

Université de Montréal

headless: A work of fiction/theory on desire and fear in narrative.

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headless: A Work of Fiction/Theory on Desire and Fear in Narrative

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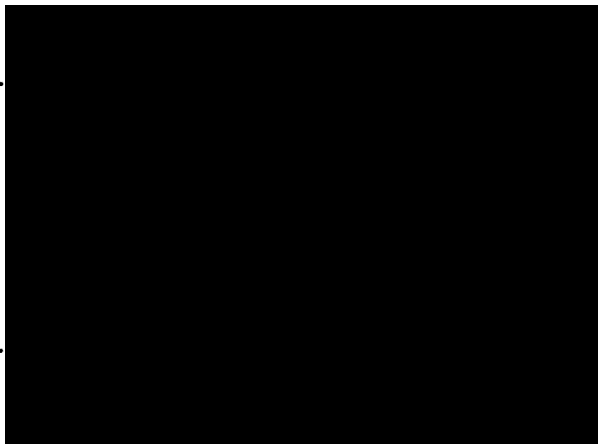
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Abstract

This project is a theory-fiction hybrid examining the writing process. Its basis is a novel, *headless*, which is being written concurrently. The fictional and critical texts will therefore become intertwined, if not interchangeable, producing self-reflexively theoretical fiction and unconventionally fictionalized theory. The project is not a retrospective interpretation of the novel but an analysis of the process itself, a snapshot of the work in progress. By generating both primary and secondary texts, the project demonstrates how the critical enterprise is both autonomously creative and inextricably connected to fiction.

The novel *headless* concerns itself with fear and desire and the ways in which these two motivations are related and complementary. In the novel a Canadian arachnologist, along with other scientists, is taken hostage by a guerilla army in the highlands of New Guinea (West Papua). His phobic obsession with spiders is paralleled by his fascination with and fear of his captors, as well as his infatuation with his black female colleague. The critical essay will explain how these themes are elaborated in the novel's story and metaphors using illustrative excerpts from the novel, but will also examine the fears and desires that motivate the writing of the novel itself. There are two main theoretical points that are made in this regard: the first is an attempt to recast so-called Orientalist motivations in writing as essential revelatory tactics; the second is an

observation on how our fears and desires survive and transcend the immanentizing of text under postmodernism.

The first part of the essay describes the central themes of the novel and, using insights gained from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, examines how fear and desire are related forms of abjection. It also deals with the role of abjection in phobia, the popular image of spiders, and the fear of acephalia (headlessness). The second part looks at the ramifications of fictionalizing real events, especially the colonial desire inherent in writing about a foreign culture (such as the Papuan tribes in the novel). Using a framework of post-colonial theory, this part will make an argument for the revelatory potential of the fear and desire involved in the fictional creation of an "other." The relationship between scientific and literary discourse is also questioned. The third and final part has to do with the impulse to create narrative, and how this tendency is used by writers of the genre known as "New Narrative" to circumvent and adjust to postmodernism's dismantling of truth and subjectivity. While fear and desire can be effects of narrative in a text, they also act as motivators for the narrative impulse. This part discusses narrative in the context of abjection, desire, death, and identity, as well as the concept that writing itself is a phobia.

Key Words: abjection, narrative, fiction/theory, arachnophobia, "New Narrative"

Résumé

headless / acéphale:

Une fiction théorique / théorie fictive sur la peur et le désir dans le récit.

Ce projet réunit la théorie et la fiction pour examiner le processus d'écriture. Il est basé sur un roman, intitulé *headless*, dont la construction est en cours. Alors enlacées, les deux textes, fiction et critique, deviennent indifférenciables et le projet produit de la fiction qui est auto-analytique et de la théorie qui ressemble à la fiction. Le but de ce projet n'est pas d'achever le roman, sinon d'analyser le processus, et de révéler un instantané de l'oeuvre en cours. Je veux montrer, par la génération simultanée des textes primaire et secondaire, comment l'entreprise de la critique littéraire est créative de façon autonome, mais en même temps liée inextricablement à la fiction.

Le roman *headless* porte sur la peur et le désir ainsi que les relations et ressemblances entre ces deux motivations. Le héros du roman est un arachnologue qui est kidnappé, en compagnie de ses collègues, par une armée guérilla dans les montagnes de Irian Jaya (Papouasie de l'ouest) en Indonésie. Son obsession phobique avec les araignées se trouve reproduite par la fascination et la peur qu'il développe face à ses capteurs et aussi dans son engouement avec sa collègue Sera. La narrative du roman se révèle pièce par pièce, du début à la fin du mémoire. En bref, Laurie Bell est né à Montréal mais déménage au

Brésil très jeunes avec ses parents. Là, il apprend à lire et devient fasciné par la science. Plus tard au Canada il étudie la biologie, et pendant ses études de deuxième cycle il rencontre un arachnologue célèbre, M. James Boyle. Il décide de faire son doctorat avec M. Boyle à l'université Cornell, mais avant même d'y arriver, Boyle lui demande d'entreprendre un voyage au Japon pour étudier une infestation d'araignées à Osaka. Pendant qu'il est là, Boyle meurt. Laurie décide de continuer ses recherches avec une équipe scientifique qui va passer quelques mois dans la jungle à Irian Jaya. Il est surpris de trouver que Sera, la fille adoptée de Boyle dont il est amoureux, est parmi les autres membres de l'équipe. Tout va bien avec la recherche, mais après quelques semaines l'équipe est capturée par une petite armée habillée en t-shirt, membres de l'Organesi Papua Merdeka (Mouvement Papouasie Libre). Ils mènent les otages dans la forêt pendant quelques mois, fuyant l'armée Indonésienne. Pendant leur capture, Laurie et ses collègues développent un grand respect pour ces hommes et leurs désirs d'indépendance et de liberté. En même temps, ils perçoivent que leur lutte est inutile. Finalement ils sont entouré par les Indonésiens. Dans le chaos qui suit, les guérillas tuent une des scientifiques Indonésienne, et Sera est tuée par une balle provenant d'un fusil de l'armée Indonésienne.

Cet essai présente, en plus d'extraits, non seulement une analyse des thèmes et des métaphores du roman, mais aussi une réflexion sur la peur et le désir, puissantes

motivations de l'écriture. L'essai inclut deux thèses significatives: une analyse de la ré-interprétation de la problématique de l'orientalisme comme stratégie importante de découverte dans un texte, et un examen de la survivance de nos peurs et de nos désirs subconscients dans les textes formalistes et superficiels du post-modernisme.

La première partie de l'essai utilise le cadre conceptuel construit par Julia Kristeva dans *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* pour expliquer l'abjection en terme de synthèse de la peur et du désir, et pour démontrer comment fonctionne l'abjection dans le roman. Les principaux thèmes traités sont: le rôle de l'abjection dans la phobie, l'arachnophobie ambivalente de la société, l'hyper-rationalisme d'une personne phobique, ainsi que la peur obsessionnelle de l'acéphale (c'est-à-dire, la perte du rationalisme) qui est liée à la peur de la castration.

La deuxième partie examine les problèmes qui accompagnent la fictionalisation des événements réels, particulièrement le désir colonial qui existe dans toute écriture qui a pour sujet une autre culture comme cela est le cas des tribus de la Papouasie dans le roman. À titre d'exemple, le processus d'invention de la tribu "Mbui," amalgame de plusieurs tribus réelles, est expliqué et lié à la création de l'Autre par le désir orientaliste.

En utilisant les idées d'Edward Saïd et Homi Bhabha, ce procédé de création est interprété en fonction de l'exploration nécessaire des interstices entre différentes cultures ainsi qu'entre le sujet et l'objet. Vient ensuite une discussion portant sur la question de la

fictionalisation en général. Puisqu'il arrive souvent que les sciences, incluant les études littéraires, déclarent leur contenu véridique, il faut se demander premièrement, ce qui sépare ces discours de la fiction, et deuxièmement (particulièrement en ce qui a trait à la théorie littéraire) si cette prétention à la vérité est nécessairement l'approche la plus productive.

La troisième et dernière partie considère le désir de créer un récit dans l'écriture, ce qui est appelé ici l'instinct narratif. Cette tendance est utilisée par les écrivains d'un nouveau genre, le "New Narrative," pour éviter et s'adapter à la déconstruction de la signification et de la subjectivité sous l'influence du postmodernisme. Dans cette section, les fondations du "New Narrative" sont détaillées: la mort et le récit, le désir et le récit, l'identité et le récit, l'écriture comme manifestation d'une phobie, l'écriture et les rêves, et finalement les pouvoirs de l'instinct narratif. L'essai démontre que non seulement la peur et le désir peuvent procéder d'un texte narrative, mais qu'ils peuvent tout aussi bien être la cause primaire de la pulsion vers le narratif.

Finalement, la conclusion présente une synthèse des concepts abordés dans les trois premières sections. En bref, l'abjection représente un espace intermédiaire entre la peur et le désir, entre une identité ou une culture et un Autre, ainsi qu'entre l'objet et le sujet de la psyché. C'est dans cet espace liminaire que l'écrivain trouve une façon d'écrire (comme le

dit Gail Scott) la vérité dans la fiction, l'imagination dans la biographie. Autrement dit, c'est l'abjection qui permet au texte d'effectuer la subversion de la signification autoritaire tout en s'adressant aux problèmes réels de l'histoire et de la politique.

Mots clés: l'abjection, le récit, la fiction-théorie, l'arachnophobie, "New Narrative"

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Dedication

This project and the novel upon which it is based are respectfully dedicated to the Nduga, the Kimyal, the Lani, the Bauzi, the Dani, the Hagahai, the Sambia, the Miyanmin, the Telefol, the Amungme, and the Moni, whom I have never met.

Part One: Abjection, Arachnophobia, Acephalia.

1 (Which comes first) In this essay, I'm telling a story. Essentially, it is the story of a researcher in the field of literary studies, a student who takes as his object of study a fictional text that is not yet written—or rather, a text in the process of being written. Through this rather hubristic theoretical move, the student hopes to conjure into being the hypothetical text, and so become not only the text's critical audience but at the same time its author. In this way the conventional apprehensive waltz between the author and the critic, in which the author leads and the critic warily follows, will be transformed into a kind of auto-analysis which, if successful, will make dancing partners of the student's ego and id. Who will lead? Does the fiction necessarily precede its analysis, or could we say that the theoretical structure, even before it is expressed, predicates the possibilities of the story? Perhaps each element contains the seed of the other. A textual chicken-and-egg problem. Because telling a story always involves presenting an argument of sorts; because a theory is another kind of story; because fiction/theory/fiction/theory/fiction

2 (Motivations) As long as I can remember, I have had a certain fear. I use the word "fear" for the sake of convenience, although the word does not adequately encompass the feeling I have when faced with the object of my dread. More explicitly, what I feel is simultaneous disgust and fascination; most succinctly, what I feel is a form of abjection. I am invaded by

a vertiginous repulsion that wants, first, to avoid any contact with the thing, wants to reject it in the way one rejects something rotten or morbid, even though the thing is alive. At the same time, I am drawn to it like a moth to a flame; furthermore, the idea of killing or harming the thing is even more traumatic than the idea of touching it. Vertigo provides a good analogy, in the sense that it is both a terror of the abyss and the desire to throw oneself into it.

Operating on the principle that the most productive terrain for a writer is whatever the writer feels compelled to avoid, I decided to write a novel about this thing that I feared. A corollary to this principle, which will be central to the investigations of this project, is that writing about what one fears is also a way to indirectly discover what one desires.

The novel, which is provisionally entitled *headless*, is the basis for and the primary text of this analytical essay. But the relationship between the two texts is a bit more complex, because *headless* is at this point a largely hypothetical novel, an incipient novel. In other words, the novel only exists as an extrapolation of what is written here. This essay includes fictional passages, interspersed with more analytical sections, but no attempt is made to label or strictly demarcate what is novel and what is theory; there would be no point in making such a distinction, because the two texts exist in a web of mutual influence and inevitably overlap to some degree. Perhaps it is more precise to say that this essay asks the reader to extrapolate not one but two imaginary texts: the hypothetical novel *headless*, which exists in a fragmentary manuscript form, and the hypothetical thesis which a hypothetical student of this hypothetical novel might write. The present essay, then, is a tertiary text, one that looks at the fiction *and* the criticism of *headless*, and combines them and confuses them and ends up throwing in a little bit of both. Roland Barthes would see this as a readerly text, one which expects the active engagement of the audience.

The project consists of three parts. This, the first part, is an introduction to the novel, and presents the first sections of a broad adumbration of its characters and plot, which will be continued in the later parts. It also includes an explanation of the novel's central themes

and metaphors as they pertain to the essay, namely abjection, arachnophobia, and acephalia. I make use of Julia Kristeva's writings on abjection to explain the functions of fear and desire as its constitutive elements, and draw on certain tenets of psychoanalysis to examine the significance of the phobic cathexis in the novel. I describe how fear and desire cling to the undersides of each other in the novel's characters, and how the fact that spiders have no heads is significant to the protagonist's obsession with them.

The second part addresses, in two very different ways, the question: how does one combine fiction-writing with an anthropological, empirical intent? And what are the benefits and risks involved? In other words, what happens when one attempts to fictionalize a story lived by real people, and particularly people who do not share your cultural background? To put it less disingenuously, part two is about Orientalism, and about theoretical and scientific discourse. By putting these seemingly separate topics together, my intention is to show how they present similar problems but also similar productive potential. New Guinea is the star of this section, since it is the setting of most of the novel and also one of the most anthropologized (yet one of the least understood) places on Earth.

The third and last part of this essay is concerned with the role of fear and desire in narrative more generally. The thoughts in this section were conceived as a response to and comment on the notion of New Narrative, as formulated by several contemporary writers and exemplified in the web-journal *Narrativity*. My own conception of New Narrative is as a method of imbuing the postmodernist, language-centered text with the emotive content associated with earlier forms of narrative. The deep narrative structure of New Narrative relies on the narrative instinct, and the presence in the text of what I have labelled (borrowing Lacanian concepts) the desire-narrative, as opposed to the wish-narrative. If it is true, as Julia Kristeva says, that "the writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death," (38) then the narrative instinct may have roots in the survival of fear and desire in the text.

I look to Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin as writing models for this project, meaning that I have allowed myself to deviate considerably from conventional academic style. I don't expect to be systematic in covering a topic as broad as fear and desire; I see this not as a single, sustained argument but as a series of observations and quotations that result in a cumulative (inductive) meaning rather than a causative (deductive) logic. In rhetorical terms it is Senecan rather than Ciceronian, in that a binding structure has not been imposed. My use of theoretical approaches, including psychoanalytic theory, narratology, and post-colonial theory, is rather heuristic. If the criticism of this essay at times seems incomplete, I think it is justifiable in that the questions posed by the critical sections are often answered in the fiction, and vice versa. If one section leaves an issue inadequately explained, I am hoping the reader will look carefully in the next section, which may be in a completely different voice and genre, to find a more eloquent expression of the idea than could have been achieved using expository prose. In other words, having decided to include both fiction and theory, I tried my best to avoid redundancy, by touching on different topics from different angles. Furthermore, in this essay you will find not footnotes or endnotes but what might be called *intra*-notes, which emphasize the a-linear character of my argument. Each number in superscript can be followed to the section of the essay that goes by that number, which serves to create an alternate thread of associations, so that the essay becomes a network of conceptual threads, a web of *intra*- as well as *inter*-textuality. The story I'm telling you is whimsical, in the way that the *flaneur* as described by Benjamin is whimsical; this is a meandering through the winding pathways of the story and the ideas in question.

What motivates these wanderings? What are my own fears and desires for this text? (These questions are not entirely rhetorical, and I ask for my own benefit as much as for that of the reader.) More than anything, the fundamental desire that permeates this text is a desire to be excited by ideas. This excitement can only be brought about by a genuine revelation; that is, I expect by writing (writing the novel, writing this essay) to discover something I did not know when I started. The content of this revelation will not necessarily

be truth (to put it in simple terms). It may be something other than truth, but it will be something which encourages me to live differently. It will provoke me. In other words, it will meet the most important and basic criteria which define something as art. This revelation will be an idea, but it will serve the purpose of art. As an ideology it will be organic and autonomous.

Writing: the process of describing what you know (about yourself) in order to arrive at what you do not know (about yourself). This is also what happens in psychoanalysis: a message is sent from the conscious self to an interpreter (the analyst), but the conscious self does not know the real revelatory content of that message until it has been read and sent back. In Lacanian metaphor, a letter always reaches its destination, because its destination is ultimately the sender himself. The writing of this novel/essay is analytical in more than one way: I'm analyzing my own work, but also sending a message to an interpreter (you, the reader) in the hope that I will find in the message something that I didn't know I was saying, by following Lacan and searching for desire in between the lines.

3 (Dreaming #1) The boy dreams of being awake. He dreams of idly twitching, trying to sleep, wrapped in his long woven hammock. Pink geckos disappear into cracks in the wall, and a double highway of ants traces the edge of the floor. He likes the geckos, and he finds the ants funny with their six little legs, so industrious and polite. Still, he doesn't want to leave the hammock. He feels safer there, curled up in a ball, suspended above the ground. There may be other things that walk on the floor in the dark.

Suddenly something wakes him, and he realizes he has been dreaming. In the corridor he hears a whisper, both deferential and panicked. His eyes open and his mind pulls itself out of the pool of sleep and tries to locate this moment in the chronology of his dreams. He is in his hammock, two feet above the floor. The noise of insects is ringing outside like the strings of a de-tuned piano in an earthquake, and a flashlight beam is weaving on the tiles of the hall floor. The house has electric lights, but perhaps the power

has gone out again, as it does every few days. He knows the whispering voice well—it's his family's cook, Eliane. She is knocking quietly but quickly on his parents' door, and calling for his father to come out to the bathroom. *Vem aqui*, she is saying. *Com pressa*. Come quickly. *Tem uma aranha*.

It is a simple house. The bathroom—a concrete cube with a drain in the middle and a simple cold-water faucet attached to the wall for bathing—is in an adjacent shed in the back yard, and the outhouse is behind that. Inside the house, only a few rooms have doors, and some have no floor. They all have four walls, a window, and a terra-cotta roof like a xylophone for the rain to play. The boy sits up in his hammock and quietly swings his legs over the side. His toes do not reach the ground. He can hear a whispered debate between Eliane and his father through the door of his parents' room at the end of the hall: she trying to convince him of the urgency of the situation, he interrogating her about the nature of the crisis, reasoning with her, and giving her calm instructions from the comfort of his big double bed. The boy carefully turns over on his stomach and slides down until his bare toes can feel the knots in the hand-woven rug that covers the floor of his room. Every morning he is vaguely grateful to feel that concrete floor beneath him as he slides out of his swaying hammock, and yet every night the thought of walking on it fills him with a thick, amorphous dread. But something is drawing him away from safety, something about the panicked voice that he has to investigate.

Eliane is as familiar to the boy as his own mother, for she has fed him every meal for as long as he can remember. To him she seems at least as old as his parents, but actually she is much younger, perhaps even a teenager. Occasionally she yells at him, for running in the house, but then sometimes she makes him whipped drinks with guava or banana and brings them to him when he is playing in the yard. And she never lets him go to bed without giving her a goodnight hug. She lavishes parcels of happiness on him daily. But there is a tone in her voice now that he isn't familiar with. It sounds like fear, and he has never known Eliane to be afraid. It sounds like something she herself hadn't expected and doesn't want.

A fear that is irrational, that you know is irrational, that nevertheless invades every nerve of your body, like a parasitic vine that creeps over every branch of a tree and slowly chokes it, until you find yourself unable to use your limbs, your lungs, your voice.

The boy has a tiny pocket flashlight that he keeps hidden under his bed, the bed which he refuses to use. The lamp has such a small bulb it only trickles a faint leaking light—hardly big enough to light up a pocket, really, let alone a room, but he takes it and looks out from behind the curtain that hangs in the doorway. Eliane is standing at the end of the corridor, pleading for someone to come to her rescue, her own flashlight splashing against the door and eerily illuminating her face. The boy hesitates for a moment and then slips out, walking as quietly as he knows how so she will not hear him. He creeps into the kitchen, towards the back door which leads to the yard. When he feels the cold kitchen tiles under his bare feet he turns on the little flashlight and points it out the open door towards the bathroom, and his stealthy footsteps stop. The bathroom shed is in complete darkness, without the light from the naked bulb which is usually always on.

He doesn't want to continue any farther. But there is nothing at all behind him to turn back to. Returning to his hammock is unthinkable, now that he knows there is something there, now that he has to know what is there. His own room is as inaccessible as the past, and his entire future is contained beyond the path from his feet to the door of the bathroom at the other side of the yard. He wobbles out the door as if he were only learning to walk once again, and shines the anemic little light ahead of him. Every stone and root in the path is familiar to him, but the yard is also littered with bits of guava peel and the thready pits of mangoes, which look like large, legless insects in the dark.

4 (Abjection) Although the common meaning of *abject*—as in "abject terror" or "abject longing," for example—is usually as simple as "absolute, without hope of respite," in psychoanalytic terms the word *abject* signifies something more specific. Julia Kristeva explains in *Powers of Horror*: the abject is that which is rejected from the bounds of the

self in order that those bounds can be maintained, and it incites feelings of repulsion and disgust. In physical terms, what our bodies reject—including food that is taboo or putrid, taboo sexuality, waste including excrement and menstrual blood, and death—is abject: that which is a part of us, but which we deny in order to keep living. (It is analogous to what Lacan called the object *a*, an unsymbolizable presence and absence, a lost object.) Death itself is simply the process of the abject invading the body; during life we push away the revolting superfluities of living, but when we lose the ability to do so we become the abject, becoming a corpse in the process. That is the reason, in psychoanalytic terms, for the repulsion and the taboos surrounding dead bodies. "The corpse...is the utmost of abjection." (*Powers* 4) Yet our ability to cast out morbidity and decay (the anti-life elements of living), while we are alive, rests on our fragile ability to maintain a coherent ego identity. And so there is a constant danger of the abject becoming confused with the subject, as it is always confused with our desires and our fears. In this way it is possible for the subject to enter a state of abjection, to inhabit a psychic place that is no longer subject but not object either.

The object, too, is necessary for the definition of our selves, and like the abject it is in opposition to the subject "I." The abject is different from the object, though, in that it is not an Imaginary construct (in Lacanian terms) but belongs rather to the Real. The object is a correlative to our selves, against which we measure our identities and which we see as the ultimate goal of an endless desirous pursuit. The abject, on the other hand, lies outside of the me-you binary of subjecthood and objecthood. According to Kristeva, if the object is the correlative of the ego, then the abject is the counterpart of the superego, as a overwhelming force, a painful presence which one endures but which is neither "I" nor "you" nor "that." Neither here nor there. If the object leads us into a series of substitutions of desire—which, according to Lacan's theory, is what roots our identities in language—then the abject is what disrupts that chain. The object, as our eternal homologous other-self, introduces us to meaning and allows meaning to be perpetuated and multiplied and recycled. The abject, on

the other hand, is the sign of non-signification: it is a reminder of the meaningless Real, it demolishes structures. It prevents us from being wholly autonomous subjects. It is "that which disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."

(*Powers 4*)

While it is an obstacle to unified-identity formation (just as the object is identity's necessary co-requisite), the object also protects the self at the border of non-existence and self-annihilation, like a vaccine protects with a dose of the dreaded disease. It is through the nausea and violence of abjection—through vomiting, the expulsion of filth, the rejection of the perverted object of desire—that the "I" is both endangered and saved. Our existence is precarious, balanced on the edge of life and non-life, and the object is what we need to push away in order to remain on the living side. In a hot-air balloon, in order to keep the basket afloat and moving, we need to occasionally drop some weight, and so we take sand bags on board with us. The sand-bags are an essential piece of equipment on the balloon, but they are meant to be thrown overboard. The object becomes integral to our selves, but we reject it to maintain our momentum. Except that the object, when cast out, does not leave. It is not an other, and therefore it remains in the realm of "I," so that in the traumatic expulsion of surplus that keeps us living we are really expelling "I," we are abjecting ourselves. "It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object."—because abjection itself is protection and threat at the same time—"Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us." (*Powers 4*) In this sense abjection is fundamentally a paradox, a state of defilement and grace that is both revolting and attractive. Abjection functions through a feeling of loathing, but it is based on the experience of want, which necessarily precedes object-formation. When the subject realizes that its chain of desired objects is based on an initial and inescapable lack or loss that makes possible identity and the Symbolic, then it turns inward to look for an object-in-the-subject, and that is the quintessence of the object. "All abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is

founded." (*Powers* 5) The relationship of the self to the abject, therefore, is a violent and painful combination of passions. A *jouissance*. Because our desire for the object cannot be satisfied—we can not become one with the object—the abject fills us instead, killing us in the process. It could be said then that we are victims of the abject, but we are its fascinated and willing victims.

headless is a story about a phobia, on one hand, but in uncovering that fear it also becomes a story about the abject. In simple Freudian terms, a phobia is a reaction to the danger of object loss. (Freud *Analysis* 83) In other words, the phobic chooses an unlikely object on which to project a speakable and thus post-linguistic fear, which takes the place of another, more primary and unspeakable fear—the fear of castration, which means the fear of loss of an object of desire, the fear of the absence of the mother's phallus, the fear of the guilty desire to emasculate and kill the father: that unutterable all-powerful stuff. This phobic cathexis could be thunder, could be horses, could be an insect or the colour yellow: it is nearly always an irrationally located object. (In contemporary psychoanalysis this kind of phobia is referred to as a specific phobia, as opposed to a social phobia such as agoraphobia.) The choice of object, however, has everything to do with abjection. "The phobic has no other object than the abject..." because, first of all, the phobic drive is a drive to expel things, to create a territory of self purged of the object of fear, and edged with the abject, like sweeping dirt out of the house on to the street. So that the phobic object is tossed out with the abject. "...But that word, 'fear'—a fluid haze, an elusive clamminess—no sooner has it cropped up than it shades off like a mirage and permeates all words of the language with nonexistence, with a hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer." (*Powers* 6) What Kristeva means by this "but" is that fear is always fear of something that is not there, and furthermore something that is in some way unrepresentable, chimerical. The phobic renounces desire as a psychic driving engine, because desire is always desire for an object, and adopts *exclusion* instead, by fetishizing the abject, and the abjection of self. Therefore the phobic lives in an abject state. Kristeva suggests in *Powers of Horror* that this reversal

of drives poses a challenge to the theory of the unconscious itself, because of the unusual way in which the "unconscious" content is excluded rather than repressed: enough to allow for a defensive position, but not enough for the formation of a clear subject-object divide.

(7) This ambiguity with regard to the difference between subject and object will be important later in my essay.

Abjection: the expulsion of surplus, the voiding of the stuff that would make us dead if we didn't reject it. But also a recognition of want, a substitute for desire, and a kind of protective lining from the parts of us that are not us. What interests me the most about abjection is its underlying interplay of fear and desire, as well as its role in the complication of the subject-object split. These are the themes that are dealt with the most in the novel and here: abjection and want, abjection and desire, abjection and fear, abjection and death, and finally, abjection and the sublime.

5 (*P. viridipes*) As an arachnologist, I've been working on a theory having to do with the reproductive habits of a hypothetical species of the genus *Lactrodectus*; specifically, I've been interested in the possibility of parthenogenesis in this species. As an arachnologist—perhaps I should make this clear—I am concerned with animals of the class *Arachnida*, and more specifically, the Araneids. In other words, I study spiders. I'd like to explain to you my theory concerning the *Lactrodectus* spiders, commonly known as the widows and red-backs, but first I have a sort of confession to make. Scientific convention dictates that I—that is, the subject pronoun I representing me—should be absent from this narrative, but I'm afraid if I were to write this from a completely objective point-of-view, it wouldn't make much sense. Perhaps that is evidence that the theory is empirically unsupportable and methodologically unsound. In any case, it seems a subjective point of view is required, so I'm going to tell you something about myself that I normally try to avoid telling people because it is a character trait that is rather unbecoming in an arachnologist. In fact, it somewhat hampers my ability to be an effective arachnologist. All my life I've had an all-

consuming fascination with spiders. But in addition to being an arachnophile, as paradoxical as this may sound, I have always been—and most likely will always remain—an arachnophobe. The most familiar feeling evoked for me by the sight of a live spider is a feeling of abject terror.

It has always been this way. As a young arachnologist, just beginning my studies in university, I would spend hours poring over illustrations in the dusty maze of the library, trying to overcome this irrational fear. Occasionally I would turn the page, the background would blur for a moment, and the eight-legged drawing would seem to rush at me or away from me and I would have to push away from the table and look at something solid and flat. In the lab the smell of 80% alcohol solution would make me feel dizzy and warm, and the sight of other students picking up spiders in their bare hands would induce an almost uncontrollable panic response. I only got through those classes by reciting a mantra I had invented to calm me down: coxa, trochanter, femur, patella, tibia, metatarsus, tarsus. I would say it in my head, over and over. Coxa, trochanter, femur, patella, tibia, metatarsus, tarsus. It was simply a list of the names of the seven parts of a spider's leg, from the top down to the pointed claw on the tip. It was strange, because if I looked at a picture of a spider's leg—or even worse, if I were to watch a spider folding its legs like scissors as it wrapped its prey in silk—I would feel the worst kind of anxiety. But for some reason reciting these names had a calming effect.

I can't say when or how this phobic obsession took hold in me, but it dates back to my pre-linguistic days, I'm sure. I have a memory from my early childhood, from before I could read, of a large picture book containing photos of spiders of all kinds. There were pictures of insects and other arthropods too, but the bumblebees or butterflies never held my attention for long: I would always turn to the pictures that scared me. When I looked at them I felt like I was clinging to something that might break at any moment, or walking on a tight-rope. There were common house spiders, wolf spiders, orb-weavers, widows, giant mygalomorphs the size of my father's hand, including one photographed in the process of

eating a bird. And there was one photo in particular that has never left my memory. Somewhere along the way I lost the book, in one of my family's moves perhaps, but this photo is still clear in my mind. It was some kind of jumping spider—that is, I know enough now to identify it as a jumping spider—and the picture was a close-up the spider's face. Spiders' faces are not really what we think of as faces of course, but on jumping spiders the eyes are remarkably specialized—they have among the most highly developed eyes of any invertebrates, the two anterior eyes in particular—and this can make them look extremely anthropomorphic. In this picture, I was sure that the spider was looking at me. Its expression was not menacing, but it had a sort of alien aloofness. Its eyes were two round black globes that somehow seemed wise to me. But then, if I looked just to the side and above those orbs, where one would expect to see eyebrows, I saw instead six other round black eyes. And below them, rather than a nose and a mouth, there were just two enormous fangs—the chelicerae, actually. The face was so familiar and yet so strange. Even after I closed the book it would appear in my mind. I remember blinking my eyes frantically to try to erase it, but it didn't go away, and if I let down my guard I would see it again, an eight-eyed face watching me passively, never blinking.

I kept returning to that book. When I examined it, I would hold the pages by the edges so that my fingers would never accidentally brush against a spider. And as I leafed through, I always shuddered as I thought about the spiders clinging upside-down to the other side of the page. I think I worried that if I left the book alone and tried to forget about the pictures, the spiders would come to life and escape from the book. I felt much safer if I occasionally checked to make sure they hadn't moved. And the more often I looked at the book to keep the spiders in their places, the safer I felt. Eventually I learned that other spiders existed in the world, and that they lived everywhere, and then it wasn't enough just to look at that book occasionally. I realized that I would have to devote myself seriously to watching the spiders, and that I would have to learn as much as I could about them. It was

never that I liked spiders. It just would have been much worse not knowing what they were doing.

My preoccupation with spiders grew into an obsession, and I became famous in our family for it. I tried to keep it a secret, but people latch onto that kind of thing and use it to define you. On my birthdays or at Christmas, when aunts and uncles would ask my mother what to get me, she would say, "Oh, anything. He likes spiders, of course, so anything spider-related will make him happy." Eventually I had a huge collection of spider paraphernalia which I found embarrassing and creepy: stuffed spiders, plastic gimmicky spiders, fake spider tattoos. With the arrival of each item I would feign interest, but inwardly I was cringing, because they were simply more spiders that I would have to keep track of.

6 (Blunters and Monitors) According to Martin Antony (University of Toronto Psychiatry Department) there are two types of arachnophobics, which he calls "blunters" and "monitors." A blunter's main defense mechanism is denial. A blunter will do anything he can to avoid coming into contact with—or even seeing—a spider. Even if he knows there is a spider nearby, he will pretend there is not and try to distract himself with nervous activity or by talking to himself. A monitor, on the other hand, wants to empower himself with obsessively collected knowledge. When he enters a room, he will search the entire room for spiders. If he finds one, he must from then on make it his business to know its exact whereabouts. He will continue to follow or monitor the spider as long as he is in its vicinity, and in fact is reluctant to leave it. ("Arachnophobia") The protagonist of the novel *headless* is a monitor who has gone to extremes by becoming an expert on spiders. A person who writes a book about the object of his fear, it might be argued, shows an even more exemplary, because more metaphoric and therefore more genuinely neurotic, version of monitoring behaviour.

7 (Maybe I Think Too Much) The main character of the novel *headless* is Laurie Bell, an arachnologist who is also an arachnophobe. At the time of the story's events he is a precocious 24 years old. He is born in Canada but grows up in Brazil with his mother, who works for an NGO, and his father, who makes conceptual installation art. Laurie says they were hippies—and they retain some hippie habits now although his father has shaved—and this is probably a large part of the reason that Laurie decides that he has to be a scientist.

In spite of his contrarian determination not to be an artist or an activist, Laurie is more similar to his parents than he would like to think. He has inherited from them, first of all, an analytical mind and a talent for language. Laurie is a cerebral person. He manages to learn languages quickly without speaking much, only by listening. His parents are first worried that he has some learning disability, because he seems to develop a capacity for language very late in life. Then they are relieved and surprised when he starts speaking at the age of four and is able to communicate perfectly in both English and Portuguese. At almost the same time, he teaches himself to read. His parents, primarily his father, begin to teach him at home, although they de-emphasize science, which is where Laurie's interest lies, in favour of literature and art. His favourite book is *Charlotte's Web*, and soon his father is urging him to read *Animal Farm* as a sort of counterpoint. As he grows up, he is always more interested in books and science than in sports, music, or other people; his parents tell him he thinks too much. His only artistic endeavour is writing poetry, which his father has encouraged him to do since he was a child: "There is a cat. / The cat lives in a house. / The house is ice cream." When he is eleven, he announces that he will no longer speak to his parents in English but will use Portuguese (which is the language he uses with the few friends he has), and will only refer to animals and plants by their Latin/Greek taxonomic names. Shortly after that, his parents decide that it is time to move back to Canada.

8 (Phobic language) These events are the beginning of the "thinks too much" theme of the novel, which in a round-about way alludes to the hypothetical and metaphorical advantages

to be had from acephalia (headlessness). If Laurie thinks too much, it is primarily a symptom of his genetic inheritance and his solitary upbringing, but it also relates to the hyper-rationalization common to the phobic individual, which Kristeva mentions and which was well documented by Freud. Phobia can coincide with heightened rational and linguistic abilities, and there are two possible reasons for this: first, the use of language can be a defense mechanism that allows the object of fear to be controlled by codifying it. Laurie's mantra-like repetition of the names of spider leg segments, and also his insistence on the use of scientific taxonomy as a child, would be examples of this tendency. Second, it may be that linguistic virtuosity is not a panacea for the phobia but a side-effect of the metaphorization of the fear. Lacan identified that the unconscious always works in metaphor and metonymy, but the phobic psyche as a whole organizes itself around such a substitution, which could be seen as a proto-linguistic substitution. For this reason the Symbolic register becomes even more consequential to the phobic, and the ability to think symbolically and express oneself linguistically is enhanced as a result. This is the first reason why Kristeva suggests that writing itself should be regarded as a phobic symptom. The phobic's use of language, however, seems to correspond to certain styles of writing more than others. "The speech of the phobic adult is also characterized by extreme nimbleness," says Kristeva. (*Powers* 41) "But that vertiginous skill is as if void of meaning, travelling at top speed over an untouched and untouchable abyss, of which, on occasion, only the affect shows up, giving not a sign but a signal." In other words, phobic language presents an ornate surface pattern without laying claim to sublime significance or a metaphysical unity. In short, it creates a postmodern text, or to switch paradigms slightly, its superficial lavishness and turgidity, and its display of disembodied affect, suggest a baroque aesthetic.

9 (Unfled flight) Fear is of two kinds, subjective and objective. Subjective fear is the revival on a given stimulus of past experience of pain, and requires our consciousness of

changes in blood pressure and muscle-tone caused by adrenaline. It might be described as “unfled flight.” Objective fear is the actual secretion of adrenaline. When I see a spider running on the periphery of my vision, the panic I feel is a chemical response and entirely irrational. The tonic reflexes which maintain equilibrium respond to visual impulses from the retinas of the eyes. There arises a tendency to keep the images of moving bodies in the same place on each retina. This results in an orientation of the body known as rheotropism or rheotaxis. Clearly, if the body is moved to keep a moving object more or less stationary on the retina, the background must, at the same time, be passing across the retina. This is exactly what happens during an unexpected fall and the primitive response is a secretion of adrenaline. Hence, I feel fear. Just as, according to the James-Lange theory of the emotions we “feel sorry because we cry,” so do we feel frightened because of physical changes in blood-pressure and muscle-tension. A spider running across the floor attracts the eye, and the reflex response follows. The conscious mind has no difficulty in projecting the origin of fear to the escaping creature.

10 (Rheotaxis) Now I'm attempting to make a career out of studying them, and I've managed to suppress my impulse to escape every time I see a live spider. But still, when I'm looking at field guides I hold the pages by the edges and never let my fingers fall on the diagrams. Sometimes I find myself working alone in the lab at night. The lights are dim and there is the low hum of the air circulators moving things around, and there are thousands of spiders in Plexiglas cages all around me. They have to be kept in separate enclosures, at least the big ones do. That's why spider silk is never harvested for use in fabric, even though it is more flexible and durable than silkworm silk, five times stronger than steel by weight, and more bulletproof than Kevlar. Back in the 18th century some French scientists thought they would try it, figuring they would create a French silk industry to rival that of China. Thousands of spiders would be required to produce enough silk for one dress, so they collected hundreds of thousands of spiders and put them all in a

capacious barn. They didn't realize how territorial and aggressive spiders are, obviously. Instead of spinning, the spiders spent all their time attacking and eating one another, and soon there were no spiders left.

I try to concentrate on what I am doing when I am alone in the lab, but sometimes I will get distracted by a movement in a nearby cage. Out of the corner of my eye I will see a funnelweb spider emerging from its nest or a wolf spider skittering across a rock, and occasionally I start to feel very jittery and sometimes I panic. It's hard to describe the feeling exactly. It's fear, but it also seems more profound somehow. I feel a sense of vertigo all over my body, but at the same time I am paralyzed—which is how a bite from a red-back makes you feel, apparently, just before you go into a coma.

I am a scientist and I understand these things quite well, but nevertheless when I am alone in the lab and I am startled by a sudden movement, I always leave the room and find a quiet, well-lit corner where I take a few deep breaths and recite words. Coxa, trochanter, femur, patella, tibia, metatarsus, tarsus. Now I'm lying in a tent in the jungle, somewhere in the Snow Mountains of Irian Jaya, shivering and waiting, and I'm paralyzed by the same abject fear.

11 (Everything I don't like) Spiders in the public imagination

He had picked his way stealthily for some distance, when he noticed a place of dense black shadow ahead of him, black even for that forest, like a patch of midnight that had never been cleared away. As he drew nearer, he saw that it was made by spider-webs one behind and over and tangled with another. Suddenly he saw, too, that there were spiders huge and horrible sitting in the branches above him, and ring or no ring he trembled with fear lest they should discover him.

—J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (153)

The giant spiders of Mirkwood Forest in J.R.R. Tolkien's classic children's tale are only one of my favourite examples of the particular loathing that is reserved for spiders in the popular consciousness. There is an almost unspeakable power of horror, it seems, in the spider's public image. One of the first horror/adventure movies ever made, Fritz Lang's *Die Spinnen* (1919), uses spiders as a central motif. Apparently the original *King Kong* (1933)

was to have included a scene in the early part of the film, on the island where various gargantuan creatures aside from Kong himself were found, where a giant mutant spider was shown devouring an unfortunate member of the scientific expedition. The scene ended up being cut from the film because test audiences found it too horribly grotesque and terrifying. More recently, the somewhat risible film *Arachnophobia* (1990) was conceived as a opportunity to exploit this seemingly primal affliction for its B-movie shriek potential. In test-screening the film, audiences were actually attached to electronic devices to monitor indicators of anxiety such as heart-rate and perspiration, the better to judge whether it's scarier to see a spider crawl on an actor's back or under the seat of a toilet.

Where, though, does this ubiquitous loathing for spiders originate? The explanation above of the somatic apparatus of fear seems plausible, but it doesn't go nearly far enough to explain the complicated cultural revulsion for all things arachnid. The question that arises, then, is just how natural is this fear—is there a long-standing primeval enmity between humans and spiders, an evolutionary aversion, as some researchers have suggested? (Seligman) Or is it primarily a culturally-constructed reaction?

The ur-narrative for Western civilization's relationship to spiders, of course, is also the story that gives the arachnid class its name. In Greek myth, Arachne is the daughter of Idmon of Colophon in Lydia, and an accomplished dyer and weaver. She has developed such a reputation as a talented weaver of tapestries, in fact, that she begins to fancy herself a rival of Athena, who besides being goddess of wisdom and the arts is also the goddess of the female industries and therefore a weaver of divine skill. Athena hears of Arachne's boastfulness, is unimpressed to say the least, and visits Arachne in the form of an old woman, suggesting to the young girl that she adopt a more humble mien. Whatever her weaving talents, the young Arachne does not have Athena's wisdom, and she immediately declares a challenge, should the goddess be listening, to compare their skills in a tapestry-weaving contest. The gauntlet having been dropped, Athena instantly appears in her true form and the contest begins. The goddess chooses as her theme the events of the founding

of Athens, of which she is the patron, and when the contest is over she stands back to compare her undeniably sublime creation to Arachne's work, expecting to see the young weaver humbled at last. Arachne's tapestry, though, clearly surpasses even Athena's best efforts in beauty and perfection. Incredulous, Athena at first tries to find fault with it, and then flies into a rage. To make matters worse, Arachne in her childish arrogance and tactlessness has depicted various examples of the foolishness of the gods. The central scene shows Athena's father Zeus, stupid with lust, taking on the form of a bull and raping the maiden Europa. Athena can't control her fury and rips the tapestry to threads. Arachne, so naïve and so indignantly righteous, and so right, can't bear this injustice and impetuously hangs herself. When Athena has cooled down and realizes what has happened, she takes pity on the young girl and decides to grant her another life. She loosens the rope around her neck, turning it into a silk thread, and changes Arachne herself into a spider spinning at the end of the thread.

The Arachne myth is not a horror story, and doesn't appear to stoke the flames of hatred against web-weaving types, but there is nevertheless an interesting illustration of abjection in Athena's behaviour towards Arachne. In her picture Arachne shows the goddess exactly what she does not want to see: that the gods are vulnerable to abject passions just as much as humans—which Athena proceeds to demonstrate in her destructive fury. Athena considers herself above Arachne, but her fear of the rivalry makes her unable to refrain from abasing herself in competition with a mortal. In the animal kingdom of which we are a part, humans are the gods, and we are generally as loathe to acknowledge the animal side of our natures as Athena is to display her human passions. Perhaps we hate spiders because the gory details of their existence—their skill as predators, their mercenary mating tactics—remind us of that part of us that we want to reject. Or perhaps we are simply jealous, as Athena is of Arachne, that spiders can do so many things that we can't.

I've got a new friend, all right. But what a gamble friendship is! Charlotte is fierce, brutal, scheming, bloodthirsty — everything I don't like. How can I learn to like her, even though she is pretty and, of course, clever? —E.B. White, *Charlotte's Web* (44)

None of this explains such a wide-spread cultural vendetta against Charlotte and her kin, though. A more convincing source of prejudice can perhaps be found in the European medieval image of spiders, which from at least the tenth century onward was inextricably tied up with notions of disease and decay. Spider bites were considered the cause of various illnesses, including the plague, and spiders were considered a source of contamination because of poisons in their environment. If a spider touched a bucket of water, for example, the water became tainted and undrinkable. Spiders were seen as unclean—in other words, they were lumped in with the abject detritus of the body, and filth, and death. Graham C. L. Davey of the City University, London, writes, "The development of this association between spiders and illness appears to be closely linked to the many devastating and, at the time, inexplicable epidemics that crossed Europe from the Middle Ages onwards. In many areas of Europe, the spider appears to have been a suitable target for the displaced anxieties caused by these constant epidemics; in other cases, its proximity to the real causes of the epidemics may have fostered opportunistic associations between spiders and disease." ("Arachnophobia") Of course, fleas were the real carriers of the plague, and perhaps it was because spiders could often be found in the same places as rats (and hence fleas) that they developed a reputation for spreading disease. Yet, the willingness to assign the threat to spiders must have been rooted in a pre-existing disgust for the creatures (no one was suggesting that birds were contaminated, for example), and it's not clear where this disgust comes from. Recent studies of arachnophobia confirm that, even today in an era of advanced epidemiological knowledge, people who fear spiders react to them with the disease-avoidance response of disgust. ("Arachnophobia") They are abjected. Perhaps our detailed knowledge of germs and viruses actually makes us more paranoid about filth than even our plague-phobic medieval ancestors, and we can see symptoms of societal germ paranoia—and therefore the abjection of small creepy-crawlies in general—in such phenomena as anti-bacterial soaps and remote bug-vacuums (I saw this device advertised in a Hammacher-

Schlemmer catalogue recently; it deploys an extended tube to allow you to remove spider webs and their inhabitants without getting too close).

The Western tendency to fear and hate spiders is not a human universal, of course, which would argue against the evolutionary theory of arachnophobia and add credibility to the historical argument. Some non-European cultures have benevolent conceptions of spiders as symbols of good luck or wisdom. In many African folktales, the spider—known as Kwaku Ananse—plays the role of a trickster and story-teller. In fact, the folktales themselves are known as spider-stories, and there is an Ashanti myth that explains how Kwaku Ananse came into possession of the stories, which had originally belonged to the sky-god. Another example is the Muslim myth that tells how the prophet Mohammed is helped by a spider who conceals him in a cave by building a web across it. (This myth was also at some point adapted to Christian purposes as well, with the spider saving Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus from Herod's soldiers). Perhaps the best evidence that spiders are perceived in a different light by different cultures is that some kinds of spiders are considered healthy and tasty nourishment in many places in Africa and South-East Asia.

The novel *headless* takes advantage of these cultural discrepancies in attitudes towards arachnids. The Papuan Highlands tribe described in the novel, which is a fictional hybrid of cultural features from several New Guinea tribes, has as one of their most important pieces of history a creation myth that involves a spider-deity named Aroa, from which humans are ultimately descended. (This is based on the creation myth of the Telefol people.) The fact that they revere a creature that to him is so loathsome is another element in the protagonist's alienation from and fascination with these people.

12 (Fear clinging to the underside of desire) The simultaneous attraction and repulsion that I mentioned earlier, and which is at the heart of the novel, can be interpreted on one hand in terms of the fundamental Freudian assertion that every fear corresponds to a former wish that has been repressed. (Freud, *Notes*, 60) Georges Bataille also discusses the Janus-

faced nature of fear and desire. He talks about the Greek mythic character Phaedra, for example, who marries Theseus and then, in spite of herself and in spite of the taboo against it, falls in love with her step-son Hippolytus:

Just as the crime, which horrifies her, secretly raises and fuels Phaedra's ardour, sexuality's fragrance of death ensures all its power. This is the meaning of anguish, without which sexuality would be only an animal activity, and would not be *erotic*. If we wish to clearly represent this extraordinary effect, we have to compare it to vertigo, where fear does not paralyze but increases an involuntary desire to fall; and to uncontrollable laughter, where the laughter increases in proportion to our anguish if some dangerous element supervenes and if we laugh even though at all costs we should stop laughing. (257)

What I like about this passage is that it emphasizes the linkages between sexual desire and death (and therefore fear), demonstrating how sex itself is closely related to abjection, and it also draws a parallel between sexual desire and laughter. Laughter, like sex, is half desire and half fear, and is besides a particularly eloquent neurotic symptom, because it displaces these drives onto a completely irrational and unique behaviour. "Laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection," says Kristeva. (8) In other words, when we laugh we know that we are experiencing an encounter with the abject, and we deal with it by laughing, perhaps to avoid a more violent reaction.

Laurie's fear of spiders becomes closely associated with sexual desire in the novel, as he begins to associate his colleague Sera with the black widows that he studies. Laurie is threatened by Sera and equally attracted to her: she is intelligent and accomplished in the field that Laurie wants to enter, and she is black, which produces a complicated self-conscious anxiety in Laurie because he worries that his fear and resentment of Sera are signs of submerged racism. It gradually becomes clear that the real neurosis metaphorized by Laurie's arachnophobia is a classic distrust of women / repressed castration fear. His phobia therefore also becomes extremely eroticized. "The eroticization of abjection, and perhaps any abjection to the extent that it is already eroticized, is an attempt at stopping the hemorrhage: a threshold before death, a halt or a respite." (Kristeva 55) Through his research on *Lactrodectus* mating habits Laurie is painfully familiar with the dangers

involved in courtship for the male spider, which is usually much smaller than the female spider, and he projects those fears onto his sexual desire for Sera.

The male spider has copulatory organs on its pedipalps which are charged from the epigastric furrow on a specially constructed sperm web. The mature male ceases building webs or finding food completely and dedicates its life to sex. It is a risky business. Once it has located a mate, the male spider dare not make a false move as it would mean certain death, so the female is approached cautiously. The male uses various strategies to ensure success. Some of the orb-web males bring gifts: they present the female with a silk-wrapped fly and then mate with her while she is distracted by her meal. Other web-bound males use music: they create vibrations on the female's web with their palps. In some species, bondage is preferred and the female is carefully secured by the male with silk before mating. During copulation in certain species the palp (male organ) breaks off and seals the epigyne (female organ) while others, after mating, make a dash for safety to seek another mate. In many species, however, the male is captured and devoured by the female after mating, or else the female tolerates the male's presence in order to later snare him as food for the spiderlings.

As a defense against his imagined peril, Laurie relies on a phallogocentric scientific discourse to explain to himself his relationships with women. The black widow spider that he is studying becomes emblematic of archetypes of women as dark and nefarious (which is how spiders are generally perceived). He becomes so caught up in this archetype, in fact, that he develops the dubious theory that a *Lactrodectus* sub-species exists in Melanesia that is exclusively female, which reproduces by parthenogenesis. He has a hard time imagining that spiders can be male, even though he knows it as scientific fact. He fancifully equates males with daddy long-legs (*Opiliones* or *Phalangida*), which technically are not spiders, and have only two eyes but also each have a penis. One of the original tentative titles of the novel was *Everything is upside-down in the spider world*, which reflects the fact that arachnid gender roles, if they can be called that, are the reverse of gender roles for most humans, and this might have something to do with our fear of them.

You can't imagine the colours spiders see. They are weirder than crawling up a waterspout with a long, extremely myopic eyeball—golds and strange mixes of violet and pink and metallic, which of course are not golds at all, but rather distinct and special spider colours that we don't have names for and could never imagine. For instance, then, a spider sees white for what is black and black for what is white, and the red hourglass that we see on her back is actually green, for example, like if you open your eyes too quickly in the morning. In this way everything is upside-down, but I don't specifically mean that. Rather, the spider does not see the black spider as white per se, but actually as black. That is, what the spider sees is black, but what the spider thinks is white.

—Frost. "Everything is upside-down in the spider world."

13 (*L. hasselti*) He moves back to Canada with his parents when he is twelve, and eventually he does an undergraduate degree in biology at McGill followed by a Master's degree at the University of Toronto, where he works on *Lactrodectus hasselti*, the Australian redback spider, concentrating on its reproductive habits. It is when he is about to finish this degree that he meets the widely-respected veteran arachnologist Dr. James Boyle, and that is what sets our story in motion.

Laurie attends a conference at the University of New Mexico, at which Dr. Boyle is the keynote speaker. He presents a paper on a panel with another arachnologist, an African woman in her twenties who has been working on a project very similar to his, and he gets into an argument with her. Dr. Boyle, in the audience, is the one to defuse this argument. Later Boyle approaches Laurie, expresses interest in his work, and asks if he would like to accompany him on a little specimen-gathering that Boyle had planned to do while in New Mexico. The next day in the desert, Boyle speaks candidly with Laurie, telling him about his early days in the field, his travels around the world, and about his daughter. He relates a story about a mentor he knew in Australia who was famous for being incredibly fervent about spiders, to the point where he was willing to cut off a finger that had been bitten rather than lose the poisonous specimen in his hand. Boyle considers himself to be just as passionate about his work, and wonders if Laurie feels the same way. Laurie doesn't mention that real spiders have always made him extremely nervous, to the point of nausea, especially if he has to touch them. Boyle is impressed by Laurie's intelligence and suggests

that he come to do his Ph.D. under Boyle's wing at Cornell. Laurie has already committed to doing his doctoral studies at U of T, but says he'll think about it.

The following Spring, Laurie takes the train to Ithaca to visit the university and Dr. Boyle, who lives in a three-story Victorian mansion facing a small park. Upon arriving, Laurie discovers that Boyle's daughter Sera is actually the woman he had the argument with at the conference. She is originally from Rwanda; she became Boyle's adopted daughter at the age of five when her parents, with whom Boyle was doing research, were killed by anti-government terrorists. Boyle had been married once, but his wife died of cancer shortly before he went to Africa. After he brought Sera home to the U.S., she lived with his parents in this house while he continued his research in Africa, Australia, Japan, and South America. When both his parents died within a year of each other, Boyle came back to spend the last part of his impressive career as head of a special Arachnid Research Center at Cornell. At around the same time, Sera began her university studies in biology and eventually she decided to work with Boyle at the ARC. Now the two of them live alone in this huge house. In the basement, Sera has set up a spider nursery, which she shows to Laurie. He finds that he is incredibly intimidated by and attracted to this mysterious woman. In Boyle, he finds the kind of intellectual mentor that he never had in his own father, whom Laurie thinks is too flighty, too artistic. Boyle and Sera are planning to turn one floor of the house into an apartment and they suggest that Laurie could live it in if he moves to Ithaca. It is decided that he will begin his Ph.D. at Cornell in January.

In November, Laurie is still in Toronto putting his life in order when he receives an email message from Boyle with the heading "Pack your bags," which turns out not to refer to his imminent move to Ithaca but something Laurie finds much more exciting: Boyle wants him to go to Osaka, Japan, to investigate a freak infestation of Australian redback spiders there. Laurie immediately agrees. The redbacks (*Lactrodectus hasselti*) are the focus of both Boyle's and Laurie's work: Boyle is trying to prove that they originated in New Guinea, and Laurie has developed a theory that a sub-species of *Lactrodectus* is

capable of parthenogenesis—that is, the female can reproduce without fertilization from the male. Before he really knows what is happening, Laurie is on his way to Japan.

14 (Anatomy) An important premise of my theory, or if you prefer, my story, is that spiders (by which I mean only members of the family *Aranea*, although the same applies to other arachnids) don't have heads. Anyone equipped with even the most basic entomological facts shouldn't find it difficult to swallow, although I have talked to people who looked at me suspiciously when I observed this, and asked "What do you mean?" and proceeded, many of them, to complain of difficulty swallowing. If you are skeptical yourself then I suggest, before you read any further, that you find an entomologist—it doesn't need to be someone whose specialty is arachnids, because we're talking about the most obvious empirical information here, and in fact virtually any kind of biologist or even just a fairly well-educated person will do, or for that matter a book on the subject of spiders, or a simple picture of a spider, really—and consult your source until you are satisfied, and then come back. So that I may assume that everyone knows what I'm talking about when I say: spiders do not have heads.

It's just as well to get some of these details out of the way at the start, so that you can decide if you will feel comfortable reading the rest of this story. Because some people feel—and I empathize, because I've felt it myself—some people feel, in a powerfully visceral way which they can't describe, that spiders are gruesome creatures. Let's start with just the anatomical. Their eight eyes are positioned where their necks would be if they had heads. Their eight legs are attached directly behind this. The brain, such as it is, is located in the cephalothorax above the stomach, which sucks liquid food through the mouth with a pumping motion; the rest of the cephalothorax is occupied by the poison glands. The abdomen is given over to the circulatory, reproductive and digestive organs and also contains the silk glands and the lungs which are shaped like books. The mouth is a thin slit, covered by the labium (lower lip) and labrum (upper lip), flanked by the chelicerae or jaws

(which are tipped with fangs) and the pedipalps, which extrude directly from beneath the carapace. They are used by males to transfer sperm during reproduction, since in addition to having no head, the male spider has no penis.

The eyes, jaws and fangs, crowded together on the cephalothorax. Coupled precariously to the usually much larger, orb-shaped abdomen, trailing silk. The eight spindling legs with their seven segments, expanding and contracting with the flow of blood. A body so different from ours is incredibly difficult to anthropomorphize. But we are humans, so we try.

15 (headless)

When I was born I had no head.
 My parents thought I'd soon be dead.
 They kept me in the firewood shed
 And fed me only crusts of bread.
 They wished they'd had a girl instead.

My blunted form, my voice inert,
 They wrapped me in a flannel shirt
 That felt like mildewed wormy dirt.
 Without a head I was still alert.
 It wasn't missed. It didn't hurt.

The months went by like links of chain
 And I became completely sane:
 I learned how life without a brain
 Would free me of all care and pain
 But let my sense of touch remain.

My head grew out as all heads should
 As I lay there in the chips of wood,
 And though it didn't feel so good
 I opened up the eyes and stood.
 I opened them as best I could.

16 (Acephalia and castration) The poem of the previous section is written by Laurie during the later part of the novel. Acephalia, lack of a head, is probably the thing that Laurie finds most disturbing about arachnid anatomy. As has been mentioned, Laurie is an extremely cerebral person and his rational abilities—his noggin—play a significant role in his ego-definition. Therefore the idea of headlessness— particularly through decapitation—is a recurring nightmare scenario for Laurie, which is connected to his arachnophobia and in his mind the primary reason for his choosing that phobic cathexis. If Laurie could be psychoanalyzed, though (and since he is a fictional character we can conduct that analysis here), it would be clear that this fear is a more direct symptom of a repressed fear, as Laurie associates decapitation, or amputation of any body part, with castration. As indicated by the title, this becomes an important theme in the novel. One of the ways it manifests itself is in Laurie's extreme anxiety when he learns that the Papuan tribe his scientific expedition is staying with has a history of cannibalistic head-hunting. (Many tribes in the Irian Highlands were cannibalistic until recently).

According to Lacan, the development of the ego, which hides the fragmentation of corporality, is necessary because humans are born prematurely. Castration is a universal fear because it is symbolic of the physical fragmentation that the ego is meant to mask; perhaps the fact that spiders have no heads is so disturbing because it also reminds arachnophobes like Laurie of the falsity of the unified ego. (Spiders, furthermore, are unlike us in that they have the ability to regenerate limbs if they are lost.) In other words, for Laurie

the missing head of the spider is the perfect analog of the missing phallus of the mother, an impossible object of desire. The object of desire, according to Lacan, is always an absent one, just as the object of a fear is always absent. (The propinquity of abjection and castration is evident there.) Because the object of desire, the phallus, can never be attained, the neurotic (including the phobic) wants to instead become the phallus for the mother. Laurie's particular manifestation of neurosis suggests that he associates the missing phallus with the head, and tries to become it through rationalization—hence the hyper-cerebral theme. Symbolic castration, though, is a necessary stage in development in that it represents the renunciation of the sustained effort to become the phallus. As the essence of lack, castration is our entrance into the symbolic register. (Contrary to the "writing-with-one's-penis" myth, insofar as it is founded on lack writing is always castration and abjection. We are made of words, but they do not belong to us.)

Despite his fears, Laurie feels a certain ambivalence towards losing his head, in the sense that it also entails of giving in to less rational drives. Laurie has been encouraged all his life to "stop thinking so much," to "let go," and although this presents a great difficulty for him, the idea of letting his fears and desires control him is appealing. He believes that if he can truly set aside his constant rationalizations in favour of a more intuitive and more erotic relationship to the world, he will be able to cure his arachnophobia. He understands this vaguely, but so far has not found a way to attempt it. He is partly right, though, because in order to cure his neurosis he needs to renounce his unconscious effort to become the phallus; he must become castrated, or in his symbolic economy, he must be decapitated. This is the attractive side of abjection. For Laurie, acephalia is equivalent to abjection, in that it represents a loss of self (forgetting oneself) and way out of neurosis. The poem about headlessness reveals his ambivalence and provides a glimpse of the *jouissance* that Lacan, in his later writings, suggested could be derived from an encounter with the Real, and even from lack itself (which was how Lacan attempted to reconcile female sexuality to his theories).

17 (How Ananse Lost His Head) There is an Ashanti story that tells how it happened that the spider has no head. In the novel Sera tells this story to Laurie. During a famine, Ananse went looking for food for him and his wife, Aso. He came across a group of spirits who were standing in a stream and splashing the water out to catch the fish. Ananse asked if he could splash too, and they invited him to step into the stream. It became evident that the spirits were using their skulls to splash the water, and they offered to remove the spider's skull for him so he could splash too, which he allowed them to do. As they splashed, the spirits sang a song:

*We, the spirits, when we splash the river-bed dry to catch fish,
We use our heads to splash the water.
O the spirits, we are splashing the water.
Since the Creator made things,
Have we taken our heads to splash the water?
O the spirits, we are splashing the water.*

The spider Ananse thought this was a fine song, so having asked their permission he began to sing along. After some time they had plenty of fish, and the spirits offered Ananse his share, telling him, "Put your head back on your body, take your basketful of fish and eat it in good health. But take care not to sing that song ever again, because if you do your head will fall off again."

"No problem," said the spider. "I've got a basketful of fish; I'm happy."

"Good," said the spirits. And they packed up their gear and went off on their way, and Ananse set off for home. Very soon, he heard the spirits beginning to sing their song again. He was feeling in such good spirits with his basket of fish, and the song was just so catchy, that he couldn't help singing along. But as soon as he did, his head fell off. He called out to the spirits for help.

The spirits came back, and they weren't impressed to see that he hadn't listened to their advice. But they were easy-going spirits, and they helped him put his head back on. As they left, they warned him that if it happened again, they wouldn't come back to help him.

They walked away, and as they walked they began to sing their song once more. Ananse tried not to listen, but it was such a great tune, it was hard to forget. He couldn't get that song out of his head. Before long, he forgot himself again and started singing it. As soon as he did, his head split open and fell off. Ananse yelped and cursed and picked up his head and, perhaps because he couldn't tell which way was up or perhaps because he didn't know what else to do, he stuck it between the cheeks of his ass. That's why the spider has a very small head and a very big bottom. (Radin 139)

18 (*Tem uma aranha*) When the boy reaches the entrance to the dark bathroom he braces himself against the door-frame and pokes his light around in the empty room as if it were a stick. As the feeble light licks the floor, he sees something like a hand lying in the middle of the room. He moves closer and waits for his eyes to adjust to the weak light. This is what Eliane had been so frightened by: it is one of those fantastical spiders covered in fur. The boy has seen pictures of them. The kind that sometimes eats the flower-kissing hummingbirds that buzz around the bougainvillea. What his father calls a tarantula, what the boy knows only as an *aranha*. It looks like a jumble of pipe-cleaners lying on the floor, and it completely covers the drain, which the boy stands on when Eliane is bathing him and his toes don't touch the concrete. There is a wide brown leather patch on its back. At first the boy can't tell which end is looking at him or with how many eyes, or how many versions of him it sees. It is completely still. He wonders whether it might be dead.

But he can't take his own eyes off it. He has a feeling that, now that he has found it, it's his responsibility to watch it, to pin it down there with the flashlight and keep it from moving until the adults arrive. But his light is so dim he doesn't think it will do, and he feels a bit worried. The spider doesn't move, it just lies there, and then the boy sees its eyes, and he feels he's being scrutinized. The boy wonders what would happen if he allowed it to escape from the cage of the flashlight beam. What if he just turned off the light, and just stood there on the concrete in his bare feet. Would the spider come and attack him, knock

him down and wrap its thick furry legs around his waist and sink its fangs into his skin? What would it feel like to be squeezed in that eight-legged grasp? Spiders never swallow what they kill. Instead it would fill him with juices and turn him to soup and then slowly suck him out, and he would become a dried-out husk. But this spider seems so intent on sitting there, still. Patient. It looks the way an electric stove element does if you leave it on in the dark. Inviting in a way, friendly and strange, like you'd want to creep over and put your hand on it.

And then it seems obvious to the boy that the spider is not going to do anything and that he will have to. So he lets the light trickle off its back and go out. He stands there in the dark for a moment to listen, half expecting it to suddenly play some eerie violin music on his neck. But nothing happens. He stands in the dark, and somewhere in the room the spider is also standing in the dark. Until finally the boy worries that it has left, that it has simply slipped out the doorway and disappeared, leaving him alone. So he turns on the flashlight again.

The spider is gone. In the middle of the floor is a glowing empty spot where the spider once was. Frantically he pans the room with his light. Then he sees it again, still still in the far corner, looking exactly as it did before, lying in the same position, as if the room has shifted while it clung to its point in space and time. It throws a huge looping shadow on the wall behind it. The boy imagines it hovering over him, to blink its eight eyes at him and touch his face.

It must have moved, but the boy almost believes it has accomplished its change of position through teleportation, instantaneously. Then it demonstrates its capacity for movement in the most unsettling way. In one jerky motion it rears on its hind legs and raises its front legs in the air, and remains poised there like a martial arts expert. The boy is surprised to hear it emit a low humming noise, like a frightened cat purring. The boy is transfixed. Then the spider lets its front legs fall and is still again. Only for a moment. It starts to walk: it glides over the concrete towards him like a slow hurricane. The boy is in

deep water and the spider is floating towards him like the tendrils of a jellyfish. At that moment all the boy feels able to do—all he wants to do—is to lie on the ground and cover himself in a woven silk sheet, to wrap himself up in horror and let the faint light go out.

The spider moves forward, and then stops, and moves forward, and stops, and the boy hears the spider screaming, a continuous, high-pitched siren, until he realizes that the sound is in fact coming from his own mouth. The voice of the spider, coming from his own mouth.

The boy's father runs in and lifts him up and away, and then kicks at the spider with his sandals and he sets the boy down on the ground just outside the door where he immediately squats and starts to cry. Eliane comes running with her flashlight and a broom, which the boy's father takes and steps into the room and swings at the spider, and the spider skitters along the concrete in a ball and bounces off the wall. And the father hits it a few times, wielding the broom like an axe. Eliane picks up the boy and cradles him against her hip even though he is already more than half her height, and the father shines the flashlight into the room and shows the boy the spider, not dead, but broken and twitching, in the corner.

Then the old man who lives in the little house next door and who occasionally digs a flowerbed or builds a wheelbarrow as a favour to them is standing behind Eliane and asking what is going on, and when he hears "aranha" he disappears into the tool shed for a moment and comes back with a small fuel can and goes into the concrete room with it. The father and the boy stand in the door with the flashlight watching as he douses the spider with some kind of clear fluid, filling the little room with fumes, and keeps jumping back to avoid splashing the fluid on himself. Then he lights a match and tosses it on the spider, which blossoms into blue flame. The old man splashes it again, and the flames lick up the walls. The spider ignited, indignant, burns there immobile with hisses and crackles and the people watch, surprised it doesn't roll over or scurry, or just very slowly start creeping away.

It doesn't do anything, except that as the flames die down its legs gradually, creakily, curl inwards and it clenches itself together as if distorted by extreme hatred or extreme shame.

Some people can hate spiders so much. People hate them with enormous lust. *Vem aqui com pressa. Tem uma aranha.* People hate spiders the way you would hate a part of your body if it got up and left. The way you'd hate your hand if your hand just decided to fall off and crawl away, as if you didn't want it any more. The way you would if your face that way just decided to fall off and crawl away, as if you didn't know it any more. As if it were dark, as if it were your very own eyes leaving you in the dark, as if you didn't see anything anymore.

When the spider catches on fire it looks like a wilted umbrella without its silk, lying jumbled on a wet sidewalk. Or someone tossing their last summer sparkler into an empty wire wastebin. *Vem aqui com pressa.* When the spider catches on fire the dark is lit up and the night itself burns, and when the flames die it is darker than it was before. *Tem uma aranha. Vem com pressa.* The boy watches the flames go out, and they leave a charred, tangled ball on the concrete. The boy starts to feel chilled. And he is more afraid than he was before. *Vem aqui com pressa. Tem uma aranha. Vem com pressa tem uma aranha Vem*

Part Two: Fictionalizing Fact.

19 (The sky is paved with clouds) That was a phrase he remembered his father saying when they flew back to Canada from Rio de Janeiro, the two of them leaning against the window and watching the city's famous Sugarloaf disappear behind a layer of cotton candy. He discovered years later that it was actually a quote from Georgia O'Keefe, one of his father's favourite painters. Over the Pacific the sky's pavement was patchy and in need of repair; through the holes Laurie could see the jigsaw shapes of Japan's coastline, its round hills looking like scoops of pistachio ice cream melting into the sea. For a moment Laurie thought he had accidentally flown back to Rio, where there were also lumpy mountains and puddles of ocean. But they had chased the sun across the globe so they must have flown west, and he had not been able to sleep through the ridiculously short artificial night when all the blinds were lowered, and now breakfast was being served to him although he knew it was midnight. The plane skirted the coast for a while and then the captain announced that they would be landing shortly in Osaka, and soon Laurie could see it stretching out for miles, all along the edge of the bay, a uniform pallor, a boundless, unflagging wash of grey buildings. From this height it looked like a gravel beach, or the layer of pockmarked cement that dries at the bottom of a mason's bucket.

In was down there in that concrete haystack that his quarry was quietly dispersing itself, he thought. He shivered involuntarily. Or else it had been a purely mental shiver and

he had decided to manifest it physically anyway, to remind himself that it was real. He took a moment to consider which was most likely. The reaction, he decided, and the subsequent semi-voluntary shiver, was partly due to nervousness about landing in a country he had never seen and where he didn't know the language, and partly due to excitement about what he might find down there. Directly under him, perhaps, a redback spider was staking out a spot under an eave or in the ladder of a playground slide. His mind filled with the image of a short metal slide, like the ones at the daycare near his Toronto apartment, that only came up to his shoulder, the sides and ladder painted bright red, the front shiny and smooth from use. And climbing up the ladder of the slide was a child—maybe 5 or 6—small, Japanese. Dark black hair, squinty dark eyes, round cheeks. The child was looking straight out at Laurie, smiling. Not looking where he was putting his hands as he climbed up the slide. But there, two rungs above—Laurie could see it but the child could not—a round black orb, striped with red, sitting calmly for the moment in a tangle of almost-invisible silk. But he wasn't sure: the round cheeks, wasn't that more a Chinese trait? He tried to think back to his trips to Chinatown for noodle soup. And the slide... he realized he had been picturing the playground at the kindergarten in Toronto. Maybe they did not have those kinds of slides in Japan at all. He had never seen a picture of a Japanese playground, he thought: that's not the kind of thing that makes the news. Then the plane started to bank and plunge toward the bay.

20 (Japan) Boyle is scheduled to follow Laurie to Japan a few days later but has set up a contact for him with a young scientist named Hiroshi Mori at the Osaka Natural History Museum. Hiroshi is the same age as Laurie and they get along well, starting work on the project immediately. The city is panicked because the spiders are poisonous, and why they have suddenly showed up in Japan is a big mystery. It is assumed that they have come from Australia because the species is common there and the port receives ships from Australia, but Laurie is uncertain. He tells Hiroshi about Boyle's theory that the redbacks in Australia

are actually from somewhere in Polynesia, and postulates that these spiders, which show variations from the Australian variety, may have somehow come directly from the same place. Meanwhile, Boyle contacts Laurie to say that he has been delayed but will be along in several days.

While they are waiting, Hiroshi shows Laurie around a little, and they do some detective work concerning the origin of the redbacks. By studying the dispersal of the spiders in the city, they guess that they first arrived at a particular port in Sakai in southern Osaka. Hiroshi then obtains all the information he can about ships that have been in that port in the last six months, but all the ships have been from Australia or North America. At this point Laurie gets a message from Sera saying that Boyle has had a heart attack and is in the hospital. He starts to finish up his work so that he can return to the U.S. Laurie is riding a wave of self-confidence because his research with Hiroshi is going so well, and in spite of himself he fantasizes that if Boyle were to die, he could take his place in the world of arachnology. Then, completely by accident, Hiroshi notices a story in the paper about a government scandal having to do with a cover-up of the return to Japan of an Imperial Japanese anti-aircraft gun that has been sitting in the jungle of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, since World War Two. The gun had been bought by a nationalist group and its return had been secretly arranged with the help of certain higher-ups in the government who were now forced to resign. On a hunch, Hiroshi looked into how the gun had been transported to Japan and found out that a small ship had been hired out of the Philippines to visit Irian Jaya and then take the gun to Osaka, landing at the same port where the spiders first appeared. This greatly excites Laurie, and he decides to postpone his return to the U.S. another day so that he and Hiroshi can examine the gun for signs of spiderwebs. (It turns out unfortunately that the gun has in the meantime been cleaned and painted.)

When he finally calls Sera a day later, he discovers that Boyle has died. Sera seems to be in a state of shock, and Laurie also is devastated. Sera tells him that the funeral is happening the next day, and it seems there is no way that he can make it back on time.

Nevertheless, Laurie makes plans to leave on the next flight he can get. Hiroshi tells him he will meet him at the airport to say goodbye, but Hiroshi arrives with the news that he has been doing some internet research on Irian Jaya and has learned that a scientific expedition is about to be launched to the interior by a British-Indonesian team, and that he thinks that they could go with the support of the Natural History Museum. This is the chance of a lifetime, and although Laurie feels an obligation to go back home for Sera's sake, he also feels that Boyle would have wanted him to go and decides he will.

He cashes in his ticket back to the U.S., and spends all the money he has for university to help finance the trip. There is no time for vaccinations, so Laurie has to forge his vaccination card. In spite of having grown up in Brazil, he has never been to the jungle and he is quite nervous because he's never had a sturdy digestive system. Within two weeks he and Hiroshi are on their way to Jakarta. At the airport, Laurie buys a copy of Charlotte's Web, his childhood favourite, which he will read during the trip.

21 (Land of oblivion)

At a time when astronauts have orbited the earth and scientists plan conquests of the planets, one corner of the world still competes with space for men's imaginations. New Guinea—the very name quickens the pulse. Here, on an island flung across the tropical Pacific like a grotesque 1,500-mile-long bird, are mountain valleys and jungle pockets that await their first explorer. Here live people who never saw a wheel until it dropped to them from the skies on an airplane. But the world changes, and soon it will be too late to see New Guinea in its pristine beauty. —National Geographic 121.5 (May, 1962)

Shortly after that passage was written, New Guinea changed political hands again; the western half of the island was given over by the Dutch and became the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya (in spite of a popular vote in favour of independence at the time), while the eastern half, which had been a territorial possession of Australia, became the independent state of Papua New Guinea. But huge numbers of people living in the interior of the island remained more-or-less oblivious to these changes. The island is geographically a remarkable place, where the endless rows of jungle-covered mountains make travel by foot a lengthy and arduous process, and that kept the many inhabitants separated from each other

as well as from the rest of the world. Indeed, even as late as the 1980's tribes were making themselves known for the first time ever to the foreigners in the land. The story of one of these tribes, the Hagahai, was in the news not long ago because of a patent for a human cell line from this tribe. The Hagahai introduced themselves to outsiders in 1983. They had heard of the existence of people like us from neighbouring tribes, and they had been facing a problem for many years: more and more of their children were dying of malaria. So a few of them ventured out of their isolated forest habitat in search of help. That was when an American medical anthropologist first began a relationship with the tribe during which she studied their diseases. Her work eventually led to observations about the presence of a human retro-virus in the tribe, which was the subject of the patent issued by the U.S. Patent Office. Although the infection is widespread in their population (which is fewer than 300), the form of leukemia associated with the virus is conspicuously absent. It was hoped that the genetic make-up of the Hagahai could be the key to a vaccine for the rest of us.

The question arises, though, and arose for many people: what gives us the right to benefit medically from research on an isolated people, research that will almost certainly have an adverse affect on those people? What made this case sound so shocking to many people, no doubt, is its setting. New Guinea has become in the Western imagination the last unexplored wilderness, which serves to underline the contrast between its natives and citizens of the technologized world. And while we have learned not to think of their hunter-gatherer societies as "primitive," we have also decided that they should be protected from our technological advances. They should be preserved.

I bring up this story because it provides an eloquent introduction to the problem of how to write about a place as mythologized and anthropologized as New Guinea. Is harvesting metaphors and narratives from the lives of the inhabitants of the island as ethically explosive as harvesting genetic samples? What is the relationship of the developed (bourgeois) world to a place like this, if not a relationship of abjection? When the word "primitive" is invoked, what it means is that "we" believe we are facing a discarded version

of "ourselves," a part of our history that both fascinates us and disgusts us. "The object from which he does not cease separating is for him, in short, a *land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered." (Kristeva 8)

22 (Cross-culturalization) The first concern with the fictionalization of fact is that the real people involved in that fact lose their agency and subjecthood; they cease to be actors and become mere actants (à la Greimas) on a structural grid of the story.

One obvious response to this concern is, why should those people be concerned about becoming actants in my story? They are real and exist in the world, whereas this is only fiction. This however is begging the question of representation. Who represents those people in the culture where the story will be read? What do people in North America know about people in New Guinea? In spite of (or because of) New Guinea's mythic status, they know next to nothing. This ignorance can imbue the story with a significance it wouldn't otherwise have. As Edward Said explains,

A text purporting to contain knowledge about something actual [...] is not easily dismissed. Expertise is attributed to it [...] Most important, such texts can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it. (94)

The danger is that the object of the Orientalist gaze, in this case New Guinea and its peoples, may become a kind of free referent, unattached to its own reality, something that makes sense to foreign understanding only within the realm of the constructed foreign discourse. In other words, the danger is that we develop an entirely textual attitude toward that place, seeing it as an arbitrary element in the grammar of our intellectual projects instead of the real, messy and complicated location and home and cultural hodge-podge that it is. European colonialists, Said suggests, devised such projects for the people they conquered, schemes "that involved but were never directly responsible to the native inhabitants." In the novel, Laurie devises his own psychic schema that involves the Papuans without allowing their participation—his obsession with rationalism discussed earlier is in fact based on a

exactly the kind of discourse that Said warns against: by constructing a dichotomy between his rationalism and the instinct/sensuality he locates in Sera, it should be clear that he perpetuating a Eurocentric fallacy. Trinh T. Minh-ha puts it this way: "The white man knows through *reason* and logic—the intelligible. The black man understands through *intuition* and sympathy—the sensible." (*Woman Native Other* 28)

I must ask myself the question, therefore: what exactly are my schemes for New Guinea, and how have I manipulated it to fit those schemes? And who do I have in mind as the beneficiary of these schemes?

Well, on one level the answer is obvious and would be very difficult to conceal if I were interested in concealing it. What I have done is read various accounts of various Papuan cultures, some anthropological, some political, some incidental—nearly all written by Westerners—and then, using any details from those accounts that appealed to me, and only those details that I thought significant, without regard to origin or relevance or even, in the final analysis, to absolute accuracy, I have synthesized a fictional tribe whom I have called the Mbui. For example, I have read cheerfully condescending old National Geographic magazine articles, I have read carefully-theorized contemporary anthropological journals, I have read a recent anecdotal book by a mammalogist about his field work in New Guinea, I have read a suspenseful account by a hostage of his ordeal in the jungle with the Free Papua Movement (OPM) army, and I have read the syrupy, moralizing memoirs of a American missionary in the highlands of Irian Jaya. Among the few sources I have read that were rooted exclusively in the reality of that place were the first-person accounts and the manifestoes of the website of the political arm of the OPM. I have also, to a certain extent, drawn on my personal first-hand knowledge of Indonesia, but to say that is to already admit the extent of my ignorance, because my travels in Indonesia did not include Irian Jaya, and the cultures of Java or Bali have as much in common with the cultures of Irian Jaya as baseball with ballet. (Indeed, it's hard to imagine two more dissimilar cultures: the Javanese who form the dominant culture in Indonesia today are mostly Muslim, while the Papuans

practice ancient animist religions or Christianity. The Javanese are at home in the city, while the Highland Papuans prefer life in the forest. The Javanese have strict sartorial customs that emphasize modesty, and are excessively discreet about sexuality, while Papuan men often wear nothing but an elongated gourd on their penises. Most significantly, the Javanese have a typically Asian respect for authority and a tradition of hierarchical social arrangement, while to the Highland Papuans there is nothing more shameful than subjugation to another person or group. Clearly these differences make for a particularly bristly colonial relationship.)

The Javanese and the Melanesians (Papuans and the inhabitants of the surrounding islands) are two completely antipathetic cultures that live next to one another, a prime example of the difficulties involved in inter-cultural contact. In this case the contact is severely imbalanced in terms of power and benefit. Yet it is only by engaging in that contact, despite the friction it causes, that each culture can discover how to live within its own influence and identity. In his introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha explains the importance of the in-between of nations (the inter-national dimension) that is found in boundaries and limits. And in his essay in the same book, he discusses how identity and empowerment are won or lost in the liminal space of "disjunctive temporality" that arises from the very clash between cultures. Ethnicity is always a performative construct, and therefore one of its essential prerequisites is a border; it is less important to define *how* a person belongs to a group than it is to define *who* belongs and who doesn't. In other words, the other culture is what allows for the construction and refinement of identity. Furthermore, a performative identity always occurs in *time*; that is, there must be a narrative involved, and therefore there must be change. A second concern, then, with the fictionalization of fact and the representation of the Other in writing, is approximately the opposite of the first one: to *not* engage in that cultural cross-representation presents a danger to both identities as well as to the transcendence of those identities. A narrative position *between* cultures, in other words, is essential to the establishment of trans-national culture. The foreign culture can not

be thought of as ego-object; it is rather located somewhere between object and subject, as a product of the relationship itself. "The 'other' is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we *think* we speak most intimately and indigenously "between ourselves." (Bhabha 4) Acknowledgement of the autonomy and the reality of other cultures is of course essential, but representation of those cultures must be seen as a conversation rather than a form of conservation.³⁷ In terms of narrative, this makes the cross-pollination and combination of the self-story (the domestic) and the voice of the other (the foreign) almost imperative. The validation of knowledge comes about through this process of reflection. Or, as Walter Benjamin says in his discussion of the storyteller,

'When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about,' goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions. ... Indeed, each sphere of life has, as it were, produced its own tribe of storytellers. ... With these tribes, however, as stated above, it is only a matter of basic types. The actual extension of the realm of storytelling in its full historical breadth is inconceivable without the most intimate interpenetration of these two archaic types. (Benjamin 84-85)

23 (Dreaming #2) In the dream [I have sometimes] I'm curled up in a ball in my hammock like a wilted petal (I'm rolling up my sleeves now to reveal the spider drawings) and my arms are covered with spiders, and you're with me and you're a spider, the kind that is smooth and opalescent like two eight balls falling into the last pocket with bone-like legs, and my hammock is a delicate web and we're both lying on our backs and you look kind of like a shape cut out of paper that you can't really identify, and I hope and I long for you to be the kind of spider that will eat me after mating. Which I know is ridiculous because you're female and black and I pretend to be male to go with my whiteness, and because of that I have all the fur and the fangs, and you could never consume me and you only ever feed me soup. Except that everything is upside-down in the spider world, where the blacker you are the more wonderful, and the more female you are the more powerful. And then I can imagine your jewelled abdomen like an opaque teardrop, and the cyan blood trickling through your legs as they expand outwards to embrace me. My pedipalps would roll down

from just beneath my mouth and extend to your book lungs, where I would find them hidden deep between your legs, one on either side, spreading like damp pages more and more rapidly and I would want to run my fingers along their edges. Lying on our backs, both of us, and facing each other, because in your room there is no up and down, no male or female. I want to say everything eight times because I think that if I do, then you will consume me, and everything will be upside-down like in the spider world. I wish that I could be set on fire, that you will sink your fangs into me, if only for a few minutes, if only for awhile.

24 (Colonialism and sexism)

As we drove from the airport to town we saw an imposing prison beside the road. A few freshly dug graves were prominent at the end of a row of older mounds. They were undoubtedly meant to be a warning. The police and military were evident in every street, and armed military posts were located on all of the major roads leading to and from the town. The arrogant young soldiers who manned them were incredibly rude to approaching Melanesians. (Flannery 219)

The modern colonialism occurring in Irian Jaya (West Papua) today is not greatly different from classic European colonialism, especially in the strategies it uses to humiliate and also to subtly feminize the colonized population. In the novel *headless*, issues of Orientalist representation are implicit in the way Laurie conscripts the Papuan people into his psychic economy, but also in his imagined version of Sera, his colleague and his obsession. This thematic thread also brings up the conflation of the colonized with the feminine, a tendency that has been thoroughly examined by Hélène Cixous, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and others.

Kristeva suggests that the two forms of oppression rely on each other for justification, and assist in the creation of a doubly threatening imagined entity:

It is always to be noticed that the attempt to establish a male, phallic power is vigorously threatened by the no less virulent power of the other sex, which is oppressed (recently? or not sufficiently for the survival needs of society?). That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed. (Kristeva 70)

For Laurie, this co-location of the cultural and sexual Other is perfectly metaphorized in the black widow spiders that he studies. The name says it all, really: the black widow is a

symbol and product of the phallogocentric perception of the feminine as dark and dangerous. Laurie conflates Sera with the black widow (or redback) spiders he is obsessed with, and he conflates the Papuans, with whom he becomes fascinated, with Sera. Both become objects of his fearful desire.

25 (In the jungle) The boy has now grown up and finds himself in the jungle, gnawing the bone of a kangaroo that lives in a tree. The kangaroo used to live in a tree, that is, until it was blasted from that tree with a shotgun by one of the men who have abducted the boy-who-has-grown-up, whose name is Laurie. He finds himself soaking wet, his legs covered with itchy leech bites, in a make-shift tent in the secret mountain camp of a band of armed guerillas, somewhere in the Snow Mountains of central Irian Jaya, the western half of the island of New Guinea. This situation is not what Laurie had expected.

Irian Jaya is the name conceived and applied by Indonesia, which takes this vast country to be one of its provinces. It means Free Irian—the idea being, of course, the old propagandist ruse that the territory has been liberated by the government. Before the Indonesians took over, the land belonged to the Dutch, according to the Dutch. The other half of the island belonged to Australia, and before that to the Germans and the British. Of course there was the interlude of Japanese control during World War II which was punctuated by an extended visit from the American army.

Laurie's abductors are a branch of a half-legendary, half-whimsical army whose weapons are machetes and spears and rusty shotguns and whose uniforms are penis gourds or second-hand shorts and t-shirts: the OPM (Organisasi Papua Merdeka) or Free Papua Movement. Their name for this vast land of swamp and mountains and trees, one half of the second largest island in the world, is West Papua, and they also have a national anthem and a (self-proclaimed) political leader living in exile in Papua New Guinea, and a red, white, and blue national flag, although anyone caught by the Indonesian authorities in the act of raising

that flag faces a possible death sentence, which General Wiranto's soldiers have shown no compunction about delivering promptly, on the spot.

Laurie thinks that their t-shirts are a fascinating story in themselves. It's strange to him, of course, that he should find himself here in this jungle with these men, but it seems somehow even stranger that their t-shirts should have wound up here. Coca-cola logos, which seem almost a part of the natural landscape; various other logos for beer or trucks or tools; one that has a picture of Daffy Duck; one that says "World's Greatest Granddad." Laurie's favourite belongs to one of the oldest men in the group, a stout man whose hair is already graying and who must be in his forties. He wears a white t-shirt riddled with holes, and although the lettering has faded and worn away almost to the point of illegibility, Laurie can still make out what it says: Manitoba Provincial Curling Championship, Brandon, 1983. What kind of story would someone have to tell in order to explain the coincidence of that shirt with this man, in the mountain forest of West Papua in 1996?

26 (The sameness of reality) He had expected New Guinea to feel somehow fundamentally different; some difference of atmosphere or light, or for the ground to behave in different, exotic ways. But on an intimate level this place was fundamentally the same as the places he was used to. The sky was bright sometimes, and dull at other times. There were pebbles on the ground, and dirt under the pebbles. Some weeds grew in the cracks in the pavement at the edges of the road. There were gutters along some of the streets in the center of Jayapura, and although they looked drastically different from the gutters in cities he had known, there was water in the bottom of them and the water looked the same. And there were spiders. This was perhaps the most constant thing he could think of in terms of environmental elements. There was no place he could go where there would be no spiders. Even in the ocean or in Antarctica there were spiders of one kind or another. If no spider could live in a given environment, then he certainly couldn't either.

27 (Fact and fictionalization) There is another, quite different, way to approach the question of the fictionalization of fact. What I'm writing (in the novel) is fiction, but it is at least partially based on fact. It has to be faithful to that fact, in spirit, in order to have political credibility. In order for it to have real clout. But how much can I maintain accuracy without getting in over my head? Actually, any attempt at accuracy and I'm already in over my head, because of the impossibility of defining who defines what is accurate. On the other hand, how much can I fictionalize the story while still remaining topical, and in good faith? Does fictionalizing necessarily entail an objectification of the people the characters are based on? On the one hand, I want to learn what I can about the real subjects for the sake of realism, but for every detail I learn I am also trammelled by further responsibility to accuracy and cultural sensitivity. How do stop history from pulling my story under and smothering the way it smothers reality? "How to state the facts when we are fiction / to be imaginative when our fiction is biography..."

Oh what a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to deceive!
—Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion* 6.17

28 (The earnestness of being important) I've always been an arachnophobe and an arachnophile, as paradoxical as that may sound. It's only in the past few years that I could actually call myself an arachnologist. And judging by my spectacular lack of success so far in that field, I may not be able to call myself one for much longer. The reason for this conspicuous failure has been my theory, my one big idea. A scientific theory is just a story you tell yourself, and once you have built up enough confidence by telling it to yourself over and over again, you start telling it to other people. You try to convince them there is truth in it—that it's more than just a story, that it is in fact knowledge of vital importance to the human race if we are ever to become more than what we are: a danger to ourselves and others. If you are one of the great minds of your time, and you are working on the answers to the big questions, your theory must seem obviously important. Suppose you are finding a cure for the diseases that kill us, or a source of unlimited safe energy, or an anti-aging

serum, or a way to feed a constantly expanding population on a constantly shrinking base of arable land, or a Grand Unified Theory of Physics, or an explanation for why people are so afraid of other members of their own species. If you have a story that presents a happy ending to one of these premises, it is no doubt easy to convince yourself that it is indeed of extreme importance—more important than your own life, for example. And I would think that once you had convinced yourself of the story's utmost importance, if you really did believe it was that important, it would be a small step from there to convincing yourself of the story's truth. In fact, believing that the story is true would almost become essential—otherwise how could you go on? If it is your job to concoct a story such as, “Energy and matter are two forms of the same stuff, and can be converted from one form to the other,” with all its mind-bending and horrifying ramifications, then the importance of your story would be self-evident, and furthermore you might become so convinced of its truth that you would rather sacrifice your own life than renounce your story. You would not be in the least surprised when your story proved to have explosive real-life consequences, when it turned out to be not fiction but more-or-less one way of describing reality.

My theory, though, has not been one of those. It has not been an earth-shattering, shock-wave-producing story that creates fallout for everyone around the globe and destroys the delicate system of civilized thought that preceded it. It has been a story, nonetheless—a story I've been telling myself over and over my whole life, sometimes with radically different outcomes. But at this point, I am losing faith in the importance of my story to the rest of the world and society. The truth is, the situation that I find myself in is causing me to seriously doubt the importance of the story, even to myself. What had seemed to be its towering monolithic urgency has been dwarfed by more tangible concerns such as the continuation of my life. The story has been stopped in its tracks by a species of fear and by a certain amount of desperation. But what I find most saddening about this situation is that as my story's importance has diminished in my mind, my ability to believe in its truth has also slowly disappeared.

29 (How to un-write) I have a few simple questions and it'll only take a few minutes. I'm concerned that my remarks might be taken out of context. Why worry as long as you're telling the truth? Don't answer that. We're not so much interested in whether what you say is *true*; what matters to us is whether it's *authentic*. If I may quote the French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet: "The true writer has nothing to say. What counts is the way he says it." Let's examine why this statement is not "true." First, since there is nothing to say, there can be no writers, and therefore there can be no "true" writers. Furthermore, since writers say nothing, what they say can be neither true nor untrue. The question is rather one of authenticity or inauthenticity. It should be clear, then, that this quotation is not true, however you may trust I'm telling the truth when I say that this is an authentic quote from the actual author, Alain Robbe-Grillet. The authenticity of the quote leads us to several conclusions.

First, there are no writers. There are only un-writers, those who untangle truths from what was written before them. If writing is the process of saying nothing, then un-writing works by un-saying all nothings until everything remains. The un-writer must take away all meaninglessness so that what's left, however improbable, must be the meaning. What counts therefore is not the way the writer says it, but the way the un-writer un-says what was said before. The threads that make up the fabric of the un-written text, of course, are quotations, and the essential un-writing tool is the quotation mark. It's what the un-writer uses to contain and un-say meaninglessness. —Corey Frost, "In Quotations" (23-24)

30 (Illumination) The author quoted above who claims there are no writers cannot, I think, be trusted. At this point polyphony and intertextuality have caught up with me. My sources have become jumbled and I no longer know whether I am primary or secondary. I've been working on this project—beginning with the seeds of the novel—for perhaps five years and my accumulated notes feature numerous anonymous passages of unknown provenance. I may have written these passages, although I know they contain lines and material which was

copied from elsewhere. At this point authorship becomes a slippery slope. In this sense the novel is being constructed in the same way that Marshall McLuhan describes medieval tomes being put together: the continual copying and re-copying of texts, and the reassembly of relevant passages from one author with the ideas of another made the maintenance of copyright farcically impractical. I can only hope that in the process of compiling myself in this way I will be similarly illuminated.

31 (Irian Jaya) In Jakarta they meet the other members of the expedition, who are at first wary of these last-minute additions. They've only agreed to let them come because the entomologist who was supposed to be on the team had to back out at the last minute. There are four British biology students, whose idea this trip was: Tom, the leader; Kate, Howell, and Lori. There are two Indonesian students, somewhat older, Rudi and Bening. In Irian Jaya they will be meeting the last member, Peter, a Dutch linguist who has been studying the languages of the Papuans and who will act as a translator.

The government officials they've talked to were at first reluctant to grant permission for the expedition, mentioning the recent activities by the OPM in the interior, but eventually the trip is approved. When the group arrives in Jayapura, the capital of Irian Jaya, they are forced to wait while their special visas are processed, and then they have to wait again because the weather is bad over the mountains. They pass the time hanging out in a seafood restaurant on the water, trying to improve their Indonesian. Laurie also runs into a man in a bar who explains that he is a mercenary from South Africa. A couple of days after their arrival, Tom announces that he's just heard from the entomologist who backed out and that she has decided to come after all. Laurie asks a few questions about this person and realizes that it's Sera. She meets them there five days later. She is brusque with Laurie at first, and he figures she is trying to hide her grief over Boyle's death. He tries several times to talk to her on a personal level but is rebuffed. Christmas is spent together on the beach, as the members of the team gradually get to know each other.

On January 3rd they finally are able to fly into the interior along with an Indonesian wildlife officer and several Papuan guides and interpreters, first to Wamena, the highlands capital, where they meet up with Peter, and then a few days later through a high mountain pass to the village of Mbuwok, where they will do most of their research. They've chosen this place, in the Meeyus Valley, because of its extreme isolation and sparse human population.

32 (The Lost Valley) Mbuwok is at an altitude of about 3000 meters in the Juliana (Meeyus) Valley, which is on the North Side of the Snow Mountains in the center of the province, and is bisected by the serpentine Tambui river. Laurie had never been that high before in his life.

Rivers need paths to the sea if they are to avoid becoming lakes, which means that valleys containing rivers (and most valleys do) usually have exits at some point; they are usually shaped more like troughs than bowls, and this allows people to move in and out of them. The combination of water, sediment-enriched soil, and human confluence is what makes valleys so popular for the establishment of civilizations: think Tigris-Euphrates, think Nile, Indus, and Yang-tze. It's a fundamental aspect of valley geography that there must be a way in and out. For this reason, it would be unusual to find a valley that was completely cut off—the proverbial Land Lost to Time—surrounded on all sides by impenetrable geographical barriers. But the Meeyus Valley had managed to pull off that feat until (certain) men mastered the art of flight by airplane. It is surrounded by mountains, towering limestone peaks that are among the highest heights in the Pacific Basin and feature monumental cliffs a kilometer high. And it has a river, the Tambui. The Tambui is energetic but nonchalant, and wanders erratically from one end of the valley to the other. After gathering all the water the valley has to give it, including the run-off from one of the nearly-extinct equatorial glaciers, which adorns the highest peak overlooking the valley, the Tambui runs casually down the valley in the direction of an imposing limestone wall that shoots up

1500 sharp and cold metres, drawing a harsh boundary between this world and the one outside. And when it reaches this wall, the Tambui does something that rivers are not known to do elsewhere in the world. It just disappears.

Did you think I was going to say that it starts to climb the cliff-face? Did you think that in its urgent desire to meet the sea and avoid transformation into a lake it had managed to learn basic rock-climbing? No. That would make this story magic realism. This is something less “magic,” and more “real.” And less “ism,” too. More earthly, let’s say, without being mundane. But also, perhaps, more unnerving.

At the end of the valley, with nowhere else to go, the river goes underground. Over thousands of years the Tambui has burrowed an escape hatch for itself, a hole bored right through the limestone range that cuts the valley off from the rest of the world. Everything it has gathered along the way, including fallen trees, stray dirt and rolling stones, or the bones of a dead water rat or human, gets sucked through the hole along with it, spiraling in a gigantic whirlpool and finally disappearing with a plume of spray as if through an unplugged drain. And on the other side of the range, a few kilometers to the west and much closer to sea level, the river resurfaces with all its debris, spouting out of the ground like a drowning man who wants a second chance at life. But no human can hold their breath as long as a river, and no-one could follow the river’s astounding course in either direction, in or out. The only way to get from the Upper Tambui to the Lower is by extended portage over the tops of the jagged mountains.

And that is why the Meeyus Valley managed, for so long, to be the ideal hidden valley, a Lost World, a Shangri-la. Of course, to the people who lived there, it was not lost. Who had lost it? They had always known exactly where it was, and the rest of the world had not. For thousands of years they had been there, growing sugar cane and taro and pulling the occasional kangaroo down from a tree. They had learned the convenience of agriculture when the people living in what would be Europe still had many years to go of chasing their food in herds. Agriculture was a vital invention for them, since it’s hard to be nomadic in a

world with four walls. But the inhabitants of the valley weren't completely ignorant that there was a "rest of the world," either. The mountain ranges didn't make it easy to travel in and out of the valley, but then one doesn't live in a house all one's life without finding out where the doors are, and even if the house has no doors, one will at least figure out which windows can be exited in an emergency. So the people living in the Meeyus Valley knew of the existence of the nearby Baliem Valley cultures, vaguely, the way that a person living in an apartment in the city knows that someone lives in the apartment above, even though he has never visited that floor. The Dutch soldiers and merchants, when they came, knew that there was something in the interior of this island they had claimed as their own, but didn't have a clear idea what. Even after most of the island had been explored, discovered, mapped, and subdued, even well into the 20th century, when the rest of the world had already gone to war with itself because the planet was too small, when the League of Nations had been established and radio invented and we were well on our way to becoming a global village, somehow this little corner in the mountains, this freakish nook, escaped attention.

That is, up until 1938, when Richard Archbold, American explorer, biologist, and member of the National Geographic Society, flew over the valley in his aquatic plane, the *Guba*, accompanied by a hearty gang of scientific associates. Previous explorers had walked through the dense forest only several kilometers away from the Meeyus, but had never suspected its existence. Archbold and his men looked down and saw a shimmering river in a bowl between two mountain ranges where there should have been no river, and around the river they saw neatly divided gardens surrounded by stone walls, and clusters of round huts covered with grass thatch, and the people who lived in those round huts heard the noise of a gigantic mosquito circling above them, and they knew (I assume) that it didn't bode well.

Archbold wasn't that surprised by this unexpected find, probably, because the area had been very little explored really at that point, and besides, the history of Western contact with the people of the island consisted of strings of similar stories: stories of travelling over what seemed to be that final impenetrable mountain range and meeting a whole new people,

completely different in language and customs from the people who inhabited the last valley, and then finding that beyond that there was another seemingly impenetrable mountain range that was home to yet another people different from the last, with another new language, until the tally of languages and peoples surpassed the number found in the whole of the European continent, and eventually mounted to the hundreds, and at last count was about a thousand languages—about a sixth of all the languages found in the world.

Archbold and his expedition, which consisted of 195 people in all, all men, including the other scientists, a team of navigators and engineers, 50 Dutch soldiers, 72 Dyak men brought in from Borneo to act as carriers, and assorted convicts and prisoners brought along by the soldiers, also to act as carriers, industriously built themselves camps all along the riverbanks of the Snow Mountains' northern foothills, ferrying all the equipment in from Hollandia (later Jayapura) with the *Guba*: tents, machetes, gas stoves, folding tables, radios powered by gas generators, medical supplies, quinine and morphine, pipes, hats, binoculars and compasses, everything they would need for blundering through the jungle, as well as their emergency supplies: flares, rifles, pistols, ammunition, and bottles of whiskey. The main camp on the Idenburg river (strategically located near the river in case they needed to "retreat") was called Bernhard camp after Prince Bernhard, consort to Crown Princess Juliana of Holland, because the day of their arrival on the site was his birthday.

As soon as the camp had been more-or-less established, Archbold and 11 of his most trusted colleagues—explorers, scientists, navigators—boarded the *Guba* and prepared to make history as the first white men to set foot in the valley which they didn't yet know was called the Meeyus, but which they had decided to name after the Princess. They set the plane down on a broad stretch of the river, uncertain whether it would be able to lift off again at that altitude, and clutching nervously at their "emergency equipment" in case it didn't.

33 (Fiction/Theory) Let's consider more carefully the other concerns—aside from cross-cultural representation—with the fictionalization of fact/narrativization of real events, and with the theorization of those narratives. Narrativization is essentially an attempt to translate a reality into a communicable form. That reality might be translated quite directly, as newspaper articles purport to do, or it could be a more intangible reality (a truth, let's say) that is translated using indirect means, as an author translates his ideas and observations about the world in a work of "pure fiction." Likewise, science and history attempt to interpret the world and represent it in a form that others can immediately grasp and use, and we should see both these activities as forms of narrativization. Of course, once a narrative has been established it too becomes a part of reality and can in turn be interpreted and represented. This is the fundamental premise of literary criticism, which sometimes treats literature the way that arachnology treats spiders. Because of this assumed position of scientific observation with regard to literature, a distinction is usually drawn between fiction and theory. It is also assumed that theory's narrativizations are more akin to science than to fiction. But why is this so? Is it even so?

We can acknowledge, first of all, that science is no less a fiction than fiction itself. "The teleology common to the Novel and to narrated History is the alienation of the facts," says Barthes (*Writing Degree Zero*). There is a difference, however, in that a scientific narrative generally is interested in positing one and only one version of its truth. The researcher devises a theory and presents that theory as truth, even though it is a understanding of "truth" that is held in suspension, as it is always possible that the theory will be disproved. Fiction, on the other, while it tries to represent a reality, never presents a definitive hypothesis about the truth of the situation. Fiction instead features multiple truths. "Any *fictional theme* is by definition a challenge to the *single* signified since it is a polyvalent signified, a 'blasting of selfhood' (Georges Bataille)." (Kristeva 138)

The question, then, is whether literary theory traffics in the single or multiple variety of truth. In the physical sciences, a theory is designed in such a way that if it is wrong, it can

be disproved, and that is what allows for the advancement of scientific knowledge. How often are literary theories disproved? In practice, it often seems as if the literary theories that are most ambiguous and open to multiple interpretation are the most successful. The most useful thinkers to literary theory—Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, Lacan, Bhabha, let's say—are certainly not models of limpid, scientific prose. Shoshana Felman explains that after initially being warned off the notoriously difficult-to-read Lacan, she was able to extract insight and pleasure from his writing only after she stopped trying to understand it: "I did not *have* to understand it: I did not have to prove anything or to be accountable to anyone for my reading...I simply read through it, without fighting with it, without trying to appropriate it as a piece of academic information." (5) Interesting theory is usually creative and often unscientific. The reason for this is that while science is obsessed with what is true, literature and its theory are obsessed with what is interesting and evocative. Another way of putting this is that successful literary theories are those that are "sexy." In fact, often people do put it that way ("You should read Zizek. He's a really sexy theorist these days."), but not much thought is given to why the adjective is so apt. It's because literary theory, like literature, operates within and because of desire.

In this way, literary theory or criticism is much closer to the creative act of writing literature than to the descriptive act of scientific theory. Science operates on the principle that the simplest explanation is usually the best. (An axiom called Occam's Razor.) Yet consistently the most successful literary theories are not those that are simple, straightforward, and empirically supportable, with reproducible results, but rather those that are shocking, elegant, dense, and as complex as literature itself. (It should be noted that this is increasingly true of scientific theories as well). Rather than describing reality, as science purports to do, literary studies are actually involved in "adding to the available stock of reality"—which I once read as a writer's explanation of what literature was meant to do, but I can't remember which writer. (Determining authorship, again.)

However, this does not mean that literary theory and criticism cannot be or should not be scientific as well. Although his conception of genre divisions was too rigid, Northrop Frye's attitude towards the criticism-literature divide, expressed in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, was a sensible one. He argued that criticism was a science and an art simultaneously, although not a pure science and not a completely disinterested art. He also talked about two varieties of critic, which he called the scholar and the public critic. The public critic is the one who gets the glory, because his or her approach is that of the artist: the goal is to synthesize and provoke. This kind of criticism, while unscientific, is in many ways the most significant. The scholar, on the other hand, is the behind-the-scenes worker of the literary and critical industry. Whereas the public critic assumes the existence of an activity called literary criticism and plays with its boundaries, the scholar makes that activity possible by doing the research, the analysis, the grunt work. By suggesting that criticism be considered an art more than a science, I don't mean to turn all critics into "public critics," because clearly the one activity cannot exist without the other.

Fiction and theory also serve different purposes and should not be folded into one genre. As Lianne Moyes points out, feminist fiction/theory demonstrates quite well the compatibility of fiction and theory, but not their interchangeability. Fiction/theory (of which I think this essay is an example) places the distinction between the genres within a single text in order to draw attention to the *continuities* between aesthetic literary endeavour and "scientific" literary studies. The genres are not pure, as genres never are. As Moyes explains, theory is not free of the materiality we assign to literature, nor is it above analysis and exegesis, while fiction on the other hand is never without its own theoretical agenda. "Theory can no longer claim priority as a discourse of truth, and fiction can no longer claim priority as a primary text." (Moyes 310)

34 (How to critique a text) "Intuitively, on the basis of a careful reading of the text, [the researcher] selects those elements of the theory which s/he thinks particularly relevant to the

text that s/he wishes to describe. S/he can then use this partial description of the text to help in making further assumptions about other aspects of the text. These assumptions can then be tested on the basis of other data. The textual description that results provides the basis for an eventual interpretation. In other words, it is possible on the basis of a description ('the text is so constructed') to attach a meaning to the text ('the text means this'). An interpretation is never anything more than a proposal ('I think that the text means this'). If a proposal is to be accepted, it must be well founded ('I think, on the basis of the data shown, that the text means this')." (Mieke Bal. *Narratology*. 10)

35 (Textual performance) In its own way, structuralist narratology can be beautiful. Not useful, necessarily, but beautiful. (A painting by Matisse is not useful either.) I am interested in the identification and taxonomy of narrative elements found in structuralist literary theory—Propp, Greimas, Bremond etc—in much the same way that I am in the theory and taxonomy of the animal kingdom.

Let me make it clear that the above is not meant as an attack of literary theory but rather a defense. I think that rather than try to justify the study of literature by giving it the paraphernalia and jargon and techniques of science, it is important to allow literary studies to be a branch of the creative arts, to generate what is interesting and evocative rather than simply factual. It must be allowed to have its contradictions and imprecisions and ambiguities.

In part, as well as being a defense of literary studies, the above is also a defense of the form of this project. When people have asked me what my thesis topic is, and I have said that I am writing about my own novel, the response has often been a puzzled one. If we see literary studies as a pseudo-scientific gathering and crunching of data, it's understandable that people would react that way. After all, I presumably have "privileged information" concerning the intent of the author, and no systematic digging up of meanings from the text, or deciphering of what the author was trying to say, would be necessary. It

would be like an archeologist looking for evidence of agriculture in the garden he has just planted. Needless to say, this is an outdated understanding of the activity of literary studies, implying as it does "respect" for the work, as opposed to engagement with the text. Writing an essay about "what the author was trying to say" is a condescending underestimation of the author's ability to say it on his or her own. The value of literary studies rather lies in creating layers of new meanings out of text—extending the web of ideas and links, if you will, that places a text in a context. In writing a long essay about my novel and the process of writing my novel and the thoughts I had while writing the novel which did not become a part of my novel, I want to contribute to the dismantling of the wall that separates literature from texts "about" literature. If there is a wall at all, I think it should be a permeable one, which allows writers to inhabit both territories as the need arises, to slip back and forth and pursue one activity while living in the area devoted to the other activity, just as, during the writing of my novel and this essay, stories and quotes and bits of text would slip back and forth from one to the other, alternately playing the roles of fiction and non-fiction. In essence what this text aspires to do is demonstrate that the same themes can be addressed—for example, abjection, colonialism, subjecthood—using the tools of either fiction or theory, or a combination of both.

36 (Mbuwok) In Mbuwok, the expedition members stay in the house of an American Christian missionary, Brenda, along with Nancy who is an Australian nurse and teacher. The village is populated by the Mbui, a tribe that has had limited contact with Westerners aside from Brenda and Nancy. At first, the villagers are distrustful of the visitors, and they make it difficult for them to do any research by insisting that they are paid for everything including directions and the use of the footpaths. The scientists become frustrated and impatient. Gradually, though, after the wildlife officer and the extra guides leave, both groups relax and some friendships develop. Laurie gets to know a good-looking and popular young man named Tambuk who has recently arrived in Mbuwok from a smaller

village in the mountains. Tambuk is a traditionalist, but is also clearly restless. He explains to Laurie about Mbui spirituality, and takes him to see the spirit house in the jungle, a place that is forbidden to women. Many of the Mbui have been converted to Christianity by Brenda's influence, but the elders still hold on to the traditional values and myths. They believe that the world was created by a great spider named Aroa, who is neither male nor female. The home of Aroa is in the spirit house near Mbuwok, and there is also a sacred place to Aroa in the mountains. They see Mbuwok as the center of the universe, and themselves as the people from whom all the others in the area are descended, including the Tamboi, and the bellicose Dalene, traditional rivals of the Mbui. Brenda explains to the scientists that in the very recent past the Mbui had been cannibalistic, and would conduct raids on the Dalene and other neighbouring tribes during which whole villages were slaughtered. Now that they are Christian, she says, cannibalism is repugnant to them.

Eventually, through Tambuk's intervention, the villagers adopt the notion that the scientists are there to help them preserve their environment and way of life, and the research progresses rapidly. Several members of the expedition (mammalogists and ornithologists) even discover new species: possums and bats and a new bird of paradise. Laurie meets with less success and is unable to find the specimen he is looking for, although he becomes fascinated with the Mbui myths about spiders, which they revere and admire. They also use the webs of some of the large indigenous orb-weavers as fishing nets.

One day Tambuk's much older brother Hemsabuk arrives in town, carrying his young daughter Aroana, who has malaria, and demanding that she be treated by Nancy. Tambuk and several other villagers try to turn him away, and he flies into a rage, drawing his ax on Tambuk. Brenda intervenes and Nancy agrees to treat the girl. Brenda explains to Laurie that Hemsabuk is perceived as dangerous. It turns out, though, that everyone in the village knows the real story except the white people. Ezekiel, who speaks some English because he worked in the American copper mine at Timika for two years, tells Laurie this story: Tambuk came here to escape Hemsabuk after an unfortunate incident several years

ago. Hemsabuk had two other children in addition to his then infant daughter. The oldest was another daughter, who was reaching marriageable age and was highly sought after. The other was his 14-year-old adopted son from a neighbouring tribe, whose parents Hemsabuk had killed in a raid. One evening Hemsabuk sent his daughter out in the rain to retrieve an axe that she had left near the river. In the dark she slipped on the rocks and fell, hit her head, and drowned. Hemsabuk was mad with grief and rage, and decided that it had been the sorcery of a rival tribe. He was so angry that he took the axe that had been in her hand when she died and struck his adopted son in the neck, killing him. Completely out of control now, he insisted that his wife prepare and cook the body of his son, and then forced the rest of his family to eat it. Tambuk refused, and was driven out of the village by Hemsabuk. That was over a year ago and Tambuk has only seen his brother once since then, but his reputation for temper and violence has grown. Laurie tells this story to Lori, who tells the rest of the expedition team.

Brenda and Nancy, meanwhile, are worried about what Hemsabuk might do if their treatment is unsuccessful and his daughter dies. For two days everyone is on pins and needles as the daughter's health wanes. Hemsabuk camps in a hut on the outskirts of the village. He is missing two fingers on his left hand. When Laurie asks Tambuk why this is, Tambuk explains that it is deeply-rooted custom among many of the Highlands peoples to cut off one's own fingers to show grief over the death of a family member. Laurie then asks him about the story he heard from Ezekiel. Tambuk confirms it, and also reveals that he himself is also adopted, also from the Tamboi, like the son that Hemsabuk killed. Finally Hemsabuk's daughter recovers, and Hemsabuk leaves with her. Tambuk goes with him.

Brenda is upset already by Hemsabuk's behaviour, but then she hears about Ezekiel's story from Kate and Tom. She interrogates her assistants Adam and Zachariah who say that it's true, and immediately decides to tell the authorities. Laurie worries what might happen, but thinks it's for the best. In the meantime, Howell gets an infection and has to be evacuated; Brenda accompanies him back to Jayapura.

The decision to tell the police turns out not to be for the best. Memnabuk, Tambuk's young cousin, comes back a week later and tells a story of police arriving in a helicopter, being shot at by Hemsabuk. The helicopter left and came back later in the day with soldiers, who bombed the village. Almost everyone was killed. He escaped but he doesn't know what happened to Tambuk. Nancy decides she will go back to the mountain village with Memnabuk to help, and Peter goes with them. The rest of the expedition team have a meeting, feeling considerable remorse over their role in this catastrophe. As their work is nearly done anyway, they decide to leave as soon as Peter and Nancy get back. They make plans for a departure on the 23rd, the day after Laurie's birthday.

37 (Oh what a tangled web) we weave when first we practice to *believe*. We all had our own stories about our expedition into that complicated jungle, the stories we wanted to believe. Officially, our mission was to assist in the establishment of a wildlife sanctuary in the Lorentz region. Most of us, having been instilled with a sense of the sanctity and importance of biological and cultural diversity, believed that we were there to conserve, to preserve, to provide sanctuary, asylum, to protect, to maintain. To affirm the value of the status quo, or even to turn back the clock and preserve that which had already disappeared. To make the ephemeral immutable. On the other hand—or on one of the other hands for there were many—it became clear that some among us, or some parts of us, wanted to disrupt, to overthrow, to progress, to evolve, to destroy. Among the scientists, I noticed at times a belief that we could change others (the Papuans) while remaining unchanged ourselves. Perhaps that is what we all wanted to some extent or another, including the OPM freedom fighters. They wanted this grinding chewing behemoth of an empire to clench and topple, and they believed they could walk unscathed out of the debris and back into the forest. What did the Mbui want? It was difficult to tell. Perhaps, they wanted simply to dwell and to transcend. They believed in their own story—they were their own story—and in the importance of tradition. It wasn't just that they wanted to protect their lives from

change; they had not seen enough of the power of the outside world, and could hardly grasp that their lives *could* change. At the same time, they were incredibly covetous of money, even though it was virtually useless in the village, and every young man harboured a secret desire to go off to the copper mines, as some of them had done already. They were happily courting the very things that would destroy them. I feared what I desired, and they were desiring what they should have feared.

Part Three: Neurotic Narrative.

38 (The Story So Far) It doesn't take much to tell a story. A few lines, each complete with a subject and verb. Also it requires some indication of the passing of time. *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. Or maybe not. Maybe, as Gertrude Stein said, anything put after anything else is a story. I was born in Montreal, Canada, on January 22nd, 1972. My father, a sculptor, was part Scottish and part French, but I grew up speaking English. When I was one year old my parents took me to Piaui, Brazil, where my mother worked for a Canadian aid agency organizing a women's weaving collective. I was educated at home and had a carefree childhood with no siblings and few friends but a passionate interest in science. At the age of twelve I was forced to leave Brazil behind when my parents moved back to Montreal. I studied biology at McGill University and then earned an M.Sc. from the University of Toronto, where I was a dedicated student and received praise for my work on parthenogenesis in certain spiders of the *Theridiidae* family. After meeting renowned American arachnologist James Boyle in 1995, I decided to study under Boyle at Cornell University. Before I could begin my doctoral studies, however, Boyle asked me to go to Japan to investigate an anomalous infestation of Australian redback spiders. While in Japan, I became convinced that the proof for my theory concerning the reproductive habits of the *Lactrodectus* spiders would be found in Irian Jaya, a remote eastern province of Indonesia. I immediately involved myself in an international expedition of wildlife conservationists to

the highlands of Irian Jaya, where I and the other scientists would live in a village among the primitive Mbui tribe. The expedition, however, did not turn out the way anyone expected. Filled with pathos and wonderment, this is the gripping, sometimes shocking, often thought-provoking but ultimately tragic story of that expedition. Etc. Etc. Already this is an immensely complex narrative, with four nuanced characters (although others could be extrapolated), a plotline that spans 24 years and four continents, and a fair degree of suspense. Already the story harbours a multitude of implicit meanings and themes: the clash between civilization and the primitive; the invention and conquest of the exotic Other by Western rationalism and Imperialism; the globalization of webs of knowledge leading to the centralization of power; the self-conscious struggle against the Freudian inevitability of becoming one's parents. From this point, the narrative could be fleshed out in an (almost) infinite number of ways. What is added to the story after this is actually unrelated to the story itself then; all the additional elements become decorations and connections to other themes and texts. In this way it becomes possible to speak about anything in the context of anything else, as long as there are no artificial limits to the length of our utterances. The more the text is limited, in fact, the easier it becomes to tell the story.

39 (Writing as phobia) Why write? Why write narrative, as Anne Stone says, "when you could be the next guest on the Jerry Springer Show?" Writing, like most human behaviour, can be explained as a manifestation of a neurosis. Kristeva suggests that "the writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead he comes to life again in signs." (38) Every writer is a neurotic in that he writes; the fact that he has something to write about is in itself evidence of his difficulty in adjusting to reality. He has to write, or else the world would be too much. Lacan suggested that James Joyce was a psychotic who avoided psychotic symptoms by creating his own Name of the Father through his writing. As Barthes writes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, "Every writer's motto reads: *mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I am.*" He writes, then, out

of fear and out of desire. "The text you write must prove to me *that it desires me.*" (6) (In other words, whether it is fiction or theory, a text is successful if it is *sexy*—desired and desirous.) Language itself is based on desire and alienation; we must find a place for our subjecthood within in, even though it is an alien system to us. I have discussed already how the phobic is linguistically hyperactive, but Kristeva also suggests the converse, that the linguistically enthusiastic are phobic, because writing is a metaphorization (a symptom) in the same way that the phobic cathexis is. "Finally, and this is the second reason why phobia does not disappear but slides beneath language, the phobic object is a proto-writing and, conversely, any practice of speech, inasmuch as it involves writing, is a language of fear." (Kristeva 38)

I'd like to suggest, on a related note, that the neuroses of writers do not end at phobia. It seems equally likely that the construction of narrative—which entails linking disparate event items in a causal chain—requires a delusional outlook. A passion for drawing connections between unrelated things. A metaphorical passion, one might say. Like a poet. Or a novelist. Constantly looking for meaning in personages and events that have none.

40 (The narrative inquisition) Once upon a time, studying narrative would have been more or less synonymous with studying literature, but that is less the case now, and the term "narrative" has taken on certain connotations: linked as it is to "storytelling" (and perhaps because narratologists in the structuralist heyday were almost always concerned with fairy tales and myths), it seems quaint, old-fashioned. Structuralism had a lot to do with this degrading of narrative, but so did post-structuralism and deconstructionism. So did modernism, for that matter. Throughout the last century, there has been a steady movement within literary fashion away from narrative. Proust, Joyce, and Faulkner all told stories, but they told them turbidly and achronologically, in such difficult, cubist and fauvist ways, that the sense of story was displaced somewhat. At the same time, beginning with the Russian

formalists (Shklovsky, Propp) in the 20's and later with Greimas, Barthes et al. inspired by anthropology and linguistics, narrative was dismantled, vivisected, and labelled so that some part of its function was made obsolete.

On the other hand, certain critics were gradually changing the significance of the novel in ways that demanded a reevaluation of narrative. Georg Lukacs' *The Theory of the Novel* challenged and updated the role of the storyteller in fiction by claiming that the novel, like the epic, is a forum for the community to talk to itself, which means that it must be designed to contain incommensurate points of view. It can not be seen as a transcendental expression of a unifying consciousness, and therefore its narrative can not be a totalizing structure. The story becomes harder and harder to tell as the community delves into its own factiousness. At the same time, this understanding of the novel encourages a kind of redistribution of power among the narrator and the characters and the audience.

Lukacs' examination of the position of the narrator as subject would have a lot to do with the evolution of narrative, making the question of who was telling the story eventually as intriguing as the story itself. Mikhail Bakhtin worked with similar questions, although he did not feel that the epic was the proper ancestor of the novel because the epic glorified the hegemonic myths of the community while the novel propagated a transgressive and satirical view of society. Bakhtin heralded what he thought was a brand new kind of novel exemplified by Dostoevsky's works, the polyphonic novel. In such a novel, he said, the voice of the other always intrudes in the narrative, just as the voice of the other is present in any discourse because of the way we are conditioned to speak. Each character in the polyphonic novel can have its own voice and its own drives in the narrative, which creates a working out of social issues that is more real than social realism. In Dostoevsky, says Bakhtin, "The consciousness of a character is given as *someone else's consciousness*, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned into an object, is not closed, does not become a simple object of the author's consciousness." (7) The polyphonic novel is a novel of multitudinous *subjects*. This approach to narrative precludes the narrative authority of the

more monologic novel because the characters are not relegated to object status and therefore can not be manipulated or made to fit precisely in the chain of causality. At the same time, the author does not renounce his or her own ability to grapple with problems from within a subject-consciousness, but "he must to an extraordinary extent broaden, deepen, and rearrange this consciousness (to be sure, in a specific direction) in order to accommodate the autonomous consciousness of others." (Bakhtin 68) Shklovsky and other proto-structuralists simply disagreed that all that could be going on in a novel, governed as it was by the laws of function.

In the 60's writers of fiction themselves started to feed off the discourse produced by structural narratology and other literary criticism. Writers such as John Barth and E.L. Doctorow re-invented (or re-claimed from previous centuries) meta-fiction, organizing in the process the first wave of self-conscious postmodern novelists, and the situation of narrative became even more precarious than it was in the first part of the century. Brion Gysin and quasi-beat writer William S. Burroughs took a cue from the dadaists and shredded it and recycled it, the practioners of the *nouveau roman* in France slowed it down and re-engineered it, voluminous Americans like Thomas Pynchon smothered it in detail while others such as Norman Mailer and Truman Capote upstaged it with reality. Meanwhile poets from Stein to Bernstein were busy reacting to the contingency of language by freeing words from their moorings of signification and syntax. The exorcism of narrative in literature, the narrative inquisition, probably reached a sort of peak with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets in the 1970's, and that context over the following decade or so also produced a modest reaction to the exorcism—not a backlash exactly, and not nostalgia either, but dissatisfaction.

41 (New narrative) "New Narrative" is a broad term; it is probably best understood as applying to a range of post-modern narrative strategies, as opposed to a genre that can be definitively linked to a particular style or group of writers or place. However, the term has

been used as a genre label over the past 20 years or so, mostly by a loose network of writers centered in San Francisco, and so it makes sense to attempt to understand it through that context.

One of the early proponents of New Narrative as a genre was San Francisco queer writer Robert Glück, who has written an elucidating essay on the origins of the concept in the webjournal *Narrativity*, which he, Mary Burger, Camille Roy, and Gail Scott founded to provide discussion about and examples of the innovative uses of narrative among contemporary writers. The premise of the site, and of the use of the governing concept, is that narrative is being recuperated in some sense and put to good aesthetic and political use. "Paradoxically, with the loss of narrative's legitimizing and explanatory functions, in much of the most interesting contemporary writing there has been an increasing recourse to, rather than a retreat from, narrative forms," says Jacques Debrot in "Narrative is boring," on the *Narrativity* site.

With the loss of narrative's legitimizing functions came also the loss of access to a convenient conduit of political messages and means for social change. This is the same dilemma struggled with by feminists and post-colonial theorists when faced with postmodernism, which has brought about the theoretical dissolution of the humanist, universalist notion of the unified (Cartesian) self, and radically subverted totalizing interpretations of text. The Author is dead, says Barthes. There is never only one meaning, says Derrida. However, enacting real social change in favour of marginal identities necessitates both a solid (provisionally, at least) identity to defend and a meaningful language with which to defend it. Queer writers in San Francisco (and elsewhere) kept running up against this problem: a text written to mobilize the Queer community, for example, could not be a postmodern exploration of the arbitrariness of signs and still be effectual, while a novel that contained an autobiographical account of Queer life was bound to be dismissed by the language-based avant-garde writers. Glück found that his writing was either too straight (for the Queers) or too straight-forward (for the lit snobs). "I

embodied these incommensurates so I had to ask this question: How can I convey urgent social meanings while opening or subverting the possibilities of meaning itself?" (Glück "Long Note on New Narrative").

This is the central debate surrounding this nebulous genre: how can a text acknowledge postmodernism's dismantling of truth and subjectivity, while still engaging social issues and conveying meaning? In other words, is it still possible to satisfy the narrative instinct?

I wanted the pleasures and politics of the fragment and the pleasures and politics of story, gossip, fable and case history; the randomness of chance and a sense of inevitability; sincerity while using appropriation and pastiche. When Barrett Watten said about *Jack the Modernist* [a novel by Robert Glück, High Risk Books, 1995], 'You have your cake and eat it too,' I took it as a great compliment." (Glück)

My examination of the roles of fear and desire in narrative is meant as an attempt to respond to this question. It would seem that forms of abjection are the unquantifiable, irreducible elements of a text—vestiges of the modernist Sublime perhaps—that resist being flattened into postmodernist surface effects. New Narrative texts are postmodern, it goes without saying, but they are perhaps a new mutation, a new strain of postmodernism. Where postmodernism has previously been a kind of cross between modernism and anti-modernism, New Narrative seems to try to merge of some elements of modernism—the sublime, and formal innovation—with elements of romanticism—the emphasis on the subject and the affect—but using an updated, socially and historically conscious version of both these isms. The most powerful New Narrative texts—Kathy Acker immediately comes to mind, and Dennis Cooper, although assigning the label is arbitrary—are intensely interested in the abject, and have direct, almost obsessive fixations (in Acker's case, on sex and death).

Interestingly, this corresponds to Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic interpretation of postmodernism. "What characterizes postmodernism is therefore an obsession with Thing, with a foreign body within the social texture" (122)—which is remarkably reminiscent of the place of the abject, but even more so: "we enter postmodernism when our relationship to

the Thing becomes *antagonistic*: we abjure and disown the Thing, yet it exerts an irresistible attraction on us; its proximity exposes us to a mortal danger, yet it is simultaneously a source of power..." (123)

The challenge of New Narrative lies in being direct, subjective, honest, truthful: all extremely problematic terms in a postmodern intellectual climate. How to tell the truth?

yes how to state the facts when we are fiction

to be imaginative when our fiction is biography

(Gail Scott "Spaces" 27)

Gail Scott's formulation of the problem here underlines the significance of identity: "*we are fiction...our fiction is biography.*" In this context "we" is referring of course to women, and the power of women's autobiographical writing. But we could expand this interrogative manifesto and say that it is absolutely vital, it seems, to write who we are, to tell *our own* truths.

In an effort to synthesize some of these ideas and to provide a tentative definition, I would like to suggest, then, that New Narrative is characterized by three basic qualities, all of which may be present or only one or two, in varying degrees, in a given text. First, there is an emphasis on community and multi-vocality, an acknowledgement of the urgency of writing *who we are*, which harkens back to Lukacs' theory of the novel, and which is often manifested in autobiographical intrusions by the author. Second, there is tendency towards political and literary radicality, as in the deployment of fiction/theory techniques for example, an insistence that writing narrative is a political act. Finally, and this is what I believe is the most common characteristic, in New Narrative the desire-narrative of the text is privileged over the wish-narrative. These terms I have devised from Lacanian theory to identify the narrative level of the plot (the wish-narrative) and the more instinctual narrative level of affect (the desire-narrative).

Lacan describes a sequence of motivations beginning with need, which is replaced by a symbolic demand that voices a wish. The demand is always unconditional. Desire, in

contrast, is linked to conditions—specific details of the wish—and always has "nothing" as its object; that is, lack taken as an object. The wish can be conscious and simple—for example, if you are hungry you wish to eat something—while desire, on the other hand, is fundamentally barred from consciousness and may come out in dreams or in symptomatic behaviour. If you go to sleep when you are hungry, for example, you will dream of food, but it is in the details of the dream—whether you dream of bread or caviar—that evidence of your desire can be found. For Lacan, desire is a process by which details are transformed by language into other details. To find desire in a text, we should focus not on the message but on the points of redundancy in the language. Desire in narrative, then, is not to be found in the characters or the plot (i.e. who it seems the characters are and what they seem to want) but in the disruptions and substitutions of the language itself. The spaces between the sentences, for example. The space between the words. The superficial linear narrative of a story represents the fulfillment of a wish. The "instinctual" narrative, the underlying pattern, represents a desire. New Narrative writing shows that the desire-narrative can be present even in apparently un-narrative texts, even in texts that are seemingly anti-narrative.

42 (Truth) "You mean you *eat* flies?" gasped Wilbur.

"Certainly. I have to live, don't I? Of course, I don't really eat them. I drink them — drink their blood. I love blood," said Charlotte, and her pleasant, thin voice grew even thinner and more pleasant.

"Don't say that!" groaned Wilbur. "Please don't say things like that!"

"Why not? It's true, and I have to say what is true."

—E.B. White *Charlotte's Web* (42)

43 (Narrative and Identity)

We were thinking about autobiography; by autobiography we meant daydreams, nightmares, the act of writing, the relationship to the reader, the meeting of flesh and culture, the self as collaboration, the self as disintegration, the gaps, inconsistencies and distortions, the enjambments of power, family, history and language. —Gluck

Establishing identity becomes a primary purpose in much New Narrative writing, especially that of Queer writers. The community in which this writing first developed wrote extensively about their own lives and each other's lives.

Gay writers Bruce Boone and Robert Glück (like Acker, Dennis Cooper or the subway graffitists again) up the ante on this factuality by weaving their own names, and those of friends and lovers, into their work. The writer/artist becomes exposed and vulnerable: you risk being foolish, mean-spirited, wrong. But if the writer's life is more open to judgement and speculation, so is the reader's. (Steve Abbott)

Establishing an identity, however, also necessarily means adopting a subject or an object position. In an interview I did with her for *Matrix* magazine, Gail Scott describes how she circumvented this dilemma:

...the flâneur had a kind of ironic stance, the flâneur's flaunting of himself in his outfit was very ironic, and I think that's very 19th-century and it requires someone who considers themselves a fairly well-constituted subject. Whereas this character [in *My Paris*] is not ironic, she's parodic. She's in a different space—and we never know whether she doesn't make it as a full subject because she doesn't know how, or if, as she implies, she's making herself minuscule, inconsequential, the better to not over-influence her story with her own subjectivity. In fact, the flâneur is lost in the crowd but is also in full control of his own individuality, Benjamin says. And that's different from her clownish, Chaplinesque posture. Which is far more deconstructed in a way. [Frost: More of an object than a subject?] I think she marks a place where, in interesting prose today, which is not much prose [laughing], the subject has gotten displaced—between the subject and the object as opposed to being here, with the object over there. —Gail Scott

44 (Narrative and Desire)

Another strategy for New Narrative writing, in addition to autobiography, has been meta-textuality, which is one way that desire manifests itself in the text, by revealing the intentions and wishes of the author. "Text-metatext takes its form from the dialectical cleft between real life and life as it wants to be," says Robert Glück in "Caricature," echoing Bakhtin: "The author is a participant in the dialogue (on essentially equal terms with the characters), but he also fulfills additional, very complex functions (he holds the reins between the ideal dialogue of the work and the actual dialogue of reality)." (Bakhtin 298) In its meta-textuality New Narrative might be a sub-species of fiction/theory, or vice versa.

New Narrative writers also often use found text, plagiarized text, text copied from their friends and colleagues, or text of any unknown origin. "Found materials have a kind of radiance, the truth of the already-known," says Glück. Anything that strikes your fancy, one might say; something you search for is something you desire.

I goes between: a love story. In Plato's Symposium, Diotima locates Love in the space between ignorance and wisdom. Offspring of Poros (way, resource, expedient) and Penia (wayless, poverty, lack.) Love paradoxically embodies this antinomy and cannot give a reason for itself. According to Diotima, Love judges without being able to give proper reasons. "It is judging things correctly without being able to give a reason," says Diotima, "surely, you see that this is not the same as knowledge, for how can knowledge be devoid of reason?" Jacques Lacan derives from this—in however faulty a way—one of his characteristic figures for love: giving that which one does not have to give.⁴ I am thinking of narrative like Love: wayless and wayward, determined to do precisely what it cannot do. Its reasons are but ruses. Between aporia and euporia Love is risked agnostically, like a narrative that risks its own foundation. Sentenced and committed, here, I goes between, exposed to every possibility of rejection and loss, abjection and shame.

—Rob Halpern

Desire is that element in the text which cannot give a reason for itself. A wholly physical element of writing, in that it cannot be rationalized. Existing below the register of the Symbolic in what Kristeva calls the Semiotic register—which refers to the organization or disposition in the body of instinctual drives as they affect language and its practice: the physical, concrete counterpart of la sémiotique, the science of signs. (Kristeva *Desire*)

45 (The narrative instinct)

New Narrative, in my view, is writing that makes it clear that within the framework of the narrative structure outlined by narratology there is another, more visceral narrative rhythm, driven by desire and fear, and that this rhythm can exist independent of conventional narrative, in more experimental forms.

For me, it's not so much meaning that I expect to find in text but emotion—that's the pressing question—and does that emotion map exactly onto the emotional content of whatever is happening in a story, or some element of a story, or is it loosely overlaid or does it flow through, under? Can there be anything about a deliberate nailing of dead words to a

wall, (live words that have been vivisected), that leaves you emotionally helpless? Everyone knows that meaning is a commodity that has no value because there's a glut. You can't expect to write a story and produce meaning from it because it's a lie, but everyone knows that you can do that with emotion. You can write a story, and even though we know it's a lie, you can put a fake identity in your story and then make that identity die or suffer or become lonely, and even though we know that it's you making that identity die, we're still sad.

So when Robert Glück says he wants to have his cake and eat it too I have a pang of agreement, but I get the impression that the cake for him is identity / voice / social meaning / survival and the eating is the acknowledgement and play that comes from recognizing that social meaning's construction (i.e., words.) But I think the cake is the words. It's a thing of beauty, with layers, sugary on the surface (and you can slice it any way you want to make lots of surfaces and make surfaces of what used to be depth), text is the cake, that impossibility of a simple transaction of meaning is the cake. You can imagine the cake and you can bake it and ice it and cut it and serve it, all on a fairly cerebral level, the level at which meanings get thrown around. But eating the cake is a completely different register, isn't it? It's something physical, like crying or laughing. And the relationship between the laughing / crying and the meaning production is fairly arbitrary, or so it seems, but it definitely exists, like the relationship between the glazed inscription on the top of the cake (its meanings) and how the cake tastes, like the relationship between this ridiculous over-extended metaphor with its semiotic stunts and the likelihood that you will feel satisfied that reading this has been a real experience.

When I read Kathy Acker, for example, or Gail Scott, I find a narrative that at every turn disrupts my ability to become emotionally invested in the events and characters, the wish-narrative, and yet obtains a more personal (to the reader) emotional whammo exactly because of the very futility of any other kind of textual engagement. This "deep" narrative structure with its irrational impact is the desire-narrative, and relies on what I will refer to as the narrative instinct. If Kristeva is right that writers are phobic then this instinct may have

roots in the survival of fear and desire in the text. This narrative-like effect can be achieved in experimental, non-linear, non-character-based narrative, pastiche, meta-text, or any of numerous postmodern devices, but what New Narrative often does is redeploy the tools of traditional narrative for the production of this lower-register narrative, thereby avoiding the legitimizing/totalizing function of traditional narrative form, and mobilizing it for counter-action against repressive intent. Rob Halpern suggests, on the *Narrativity* site, that "to deny narrative, to resist its claim upon us, is not so much resisting ideology as it is ideologically blind to the fact that without narrative we are bereft of the means of counter-strategy in the face of dominant and oppressive ideological orders." We can think of this kind of narrative usage as a performance of various narrative "poses." "Rather than the solution to crisis, narrative is the performance of it" (Halpern).

If we place this value on narrative and its emotional potency, why problematize narrative at all? Why write theory-based fiction rather than fiction *tout court*? Because "in order not to sink in sadness our fiction must be theory." (Gail Scott "Spaces" 27) In other words, in order to remain engaged in history rather than being overwhelmed by it and confined to the quotidian. Fredric Jameson articulates this imperative as the necessity of self-theorizing to social progress: "To reckon one's own position as an observer into the critical thinking in process... one [then] no longer has to posit an end to history in order for historical thought to take place." (*Marxism and Form*).

46 (Based on a true story) This part of *headless* is based on real events of 1996: a group of young biologists from England, the Netherlands, and Indonesia were working on a catalog of indigenous wildlife in the Lorentz Wildlife Preserve in Irian Jaya, when they were abducted by the guerilla army of the Organesi Papua Merdeka (Free Papua Movement). They spent four months in the hands of their captors, being moved around in the mountainous jungle and pursued by the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI). Two of the Indonesian scientists in the group were killed before the remaining captives were released /

escaped / were rescued. One of the British biologists, an undergraduate student at Cambridge, wrote a book about the experience (Daniel Start, *The Open Cage*), from which I have gleaned many details of the political situation and life in the jungle, although the majority of the events and characters in the novel are fictional. Recently (following the change of government in Indonesia and a turn in the direction of democracy) the name of the province was changed from Irian Jaya to West Papua. The struggle of the OPM for independence from Indonesia continues.

Charles Peirce called abduction (a different sort) the third kind of intelligence after deduction (logical) and induction (empirical). His definition of abduction involves reasoning by metaphor. Looking outside the paradigm. It is not until Laurie and his colleagues are abducted that he begins to understand what he is doing there.

47 (Abduction) On January 22nd (Laurie's birthday), a day before the team is scheduled to leave Mbuwok, about a hundred men, mostly armed with bows and arrows but some with guns, enter the village and take them captive along with about 12 villagers and a few other Papuans. In all, there are 24 hostages: 3 Europeans, 2 North Americans, 1 Japanese, 2 Indonesians, 2 Papuans from Jayapura, and 12 Mbui villagers. They are immediately taken to a secret camp of the OPM. Their friend Tambuk is among the leaders of the OPM group. The 14 Papuans are released the next day, but all the rest remain in captivity. The villagers they were living with bring a pig's heart for them to eat as a gesture of good will. (There is a custom among the Highlands tribes that if you eat a pig's heart with someone, then you can never cause them harm.) Kate at first refuses to eat it because she is vegetarian, but the others prevail upon her to take a symbolic nibble. They try to reason with their captors, but not too much for fear of alienating them. In general they are happy but hungry.

A friendship develops between Laurie and Lori, one of the British women, but he ultimately feels excluded from the Brits' close circle, partly because Tom and Kate have struck up a romance, and partly because of their bizarre rituals of friendship (Laurie usually

doesn't get their jokes). Lori is also resentful of Tom and Kate and turns to Laurie for affirmation. Laurie discovers he doesn't like Lori so much—for one thing, she is voyeuristic with her camera, and she is starting to show the signs of stress and acting very erratically. The other reason for his disinterest is that Laurie continues to be obsessed with Sera, and feels drawn to her even though they don't talk much.

Tambuk and the other OPM leaders eventually decide that it is time for them to move. The travel through the jungle is hard on them and they all get sick. At one of the makeshift camps, right outside his tent, Laurie finally finds a specimen of the spider he has been looking for, which he had only guessed was a real species. In the process of trying to catch it in his bare hands, however, it bites him on the finger and he loses it. Not knowing what the potency of the spider's venom might be, he thinks about Boyle's story of the arachnologist cutting off his finger and it occurs to him that he should do the same, but he can't bring himself to. Over the next day he gets sick, and he assumes at first it is from the spider bite and that he will die. (Redback bites can be fatal without the antidote). He gets sicker and sicker over the course of several days, and he wonders why he hasn't died. Finally the hostages are visited by the Red Cross, and it turns out that Laurie has malaria. They are given medicine and have a few days to rest, and they mostly recover. The Red Cross worker takes photos of them, telling them to look as miserable as they can because the photos will appear in the media, but they are so relieved to have medical care and food that they can't help smiling. He shows them newspaper clippings about their plight so far. They write letters home and talk to each other about their past lives.

Rudi talks about the mistakes of Indonesia—in particular the superciliousness of the Javanese—and his eagerness to fix them. He implies that the Westerners are not in danger, but that the Papuans will kill him and Bening. The hostages learn that the rebels think that their ancestors were white, and that the coming of these white Westerners represents the coming of their saviour (many of them are Christian). They believe that a white baby will be born in the valley, which will signify their independence. They start to refer to the camp as

Bethlehem. There is an incident in which one of the rebels tries to convince Kate to have sex with him, while becoming more and more aggressive, but Tambuk arrives and stops it before things turn ugly. When Tom hears about this from Kate, he loses his temper and attacks the rebel, who is about to draw his machete when he is stopped by another group leader, Sayo (who speaks English and whom the hostages have gotten to know a bit), who shouts at them. Sayo later admits to his hostages that he is very worried that one of them may be harmed, which would certainly lead to a negative reaction to the OPM from the world media. They keep marching through the jungle, at one point crossing a very rickety bridge and almost being separated. They hear rumours about the local leader of the OPM, Kris Kimzo, and what a fierce and respected leader he is. They learn that his entire family was allegedly killed by the Indonesian army, and some of the OPM soldiers believe that he has special powers. Finally they hear that the political leader of the movement, who is living in exile in Papua New Guinea, has made an announcement that the hostages should be released. The Red Cross come back and act as go-betweens for the negotiations with the Indonesian Army and the British Special Forces Unit, which has been called in to assist in freeing the captives. Through the government and various NGO's, millions of dollars in development aid for the region have been offered in exchange for the safe release of the hostages. A big celebration is planned for the day of their release.

48 (Death) In this part of the novel, and in this part of the essay, we come up against death. Death, the ultimate form of abjection, is also the ultimate engine of narrative and its final justification, as any narrative is inherently an eschatology. Many writers have remarked on the relationship between narrative and death, although some have seen this as empowering and some have seen it as a limitation. Virginia Woolf relates the narrative drive toward death to a kind of phallogocentric determinism in *Orlando*, when she states ironically that the duty of the biographer is "to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump

into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads." (38) (What she resists, of course, is not death itself but the strictures against smelling the flowers along the way.) Kathy Acker, in contrast, sees death as writing's ultimate referent, from which the honest writer will not flinch, and as a kind of precondition for revelation. Inspired by Bataille, Céline, Genet, and others, she continually refers to writing as a process of "working past failure," (*Hannibal* 23) moving beyond the point where a secure identity can be maintained—a process of self-abjection, in other words. Throughout her writing, she seems obsessed with the idea of living through death—which only writing can allow her to do—as her characters die over and over again. Perhaps, then, in writing we do not come up against death so much as we undergo it. It is only after the author dies (in the sense of relinquishing proprietorship of the text, in the sense of ending the life of the narrative, and perhaps even in the literal sense, when the writer bequeaths the text to the living) that true meaning can be located in the text.

"Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death," says Walter Benjamin. (94) Death is as important to narrative as it is to life, philosophically speaking. However, as mortals, we do not have the opportunity to experience our own deaths. That is why fiction plays such a vital role: it allows us an opportunity to extract a meaning from life, however arbitrary, without actually dying in order to do so. The novelist kills off his characters so that his readers may live. "The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about." (101)

Another theorist who sees death as a fundamental prerequisite to the functioning of narrative is Paul Ricoeur, who bases his ideas on Heideggerian philosophy. Ricoeur explains that the death of an individual (a cultural hero or founder, for example) is recuperated by a collective (a community) in narrative. Death is what permits meaning to be

assigned; when the story is finished, it can be understood, but not before. This makes chronology a necessary part of interpretation. Structuralist narratology was unsatisfactory, according to Ricoeur, because the structuralists attempted to neutralize chronology in narrative. "The chronological dimension was not abolished, but it was deprived of its temporal constitution as plot. The segmenting and the concatenating of functions thus paved the way for a reduction of the chronological to the logical." (Ricoeur 180) In other words, structural analysts such as Propp and later Greimas and Barthes treat plot as a synchronic machinery that is designed solely to restore order to the rupture created by the initial lack or crisis of the story. In such an analysis the quest—the process or the actual living if you will—is brushed aside and becomes no more than an achronological residue, a footnote to the reestablishment of order (death) after disorder (life).

Several kinds of death occur or threaten in *headless*. Dr. Boyle's death while Laurie is in Japan acts to establish an autarkic space for Laurie's story; it also introduces an Oedipal guilt into Laurie's motivations: his earlier fantasies about replacing Boyle (whom he sees as a substitute father) lead Laurie to feel on a unconscious level that he has caused Boyle's death. Laurie's fear of his own possible death by spider venom is significant in that it reminds him that he is a participant in a story, which must necessarily have an ending. It's not necessary to indulge in character-based metafiction to illustrate this; Laurie is not aware of being in a novel, but he understands that his theory concerning the *Lactrodectus* species is a construction that he may have to abandon to save his own life—he may have to kill off his hypothetical spider, in other words, to restore meaning to his own narrative. Perhaps most significantly, there are the violent deaths that occur near the end of the novel. When humans meet humans at the borders of their identities—through intercultural contact, for example—a dangerous blurring takes place: there is a danger to the security of the well-contained self, which may be ultimately liberating, but there is also a danger that the risk to the ego may find expression in physical aggression towards the other. The organization of the OPM and the hostage-taking, regardless of their altruistic intentions, are a flirtation with

death necessitated by Indonesia's imperialist threat of death/oppression, which in turn is instigated by pressure from the global capitalist machinery, including American support of Suharto's regime in order to prevent the spread of communism, and the influx of American investment into Irian Jaya for the exploitation of mineral resources. This narrative string can of course have only one end, just as global capitalism seems to always work by deferring and displacing death and oppression until they are far enough away that the consumer (who benefits from them) doesn't notice. I thought it was important that this inevitable and very real death be manifest within the narrative, in order to give full import to the ramifications of the situation.

49 (Writing violence) *Intention: I become a murderess by repeating in words the lives of other murderesses.* —Kathy Acker, epigraph, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*. How to approach violence in writing a novel? How to approach the writing of a novel as a form of violence itself? I've been taking random stabs at this material, I've been "wrestling with causality" (Lu) and hoping I'll come out on top. If causality is a kind of predetermination, it's a kind of totalitarianism—causality produces casualties—then I'm writing to struggle against the law, really trying to murder plot. Except I wish that the material would fight back. Because the story itself is benign. If only I could feel as though I were acting out of self-defense, then I could be a lot more sanguine about my murderous intent. As it is, the violence is turned back on me: what I'm facing when I write is a self-amputation / decapitation / castration.

50 (Murder) "C'est des hommes et d'eux seulement qu'il faut avoir peur, toujours."

—Céline, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (15)

Finally the day comes when they are supposed to be released and they are taken to another Mbui village, farther up the valley. For weeks the village has been planning a feast to welcome them and the international observers who will be flown in by helicopter, and a

platform has been set up for speeches. Kris Kimzo arrives in the village with a small entourage. Just before the hostages are to leave, however, Kimzo gives a speech about how he wants the President of the U.S. to endorse their cause before he will release the hostages, and then defiantly takes his men and the captives back in to the jungle. They spend the next few days fleeing the Indonesian army elite squadrons, who are being helped by white South African mercenaries. At one point the soldiers manage to shoot down an army helicopter that is pursuing them (Laurie is reminded of the pepsis wasp which hunts spiders). Sera talks to Kris Kimzo, who takes a liking to her, and Laurie thinks that Sera is seducing him but he doesn't mention it. They travel further away from the villages and higher into the mountains, and Kimzo decides that they will take the hostages out of the valley, through a maze of limestone caves. Tambuk and Sayo and the other Mbui are uncomfortable with this, both because they don't want to leave the valley—they are tired of running—and also because to the Mbui these caves are a sacred place, the ancient home of Aroa, the spider goddess. The guerillas gradually split into two factions, one led by Kimzo and one led by Tambuk. They all enter the caves, but they cannot find a way through the mountain to the next valley. Tambuk secretly tells the hostages that he is going to take them back to the village, and he and Sayo sneak them out of the caves. Kimzo and his men eventually catch up to them however, and there is a confrontation. While they are arguing about which direction to take, they are located by a radio-controlled helicopter drone that ABRI has been using to find them. Kimzo leads the hostages further into the mountains, sending Tambuk and Sayo in the opposite direction.

Finally the guerilla party is almost surrounded by the army, and several of the soldiers are shot from helicopters. Seeing the futility of the situation Kimzo orders the execution of the two Indonesians. Before the hostages realize what is happening, Bening—who was injured—has been killed with an axe (the soldiers have run out of bullets by this point). Rudi is out of his mind with grief, and the Westerners are in shock, and protesting and trying to stop them, but the soldiers aren't listening. Meanwhile, Lori has

momentarily disappeared. Then she appears again carrying a machete that she picked up from one of the rebels who was shot by the army. Kimzo has made Rudi kneel in front of him and is about to strike his neck with the ax. Lori walks into the center of the melee and grabs Sera, who happens to be the closest Westerner, and puts the machete to her throat. At first a tribesman raises his bow at her, but the group leader prevents it. She tells Kimzo not to kill Rudi or else she will kill Sera, who is American, and then the U.S. president will not help them. Kimzo laughs at her and says it doesn't matter because Sera is not white. Then she grabs Laurie and puts the machete to his throat. Kris says go ahead. She can't do it, of course, and lets him go. Kimzo laughs again and picks up the ax to kill Rudi, but then in desperation Lori screams, and falling to her knees, she cuts off her own finger. Everyone is aghast. Kimzo at first puts down his axe, and it seems like he is genuinely affected by this gesture, and uncertain what he will do, either kill the hostages or let them go. Before he can make up his mind, however, an army helicopter flies over the clearing and opens fire, strafing both Kimzo and Rudi with bullets. In the chaos, the other hostages take off through the trees. Tom and Kate and Hiroshi, helping Lori, go in one direction, and Laurie and Sera go in another. The Papuan soldiers also scatter, or else try to shoot at the helicopters with bows. The jungle is riddled with gunfire.

Laurie and Sera run downhill and then take refuge in a hollow tree, where they wait, petrified that Kimzo's followers will find them and kill them. They talk about why Lori would have cut off her finger, and Sera relates a memory she has from her childhood in Rwanda, about seeing a friend of her (biological) father's kill himself rather than be killed by a mob. Laurie tells Sera the Christian myth of the spider helping Joseph and Mary as they flee from Herod's soldiers by concealing them behind a web. They both feel they may be close to death, and Sera reveals that she is pregnant. Laurie at first thinks she means by Kris Kimzo, but Sera says no, the father is James (Dr. Boyle). She explains that her adoptive father had for many years also been her lover. They hear voices of Indonesian soldiers on the hill below and think maybe it is safe to go out, and they start to run, Laurie

first, Sera behind. A helicopter flies above them and a soldier shoots Sera, mistaking her for the OPM. When Laurie emerges from the jungle, the Indonesian soldiers take souvenir snapshots of him.

51 (Parthenogenetic plot) A lot happens in this story, so pay attention. I never really meant for so much to happen, narratively I mean. It just seemed to occur on its own, to be born out of itself. I didn't have to coax it or perform any intricate manoeuvres. Like a ball of yarn that ravel itself into a sweater when you pull on one corner. The few notes and facts I laid down during my research reproduced themselves independently, without any sort of fertilization from me or any other ideas / events or any other aspiring author-god. The scientific name for asexual reproduction of this type, development from an unfertilized gamete, is parthenogenesis. It's something that happens all by itself. Asexual because only one individual organism, sexed or not (although usually female) need be involved. The term asexual, however, I fear may be misleading because, at the risk of sounding like I'm perpetrating a cheap ploy to attract the readerly lust of libidinous minds, this story is actually, despite its parthenogenetic origins, all about sex.

Even if that is a ploy to act readerly lust, it is nonetheless true, and I must protest that it is not a cheap ploy. It comes at considerable expense: expense to my reputation as a writer of intricate subtleties; expense to my characters' chances for self-awareness and growth; expense to the extremely incisive, current, and generally worthwhile anti-colonialist and anti-humanist theoretical stratagems—I mean humanist in the clearly out-moded essentialist and universalist sense—that I had hoped to put forth as the fundamental themes of this story. Because of the damage it will do in these areas and several others, the claim—or the *confession*, rather—that the theme of sex pervades and in fact overwhelms this story is difficult to make. I'm only making it now after the story has unravelled itself because I have no other choice. It was not really what I had meant to happen.

I'll say this again—but you're soon going to have to get into the habit of catching these things the first time around: what I had meant to happen, narratively, was not much. I was after bigger fish, I thought, than mere narrative twists, climaxes, denouements: mere "plot." This story was to be no chronological filing cabinet, no, because large and important issues are at stake. These issues, one would think, require a copious amount of painstaking, abstract exegesis: an occupation incompatible with the tracking of some wild and unpredictable story through the lush jungle of its possible branching outcomes, like a pith-helmeted, gum-booted hero from a 19th-century safari adventure-romance / veiled defense of colonialism. Yet, that is exactly where I have ended up—where we have ended up, because you are in on this now too—that is, we have ended up in the jungle. At the outset of the story—which begins *in medias res* as is appropriate for stories in which a lot will happen—the archnologist whom you have been reading about in the preceding sections has ended up in the jungle. How one manages to "end up" somewhere in a story which has only just begun is a subject for flashbacks. Not only is he in the jungle; he doesn't know *where* he is in the jungle. A story has grown up around him. I had not intended for that to happen. I had not intended for the story to plod along with its head down until it fell into its narrative grave. I did not intend to write anything about people dying, but people have ended up doing so anyway. I did not intend to write about so many different people intruding on the scene and causing things or having things caused to them. I certainly did not intend disease, violence, exploitation, danger, kidnappings, despair, or murder, but those things happen too, or have happened. Now that this story has pulled itself out of its own hat, I feel more or less helpless to stuff it back in, so I guess I will have to go ahead and let it exist.

52 (Return) Laurie and the others are collected by the Indonesian army and flown to Jayapura, except for Lori who is taken by helicopter to the hospital at the mining town of Timika. She had grabbed her amputated finger before fleeing, and the American doctors at Timika are able to reattach it. They are kept in "quarantine" for several days and not allowed

to talk to the media. In the meantime the Indonesian authorities have disseminated the story that Bening, Rudi, and Sera were killed by OPM "terrorists," who were subsequently wiped out by the army. (Laurie later finds out that Tambuk and Sayo made it back to their villages safely.) Laurie returns to Jakarta, where he visits Rudi's parents, and then makes arrangements to fly home. In the Singapore airport, while checking his back-pack, he remembers the spider specimen that he stashed in a side-pocket when they were kidnapped, and when he opens the pocket it suddenly erupts with spiderlings which make an effort to balloon away in the still air of the airport waiting area.

Laurie goes back to Toronto, sees his parents, and then returns to Ithaca. He discovers that Sera has notified Boyle's lawyer that if anything happened to her, the house was to be left to Laurie. The lawyer gives him the keys to the house, and when he finally goes there he finds that Sera has left a very peculiar tribute to Boyle: the interior of the house has been entirely filled with threads criss-crossing from wall to wall to ceiling to floor.

53 (Self-amputation) No one understood really why she did it, including me, but I think there was a certain self-contained logic to the act which we all saw and grasped intuitively. Sometimes a thing will happen and the cause, the overwhelming impetus that made the event all but inevitable, will be so obvious that all observers are sent scurrying for the underlying reasons, the deeper meaning. But at that moment we had all already plumbed to the absolute depths of meaning, and had found there nothing more reassuring or real than the looks we saw in each other's faces everyday. The weeks of analysis and fear we had lived through had already supplied any hope we had of understanding, or had taken away all hope. It came down to an incontrovertible fantasy: Lori cut off her own finger because Kris Kimzo was about to cut off Rudi's head, right there in front of all of us, Rudi, our friend and colleague, was about to die and we were going to live, untouched. There was nothing we could do about the first part of this situation; it was only the second part that we could affect. And as

absurd and surprising as it may sound, and as shocked as we were when it happened, I think all of us—well, I anyway, knew the moment that I heard Lori cry out in pain that she had done what we all wanted to do. Using a kind of reasoning that could not be done with the head. Her reason was without reason, and reason had died already in the jungle. No, the jungle was not where it died. I think it had actually disappeared from the places we respectively dwelled a long time ago, and part of why we were here was an attempt to recapture it, to collect it and preserve it. By making a clear divide between the savage—the people and animals here in the jungle—and us. The rational. But instead of locating a specimen of truth and logic, what we had found was something that was less efficient, less profitable, less reassuring. And not “natural” in any sense. Her act was an act of desperation in the face of even greater desperation, and the two acts rushed against each other like the shockwaves of two explosions, meshing and causing all kinds of havoc along the edges.

We don't know which act of desperation won in the end. Both were ultimately proved to be futile, I guess, simply two more pebbles thrown into the ocean. The net result was zero, as if in the end the two gestures simply merged and cancelled each other out. I watched Kimzo's face during those final moments, and I am in as good a position as anyone to decide whether Sera's paradoxical threat was successful or not. But to me, it didn't seem that Kimzo was actually trying to decide what to do. Whatever was going on in his head just before he died, it didn't seem like it could be decided one way or another.

54 (Dreaming #3) Most dreams will have a spider, even if you never see it. Sometimes spiders will spin incredible things and bits of your dream will get caught like particles of dew in ultraviolet webs. In that case your dream falls apart, or parts of it get reflected around behind themselves like the surface of a dewdrop, or else the whole night gets drugged and soggy like a silk-wrapped soft fruit, and then you won't remember anything. What was that gentle lace on your skin that calm time, that halcyon time in your mind? You won't

remember, until it suddenly travels up your spine like an anachronism: those were eight tiny points on my neck in the morning, and suddenly swallowing doesn't feel uneventful.

The desire-narrative—that is, the narrative instinct that persists despite the presence or absence of linear narrative— can be compared to the phenomenon of waking from a dream and not remembering a thing about the plot of the dream or the characters or setting, but nevertheless being left with a very strong impression of the emotional content of the dream. This is simply the reverse of the third psychoanalytic analogy for writing (after phobia and delusion) and the third way that narrative is neurosis: the narrative—perhaps the novel in particular—is a dream-work, a metaphorization of repressed desires and fears, where everything is upside-down and backwards, as in dreams: a wish becomes a fear, black becomes white, the self becomes the other.

55 (Weaving) A spiderweb is a sturdy construction, but during the course of a day and as various insects get tangled, the web gets mangled and repairs become necessary. Some spiders, orb-weavers for the most part (an orb web is the type most often thought of as a web: it consists of a number of radiating lines connected by a spiral of sticky thread, forming a sort of bull's-eye pattern, at the center of which sits the spider), dismantle their web and construct an identical new one every night, even if the web is in perfect condition. (This activity has quasi-religious overtones to me; it reminds me of a certain temple in Japan which is torn down and rebuilt every five years, identical each time. The difference being that the temple takes five years to complete, so that as soon as it is finished it is destroyed, while the spider makes use of its web for a day at least.) They will choose a spot in a corner or between two blades of grass—somewhere conspicuous enough that prey will wander into it, but out-of-the-way enough that it will not be wrecked by some larger animal bustling through.

Most of my writing—for the novel and for this essay—is done at night, when there are few disturbances. I sleep in the mornings usually, and when I come back to the text in

the evening I discover all the holes that have been revealed by my day-old perspective, and I have to re-write it and make repairs. I want the story to attract attention, but I don't want it to be in the way—that is, I don't want it to be brushed aside by someone on their way to somewhere else. I start with a single thread. The word text itself is derived from the Latin verb *texere*, to weave, and the Latin word *textum* means a web. My late-night quilting of intertextual tissue, and Benjamin's conception of writing as a process of forgetting, both evoke Homer's Penelope and the weaving and nocturnal unravelling she did to delay her suitors during Odysseus' long absence. "So by day I'd weave at my great and growing web / By night, by the light of torches set beside me / I would unravel all I'd done." (Penelope's words to a disguised Odysseus. 19:167-69)

When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting. However, with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting. This is why Proust finally turned his days into nights, devoting all his hours to undisturbed work in his darkened room with artificial illumination, so that none of those intricate arabesques might escape him.

(Walter Benjamin. "The Image of Proust" *Illuminations*. 202)

56 (Which is last) If you've followed a thread all the way through the web to here then it must mean this is the end, and you've either found your way out of the narrative jungle or you've lost yourself along the way. The fact that you have ended up here after touching on 56 intersections of the thread is significant and not entirely coincidental: 56 is the seven parts of the spider's leg—coxa, trochanter, femur, patella, tibia, metatarsus, tarsus—times eight. This essay is on its last legs—its narrative demise approaching fast; by way of conclusion, though, I feel bound to observe that what we have been dealing with from various oblique angles has not been the appendages themselves but rather the pleurae, the sockets from which the appendages emerge and which hold together the carapace and sternum—the spaces in between, in other words.

The abject itself, with which this essay began and which forms the foundation lines for the narrative web of *headless*, is a kind of interstitial state, hovering as it does between life and death, order and disorder, the sacred and profane, attraction and repulsion, fear and

desire. This complicated see-saw of motivations is also the lost-and-reclaimed sublime element of the New Narrative text. Here the in-between-ness manifests itself most significantly in the subject-object divide, which ceases to be so divisive. By flirting with abjection in a text, a writer can hope to effect a compromise between the totalizing xenophobia of the "I" and the disempowerment of absolute objectification: walking the borderline of neurosis to avoid falling into either sanity or madness. "On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogenous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject." (Kristeva 207)

Therefore, death being the necessary prerequisite of meaning in the text, we let the text die. Consider, though, that spiders grow by ecdysis (moulting): the chitinous exoskeleton that covers the spider's body except for the abdomen is rigid and therefore must be periodically cast off as the spider matures. When this is about to happen, it may appear as if the spider is dying. It stops eating and hides itself, while its body darkens and becomes brittle. It may take the spider several days to shed its suit of armour, and in most cases it spends this time suspended from a thread, upside-down. The heartrate speeds up, which increases the pressure in the blue haemolymph. The way the spider will escape from its old self is by using the strength of its heart to crack open the rifts along its side where the carapace and sternum meet, where the legs are joined to the body—the pleurae. The spider emerges slowly from the top of its old shell, cephalothorax first and then abdomen and then the eight legs together: coxa, trochanter, femur, patella, tibia, metatarsus, tarsus. If a leg is lost during the first few moults, it can easily be regenerated. Perhaps what is happening then, as the story splits open the in-between spaces, is a kind of a textual ecdysis, and from the discarded exoskeleton of this project will emerge a new one.

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