue that 'talk-stories do not represent a stable text but depend solely on the mothers' memories,' an argument which also directly applies to Zhang's work, where the narrators must grapple with 'the absurdity of being a Chinese person who couldn't speak Chinese,' or remember their own cultural memories.[185] Annie later comments that 'the memories I had of China — of my uncle and my grandparents whom I lived with — were all given to me by my mother,' further strengthening this argument.[186] Not only does this transference of memory suggest an erosion of cultural identity, as Dunick has pointed out, but it also points to an erosion of personal identity, too, whereby one's memories, opinions, and emotions do not originate within the Self but are consumed from an Other in a uniquely abject example of borderless maternal connection.

Abject families and food as metaphor

Food and food-related metaphors are one of the primary ways in which Zhang highlights both cultural identity, and the border-defying connective tissue present amongst these families. In the opening story, 'We Love You Crispina', Christina's mother says '"There are a couple of ways that people will always know you are my daughter… You and I love eating sour things… We hate soft, sweet peaches and we love hard, sour plums."'[187] In this example, that which makes Christina and her mother different does not lead to ostracization, but leads to connection. Writing on food metaphors in Amy Tan's novels, Qiping Liu claims that food exists within The Third Space, as conceptualised by Homi Bhabha, arguing that 'discourse on food constructs this Third Space of enunciation, formed around ambivalence, ambiguity,

[184] Lisa M.S. Dunick, 'The Silencing Effect of Canonicity: Authorship and the Written Word in Amy Tan's Novels', *MELUS,* 2006, Vol.31 (2), pp.3-20.
[185] Dunick, p.5-6.; Zhang, *Sour Heart,* p.279.
[186] Ibid., p.94.
[187] Ibid., p.28.

and hybridity,' and it is within this Third Space that we can analyse the construction of new culture and cultural identity.[188] Food as a literary trope exists within this Third Space, occupying the liminal zone of the abject where it 'blurs the limitations of existing boundaries and calls into question established categorizations of cultural meaning and identity.'[189] Liu goes on to suggest that 'The Third Space is one in which the mother and daughter can construct and inhabit together, bridging generational and cultural differences.'[190] Within this line of analysis, Christina and her mother are creating their own community, despite the cultural differences caused by their immigration — Christina does not remember her time in China, while her mother cannot speak English — and in spite of a would-be ostracization from white American society, who dismiss them on account of their race, and from fellow Chinese immigrants, who dismiss them on account of their poverty. Sleeping together in one bed, Christina's family imagine themselves as sandwiches, creating a narrative in which they exist as the sum of three parts, rather than multiple beings: '"our lovely daughter is the turkey and you're the cheese, my lovely wife, and I'm the lettuce?"'[191] Indeed, Christina herself notes that she likes to sleep between her parents because 'I needed to be bound by their flesh before I could materialize'.[192] This metaphor is repeated, and later, after a day without eating, when a 'great depressed hollow opened up between us,' Christina is only comforted by returning to this gesture of closeness: 'he could be the top bun and if my mom could be the bottom bun and if I could be the cheese and the pickles and the burger… and all the things that make a cheeseburger the most astounding food in the entire world.'[193] While Liu's article looks at the way traditional Chinese food opens up a dialogue between mothers and daughters in Tan's novels, Zhang's narrators and families are connected by traditionally American foods — sandwiches, burgers, hot dogs.[194] Christina, in her displacement, has no connection to traditional Chinese food; instead, American food

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[188] Qiping Liu, 'Food as Storied Matter in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*', *ANQ*, 2020, pp.1-8, p.4-5.
[189] Paul Meredith, 'Hybridity in the Third Space: Rethinking Bi-cultural Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand', 1998, cited in Liu, 2020, p.4-5.
[190] Liu, p.6.
[191] Ibid., p.24.
[192] Ibid., p.18.
[193] Ibid., p.30.
[194] Ibid., p.24.

ideals become aspirational. For a family which frequently feeds itself from refuse bins outside of supermarkets, fast food represents not just cultural acceptance but wealth; burgers and hot dogs come to symbolise the American Dream. With these food metaphors, Zhang not only demonstrates Christina's Otherness, but shows how she attempts to tackle this by reconfiguring her family into models of American ideals. Equally, they highlight an important point around the dissolution of identity borders in the kind of enforced community of these families, closed off from any other interaction. The family are not three individuals, but three components of one product.

This trope of a borderless family connection is the major underlying theme across the collection. In her review, Jia Tolentino comments that *Sour Heart*'s 'organizing theme is familial love that warps a person beyond all recognition: specifically, a type of immigrant devotion with a power that is both creative and entropic, and which affects its recipients in idiosyncratic ways.'[195] Tolentino's use of the term 'entropic' to describe Zhang's multiple families is particularly pertinent here; considering a devotion which operates within the liminal space between order and disorder allows us to imagine love as existing within abject space. For Zhang, love is abject, in that it is borderless and encroaching, without care for order or restrictions: family love is a love that is 'too much'.[196] This is particularly prevalent in one of the later stories, 'The Evolution of My Brother', in which the protagonist, as an older teenager returning home, reflects on her family relationship:

> Now that I am on my own, the days of resenting my parents for loving me too much and my brother for needing me too intensely have been replaced with the days of feeling bewildered by the prospect of finding some other identity besides "daughter" or "sister"... I long to come home, but now, I will always come home to my family as a visitor.'[197]

In this, we can see the ways in which Zhang's depiction of a cross-boundary love can

[195] Tolentino, 2017.
[196] Zaleska, 2017.
[197] Zhang, *Sour Heart,* l.2757.

be both distressing in its presence and, later, in its loss. However, while her characters struggle with their feelings around boundaries, this love is also one of unification and a tool against the isolation of being made abject by a society in which you are the Other. This argument recalls the community experience that helps Esch, in *Salvage the Bones*, remain true to her own sense of agency, and is repeated once again in the later section on *Close to the Knives,* which is particularly focused on the galvanising potential of community within marginalised groups. However, unlike Esch, who is held by but remains independent from her brothers, for the families in Zhang's work, their bid to present as a united front against an inhospitable environment can result in the borders of their individual selves becoming eroded. Nevertheless, this does not result in a destruction of selfhood — as in *The Bluest Eye* — even if it does necessitate a 'finding of some other identity' later in life; identity is not lost, as it is to Pecola, but is, instead, something to be found.[198] We must also note the importance of the short story form when considering community as a theme. Instead of only delving into the micro-community of one individual family, the collected story format allows Zhang to present a wider, macro-community of families of similar background and make up, weaving in and out of each other's narratives. While there are core differences between them, they all struggle with similar concerns around alienation and class, and the presentation of these stories as a collective offers a valuable contribution to the idea of wider community as a subversion of marginalisation. Ultimately, we can consider *Sour Heart* a mode of abject short story form, committed as it is to a non-distinct, border-defying style: characters in different stories mirror each other so intently that they reject individual identities, while families, stories, and memories weave in and out of each other. The similarities yet differences in these stories suggest a form of permeable borders between the stories themselves; each one is distinct, yet inextricably linked to the others. This concept of collaborative stories — abject in its dissolution of borders around individuality, but fundamentally joyful in its rejection of the loneliness of abjectification — will be revisited in more depth in my analysis of *Close to the Knives,* which looks into experimentations in form as abject more deeply.

[198] Ibid., l.2757.

Bodily abjection

Abjection is also figured physically, frequently manifested upon the body. In the opening story, 'We Love You Crispina,' Christina and her parents, newly immigrated to the US, are living in 'a shared room that was all mattress and no floor,' with five other families occupying each of the other mattresses, where they are afflicted by bedbugs: 'I slept between my parents every night and often woke up with long scratch marks up and down my legs and arms because I was born itchy as all hell and I would die itchy as all hell.'[199] Christina's itchiness — which forced her to 'cry out in the middle of the night' — becomes the key connection point between all of the stories to follow, in which the parents of the various girl protagonists mention a noisy, itchy girl in their recollections of their first years in America.[200] Christina's itchiness holds a representative power in the collection; not just of discomfort in a new place, but as a physical manifestation of the poverty which haunts all of the people who once had to share this room. Her story operates as a cautionary tale in the same way as Morrison's Pecola, with Christina embodying what the other characters have to fear: one of the later protagonists refers to 'Christina, who had a face so gloomy and teary that she made me think being ten was going to be the most sorrowful year of my life.'[201] While the collection frequently plays with depictions of the body which are both 'disgusting and sensual' — a attitude towards the abject body which will be explored further in later sections on *Close to the Knives,* and, particularly, *Suicide Blonde* — one of the most striking moments of abject body horror occurs in this first story.[202] Christina compares herself to her father, asking:

> [H]ow was I supposed to compete with my father, who was so good about not wasting a single thing, like how when I was four, I used to always throw up my food and no one was able to figure out why except maybe it had something to

[199] Ibid., p.13.; Ibid, p.13.
[200] Ibid., p.15.
[201] Ibid., p.45.
[202] Stephanie Newman, 'Writing "Goopily" About the Body: An Interview with Jenny Zhang on "Sour Heart", *LA Review of Books,* 2017. https://bit.ly/3wjkKq0 [Accessed: 06/05/2021].

> do with how the previous year, my parents and I left the only country we had ever known to come to this one… I was terrible at keeping food down and there were times when my dad would spoon the food I had vomited up directly into his own mouth so that not a single morsel of food went wasted… that was how much he was willing to sacrifice for us.[203]

Vomit — an expulsion of the internal into the external with the power to trespass both the physical and figurative border of the self — occupies an important place in abjection theory. As an object, it is disturbingly abject, symbolic of something which is both of the I and of the Other. However, as an action, it has protective power against abjection: Kristeva argues that when the ego 'cleanses itself of [an abject object], and vomits it,' this 'violence' allows one to reassert the borders of their Self, confirming what is and is not Other.[204] By eating what Christina has vomited, her father subverts the protective element of the act: rather than reinforcing a border, by vomiting, he has collapsed a border, by consuming. Christina also suggests that her constant vomiting is related to their immigration and unsettled state; in other words, another way in which the abjection of being Other is manifested physically. This moment acts as a visceral example of the kind of co-dependent relationship the family has, drawn tighter together by their complete isolation in their Othered state.

By analysing Zhang's *Sour Heart,* this thesis is able to consider elements of racialised abjection not present in the previous sections on *The Bluest Eye* and *Salvage the Bones*: namely, the ways in which immigration, language, and food play into the ways that race is perceived and abjectified. It also expands upon the ideas of inter-family community introduced in the section on Ward, and propels it forward to include further thinking on marginalised communities more widely, which will be particularly relevant to analysis of Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives.* Ultimately, Zhang's text helps this thesis to build upon the idea that abjection can be subverted and abject identities be redrawn within the liminal space of the margins.

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[203] Zhang, *Sour Heart,* p.8.
[204] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p.45.; Ibid., p.3.

Chapter Three:

Case Studies in Abjection, Gender & Sexuality

This chapter includes two case study sections, focused on David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives* and Darcey Steinke's *Suicide Blonde.* The first section looks at *Close to the Knives,* a non-traditional text which combines political and personal essays to create a kind of community memoir or archive. This section argues that Wojnarowicz's text, centred on and within the AIDS epidemic of 1980s New York, assumes an active position as a political text, as much as a personal one. Particularly, it directly links to Imogen Tyler's argument that abjection must be viewed as not just a 'psychic process but a social experience' which is felt within the 'embodied subject,' marking it out of great value to this thesis which is primarily concerned with depictions of the embodied effects of abjectification.[205] This picks up on the argument towards embodied abjection outlined in the previous chapter, and also provides further development of the interest in community that is depicted in the section on *Sour Heart,* as well as the argument towards witnessing as power that is central to the section on *Salvage the Bones.*

The second section, on *Suicide Blonde,* engages with some stalwarts of the Kristevan abject — particularly the figures of the abject mother and abject corpse — but also offers an opportunity to look at the limitations of the Kristevan abject as an analytical mode. It is occupied with the bodily abject in a manner that recalls the earlier section on *Sour Heart,* but the primary purpose of this section is to consider an alternative mode of resistance to abjection. Where previous sections, particularly those on *Salvage the Bones* and *Close to the Knives*, have focused on witnessing as a tool against abjectification, this section looks at the ways in which self-abjectification — a loss of selfhood that is distinctly opposite to the kinds of witnessing previously analysed — is presented as a potential model for transgression and transformation.

[205] Tyler, 'Against Abjection', p.87.; Ibid. p.94-95.

‘The ritual of memorial’:
Witnessing and archive as resistance in *Close to the Knives*

> ‘I’m carrying this rage like a blood-filled egg and there’s a thin line between the inside and the outside a thin line between thought and action and that line is simply made up of blood and muscle and bone… the thin line between the inside and the outside is beginning to erode and at the moment I’m a thirty-seven-foot-tall one-thousand-one-hundred-and-seventy-two-pound man inside this six-foot body and all I can feel is the pressure all I can feel is the pressure and the need for release.’[206]

The ‘blood-filled egg’ — an image loaded with symbolism of fragile, permeable borders — provides a striking metaphor for abjection in *Close to the Knives,* the 1991 text by multi-faceted artist, writer, and activist David Wojnarowicz.[207] In this formally experimental text, Wojnarowicz utilises multiple forms to depict the height of the AIDS epidemic in 1980s New York, documenting his own experiences as a person with AIDS, as well as those of friends around him, in order to bear witness to the fatal potential of social abjection empowered to its most extreme form. As exemplified in the opening quotation above, Wojnarowicz uses *Close to the Knives*, which frequently veers into tones of manifesto, as a vehicle for rage and radicalisation. While the previous chapter of this thesis focuses on the relationship between abjection and race, this chapter will look at the ways in which Kristeva’s theory of abjection is ill equipped to analyse contemporary literature around sexuality and gender. With this in mind, this section on *Close to the Knives* focuses not so much on the effects and experiences of being made abject, as in *The Bluest Eye,* but instead looks at Wojnarowicz’s *resistance* towards being made abject and his embodiment of a spirit of revolt, developing the arguments first set forth in my analysis of *Salvage the Bones*. It also calls back to the themes of community and Otherhood laid out in the section on *Sour Heart*. My analysis will explore the ways in which Wojnarowicz’s work stretches and threatens the limits of Kristeva’s theories by subverting the nature

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[206] David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration,* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2014), p.128-129.
[207] Ibid., p.128-129.

of marginalisation and repositioning Otherhood at the centre while consigning dominant, heteronormative systems to what he refers to as 'the Other World'.[208]

Form as abject

Despite its subtitle, *A Memoir of Disintegration*, to classify *Close to the Knives* as an autobiography, in the traditional sense, would suggest a lack of engagement with the unusual form the text takes, and the political power that is to be found in this multi-narrative form. Instead of solely recounting his own personal, private history, Wojnarowicz composes *Close to the Knives* with the same collage aesthetic that so frequently characterised his visual artwork. There is no real overarching narrative to the text, which is made up of standalone chapters written in various stylistic forms, including: the stream of consciousness personal account of 'SELF-PORTRAIT IN TWENTY-THREE ROUNDS'; the short vignette structure of 'BEING QUEER IN AMERICA: A Journal of Disintegration'; 'The Seven Deadly Sins Fact Sheet', a list of homophobic public figures in politics and the Catholic church which outlines their anti-gay rights voting history, treatment of people with AIDS, and actions against AIDS education; 'DO NOT DOUBT THE DANGEROUSNESS OF THE 12-INCH-TALL POLITICAN', a polemic essay tackling the USA's handling of the AIDS epidemic and drug testing; 'THE SUICIDE OF A GUY WHO ONCE BUILT AN ELABORATE SHRINE OVER A MOUSE HOLE', which features transcripts of tape recordings and phone calls, journal entries, and descriptions of dreams; and the final chapter, 'POSTSCRIPT', which is closest to traditional memoir, consisting of Wojnarowicz's reflections on his childhood and parents, interspliced with observations from a bull fight in Mexico. Excerpts from the text are also repurposed in various paintings by Wojnarowicz.[209] Formally innovative, *Close to the Knives* offers an alternative to traditionally canonical life-writing, which typically centres the

[208] Ibid., p.71.

[209] Examples of this can be found in visual works including *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* and *I Feel A Vague Nausea*, as well as others. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Hujar Dead),* 1988-89, [Black-and-white photograph, acrylic, screenprint, and collaged paper on Masonite], Collection of Steven Johnson and Walter Sudol, courtesy Second Ward Foundation. Image courtesy the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P.P.O.W, New York.; David Wojnarowicz, *I Feel a Vague Nausea,* 1990, [Five gelatin silver prints, acrylic, string, and screenprint on composition board], Collection of Michael Hoeh. Image courtesy the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P.P.O.W, New York.

individual artist as genius, looking back over his journey to mastery; instead, I argue that the text is better read as an archive, bearing witness to the experiences of a collective community. In this way, Wojnarowicz charges the text with a certain political power; by utilising his voice as a vehicle to give voice to many, he is able to communicate the experiences and needs of both a community and movement, positioning himself as a representative of something much larger than one singular history. This commitment to multi-narrative storytelling is a crucial link between this text and Zhang's *Sour Heart,* which employs a similarly formally abject model in order to encapsulate the importance of community.

The archive, as a historical and literary concept, holds great cultural importance within queer communities, where it is utilised as a method through which histories, truths, and experiences can be told directly from the margins. Writing on the 'Archivist as activist,' Diana K. Wakimoto, Christine Bruce and Helen Partridge emphasize the fact that the creation of queer archives is a 'conscious, political [act],' one which provides a way for marginalised communities to 'maintain their own records and memory as well as a way to combat the inevitable silences and gaps in other archives and repositories'.[210] If we view the composition of all of the formally different chapters of *Close to the Knives* as a curation, it certainly upholds these values of preserving records, preserving one's own voice, speaking back to mainstream silences, and acting with conscious, political intent. Mysoon Rizk, writing on Wojnarowicz's visual artwork, notes that 'collage made it possible for him to suggest a multiplicity of other voices, faces, stories, and conditions in combination with the singularity of his own,' an ethos which achieves a similar effect in his writing as it does in his paintings.[211] This argument is echoed in Fiona Anderson's work on queer cruising and the New York waterfront, where she similarly situates Wojnarowicz as a representative or spokesperson for a wider community, utilising his work as an entry point into a specific community: 'it is not so much a book about

[210] Diana K. Wakimoto, Christine Bruce, & Helen Partridge, 'Archivist as activist: lessons from three queer community archives in California', *Arch Sci* 13, 2013, pp.293–316, p.297.
[211] Mysoon Rizk, 'Reinventing the Pre-invented World' in *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz,* Dan Cameron, John Carlin, C. Carr, and Mysoon Rizk, ed. Amy Scholder, (New York: Rizzoli,1998), 45-65, p.50.

Wojnarowicz as it is a book around him'.[212] Rizk goes on to say that 'for the purpose of providing room in the general record for outsiders like himself, he sought to make and preserve histories in which dominant narratives were besieged by still-emerging narratives as well as by the recovered fragments of invisible and disappeared ones'.[213] If we apply this argument to *Close to the Knives,* it is clear to see that the text applies itself to this same process of preservation, bearing witness to the lives of those outwith the 'dominant narratives'. In Wojnarowicz's own words: 'I am glad I am alive to witness these things; giving words to this life of sensations is a relief.'[214] While Wojnarowicz's own voice is distinctly present throughout *Close to the Knives*, there is an overarching sense of community storytelling, rather than personal reminiscing. Arguably, there is a suggestion that some elements of the text consist of amalgamated experiences, rather than solely his own memories. This is sometimes explicit — as in the interviews with friends transcribed in the chapter 'THE SUICIDE OF A GUY WHO ONCE BUILT AN ELABORATE SHRINE OVER A MOUSE HOLE' — but also less explicitly inferred by the ways in which the experiences he recounts — of homelessness, sex work, addiction, being diagnosed with AIDS — are presented as so ubiquitous amongst the peers who pass through the text that specificity becomes irrelevant. He refers to a common understanding in which words are unnecessary, exemplified by his comment that, upon seeing a fellow hustler, 'our eyes have met for twelve years and we have never spoken a word, not even a nod, but we have had whole conversations in that brief contact'.[215] In this, we can pinpoint another example of witnessing: in which the abject recognise each other, without judgement. Just as the act of being witnessed operates as a mode of power in Ward's *Salvage the Bones,* here Wojnarowicz depicts its importance within the real world. This is particularly vital when considering the climate in which the text takes place, where government bodies are refusing to acknowledge or adequately fund treatment for the AIDS epidemic, effectively dehumanising queer and sick bodies as not worth saving: 'denying all people information that could protect them in an

[212] Fiona Anderson, Cruising the Dead River: David Wojnarowicz and New York's Ruined Waterfront, (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p.3.
[213] Rizk, p.50.
[214] Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives,* p.216.
[215] Ibid., p.167.

epidemic is nothing more than wholesale murder'.[216] Witnessing here acts as a form of humanisation. By witnessing the community at large in his work, Wojnarowicz is rejecting the dehumanisation of abjectification and reasserting personhood.

This positioning of himself as a witness is made most explicit in 'THE SUICIDE OF A GUY WHO ONCE BUILT AN ELABORATE SHRINE OVER A MOUSE HOLE', a chapter which intersplices Wojnarowicz's political observations and journal entries with his investigation into Dakota, a peer who died of suicide. In his Author's Note, Wojnarowicz explains that the chapter originally included excerpts from letters written to him by Dakota, but he was forced to remove them due to copyright permissions law and a refusal of permission from Dakota's parents, who had destroyed all of his creative work:

> 'In the case of Dakota, his entire identity has been murdered by his folks. What fragments of his existence survive, in letters received by friends, are made invisible by the State in the form of this law… I would hope that in my recollections of Dakota, as well as the recollections of his friends, some sense of the guy comes through in a benevolent way, as it is very emotional for me to have to participate in the process of denying him a voice by editing from this manuscript his personal words to me.'[217]

In a way, we can consider this chapter to be a eulogy for Dakota. Comprised of transcripted conversations with Dakota's friends and Wojnarowicz's own reflections on him, it recounts his life without glamorisation, while also pondering the motivations behind his suicide and rumoured murder of a drug dealer. However, Wojnarowicz also explores the ways in which the unhappiness of Dakota's life and legacy holds up a mirror to the lives of his peers, acknowledging that he had started to 'obsess about seeing [Dakota]... Maybe he can show me something in myself, some essential tool

[216] Ibid., p.133.; The chapter, 'The Seven Deadly Sins Fact Sheet', outlines the various ways in which the government and Church disempowered attempts towards education around AIDS and contraception: 'During the years of the Regan administration our president was completely silent about the spread of this epidemic.' Ibid., p.134.
[217] Ibid., p.200.

that will connect all these fragments I've seen'.[218] Although this Author's Note refers explicitly to this single chapter, I would argue that Wojnarowicz's preoccupation with the denial of Dakota's voice can be viewed as an underlying motivation for *Close to the Knives* as a whole. Dakota's final death came not with his suicide, but with the destruction of his personal works, and with it, his opportunity to voice his own legacy; while Dakota's 'entire identity [was] murdered,' with *Close to the Knives,* Wojnarowicz is ensuring that his will endure. With this in mind, we can consider the text as the fruits of Wojnarowicz's choice to bear witness: to his own life, to the lives of his peers, those with AIDS, and to the sins of a government who pushed them to the border zones.

Architecture as imagery

Borders, as a motif, recur throughout the text. They appear literally, in the physical spaces Wojnarowicz does and does not inhabit, from the 'wrought-iron spikes topped with deadly blades' that separate him from a church, to the wall being 'slowly destroyed' by rain in an apartment leased to him 'only after signing an agreement that if there were a cure for AIDS I would have to leave within thirty days'.[219] They also appear figuratively, in terms of situating the queer body, the ill body, the poor body outside of the heternormative dominant space, in making them Other. In her writing on Wojnarowicz, Melissa Jacques discusses the idea of 'the alien' as a figure which exemplifies Otherness:

> '[the alien inhabits] an unimaginable and therefore unmanageable space outside of the circumscribed world of the familiar. Once it crosses the threshold safeguarding that world, the alien - simply by virtue of its presence - weakens the barriers between self and other and, more important, between what is human and what is monstrous… [The alien] threatens the very

[218] Ibid., p.185.
[219] Ibid., p.54.; Ibid., p.93.

> structures that render its victims human because it undermines the security of their human origins; it threatens the figurative architecture of home. '[220]

As an uncanny figure which exists outside of the centre, yet simultaneously troubles the borders which uphold that centre, we can consider the alien to exemplify Tyler's concept of the socially abject. However, Jacques' articulation of the role of architecture within this sphere expands upon Tyler's work in a vital way. In particular, Jacques' conception of the house, a space which 'determines the condition of the proper,' is of particular note: the house 'functions as a limit, demarcating centre from periphery, inside from outside, normal from perverse.'[221] If we refer back to *The Bluest Eye* and Morrison's nuclear home/nuclear family framework, it is clear to see the importance of a traditional home as a sign of acceptance within the centre. In fact, the novel begins with the destruction of the Breedlove home, and with it, the start of Pecola's personal destruction. To exist without a home, then, is to be banished to the 'unmanageable space' of the alien.[222] Interestingly, architectural metaphor is also linked to memoir more widely. In her experimental memoir *In the Dream House,* published in 2019*,* Carmen Maria Machado notes that the word 'archive' is rooted in the ancient Greek word for 'house,' and opens the text by quoting Louise Bourgeois: 'Memory itself is a form of architecture.'[223] Her memoir, connected to Wojnarowicz's not only through similarly innovative experiments with form but through their mutual preoccupation with preserving and adding to a collective queer archive, provides a rich companion piece. While detailed analysis of Machado's work is outwith the scope of this thesis, the fact that these themes and techniques have a continuing legacy is poignant, highlighting the ongoing necessity of engagement with such work.

Further unpicking the importance of architectural imagery, Jacques goes on to argue that:

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[220] Melissa Jacques, 'Making Cruising Dwelling', *Performance Research*, 2005, Vol.10.4, pp.155-169, p.155-156.
[221] Ibid., p.156.
[222] Ibid., p.156.
[223] Carmen Maria Machado, *In The Dream House,* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2019), p.2.

> ‘Architectural metaphor is deployed as a means to organization that is selective, exclusive and often violent. The figure of the alien-as-monster is a product of this violence. Always already present, it is the other upon which the stability of the community depends. In order for the community to maintain its myth of wholeness, those identified as alien are pushed to the periphery of the social body. Thus marginalized, they are rendered manageable by the imposition of literal as well as metaphorical limits.’[224]

At the end of *The Bluest Eye,* Pecola is last seen ‘picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers’ outside of a house ‘on the edge of town,’ the tragic embodiment of the alien ‘pushed to the periphery’ in sacrifice to the ‘myth of wholeness’.[225] Interestingly, *Close to the Knives* is defined not by a desire for the security of the house and home, like *The Bluest Eye,* but a resistance to the restrictions of those figurative four walls of normalcy: ‘Transition is always a relief. Destination means death to me. If I could figure out a way to remain forever in transition, in the disconnected and unfamiliar, I could remain in a state of perpetual freedom.’[226] Wojnarowicz’s narration is characterised by movement, frequently centred around wandering, driving, cruising the waterfronts, and visiting, and his assertion that it is this very perpetual motion that allows him ‘freedom’ presents a subversive alternative to social abjection as necessarily destructive. Jacques argues that, by mobilizing the alien, Wojnarowicz attacks ‘the will to architecture,’ rendering ‘the boundaries imposed by those in power permeable’ by insisting on constant movement.[227] Being made socially abject means existing outwith borders; however, the abject itself is defined by its liminality, its ability to make boundaries ‘permeable’.[228] By embracing the potential of liminality, rather than being crushed by the lack of stagnant stability, Wojnarowicz disempowers the centre by refusing to acknowledge the walls which define it. If oppression is found in the stasis of centre, which must

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[224] Jacques, ‘Making Cruising Dwelling’, p.156.
[225] Morrison, *The Bluest Eye,* l.2670.; Jacques, ‘Making Cruising Dwelling’, p.156.
[226] Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives,* p.36.
[227] Jacques, ‘Making Cruising Dwelling’, p.156.
[228] Ibid., p.156.

remain static if it is to maintain the status quo, movement within the liminality of the abject margins becomes a mode of resistance. This model of finding freedom in movement is seen again in Darcey Steinke's *Suicide Blonde,* and will be further analysed in the next chapter. Where Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* is destroyed by her desire for acceptance, Wojnarowicz rejects the parameters of heteronormativity, and in doing so, frees himself of the kind of depersonification which Pecola suffers under.[229] This applies not only in the physical sense, but figuratively, too: when he writes, 'I crawled through the walls of every social taboo I could come across,' he highlights the fallibility of social structures which crumble when met with the pressure of someone who refuses to accept the ideology which upholds them.[230] This comment is particularly rich when we consider the way in which it positions the abject as something of value: it is precisely the abject nature of these taboos which makes the border permeable, thus allowing him to transgress. In doing so, he is able to break down taboos and resist confinement within the margins.

Bearing witness and social abjection

A rejection of hegemonic ideology underpins *Close to the Knives*, both in its ambitions to archive a marginalised community and in its more overtly activist statements arguing towards improved support for people with AIDs. Wojnarowicz writes:

> 'My fear was based on understanding the social structure that beckoned to me and promised a life of security and support to me if I would just embrace its illusion and lies. If I let this illusion wrap its stinking arms around me I knew I'd suffer a death more terrifying than physical death: an emotional and intellectual strangulation. The life that the man in the grinning death mask waved like a banner from the edge of the horizon was one in an activity that I

[229] It is impossible to make a direct comparison between Pecola, as a fictional character, and Wojnarowicz's lived experiences, regardless of whether we consider *Close to the Knives* as a traditional memoir or otherwise. However, Morrison's framing of Pecola's story as a lens through which to explore the embodied effects of racism means that we can compare the two as a vehicle through which abjection can be understood both metaphorically and literally.
[230] Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p.133.

> cared nothing about but one that I would repeat endlessly until the day my teeth fell out, all in order to be able to eat and sleep inside a tiny wood and plaster structure he'd allow me to call: home.'[231]

Home here does not signify safety, security, or acceptance; rather, it is a symbol of heteronormative imprisonment. Key to understanding Wojnarowicz's motivation is his fear of 'emotional and intellectual' death; while Pecola suffers this kind of metaphorical death as a result of prolonged ostracization from the centre, Wojnarowicz suggests that enforced sublimation carries just as fatal a risk.[232] In order to tackle this, he performs a subversion of the centre: 'First there is the World. Then there is the Other World. The Other World is where I sometimes lose my footing... The Other World where I've always felt like an alien.'[233] In this dynamic, he upholds the binary between centre and Other but reverses it; in his understanding, it is the dominant, heternormative world which is 'Other'. With this, he draws himself, and similarly abjectified people, out from the margins and into the centre. Todd Ramlow suggests that 'these cast-offs are brought together, despite their differences (or perhaps because of them), by the common experience of oppression and their literal and metaphorical abjection from the "neutral" spaces of normalcy and the body politic.'[234] This idea underpins the overall argument of this thesis: the experience of being made socially abject can only be resisted through acts of community, in which subversive strength can be found in mutual marginalisation. Where the act of being made abject is amplified through isolation in *The Bluest Eye, Salvage the Bones,* and *Sour Heart,* Wojnarowicz's focus on community allows him to avoid the kind of destructive ostracization that the previous protagonists suffer with. This focus on collective experience is most clearly articulated when he states that 'there is an unspoken bond between people in the world that don't fit in or are not attractive in the general societal sense,' a stance which Ramlow describes as 'subjectivity as multiplicity' or the 'desire to become pluralistic'.[235] Ramlow suggests that this form of

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[231] Ibid., p.133.
[232] Ibid., p.133.
[233] Ibid., p.71.
[234] Todd R. Ramlow, 'Bodies in the Borderlands: Gloria Anzaldua's and David Wojnarowicz's Mobility Machines', *MELUS,* 2006, vol.31.3, pp.169-187, p.176-177.
[235] Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives,* p.143.; Ramlow, 'Bodies in the Borderlands', p.181.

collective subjectivity hinges on the idea that subjectivity cannot be determined as a 'lack that must be "overcome,"' but rather, that it is this very 'incompleteness' which 'creates multiple connected identities and communities'.[236] Initially, this seems to imply a loss of personal identity in service to a larger whole — as happens to Pecola when she believes she has gained her blue eyes, becoming "white" — or that meaningful community connections can only be made if the Self is incomplete. However, there is perhaps a more meaningful argument to be made by introducing the act of witnessing into the framework; the Self is not made whole by dissolving into a group, but rather, an unsure or troubled Self is verified in its wholeness by the act of being witnessed by a community which does not attempt to change one's identity or to perpetuate the harms inflicted by dominant forces. The form of witnessing that ultimately empowers Esch in *Salvage the Bones* is employed on a bigger scale by Wojnarowicz; a collective subjectivity ensures one is not only witnessed by those within the collective, but ensures they loom big enough that they cannot be ignored by those who would abjectify them. By becoming part of a collective, Wojnarowicz does not reduce his sense of identity, but multiplies it: in stating that 'crimes against humanity have an unforgivable weight when compared to crime against an individual,' he argues for the power of community to build upon the value of the individual, rather than reduce personhood.[237]

The useful corpse

Inextricable from this three-pronged process of bearing witness, being witnessed, and demanding to be witnessed, however, is the role of the body. The potential of the body as symbol was vital to Wojnarowicz's work, both as an artist and as an activist, where he took part in ACT UP protests and, after ultimately dying of AIDS, had his ashes scattered on the White House grounds in a final act of protest. While *Close to the Knives* exemplifies the importance of community in resisting abjection, it does not shy away from the fact that this resistance requires a certain commodification of the self, too:

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[236] Ibid., p.182.
[237] Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives,* p.217.

> ‘I imagine what it would be like if, each time a lover, friend or stranger died of this disease, their friends, lovers or neighbors would take the dead body… and blast through the gates of the white house and come to a screeching halt before the entrance and dump their lifeless form on the front steps’.[238]

In this fantasy, Wojnarowicz articulates what Lauren DeLand refers to as the ‘useful corpse,’ a strategy in which a person with AIDS is ‘exploited productively’ in order to refashion ‘this vilified corpse into a political weapon to be detonated at the door of those directly responsible for perpetuating the epidemic.’[239] Viewed through the lens of the Kristevan abject, which defines the corpse as the ‘most sickening of wastes… a border that has encroached upon everything,’ the useful corpse represents the ultimate form of abjection: the most ‘sickening’ object, forced into the realm of witnessing.[240] We can consider *Close to the Knives* as a form of manifesto which illuminates the motivations behind the utilisation of the ‘useful corpse’ as a political symbol. This is particularly clear when we focus on Wojnarowicz’s preoccupation with the private and the public: ‘to turn our private grief for the loss of friends, family, lovers and strangers into something public would serve as another powerful dismantling tool,’ which rejects the ‘illusion of ONE-TRIBE NATION,’ his terminology for the heteronormative American centre.[241] By employing the HIV+ body as a symbol, he can ‘[lift] the curtains for a brief peek and reveal the probable existence of literally millions of tribes.’[242] This suggests that, for Wojnarowicz, the borders are the realm of the private, where abjectified figures and practices are made anonymous and unseen. By drawing these margins into the centre, the ‘public’ realm, it forces those who would deny the existence of the socially abject to witness those they have abjectified. In this way, the body is not just a symbol of suffering, but a ‘dismantling tool’ which revolts against a form of oppression which is only able to continue through the active blindness that comes with abjectification. However, LeLand notes the

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[238] Ibid., p.131.
[239] Lauren DeLand, ‘Live Fast, Die Young, Leave a Useful Corpse’, *Performance Research*, 2014, vol.19.1, pp.33-40, p.34.
[240] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p.37.
[241] Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives,* p.98.; Ibid., p.121.
[242] Ibid., p.121.

potential problems with employing the body as a weapon, suggesting that this practice denotes the HIV+ body as 'tragically perverse' by using it to '[reinscribe] the cultural attitudes it protests in being more useful dead than alive.'[243] She goes on to argue that 'the necessity to become a useful corpse – to perform theatrically one's own total abjection in exchange for the possibility of attention, of care, of change – is perhaps the most heinous [of indignities].'[244] This point of conflict does not negate the power that the useful corpse has as a 'dismantling tool', but nevertheless, LeLand's argument raises an important question regarding whether further abjectification of another, even if in service of an already-abjectified group, is appropriate action. This recalls Tyler's argument that the 'transgressive potentiality' of the abject does not negate or supersede the active harm it causes to the abjectified person in question.

In contrast, Thomas Lawrence Long notes that AIDS-affected artists and activists 'frequently embraced the identity of the social pariah,' in order to reject 'mainstream gay-rights assimilationist and essentialist positions in favor of an oppositional identity,' an argument which implies this belief in the transgressive potentiality of being made abject.[245] However, approaching this with LeLand's stance in mind prompts a more critical look at whether this embracing can be seen as an active choice to politicise one's own body, or whether it propagates more harm. We must question what it means to the sense of self when a subject is first relegated to 'a body' — as a diagnosis of AIDS ultimately does by characterising one's identity through physical factors — then to 'a symbol'. Does this result in even greater depersonification than being made abject does, or does it, through an act of sacrificial martyrdom in aid of a community, offer a route towards re-personification? There is also an undoubtedly counter-capitalist argument to be made here when we consider that the useful corpse implies that a person with AIDS is only of value when they are 'productive', even if this productivity comes in death. We can view this as a subversion of production-focused capitalism: the abjectified person becomes a

[243] LeLand, p.34-35.
[244] Ibid., p.34-35.
[245] Thomas Lawrence Long, 'The Mark of the Beast is the Glory of the Pariah: AIDS Apocalypticism of Diamanda Galás and David Wojnarowicz', *Literature Interpretation Theory,* 2012, vol.23, pp.226-245, p.227.

productive tool of the oppressed when they can no longer produce for the capitalist centre. Both these physical protests and the act of writing *Close to the Knives* — as much an account of suffering and loss as it is a bid to ensure the legacy of this community is told in their own voice — are examples of utilising the body to enact witnessing. While I have initially positioned the text as an archive, we can also view it, not as a memoir as the subtitle suggests, but as a memorial. Wojnarowicz writes that 'one of the first steps in making the private grief public is the ritual of memorial. I have loved the way memorials take the absence of a human being and make them somehow physical with the use of sound,' or, in the case of *Close to the Knives*, through words.[246] This memorialisation directly counters LeLand's argument that 'the useful corpse gains its utility at the moment when it can no longer speak for itself and becomes thus available as a pliable signifier.'[247] Wojnarowicz himself became a useful corpse, his ashes scattered at the White House grounds, but in writing this memorial he ensures his legacy, and simultaneously, the experiences of those around him that he also recorded, perseveres in his own voice.

Considered through the lens of archive and memorial, *Close to the Knives* occupies an active, political position as a text. Both the themes of the text and its experimental form inhabit the realm of the abject, however, Kristeva's limited interaction with sexuality and gender mean that her theorisation is unable to fully engage with the many questions Wojnarowicz's work brings to the fore. By forcing us to contend with these limitations, *Close to the Knives* promotes the need to expand upon our conception of the abject, opening up space to engage with community, witnessing, and transgression through the lens of the abject, widening the scope of its potential as an analytical tool. In his subversive act of repositioning Otherhood within a new centre, he redefines ideas of the mainstream/marginalised binary in a way that is relevant to all of the texts mentioned within this thesis, and opens up space to reconsider the ways in which we might analyse the effect of borders and social abjection.

[246] Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives,* p.98.
[247] LeLand, p.40.

‘Such exquisiteness and such horror’: Self-abjectification, sex work, and transformation in *Suicide Blonde*

In her foreword for Canongate’s 2019 reprint of Darcey Steinke’s 1992 novel, *Suicide Blonde,* Maggie Nelson summarises the novel as centred around ‘the consciousness of a questing female, for whom the words “abjection” or “debasement” are someone else’s, insistences of a culture stubbornly deaf to the mess of female journeying in extremis’. With this description in mind, Jesse, the protagonist and narrator of *Suicide Blonde*, is immediately situated outside of centre, existing within the abject outer extremities. Despite this, Steinke depicts her as actively rejecting the culture which creates these definitions: centre/margin, non-abject/abject, good/bad. Abjection or debasement, as negatively-loaded terms, may not be the words Jesse herself would use but as themes, they take centre stage in the novel, preoccupied as it is with the body, nihilism, and transformation. Steinke’s characters are unarguably abject — societal outcasts existing within the border zones, separated from a heteronormative centre which they resist and which rejects them — and yet there is a crucial difference between Jesse and the characters previously analysed in this thesis: where those characters were *made* abject by others, Jesse *makes herself* abject. This chapter will examine the idea of abjectification as a choice, investigating the potential attractive qualities of the same destruction of selfhood which is so actively resisted by all of the texts previously analysed.

Firstly, it is useful to situate *Suicide Blonde* within the framework of the previous texts analysed in this thesis. Steinke’s novel carries many key comparison points to previous texts; however, it also provides several interesting contradictions and counterpoints to arguments I have previously raised. In *Suicide Blonde*, the main themes of interest to this thesis are Steinke’s references to dissolution of self into the other and descriptions of the bodily abject, as well as her use of religious imagery as a lens to describe scenes of depravity and nihilism. Dissolving, or troubled, borders has been one of the key recurring themes throughout this thesis, and Steinke’s portrayal of this form of abjectification offers an interesting pairing to the portrayals seen previously. Pecola, in *The Bluest Eye,* is destroyed by the erosion of her Self

into The Other; however, Jesse actively seeks ways to destroy herself, time and again. Steinke shows Jesse venture towards merging with her mother, with her boyfriend Bell, and with Madison, a woman with whom she becomes obsessed. However, while Pecola becomes The Other — an anonymous non-self, isolated and abandoned — Jesse dissolves her Self into *Others*: co-opting a new identity, rather than losing one. There is a similar contrast noticeable when comparing her with *Salvage the Bones'* Esch: where Esch finds security and validation in community, Jesse seeks communities which allow her to disappear, frequenting male gay bars and strip clubs, where she knows she will not be the main attraction, and seeking out partners like Bell and Madison, who are too self-absorbed to affirm her selfhood. And yet, neither is this the kind of community which David Wojnarowicz depicts in *Close to the Knives,* where one may be anonymous and yet, through shared experience, have their self assured by becoming plural; as in, one of many, or in other words, fundamentally not alone. Jesse never becomes plural, but rather attempts to become one with an Other. Despite being outwardly very different, Zhang's *Sour Heart* proves the closest text for comparison. Although the differences are obvious — Zhang is occupied with race, girlhood, and immigrant Otherhood, while Steinke's Jesse is an adult white woman attempting to escape her Christian, 'all-American' background as a minister's daughter in the suburbs — Zhang's protagonists are all ultimately searching for a mirror, for a way to validate their selves. Perhaps Jesse's attempts to lose herself in others is, in fact, a way to validate herself; by finding herself in the mirror of another, she can prove she exists.

Suicide Blonde follows Jesse, a 29 year old woman, as she wanders San Francisco, disconnected from her bisexual boyfriend Bell, caring for the housebound Madame Pig, and obsessing over Madison, a sex worker whose compulsion for nihilistic self-destruction entrances Jesse. In her review of the novel, Sarah Ferguson refers to these characters as 'an unholy trinity, each of whom is a grotesque caricature' and suggests that Jesse, in her compulsive attachment to each of them, '[experiences] her own life with a voyeur's greedy longing'.[248] While this analogy

[248] Sarah Ferguson, 'In Short: Fiction: Suicide Blonde', *The New York Times,* 1992, https://nyti.ms/3hnAjIA [Accessed: 02/07/21].

provides a useful framework for analysing the text, there is one alteration I would make to Ferguson's definition of Jesse's 'unholy trinity': Pig, while a vital character in the text, is not so crucial as Jesse's own mother. Although Jesse's mother never actually appears in the novel besides over the phone, Pig, as I will explain in more detail later, is most notable when considered as a stand-in for Jesse's mother, who Jesse both fears and obsesses over, convinced she is a vision of her own future: 'when I stepped into my reflection I thought I was my mother.'[249] However, the dynamic that Ferguson picks up on — which figures Jesse as the worshipper and the 'trinity' as gods to be loved and feared — offers a helpful entry point for analysing both the book's overarching themes of submission and domination, and the more subliminal religious themes which underpin the novel in the form of recurring images and metaphors.

The figure of the voyeur

Equally, Ferguson's figuring of Jesse as a voyeur is crucial to this thesis. Jesse, while objectively the protagonist of the text, embodies a narrative role reminiscent of *The Great Gatsby's* Nick Carraway or *On The Road's* Sal Paradise, in that the story follows her as she follows someone *else*; in other words, the text employs the trope of the narrator-as-voyeur. Voyeurism has clear links to abjection — in that, it involves a minimising of the Self in order to focus, obsessively, on the Other — and is explicitly referred to by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror:*

> Voyeurism is a structural necessity in the constitution of object relation, showing up every time the object shifts towards the abject; it becomes true perversion only if there is a failure to symbolize the subject/object instability. Voyeurism accompanies the writing of abjection. When that writing stops, voyeurism becomes a perversion.[250]

[249] Darcey Steinke, *Suicide Blonde,* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2019), p.84.
[250] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p.46.

Kristeva's argument that voyeurism is necessary to the formation of object relation is particularly pertinent here: if we consider *Suicide Blonde* through a psychoanalytic lens, object relations is one of the key aspects that Jesse most struggles with, despite being an adult, rather than a child, as the theory is originally focused on. Associated with prominent psychoanalysts including Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, Laura Melano Flanagan summarises object relations theory as referring to 'not only the "real" relationships with others but also to the internal mental representations of others and to internal images of self as well.'[251] As such, while it refers to 'the complexity of external relationships with others,' it also includes 'a whole internal world of relations between self and other, and the ways in which others have become part of the self'.[252] Occupied, implicitly if not explicitly, with borders — between the self and other, as well as between the "real" other and perceived other — object relations is pertinent to abjection studies. Jesse, ever the voyeur, is so preoccupied with the various others which orbit around her — Bell, Madison, Pig, her mother — that she is subsumed by them, or by her image of them, to such a degree that the limits of her own selfhood begin to fray. This disintegration of selfhood will form one of the key arguments of this chapter.

The abject mother

For the purposes of this thesis, Jesse's relationships with her mother/Pig and Madison, in the ways in which they allow for investigation of Steinke's depictions of the abject, prove the most relevant. Her relationship with Bell would also provide a rich line of analysis, however, meaningful exploration of this relationship is beyond the scope of this particular thesis. As outlined in previous chapters, the mother holds an important place in abjection theory, understood as a figure emblematic of the troubled border between Self and Other. Described by Kristeva as a 'dual relationship,' in that the interconnected nature of the mother/child makes it harder to distinguish the point of separation, she goes on to argue that the child constantly

[251] Laura Melano Flanagan, 'Object Relations Theory' in *Inside Out and Outside In: Psychodynamic Clinical Theory and Psychopathology in Contemporary Multicultural Contexts,* ed. Joan Berzoff, Laura Melano Flanagan & Patricia Hertz, 5th ed., (Washington: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), pp.92-125, p.93
[252] Ibid., p.93.

fears ‘his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother’.[253] This is a recurring sentiment in *Suicide Blonde*, with Jesse regularly comparing, contrasting, and attempting to distance herself from her mother:

> When we speak there is a suck that makes me lean into her voice; when I’m in her presence she gets a predatory look. My mother sees me as a part of her body, something that still belongs inside, a heart or a liver that she wants back. [254]

This sense of being something so quintessentially of the Other — a ‘heart or a liver,’ something life-giving and necessary — speaks directly to the kind of the abject quality Kristeva assigns to the mother. In Kristeva’s configuration, the child is always the Subject to the mother, the eternal Other, and so it is up to the child to ‘[separate] oneself from the phantasmatic power of the mother,’ or, to resist ‘the suck that makes me lean in’.[255] In this dynamic, the mother, as the Other, ‘turn[s] into an abject,’ which tries to regain its subjecthood by consuming the child: in Steinke’s words, becoming ‘predatory’.[256] By examining this relationship through corporeal imagery, in which Jesse is figured as ‘part of her [mother’s] body’, we return again to the overarching theme of this thesis: that abjection belongs to the body.[257] We see this again in a later moment, when Jesse recalls a childhood memory in which she, aware of her mother’s constant dieting, innocently suggests she get gastric bypass surgery, something which the young Jesse has seen on TV but has not really understood. Her mother, furious, responds by saying ‘“You want to cut me open.”’[258] Their relationship to each other consistently revolves around imagined bodily violence: taking, cutting, destroying. Where Steinke evolves the figure of the abject mother past the point of Kristeva’s examinations is by imagining what this threat of consumption could look like in *practice,* rather than just in theory. Jesse does not actually fear being absorbed or consumed by her mother — she knows her mother is not truly a predator — but

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[253] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p.64.
[254] Steinke, *Suicide Blonde,* p.16.
[255] Kristeva, p.100.; Steinke, p.16.
[256] Kristeva, p.13., Steinke, p.16.
[257] Ibid., p.16.
[258] Ibid., p.17.

what she fears, practically, is *turning into* her mother. The destruction of Self that Kristeva refers to is made real not through consumption but through transformation: the transformation of ageing, and, crucially, of a body that changes and is changed. When Jesse says, 'I remembered the first time I saw my mother naked. She stood before a mirror, pulled at her hips, pressing her stomach, checking as I was now for signs of decay,' she tells us that when she sees herself as her mother, she sees not only an unavoidable lineage of self-conscious self-hate, but more specifically, 'decay'.[259] Through the lens of the abject, we can see this decay as a reference to Kristeva's abject corpse: 'corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live,' it is the ultimate 'place where I am not'.[260] In ageing, or 'decaying', into her mother, Jesse is becoming the corpse, the ultimate non-self. When she tells her mother '"You just remind me I'm going to die,'", she acknowledges that she has abjectified her mother to such a degree that she has become a figure of threat, representing complete destruction through complete transformation.[261] The figure of the corpse returns again at the end of the novel, when Jesse finds Bell's body after his suicide, and comments: 'my life fans out like a string of paper dolls. I am malleable, chameleonlike. Each life eats the last until I'm a Russian doll, containing ten women of decreasing size.'[262] Once again, the corpse represents not a physical death, in body, but a death of identity and selfhood. Confronting the corpse makes her feel 'malleable', which we can also understand as borderless, and so necessarily abject, while the feeling of containing multiple lives and multiple women compounds this, as it rejects the singularity of the one Self.

Pig, in her maternal role in Jesse's life, frequently figures as a stand-in for her unnamed mother, and as such, carries a similar level of transformative threat:

> I wanted to yell at Pig that there was no more poignancy in the aging of a beautiful woman than a plain one. If beautiful girls had higher expectations it was only because of vanity, not that they were better people or more blessed.

[259] Ibid., p.4.
[260] Kristeva, p.4.; Ibid., p.3.
[261] Steinke, *Suicide Blonde,* p.88.
[262] Ibid., p.180.

> And besides, it didn't seem possible I could end up like Pig… with the pain I thought, Once she was like me.[263]

The danger of 'end[ing] up like Pig' is not rooted in its similarity to death, as it is with Jesse's mother, but is nonetheless linked to another kind of loss: namely, beauty, and its social capital.[264] This is touched upon in Jesse's comments about her mother — her dieting, her divorce, her unabashed need to '[work] so hard to be loved' — but really materialises explicitly in Jesse's feelings towards Pig.[265] She describes Pig's body as 'a sloppy dream… no matter how many times I saw her naked I was always surprised and a little horrified.'[266] Jesse's compulsive appraisals of other women's bodies allows her an opportunity to define them as Other, in opposition to her own body. However, Steinke makes it clear to us that this is rooted in anxiety from the opening pages, where Jesse is rejected by Bell: 'The teddy incident was terrifying because it exacerbated the sensation that my feminine power was diminishing, trickling like drops of milk from a leaky pitcher.'[267] This reference to 'feminine power' is crucial: Jesse's distress at the potential for turning into her mother or Pig is not only centred around loss of self, but loss of power. She is constantly appraising the power dynamics of her relationship with these two women, aware that while she is — currently, at least — young, thin, beautiful, their relative wealth offers them a certain power over her. A comment from Megan Nolan's recent novel, *Acts of Desperation*, provides the most fitting insight into Jesse's predicament: 'being young and beautiful felt like a lot sometimes, felt like it translated to real-world power, but money shat all over it every time.'[268] Despite consistent bids to detach herself from these women, whom she figures as hauntings, she acknowledges that if things were to become too difficult to manage, 'my mother would buy me a ticket home... I could go back to Pig. I smiled at the thought of them as my only alternatives.'[269] This is, in one sense, a practical solution — as in, a financial one — but it also offers an emotional solution. If

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[263] Ibid., p.42.
[264] Ibid., p.52.
[265] Ibid., p.7.
[266] Ibid., p.38.
[267] Ibid., p.3.
[268] Megan Nolan, *Acts of Desperation,* (London: Vintage, 2021), p.22.
[269] Steinke, *Suicide Blonde,* p.75.

Jesse's attempts at self-definition become too hard or too tiring, there is always a mother to retreat into. She holds onto abjectification of herself as a potential source of relief, aware that ultimately it is she, not her mother, who would make the decision to completely dissolve those borders.

Sex work and abject Otherhood

Central to the plot of *Suicide Blonde*, and irremovable from these questions of money and power, is Jesse's move into sex work. Interestingly, the Canongate reissue of the novel is adorned with the promotional tagline 'The cult feminist classic,' and yet, as a text primarily concerned with sex work and non-heteronormative sexuality, it also depicts a life which is in opposition to — or rather, is excluded from — the tenets of a traditional kind of feminism. This is seen specifically in anti-sex work, carceral, trans-exclusionary feminism, which tends to incorporate a focus on a moral binary of good versus bad with regards to femininity. In *Playing the Whore,* her book on the politics of sex work as work, Melissa Gira Grant refers to this explicitly, arguing that 'when sex workers are "rescued" by anti–sex work reformers, they are being disciplined, set back into their right role as good women,' whereas working sex workers 'serve as objects of fantasy for women: as the bad girls to fear and keep far from and, on occasion, to furtively imagine themselves as.'[270] This binary can be understood clearly as a border, in the Kristevan sense, with sex workers firmly positioned on the outside. Most importantly, within this ideology, women are divided into 'the pure and the impure, the clean and the unclean, the white and virgin and all the others. If woman is other, whore is the other's other.'[271] Sex workers, then, are positioned as the abject characters through which 'good' women are able to distinguish themselves against. Molly Smith and Juno Mac expand upon this argument in *Revolting Prostitutes,* categorising the woman on the other side of the binary as 'the 'default woman' — and the 'default woman' is certainly not a drug user or a sex worker.'[272] They go on to argue that 'supposed sexual excess, and the loss

[270] Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work,* (London: Verso, 2014), p.52.; Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore,* p.79.
[271] Ibid., p.68.
[272] Molly Smith & Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights,* (London: Verso, 2018), p.102.

that accompanies it, delineates the prostitute as 'other'. The 'good' woman, on the other hand, is defined by her whiteness, her class, and her 'appropriate' sexual modesty, whether maidenly or maternal.'[273] Race, class, and sexuality, then, demarcate whether one is 'good' or 'bad'. Seen through this lens, Jesse's whiteness and educated, middle class background automatically characterise her as 'good'; as such, her only route to self-abjection and transformation is through sex. Gira Grant goes on to argue that 'for some white women, slut transgresses a boundary they've never imagined crossing. Women of color, working-class women, queer women: They were never presumed to have that boundary to begin with.'[274] In this, we can see a more problematic side to Jesse's fascination with self-abnegation and attempts at transformation. Gira Grant makes clear that these perceptions of women of colour, working-class women, and queer women are outwith their control; they do not choose to be marked as abject. Jesse's transgression into abjection — across the boundary into 'slut' — is her choice. This is also one of the fundamental points of difference between *Suicide Blonde* and *Close to the Knives:* while Wojnarowicz chooses to reject the culture that defines what is or is not abject, he cannot choose the ways in which his identity markers — as gay, ill, poor — are defined as abject in the first place. *Suicide Blonde* is primarily written about, or for, those who exist outwith the boundaries of the 'good', traditional feminist: sex workers, but also nihilistic characters like Madison, women who roam in a kind of selfish isolation, unmoved by the community suffragette spirit which is so frequently called upon as crucial to the feminist movement. The female characters in *Suicide Blonde* are not part of a movement, they are not moved, they do not move towards something, nor are they motivated towards a productive goal. Primarily, they are motivated by the opposite of progress. Instead, they seek destruction: of Other(s) and of Self.

The drive for self-destruction

This form of seeing, or seeking, oneself in the other is also crucial to Jesse's relationship with Madison, which features similarly blurred borders as does that with

[273] Ibid., p.35.
[274] Gira Grant, p.69.

her mother and with Pig, but speaks more directly to her desire for destruction:

> When I stepped into my reflection I thought I was my mother… But I looked more like Madison than my mother and I thought how malleable women are, with clothes they can look like virgins or whores or housewives. Their earrings give information, hemlines speak, eye shadows imply.[275]

Whether it is her mother or Madison, the most striking thing about this passage is that the person Jesse sees in the mirror is not herself. Despite her assertion that women are 'malleable,' we see very little of this in any characters other than her. Steinke is careful to imbue all of the other characters with a marked consistency: Madison is always cruel, Jesse's mother is always desperate, Pig is always pitiable. Instead, it is Jesse we see model herself after and for others, admitting that she 'wanted to be pleasing'.[276] In a moment of self-reflection, she notes that 'I was a fool to hate people who were obviously one thing or another and by not choosing to be something completely I would end badly.'[277] This kind of unsteady identity is referred to by Tyler in 'Against Abjection', where she argues that 'the words, 'I don't even know myself' speak so much of being abject. In order for injury to be recognized, these women need to be recognized as subjects by another'[278]. This self-awareness can be seen to prove that Jesse seeks to abjectify herself by losing herself in an Other, in a bid to adopt a new identity.

However, her main fascination with Madison is centred around Madison's philosophy of sex: 'My mother had taught me that a woman was most valuable before she had sex... But Madison believed the more sex a woman had, the more precious and powerful she became.'[279] Previously in the text, Jesse considers sex to be a tool with which she can make Bell stay with her, arguing that she 'wanted to be pleasing. That's what mother did to try and keep my father'.[280] For Madison, sex is a tool which is not used for gain — as in, gaining a man — but for annihilation. Jesse

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[275] Steinke, *Suicide Blonde,* p.84.
[276] Ibid., p.16.
[277] Ibid., p.60.
[278] Tyler, 'Against Abjection', p.93.
[279] Steinke, p.103.
[280] Ibid., p.16.

observes that ‘Madison didn’t want a normal life, she wanted to be perverse and powerful, to transform into a monster,’ and in this way, she can be seen as a direct figuration of the social abject, willfully disrespectful towards the ‘system[s], order… rules’ imposed upon women, as described and represented by Jesse’s mother.[281] Writing on women’s sexuality and consent, Katherine Angel suggests that viewing women’s sexuality as contractual — and placing a positive or negative value on it — ‘not only tends to legitimate male sexual aggression, but it also further alienates women from their own desire and pleasure.’[282] She goes on to argue that ‘it enables a view of sex as the exchange of a good, a resource that women ‘give up’, risking a loss of value to themselves in the process, in exchange for something they value more.’[283] Jesse’s mother embodies this viewpoint, while Madison seems to embody the opposite extreme. Angel’s argument that ‘This is a vision of female sexuality as a realm of trade-offs and exchanges — a form of goal-focused, contractual, service-orientated behaviour,’ chimes with Madison’s proclamation that ‘I know that it’s a service… I’m like a mechanic’.[284] Clearly Madison’s job as a sex worker complicates Angel’s argument, but this attitude towards sex appears to be tied up less in sex as work and more in sex as annihilation. This distinctive seeking of absolute abjection through oblivion is part of the appeal for Jesse, for whom transformation into a ‘monster’ like Madison may be more enticing than transformation into a ‘corpse’ like her mother. Angel’s argument that sexual pleasure ‘shatters the boundary between ourself and the other’ is clearly at play here, with Steinke questioning whether the shattering of that boundary — and the necessary abjection it entails — may be worth seeking out in itself.[285]

In Kristeva’s work, this idea of oblivion through abjection is classified as jouissance, suggesting a kind of cathartic joy: ‘the sublime point at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us - and “that cancels our existence”’.[286] Tyler claims that Kristeva is occupied with ‘the jouissance of abject encounters,

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[281] Ibid., p.99.
[282] Katherine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again,* (London: Verso, 2021), l.904.
[283] Ibid., p.64.
[284] Steinke, p.90.
[285] Angel, l.1510.
[286] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p.210.

the exhilarating fall inwards into the monstrous depths of the narcissistic self,' a phrasing that sounds remarkably close to Madison's desire to 'transform into a monster'.[287] Transformation, here, is figured as a form of jouissance: a descent into abjection that results in a transfiguring destruction of selfhood. However, while this is posited as a transgressive act of empowerment, Tyler takes issue with feminist critique that blindly believes in abjection as a source of feminist potential, arguing that 'the risk of this affirmative abjection is precisely that it might reproduce rather than challenge the cultural production of women as abject,' to a point at which 'being for the abject is imagined as a form of political practice'.[288]. With this in mind, it is vital to note that while Madison — symbolic of jouissance as found in self-destruction — is a creature of fascination to Jesse, but also one of revulsion and terror. In this way, she can be seen as symbolic of the abject in much the same way as the corpse. However attractive she may initially appear, she, fully succumbed to 'the depths of the narcissistic self', frequently betrays Jesse, as when she sends her first client to her without Jesse's knowledge or consent, and ultimately Jesse leaves her.[289] Jouissance is not presented as a transformative feminist act; it is depicted as an unsustainable pain.

In *Suicide Blonde,* Steinke manifests several different aspects of the Kristevan abject, particularly the figures of the abject mother and abject corpse, disintegration of self, and voyeurism, yet the text, in its exploration of abjection, pushes beyond the scope of Kristeva's theory. By considering the ways in which abjection can appear as an alluring — as well as frightening — vehicle for transformation through willing self-destruction, Steinke forces us to consider new ways in which abjection might be embodied, experienced, and analysed.

[287] Tyler, 'Against Abjection', p.79.;
[288] Ibid., p.84.; Ibid., p.85.
[289] Ibid., p.280.

CONCLUSION

By analysing this selection of literary case studies, this thesis points a spotlight at the areas in which the Kristevan abject can be expanded in order to better engage with intersectional ideas of race, class, gender and sexuality. While abjection theory is an inarguably valuable and necessary critical lens, this work argues that utilising Kristeva's abjection theory in its original form as a theoretical lens, without critically evaluating the theory itself, results in a weaker tool. In order to engage with contemporary literature, the Kristevan abject needs enrichment from supplementary critical work on the embodied experience of marginalised people — as is present in new writing on abjection, like Darieck Scott's work — and as this thesis has outlined. In ways, this project responds to Imogen Tyler's essay, 'Against Abjection', and is informed in particular by her argument that 'abjection hurts'. By incorporating her thinking on abjection as a social and embodied experience and applying it to literary studies, this thesis cements its focus around the consideration of literature as a model through which one can better understand the experience of being *made* abject. Ultimately, the core argument of this project is that abjection theory must be developed if it is to meaningfully engage with contemporary depictions of race, class, and sexuality and gender. By presenting a series of core texts which engage with these topics while also engaging with undeniably abject themes, imagery, and concerns, we are able to see that there is still a demand for abjection theory in contemporary literary studies, but that there is scope for a "new" abject, one which is better equipped to engage with intersectional issues of marginalisation and embodied experience.

While it is outwith the scope of this project to offer a completely evolved theorisation of the abject that meets all of these goals, this thesis aims to provide insight into how examinations of intersectional identities and experiences can add value to abjection studies. By looking at the different ways in which abjection is felt, and by thinking both critically and empathetically about the ways in which it manifests within those Othered by a white, heteronormative society, our

understanding of abjection as an embodied experience is deepend, and it becomes a more valuable analytical tool as a result. The texts analysed here are particularly powerful in their descriptions of borders: how it feels to be cast outside of them, societally, and how it feels to have them eroded, personally, in terms of identity and Selfhood. By focusing on this, and on the idea of abjection as something which is figured within and manifested upon the body, this thesis positions abjection as something tangible, with felt effect: as something which 'hurts'.

While Tyler takes a mainly combative stance towards Kristeva, this thesis is more interested in looking at how her theory can be enhanced by being viewed in conversation with contemporary intersectional critical work. Through original case studies, this work has been able to not only consider different figurations of abject experience, but also brings possible modes of resistance into consideration. The case studies on *The Bluest Eye* and *Salvage the Bones,* for example, put forward the idea of community as a site of respite from the pain of being made abject or Other. This idea is revisited in the study on *Close to the Knives*, where community and shared experience is posited as a form of becoming plural, a phenomena which should be abject, in its necessary dissolution of the borders of Self, but is figured instead as a positive experience: one in which abjectification can be resisted by finding your identity validated by community, rather than minimised. Crucially, through analysis of these texts, this thesis is able to articulate its central argument that the act of witnessing can be used as a tool for agency and operate as a mode of resistance towards abjectification. This is then considered in reverse — as in, a refusal to be witnessed — in the study of *Suicide Blonde,* where ideas around Self-abjection and identity dissolution as desired effects are analysed, and questions around the destruction of Selfhood as transgressive or transformative are raised.

Ultimately, by not only considering texts through the ways in which they describe abjection, but also by investigating the ways in which they respond to abjectification, this thesis is able to engage with abjection studies on a deeper level. This allows for engagement with both Kristeva's original theory and Tyler's conception of societal abjection, while also allowing space to incorporate ideas from

contemporary criticism on race, class, gender, and sexuality, resulting in a more nuanced analysis of literary depictions of embodied abjection.

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