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WHO IS IT FOR? PERSONAL WRITING AND
ANTAGONISTIC READERS

by

DANA GLASER

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women's
and Gender Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master
of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Who is it for? Personal Writing and Antagonistic Readers

by

Dana Glaser

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Feminist accounts of how “the personal” is used in feminist critical nonfiction have theorized that the effect of the personal is to connect the writer with readers who share a sense of her investment in the subject matter. Looking at two recent, prominent works about gender and sexuality, and race, respectively that combine genres of criticism and narrative memoir – Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* – this paper considers how personal writing is shaped not by readers it wants to connect to, but by anxious, even dreadful, anticipation of being read by its most resistant and vitriolic readers. I argue that Nelson’s and Coates’s formally dexterous choices – particularly their respective decisions to address their narratives to second person intimates – have been shaped in response to their understandings of what I call the antagonistic reader, a reader whose cognitive and emotional resistance to the writer’s words poses a threat to the text.

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Introduction

There's a tenor to a lot of recent popular writing about feminism that I think is crystallized by the title of novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (decoratively bound, cutely small) book, once a TED Talk, *We Should All Be Feminists*. To be under the age of 35 and known in your circle of family and friends (at least, in the kind of circle for whom popularity is measured by the New York Times Bestseller List) as a feminist is to receive this book as a gift many times. The titles in this trend pitch themselves as a friendly, or friendlier, feminism, or anti-racism; a list of its exemplars includes things like bell hooks' *Feminism Is for Everybody*, the popular blog "Everyday Feminism," Caitlin Moran's *How to Be a Woman*, Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist*, Ileoma Ojuo's *So You Want to Talk About Race*. By virtue of the energy of their desire to be easy, accessible, and welcoming, the writers of friendly feminism betray an anxiety about reaching their audience. They recognize feminism and anti-racism have an unusual amount of difficulty reaching the number of listeners who should, by rights, be theirs; for example, Ojuo writes, "These are very scary times for a lot of people who are just now realizing that America is not, and has never been, the melting-pot utopia that their parents and teachers told them it was... This is not just a gap in experience in viewpoint. The Grand Canyon is a gap. This is a chasm you could drop entire solar systems into" ("Introduction," Kindle Edition). But the shared structures of friendly feminism are defined by a kind of optimism about this resistance; they approach it by offering what they see as simpler, clearer explanation and with a more relatable voice, a voice that puts a friendly face up against the scare words "Black" and "feminist." *I used to think just like you*, the texts say to their reader. Adichie, for example, quips: "At some point I was a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes to Wear Lip Gloss And High Heels For Herself And Not For Men" (10). They try and lower the barrier for entry into dialogues that (they worry) might have seemed too

intimidating: “I am not terribly well versed in feminist history. I am not as well read in key feminist texts as I would like to be,” Roxane Gay writes (xi). If their work observes anxiously a knowledge gap and a reluctance in the field of readers, their remedies for this gap show that they see it as a straightforward phenomenon of obliviousness and misunderstanding. It’s an ignorance that can be dispelled with clarity and simplicity, but most of all, it’s an ignorance that can be dispelled by offering up themselves. Personal details and personal voice, the style implies, forge personal *connection* with a reader whose intellectual distance from the writer is really just a space created by unfamiliarity and emotional distance for bias to rush in. “But no matter how daunting, you are here because you want to hear and you want to be heard,” Ojuo writes, “We can find our way to each other... And it all starts with a conversation” (“Introduction,” Kindle Edition).

Like the spate of books I’m calling friendly feminism, Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*, two of the most prominent and well-received popular books about identity published in the last five years, are works of personal nonfiction, which offer up autobiographical details of the writer’s life, even *intimate* details of the author’s life, in the service of theorizing (though in the interest of accessibility, writers of the former category might say *explaining*) gender and sexuality, or race, respectively. All of them emerge out of feminist methodology that insists on thinking about gender and sexuality through experience, “the personal,” and the body, and a tradition of feminist writing that might be called critical memoir, narrative essay, personal criticism, autotheory (as Nelson calls *The Argonauts*). The antecedents of the kind of hybrid writing *The Argonauts* and *Between the World and Me* represent – writing bounded by a narrative arc but moved by logical thought; writing that thinks through anecdotes; writing that is consciously in dialogue with scholarly discourse – can be traced back (at least) to Virginia Woolf’s essays, and might include writers like Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Alice

Walker, Patricia Williams, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick – a very incomplete list.¹

It is difficult to draw a line around this tradition and definitively list its membership, because it is difficult to say what kinds of writing count as personal. Coates, for example, is usually seen as writing out of the tradition of black autobiography, especially in the vein of James Baldwin; *The Fire Next Time* is made up of two critical essays, one of which is addressed to his nephew as an entrée into the realities of racism, that use autobiography and anecdote to think through race and religion. It is a personal essay, but its *personal-ness* is less talked about than, say, Audre Lorde's *personal-ness*, either because feminist writing consciously cultivates attention to personal experience, or because "the personal" is coded female, and is only problematic when a woman is doing it (or, rather, both, since feminist theorizing about the personal arose to reclaim women's experience from its pejorative). In her essay "Getting Personal: Autobiography as Cultural Criticism" accounting for the late 70s and 80s trend of introducing personal elements to scholarly writing, Nancy K. Miller lays out the following possible definitions of the personal: it may be the inclusion of autobiographical facts; it may be a "certain intensity in the lending of the self," to the subject matter and act of writing, as Mary Ann Caws theorizes; it may be rhetorical *personality*, a writing style; it may be the decision to write in the subjective first person; it may mean speaking from the positional, speaking *for* or *as* one's identity category (2, 6, 9, 14, 16). It is equally difficult, and not unrelatedly difficult, to delineate what counts as critical: feminist literary critics, for example, have insisted that memoir alone is a kind of theoretical exercise, that recording

¹The work these writers produced shares prominent features with *The Argonauts* and *Between the World and Me*. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* makes narrative the intellectual moves of its speaking "I." Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* interweaves her personal experiences as mother with theorizing and criticism of theorizing about patriarchy, motherhood, and childbirth. Audre Lorde conceives of the body as the ultimate, physical landing for racism and also as the site from which to theorize politics in *The Cancer Journals*, and uses her own bodily experience with breast cancer to do so. Patricia Williams' *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* uses anecdote to think legal theory. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* is one of the most generically hybrid texts, combining history, memoir, poetry, and passages in both English and Spanish. Eve Sedgwick similarly combines recovered documents of her own writing, poetry, reportage, and theory in works like "A Poem is Being Written" and *A Dialogue on Love*.

women's lives is the basis of a critical feminist politics. Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, which is a straightforwardly chronological and novelistic narrative of her childhood and which many feminists cite for having been an early model for life beyond normative femininity, is also a critique of bourgeois ideology, elaborated through the occasions and events in her life and education that gave rise to new and competing intellectual positions – much the way Coates recounts how one moment in his life gave rise to a commitment to black nationalism, the next, to racial deconstruction, and so on.

Theoretical accounts of personal criticism (or critical memoir, or narrative essay, or autotheory) trying to define “the personal” and identify what it's doing within or in conjunction with “the critical” or “the theoretical” suggest that what the personal does in these texts is something like what the friendly feminists imagine it will do: it *connects* with the reader. In her essay “Me and My Shadow,” a critique of academic prose's cold postures and a manifesto for reuniting the thinking and feeling self, Jane Tompkins writes:

Sometimes, when a writer introduces some personal bit of story into an essay, I can hardly contain my pleasure. I love writers who write about their own experience. I feel I'm being nourished by them, that I'm being allowed to enter into a personal relationship with them, that I can match my own experience with theirs, feel cousin to them, and say, yes, that's how it is. (24)

In *Women of Bloomsbury*, Caws defines personal criticism as “a willing, knowledgeable, outspoken involvement on the part of the critic with the subject matter, and an *invitation extended to the potential reader to participate* in the interweaving and construction of the ongoing conversation this criticism can be, even as it remains a text” (emphasis mine) (Miller, 24). Picking up this idea that personal criticism is fundamentally engaged criticism, Miller writes:

By the risks of its writing, personal criticism embodies a pact, like the ‘autobiographical pact’ binding writer to reader in the fabulation of self-truth, that what is at stake matters also to others: somewhere in the self-fiction of the personal voice is a belief that the writing is worth the risk. In this sense, by turning its authorial voice into a spectacle, personal writing theorizes the stakes of its own performance: a personal materialism. (24)

Writing personally showcases the writer's emotional investment in what she's writing about, in the belief that what she's writing about matters to readers too. In all three of these accounts, "the personal" in personal writing reaches out to the reader, invites some kind of identification or at least activates a shared care, and risks itself in order to do so. The question is: does the personal impulse seek to connect to all readers? What kind of readers does this account of the personal implicitly imagine? Is connection always desirable?

The Argonauts and *Between the World and Me* are books that seem to take pains to announce are not "for" everybody – that, in fact, they're hardly for anybody. Much of *the Argonauts* is conducted as a kind of remembered conversation; it's addressed to "you," to Harry Dodge, her queerly gendered partner whose transition the narrative recounts, remembering what "I" said, and what "you" said, through anecdotes about Nelson's past and about their shared past: it presents itself as a text between us, *for* us. Nelson's writing was celebrated in most reviews for the nuance it achieves through narrative, for, in one critic's words, "not telling its readers how to be but offering one picture of what it might be like" to live outside gender and sexual boundaries – and yet, she disclaims both a desire to convince others, *and* a desire to model for others: "I don't want to represent anything. At the same time, every word I write could be read as some kind of defense, or assertion of value, of whatever it is that I am...I am interested in offering up my experiences and performing my particular manner of thinking, for whatever they are worth...But I have never been less interested in arguing for the rightness, much less the righteousness, of any particular position or orientation" (Ruby; *The Argonauts*, 97). Nelson is as agnostic about her audience's reception of the text as it is possible for a person who has taken pains to publish something can be. *Between the World and Me* is also written to a specific second person: it is following Baldwin, it is addressed as a letter to his son. When asked, Coates has repeatedly said in

interviews that he was surprised by how many people read the book at all, surprised that white people were interested in his work, and that he expected his audience – who he imagined to be mostly young black men – to be as limited as the audience of his first memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle*, was (León, Wallace-Wells, Allen).

You could read these declarations of disinterest completely literally, and take at face value that Nelson and Coates simply aren't interested in addressing unsympathetic or bigoted readers, that they're just writing *for* Samori and Harry Dodge, or for the communities they represent, or even more intimately, for themselves, and to serve their own understanding, and they just happened to publish that exercise, for whatever it's worth. There is an ethics to those aims: an admirable humility in one's writing powers, a political commitment to not "congeal difference into a single figure," yourself, as Nelson puts it, and a virtue in attending to the audience whose disadvantage makes their needs for your work more acute (78). Coates, in fact, faced strident criticism from prominent black thinkers for finding a wide readership among white readers. In that vein, you could also read Coates's and Nelson's demurring completely pessimistically, as an insincere cover for pandering to a majoritarian audience and bolstering sales, both of which these books did in outsize numbers. I want to do neither. I think Coates's and Nelson's rhetorical refusal of the reader, or of most readers, is best read as both performed and performative, without being insincere: their mode of address emerges from the same anxiety about reaching readers that animates friendly feminism's friendliness, but it represents a more dexterous approach, occasioned by Coates's and Nelson's deeper sense of the readers' listening problem.

Throughout *The Argonauts* and *Between the World and Me*, Nelson and Coates recount encounters with interlocutors who model the dynamics of that more intractable listening problem, which I call antagonistic reading. Antagonistic reading is a practice of reading/listening/interpreting with a cognitive and emotional resistance that goes beyond the

“usual” ignorance or misunderstanding that could be addressed by the friendly feminists’ clarity, explanation, and accessibility. It is not the same thing as antagonism, a responsive contrary position. Antagonistic reading *can’t* be a responsive contrary position because what it fundamentally is is the mental distortion, disruption, or blocking of the speaker’s testimony in the first place before the reader has even “really” absorbed it. Recent scholarship in social epistemology, which builds on feminist philosophy of science’s insights about how social position structures (and limits) knowledge, has given various accounts of how what I’m calling antagonistic reading might work epistemologically, accounts of ignorance as a phenomenon that doesn’t result from being negligent about proper epistemic practice, but as a substantive epistemic practice in itself, one that is socially and structurally determined.² But my purpose is not to say that Coates’s and Nelson’s memoirs match one or another theoretical account of how this resistance – this “willful ignorance,” “white ignorance,” “silencing” – works epistemically, or psychologically, so much as to examine how their texts participate in the theorizing of raced and gendered ignorance through their own theories of antagonistic reading, and to argue that the anticipation of these antagonistic readers, however Coates and Nelson each conceive them, is a shaping force on *The Argonauts* and *Between the World and Me*.³

Reader response theories have argued in different ways for a criticism focused on the reader, based on the idea that the act of reading animates or even creates the text, that the text *really* exists in the mind of the readers, or the texts really exist multiply in the minds of readers. This is not the sense in which I mean the antagonistic reader shapes these texts. I mean that Nelson and Coates’s anticipation of being read by antagonistic readers, and their imaginative “dialogue” with such readers, influenced how they chose to write. This interpretive approach is based on an

²For perspectives from feminist epistemology and feminist philosophy of science on knowledge and social position, see Harding and Haraway. For theories of ignorance as an epistemic practice, see Alcoff.

³ For willful ignorance, see Alcoff. For white ignorance, see Mills. For silencing, see Hornsby and Langton.

understanding of writing and reading as a single communicative and mutually constructing process that comes from Mikhail Bakhtin's late essay, "The Problem of Speech Genres." The essay argues that an understanding of linguistic communication needs to take into consideration all forms of "speech genres," from literary genres – a complex and developed ("secondary") form – to daily interactions, which have their own generic forms that partly determine an individual's style of speech. For Bakhtin, all language is determined in its style, content and structure by the sphere of communication, which includes the person being spoken to, the genre of speech (i.e. the academic essay, the daily rejoinder), conventions of the national language, the individual speaker. The basic unit of communication, he writes, is not the sentence, as various schools in linguistics have argued, but the utterance, which is defined by a change in the speaking subject. A tweet is an utterance. A novel is an utterance. Our fluency in our linguistic world is achieved through our fluency with speech genres, which vary from "rigid and trite" to "flexible, plastic and creative," and which we absorb and use in daily life without suspecting they exist. I do not have to invent from scratch each utterance I will make when I order a coffee at a coffee shop: I have speech genres such as "greeting" and "refusal" and "thanks" at hand, and my own expressive style has, at least in the speech constructed by this sphere of communication, very little influence over what I say. My perception of generic forms in other people's speech allows me to predict the structure of their utterances, to perceive their "speech will," to predict when their utterance will end, and to begin actively absorbing and formulating my response as it is ongoing. Every utterance – including complex secondary genres such as novels (or critical memoirs), which absorb and assemble daily and primary utterances – is involved in an active and mutual process of listening and responding:

The utterance is related not only to the preceding, but also to the subsequent links in the chain of speech communion. When a speaker is creating an utterance, of course, these links do not exist. But from the very beginning, the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created. As we know, the role of *others* for whom the utterance is constructed is extremely great. We

have already said that the role of these others, for whom my thought becomes actual thought for the first time (and thus also for my own self as well) is not that of passive listeners, but of active participants in speech communication. (94)

Put simply, as Coates and Nelson formulate the utterances that are *Between the World and Me* and *The Argonauts*, they project images of the readers to whom they were communicating, a projection which has a profound shaping role on the text. The readers they project, and their sense of possible responsive reactions, comes from past dialogues they've had on race, past responses they've received or witnessed. Their predictive sense of the anticipated antagonistic reader is formed by historical, real antagonistic readers, whose genre of response they are already familiar with. Similarly, what they are able to say about race and gender is built on what people have said in the past about race and gender, and they are either consciously or unconsciously responsive themselves to those preceding utterances.

The responsiveness of *The Argonauts* and *Between the World and Me* is pointedly conscious. Both texts are presented literally as responses: Coates presents *Between the World and Me* as a response to the moment when his son Samori found out that Michael Brown's killer would not be indicted and said, "I've got to go," and went to his room (11). *The Argonauts* presents itself as a response to Harry's request for it: "*You've written about all parts of your life except this, except the queer part, you said. Give me a break, I said back, I haven't written about it yet*" (32). And both texts are patently in conversation with thinkers about race, or gender and sexuality, who came before them – in Nelson's case, the words of the queer and psychoanalytic thinkers who she is in dialogue with are literally tumbled into her text, absorbed into her own words and distinguished only by italics. And both texts recount anecdotes of discursive and interpretive interactions with interlocutors who practice antagonistic reading.

The cast of antagonistic readers Nelson assembles differ from the array Coates assembles. But both authors conceive of a destructive process of reading that operates in a similar way: the

interpretive action of the antagonistic reader turns on reducing the figure of the author into a caricature, creating, as Nelson puts it, quoting Eve Sedgwick, “a hologram bearing their name,” one whose words are entailed by and thus conflated with that holographic identity. This neat reduction and entailment allows the reader to effectively erase the author’s word and to rewrite the meaning of the exchange according to their own need. Coates and Nelson represent the need driving these interactions differently. For Nelson, the antagonistic reader operates by a kind of zero-sum economy of visibility in which their visibility – as [bona fide] radical, intellectual, man – is obscurely threatened when certain speakers make claims to visibility through speech. In the world of *Between the World and Me*, antagonistic readers are readers who operate by the logic of whiteness (as I’ll discuss, this is not the same as “readers who are white,” since part of Coates’s project is to deconstruct and denaturalize race), and the need that motivates them is the need for absolution. Without collapsing their differences, these accounts both see antagonistic reading as a drive to shore up something like the reader’s sense of *legitimacy* – whether existential or moral. Both see this drive as intimately caught up in the workings of identity.

Though their gestures of refusal seem to want to keep the sphere of their readership to those who will identify with their personal stakes in the subject matter – both of which are very, very high; Nelson is writing, in a sense, for her marriage; Coates, for his life and his son’s – both understand the antagonistic reader as presenting threats that preclude them from doing so. Instead, their address to a specific reader is the means by which they attempt to pre-empt and redirect the antagonistic reader’s reading. Their gesture of writing to “you” both addresses the reader more directly – calling up even one reader concretely dissolves the haze of anonymity behind which the narrate of a general, universalized address hides, reminding you of your personal *presence* as a reader – even as they turn away from “you” to address the specific recipient, Harry or Samori. The effect is that the reader is both contained in and refused by the “you.” In Nelson, the second person

address to Harry refuses the antagonistic reader by, to use her word, metabolizing the antagonistic reader – into the figure of Harry, who performs the erasing impulse the antagonistic reader feels pre-emptively, lovingly, in the form of edits. Her second person address is a kind of controlled submission to the antagonistic reader. Coates’s “you” provokes and then ostentatiously refuses the reader, creating a sense that he has accused the reader but then denying the reader the grounds on which to respond or defend themselves.

Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*: Submission

I. Object Lessons and the Horrible Thing: Dread of the Antagonistic Reader

The Argonauts is populated with figures of the antagonistic reader. First: Rosalind Krauss, the art historian. Nelson recalls attending a seminar at the CUNY Graduate Center, where she was as a PhD candidate, at which Jane Gallop and Rosalind Krauss had been invited to speak. Nelson narrates that Gallop presented photographs her husband had taken of her and their child – some of them quite intimate (in the bathtub, lounging naked, perhaps most vulnerably, in a favorite, ugly shirt) – in order to explore photography from the perspective of being the photographed subject. She coupled that understanding of photography “from the inside” with a discussion of motherhood, another subject position often seen as too personal, too subjective to speak to its own condition.

Krauss’ presentation savaged Gallop’s:

The room thickened with the sound of one keenly intelligent woman taking another down. Dismembering her, really. Krauss excoriated Gallop for taking her own personal situation as subject matter, accused her of having an almost willful blindness to photography’s long history. She alleged – or so I recall her alleging – that Gallop had misused Barthes, had failed to place her investigation in relation to any lineage of family photography, had punted on the most basic aesthetic concepts in art history, and so on. But the tacit undercurrent of her argument as I felt it, was that Gallop’s maternity had rotted her mind – besotted it with the narcissism that makes one think that an utterly ordinary experience shared by countless others is somehow unique, or uniquely interesting. (41)

Second: certain readers of Judith Butler. Nelson quotes Butler as saying, “It’s painful for

me that I wrote a whole book calling into question identity politics, only then to be constituted as a token of lesbian identity” (53). Butler wonders if people didn’t really read the book, or if the commodification of identity politics was powerful enough to overtake and absorb whatever she had actually written. Nelson writes, in a rare moment in which her endless intellectual sympathy runs dry:

I think Butler is generous to name the diffuse “commodification of identity” as the problem. Less generously, I’d say that the simple fact that she’s a lesbian is so blinding for some, that whatever words come out of her mouth – whatever words come out of *the lesbian’s* mouth, whatever ideas spout from her head – certain listeners hear only one thing: *lesbian, lesbian, lesbian*. It’s a quick step from there to discounting the lesbian – or, for that matter, anyone who refuses to slip quietly into a postracial future that resembles all too closely the racist past and present – as *identitarian*, when it’s actually the listener who cannot get beyond the identity that he has imputed to the speaker. Calling the speaker *identitarian* then serves as an efficient excuse not to listen to her, in which case the listener can resume his role as speaker. And then we can scamper off to yet another conference with a keynote address by Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, at which we can meditate on Self and Other, grapple with radical difference, exalt the deciveness of the Two, and shame the unsophisticated identitarians, all at the feet of yet another great white man pontificating from the podium, just as we’ve done for centuries. (54)

Third: the patrician playwright, who, at a Q&A on Nelson’s book tour for *The Art of Cruelty* raises his hand and says “I can’t help but notice that you’re with child, which leads me to the question – how did you handle working on all this dark material [sadism, masochism, cruelty, violence, and so on] in your condition?” Nelson writes:

Ah yes, I think, digging a knee into the podium. Leave it to the old patrician white guy to call the lady speaker back to her body, so that no one misses the spectacle of that wild oxymoron, *the pregnant woman who thinks*. Which is really just a pumped-up version of that more general oxymoron, *a woman who thinks*.

As if anyone was missing the spectacle anyway. As if a similar scene didn’t recur at nearly every location of my so-called book tour. As if when I myself see pregnant women in the public sphere, there isn’t a kind of drumming in my mind that threatens to drown out all else: *pregnant, pregnant, pregnant...*(91).

Fourth: right-wing culture warriors. Nelson recounts an incident in 1991 in which the title of a talk Eve Sedgwick was giving, “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” was published in an

MLA program and unleashed a wave of criticism of her depravity, before the content of the talk had even been written.

About learning she was ill just as the ‘journalistic hologram bearing [her] name’ became the object of ugly vitriol, [Sedgwick] writes: “I don’t know a gentler way to say it than that at a time when I’ve needed to make especially deep draughts on the reservoir of a desire to live and thrive, that resource has shown the cumulative effects of my culture’s wasting depletion of it.” She then names a few of the “thousand things [that] make it impossible to mistake the verdict on queer lives and on women’s lives, as on the lives of those who are poor or who are not white.” This verdict can become a chorus of voices in our heads, standing by to inhibit our capacity to contend with illness, dread, and devaluation. “[These voices] speak to us,” Sedgwick says. “They have an amazing clarity.” (113)

Fifth: Nelson’s stalker of sorts – a balding, middle-aged man in his fifties carrying an attaché case. A few months before Iggy is conceived, a man left a voice mail on her phone at work saying her aunt, who was murdered as a young law student in 1969, “got what she deserved.” The man was “obsessed with Jane’s murder, and with me as someone who had written about it” (114). The man showed up at the university’s campus and began to ask for Nelson. Nelson couldn’t shake the feeling that she has materialized this man herself:

...it was I [not her mother] who insisted on writing about Jane’s murder, and while I knew intellectually that I wasn’t responsible for this man’s actions any more than Jane was for her murder (as the caller had indicated), my less enlightened self felt sick with a sense of late-breaking comeuppance. I had summoned the horrible thing, and now here he was, attaché case in hand. It wasn’t long before my image of him merged with that of Jared Lee Loughner, the man who, exactly two weeks prior, had walked up to Representative Gabby Giffords in a Safeway parking lot in Tucson, Arizona, and shot her, along with eighteen others. A form letter from Giffords was found in Loughner’s home with the words ‘Die, Bitch,’ scrawled on it; Loughner was known for saying that women should not hold positions of power.

It doesn’t matter to me if both these men are mad. Their voices still have clarity.
(118)

The cast of characters in these examples who conduct a series of communication failures that range from bothersome to brutal do so by a shared logic: these listeners can only hear whatever their version is of *lesbian, lesbian, lesbian*. Their antagonism circumscribes and reduces the figure of the author and focuses a myopic attention on this creation, this figure who is “a hologram

bearing her name.” Nelson’s vision of Butler’s readers is that they treat the reductive identity of the *lesbian* is treated as though it naturally entails certain discursive positions, certain beliefs. They produce a “natural” joining of author and idea that makes the reduction of one conveniently the reduction of the other, obviating both. The lesbian is identitarian, a neatly wrapped argument we’re already familiar with, and which we can easily shelf; the lesbian is an understandable figure, there’s no need to understand her. The author’s actual words are effectively erased. The patrician playwright can only hear *pregnant, pregnant, pregnant*, a litany that drives his interest away from Nelson’s actual book, her actual words—the question he asks at her talk is about her “condition.” Thoughts about cruelty can’t flow from the pregnant woman, the figure of care, so thoughts about those thoughts are disregarded. Eve Sedgwick becomes Jane Austen becomes “the masturbating girl”: what was galling to her critics, Nelson writes, “was the spectacle of a writer or thinker — be it Sedgwick or Austen — who finds her work happy-making, and who celebrates it publicly as such” (113). This reduction so neatly conflates the content of Sedgwick’s thoughts with the figure of the masturbating girl that the critics need not wait for the thoughts to materialize at all before responding to them. Rosalind Krauss’s substantive critiques of its ahistoricity, its mis-use of theory, but Nelson hears the “undercurrent” of Krauss’ argument as “maternity had rotted Gallop’s mind.” Gallop presents herself complexly: photographic subject, wife, *and* critic; mother, subject, feminist theorist of motherhood. Nelson’s diagnosis of what’s going on in this scene could be phrased as her perception that all Krauss really hears is *mother, mother, mother*.

Nelson depicts these figures as accruing something to themselves, satisfying their own need for what’s alternately described as seriousness, authority, sophistication, rectitude. When she introduces the anecdote about Krauss, she writes, “The professors gathered solemnly around a long wooden table in one of the more handsome rooms at the Grace Building, where CUNY was then situated,” she writes (39). The prize of the exchange between Gallop and Krauss is academic

authority. While Nelson describes Gallop as sort of endearingly zany, “droopy-eyed and louche, and had that bad but endearing style that so many academics have,” Krauss “was Gallop’s inverse – sharp face, classy in a silk scarf, Ivy League, Upper East Side way” (40). Krauss “lashes” Gallop for her lack of rigor so she can uphold and assert her own. She acts as though “Gallop should be ashamed for trotting out naked pictures of herself and her son in the bathtub, contaminating serious academic space with her pudgy body and unresolved, self-involved thinking,” so that Nelson will be forced to admit “It’s true that Gallop is no art historian, certainly not in the way that Krauss is” (41). Gallop’s thinking must be rotted by motherhood, *too soft*, so that Krauss can be *the real* scholar, *the real* thinker. Similarly, Judith Butler’s thinking must be identitarian, “unsophisticated,” so that the work of Žižek, Badiou and Baudrillard can be broader minded, transcendent. The excuse not to listen to the identitarian serves to let the listener resume his role as speaker. The antagonistic reader’s drive for legitimacy is zero-sum: in order for him to speak, she must be silenced. Krauss is Gallop’s *inverse*. The very thing that enraged the right-wing culture warriors about the non-existent talk “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl” was, Nelson recalls Sedgwick thinking, the specter of self-pleasure both literal and literary, which is to say, the image of a woman’s self-containment, a refusal of the kind of dialectical relationship by which your incompetence equals my authority – a dialectical relationship that, as feminists such as Beauvoir and Catharine MacKinnon have theorized, has defined “man.” In Nelson’s reading through Sedgwick’s reading, the culture warriors flagellated this image of self-containing and self-sustaining pleasure, to (dialectically) legitimate their own ascetic discipline, their own upright usefulness.

Nelson sees the drives behind antagonistic reading as those that operate political subjectivity. They come down to a desire for legitimacy and visibility – twinned concepts in Nelson’s theorizing about gender and sexuality. At the time she met Harry, Nelson writes, opening the book,

I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly! – in the expressed. This idea gets less air time than his more reverential *Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent*, but it is, I think, the deeper idea. Its paradox is, quite literally, *why I write*, or how I feel able to keep writing.

For it doesn't feed or exalt any angst one may feel about the incapacity to express, in words, that which eludes them. It doesn't punish what can be said for what, by definition, it cannot be. Nor does it ham it up by miming a constricted throat: *Lo, what I would say, were words good enough*. Words are good enough. (3)

Harry, meanwhile, had, at that point, “spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are *not* good enough....Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again. All that is unnameable falls away, gets lost, is murdered. You called this the cookie-cutter function of our minds” (4). This opening standoff prepares us for Nelson's reconsideration and elaboration of her beliefs about language: “I've explained this elsewhere,” she writes about Wittgenstein, “But I'm trying to say something different now” (4). Meeting Harry is what causes Nelson to confront the problem of visibility anew: Harry's life is caught in the jaws of visibility's self-defeating currents, best and poignantly explained with a drawing of Harry's of a ghost, cutely captioned, “*Without this sheet, I would be invisible*” (86). The ghost is unrecognizable to others as ghost without the sheet, but the sheet eliminates the invisibility that is the essence of ghost. Harry likes the changes the T brings that make his masculinity recognizable and affirmable by the world, but, Nelson writes to him, “You also feel them as a sort of compromise, a wager for visibility...visibility makes possible, but it also disciplines: disciplines gender, disciplines genre” (86). Harry's desire for his gender to be physically visible diminishes another crucial aspect of his internal experience of it, its indeterminacy. This is understanding of gender that Judith Butler famously elaborates in *Gender Trouble*, the opening paragraph of which states:

On the one hand, *representation* serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category women. For feminist theory, the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed necessary

to foster the political visibility of women. (2)

Butler goes on to argue that there is no “natural” essence, woman, that the language seeking to “accurately” describe what woman “really is” (as opposed to the degraded and subjected being she is now) constitutes her, and is thus always asserting normative and exclusionary force on subjects. Language, for Harry and increasingly for Nelson, the act of speaking or writing itself, is a bid for this kind of visibility; the kind that legitimates a person as subject within a political and juridical system. As Butler writes, visibility has been *so* necessary for legitimacy that one only becomes available to be counted as subject at all when one is visible as one gender or the other (46).

The antagonistic readers whose reading makes them sophisticated by making the speaker unsophisticated, rigorous by making the speaker soft, disciplined by making the speaker self-indulgent, are, in Nelson’s view, seeking visibility and legitimacy in an almost existential sense. In their zero-sum vision, the speaker’s speech is a bid for visibility that threatens to exclude and discipline their own identities, and they must reverse the dynamic in favor of their own visibility and legitimacy. Antagonistic reading is a microcosm of Butler’s society-level understanding of how power constitutes and disciplines its subjects through gender, an examination of it “from the inside” (84). Early in the narrative Nelson recalls a particularly painful incident in her relationship with Harry when, just getting to know his three-year-old son, his ex says “*Tell your girlfriend to find a different kid to play house with*” (14). “To align oneself with the real while intimating that others are at play, approximate, or in imitation can feel good,” she muses in response to this, and “Some people find pleasure in aligning themselves with an identity, as in *You make me feel like a natural woman*,” which is why D.W. Winnicott’s notion of “feeling real,” contrary to a realness situated in an identity, a realness that is dialectical and zero-sum, is so moving to her: “One can aspire to feel real, one can help others to feel real, and one can oneself feel real – a feeling Winnicott describes as the collected, primary sensation of aliveness” (14). These are the

dimensions behind bolstering yourself with a destructive reading of another: a primary need for the *feeling* of political, social legitimacy, of realness.

As the narrative progresses, we get an escalating sense of the imaginative grip the antagonistic readers have on Nelson as she writes into an uncertain readerly landscape tripped with discursive landmines. Her examples make it clear why they're threatening to the text, why she can't simply write to others, and ignore them. For one thing, her sense is that antagonistic readers can be anyone: it's not just that right wing culture warriors rip apart queer theorists; keenly intelligent women rip apart other keenly intelligent women; left Marxists dismiss left post-structuralists; playwrights talk past memoirists. Antagonistic reading is not a dynamic that she sees as only taking place across group boundaries (obviously, in large part because her project is to deconstruct group boundaries). There is no clear way of distinguishing which set of readers she could address "instead" of addressing antagonistic readers – all readers are potentially antagonistic readers, even (actually, especially – as I'll discuss) the queer readership she most wants to address. And antagonistic readings, Nelson suggests, are contagious. When she recalls listening to Gallop's lecture, Nelson remembers being "surprised and pleased that she was showing us naked photos of her son," and thinking "I liked that Gallop was onto something and letting us in on it before she fully understood it. She was hanging her shit out to dry: a start" (40). She is a captive audience, but also one seducible to the lure of Krauss' self-mastery, prestige, *legitimacy*. Sitting down in the solemn seminar room, she writes, "I felt as though I had truly arrived—somehow I had been plucked from the corner booth of Max Fish and deposited at the center of an intellectual mecca, complete with dark wood and academic superstars" (39). At the end of the episode she writes that she "stood with Gallop," but there's something joyless in it ("I felt I had no choice,"), and it's not before she has ceded that Gallop *has* always been something of a narcissist, that she really *isn't* an art historian in the way Krauss is. Krauss' lashing, the authorial Nelson implies, threatened to dim

the shine of Gallop's words in the eyes of other willingly attentive and open readers.

But the real threat is to Nelson herself. The lashing Rosalind Krauss gives Jane Gallop "stood for some time in my mind as an object lesson" (41). Whatever principle she internalized from that lesson about how to be and how to write in such and such a space and what will come to you if you violate such rules, it preoccupied her and held sway with her long after that day. What starts as a warning becomes, by the end of the text, so formless and general a threat that it casts, in the form of the man with the attaché case, a mythic and overwhelming dread over the act of writing. The examples of possible antagonistic readers accumulated over 120 pages or so seem to eliminate the possibility of any right way to be. You can be as philosophical and removed as Judith Butler, and still be too personal, just *the lesbian*; you can draw your thought from a complicated and multifaceted image of yourself as mother, wife, critic, feminist and still be seen reductively as *mother*, just *soft*. Trying to write a talk she was due to give about Eve Sedgwick at CUNY that would later become part of this book, she is overcome by paranoid thoughts about the stalker: "Other moments of my life may have looked worse, but this one felt like its own kind of bottom: I'd never felt so scared and nihilistic at the same time. I wept for the baby and the life I felt sure would never be ours, no matter how badly I wanted it" (116). Throughout *The Argonauts*, pregnancy is writing's metaphorical twin, the two supposedly mutually exclusive creative acts that Nelson works to make compatible. The image of a man obsessed with Jane's murder and obsessed with Nelson for writing about Jane's murder, driving Nelson to sit on her back porch and smoke an egg-shriveling cigarette that breaks a two-year fertility regimen while sitting next to a cylinder of pepper spray is an image of antagonistic reading at its most obscenely threatening, as too tangible in its operation, and yet so diffusely general in its possibility as to not just erase but to pre-emptively paralyze speech.

II. A Feminist Critique of Queer

To read *The Argonauts* thinking about how it might be shaped by this collection of figures is to read it thinking about the anxieties she's tamed and the provocations she's softened or submerged. In spite of disavowing any desire to persuade or defend the rightness of any position, Nelson *does* make an argument – a provocative one. And in spite of the looming possibility of crushing dread figured by the “horrible thing,” Nelson is able to imagine more specifically what kinds of negative reactions and which communities of readers her argument is likely to call up.

To be initially schematic about a subtle argument: *The Argonauts* is a feminist critique of queer thought and practice from the borders of, and to, the queer community. Early in the argument, Nelson sketches the terrain of queer thinking that defines the term queer and its radical potential against family. Early in her relationship with Harry, when she drives by Prop 8 signs that were springing up on the Los Angeles mountainside (advocating a ballot measure against gay marriage in California), she thinks of Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, an image Opie carved into a back after breaking up with her partner of two stick figure women holding hands in front of a house and a sun and clouds. Nelson writes, “I don't get it, I said to Harry. Who wants a version of the Prop 8 poster, but with two triangle skirts?” (11). Later, when her friend notices a mug Nelson's mother gave her plastered with a photo of the family, Nelson seven months pregnant, all of them dressed up to see the Nutcracker at Christmastime, and says “*I've never seen anything so heteronormative in all my life,*” Nelson questions, “But what about it is the essence of heteronormativity?” Is it the fact that her mother used a boojie photo service, “the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation,” the tradition of being photographed during the holidays in your holiday best (13)? Nelson agrees with queer thinkers' critique of the homonormative direction of the GLBTQ+ movement. “There's something truly strange about living in a historical moment in which the conservative anxiety and despair about queers bringing down civilization and

its institutions (marriage, most notably) is met by the anxiety and despair so many queers feel about the failure or incapacity of queerness to bring down civilization and its institutions,” she writes; “if we want to do more than claw our way into repressive structures, we have our work cut out for us” (26). At the same time, she sees the radical versions of queer living and thinking on offer as exclusionary.

By way of Eve Sedgwick, Nelson offers us two alternate definitions of “queer.” Sedgwick, Nelson writes,

wanted to make way for ‘queer’ to hold all kinds of resistances and fracturings and mismatches that have little or nothing to do with sexual orientation. ‘Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurring, eddying, troublant,’ she wrote. ‘Keenly, it is relational, and strange.’ She wanted the term to be a perpetual excitement, a kind of placeholder – a nominative, like *Argo*, willing to designate molten or shifting parts, a means of asserting while also giving the slip.” (29)

At the same time, Sedgwick “argued that ‘given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against *every* same sex sexual expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term [*queer*]’s definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself” (29). Nelson describes this dichotomy as Sedgwick wanting to have it both ways, a dichotomy and a desire that puts a point on the problem. “Queer,” she thinks, is too attached to its definitional center, to its desire for the visibility offered by an identity like “homosexuality,” which really means gay, which really means male. In one narrative, she recalls feeling what she suspects is an unwarranted annoyance at a bouncer who will not let her bring her five-month son into a (presumably gay) burlesque show; she felt, she says, “the specter of what Susan Fraiman has described as ‘a heroic gay male sexuality as a stand-in for queerness which remains ‘unpolluted by procreative femininity’” (67). She observes, later, that “the tired binary that places *femininity, reproduction, and normativity on one side and masculinity, sexuality, and queer resistance on the other* has lately reached a kind of apotheosis, often posing as a last, desperate

stand against homo- and heteronormativity, both” (75, italics attributed by Nelson to Susan Fraiman). In response to Lee Edelman’s argument that “*queerness* names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” and to his invective to *Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized*, she asks “why bother fucking this Child when we could be fucking the specific forces that mobilize and crouch behind its image?” Of Edelman’s reading Freud’s Wolf Man case as a coded fantasy of gay male sex, she writes “This interpretation has appeal and value. But if the woman’s [the mother’s] genitals have to be willfully erased in order to get there, and her pleasure distorted into a cautionary tale re: the perils of castration, we have a problem. (Rule of thumb: when something needs to willfully erased in order to get somewhere, there is usually a problem)” (69). She is skeptical that the radical potential of queerness can be located in “sexual deviance”: “In an age all too happy to collapse the sodomitical mother into the MILF, how can rampant, ‘deviant’ sexual activity remain the marker of radicality? What sense does it make to align ‘queer’ with ‘sexual deviance,’ when the ostensibly straight world is having no trouble keeping pace?” (110).

Against these attachments and exclusions, she makes a case for seeing women’s experiences as disruptive, as “queer.” In response to her friend’s offhanded comment about her heteronormative mug, Nelson wonders, “Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one’s ‘normal’ state, and occasions a radical intimacy with – and radical alienation from – one’s body?” (13). She makes this visible: she writes of the pregnant body’s “obscenity,” the public autoeroticism of the intimate relation between fetus and child. And then, the eroticism of the intimate relation between baby and child, the political significance and the radical transgression of insisting on being mother and person, maternal and erotic, maternal and intellectual, and insisting on not just being both at different times but being both, substantively, at

once (64, 74, 96, 100). She points out the *normativity* of the command to be available for sex, and tries on the radical potential of abstaining from sex (!): “Faced with the warp speed of this ‘new kind of hot, psychotropic, punk capitalism,’ especially from my station of fatigue, exchanging horniness for exhaustion grows in allure. Unable to fight my station, at least for the time being, I try to learn from it; another self, stripped” (111).

This is more than just an argument, via “queering” maternity and the aging female body, for queer to more fully embrace Sedgwick’s first definition, queerness as flight. It’s an argument underlining how difficult it is really for groups and identities to remain open to “all that is flow,” an argument that points out that queer’s declaration of being keenly relational and strange has been, at times, disingenuous, a self-gratifying posture that allows and masks a “release” back into the default commitment to the definitional center. She writes:

Perhaps it’s the word *radical* that needs rethinking. But what could we angle ourselves toward instead, or in addition? Openness? Is that good enough, strong enough? You’re *the only one who knows when you’re using things to protect yourself and keep your ego together and when you’re opening and letting things fall apart, letting the world come as it is—working with it rather than struggling against it. You’re the only one who knows. And the thing is, even you don’t always know.* (27, italics Pema Chodron)

The answer *The Argonauts* gives to this self-questioning is yes, we should angle ourselves towards openness, but no, it’s not strong enough. At one point she recalls the first day in a graduate seminar with Eve Sedgwick, in which Sedgwick asked the students to break the ice by choosing a totem animal. Nelson recalls first recoiling at the exercise of labeling at all (“the game placed an icy finger on my identity phobia”) and then, when the circle got to her, unexpectedly saying her animal was an otter:

It was important to me back then to feel, to be wily. To feel small, slick, quick, amphibious, capable. I didn’t know then Barthes’ book *The Neutral*, but if I had, it would have been my anthem – the Neutral being that which, in the face of dogmatism, the menacing pressure to take sides, to offer novel responses: to flee, to escape, to demure, to shift or refuse terms, to disengage, to turn away. The otter was thus a complex sort of stand-in, or fake-out, another identity I felt sure I could shimmy out of.” (112)

In other words, Nelson understands *flow* and openness as necessary political aims but also as seductive, gratifying, even *assuaging* stances: *you're the only one who knows when you're using things to protect yourself and keep your ego together*. Fixed identity can protect and keep your ego together; letting the world come as it is can also be used to protect yourself and keep your ego together. She does not disavow the need for visibility. She marshal's feminism's definitional center to expose and disrupt queer's reliance on its (exclusionary) definitional center.

Throughout, Nelson shows a wariness that being a woman who can “pass” and whose identity is at minimum not *quite* at the definitional center of queer while making the critique above courts the vitriol of potentially antagonistic readers. The readings she knows she courts are described by words like presumption, appropriation, privilege. She shows flashes of keen attention throughout the narrative to her position in the queer orbit, and to how Harry's overtly changing gender locates her in it. For example, she writes, “Soon after we got together, we attended a dinner party at which a (presumably straight, or at least straight-married) woman who'd known Harry for some time turned to me and said, ‘so, have you been with other women, before Harry?’ I was taken aback. Undeterred, she went on: ‘Straight ladies have always been hot for Harry.’ Was Harry a woman? Was I a straight lady?” (8). In another example, Nelson describes going to see an art porn movie her friends made, and feeling put off by the movie's ending dedication “to the queerest of the queer”: “The audience applauded, and I applauded too. But inside the dedication felt like a needle zigzagging off the record after a great song. Whatever happened to horizontality? Whatever happened to *the difference is spreading*? I tried to hold on to what I liked most about the movie, which was watching people hit each other during sex without it seeming violent...” (63). What Nelson liked most about the movie was the characters whose sexuality “reminded me of mine in ways I couldn't name but moved me,” to see her own non-normative preferences depicted tenderly

– “held and beheld,” to use her words, by queer. That the movie’s dedication to the “queerest of the queer” sounds an off-note suggests that she feels cast out by it, that she’s sensitive to the fact that she’s not seen as the queerest of the queer. Soon after Harry’s top surgery in Florida, eating dinner at a Mexican restaurant, Nelson writes to Harry, “You pass as a guy; I, as pregnant” (83). Unsaid, but implied: *we pass as normal*, or rather, normative. She is much too savvy either to argue or to genuinely believe this “passing” is an irrelevant mis-perception of her “true” queerness. When she takes off alone on book tour for *The Art of Cruelty*, “passing” as pregnant, military personnel salute her, and she muses: “So this is the seduction of normalcy, I thought as I smiled back, compromised and radiant” (90). The way one is seen, the way one is treated, determines as much as reflects one’s gender. This passing is *compromising*.

Nelson recalls that Sedgwick “took heat” when she tried to practice her own fugitive definition of queer as a signifier that could be invoked simply by the desire to use it in the first person: “Annoying as it might be to hear a straight white guy talk about a book of his as queer (do you have to own everything?), in the end, it’s probably all for the better. Sedgwick, who was long married to a man with whom she had, by her own description, mostly postshower, vanilla sex, knew about the possibilities of this first-person use of the term perhaps better than anyone else. She took heat for it, just as she took heat for identifying with gay men (not to mention *as* a gay man) and for giving lesbians not much more than an occasional nod” (29). She knows the kind of “heat” that might produce antagonistic readers from having once dished it out herself: “For all the years I didn’t want to be pregnant—the years I spent harshly deriding ‘the breeders’ – I secretly felt pregnant women were smug in their complaints. Here they were, sitting on top of the cake of the culture, getting all the kudos for doing exactly what women are supposed to do, yet they still feel unsupported and discriminated against” (90).

III. Making the Brutal Tender

It is a testament to *The Argonauts* and its rhetorical and formal dexterity that the following description of it seems like a gross misreading: “a cis-woman claims she has some understanding of what FTM gender transition is like from her own experience of pregnancy.” Certainly Nelson’s associational rather than straightforwardly argumentative mode of writing, her use of analogy rather than declarative comparison to make the claim I summarized, her thinking’s ability to sympathetically analyze two positions, even to “want it both ways” herself sometimes, have something to do with diffusing the potentially explosive assertions of *The Argonauts*. But the way Nelson primarily addresses and manages the readings of potentially antagonistic readers is through her address to Harry.

When Nelson writes about the crescendo of dread occasioned by “the horrible thing,” she extends her thinking to a larger consideration of paranoia. Turning away from the paranoid thinking she learned from her mother and internalized – her mother’s is the voice in Nelson’s head asking about her next writing project “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”, the voice that risks seeing writing *only* in terms of the horrible thing it might summon – Nelson examines the reparative writing practices of some of the ‘many-gendered mothers of her heart.’ The many gendered mothers of her heart say: “Just because you have enemies does not mean you have to be paranoid. They insist, no matter the evidence marshaled against their insistence: *There is nothing you can throw at me that I cannot metabolize, no thing impervious to my alchemy*” (122-123). This is the ethos that carries her up and out of the nihilistic bottom to which her stalker dragged her: “The realization that I could incorporate the stalker into my talk about Sedgwick eventually became an incitement for me to get back to work. *Yes, get back to work.* It even became a source of comfort, as if bringing such an episode into the orbit of Eve would neutralize its negative force” (123). And it is the ethos that describes how *The Argonauts* is shaped by its confrontation with antagonistic

reading: by bringing the dread of it into Harry's "orbit," by metabolizing the antagonistic reader into the text as the figure of Harry, her original antagonistic reader.

In the beginning of the book, Nelson's depiction of "you," of Harry, is blissful, giddy, loving. She is vulnerable, she is desperate to make him love her. As they begin to settle into a life as a family with Harry's son, they're brought up short by what Nelson calls their "hard season": custody battles, the illness of Harry's mother, but most of all (for this text's considerations anyway), a peak in Harry's feeling of imprisonment in his own body. Nelson writes in a minimal way about the problems between them during their "hard season," (probably according to Harry's wishes, as I'll discuss; in a desperate bid for hope during this time, Nelson searches – shamefully, she knows – for evidence that the blissfully in love Mary and George Oppen fought during their lifetimes; Harry tells her of course they fought, but they probably kept it private, "out of respect and love for one another"), but she makes it clear that her anxiety about Harry's transition was central to them, and that this anxiety worried over how the changes would come to define her *in relation*. During this period Nelson recounts the following conversation:

I just want you to feel free, I said in anger disguised as compassion, compassion disguised as anger.

Don't you get it? you yelled back. I will never feel as free as you do, I will never feel as at home in the world, I will never feel as at home in my own skin. That's just the way it is, and always will be.

Well then I feel really sorry for you, I said.

Or maybe, Fine, but don't take me down with you. (31)

Nelson's mis-remembering reads and translates her own final comment ("Well then I feel really sorry for you") as an impulse to draw a line between the two of them, to relinquish and separate herself from Harry's problems with gender ("don't take me down with you"). In context, the comment probably meant something like: don't let your inability to live in your own skin threaten our relationship. But it also shows us that there was a time in their relationship in which Nelson saw Harry's freedom as her comedown and entrapment, Harry's self-definition as overwriting her

own. She casts their relationship as having operated by a logic of zero-sum visibility: they're reading each other antagonistically. Nelson goes on:

You showed me an essay about butches and femmes that contained the line 'to be femme is to give honor where there has been shame.' You were trying to tell me something, give me information I might need. I don't think that line is where you meant for me to stick—you may not even have noticed it—but there I stuck. I wanted and still want to give you any life-sustaining gift I have to offer...But I also felt mixed up: I had never conceived of myself as femme; I knew I had a habit of giving too much; I was frightened by the word *honor*. How could I tell you all that and stay inside our bubble, giggling on the red couch?

I told you I wanted to live in a world in which the antidote to shame is not honor, but honesty. You said I misunderstood what you meant by honor. We haven't yet stopped trying to explain to each other what these words mean to us; perhaps we ne never will. (32)

Harry's becoming male *shunts* Nelson into becoming *femme*, into becoming more traditionally/visibly female. Early in *The Argonauts*, Nelson gives us a reading of Harry's film *By Hook or By Crook*, in which Harry and his cowriter, Silas Howard, argue that the issue of being called by the "right" pronoun isn't solve-able by insisting that everyone in the outside world use the pronoun that corresponds with one's innermost feeling, because "Words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure...One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly. Like when you whisper, *You're just a hole, letting me fill you up*. Like when I say *husband*" (8). Seemingly abusive sexual language is loving within the context of their mutually created sexual theater of violence; "husband" isn't normatively imbued with authority when Nelson says it to her butch partner. By their own fluid theorizing, as the context changes, which is to say, as Harry's gender changes, the meaning of the word "husband" threatens to change. "Honor" veers into sounding biblical, that which is due to authority (as in: honor thy father). Nelson's fixation on it is an anxiety about her own visibility and legitimacy – as queer, as feminist. Her worry that she'll be forced to become more and more normatively "woman" as Harry moves further into "man."

When she recounts finishing a first draft of the manuscript of this book and giving it to

Harry, she explicitly casts him as her antagonistic reader:

I finish a first draft of this book and give it to Harry. He doesn't have to tell me that he's read it: when I come home from work, I can see the pile of ruffled pages sticking out of his knapsack, and I can feel his mood, which one might describe as quiet ire. We agree to go out for lunch the next day to talk about it. At lunch he tells me he feels unbeheld – unheld, even. I know this is a terrible feeling. We go through the draft page by page, mechanical pencils in hand, with him suggesting ways I might facet my representation of him, of us. I try to listen, try to focus on his generosity in letting me write about him at all. He is, after all, a very private person, who has told me more than once that being with me is like an epileptic with a pacemaker being married to a strobe light artist. But nothing can substantively quell my inner defense attorney. *How can a book be both a free expression and a negotiation? Is it not idle to fault a net for having holes?*

That's just an excuse for a crappy net, he might say. But it's my book, mine! Yes, but the details of my life, of our life, don't belong to you alone. OK, but no mind can take the same interest in his neighbor's me as in his own. The neighbor's me falls together with all the rest of the things in one foreign mass, against which his own me stands out in startling relief. A writer's narcissism. But that's William James's description of subjectivity itself, not narcissism. Whatever—why can't you just write something that will bear adequate witness to me, to us, to our happiness? Because I do not yet understand the relationship between writing and happiness, or writing and holding.
(46-47)

Harry wants to erase Maggie's words: pencil in hand, he wants to (it is only fair to qualify, *as Nelson feels it*) to facet the text in accordance with his own needs, likely (he is, after all, a very private person) he wants to make actual cuts, to put less of them and less of him on display.

Nelson's rational mind can hardly triumph over the "inner defense attorney" who feels these edits as painful reductions to the writing, and also to her self: "We used to talk about writing a book together...Eventually, however, I realized that just the idea of such a merging was causing me too much anxiety. I guess I wasn't ready to lose sight of *my own me* yet, as for so long, writing has been the only place I have felt it plausible to find it (whatever 'it' is)" (47).

It is clear by the end of the memoir, however, that Nelson *does* let him edit her manuscript, that it is a true – if unequal – collaboration: Nelson narrates in vivid, subjective detail her

experience of the birth of her son Iggy, interwoven with passages written by Harry⁴ in vivid, subjective detail about midwifing his mother into death. This collaboration tries to work through the problem of visibility, by showing, if not telling (words are not good enough to tell), *how* to be open well enough and strongly enough. Nelson and Harry rewrite labor and death, two experiences we normally think of as things we succumb to or that overtake us (in spite of the fact that the word “labor” should be a dead giveaway; “*You don’t do labor,*” Nelson recalls being counseled several times, “*Labor does you*”), as states that are achieved. In the middle of the book, having reached a point where she says *to* Harry that her fears about his transition had been unwarranted, that she’s “no longer sure which of us is more at home in the world, which of us is more free” (an incredibly provocative statement about the equivalence of their experiences!) she then seems to shift her orientation outward, asking Harry as if in strategic conference: “How to explain, in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy?” (53). Messy shit is a shorthand, in other words, for being in between, for a transition that is not traveling from one pole to another. Later, her literal fear of shitting during labor – “all through my labor, I could not shit at all, as it was keenly clear to me that letting go of the shit would mean the total disintegration of my perineum, anus, and vagina all at once” – is an allegory of the fear of relinquishing the need to keep your ego together, the need to be definable and visible, the need that drives antagonistic reading. There is no *answer* for how to let shit stay messy, without succumbing to total disintegration. What Nelson gives us is a *feeling* of how to do it.

The task of the cervix is to stay closed, to make an impenetrable wall protecting the fetus, for approximately forty weeks of a pregnancy. After that, by means of labor, the wall must somehow become an opening. This happens through dilation, which is not a shattering, but an extreme thinning (*O so thin!*)

This feeling has ontological merits, but it is not really a good feeling. It’s easy enough to

⁴I have chosen to continue to refer to Harry Dodge as Harry, even in these passages where he takes on an authorial role (enough of one that I think the transition from character to author/narrator should be marked), because there is no autograph in the book that marks him as Harry Dodge.

stand on the outside and say, “You just have to let go and let the baby out.” But to let the baby out, you have to be willing to go to pieces. (124)

Giving birth involves a kind of imaginative commitment to openness. “I try to commit to the idea of letting him out. I still can’t imagine it,” she writes. Disentangling yourself from mutual definition feels impossible; it involves negotiation, and a mutual leap of faith into doing that which feels impossible/bad: “At the bottom, which one can’t quite know is the bottom, one reckons. I’ve heard a lot of women describe this reckoning (it might also be called nine centimeters) at which one starts bargaining hard, as if striking a deal to save your conjoined lives. *I don’t know how we’re going to get out of this, baby, but word is that you’ve got to come out, that I’ve got to let you, and we’ve got to do this together, and we’ve got to do it now*” (130). It involves letting others move you into postures that feel uncomfortable: “They tell me the baby is facing a weird way, I have to lie on my left side, with my leg elevated. I don’t want to. They tell me twenty minutes this way. I see a collection of hands holding my leg. It hurts. After twenty minutes, he has turned” (131). It requires imaginative intellectual trust in others that is predicated on awareness of your own incapacity. It is following the course of action that goes against your instincts, without understanding why, or how. It is an incredibly difficult and uphill relinquishing. So is death, Harry writes: “each of the volunteers told me that my job was to let my mom know that it was ok to go” (131). Later: “she was in the doorway of all worlds and i was in the doorway too. i forced myself not to disturb her, she seemed all at once to know where she was going and how to get there. her job. her map. the goal at hand...and then her eyes relaxed and her shoulders relaxed of a piece. and i knew she had found her way. dared. summoned up her smarts and courage and wacked a way through. i was really astonished. proud of her” (132).

Their collaborative conclusion retroactively reveals to the reader the extent to which Nelson has “metabolized” the antagonistic reader into the rest of the text. What that means is that she has

let Harry represent to her, from the outside, the modes of thinking and the tangible interests she imagines the antagonistic readers might bring, and she has already subsumed those modes of thinking into the text by submitting to his edits. If the passage in which Nelson cannot quell her “inner defense attorney” leaves us in suspense – how did they resolve it? how much does what we’re reading now look like the original manuscript? – her revelation of the extent to which Nelson has allowed Harry’s incursion into the text retroactively allows us to feel Harry as a pervasive force on the text. For example, Nelson offers this potentially provocative – a potentially presumptuous – analysis of the changes they’re both undergoing during Harry’s recovery from top surgery in the middle of the book: “On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more and more ‘male,’ mine, more and more ‘female.’ But that’s not how it felt on the inside. On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness. In other words, we were aging” (83). That analysis must tread very, very carefully between the generosity of understanding it tries for and a collapsing of difference into smug and featureless humanism. Nelson presents this as the view from *their* inside, but she is the speaker for this subjectivity – perhaps (a reader sensitive to such issues will suspect) her subjectivity is subsuming Harry’s experience of his transition, perhaps she is recalling how *she* felt during that time as the way *they* felt during that time, and perhaps that recollection erases however Harry felt about it, the “true” inside of gender nonconforming experience? But then it is Harry’s *own narrative* at the end of the text that links death to labor and to transition, that paints death as a self-actualization for the subject that is a loss to others (as he reminds Nelson she once did, after she rages as the mother of a student who mourns her son’s FTM transition as a death). Did Harry write about his mother’s death because Nelson’s manuscript had mused on the parallels of gender transformation and aging? Or did Nelson muse on the parallels between gender transformation and aging, because Harry introduced a narrative of death as self-actualization? The proprietary origins

of this line of thought are lost.

The rhetorical effects of Nelson's submission to Harry's influence reach the reader through her choice to address the narrative to Harry as "you." On the one hand, the specificity of the address draws a circle of intimacy around the text. In her article "Second Person Narration in Literary and Conversational Storytelling," Jarmila Mildorf discusses reasons why people might, despite the usual unnaturalness of using "you" for oral storytelling ("why tell someone his or her [own] life story?"), tell stories conversationally in the second person. She analyzes one such example, a recording from StoryCorps in which a father and a son are narrating the time in their lives when the father decided to remarry after the mother/wife's death – a time they both lived through and remember. The father and son prompt each other with introductions like "You called me up, I think it was a Sunday, and you said, 'I have to tell you something...'" (86). Mildorf writes that this form of second-person dialogue "serves not only the purpose of 'interactional remembering" (Norrick 2005) but also the 'performance of interactional remembering,' helping speakers create not only a 'performance of self' (Thornborrow and Coates 2005: 13) but in fact a 'performance of you and I'" (90). Nelson's "you" sounds like this: her use of it cleaves closely to her narration of remembered events in their life together, as if she is one half of a dialogue in which they're reconciling their memories of the same events in front of an audience. The memories that are exclusively her own – such as her recollections of the seminar at the Graduate Center – are not addressed to "you." "You" rhetorically signals from the beginning what the text fully reveals in its climax – that this is an "interactional" remembering. It is a collaboration, and it thus travels under Harry's authority. This redounds the accusation on the tip of the imagined antagonistic reader's tongue – *presumption* – back onto the antagonistic reader: however *The Argonauts* influences or distorts *their* visibility, it impacts Harry's more, and he has approved it, even has some ownership of it (so who are you to take issue with it?). The specificity of the "you" makes one particular

reader's stakes in the text concrete, and primary; the stakes that mobilize the antagonistic reader are inevitably secondary and comparatively diffuse. Their claim on the text lacks merit.

At the same time, Nelson's you obliquely encompasses the reader in its scope. In an overview she gives of a special issue of *Style* dedicated to exploring the second person, Mildorf neatly summarizes a contribution by David Herman:

David Herman's contribution to the special issue of *Style*. Herman (1994) discusses what he terms "double deixis"—instances of you where there is "neither complete concord nor complete discord between grammatical form and deictic functioning, but rather a merely partial (dis)agreement between the form and functions of you" (392). Doubly deictic you makes it difficult for readers to decide whether the pronoun is to be interpreted as generalized or generic you, as the protagonist's self-address, as the text's internal address to some narratee, or as an external address to the reader—or, in fact, as a combination of some or all of these possibilities at the same time. (78)

There are few occasions for literal grammatical confusion about when Nelson's you addresses Harry and when it refers more broadly, i.e., when it means "one." But the context that produces Nelson's "you's" referentiality is always only partly described: she attributes memories and thoughts to the "you" that only Harry, a specific person, can really have held, but the text also does not construct this "you" as participating in a true dialogue. Harry never addresses her as "you" back, the way the speaking parties do in Mildorf's exploration of conversational second person. The context surrounding Nelson's use of the specific second person is that it is used in a published book that addresses unknown readers; there is no implicit context provided by its genre (like the use of letter in *Between the World and Me*) that imaginatively rationalizes this second-person as exclusive and private. The you thus joins in its referentiality you the reader, and Harry, one reader. In his posture as antagonistic reader, Harry's concerns thus carry "your" concerns. Nelson diffuses the anticipated threats of the antagonistic reader by giving the sense that their grievances have been aired; her submission to Harry's edits is a kind of performative submission to the antagonistic reader, pre-empting their reaction by having already reacted to it. She rhetorically takes the wind

out of their sails.

The effects of this metabolic “you” aren’t just aimed at the imagined antagonistic reader, though. They are also for Nelson herself, to use imaginatively as she is writing, to neutralize the paralyzing anticipation of calling up “the horrible thing.” Her “you” is both rhetorical and psychological tool. Surveying a lifetime of anxiety, she recalls to the reader being a child and attempting to write “prophylactically” against her own fears, by imagining them in vivid and gory detail. She remembers being proud of a story that detailed the gruesome kidnap of her and her best friend – “Now Jeanne and I would never be kidnapped and tortured without having foreseen it!” – for a brief moment before her mother and teachers’ concern about its morbidity made it clear to her it wasn’t worthy as art or protection (119). In contrast to that prophylactic praxis, Nelson remembers to Harry:

In the wake of the Patriot Act, during the second administration of George W, you made a series of small, handheld weapons. The rule was that each weapon had to be assembled from household items within minutes. You’d been gay-bashed before, two black eyes while waiting in line for a burrito (you ran after him, of course). Now you thought, if the government comes for its citizens, we should be prepared, even if our weapons are pathetic. Your art-weapons included a steak knife affixed to a bottle of ranch dressing and mounted on an axe handle. A dirty sock sprouting nails, a wooden stump with a clump of urethane resin stuck to one end with dull bolts protruding from it, and more.

One night during our courtship, I came home to find the stump with bolts lying across the welcome mat of my porch. You had left town, and I had been baffled by your departure. But when I ascended my front steps and saw the weapon, shadowy in the twilight, I knew you loved me. It was a talisman of protection—a means of keeping myself safe while you were gone, a tool to fight off the suitors (had there been any). I’ve kept it by my bedside ever since. Not because I think they’re coming for us per se. But because it makes the brutal tender, which I’ve since learned is one of your principal gifts. (118)

Bringing the text into Harry’s orbit means learning and working by the lights of a new prophylactic praxis. The old one was mimetic of the future it feared. The new one absorbs, processes, returns something different. To pile on the trite idioms, Harry’s praxis commands, face your fears: what is threatening is the threat of erasure, so Nelson addresses that threat by submitting to erasure — but

it is a controlled submission, and a partial erasure. It is a submission with a safe word, a way of making the brutal experience of antagonistic reading tender. It is an arming of the mind against the psychological threat of animosity that doesn't just allow for the art to go on, around of or in spite of the circumstance of the horrible thing; it is an arming of the mind that makes the action of absorbing and processing the threat the art itself – a miniature metaphoric model for the way Nelson has absorbed the antagonistic reader in such a way as to produce the unique forms of *The Argonauts*.

Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*: Provocation

I. Antagonistic Reading as Signifying Trap

Watching and listening to interviews with Ta-Nehisi Coates – and since the success of *Between the World and Me*, there have been many – I sometimes think *Between the World and Me* is less a memoir than presciently engineered performance art. Prominent interviewers, almost always white, or in Coates's terms, interviewers who need to believe they are white, cannot resist asking Coates if he sees any hope for racial relations in America. Here's a transcription of a recent, symptomatic exchange between with Stephen Colbert on *The Late Show* that clocks the pattern and then, almost surreally, indulges in it:

Colbert: You've had a hard time in some interviews expressing a sense of hope that things will get better in this country. Do you have any hope tonight for the people out there about how we could be a better country, we could have better race relations, better politics?

Coates: Um, No. But I'm not the person you should go to for that. You should go to your pastor, your pastor provides you hope, your friends provide you hope. There are figures that exist – in better times, the president of the United States provides you hope. There are people who have that kind of moral place in the world, that's not my job, that's somebody else's job --

Colbert: But I'm not asking you to make [shit] up, I'm asking you if you personally see any chance for change in America –

Coates: Maybe, maybe –

Colbert: We're a democracy –

Coates: I would have to make [shit] up to answer that in a satisfying way. (*The Late Show*

with Stephen Colbert)⁵

Every time an interviewer asks Coates about “hope” they – unknowingly? – attest to the problem *Between the World and Me* addresses itself to – which is, in a phrase, white ignorance. Every time a white interviewer asks Coates if he sees hope for racial progress in America, or asks him about his “famous” pessimism, they declare either that they haven’t read the book, or that their need for hope is so great that they have ignored what the book actually says. These come to the same thing. To read *Between the World and Me* with attention and watch these interviews fumble again and again is to stop listening to the white conversation about *the* need for hope and to start suspiciously asking why it is that *they* so urgently need “hope.”

The reason it’s so galling to me to watch these interviews is that Coates makes it clear that to ask about “hope” constitutes a misreading of him within the first six pages of *Between the World and Me*. He makes it clear by explicitly stating it. The book begins:

Son,

Last Sunday the host of a popular news show asked me what it meant to lose my body. The host was broadcasting from Washington, D.C., and I was seated in a remote studio on the far west side of Manhattan. A satellite closed the miles between us, but no machinery could close the gap between her world and the world for which I had been summoned to speak. When the host asked me about my body, her face faded from the screen, and was replaced by a scroll of words, written by me earlier that week.

The host read these words for the audience, and when she finished she turned to the subject of my body, although she did not mention it specifically. But by now I am accustomed to intelligent people asking about the condition of my body without realizing the nature of their request. Specifically, the host wished to know why I felt that white America’s progress, or rather the progress of those Americans who believe that they are white, was built on looting and violence. Hearing this, I felt an old and indistinct sadness well up in me. The answer to this question is the record of the believers themselves. The answer is American history.

There is nothing extreme in this statement. (5 – 6)

After this introductory recollection of the interviewer’s question, he pivots away from her, opening out into the textual present tense to answer why it is he thinks American progress was built

⁵The interview aired on cable, I’ve filled in the bleeped expletives.

on looting and violence. White Americans, he says, can't see the blatant and available facts of their own history for what it is (and here, I must confess myself white)⁶: they have only a "dim awareness" that they have transgressed against democracy, which Coates calls their God, because they've constructed their understanding of democracy such that "people" in "government of the people" has never designated black people. They see this exclusion as having been in some way inevitable: they see racism as the "natural" effect of the "natural" feature of the world, race. In reality, Coates writes, race is the child of racism, and black oppression was and is for the construction of whiteness. Coates explains these assertions, which summarize the broader assertions of the book, in such a way that they describe an answer he *might* have given the interviewer at the time – but the assertions are not that answer. They are a new dialogue, in the here and now, directed to Coates's son. Returning to the interviewer at the end of this opening salvo, he writes:

That Sunday, with that host, on that news show, I tried to explain this as best I could with the time allotted. But at the end of the segment, the host flashed a widely shared picture of an eleven-year-old black boy tearfully hugging a white police officer. Then she asked me about "hope." And I knew then that I had failed. And I remembered that I had expected to fail. And I wondered again at the indistinct sadness welling up in me. Why exactly was I sad? (10)

Coates's introductory framing is a kind of coda for reading: the interviewer's bad reading is replaced by Coates's address to Samori, the good reader, who he tells to "never look away," never let "our" phrasing obscure the physical, real dimensions of meaning. By negative implication, the "reading" represented by the interviewer's follow up question is an obfuscation, a flight, a way of

⁶And risk a fumble of my own: do I remove myself, as critic, from "whiteness" by using the third person? I "am" white, but I do not *believe* myself white, insofar as I agree with Coates on racial deconstruction and insofar as that belief is allowed to be conscious. Because my reading of Coates is that his construction "people who believe they are white" purposely leaves a gap for white people to recognize their causal agency in their construction of themselves as white, and doing so is a practice of good as opposed to antagonistic reading, I will refer to white people in the third person, as if I'm not one of them, while acknowledging that Coates's deconstruction of race also doesn't ratify the idea that individuals can choose to duck out of whiteness. I think *Between the World and Me* is agnostic on these politics of personal exoneration, as it would call them. Actually, as I will argue, constructing the conditions of this footnote's confusion and then leaving the reader to figure it out alone is sort of the point.

obviating his answer. In this anecdote about the interviewer, Coates reads the interviewer as an antagonistic reader, and in the same breath, gestures his book's approach to this reader – a turn away from the reader to Samori, which constitutes a refusal to engage an antagonistic reading he sees as a trap, the opening invitation into a dynamic by which readers/listeners force speakers/writers to signify against themselves.

Coates calls this exchange with the interviewer his own failure of communication, figuring the interviewer's ignorance as a sleep from which he could not wake her; but the details of his narration make it clear that the interviewer stands for a failure of listening. When the host asks her question about "hope," she introduces it, wordlessly, in Coates's account, with a photograph of an eleven-year-old black boy tearfully hugging a white police officer. This image provides the complementary key to understanding how asking about "hope" is not really an interrogative question but an antagonistic reading. Coates has just explained that that "the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your [black] body" (9). The overwhelming number of police murders of black people is not a pattern but a principle; what happened to Eric Garner and Tamir Rice is not a *possible* threat to some black boys but a present-tense assault on all black individuals, now. The photograph half-heartedly suggests in response to this that not *all* black boys are threatened by police, or, not *all* police have it out for black boys, or, not all black people share your vision of relations with the police. It qualifies the meaning of "hope" in the question it's paired: what the interviewer asks about is not a forward-looking stance towards future outcomes – the interviewer does not ask Coates, as a journalist researched in the matter, about how effective a policy of reparations would be for ameliorating income disparities and segregation, for example – but a question about how bad the present picture is, *really*. Hope becomes "hope" because the interviewer asks, "things aren't really as bad as you say, are they?" rather than "things can change, can't they?" In other words, if the host is "asking [him] to awaken

her from the most gorgeous dream” (whiteness), she also asks him to return her to it. In his description of it, it’s an odd ritual: he is “summoned to speak” for the world beyond The Dream, the world black Americans experience, only to be immediately asked to contradict what he has just been summoned to say. If the flashed photograph represents the network’s muted desire to argue back, the interviewer asking instead about “hope” testifies to an unwillingness to do so, it suggests a need for Coates *himself* to provide the alleviation, the contradiction, the negation to his own argument.

This need for Coates himself to contradict his words, the belief that that contradiction has power that the white interviewer’s contradiction would not have, is an attempt to erase his words by making him into a “holograph bearing his name.” To believe implicitly in his having such power reads him as speaking for all black people, rather than just describing an objectively observable experience about black people to which he is as much a witness as anyone else. He is incarnated as *the* black voice, *the* expert on “race relations.” Like Nelson, Coates sees this reduction and conflation as motivated by the interviewer’s own need – here, the need for absolution.

I call it absolution because I think Coates’s text implies that psychologically, that word best characterizes what antagonistic readers need: Americans deify democracy, and understand their former racism as having “stood in defiance of their God.” Absolution is the forgiveness of sin from a higher authority, and the white antagonistic readers in his examples *do* desire to be remitted from charges by a higher authority: the race prophet who speaks for all black people, or by virtue of the nature of things and the inevitability of any other outcome or course of action. But the irony is that desiring forgiveness for sin implies that one has acknowledged sin. Coates’s sense of how antagonistic reading operates is that it attempts to evoke absolution by shifting the causal narrative so that the speaker can’t be said to have caused the sin he’s being absolved for. To desire Coates to

contradict his own words suggests that the interviewer sees the problem as Coates seeing the problem: the problem is not racially disparate outcomes but black people's belief that there are racially disparate outcomes. Only by the lights of the belief that he *is* the problem, that his speaking *is* the problem, does it make sense, without arguing against or cross-examining, to invite him to revoke what he just said.⁷

We see this operative logic at work again in a second example of the antagonistic reader. In Part II, the part of the book that narrates Coates's life after he has grown up and achieved the "velocity of escape" from the streets of Baltimore, where racism is brought to its most tangible point, he recalls to Samori a moment from Samori's early childhood that is a kind of lesson about how black people can always be snatched "back" into the vise of the streets, into that visceral racism:

Perhaps you remember that time we went to see *Howl's Moving Castle* on the Upper West Side. You were almost five years old. The theater was crowded, and when we came out we rode a set of escalators down to the ground floor. As we came off, you were moving at the dawdling speed of a small child. A white woman pushed you and said, 'Come on!' Many things now happened at once. There was the reaction of any parent when a stranger lays a hand on the body of his or her child. And there was my own insecurity in my ability to protect your black body...someone had invoked their right over the body of my son. I turned and spoke to this woman, and my words were hot with all of the moment and all of my history. She shrunk back, shocked. A white man standing nearby spoke up in her defense. I experienced this as his attempt to rescue the damsel from the beast. He had made no such attempt on behalf of my son. And he was now supported by other white people in the assembling crowd. The man came closer. He grew louder. I pushed him away. He said, "I could have you arrested!" I did not care. I told him this, and the desire to do much more was hot in my throat. The desire was only controllable because I remembered someone standing off to the side there, bearing witness to more fury than he had ever seen from

⁷Several reviewers have noted these same dynamics operating in Coates's real reception after *Between the World and Me* was published. Constance Grady's article in Vox, "Colbert asked Ta-Nehisi Coates if he has hope for America. Coates said no," traces the trend of white interviewers asking about hope and the implicit suggestion in their question that "it is Ta-Nehisi Coates's job to teach us all there is to know about racism in America. And once he's finished, we would also like for him to make us feel better, to absolve us of our guilt." Jamelle Bouie's Slate article, "We Made Ta-Nehisi Coates Into a Symbol," characterizes white reception of Coates as making him into Race Prophet, an observation I read Coates making as well in this opening episode. In the Washington Post, Carlos Lozada implies in "The Radical Chic of Ta-Nehisi Coates" that white readers enjoy reading Coates precisely because they see it as completing a responsibility to absorb "the best and correct thinking on racism, white privilege and structural inequality," which is to say, the reading and coming to consciousness alone is presented as an absolution.

me—you. (94)

The white woman “reads” Coates’s words, hot with the moment, and visibly begins to reduce him to a two-dimensional figure of The Violent Black Man, shrinking back with a surprise that, Coates’s account suggests, she doesn’t really come by honestly, since she was the one who first laid hands and overstepped boundaries. Her shock reflects, and then projects to the other white people, her sense of the “disproportion” of the volatile black man’s anger. The white man steps in to defend the white woman, an action Coates reads as his attempt to “rescu[e] the damsel from the beast.”

Here, too, the antagonistic “reading” of Coates – his words but also his gestures, expressions, his body – turns on the readers’ need for racial absolution. Coates writes that he has retold the story many times in search of his own absolution – not absolution from the offended white people or on behalf of the offended white people, but absolution from or on behalf of Samori, for “in seeking to defend you I was, in fact, endangering you” (95). In other words, he is adamant about refusing to indulge culpability for the interaction. He does not tell us what words he said that were hot with the moment, he does not allow us to analyze by our own lights whether he “overreacted,” because to do so buys into the logic of the antagonistic reading: that logic dictates that no matter how large or small the mistake, it will always be made to “explain” crimes of a heinous magnitude:

‘I could have you arrested,’ he said. Which is to say, ‘One of your son’s earliest memories will be watching the men who sodomized Abner Louima and choked Anthony Baez cuff, club, tase, and break you.’ I had forgotten the rules, an error as dangerous on the Upper West Side of Manhattan as on the Westside of Baltimore. One must be without error out here. Walk in single file. Work quietly. Pack an extra number 2 pencil. Make no mistakes.

But you are human and you will make mistakes. You will misjudge. You will yell. You will drink too much. You will hang out with people you shouldn’t. Not all of us can always be Jackie Robinson—not even Jackie Robinson was always Jackie Robinson. But the price of error is higher for you than your countrymen, and so that America might justify itself, the story of a black body’s destruction must always begin with his or her error, real or

imagined – with Eric Garner’s anger, with Trayvon Martin’s mythical words (“You are gonna die tonight”), with Sean Bell’s mistake of running with the wrong crowd, with me standing too closet to the small-eyed boy pulling out. (95 – 96)

Just as The Racial Expert in some way *is* the problem he describes in the eyes of the white interviewer (and all those whose views she represents with her questions) and, by virtue of the belief that his verbal revocation can *solve* the problem, sees his words as the cause of it, The Violent Black Man carries an excess of causality: his incarnation as the beast casts the white woman as the figure of innocence, the damsel, and the white man as the champion of innocence, the righteous warrior – evacuating them of any inciting agency. It allows for the white listeners’ amnesia or deafness about the fact that, basically, the white woman started it (pushing a four-year-old!), and pre-emptively absolves the white man of the control he attempts to exert when he says “I could have you arrested!”, a statement that, without the presumption that The Violent Black Man’s rage is always already initiating all of the unfolding actions, looks like the attempt to exercise arbitrary, interfering, and naked racial power.

Like Nelson, part of Coates’s understanding of the threat antagonistic reading poses to a text and to the writer/speaker it is conflated with is that it’s a catching phenomenon: the white woman’s shock signals the white man’s reading of Coates as beast, and the man draws in a crowd of supportive white people – all of whom buy into the reductive (and ready-made) narrative projected by the original interlocutors. And the contagion of the antagonistic reading is not limited to other (white) “readers” of Coates’s words; the greatest threat is that he will catch the reading himself. Nelson presents an image of herself so cowed by the formless dread of “the horrible thing” that writing can call up, the world’s blind hatred, that she is paralyzed and silenced. Coates presents an image of himself beginning to inhabit and embody the reading to which the white onlookers seek to reduce him, or, to be unable to entirely avoid seeing himself as doing so. As the dialogue escalates, the man gets closer, Coates gets more and more violent, more and more reckless – he

pushes him away, he doesn't heed the man's threats to "have him arrested," he wants to "do much more" than tell him off. When he returns home, he's shaken, in part out of "shame for having gone back to the law of the streets," in other words, for acting the role of "ghetto" black man the white Upper West Side onlookers clearly think he is (94). Antagonistic reading is a kind of trap: it invites you into its listening-speaking dynamic, invites you to behave in such a way as to fulfill its distorted and thus distorting expectations. It is "as natural as Prometheus hating the birds" to get angry sensing another person reacting to you as 'beast,' but the anger that reader's framework naturally produces will only be legible to them within that interpretive framework (36). It will only be legible as "justification" for "having you arrested." Thus these interpersonal antagonistic readings are an instance of and a synecdoche for the operation of contemporary American racism writ large. "The killing fields of Chicago, of Baltimore, of Detroit, were created by the policy of Dreamers, but their weight, their shame, rests solely upon those who are dying in them. There is a great deception in this. To yell 'black-on-black crime' is to shoot a man and then shame him for bleeding," he writes (111). He reads contemporary racism as also being a discursive, psychological trap: it creates circumstances in which it would be natural for people to behave in such a way as to confirm the reductive "readings" of them that justified the creation of the circumstances in the first place. Then it disorders this cycle.

Because of Coates's deconstructive thinking about race, antagonistic readers are not synonymous with white readers. But in the mind's eye of this text they are readers whose interpretive practices follow the logic of whiteness. Antagonistic reading – the conflation of black speakers and their words into a trope such that they – their conflated person/speech – are always made to signify white self-justification – *is* whiteness. It is the discursive incarnation of racism. Which is racism. It's common among his reviewers to notice that Coates locates racism in the body, and easy to read his arguments about the body about it as an attempt to locate all the meaning

and evidence of injustice in materiality. I don't take him to be saying that. It's not that all of "our" phrasing, "race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy," is irrelevant, because racism is "really" a visceral experience; it's that it's all the more important to understand, carefully, how the discourse operates, because all of that discourse, "the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body" (10). Words and actions are like matter and energy, one always potentially the other. Words hurt, actions signify. These are the stakes in theorizing and confronting antagonistic reading.

II. White Readers and Performative Refusal

Although Coates said in interviews after the publication of *Between the World and Me* that he expected his book to be of interest mainly to black people, and that he didn't expect to accumulate the number of white readers he allegedly did, some of the most negative responses he received came from prominent black academics. Their critique of the book stemmed from its popularity with white readers.⁸ In a conversation with Kevin Powell at The New School about Black Masculinity in October 2015, hooks said conversationally:

Think about how white people are so enamored with Ta-Nehisi Coates's book, but you won't find anything in his book about gender, about teaching his son to see women differently. It's all about this whole idea that – and everybody's so happy, the black man is speaking to his son, the black man is reaching out to his son. And you know, that's just another kind of bullshit. This book is very much written in Atlantic Monthly and New Yorker-speak, and I don't know what young black men it's reaching out to, but it's reaching out to a mythic, fictive black male, not the reality of young black men, for whom a certain kind of language isn't going to draw them in. I mean I think you have to be true to who you

⁸ I should say, its alleged popularity with white readers. *Between the World and Me* did receive several glowing reviews from white readers, though it also received glowing reviews from black readers, including the ubiquitous praise from Toni Morrison that graces the book's front and back covers. Sales numbers are notoriously difficult to track accurately. Critics who claim Coates's book is popular with white readers may be operating under the assumption that it is impossible for a book to make it to #1 on the New York Times Bestseller List without an unusual amount of white readers for a book written by a black author, but they're eyeballing it at best (as well as speaking relatively: Coates's book might not be more popular with white readers than other books written by white authors). Sales figures are not broken down by racial demographic.

say your audience is! Is it a letter to your son because you want him to understand, and other black boys to understand, or is it a letter to white people so that you can let them know, you're not like those other trifling Negroes that don't have shit to say to their sons? (Jobs)

There's an anxiety in this critique about what happens when a book is *for* white readers, which seems to acknowledge Bakhtin's sense that any kind of speech is influenced by its intended or imagined interlocutor and responder. hooks reads the book as being for white people because she reads gesture of addressing the book to Samori as showy (or, vice versa). More than an empty rhetorical decoration on a book that 'really' addresses upper middle class, educated white readers, she sees Coates's address to his son as deceptive. And not just deceptive, a ploy to make white readers believe they're reading "authentically black" discourse, but pandering: a ploy justify himself as the responsible father in accordance with white society's wish to discipline the "out of control" behavior of black boys.

I agree with hooks that Coates's address to Samori is showy. I also agree with hooks that *Between the World and Me* addresses itself to white readers. But her critique rests on the assumption that showiness is synonymous with insincerity, that insincerity is synonymous with deception, and that the motive for deception is to curry favor. It seems to operate on the assumption that being for white readers means the book isn't really for black readers, that it can only address one of those groups at a time, or only address one of those groups authentically at a time.

None of these conclusions follow. Coates's address to Samori *is* showy, but it is also sincere. *Between the World and Me* does address white readers, but it also addresses black readers, and it does so at the same time.⁹ With respect to white readers, Coates's address to Samori is

⁹I only discuss Coates's imaginative angling towards black readers and white readers because this is the critical axis along which he distinguishes different modes of reading. While he acknowledges other kinds of difference, including gender, sexuality, and other racial oppressions, these subjectivities are not hailed by the text as readers. I do not mean to say that he does not imagine that women will read this book, but he does not address himself to "woman" or "Muslim-American" as a mode of reading or as specifically likely figures of potential antagonistic reading.

performed: he firmly, visibly, and self-consciously directs his address to Samori in order to situate the white reader as a voyeur of a conversation about himself. This is performative rather than naturalistic: the trope is not meant to convince the reader that as he was writing, Coates held only Samori in his mind as the sole reader, that this book is some kind of artifact he decided to publish after the fact, or even that he held only young black men in his mind as readers. Addressing Samori refuses white readers as the central addressee by declaring the intention to refuse them. It's as if Coates is standing in a room full of people, speaking at audibly *to* Samori, knowing other people at the party are listening to him talk, perhaps even hovering near, waiting to cut in on the conversation; he knows they can hear what he is saying, even tailors much of what he is saying knowing that they're listening, and yet, he continues to keep his back turned to the lingerers holding their plastic cups of wine looking for an entry point. The dynamics of that scene aren't reducible to the evaluation that he's *really* talking to the hovering white listeners: it matters that he decides to keep his back turned, even if they know that he knows they can hear him. The effect of Coates's refusal is to create a vacuum for the anticipated needs of the antagonistic readers: their anger, the uncomfortable guilt that prods their need for "hope," are outside the dialogue he's conducting. He withholds the acknowledgment and recognition that would allow that anger to be seamlessly directed *back* at him. Coates's refusal of the white reader situates them with respect to the speaker in such a way as to force antagonistic readers to recognize, in their impulse to respond, *themselves* as instigators, as the ones who bring anger to the text, as the causal agents of an antagonistic dynamic that is ultimately rigged to justify its own bad reading. *Between the World and Me* performatively refuses white readers to construct them as instigators of an antagonistic dynamic that it is also *sincerely* showing young black men how to refuse.

In order to refuse white readers, he needs to provoke them. *Between the World and Me* is written in a totalizing language that speaks as though it is delivering an indictment to white readers;

“as though,” because it indicts them askance, forging one defining element of indictment – bringing the charges *to* the accused. Coates’s language is provocative in the sense that it addresses itself to the white reader’s usual modes of cognitive flight; it boxes her in, forces her not turn away. The white reader’s ability to look away, to dismiss the charges, is sustained, Coates’s language asserts, by what they think of as nuance. He shows us this in the interviewer’s first question about “hope”: presented with an overwhelming pattern of police killing innocent black people – Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, Marlene Pinnock— her response is to immediately recourse to a photograph that “complicates the picture.” And that “more complicated” picture is the occasion of an antagonistic reading that slides seamlessly from “more complicated” to “not as bad as you made it seem,” the occasion for the process of reduction, conflation, erasure I described above. Coates’s language in the rest of the text is totalizing because the antagonistic reader demands evidence of racism that is total; any individual boy who has bonded with the police, has an outsize affective power that allows the instance to stand, unintelligibly, “in contradiction” with the claim that the police have the authority to destroy black bodies.

Coates’s totalizing language is legalistic in its thinking, as if to address the habits of mind that have failed to bring charges against the murderers of Tamir Rice, Eric Garner and Michael Brown. White readers’ continued erasure of the words that would pierce their ignorance comes, his language implies, from seeing nuance in places that weaken their liability; they cannot see racism (at all), or rather, they cannot see what Coates would call racism, and which they would deny was racism, as culpable action. Criminal law generally conceives of a crime as consisting of *actus reus* and *mens rea*: a criminal act must have occurred, and the person must be culpable in *thought* as well as action. A person can be culpable in thought across a range of degrees, from engaging in an action negligently (a reasonable person would be aware of a “substantial and unjustifiable risk”) to purposefully (the actor has the “conscious object” of engaging in conduct and believes or hopes the

attendant circumstances – for the completion of his intended result – exist). In order for a criminal act to have occurred, it must also be shown that the resulting injury was *caused* by the accused’s action. In order for the accused to be legally liable for the crime, the accused’s action must be established as having factually caused and then legally caused the resulting injury. The accused is said to have caused the crime factually when his or her action was necessary to the resulting injury (the result would not have occurred “but for” the accused’s action); the accused is said to have legally caused the injury in question so long as no intervening proximate cause can have interrupted the chain of events between his or her illegal action and the result (“Causation (law),” “Mens Rea,” “Actus Reus”).

Coates tracks the ways of thinking with which his white readers have habitually diminished the role of intention in their conception of guilt when the intention was racial domination, or habitually exaggerated the importance of intention when the harm to black people was caused by the unknowing, negligent actions of people working in concert. This is why the impact of his language – David Brooks called it a ‘slap,’ Michiko Kakutani called it “searing,” Tressie McMillan Cottom called it “gut-wrenching” – *feels* so powerful to many readers: at each turn he asserts the importance of intention or the unimportance of intention, the obvious gross negligence or the absence of proximate causes, wherever he predicts his antagonistic white reader will be inclined to see good intentions or complicating proximate causes like personal responsibility as blindingly enlarged nuance (Brooks, Kakutani, Cottom).

The white reader’s desire to diminish racism by minimizing its causal impact emerges in the interviewer’s first question – why does Coates feel that white America’s progress was built on looting and violence? This is the question that already calls up an old and indistinct sadness, the question that evidences the erasure of earlier words and predicts the interviewer’s antagonistic reading of Coates’s answer. That looting and violence occurred in America’s history is obvious;

what is clearly controversial to the interviewer is not that slavery happened, or that it included looting and violence, but that white America's progress *was built on* looting and violence, that the progress white America enjoys did not emerge in spite of or incidentally to or triumph over looting and violence, but was caused by it. Coates goes on to mock and then ruthlessly deconstruct this impotent sense of the looting and violence that allows it to remain isolated in the past:

As for now, it must be said that the process of washing the disparate tribes white, the elevation of the belief in being white, was not achieved through wine tastings and ice cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various other acts meant, first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies. (8)

The language of this argument is provocative in its derisiveness, in its contempt of the naiveté – did you think it was all ice cream socials? – white readers will reach for in an attempt to quarantine the violence into the past, and reasserts that ‘washing the disparate tribes white’ happened *through* chaining, strangling, pillaging, and rape, that these actions were central to the emergence of unified whiteness.

White people diminish their liability for racism by impoverishing its causal power, but they also diminish their liability by overloading the causality of race, which makes it such a powerful and dominating original cause that disparate and negative effects for black people are inevitable:

Americans believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism – the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them—inevitably follows from this inalterable condition. In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men. (7)

He is swift to reverse the causal order of race/racism to restore the contingency of the results, restoring the explanatory gap where white action belongs: “race is the child of racism,” he writes (7). He continues to deconstruct the naturalism of race to make room for white agency to be its cause throughout the book: “There will surely always be people with straight hair and blue eyes, as

there have been for all of history. But some of these straight-haired people with blue eyes have been ‘black,’ and this points to the great difference between their world and ours. We did not choose our fences. They were imposed on us by Virginia planters...” (42).

He is ruthless in dismantling concepts that emerge to siphon away white liability onto proximate causes, like “black on black violence.” This is the purpose of statements like “To yell ‘black-on-black crime’ is to shoot a man and then shame him for bleeding,” which foreshortens time to make originating crimes like the mass plunder of slavery and redlining as foreseeable and immediate a cause of ghetto violence as a gunshot is to bleeding (111). He forges linguistic equivalencies that seem intentionally reductive, even intentionally obfuscating: “there is no difference between the killing of Prince Jones and the murders attending these killing fields [the streets] because both are rooted in the assumed inhumanity of black people. A legacy of plunder, a network of laws and traditions, a heritage, a Dream, murdered Prince Jones as sure as it murders black people in North Lawndale with frightening regularity” (110). This is a collapse that I think he anticipates will be astonishing for most of liberal white readers: that there *is no difference* between direct murder and the convergence of history, laws and practices that produced a neighborhood like North Lawndale. This is a radical reshaping of our usual sense of blameworthiness, even for readers better versed in ideas about structural racism: culpability spread across several actors over time for murders resulting indefinitely from each individual action decades later is *the same* as culpability seemingly centered in one individual solely deciding, instantly realizing murder, not only because the several actors working in concert over time to produce the effects of street murder acted more knowingly than we usually conceive – this was the subject of his article “The Case for Reparations,” an empirical argument – but because the single actor who murders is not single, all white people share in the culpability of the murderer of Prince Jones – this is the subject of *Between the World and Me*, a theoretical argument.

Such radical collapses of time and action confront intentionality, as well as causality. The standard common law test of criminal liability states that the act is not culpable unless the mind is guilty. This standard subtly shapes all our usual senses of culpability, and white people's perception of good intentions, or of diffuse intentions, or of structures seeming to operate without intentions lessens their sense of racism as criminal. Describing an imagined confrontation with the white woman who pushed Samori, Coates writes "Had I informed this woman that when she pushed my son, she was acting according to a tradition that held black bodies as lesser, her response would likely have been, 'I am not racist.' Or maybe not. But my experience in this world has been that the people who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration" (97). Each individual's appeal to their own – un-transparent – intentions exonerates them all of racism: "there are no racists in America, or at least none that the people who need to be white know personally," Coates writes (97). Because of this Coates goes on to repeatedly assert that *collective action* is intentional; the pillaging, flaying, chaining, strangling, raping were acts "*meant* to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies" (8). If the policies producing the streets do not *knowingly* murder black people, in the very least they do *recklessly*: "The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear...a society that protects some people through a safety net of schools, government-backed home loans, and ancestral wealth but can only protect you with the club of criminal justice has either failed at enforcing its good intentions or has succeeded at something much darker" (19). In opposition to white peoples' exonerating appeals to internal states, he asserts to Samori that intention is irrelevant: "It does not matter that the 'intentions' of individual educators were noble. Forget about intentions. What any institution, or its agents, 'intend' for you is secondary. Our world is physical. Learn to play defense – ignore the head and keep your eyes on the body" (33). On the other hand, while white people are obsessed with the

politics of personal exoneration now, in response to which he accordingly diminishes the importance of intention, they have, he writes, a calculated amnesia about culpable intentions in the past: recalling a visit to Petersburg Battlefield, he asks Samori if he remembers “the man on our tour dressed in the gray wool of the Confederacy, or how every visitor seemed most interested in flanking maneuvers, hardtack, smoothbore rifles, grapeshot, and ironclads, but virtually no one was interested in what all of this engineering, invention, and design had been marshalled to achieve” (99). The myth of the noble South that glued America back together was premised on the erasure of the Confederacy’s intention: in recalling the Civil War, Americans are only interested in thinking about *method*, in a narrative that turns “the mass slaughter of the war into a kind of sport in which one could conclude that both sides conducted their affairs with courage, honor, and èlan” (102). So, in response to such mythologizing, and in total contradiction of his assertion to Samori that intentions don’t matter, Coates strenuously locates the meaning of the Civil War entirely in the intentions of the south:

At the onset of the Civil War, our stolen bodies were worth four billion dollars, more than all of American industry, all of American railroads, workshops, and factories combined, and the prime product rendered by our stolen bodies – cotton – was America’s primary export...Here is the motive for the great war. It’s not a secret. But we can do better and find the bandit confessing his crime. “Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery,” declared Mississippi as it left the Union, “the greatest material interest of the world.” (101)

The totalizing language of *Between the World and Me* works towards indictment. It conceives of the problem of white ignorance not as a matter of lack of evidence of racism, but as a matter of conceptual distortion that allows people not to see the known facts *as evidence*, because they cannot see the actions leading to racism as culpable. The evidence of racism is not evidence to them because there are, in their minds, no charges with respect to which the facts prove or disprove. Coates strips away the distortions that spackle over the massive gaps in blame; he makes plain and explicit the magnitude of the crimes with visceral physicality; then he metaphorically

leaves the room, leaving the reader to sit with the absurdity that such disproportionate racial “misfortune” happened “naturally.” He does not accuse. Early in the book, he explains that he is writing to Samori because this is the year Samori has learned that the police have been endowed with the authority to destroy his body; after a litany of crimes that white dominion authorizes, of which murder is simply the superlative case, Coates simply writes, “All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible” (9). “No one is held responsible” is the core of his linguistic action. We are left to sit with this lacuna, which explicitly refuses to say to white readers, *you are responsible*. The effect of this refusal is that in order to seek absolution through antagonistic reading, to begin obviating and erasing the content of the text’s implicit accusation, they need to construct it as one. Defensiveness will be offensiveness; they will need to see themselves as causal instigators of the antagonistic dynamic, when erasure of themselves as cause, and the overburdening of the black speaker’s causality, is how antagonistic reading delivers self-justification.

Addressing Samori is the crux of this refusal. Coates’s language fails of accusation because it fails to be invested; Samori is the main vessel of his care, where it is held and withheld from white readers. When he writes to Samori, for example, “It does not matter that the ‘intentions’ of individual educators were noble. Forget about intentions. What any institution, or its agents, ‘intend’ for you is secondary. Our world is physical. Learn to play defense – ignore the head and keep your eyes on the body,” he is in one sense making an argument about culpability, that an action’s culpability should be located in its effects, because of the historical level of self-denial about racist intentions. But he’s also telling Samori to forget intentions – not because they’re not relevant in a moral accounting, but because moral accounting of white actions is really none of his concern. It’s not his responsibility to account for events from the white person’s intentional perspective; what matters is to attend to his own perspective, where you get killed whether or not

the white officer acted purposely. This leaves the nitty gritty of moral accounting to white readers, if they wish to account themselves moral. About the question of whether white Americans will succeed in creating a “nobler basis for their myths” of democracy, he says, dispassionately, “I cannot call it” (7-8).

Coates’s language insists that white readers extend themselves to meet *him*. I agreed with hooks that Coates’s address to Samori is showy in the sense that it is more declarative than naturalistic; there is very little reference to private events, very little interpersonal shorthand; his introduction of anecdotes that include Samori with “perhaps you remember” and “do you remember” seem more expository than questioning, as if they’re there to remind the reader of Samori’s presence as the intended listener. However, I don’t agree that Coates’s language is not for young black men, that it is Atlantic Monthly-speak, implicitly, white-speak. In the first of a four-part book club written in response to *Between the World and Me* in *The Atlantic*, Tressie McMillan Cottom writes that she sees the book as being split in two – a book for black readers, and a book for white readers for whom “thinking about the necessary ugliness of America is novel” (Cottom). She thinks this latter book is strongest when it is anchored by history, and she deplores that she thinks white readers cannot “help but look for their own reflection in the gaps Coates provides more of than I prefer” (Cottom). In other words, he gives them too much leeway not to be convinced, to go on seeing themselves the way the world they “created in their image” has always reflected.

These gaps are, I think, intentional: at a talk he gave at The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Coates said, “I felt like many of the people that I was reading in the ’90s, when I was in college, were very much burdened by the need to explain to white people” (León). His thinking about race is deconstructionist and Foucauldian, not the (neo) Liberal of Atlantic-speak. This language tells a facility with the black intellectual tradition and the theories it draws on;

if that is what hooks means by saying this language alienates real black youth, it's hard to go with her there given the image Coates presents of himself as a kid living in Baltimore reading Malcolm X like it will save his life. The text does little to help a white reader unfamiliar with these patterns of thought through a passage such as his opening response to the interviewer's question about why Coates feels white America's progress was built on looting and violence:

“As for now, it must be said that the process of washing the disparate tribes white, **the elevation of the belief in being white**, was not achieved through wine tastings and ice cream socials, but rather **through** the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of our mothers; the sale of children; and **various other acts meant, first and foremost**, to deny **you and me** the right to secure and govern our own bodies” (8)

I have bolded the gaps where average white readers, thinking Liberally, would be likely to lose Coates. This sentence asks you to understand race as a social construction; many of his (mostly college-educated and upper middle class)¹⁰ readers likely do have a sense of race as a social constructed, although some – the readers of, say, an Andrew Sullivan, former editor of *The New Republic* (a comparable index for readers of *The Atlantic* and of Coates)¹¹, will struggle to understand or otherwise chafe at the idea that race is a “belief,” is not materially genetic.¹² It asks you to understand not only that race is socially constructed, but that it's defined dialectically by blackness, that the elevation of whiteness *demands* the ‘essential’ below of blackness (ideas that are Hegelian and Beauvoirian, among others). Perhaps most difficult of all for thinkers raised on Enlightenment thinking's individualism and reverence for self-determination, it requires an understanding that power operates intentionally – the disparate actions of slave owners over hundreds of years were, collectively *meant* to assert the permeability of the black body, not as aims incidental to their economic interests, but *first and foremost* (and here the sentence moves into a

¹⁰ The Atlantic Press kit describes its average digital audience as having a median household income of \$91,505, average age 45, 52% male/48% female. https://rethink.theatlantic.com/pdf/MediaKit_Final_081816.pdf

¹¹ <https://s3.amazonaws.com/newrepublic/pdf/2014/2014+Media+Kit.pdf>

¹² <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2018/03/denying-genetics-isnt-shutting-down-racism-its-fueling-it.html>

critique of Marxism and a consideration of the race question) – without reference to the declared or conscious intentions of its constituents (in other words, it requires understanding Foucault’s dictate in *History of Sexuality, Vol 1*, “Power is intentional and non-subjective” (90); understanding these diffuse but ‘intentional’ mechanisms of power, understanding what intentionality means beyond an individual mindset, is a theoretically sophisticated task). The sentence finally demands an understanding of the ways in which the control exerted by slavery persists through time and can *still* be said to intend to deny Coates and Samori of self-possession in the present day. In short, it demands a versatility and comfort with several concepts deployed in race theory over the course of a few lines. Coates does not stop to elaborate the constituent components of these assertions so that they might be convincing to someone who does not immediately understand how the abstraction “power” intends.

When he first recalls the interviewer’s question, he writes “the host of a popular news show asked me what it meant to lose my body” (6). It is immediately apparent to viewers of popular news shows that this is not, word for word, what she asked: it is not the language of popular news shows. This is an introduction to the idea that the thinking of the book is translated out of our (mainstream American) habitual modes of thinking, and that, to put it back into “our” language, the reader would need to perform a kind of translation. Statements that register to us as sounding mythic, passionate, and dramatic, he declares as straightforwardly factual: the interviewer asks him why he thinks white America’s progress was built on looting and violence, a statement she obviously believes is radical; he deadpans “there’s nothing extreme in this statement” (6). He does not argue or justify the expressively extreme statements (“Americans deify democracy”). This is not because he believes these claims are literally and empirically “self-evident” but because they’re self-evident to him, and he wants to make the reader feel his unwillingness to spend any energy making the language of his world transparent to us. He does not accuse, by virtue of not caring to

prove.

We can see how the refusal to accuse, by virtue of the refusal to address, situates white readers to recognize their own racial agency most clearly in the fact that he does not address white readers. He addresses readers “who believe that they are white.” In order to feel yourself accused in the first place, you need to assent to the idea not that you *are* white, or that others usually treat you as white, or that you have the “privilege” that, with or without your consent, comes along with generally being considered to be white – you have to assent to the statement that you *believe* yourself white. In order to stand even implicitly accused by the text, you have to assert active belief in whiteness. This is an unexpected maneuver from an author who espouses social constructivism and (often) believes personal intentions don’t matter, and it is designed to set the bar for antagonistic reading high. The only belief Coates ascribes to whiteness is the belief that you have the authority to plunder the black body. So a white reader, feeling accused, desiring to justify himself, in order to defend “white people,” must look to the contents of her own “belief” for some other grounds for whiteness besides the authority to plunder the black body. The term of art throws the white reader back onto herself, possibly to confront the emptiness of her “belief” in whiteness, possibly to claim whiteness in order to refute an accusation Coates has not delivered to her – either way, making her defensiveness laborious, multi-step, active, and thus, if not stopping the reading it its tracks, making it visible enough in its own initiating causality to become self-aware.

III. Black Readers

That Coates’s address to Samori performatively refuses white readers does not mean that the book is not also sincerely *for* him, and for young black people like him (perhaps: young black

men).¹³ What Coates wants for Samori is for him to come to consciousness; on the most basic level, he's given him a memoir that narrates his own coming to consciousness and dramatizes the ways white supremacy gets into black people's minds, conducts even one's attraction to certain theories of black nationalism, draws a line across one's mind's horizon of possibility. But I don't think Coates's other task, addressing white readers askance, produces two wholly distinct books, as Cottom does: the refusal Coates performs, a refusal of antagonistic reading, which is fundamentally a refusal to be discursively bound by and made to justify the logic of whiteness, is what consciousness is useful for, the way to achieve the 'velocity of escape' when the news makes it clear that there are really no guarantees of 'escape' for black bodies, change is unlikely in Samori's lifetime, and one's lifetime is all there is.

What Coates offers *Samori* instead of "hope" is "the struggle." The struggle is probably the reason many readers see *Between the World and Me* as pessimistic and anti-activist: it has a mysterious, Stoic bent to it that seems to suggest that black people should overcome racism by learning to mentally rise above it. Coates first introduces the struggle as "the question of how one should live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream...and the pursuit of this question, I have found, ultimately answers itself" (12). The question answers itself because it is "unanswerable, which is not to say futile. The greatest reward of this constant interrogation, of confrontation with the brutality of my country, is that it has freed me from ghosts and girded me against the sheer terror of disembodiment" (12). The reward of the struggle, which is to say, consciousness, *sounds* obscurely and maybe unconvincingly metaphysical in its rewards, even uncharacteristically religious, a state of enlightenment in which an unanswerable question answers

¹³I think the book desires to address young black *people*. It expresses this desire by including the figures of black girls whose lives are shaped by what Coates thinks of as the same fear that shapes black boys' lives on the street, by including black women who were brutalized by police in the lists of the dead, by figuring a black woman as the specific slave whose whole life was lived in suffering. Whether he successfully does so is an open question. For critiques of Coates's failure to consider gender, see Cottom, Bennett, Hilton.

itself, and provides an inexplicable fearlessness. But actually what Coates offers via “the struggle” is a much more practical guide for survival: a psychological tool to enable refusal.

If antagonistic reading of blackness is a rigged trap that seeks to convert black people’s natural responses and natural anger, their natural fear, into something that gives the reader ‘a reason’ (a reason that is always already the cause of any transgression), allowing themselves to live in ignorance, totally absorbed in the cosmopolitan world that believes it is post-racial (the scene of Samori’s youth), is to allow themselves to be disappointed, fearful, and angry, which is to allow themselves to be sucked in. To be affected and surprised by every fresh reminder of white supremacy is to risk making the mistake of being pulled under by anger and fear. In the narrative aftermath of *Howl’s Moving Castle*, Coates recounts a litany of the things white people would rather countenance than relinquish their belief in their own whiteness – a man chocked to death on film, the belief that a teenager holding candy and soda is a monster, Prince Jones followed through three jurisdictions, the pushing of his four-year-old son like just an obstacle in their day. He concludes this litany:

I was there, Samori. No. I was back in Baltimore surrounded by them boys. I was on my parents’ living room floor, staring out at that distant world, impenetrable to me. I was in all the anger of my years. I was where Eric Garner must have been in his last moments—“This stops today,” he said and was killed. I felt the cosmic injustice, even though I did not fully understand it. I had not yet been to Gettysburg. I had not read Thavolia Glymph. All I had was the feeling, the weight. But part of what I know is that there is the burden of living among Dreamers, and there is the extra burden of your country telling you the Dream is just, noble, and real, and you are crazy for seeing the corruption and smelling the sulfur. For their innocence, they nullify your anger, your fear, until you are coming and going, and you find yourself inveighing against yourself—“Black people are the only people who...”—really inveighing against your own humanity and raging against the crime in your ghetto, because you are powerless before the great crime of history that brought the ghettos to be. (106)

All of the instances in which white supremacy exercises its power are conflated – the most trivial instance, the white woman shoving Samori, tantamount to the most serious murders insofar as they *all* threaten to send him to the same place, which is “back.” These antagonistic readings – a

protective father as beast, a teenager with his hands full of candy and soda as monster, a man naturally fearing the unmarked car trailing him as fleeing criminal – invite the same impotent rage, a rage that fuels the dynamic and works to justify the initial reading to the reader. To feel all the cosmic injustice with no recourse to action can make you “slip up” by letting it slip out, can make you an Eric Garner – and they win. That impotent rage can make you internalize their antagonistic reading of you, their nullification, even make you become what they read you – and they win.

The only way to get outside of this signifying cycle is to know how it works. Learning how it works is the struggle, and knowing how it works is to diminish its power to enrage you and allows you to refuse the cycle. Coates writes,

By the time I visited those battlefields, I knew that they had been retrofitted as the staging ground for a great deception, and this was my only security, because they could no longer insult me by lying to me. I knew—and the most important thing I knew was that, somewhere deep with them, they knew too. I like to think that knowing might have kept me from endangering you, that having understood and acknowledged the anger, I could control it. I like to think that it could have allowed me to speak the needed words to the woman and then walk away. I like to think this, but I can’t promise it. The struggle is really all I have for you because it is the only portion of this world under your control. (106 – 107)

The use of the struggle is that it allows you to refuse your energy, your care, your explanatory attention, to the antagonistic reader, whose discursive project of erasure and self-justification is inevitably fed by them.

Conclusion: Antagonistic Readers and Speech Genres

Towards the end of his narrative, Coates tells Samori: “I have spent much of my studies searching for the right question by which I might fully understand the breach between the world and me. I have not spent my time studying the problem of ‘race’ – ‘race’ itself is just a restatement and retrenchment of the problem” (115). To say that Coates sees antagonistic readers as practicing racism is an explanatory reversal. I’ve read *The Argonauts* and *Between the World and Me* as texts

profoundly interested in theorizing the antagonistic reader for the sake of their reception among more sympathetic readers, and for the sake of their authors' own ability to hear their words outside antagonistic reading's patterns ("It doesn't matter to me if both of these men are mad. Their voices still have clarity"), but also, because antagonistic reading is an index for racism and sexism, as a critical end in its own right: understanding the antagonistic reader is a way of framing the question (i.e., "what is racism?") without begging the question ("racism is hatred based on race"; "But what is race?" "Race is the child of racism"; and so on), of understanding what racism is and sexism/heterosexism are by understanding how they operate in our own minds, cognitively and psychologically.

I agree that antagonistic reading – and being read antagonistically – is a central phenomenon of racism and sexism, and probably also one specific to issues of political subjectivity (though the social epistemologists disagree). Other writers have tracked, in their own way, phenomena of reception that I think fit in with what I've called antagonistic reading here, even if writers' accounts of the impulses behind it or the modes of its operation don't totally conform with the characteristics Coates's and Nelson's theories hold in common. Here, for example, is William Lloyd Garrison musing on the ante-bellum public's reception of testimony about slavery in the Preface to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*:

So profoundly ignorant of the nature of slavery are many persons, that they are stubbornly incredulous whenever they read or listen to any recital of the cruelties which are daily inflicted on its victims. They do not deny that the slaves are held as property; but that terrible fact seems to convey to their minds no idea of injustice, exposure to outrage, or savage barbarity. Tell them of cruel scourgings, of mutilations and brandings, of scenes of pollution and blood, of the banishment of all light and knowledge, and they affect to be greatly indignant at such enormous exaggerations, such wholesale misstatements, such abominable libels on the character of the southern planters!...Skeptics of this character abound in society. In some few instances, their incredulity arises from a want of reflection; but, generally, it indicates a hatred of the light... (*Narrative of the Life, Preface*, 1178 – 1179)

Here is bell hooks, writing in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, published in 1984, about

the response she received from her white feminist classmates at a Women's Studies seminar at Stanford when she pointed out that the syllabus only assigned readings by white authors: "When I criticized [the lack of texts by women of color on the syllabus] white women directed an anger and hostility at me that was so intense I found it difficult to attend the class. When I suggested that the purpose of this collective anger was to create [a] psychologically unbearable [atmosphere] for me...I was told that they were not angry. *I* was the one who was angry" (32).

Here is Judith Butler in "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," musing over how it was that a video that showed police beating a passive Rodney King, a video taken by most to be evidence *against* the police, could be taken by the jurors to "show" that King was a threat: "a juror reported that she believed that Rodney King was in 'total control' of the situation. How was this feat of interpretation accomplished? That it *was* achieved is not the consequence of ignoring the video, but rather, of reproducing the video within a racially saturated field of visibility. If racism pervades white perception, structuring what can and cannot appear within the horizon of white perception, then to what extent does it interpret in advance 'visual evidence'?" (15 – 16).

Here is Sara Ahmed in her recent *Living a Feminist Life* describing an experience that she takes as formative for young feminists:

Through feminism you make sense of wrongs; you realize that you are not in the wrong. But when you speak of something as being wrong, you end up being in the wrong all over again. The sensation of being wronged can thus end up magnified: you feel wronged by being perceived as in the wrong just for pointing out that something is wrong. It is frustrating! And then your frustration can be taken as evidence of your frustration, that you speak this way, about this or that, because you are frustrated. It is frustrating to be heard as frustrated; it can make you angry that you are heard as angry. Or if you are angry about something and you are heard as an angry person (an angry black feminist or an angry woman of color), then what you are angry about disappears, which can make you feel even angrier. (38)

These accounts are not coextensive with each other, but they share some of the distinguishing

attributes that Coates and Nelson see in antagonistic reading. Their ignorance isn't straightforward lack of knowledge, Garrison writes, it's a motivated ignorance. Figures are reduced: hooks is Angry, Ahmed's feminist is Angry. Words are erased: the angry feminist can only speak anger, and so "what [she is] angry about disappears," just as some of Butler's readers, Nelson writes, hear only *lesbian, lesbian, lesbian*; the white juror's field of visibility "interprets in advance," so that the text of the video is so irrelevant that it can be made to say its own opposite. The episodes turn on cognitive reversal: like Coates, hooks and Ahmed imagine antagonistic reading as performing a kind of reversal, the speaker, by speaking, *causes* the problem he is reporting; the speaker *is* the emotion his speech provokes in the reader. In Butler's account of the white jurors, Rodney King is always already the instigator. "They were not angry. *I* was angry." The reader is emotionally invested in this response: they are *stubbornly* incredulous, they are intensely hostile, they are, in Butler's article, paranoid (16).

Can literature intercede in this dynamic, or is the predetermination of the visual field a closed loop, to ask in Butler's language? Or, to ask the same question in Coates's language: is refusal of the antagonistic "trap" that resignifies whatever enters into it according to its own logic even possible? This essay takes as a premise that Nelson and Coates take as *their* premise that it is possible, or at least, it is worth innovatively trying. Whether Nelson and Coates's refusal "worked" would require a reception study far beyond my scope, not to mention a serious investigation into what working means and what it would look like. I have tried to imagine, for example, how explosive Maggie Nelson's claims *might have been*, partly by showing how conscious she is of how explosive her claims might have been, judging on the way leftist communities often react to what they see as co-optation and privilege. That her prominent reviewers said nothing of it, and wrote mostly glowing reviews of her sensitivity and her dismantling of exclusionary boundaries, might be a sign that her literary dexterity "neutralized" some antagonistic readings (ironically,

among reviewers on Goodreads, the most widely disliked aspect of her book by far was its hybridization of genres; readers either decried its “pretentious” incorporation of academic voices or its “naïve and unscholarly” treatment of theorists like Žižek) (Esposito, “The Argonauts,” *Goodreads*). But we might look for totally different signs of *Between the World and Me* “working”: Coates might be a writer for whom his aims are “working” if his white readers respond angrily. Does that mean we must agree with some of Coates’s black critics that the glowing reviews he received from white critics means, at best, that *Between the World and Me* didn’t “work”? The reviewing class, as these critics themselves point out, have their own aims (even “average readers” who post reviews on Goodreads have their own aims!); the range of responses of average readers of various identities are less available, both because they lack platforms and because some they may know their views are unpalatable to others. On the other hand, even if Coates’s book “reached” potentially antagonistic white readers in such a way as to diffuse and reorient the dynamic of reduction, erasure, and cooptation, would we count the book as “working” in light of the (I think genuinely unanticipated by Coates) antagonistic reading it received from black critics like bell hooks?

What we can say is that genre, in its broadest sense (in fact, in Bakhtin’s sense), plays a crucial role in the potentially antagonistic reading-speaking-responding dynamic. Let’s consider Miranda Fricker’s account of what she calls “epistemic injustice,” her model of how the social practice of knowledge admits of prejudice and thus allows a hearer to be “ignorant of,” which is to say, reject as knowledge, the words of a speaker who is offering testimony that otherwise should or would be considered knowledge. Most of our knowledge is gained not through our direct senses, but by being told: a proposition becomes the listener’s justified true belief when he properly judges the speaker conveying the proposition to be a good informant (“Rational Authority and Social Power,” 163). A good informant is someone who has qualities that indicate he is competent to

know that p and trustworthy to truthfully tell *that he knows that p*. In a one-on-one and face-to-face exchange of knowledge, which Fricker takes as a kind of model case, the listener who desires to know must make a (quick, often semi-conscious) judgment about the credibility of the speaker. Listeners judge the credibility of speakers “in the light of a set of background assumptions about how far people like him are trustworthy about things like this in relation to people like her” (*Epistemic Injustice*, 36). Fricker goes on to give an account of how identity of the speaker can incur a near constant credibility deficit for some speakers, such that women, for example are almost always judged less credible about things like this, or that, or the other, in relation to people like her, or him, or them; each instance of this is a testimonial injustice, and the persistent and disproportionate number of testimonial injustices that accrue to some kinds of people build up into hermeneutical injustices – certain groups, persistently assigned less credibility across a wide range of topics, are prevented from contributing to society’s pool of knowledge, such that the society’s pool of concepts lack ones that will adequately and easily describe that group’s experience (Fricker’s paradigmatic example is the concept “sexual harassment,” the experience of which, before that concept was developed, women struggled to describe and make clear with words like “unwanted flirting”). What is relevant and useful in her account, however, is that she sees credibility as being assigned by considering the relation between speaker (or writer), listener (or reader), *and* speech. The listener judges the speaker credible or competent with respect to the kinds of claims to knowledge they make: a woman who is judged credible to observe that this or that behavior in the classroom was sexist might not be judged credible in a courtroom to observe that this or that behavior violated Title IX. A woman can be judged as less credible generally, less objective than a man with respect to any kind of knowledge; similarly any kind of speaker might incur a credibility deficit with respect to claims to a kind of knowledge that is obscure or that listeners are prejudiced against (i.e., think of white readers’ resistance to believe that *anything* was

caused by race); or these factors can concur: women, who are already generally seen as more partial, whose speech is always more “personal” and less universal, speaking about feminism, a theory of political subjectivity that is already seen as failing to think about “serious” “universal” issues like war and the economy, are seen as not just partial but as biased, as theorizing entirely for their own advancement.

Genre, in Bakhtin’s sense – the function of speech, defined by the sphere of communication – determines how we characterize “things like this” in the process of judging “how far people like him are trustworthy about things like this in relation to people like her.” If we read testimony written in the language of a legal brief we understand it to be making a different kind of claim than testimony written in the language of a news article, even if they testify to the same facts. Bakhtin’s own account of speech genres says that it allows us to plot a speaker’s “speech will” and to begin formulating our response as they’re speaking – this allows us to use language fluently, in his account, but it also sounds like an account of the mental operation a listener performs to obviate a speaker’s actual words. Complex secondary genres intervene in this interlocutory process differently, from each other and from straightforward testimony and daily speech. Literature, I’m tentatively saying, may have a better chance of “working” with antagonistic readers (tentatively, because I’m keenly aware of all of literature’s *disadvantages* – the main one being its shrinking and relatively self-selecting audience), by virtue of what Bakhtin acknowledges to be its expressive flexibility, its room for personal style. To read literature as being produced not just by “the reader” but produced by the competing forces and needs of different readers, and especially by the needs of its most aggressively responsive and virulent readers, is to ask how those formal elements communicate. For example: how does fiction operate in this antagonistic dynamic? Does nonfiction incur a special risk of antagonistic reading by making more legible claims to knowledge than, say, fiction? How does narrativity influence how readers perceive and emotionally respond to those

claims? Coates's and Nelson's use of second person address is an example of how literature's expressive flexibility can interrupt and redirect the antagonistic reader's patterned responses – as are the broader and more global ways in which they're hybrid, experimental, and defiant of expectations.

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