Intertextuality and Sociopolitical Engagement in Contemporary Anglophone Women’s Writing

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INTERTEXTUALITY AND SOCIOPOLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY ANGLOPHONE WOMEN’S WRITING

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School, Marquette University, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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My project examines contemporary Anglophone women’s rewriting to locate an emerging mode of intertextuality that defies existing literary categories. Together, the writers in my project present a new and formally innovative intertextuality that rebels against available terminology and requires new ways of reading. This project centers authors from a variety of historical contexts, including the African diaspora and former British colonies, whose intertextuality is grounded in the interrogation of Western forms and conventions. I argue that the rewritings of Ali Smith, Helen Oyeyemi, and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne deploy intertextuality to recuperate women’s experiences while interrogating the mechanisms responsible for their erasure. In each of the works I study, the source text is appropriated and rewritten through a process of interrogation aimed at the ideologies it engenders. I argue that this intertextuality is deeply committed to sociopolitical activism. My methodology draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism to uncover a culturally situated, embodied mode of intertextuality that brings text, reader, and author into dialogue with each other. I argue that the intertextuality employed by each of these authors requires readers to accommodate ambiguity and instability while engaging in a reading practice aimed at dismantling oppressive structures. My project concludes by extending this analysis into the realm of media-activism by exploring the work of artists Janelle Monáe and Elisa Kreisinger. This final chapter locates a nascent moment of female artists using a dialogic mode of intertextuality to create transformative works of digital activism.
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Jackielee Derks, B.A., M.A.

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Helen Oyeyemi’s *Mr. Fox* tells the story of a Yoruba woman who finds herself in a room of her own filled with endless supplies of pen and paper. The woman, whose name is simply Brown, is abandoned by her husband on the streets of Paris after she wishes him dead and pays a witch to bring him back to life. When she first enters the room, she discovers a desk and the remnants of another writer’s work—empty pen cartridges and a wastepaper basket filled with crumpled drafts. Her ancestors haunt her and slip her notes from beyond the grave. They demand: “Write the stories.”¹ When she questions this calling, asking her ancestors what they want from her, they answer: “You are Yoruba.”² She tries to protest, asking, “Am I?” and reminding them she is in Paris and does not even speak the Yoruba language, but her ancestors counter: “Tell the stories…We want to know all the ways you’re still like us, and all the ways you’ve changed…You can and you must…Those stories belong to us. It doesn’t matter what language they’re in, or what they’re about; they belong to us.”³ She finally acquiesces, but only after the promise that her lost husband will be returned to her if she writes the stories. When she sets to work, the words suddenly seem to flow out of her and onto the blank sheets of paper waiting on the desk. She writes story after story, though she does not recognize the people in them or the places in which they are set. When she finishes, she tells her ancestors: “Here are your stories, then. Have them back.”⁴

² Ibid., 104.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid., 107.
With this story, Oyeyemi, a Nigerian-born black woman, writes herself into Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* as Brown. In doing so, she lays claim to Woolf’s tradition and makes it her own. Brown reanimates Woolf’s Mrs. Brown from “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” to confront Woolf’s legacy and expand Woolf’s concern for the material and ideological conditions that stifle female creativity. Much like Woolf’s Mrs. Brown, Oyeyemi’s Brown allows the story to explore the significance and purposes of character. However, Oyeyemi reminds us that Woolf’s room and Mrs. Brown remain within the limits of the British imagination. In an interesting turn, Brown also embodies Oyeyemi’s protagonist, Mary Foxe, who is a muse actualized by her author, St. John. Throughout *Mr. Fox*, Mary and St. John write themselves into a series of short stories by occupying a vast array of characters and plots. Mary’s name gestures to the narrator of Woolf’s book to pull on the inheritance that enables a woman to write. In doing so, Oyeyemi confronts the British lineage that grants Woolf’s Mary the money and freedom to occupy a room of her own. Ultimately, Oyeyemi asserts authorial agency over the image of the woman writer to disentangle this literary inheritance from its racially white and Eurocentric origins. In doing so, *Mr. Fox* makes visible the feelings of alienation and estrangement often faced by Black women writers within Western literature.

Oyeyemi’s story offers a snapshot of a broader trend in contemporary women’s writing. In the 21st century, Anglophone women writers are producing texts that are formally innovative and grounded in a culturally engaged mode of intertextuality. Oyeyemi, for example, engages a vast network of source texts in *Mr. Fox* to trace a genealogy of misogynistic violence beginning with the “Bluebeard” fairy tale and extending into contemporary literature. Specifically, I argue that Oyeyemi uses
Bluebeard’s bloody chamber to excavate the aesthetic violence within literary
conventions and forms. Each of the short stories within Mr. Fox rewrites a canonical text
or framework, engaging it in a form of interrogation. In this way, Mr. Fox is composed of
a series of bloody chambers tied together through the framing narrative of Mary and St.
John. Oyeyemi employs a mode of intertextuality that fractures the novel form to
implicate Western literature in the perpetuation of gender-based violence. Together, the
three writers in my project, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Ali Smith, and Oyeyemi, represent a
broader trend in innovation and intertextuality that rebels against available literary
categories and requires new ways reading.

Oyeyemi’s work intermingles the local Yoruba culture and a fluid, transnational,
multilingual culture to illustrate the inadequacy of existing literary categories. In this
project, I draw from Nigerian, Irish, and Scottish contexts to locate a mode of
intertextuality grounded in the interrogation of Western forms and conventions.
Oyeyemi’s novel Mr. Fox, for example, rewrites a constellation of literary forms and
genres to excavate the violence within Western aesthetics. Specifically, Oyeyemi’s
rewriting traces a lineage of misogynistic aesthetics from the “Bluebeard” fairy tale
through contemporary forms and genres. Ní Dhuibhne juxtaposes an ancient Irish fairy
story with a contemporary rewriting to expose the discursive violence used to silence
women’s reproductive agency. Scottish author Ali Smith rewrites history in a dual
narrative that breaks open the linearity of the novel to create a form of intertextuality that
demands its readers accept instability. The authors I study deploy intertextuality to
recuperate women’s experiences while interrogating the mechanisms responsible for their
erasure. In doing so, they demonstrate how intertextuality can be used to create incredibly innovative literary forms aimed at dismantling oppressive ideological structures.

My Archive

Beginning with the publication of her first short story in 1974 in the *Irish Press*, Ní Dhuibhne has proven to be both a prolific writer and an important voice in contemporary Irish literature. The most established writer to be included in my study, Ní Dhuibhne’s work straddles the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Her writing is often described as feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial—all terms that Ní Dhuibhne herself has used in interviews. Ní Dhuibhne’s work, which includes novels, short stories, poetry, children’s books, drama, and criticism, demonstrates her ability to cross new generic boundaries and write within a diverse set of literary traditions. Ní Dhuibhne, who grew up speaking English and Irish, writes in both to explore the territory of language in modern Ireland. Her work focuses on the specificity of women’s experiences as Irish subjects. In this way, Ní Dhuibhne’s work examines the precarious position of Irish women in a postcolonial and patriarchal society. Her outspoken engagement with feminist ideology and her commitment to examining colonialism’s legacy throughout contemporary Ireland infuse her writing with a sense of political engagement.

Since her first novel, *Free Love and Other Stories*, in 1995, Smith has emerged as one of the leading voices in contemporary British literature. Her work, which currently

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5 Though Smith was born in Inverness, she currently lives and works in Cambridge. And, while she considers herself a Scottish writer, her work is often subsumed under the broader and dominant category of British literature.
includes eleven novels, numerous short stories, and several plays, has garnered worldwide recognition and critical acclaim. As a Scottish, lesbian, and woman, Smith insists that the terms applied to her work are necessary even though she is uneasy with such labels. She is often outspoken about the need for representation and the feminist priorities that shape much of her work. Smith defies traditional literary conventions and insists on experimentation and playfulness. How to Be Both takes Smith’s inventive forms into a space that calls into question the form of published books as static verbal artifacts. The novel’s dual narrative creates a multidimensional representation of time. Smith’s writing also interrogates the power of language to constitute reality. Her use of puns and moments of wordplay, for example, make transparent the immediacy of language. Though Smith’s writing has always been overtly political, in more recent years she has garnered attention for grappling with issues such as climate change, the global pandemic, the Trump presidency, Brexit, and the murder of George Floyd. Her most recent installment in a quartet of novels, Summer, was awarded the Orwell prize for portraying the political upheaval of post-Brexit England during the early days of COVID-19. Smith’s fiction not only captures the sense of turmoil that has pervaded this contemporary moment, but it also engages art to bridge the gap between the personal and political.

Beginning with the publication of her first novel, The Icarus Girl, in 2005, Helen Oyeyemi has been challenging conventions and producing innovative and genre-bending work. A self-described nomad, Oyeyemi left England soon after finishing her A-levels

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and has since resided, often for short stretches of time, in various locations such as Berlin, Budapest, Prague, New York, and even Kentucky. Her novels often occupy fictionalized versions of these cities, including the 1930s high-society version of New York found in Mr. Fox. Oyeyemi has written seven novels, two plays, and a short story collection. Her work is often characterized as both feminist and postcolonial in its engagement with the sociopolitical discourses concerning gender, race, and imperialism. Though she is often included in both British and African anthologies, Oyeyemi’s writing scrutinizes the logic underpinning such compilations and lays claim to a much wider transnational or global literary tradition. Oyeyemi’s work is known for prioritizing fractured and mutable subjectivities over representations of whole or stable identities. Oyeyemi, a Nigerian immigrant, examines trauma as colonialism’s legacy and takes up the liminal positionality that transnational migrants often occupy. In this way, her characters exist at the intersection of national and linguistic identities.

Rewriting

Rewriting has been an important literary technique throughout women’s history because women have always needed to carve a place for themselves among a canon dictated by white men. Contemporary authors such as Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Toni Morrison, and Jeanette Winterson have turned to rewriting to engage the past in a

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8 Oyeyemi’s family immigrated to England from Nigeria when she was a child. Though she is no longer geographical confined to one location, Oyeyemi’s writing is often considered part of a broader movement of immigrant and ethnic writing.
form of feminist critique. Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, first published in 1979, is widely acclaimed for its feminist rewriting of classic fairytales. Winterson’s work deconstructs gender identity and explores female sexuality by rewriting traditional tales. Atwood’s rewriting of the “Bluebeard” fairy tale in “Bluebeard’s Egg” investigates the tension between masculine power and female sexuality within a patriarchal society. Morrison’s work blends together African, American, and European fairy and folk tales to investigate female subjectivity in a racially-stratified, post-slavery world.

Recently, critics have paid attention to the potential for social critique in contemporary women’s rewriting. In *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition*, Gayle Greene argues the feminist rewritings of authors such as Atwood, Doris Lessing, and Margaret Laurence problematizes form as a means of achieving social change. Similarly, in her introduction to *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women’s Fiction*, Linda Anderson notes that the intertextuality in women’s rewriting disrupts the oppressive nature of inherited stories to create space for alternative truths. Alice Ridout’s *Contemporary Women Writers Look Back: From Irony to Nostalgia* also connects the act of rewriting in the works of Atwood, Morrison, Lessing, and Zadie Smith with the problem of women’s literary inheritance. Though Ridout locates these texts’ use of parody, irony, and nostalgia within postmodernism, she does so through Linda Hutcheon, whose work theorizes the apolitical and emotionally detached forms of intertextuality that dominated the twentieth century and has exerted a significant influence on how we theorize history.⁹ When women writers employ rewriting to recuperate their history, tell

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⁹ In their introduction to *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women’s Writing*, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn also turn to Hutcheon’s definition of historiographic metafiction to situate the work of women writers such as Carter, Winterson, and Sarah
their own stories, and assert agency, the result is inherently political. In contemporary women’s writing a clear intersection between women’s revisionist writing and social critique has emerged that calls attention to the politics of rewriting.

Defining Intertextuality

In this project, I argue that the rewritings of Ní Dhuibhne, Smith, and Oyeyemi defy existing definitions and illustrate an emerging mode of intertextuality with a deep commitment to sociopolitical activism. Each of these texts interrogates the ideologies of the works in its intertextual matrix. Ní Dhuibhne’s short story, for example, inserts the ancient fairy story within the contemporary rewriting as fragments of italicized text. This juxtaposition of the two texts collapses the distance between them and foregrounds the fairy tale discourses that permeate the contemporary story’s narrative voice. In doing so, Ní Dhuibhne links these discursive practices with the silencing of infanticide throughout Ireland's history. Each of the textual encounters I study interrogates the source text’s ideologies. Readers are invited to make meaning from fractured or ambiguous narratives. Rather than positioning the reader as Roland Barthes does, as the location where unity is achieved, these works refuse the idea of an author without context or biography. This embodied form of intertextuality fractures the idea of unified meaning. The reader is no longer the site where fragments are made whole. Rather, a culturally situated, embodied reader emerges in the space where a universal reader once stood, and she is left to dwell in the possibilities created by instabilities that will not resolve.

Waters as a means of revising history and examining its dominant ideologies.

My methodology draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism to ultimately reposition intertextuality within current debates about the role of aesthetic forms and sociopolitical activism. Bakhtin’s most important works emerged after his arrest and exile in Stalinist Russia. Returning to his work allows us to frame intertextuality as a device capable of achieving political outcomes—a move that resists some of the major assumptions that have dominated literary criticism since the birth of poststructuralism. In 1969 Bulgarian-French feminist, Julia Kristeva wrote in “Word, Dialogue and Novel” that “every text builds itself as a mosaic of quotations, every text is absorption and transformation of another text.” Kristeva’s work, which she positions as a rewriting of Bakhtin, argues that the “notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and a poetic language is read as at least double.” In a move that anticipates Roland Barthes, Kristeva situates the author as “an absence, a blank space” in which the text exists. Though Kristeva’s work was essential to helping us move beyond images of the male author as a solitary genius, her definition of intertextuality ultimately depoliticizes the study of literature by presenting intertextuality as disembodied from notions of gender, nation, and race. Similarly, in “The Death of the Author,” Barthes echoes Kristeva by insisting that “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composition, oblique space where our subject slips away, where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.” In what would soon become the mantra of poststructuralism, and later postmodernism, Barthes proclaimed the author

12 Ibid., 37.
dead and with him reading practices invested in his identity and intent. Interestingly, much like their own break from structuralist forms of literary criticism, both Kristeva and Barthes position the text, author, and reader as spatial subjects existing exclusively at the expense of each other.

While the poststructuralists used intertextuality to reject the author, gynocentric critics were focused on building a canon that foregrounded women’s contribution to literary history. Such work often positions intertextuality as evidence of women authors grappling with their literary inheritance. In *The Madwoman in the Attic* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that traditional canonicity is determined by a set of literary traits that prioritizes texts authored by men because Western literature traces history through moments of solitary genius originating from Shakespeare and Milton. Gilbert and Gubar’s groundbreaking study not only confronts the assumptions associated with authorial influence, but it also develops a framework for tracing a woman-centered literary history and identifying a gynocentric literary canon. Though this search for a matrilineal literary inheritance foregrounds the figure of the author, the work of gynocentric critics is grounded in a difference-based feminism that has since been displaced by the feminist priorities of equity and equality.

Though often described as postmodern authors, Ní Dhuibhne, Smith, and Oyeyemi present, I argue, a new and formally innovative moment in women’s writing that cannot be adequately defined as such. Specifically, the sense of play, fragmentation, and formal innovation that often characterizes the work of these authors is a far cry from the emotional detachment of typical postmodernism. In this way, my argument takes the critical conversation around Ní Dhuibhne, Smith, and Oyeyemi in a new direction. For
example, Chloé Buckley and Sarah Ilott describe the formal qualities of Oyeyemi’s rewriting as a rhizomatic system, a “rupturing of unified structures or narratives, shattering a seemingly familiar story only to start it up again along new lines.” A similar treatment of intertextuality can be seen in the critical response to Ní Dhuibhne’s work, which is often circumscribed by its associations with postmodernism. Despite the tendency to rely on established paradigms to describe the formal qualities of these texts, critics have noted that each also defies the sense of fragmentation and detachment that radiates from traditional postmodern works. More specifically, many critics have noted the return to affective moments within works of these authors. In this way, critics appear to anticipate the limits of intertextuality’s inherent entanglement with postmodernism.

Chapter Summaries

Throughout this project, I argue that intertextuality can interrogate our forms of knowledge. This activism can be found in both the work itself and the various ways that each rewriting asks its readers to engage in the dismantling of dominant ideologies and structures. Together, the chapters in my project demonstrate how rewriting is a tool for interrogating the governing structures of cultures. Each of the texts in this study violates conventional literary forms. While doing so, however, these authors make space to uncover various types of female knowledge. Ní Dhuibhne, for example, uses intertextuality to excavate the discourses responsible for burying the violence of Ireland’s suppression of women’s reproductive agency. In all three chapters of this project, this

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form of intertextuality recovers women’s knowledge. In this way, my project identifies a new literary form, a type of intertextuality deeply imbued with a sense of cultural and political potential. These texts also insist upon a new mode of reading that remains attentive to both the nature of intertextual dialogue and reinserts the history, culture, and agency of both the writer and her reader. This move, I argue, makes space for context and the reassertion of the author. More specifically, my project investigates the authorial agency asserted within each rewriting as a form of feminist activism.

My first chapter, “Suspicious Narration in Éilís Ni Dhuibhne’s Rewriting of ‘Midwife to the Fairies,’” takes up this argument by examining a short story from Ni Dhuibhne, who often juxtaposes folklore with her own modern narratives. Chapter one makes visible a new form of intertextuality as feminist activism by investigating how Ni Dhuibhne weaves together her own story and various intertexts to bring into contact the Irish cultural discourse of the past and present. In “Midwife to the Fairies,” Ni Dhuibhne splices together the italicized text of a fairy story with a modern rewriting in a move that disrupts the narrative’s cohesiveness, creating a story that transcends both temporal and discursive boundaries. This chapter narrows in on the local to investigate how Irish nationalism uses language to erase women’s experiences. Together, the ancient fairy story and its modern counterpart create a narrative that interrogates the taboos surrounding female reproduction and infanticide in post-colonial Ireland. Adopting a methodology first developed by Joycean scholar Margot Norris, my argument deconstructs the narrative voice in Ni Dhuibhne’s contemporary story to demonstrate how fairy tale discourse is used in Irish society to bury the issue of infanticide—and women’s issues, more generally. Specifically, I argue that this juxtaposition reveals the
function of fairy legend as a bloodless euphemism that Ireland continues to use to rid itself of its own violence. Ni Dhuibhne exchanges narrative coherence for a literary form that brings together both source and intertext in a subversive dialogic exchange.

The intertextuality within each of the texts included in my study essentially trains readers in a radical practice of reading that suspends the search for stable meaning in favor of a form of open instability that can subvert the power of contemporary governing ideologies. Ni Dhuibhne’s deconstruction of the narrative voice in “Midwife to the Fairies” largely depends on the reader’s ability to analyze the narrative voice’s discursive strategies. Not only must audiences be aware of Irish colloquialisms and rhetoric, but readers must also actively question the narrator’s agenda. Reading the narrative voice’s gaps, omissions, and circumlocutions reveals the ways that Irish discursive practices reinforce patriarchal authority and silence women’s experiences. More specifically, Ni Dhuibhne’s rewriting brings the ancient fairy story in dialogue with contemporary discourses surrounding infanticide to show how the mythic language of fairy tales is used as a coping strategy. In other words, the fairy tale is an alibi that allows the whole country to participate in a form of willful ignorance—a practice for which Ireland’s women pay the price. To accomplish this work, Ni Dhuibhne’s rewriting requires us to read within the gaps, omissions, and turns of the narrative voice. This type of reading is suspicious in that it seeks to uncover the narrator’s agenda. The process of reading “Midwife to the Fairies,” however, not only reveals this hidden agenda, but it also forces readers to confront their own discursive practices and their willingness to participate in erasure of women’s agency. In doing so, “Midwife to the Fairies,” engages readers in the
process of interrogating the violence hidden within Ireland’s discursive practices while simultaneously implicating readers in that violence.

In my second chapter, “Unfixing History and Rewriting Art in Ali Smith’s How to Be Both,” I explore how Smith intertwines two stories: a rewriting of fifteenth-century Italian painter Francesco del Cossa’s life and a modern coming-of-age tale. Though these two narratives are sequential in terms of setting, Smith demanded that How To Be Both be printed in two alternating versions—one beginning with the Renaissance story and one with the contemporary. The historic narrative explores the possibility that del Cossa was actually a queer woman passing as a man to paint professionally with the great masters of fifteenth-century Italy. Alternately, the contemporary section of How To Be Both grapples with this revision and its broader implications for Western modes of historiography. One section of the text puts forth a revisionist history while the other simultaneously undermines that narrative. Specifically, as I argue in this chapter, Smith’s text employs a mode of rewriting that unsettles fact and the infallibility of history while simultaneously refusing to replicate those ideologies by asserting a similarly cohesive and stable counter-narrative. In this way, How To Be Both participates in the broader project of reinserting both women and queer sexuality back into history’s grand narratives while also refusing the methodologies responsible for their erasure. Ultimately, I argue that Smith’s novel demonstrates how form can accommodate instability and the potential inherent in viewing history as a site of multiple, and at times contradictory, truths.

For Smith, the full extent of the novel’s meaning can only be understood by a reader willing to accommodate ambiguity. The novel’s form requests this first and
 foremost through its dual publication—Smith had the book printed in two versions, each beginning with one of the novel’s two stories. The material conditions of the book, therefore, ensure that people are reading different stories. Smith’s novel expands the text’s narrative possibilities, however, by having both stories intertwine to suggest various possible meanings. In this way, the novel invites multiple readings. For example, there is a moment when both sections of the novel converge through one of Francesco del Cossa’s paintings. This moment can be found at the end of one story and the beginning of the other. As if looking through the painting, the characters, Francescho, the ghost of a famous Renaissance painter, and George, a contemporary adolescent, can almost see each other. In this way, the novel collapses time so that both characters are only in the present. However, the novel also brings the reader into this moment by asking us to look through the art as well—to see the multiple, overlapping, and intertwining moments within both narratives as happening simultaneously and to think historically in a new, non-linear way.

The third chapter of my project, “Excavating Bluebeard’s Bloody Chamber in Helen Oyeyemi’s Mr. Fox,” focuses on the fairy tale and mystical intertexts that resonate in both Jane Eyre and Oyeyemi’s rewriting. I argue that Brontë’s novel turns to the “Bluebeard” fairy tale to excavate the link between the forced incarceration of women in mental asylums and coverture law. Furthermore, I argue that the bloody chamber metaphor allowed Brontë to confront this phenomenon in coded language appropriate for Victorian sensibilities. Though coverture no longer exists, Oyeyemi’s text borrows the bloody chamber metaphor to demonstrate how the systems that predicated women’s legal

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15 Three writers that Brontë was familiar with, Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer Lytton, and William Makepeace Thackeray, threatened their wives with allegations of lunacy.
subjugation continue to manifest in our contemporary moment. Particularly, as I argue in this chapter, Oyeyemi’s text uses the short story form and a constellation of intertexts, from Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Perault’s “Bluebeard” to more recent adaptations such as Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, to confront the violence inherent in overly romanticized embodiments of female mutilation. In doing so, Oyeyemi embraces Brontë’s mysticism and uses the bloody chamber as a means of transformation, a way to deconstruct the cynicism that pervades contemporary discussions about the portrayal of violence against women in art and literature.

Chapter Three of this project expands this concept of active reading by examining how Oyeyemi implicates the reader in a form of willful ignorance. Specifically, this chapter argues that Oyeyemi pulls authors into her text to engage readers in the excavation of aesthetic violence throughout Western literature. The main target of this rewriting is the male author, who often participates in an aesthetics based on female mutilation and gender-based violence. However, Oyeyemi’s novel also rewrites two iconic women’s texts: Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and du Maurier’s *Rebecca*. In doing so, Oyeyemi demonstrates how women authors often benefit from and reinforce misogynistic forms of aesthetic violence. In this chapter, I argue that *Mr. Fox* recreates Bluebeard’s bloody chamber through a series of short stories that each confronts a major author or work in Western literature. In doing so, the novel implicates readers in both the production and reception of this violence. More specifically, the novel opens the doors of these chambers to confront readers with the knowledge buried within. In doing so, the novel invites readers into each of these rooms to confront our accountability in perpetuating masculine forms of violence.
I conclude my project by extending my argument beyond literary texts into popular forms of twenty-first-century media. Beginning with Janelle Monáe’s emotion picture “Dirty Computer” and moving into the feminist remixes of media artist Elisa Kreisinger, my conclusion considers how contemporary female artists across media participate in the intertextual activism of Ni Dhuibhne, Smith, and Oyeyemi. These films suggest a politically committed form of dialogic intertextuality through experiments in multimodality. Specifically, I argue that both Monáe and Kreisinger extend the play with form that my previous chapters identified in literature by weaving separate individual “texts” into innovative cinematic narratives. Monáe’s “Dirty Computer,” for example, mixes a series of short music videos into an overarching frame narrative to create a film that draws on the work of feminist writers and artists such as Naomi Wolf, Carolee Schneemann, Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, Mary Beard, and Toni Morrison. Monáe’s multimedia intertextuality lays bare and challenges the systems that predicate sexism and racism. Monáe and Kreisinger are part of a nascent moment of female creators using a dialogic mode of intertextuality to transform contemporary media and confront an ever-growing list of social and political injustices.

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At the end of Oyeyemi’s novel, Mary Foxe returns once again to empower us to disrupt the limiting structures that govern society. To do so, Oyeyemi claims the lighthouse as a symbol of female creativity. This particular lighthouse is part of St. John’s familial inheritance and has been passed down through generations. For St. John, the lighthouse’s maintenance and upkeep are a burden that he struggles to maintain. In this way, the novel acknowledges literary inheritance as a masculine phenomenon. However,
Mary claims the lighthouse as the site of her own liberation. Specifically, she frees herself from St. John’s control and becomes a living woman. In an interesting move, the lighthouse is also where St. John’s wife, Daphne, begins to pursue her own intellectual life. Within this space, Oyeyemi breaks away from Woolf’s image of the female writer working in isolation. In place of Woolf’s room, Oyeyemi’s lighthouse emerges as a newly reformed space for female creativity—a beacon that calls women into community.
Chapter One

Suspicious Narration in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne’s Rewriting of “Midwife to the Fairies”

In an interview with The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies, Irish author Éilís Ní Dhuibhne explains how her introduction to feminist theory forever altered her approach to writing: “I began to write exclusively about women from that point. I began to focus on specifically female experiences. I took an interest in rewriting or re-inventing women’s history, a history which had been largely unwritten. But the most significant effect, by far, of feminism on me was that it convinced me that it was important that I write.”¹⁶ This statement suggests that, at least for her, both the product and the act of writing itself are feminist activities. Ní Dhuibhne, who writes in both the English and Irish languages, often focuses on the specificity of women’s experiences as Irish subjects. In this way, her work examines the precarious position of Irish women in a postcolonial and patriarchal society. And yet, while clearly invested in recovering women’s stories, her work also positions the acts of reading and writing as potential sites for ideological agency.

This chapter investigates the connections amongst language, form, and politics to argue that the intertextuality in Ní Dhuibhne’s short story, “Midwife to the Fairies,” interrogates the sociopolitical discourses responsible for silencing women’s experiences, especially those concerning reproduction. “Midwife to the Fairies” is a retelling of a traditional Irish story about a midwife who is called to upon by a fairy man to deliver a

In the contemporary rewriting, a midwife, Mary, recounts the unusual circumstances surrounding a delivery after the baby is found dead. I argue that Ní Dhuibhne juxtaposes this ancient fairy story with her modern rewriting to demonstrate how fairy tale discourses are used to bury the issue of infanticide deep within the country’s collective social consciousness. My argument deconstructs the narrative voice in Ní Dhuibhne’s contemporary retelling to expose the fairy story as an internalized mechanism that reinforces patriarchal authority. I argue that the narrative voice turns to the fairy myth in an attempt to simultaneously deflect responsibility and bury the issue of infanticide out of the public’s sight. The juxtaposition of these two stories, the ancient and the new, creates a dialogic exchange that links the phenomenon of infanticide with the mythic language of changeling tales. In doing so, the story exposes infanticide as a social problem that Ireland would rather silence than address. Thus, the fairy tale acts as an alibi—a way for the entire country to participate in a form of willful ignorance. In this chapter, I argue that Ní Dhuibhne’s intertextuality excavates this knowledge to reveal the violence hidden within Irish society’s sociopolitical discourses.

Ní Dhuibhne’s work often blurs the boundaries amongst traditional literary categories to examine the specificity of women’s experiences in post-colonial Ireland. Since the publication of her first short story, Ní Dhuibhne has written fiction, drama, children’s literature, and criticism using several pseudonyms.18 Though at times her

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17 “Midwife to the Fairies” was first published in Blood and Water in 1988 and later republished in a collection of the same name, Midwife to the Fairies, in 2003. This chapter cites the 2003 edition.
18 According to Rebecca Pelan, Ní Dhuibhne also publishes her work using various pseudonyms: “Éilís Ní Dhuibhne for her fiction and drama (first used on publication of her story, ‘Blood and Water’ in 1983), Éilís Ní Dhuibhne-Almqvist (her married name) for much of her folkloric work, and Elizabeth O’Hara for her children’s books.”
reasons for doing so are purely practical (she chose Elizabeth O’Hara for her children’s fiction, for example, because it is easier for a younger audience to pronounce than her Irish name), these various identities represent Ní Dhuibhne’s fluidity as an author—her uneasiness with being locked into a single authorial mode. This sense of expressiveness also characterizes Ní Dhuibhne’s engagement with language and form. Specifically, Ní Dhuibhne, who is multilingual, writes in both the English and Irish languages in order to explore the tensions between these linguistic modes. Her background as a folklorist also infuses much of her writing with traces of ancient Irish stories and legends.  

In these ways, Ní Dhuibhne’s work explores how “Irish nationalism constitutes a backlash against everything that’s British, but has produced a terribly rigidly Catholic, censorial, punitive society which evolved after independence and which most people now would have enormous problems with.”  

Much of Ní Dhuibhne writing examines how this national identity intersects with the cultural construction of femininity and the repressive sociopolitical discourses surrounding women’s reproductive and bodily autonomy. In these ways, Ní Dhuibhne’s work, which often preserves Irish identity by resurrecting its language and folklore, simultaneously interrogates the ways in which this past continues to circumscribe women’s experiences in contemporary Ireland.

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Dhuibhne also published some of her early work under the name Elizabeth Dean. Rebecca Pelan, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne: Perspectives (Galway: Arlen House, 2009), 14-15.

19 Ní Dhuibhne conducted research at the Folklore Institute in the University of Copenhagen from 1978-9 and more recently with the National Folklore Collection (NFC) at the University of Dublin, where she also teaches creative writing.

20 Though many critics and writers are uncomfortable labeling Ireland as a postcolonial nation due to its geographic proximity to England as well its racial and ethnic similarities, Ní Dhuibhne argues that Irish identity must be understood in terms of its resistance to British colonialism. Caitriona Moloney and Helen Thompson, Irish Women Writers Speak Out: Voices from the field (New York: Syracuse UP, 2003), 115.
Throughout the short story, Ní Dhuibhne splices italicized excerpts of the ancient fairy legend within her own contemporary retelling. The visual effect of the alternating texts disrupts the narrative’s cohesiveness, creating a story that transcends both temporal and discursive boundaries. Specifically, this juxtaposition collapses the distance between these two discursive forms to foreground the ways in which contemporary rhetoric pulls on the mythic language of fairy stories to silence women’s experiences. Both stories are about a midwife that is called upon by a man in the middle of the night to attend an unusual birth in a rural home. In the ancient story, the woman unknowingly attains the ability to see through the magic that disguises the fairies as humans. The story ends when the midwife recognizes the fairies sometime later and the man who originally called on her pokes her eye out as punishment. The contemporary tale that Ní Dhuibhne crafts parallels both the plot and structure of the fairy story. Told through the voice of Mary, a nurse’s aide and practicing midwife, the story details how her evening is disrupted when a stranger knocks on her door and insists that she accompany him to help with a birth at a rural home. Mary’s narration recounts the uncanny circumstances surrounding the delivery and the subsequent death of an infant. Throughout this testimony, Mary pulls on the discursive strategies and mythic language of the fairy story in an attempt to deny any culpability for the infant’s death. Instead of confronting the many social factors that contributed to this tragedy, Mary’s testimony instead obfuscates these realities by alluding to the ancient changeling myth. In doing so, Mary’s narration foregrounds the ways that such myths work to silence and marginalize women’s experiences.

As one of Ní Dhuibhne’s earliest and most well-known works, “Midwife to the Fairies” is often recognized for its feminist revision of Irish myth. In such cases, the
recuperation of the Irish fairy myth inserts a type of female agency that is grounded in the association between midwifery and a secret form of female knowledge. Critics such as Caitriona Moloney and Anne Fogarty, for example, credit the fairy legend with contrasting a more woman-centered narrative with one that foregrounds the exclusion of women from contemporary public discourses. Fogarty goes so far as to link the taboos surrounding pregnancy, birth, and infanticide with fairy activity—a tendency that continues well into the modern era. Similarly, Tudor Balinisteanu reads the juxtaposition of the folktale and the contemporary story as evidence of women’s subjugation, particularly in matters of reproduction and female health. While such critics focus on what the ancient fairy story offers Ní Dhuibhne’s rewriting, Jacqueline Fulmer reads the juxtaposition of the two stories as a narrative strategy meant to manipulate readers into examining their own reactions to the issue of infanticide.

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21 In his study of the “Midwife to the Fairies” tale type, folklorist Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh discusses the types of knowledge that traditional midwives were trained in: a midwife was generally an older woman “who had accumulated her experience over a lifetime of service to those around her. She was often unpaid in her work or received only the little that her grateful neighbors could afford…the midwife was required to be skilled not only in the mechanics of birth, but also the art of holistic medicine. To this end a working knowledge of herbal remedies and preparations was essential.” According to Mac Cárthaigh, “Midwife to the Fairies” connects the knowledge of the midwife with the authority of fairy legends more generally, which constitute a mythological system or fairy faith. Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, “Midwife to the Fairies: A Migratory Legend,” Master’s Thesis (University College, Dublin, 1988): 28-9.


23 Fogarty, “Preface,” xi.


doing so, Fulmer frames Ní Dhuibhne’s technique as a trick played on readers to force them into confronting their own complicity in Ireland’s infanticide problem. My own reading builds on this body of feminist criticism but focuses on the dialogic relationship between Ní Dhuibhne’s story and its source to argue this intertextuality exposes the sociopolitical function of fairy tale discourse in contemporary Ireland. By focusing on the narrator’s deliberate attempts to exonerate herself, my argument deconstructs the narrative’s rhetorical strategies to link the ancient language of fairy faith to the contemporary discourses responsible for silencing women’s experiences and concealing the issue of infanticide.

My methodology draws upon an unexpected source for deconstructing the narrative voice in Dhuibhne’s retelling. In *Suspicious Readings of Joyce’s Dubliners*, Margot Norris analyzes the narrative voice’s gaps, omissions, and misleading prompts, focusing on what the narrator chooses to include or leave out as evidence of its underlying agenda. Focusing on the narration throughout *Dubliners*, Norris argues that “cultural norms and values are mobilized in a variety of rhetorical practices that speak to readers configured in certain relations to the narration and to the other figures in the story.”

A suspicious reading deconstructs these rhetorical moves to reveal a counter-discourse, which opens up an oppositional meaning that conflicts with what the narrative voice actually says. Norris’ reading of “Clay,” for example, reveals a narrative voice characterized by a language of desire.

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27 Ibid., 10.
28 Ibid., 7.
the story as Maria desires it to be told—with all the importance that society otherwise
denies an old maid like her.29 This method of reading, Norris argues, becomes an ethical
act when the stories in *Dubliners* reflect that judgement back onto the reader. A
suspicious reading of “Clay” does so by allowing “us to see the blind spots in Maria’s
story and, in them, to see ourselves as their cause, if not their instrument.”30

Ni Dhuibhne’s narrator in “Midwife to the Fairies” presents us with a similar type
of narrative blindness—one that echoes the violence of the fairy legend—to also
implicate the reader in the story’s ethical dilemma. Specifically, I argue that Mary
attempts to pull on her reader’s sympathy to construct the narrative that she desires: Mary
would like us to exonerate her, to see her as an innocent bystander rather than an
accomplice in the infant’s death. Like the narrators’ double-voiced discourses in Joyce’s
*Dubliners*, Mary turns to colloquialisms and relies on coded language to obfuscate the
truth and mislead her audience.31 The story’s narration is also riddled with gaps and
omissions that, upon further examination, offer insight into Mary’s agenda and the
patriarchal ideologies she has internalized. My argument, then, connects this suspicious
reading with the fairy tale intertexts to interrogate the discourses used by Irish society to
bury the issue of infanticide. In doing so, I begin with a suspicious reading of the text’s

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29 Ibid., 14.
30 Ibid., 140.
31 Though many critics allude to the connection, Laura Lojo Rodriguez argues that Ni
Dhuibhne’s use of the short story form follows in the tradition of Joyce’s *Dubliners*. See
Laura Lojo Rodriguez, “Voices From the Margins: Éilis Ni Dhuibhne’s Female
Perspective in ‘The Pale Gold of Alaska and Other Stories,’” *Nordic Irish Studies* 10
178. For more on Ni Dhuibhne and the short story, especially as a form defined by male
writers, see Elke D’hoker, “Double Visions: The Metafictional Stories of Éilis Ni
Dhuibhne, Anne Enright and Emma Donoghue,” *Irish Women Writers and the Modern
language to ultimately reveal how Ní Dhuibhne’s intertextuality links ancient fairy faith with the contemporary discourses responsible for silencing women’s experiences. The juxtaposition of the ancient discourse with the contemporary, I argue, reveals the function of the fairy legend as a bloodless euphemism that Irish culture continues to use to rid itself of its own violence.

The Fairy Legend

Ní Dhuibhne’s rewriting of the ancient “Midwife to the Fairies” tale foregrounds the role of mythic discourse in maintaining Ireland’s image as a virtuous and morally just nation. Throughout Irish history, folklore and myths have served the discursive function of communicating society’s values and norms through a complicated system of symbols and motifs. In her work on Irish oral tradition, Angela Bourke compares the body of fairy legends to a database from which a particular story’s images work as retrieval codes for a vast archive of social knowledge. In a historic sense, these stories helped individuals survive by instructing them on the laws of nature and the social expectations of the community. Throughout time, though, they have worked to maintain an archaic discursive system—a form of indirect speech that reinforces the community’s rigid sense of morality. In her work on the Bridget Cleary case, Bourke explains that fairy legends function as a “way of handling social deviance and stigma, a vocabulary and system of metaphor through which to contain the sort of tensions that Victorian administrators preferred to house in grim four-story buildings.”

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33 Angela Bourke, “Reading a Woman's Death: Colonial Text and Oral Tradition in
gendered: menstruation, childbirth, postpartum depression, infanticide. Though Bourke’s remark specifically refers to the 19th century, her point that fairy stories conveniently silence issues surrounding women’s experiences continues to apply to contemporary Ireland. Furthermore, fairy tale discourse not only enables this silence, but it also circumscribes the meaning of such experiences to prevent them from being fully realized within the public’s consciousness.

The “Midwife to the Fairies” legend that Ní Dhuibhne rewrites suppresses issues related to crisis pregnancies and infanticide using the metaphor of the fairy changeling. Referring to this fairy legend, Ní Dhuibhne explains “stories about infanticide, whether metaphorical, as in the case of the “Midwife to the Fairies” or the “Changeling” legend, or literal but hushed, form part of the hidden history of women, in Ireland, and of course everywhere.” In other words, “Midwife to the Fairies” silences the issue of infanticide by burying it within the logic and discursive function of the changeling myth. According to fairy lore, the fairies were not able to reproduce on their own, so they often abducted women and children and left changelings in their place. The changeling looked like the original but often behaved erratically and failed to thrive, eventually passing away entirely. As a socially constructed myth, the changeling accounts for the unusual

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*Nineteenth-Century Ireland,* Feminist Studies 21.3 (1995): 579. Bridget Clearly was an Irish woman who was murdered by her husband in 1895. Her husband claimed that Bridget was abducted by fairies and the woman he killed was really a changeling. Several factors are said to have contributed to the belief that Bridget was a changeling, including her sense of independence and her profession as a dressmaker. When she became ill with bronchitis, Bridget’s husband and father accused her of being a changeling and tried several remedies to bring back the real Bridget. The last, which was setting her on fire, eventually led to Bridget’s death. For more on the Bridget Clearly case, see Bourke’s “Reading a Woman’s Death” and *The Burning of Bridget Cleary.*

34 St. Peter, “Negotiating the Boundaries,” 71.
circumstances surrounding the death of a pregnant woman or her child.35 However, Bourke clarifies that changelings were often blamed for all sorts of socially unacceptable behavior, including anything from a woman’s rebelliousness to the threat a new infant posed to a family already struggling to survive. In such cases, the changeling served the functional role of rationalizing the violence and murder that sometimes results from the pressure to either assimilate to social expectations or dispose of an unwanted child.36 In containing such events within the vocabulary of metaphor and myth, women’s issues such as abortion and infanticide—and the larger social conditions that contribute to them—are essentially buried and left unacknowledged.

The fairy legend that Ní Dhuibhne weaves into her contemporary story begins when a nameless midwife is called upon one evening by a man seeking help with a woman’s labor and delivery.37 The human midwife, unaware that the man is really a fairy in disguise, is taken on horseback to a dwelling some ways away from her own home. When they enter the house, the midwife notices a group of people eating and drinking

35 According to Mac Cárthaigh, the period of time surrounding the birth of a child was full of anxiety for the community because labor and deliver were often full of risk. Even with good care, women and children would often die due to natural causes. In such cases, the changeling myth explained the tragedy. Mac Cárthaigh, “Midwife to the Fairies,” 31-33.
36 Bourke, “Reading a Woman’s Death,” 571.
37 In the acknowledgments to Blood and Water, where “Midwife to the Fairies” was initially published, Ní Dhuibhne explains that the fairy story she used was translated from a manuscript that is housed in the Department of Irish Folklore at University College, Dublin. According to Mac Cárthaigh, “63 versions of the legend have so far been recorded in Ireland, the majority of these coming from the archives of the Department of Irish Folklore and the remainder from published works of the last 150 years.” Mac Cárthaigh goes on to explain that the “Midwife to the Fairies” story “has been recorded in many parts of Europe and the Middle East.” However, it was officially titled and identified as one of 26 separate fairy legends in Reidar Th. Christiansen’s 1958 index The Migratory Legends where it was assigned the number 5070. Mac Cárthaigh, “Midwife to the Fairies: A Migratory Legend,” 2.
while the woman in labor lies in a corner of the main room. Ní Dhuibhne does not include details about the birth or how the midwife gains the ability to see through the fairies’ disguise; however, the versions of the story that most closely align with the excerpts included in “Midwife to the Fairies” explain that the midwife is given an ointment to anoint the newly born baby, and she unknowingly rubs it in her eye. In many versions of the story, the ointment’s magic instantly grants the midwife the ability to see through the facade that the fairies have constructed. She notices that what appears to be a grand home is actually a poor and dilapidated dwelling. Despite this unsettling realization, the midwife is returned home without being discovered. However, as Ní Dhuibhne’s version of “Midwife to the Fairies” explains, the woman happens upon the fairies sometime later on her way to a local fair. When she sees the man who called upon her, she inquires about his wife, the woman who gave birth to the baby. Furious at being recognized, the fairy man asks the midwife which eye it is that she is able to see him with. When she tells him that it is her right eye, the man strikes her with his stick, knocking her eye from her head. Here, Ní Dhuibhne’s story abruptly ends with the fairy man exclaiming, “You’ll never see me again as long as you live.”

Though on the surface this story is about a midwife who survives her encounter with fairies, reading deeper into the changeling associations reveals the story’s role in silencing women’s experiences. The woman in labor is clearly a human who has been abducted by the fairies in order to steal her unborn child. Thus, this story pulls on the

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40 Ibid., 30.
changeling myth to serve the social function of explaining the disappearance of a local woman and the subsequent loss of her pregnancy or death of the infant. The midwife in this story identifies the fairies, though, and in doing so threatens the silence surrounding abortion and infanticide. In such cases, speaking the truth will break down the social structures that govern the entire nation’s sense of morality. Ní Dhuibhne connects this ancient function of the midwife tale with Ireland’s sense national virtue:

The controversy about abortion in Ireland is one which has interested and angered me, as it has many women. Abortion is still illegal in Ireland. The position of the right suggests that abortion has never occurred in this country and cannot be allowed now. Sources indicate, however, that even if abortion was not practiced much here, infanticide was common, and exposure of infants occurs even today. There is, as invariably in Ireland where any sexual issue is concerned, a stark contrast between the official version of things and the true story.41

Thus, the “Midwife to the Fairies” legend serves the important sociopolitical function of burying the truth about abortion and infanticide, essentially erasing the nation’s violent history. In containing these experiences within the vocabulary of metaphor and myth, these issues are kept safely out of the public’s consciousness so that Ireland might maintain a facade of moral righteousness.

While fairy legends are treated as informal or colloquial expressions in contemporary Irish society, they continue to maintain a tenacious hold on the public psyche. These stories are often adapted to a teller’s specific circumstances—dates and locations are changed and characters are sometimes named after the teller’s acquaintances—but the core of the story remains intact. The act of telling a fairy story, then, pulls on this deeply embedded system of metaphor and symbolism to establish the storyteller’s credibility. Bourke points out that listeners appear gullible to the tale’s less

41 St. Pete, Negotiating the Boundaries,” 71.
believable parts in exchange for hearing a good story. More importantly, though, both the teller and the audience are initiated into a type of double-speak which allows them to simultaneously believe and not believe. To illustrate this phenomenon, Bourke recounts an anecdote about an American anthropologist who is said to have asked an Irish woman “whether she really believed in fairies.” According to Bourke, the woman responds, “I do not, Sir, but they’re there!” The woman’s answer, which expresses both an affirmation of fairy existence and a denial, illustrates the ways in which these legends operate outside traditional boundaries. According to Bourke, “This ability of fairy legends to deal with so much of the betwixt-and-between – the liminal, the marginal, and the ambiguous, weather in time, in the landscape, or in social relations – makes them important cognitive tools.” In other words, fairy legends continue to hold a legitimate function within Irish discourse because they allow individuals to believe and not believe at the same time—or to speak while actually saying nothing at all.

Mary’s Suspicious Narration

A key feature of the mythic discourse Mary appropriates is the ultimate authority of a patriarchal figure. In the ancient tale, the male fairy oversees the summoning of the midwife and is responsible for her journey to and from the fairy home. By dictating the terms by which the midwife is included, the male agent asserts his authority over an

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43 Ibid., 31.
44 Ibid.
otherwise female-centered experience. In the contemporary narrative, the man who calls on Mary is also responsible for overseeing the conditions of the birth. According to Mary’s description, the man was not more than eighteen or nineteen years old, and yet he takes control of the situation, insisting that Mary come and then hurrying her along. The man, whom Mary later identifies as Sean O’Toole, also makes sure to immediately emphasize that he is married to the laboring woman—an assertion that ultimately raises suspicion given the circumstances. Once they arrive at the home, Sean passes Mary off to the household’s women, but once again takes command when it’s time to return her home.

At the end of the ancient fairy story, the male fairy that summoned the midwife blinds her in an act that is meant to both punish her and reaffirm his dominion over the entire episode. Similarly, Mary explains that after the baby she delivered is found dead and the mother is taken in for questioning, she is threatened by a man that resembled Sean: “He just pulled out a big huge knife out of his breast pocket and pointed it at my stomach. He put the heart crossways in me. And then he says, in a real low voice, like a gangster in *Hill Street Blues* or something: ‘Keep your mouth shut. Or else!’”46 Though Mary walks away from this incident without any physical harm, she is successfully silenced by the man’s violent intimidation. In both stories male authority is reaffirmed to prevent the midwife from speaking out and threatening the social silence surrounding infanticide.

Though Sean’s threat is enough to ensure Mary’s silence, her story demonstrates how male authority dictates almost every facet of her experience. From the beginning, Mary’s husband, Joe, establishes himself as the patriarchal figure in their household by answering the door and removing the chain to allow Sean inside. This is especially

46 Ní Dhuibhne, “Midwife to the Fairies,” 29.
interesting because Mary insists that keeping the chain on the door is the key to staying safe. She mentions a woman from a few towns away that was “hacked to pieces at ten o’clock in the morning” in her own home. As a woman, Mary understands that little acts of self-defense can be the difference between life and death. Joe, however, thinks nothing of undoing the chain and allowing Sean inside, simultaneously asserting himself as the keeper of the house and undermining Mary’s concerns. Later when Mary reads about the infant’s death in the local newspaper, Joe vehemently tells her to stay out of it: “Keep your mouth shut, woman…You did your job and were paid for it. This is none of your business.” According to Joe, Mary’s role as a woman is simply to see to the birth—everything that comes after is the business of men, including the issue of the baby’s death. Though Joe’s comment is clearly not violent, it does contain a threatening undertone that infantilizes Mary and prevents her from speaking out. As the official investigation into the baby’s death draws out, Mary finds she must absolve her conscience by telling her story to the Garda. Though her testimony is finally heard, the sergeant ultimately silences her one last time by failing to take down her statement. In each of these scenarios, patriarchal authority ultimately controls Mary’s actions and suppresses her attempts to speak.

Mary’s narrative also reveals how male authority dominates the social discourse surrounding women’s medical experiences. This is most evident in Mary’s dismissal of her patient’s health issues: “I’ve no belief in that pre-menstrual tension and post-natal depression and what have you.” Mary, herself a practicing nurse’s aide, is very much

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47 Ibid., 23.
48 Ibid., 22.
aware of women’s suffering, but refuses to validate such experiences by recognizing them as medical illnesses. She goes on to further undermine her female patients by alluding to the belief that women are hysterical: “I’ll say one thing for male patients, there’s none of this depression carry-on with them. Of course they all think they’re dying, oh dying, of sore toes and colds in the head and anything at all, but it’s easier to put up with than the post-natals. I’m telling no lie.”

Though she mocks her male patients for their exaggerated response to the simplest ailments, Mary frames depression as malady that only women are susceptible. Acknowledging the ailments of her female patients would mean breaking the silence surrounding the darker side of women’s experiences. Instead, these women are demeaned and ridiculed for succumbing to what society has determined is a female weakness of the mind and body. Furthermore, Mary’s aversion to these types of gendered illnesses mimics the discourse and practices of a male-dominated medical profession, which has a history of infantilizing women and writing their suffering off as hysteria. Mary’s discourse not only reinforces these views, but it also demonstrates how patriarchal authority has been coopted by the very women it works to oppress.

Though Mary clearly attempts to uphold male authority throughout her narrative, a suspicious reading aimed at the gaps and misleading prompts reveals a tension between her own agency and the myths she has internalized. This tension is perhaps most evident when she speaks about her nine-to-five nursing job at the hospital and her matrilineal role as a midwife. Mary’s reaction to being fetched to deliver the baby emphasizes the demarcation between her profession and her unofficial role as community midwife. Mary

49 Ibid., 23.
admits, “I felt annoyed, I really did. The way people make use of you! You’d think there was no doctors or something. I’m supposed to be a nurse’s aide, to work nine to five, Monday to Friday, except when I’m on nights. But do you think the crowd around here can get that into their heads? No way.” 50 Instead of viewing midwifery as a role she serves as part of community, she feels taken advantage of, inconvenienced by neighbors who seek out her help instead of going to the hospital. She further emphasizes the fact that she is a professional aide when she tells Sean “I’m off duty, you know, and anyway what you need is the doctor.” 51 Mary’s statement defers to male authority it several ways: first, Mary minimizes the midwife’s knowledge by suggesting that the doctor is a better option. In doing so, she diminishes the body of knowledge passed down amongst generations of midwives and prioritizes instead to the professional expertise of the obstetrician. 52 Second, Mary submits her role to the governing structures enforced by the hospital. In other words, being a midwife is an identity, a social role that is not regulated by the clock; however, Mary’s participation in labor and delivery has been reduced to a nine-to-five job serving that ultimately serves male authority.

Despite her attempts to reinforce patriarchal discourses concerning female medical experiences, Mary unwittingly compromises this position as she becomes

50 Ibid., 23.
51 Ibid., 25.
52 According to Sandra Ryan, around the beginning of the 20th century, childbirth was identified as a previously untapped area of medicine and soon became a lucrative profession for the emerging specialization of obstetrics. As physicians gained notoriety and opened clinics around Ireland, they displaced the midwife within the community. Many openly sought to discredit midwifery as a practice or went so far as to seek legal action to prevent midwives from practicing. Sandra Ryan, “Interventions in Childbirth: The Midwives’ Role.” Women and Irish Society: A Sociological Reader. Ed. Anne Byrne and Madeleine Leonard. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1997. 256-7.
increasingly wrapped up in the of telling her story. As Mary’s narrative voice gains a conspiratorial quality, the professional nurse’s aide is revealed as a public image in tension with Mary’s more private self. In defense of her decision to attend the birth, Mary discloses that the local maternity ward was closed, so women were forced to deliver at the general hospital. She attempts to make light of this situation by telling Sean:

“Well…closing maternity wards won’t stop them having babies.”

Sean does not appear to get the joke, but Mary’s remark discloses her own doubt in the hospital’s ability to accommodate the community’s needs. Mary agrees to go with Sean but appeals to the reader with the question “What else could I say?”

Mary then goes on to acknowledge that being a midwife is a sacred duty passed down through generations of women: “A call like that has to be answered. My mother did it before me and her mother before her, and they never let anyone down. And my mother said that her mother had never lost a child. Not one. Her corporate works of mercy, she called it.” As if sensing her slip, Mary corrects herself: “But of course I was under no obligation, none whatsoever, so I said.”

She attempts to disentangle her decision to assist in this birth from her role as the community midwife, but the damage has already been done. Mary’s speech reveals her struggle to reinforce the internalized voice of patriarchal authority while simultaneously identifying with her matrilineal calling.

Even Mary’s attempts at undermining and silencing female mental health issues is revealed to be a type of double-speak. When Mary compares her female patients’

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54 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 25.
maladies with those of her male patients, she first acknowledges the existence of these illnesses before trying to convince readers that she does not believe in them. Mary then goes on to proudly explain that she maintained her sanity even after sixteen years as a housewife: “I didn’t go half-cracked the way some of them do, or let on to do.” The first part of her statement demonstrates pride in her ability to fulfill her role as a mother. Mary wears the badge of successful homemaker proudly; she served her sixteen years and was able to do so without experiencing the mental breakdown that she realizes many women are prone to. Again, Mary acknowledges the existence of this problem in order to brag about her own ability to avoid it. In an attempt to cover her slip, Mary quickly amends her statement by saying that these women only let on that they are ill. Mary’s colloquial expression gives the impression that such illnesses are made-up at the discretion of unsatisfied or unsuccessful housewives. This opinion is reinforced when she immediately adds the statement that she does not believe in premenstrual syndrome of postpartum depression. By this point, Mary’s double-speak clearly mimics fairy tale discourses—she simultaneously denies belief but speaks about such experiences as if they are clearly real. Furthermore, Mary admits that such illnesses were a frequent part of her job at the hospital: “I come across it often enough, I needn’t tell you, or I used to, I should say, in course of my duty. Now with the maternity unit gone, of course all that’s changed.” Again, Mary refers to a type of shared knowledge that is left unsaid within her broader statement. In this way, Mary’s language can be read differently depending upon who her audience is: either she reaffirms the frequency with which women let on to be mentally ill or she is acknowledging a shared experience with those who already know

57 Ibid., 22.
about such things. For Mary, the issue is not really whether she believes in these illnesses, but whether to break the silence surrounding them and publicly acknowledge their legitimacy.

As Mary’s story continues, her appropriation of mythic language continues to expose the role of fairy tales in burying social taboos. Mary avoids referencing the fairies directly in her telling of the story, yet her speech mimics the fairy myth in both form and function. On her way to the birth, for example, Mary notes how the drive takes her “at the back of beyond,” which suggests that she is leaving the boundaries of the human word for the fairy realm. Mary goes on to claim that the house was not visible from the road—it was surrounded by trees and appeared out of nowhere. When she finally sees the house, Mary explains that it “was kind of buried like at the side of the road, in a kind of hallow.”

Below Mary’s description, Ní Dhuibhne inserts an excerpt from the fairy story describing the fairy fort as suddenly appearing in the side of a hill. Mary’s description pulls on the uncanny imagery of the fairy story to signal that the home she is about to enter exists outside the boundaries of what she considers socially acceptable. The fairy associations continue as Mary describes the interior of the family’s home:

A big room it was, with an old black range and a huge big dresser, painted red and filled with all kinds of delph and crockery and stuff. Oh you name it! And about half a dozen people were sitting around the room, or maybe more than that…what looked like mother and father and a whole family of big grown men and women…It was a funny set up, I could see that clear as daylight, such a big crowd of them, all living together. For all the world like in Dallas.

Mary, who lives a very regimented and orderly life, is immediately suspicious of the overpopulated house with its big furniture and abundance of knickknacks. Her only frame

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59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
of reference for understanding the family’s living arrangement is an American soap opera. The curious scenario inside the house again echoes the fairy story: “inside there were lots of people, eating and drinking.” Her descriptions of the family grow even more unnerving as she leaves the house later that evening: “The were all so quite and unfriendly like. Bar the mother. And even she wasn’t going overboard, mind you. But the rest of them. All sitting like zombies looking at the late-night film. They gave me the creeps.” Though Mary does not explicitly connect the family with the fairies, the juxtaposition of these descriptions suggests that she has internalized the language of the myth and uses it to interpret her surroundings. In this way, the fairy legend provides her a framework through which she can process and appropriately speak about her experiences.

Mary’s descriptions of the family’s home also demonstrate how the mythic language of fairy legends provides a means of addressing deviant subjects through language that codifies the experience. According to Bourke, the fairies from these legends “belong to the margins, and so can serve as reference points and metaphors for all that is marginal in human life.” In other words, the mythic language works to create categorical spaces into which the socially deviant can be safely secluded. Enclosing the marginal or unsettling aspects of life within the language of fairy myths keeps them to the periphery of the public’s psyche and safely hidden out of sight. Well into the 20th century, fairies were blamed for human maladies ranging from a general failure to thrive to cognitive or physical impairments. Even as technology and advancements in medicine

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 27.
63 Bourke, The Burning of Bridget Cleary, 28.
64 Ibid., 34.
have provided explanations for these previously irrational conditions, fairy myths continue to provide a socially acceptable way of speaking about difficult issues. As Bourke points out, it is not uncommon to hear someone remark “‘he’s like something the fairies left!’” or “‘She’s away with the fairies!’” Though such colloquialisms appear harmless, the reliance on mythic language as an acceptable coping mechanism means difficult issues continue to be suppressed deep within the social consciousness.

When Mary associates the home with a fairy dwelling, she establishes a connection to the changeling myth and begins the work of suppressing the alarming details surrounding the birth. The first of these is the family’s relative disinterest in Mary’s arrival or the woman in labor. When Mary is finally take upstairs, she describes an unwelcome sight:

The girl. Sarah. She was lying on the bed, on her own. No heat in the room, nothing…she must have been feeling a good amount of pain but she didn’t let on, not at all. Just lay there with her teeth gritted. She was a brave young one, I’ll say that for her. The waters were gone and of course nobody had cleaned up the mess, so I asked the other young one to do it, and to get a heater and a kettle of boiling water. I stayed with Sarah and the baby came just before one. A little girl. There was no trouble with the delivery and she seemed all right but small.\

From the beginning, Mary realizes that the mother is very young and the circumstances surrounding her pregnancy are suspicious. She is left alone without any form of comfort or assistance—as if she is being hidden away. Mary has already alluded to the fact that Sean is not really Sarah’s husband, but the family’s complete lack of emotional investment tells Mary that this birth is highly unconventional. Once the deliver is over, Mary tells Sarah that the infant is too small and needs to be put in an incubator, but the

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65 Ibid., 38.
66 Ibid., 27.
new mother appears despondent: she “was sitting up smoking a cigarette, if you don’t mind. She said nothing.” Since Sarah shows no interest in the baby, Mary takes over: “What can you do? I washed the child…she was a nice little thing. God help her…I wrapped her in a blanket and put her in beside the mother. There was nowhere else for her. Not a cot, not even an old box. That’s the way in these cases as often as not. Nobody wants to know.” Though Mary does not say much more about the situation, what she leaves out is important. As a midwife and nurse’s aide, Mary recognizes the crisis surrounding Sarah’s pregnancy and the baby’s birth. However, she also realizes that nobody wants her to speak those truths out loud. Here, the fairy tale discourse allows Mary to tell the story without directly saying too much. In other words, she not only pulls on the language of fairy stories, but the silences as well.

As Mary’s assertions demonstrate, the mythic language obscures a large body of semantic meaning within commonly accepted phrases and colloquialisms, but Mary also deliberately attempts to appeal to her audience by assuring them she is in the right. She does so by using common sayings and addressing readers as co-conspirators in her double-voiced narration. When she explains that male patients at the hospital are easier to deal with, Mary assures readers “I’m telling no lie.” Her meaning is both literal, in that she is telling the truth, and an assertion that what she says is commonly accepted knowledge. Similarly, when Sean introduces himself as Sarah’s husband, Mary acknowledges the hidden truth in his assertion: “‘I see,’ says I. And I did. I didn’t come down in the last shower. And with all the carry-on that goes on around here you’d want to

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 23.
be thick or something not to get this particular message straight away.” Like the midwife in the legend, Mary sees through Sean’s disguise, which she communicates to readers by making sure she does not appear gullible. Throughout the story, Mary also seeks approval for her choices by asking her audience what she could have done differently. When she concedes to go with Sean, she justifies this decision by asking, “What else could I say?” Of course, she could have declined, but Mary really wants readers to reaffirm her decisions. This becomes increasingly important when she starts to reveal details about the labor and birth. When Sarah refuses to accept the baby, Mary asks, “What can you do?” Rather than pursuing some indication that Sarah is okay, that she is not suffering from illness, abuse, or trauma, Mary throws her hands up and moves on. And, when she leaves the house despite these red flags, Mary again addresses readers: “What could I do?” Though she appears to ask for help, Mary’s questions are actually meant to shift attention away from the many ways she could have changed the outcome of the situation. In this way, the questions appear to make her vulnerable, but really they are meant to reaffirm her case and solicit her reader’s sympathy.

Mary’s question also shifts the tone of her discourse from the assertive, no-nonsense voice that narrated the beginning of the story to one of self-doubt and insecurity. By revealing her vulnerability, Mary hopes to solicit the reader’s sympathy and invite her audience into the moral dilemma she faced. As she begins to open up about
her reaction to the events of that night, Mary even concedes that she could have done better:

to tell the truth they were on my mind. The little girl, the little baby. I knew in my heart and soul I shouldn’t have left her out there, down there in the back of beyonds…She was much too tiny, she needed care. And the mother, Sarah, was on my mind as well. Mind you, she seemed to be well able to look after herself, but still and all, they weren’t the friendliest crowd of people I’d ever come across. They were not.74

After her previous comments, Mary’s admission is a consolation to prove that she is worthy of sympathy. Once she reveals this bit of emotion, Mary quickly shifts tone again with a simple “But that was that.”75 And, it probably would have been the end of the issue for Mary, but a week later the newspaper reports that Sarah was arrested after the corpse of her baby was found dumped in a shoebox behind the family’s house. Once the story breaks, it gains the country’s attention and drags on, making it difficult for Mary to go on with her own life: “And it was on my conscience. It kept niggling at me all the time. I couldn’t sleep, I got so I couldn’t eat. I was all het up about it, in a terrible state really. Depressed, that’s what I was, me who was never depressed before in my life. And I’m telling no lie when I say I was on my way to the doctor for Valium…”76 Despite her earlier comments against mental illness, Mary now admits that her own guilt was manifesting in depression. She even emphasizes her desperation by assuring us that she is telling the truth when she says she was ready to seek out medical help. Despite the fact that Mary’s conscience was making her sick, she continues to insist that she had nothing to feel guilty about. As proof of this, Mary explains that simply telling her story solves

74 Ibid., 27-8.
75 Ibid., 28.
76 Ibid.
her mental health crisis: “I walked out of that Garda station a new woman. It was a great load off my chest. It was like being to confession and getting absolution for a mortal sin. Not that I’ve ever committed a mortler, of course. But you know what I mean. I felt relieved.”77 Though the comparison to a religious confession suggests Mary needs forgiveness, she immediately shakes off this association by assuring she would never come close to committing a mortal sin. In other words, Mary’s conscious is not bothered by her involvement with a potential murder; rather, Mary only needs to reaffirm that there was nothing else she could have done. The missing details of Mary’s statement also leaves a gap in the story that Mary quickly glosses over. Her meeting with the Garda does not appear to impact that case, though, which suggests Mary only further incriminated Sarah. Thus, Mary’s visit to the Garda is little more than an attempt to once again deflect responsibility—to make herself appear a victim rather than an accomplice.

Perhaps the most telling of Mary’s narrative cues is the omission of any details on the infanticide itself. Other than the snippets she reads from newspaper article, Mary never addresses any of the particulars revealed throughout the case. Within Mary’s story, several questions are left unanswered, such as: How old was Sarah? Was she related to the family she was with? What was Sean’s relationship to her? What led to the baby’s death? Mary makes sure the emphasize that the revelation and subsequent trial haunted her for months, but she does not bother to include any of the details that would have been revealed throughout that time. Furthermore, the absence of any acknowledgement of the social conditions leading up to the baby’s death mimics society’s treatment of infanticide in general. Neither Mary nor any authority figure in the story addresses the closing of the

77 Ibid., 28-9.
maternity ward, postpartum depression, child abuse, unhealthy living conditions, or poverty as factors that potentially contributed to this tragedy. Rather, Mary spend the entirely of her narrative energy making herself appear like an innocent bystander. In doing so, she ignores her responsibility as a midwife, choosing instead to reinforce patriarchal authority and submit to its domain. In doing so, Mary ultimately chooses to maintain the status-quo. However, the insertion of the ancient fairy story reveals how Mary’s narrative strategies pull on mythic discourse to silence the issue of infanticide, coding it in metaphor and burying it out of sight.

Conclusion

At the end of the ancient fairy story, the midwife is blinded by the male fairy’s violent assault, a narrative device that reinscribes male authority over women’s knowledge and experiences. In the contemporary story, Mary is blinded as well, but her blindness reveals her resistance to the overwhelming responsibility of seeing. As the community midwife, Mary has already been displaced by the professional doctor. Furthermore, the maternity ward has been shut down, meaning women and their babies no longer have access to the specialized care they require. The institutions meant to replace the role of the midwife have already failed in Bray. In a country where abortion is illegal, contraception nearly impossible, and infanticide the fault of the mother, women have few options. In the end, Mary not only turns her back on Sarah, but she also maintains the silence responsible for her predicament. Furthermore, Mary pulls on the discursive strategies of the fairy myth to absolve herself of responsibility and win her reader’s sympathies. In doing so, she incriminates Sarah, placing all of the blame on her.
Mary’s final act of narration is to ask, “But who am I to judge?” In the end, after skillfully portraying herself as victim and deflecting attention away from the social factors that contributed to the baby’s death, Mary asks us to be blind as well.

My suspicious reading of Mary’s narrative strategies ultimately foregrounds the ways that language is weaponized to maintain Ireland’s image as a morally just and riotous nation. Specifically, women’s experiences are buried within metaphor and coded language so they can be ignored and essentially forgotten. The intertextuality in Ní Dhuibhne’s rewriting locates the sociopolitical discourses responsible for silencing these experiences within the ancient fairy myth. In juxtaposing these two stories, Ní Dhuibhne demonstrates how mythic discourse continues to bury the issues of abortion and infanticide deep within the country’s social consciousness. Deconstructing Mary’s narrative voice foregrounds the link between her narrative strategies and the fairy story. Reading the narrative’s gaps, omissions, and misleading prompts, reveals how Mary deflects attention away from these social issues to instead frame herself as a victim. In doing so, she not only participates in the oppression of women’s experiences, but she co-opts the strategies of patriarchal authority. The juxtaposition of these two stories creates a dialogic relationship that ultimately excavates the violence hidden within Ireland’s sociopolitical discourses. More specifically, this method of reading links the ancient changeling metaphor with contemporary coping strategies—a move that incriminates the entire country in Ireland’s violent treatment of women.

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78 Ibid., 30.
Chapter Two

Unfixing History and Rewriting Art in Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both*

Ali Smith has a reputation for creating expansive literary works that break the boundaries of genre and form. With *How to Be Both*, Smith manages to write two stories that occur simultaneously: one an historic rewriting of the fifteenth-century Renaissance painter, Francesco del Cossa, and the other a modern coming-of-age tale about an adolescent girl named George. To escape the linearity of the novel form, Smith ensured that the book was published in two alternating versions, each beginning with one of the two stories. In other words, half of the books published began with the Renaissance story and the other half began with the contemporary story. The book’s publication and distribution, therefore, ensure that neither story ever occupies a fixed position within the novel—there is always the chance that either story will be read first. The material conditions of the book both facilitate and accommodate formal instability. Though both stories are technically separate, they also intertwine and reveal more of each other as they are read together. The result is a book that begs to be read multiple times and in multiple ways.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Smith explains how the novel’s structure is influenced by painted frescoes: “There’s a fresco on the wall: there it is, you and I look at it, we see it right in front of us; underneath that there’s another version of the story and it may or may not be connected to the surface. And they’re both in front of our eyes, but you can only see one, or you see one first. So it’s about the understory.”  

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79 Alex Clark, “Ali Smith: ‘There are two ways to read this novel, but you’re stuck with it
is able to replicate this layering effect through its dual publication, which ensures that neither story is ever all the reader ever sees. No matter which order the stories are read in, there is always an understory. In this way, the book’s two sections occur simultaneously. For Smith, the fresco inspires a narrative representation of dimensional time that mimics art’s ability to transcend the continuum of history. Or, as she explains, “When we meet a piece of art, there’s something about that encounter that isn’t fixed in time, but rather, it unfixes time…The past and present exist in the same moment and we know, as beings, that we are connected. All the people who lived before us, all who came after us, are connected in this moment.”

This chapter argues that the multidimensional form of How to Be Both violates the conventions of the novel as a closed system. In doing so Smith’s intertextuality unearths a hidden knowledge that disrupts the dominant methodologies of Western historiography, including those responsible for constructing the narratives surrounding art and aesthetics. The rewriting of Francesco del Cossa’s life opens up the possibility that the great Ferrarese artist was actually a woman who disguised herself as a man to paint professionally. This section, which is told through the voice of del Cossa’s ghost, reflects on the meaning of art to locate beauty in everyday details—a move that disrupts hegemonic discourses that ascribe value based on an artwork’s participation in Western conventions. In the contemporary story, George connects with the memory of her dead

- you’ll end up reading one of them,” The Guardian, Sept. 6, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/06/ali-smith-interview-how-to-be-both.
mother through del Cossa’s art. She imagines what it would mean for del Cossa to really be a woman, a thought that her mother first proposed. Reading the stories in this order suggests that del Cossa’s ghost has been brought back from beyond death to connect with George through the art. However, the version of the book that begins with George’s story undermines this reading by presenting to the possibility that del Cossa’s ghost is actually the invention of George’s imagination. In this way, much of the meaning suggested by Smith’s rewriting depends upon which version of the book is read. I argue that this play with form results in a rewriting that refuses to assert a stable counter-narrative.

Specifically, in rejecting narrative coherence and authority, How to Be Both refuses to insert a monolithic consciousness that would act as an ideologue of twenty-first-century values.

I argue that Smith’s novel interrogates history through a dialogic rewriting that bears the historic discourses while offering a multivalent and multi-voiced collection of possibilities. The novel’s polyphonic consciousness displaces and interrogates the monolithic historic narrative and the ideologies it engenders. In How To Be Both, this intertextuality unsettles the factual nature of artifacts such as paintings, letters, and records by subjecting them to diverse and often conflicting voices. The narrative reclaims women’s knowledge by opening up history as a site of misreading and misrepresentation. However, Smith’s text also destabilizes historiography by focusing less on grand narratives and more on minute moments while blurring the teleological structures of narrative and temporality by merging past and present. In this way, the novel’s dual structure creates a formal representation of multidimensional time. Ultimately, the novel
disrupts the dominant methodologies of Western literature and historiography by creating a form that accommodates instability.

Due to the novel’s dual structure, it is impossible to capture a stable summary of the story’s plot. Both the novel’s events and its meaning depend upon the order in which the two sections are read. Furthermore, the narratives intertwine and reference each other, so the novel is revealed across both sections and through more than one reading. Despite the form’s instability, there are several threads that become apparent after reading both sections. The story of Francescho del Cossa, a fifteenth-century Renaissance artist is told in “Eyes.”

Francescho’s story is narrated through the voice of her ghost, who has been pulled back to Earth and tethered to George by an invisible bond. Upon her arrival, Francescho finds herself in a nondescript room surrounded by a collection of the Ferrarese paintings, including her own portrait of Vincent Ferrer. Throughout this section of the novel, Francescho explains that she was actually a woman who, at the suggestion of her father, concealed her sex to gain access to training and eventually build a career painting professionally. Her story reveals that this concealment gave Francescho the ability to transverse fifteenth-century gender norms and allowed her a method of identity formation outside the discursive and corporeal systems of traditional gender signification. In this way, Francescho’s story grapples with the erasure of both women and queer

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81 Francesco is the English version of Francescho; therefore, most of the secondary sources used in this chapter refer to del Cossa as either Francesco or simply Cossa. The “Eyes” section of Smith’s novel maintains the Italian spelling while the “Camera” section uses the English. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to Smith’s character as Francescho and the historic figure as del Cossa. I will also use the gender pronoun that aligns with the particular source being referenced (masculine for the historical record and feminine for Smith’s novel).
identities from history’s authoritative narratives. Readers who begin with this section are inclined to read Francescho’s story as a rewriting that recuperates this lost history.

The “Camera” section of the book is George’s coming-of-age story, which is set in contemporary Cambridge.82 “Camera” opens with the memory of George’s mother, Carol Martineau, pondering the circumstances surrounding del Cossa’s work on the Hall of Months frescoes in Ferrara. Or, more specifically, Carol wonders what made the artist send a letter to the Duke requesting more money as compensation for the work completed on the frescoes. George reveals that her mother, a passionate feminist and political activist, died the previous September after a severe reaction to antibiotics. For George, who often sneaks off to the National Gallery in London to sit in front of del Cossa’s painting, imagining the artist as a woman helps her cope with the loss of her mother by blurring the distinction between past and present. George begins researching del Cossa’s life for a school project on empathy and imagines that her mother might send del Cossa’s ghost from beyond the grave to help her. In this way, a reading that begins with “Camera” is set up to see “Eyes” as a projection of George’s consciousness—a way for her to cope with the loss of her mother. Throughout both of the novel’s sections, these two stories echo and haunt each other, fracturing the narrative so that both exist in the present moment.

82 Francesco is the English version of Francescho; therefore, most of the secondary sources used in this chapter refer to del Cossa as either Francesco or simply Cossa. The “Eyes” section of Smith’s novel maintains the Italian spelling while the “Camera” section uses the English. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to Smith’s character as Francescho and the historic figure as del Cossa. I will also use the gender pronoun that aligns with the particular source being referenced (masculine for the historical record and feminine for Smith’s novel).
Scholarship on *How to Be Both* reveals that the novel’s large terrain facilitates a variety of critical approaches. The field of metamodernism, for example, tends to align Smith’s techniques with the aesthetic consciousness that thrived in the works of early twentieth-century writers.83 Yvonne Liebermann situates Smith’s intertextuality in *How to Be Both* within the broader concerns of metamodern fiction by focusing on the text’s foregrounding of multiple possibilities.84 While Liebermann also mentions Smith’s ekphrasis as evidence of her metamodernism, Emily Hyde links these to the novel’s form by focusing on how the text’s engagement with del Cossa’s art disrupts the flow of time. More specifically, Hyde argues that the novel’s ekphrasis allows Smith to achieve simultaneous temporalities by assuming an embodied viewer or audience.85 Turning to Linda Hutcheon’s work on historic metafiction, Ana Raquel Fernandes argues that art, literature, myth, and history are interwoven throughout *How to Be Both* to create new interpretations of both past and present.86 This type of historic metafiction is part of a growing phenomenon in contemporary women’s literature, which Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn attribute to women’s exclusion from both history and the traditional

84 Yvonne Liebermann, “The Return of the ‘Real’ in Ali Smith’s *Artful* and *How to Be Both*,” in the *European Journal of English Studies* 23, no. 2 (2019), 136-151 and
Western canon.\textsuperscript{87} According to Heilmann and Llewellyn, contemporary fiction by women writers that reclaims historical events and subjectivity works to interrogate the “male-centered past’s treatment of women at the same time as seeking to undermine the ‘fixed’ or ‘truthful’ nature of historical narrative” so that women can claim their own counterhistories.\textsuperscript{88} My argument builds on this existing body of scholarship, but narrows in on the relationships amongst the novel and its many sources to demonstrate how Smith’s intertextuality disrupts the infallibility of history and literary convention to invent a form that ultimately prioritizes instability over narrative coherence.

Throughout this chapter, my methodology narrows in on the intertexts within the retelling of del Cossa’s story to investigate how the novel interrogates the dominant narratives surrounding his art. More specifically, my argument focuses on the sources that Smith consulted by retracing her investigation into del Cossa’s history and critical reception. Smith invites readers to follow this path of research by discussing many of her influences and sources in essays and interviews published since the book’s release. My own reading begins with Verwoert’s essay in \textit{Frieze}, which originally inspired Smith’s novel, the 1922 Warburg lectures, and the treatises on painting written by Leon Battista Alberti and Cennino Cennini.\textsuperscript{89} To locate potential sources for Smith’s insights into the history of the frescos and the Este court, I also considered Charles M. Rosenberg’s work, \textit{Art in Ferrara During the Reign of Borso D’Este} and Paolo D’Ancona’s, \textit{The Schifanoia Months at Ferrara}. This history, I argue, is important to fully understanding how Smith’s

\textsuperscript{87} See Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, \textit{Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women’s Writing} (New York: Palgrave, 2007).
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 2-3.
rewriting interrogates the critical conversation surrounding del Cossa’s art. However, my methodology also makes lucid the relationships among Smith’s rewriting and its many sources. Specifically, following this conversation foregrounds the ways in which the governing structures of Renaissance society required artists like del Cossa to effectively conceal themselves within acceptable forms and motifs. I argue that Smith’s rewriting of del Cossa’s life recuperates this hidden knowledge, which has often been erased by historic narratives. My reading, however, also considers the novel’s form to argue how the multiple dimensions put forth by the book’s dual narratives simultaneously undermines the revisionist history within Smith’s rewriting. In other words, Smith’s rewriting interrogates the infallibility of history to create a form that accommodates narrative instability. In this way, my methodology not only uncovers a new form within Smith’s rewriting, but it also proposes a way of reading that bears ambiguity and allows multiple, and often times conflicting, truths to exist simultaneously.

Francesco del Cossa’s History

All traces of Francesco del Cossa were almost lost to history because the Italian art critic and historian Giorgio Vasari mixed him up with another painter.90 He was not remembered until a letter he wrote to the Duke, Borso d’Este, was discovered by chance during the early nineteenth century.91 The letter was written around 1470 while del Cossa was working on the spring months in a series of frescoes that line the Sala Dei Mesi.

90 Smith, “He looked like the finest man who ever lived.”
91 Since the letter’s discovery, historians have deduced that del Cossa was born sometime during the year of 1436 to a prominent stone mason in Bologna, Italy. “Francesco del Cossa,” National Gallery of Art, accessed March 1, 2022, https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1172.html.
the Hall of Months, at the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara. He wrote the letter to the Duke, who had commissioned him to paint the frescoes, requesting better compensation for his work. The frescoes were also almost lost when the Este family moved their court to Medena and the palace at Ferrara was abandoned. The palazzo was eventually turned into a barn and later a tobacco factory. Sometime during this period the frescoes were covered with whitewash and entirely forgotten. All memory of them was erased until hundreds of years later when the whitewash began to peel away revealing bits of eyes and pieces of faces peeking out from underneath.\footnote{Ali Smith, “He looked like the finest man who ever lived,” \textit{The Observer}, August 23, 2014, accessed January 30, 2018, \url{https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/24/ali-smith-the-finest-man-who-ever-lived-palazzo-schifanoia-how-to-be-both}.}

The whitewash was removed and the frescos were discovered then consequently restored between 1835 and 1840. Like much of his other work, del Cossa’s panels were originally thought to have been painted by Cosmè Tura, founder of the School of Ferrara. When del Cossa’s letter was discovered in the archives around 1885, he was finally credited for the March, April, and May panels (along with several other paintings that were originally attributed to Tura).\footnote{Paulo D’Ancona, \textit{The Schifanoia Months at Ferrara} (Italy: Edizioni Del Milione, 1954), 92.} Since then, del Cossa has been recognized as one of the three primary Ferrarese painters, the others being Tura and Ercole di Roberti, del Cossa’s apprentice.\footnote{“Ercole di Roberti,” National Gallery of Art, accessed March 1, 2022, \url{https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1833.html}.} Second only to Tura, del Cossa’s artwork, which is characterized by ornamental details, lush gardens and landscapes, intricate rock formations, and dynamic architecture, has since helped define the School of Ferrara.
Though art historians celebrate del Cossa’s letter to the Duke primarily as documentation that reestablishes him as an instrumental figure in the Ferrarese movement and sheds light on the fresco’s production, Smith notes that this was the first documented case of an artist demanding proper payment. The key being proper—remuneration for talent as well expenses. As del Cossa’s letter makes clear, he valued his work well above that of his contemporaries:

And I humbly beg to remind Your Lordship that I am Francesco del Cossa, the one who has painted all by himself the three panels by the entrance: so that if Your Lordship should not want to give me more than ten [bolognini del pede]: although I were to lose forty or fifty ducats and although I live only by the work of my hands, I would be content and at peace: but as there are other circumstances attached I feel sorry and sad in my heart: especially when I consider that I, who have begun to win a name for myself, am treated on a par with the worst dauber in Ferrara: and that my having studied all the time, and my continuing to do so, may not receive, this time, some consideration, especially from Your Lordship, outside what is reserved to those who do not practice such studies, Your Lordship may be certain that I cannot help but being saddened and grievously hurt. And also that my having worked in good faith, as I have done, using solid gold and good paints should be paid the same price as is given to those who have not been at such pains nor expense, would also seem strange to me: and this I say, my Lord, because I have painted nearly everything [a fresco] which is lasting and good work, as all the masters of the art know.

According to art historian Evelyn S. Welch, negotiating payment was not unusual during this period and artists would often request additional compensation at the end of a project to cover expenses for materials used. However, del Cossa’s request is unique in that he tried to set himself apart from his associates after a joint petition filed by the group had been denied by the Duke. Furthermore, del Cossa based his request on elevating his skill and worth above his contemporaries: first, in the hours of his training and reputation

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95 Ali Smith, “He looked like the finest man who ever lived,” The Observer.
96 Letter from Francesco del Cossa to the Duke, translated and reprinted in D’Ancona 93.
in Bologna; and, secondly, through the quality of both his talent and the supplies used to complete the murals.  

The letter is also significant because it contradicts the Duke’s reputation as a very generous and just purveyor of the arts. His response is scratched in pencil on the bottom of the letter: “Let him be content with the fee that was set.” The Duke’s refusal to consider del Cossa’s request is significant given that the murals were to depict not only his grandeur but also his commitment to justice.

Smith’s Historic Rewriting

Since almost nothing else is known about Francesco del Cossa outside of this one letter and what remains of his art, Smith takes advantage of this historical chasm to imagine that del Cossa was actually a woman who disguised herself as a man to paint professionally. Smith’s rewriting considers how Francescho’s gender and sexuality might contribute to the Duke’s lack of generosity. In How to Be Both, Francescho petitions the Duke because she feels that her art has been unfairly compensated. After learning that her assistant, Ercole has gone against her wishes and signed her name to the joint petition put forth by the artists as a collective, Ercole tells Francescho that the Duke will not give more money to her alone because “he likes the boys. Not the girls.” To explain, Ercole recounts a conversation he overheard between the Duke and his servant,

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98 Ibid., 124.
99 Ibid., 122.
100 Francesco is the English version of Francescho, therefore, most of the secondary sources used in this essay refer to del Cossa as either Francesco or simply Cossa. The “Eyes” section of Smith’s novel maintains the Italian spelling while the “Camera” section uses the English. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to Smith’s character as Francescho and the historic figure as del Cossa. I will also use the gender pronoun that aligns with the particular source being referenced (masculine for the historical record and feminine for Smith’s novel).
101 Ali Smith, How to Be Both, 134.
Pelegrino the Falcon: “I heard him ask the Falcon to bring you to him, in the way he likes the new boys and men to be brought, cause he likes to be entertained by talent and he likes a talent to belong to him. And I heard the Falcon refuse him. Which is why you were never called to serve him in that way. But it’s not the Falcon who told him anything about you, Master Francescho. The Falcon knows your worth.”

According to Ercole’s account, Francescho is worth less to the Duke because she is not sexually available in the way he requires. In other words, the Duke would probably pay her more if she were a boy who could provide the Duke with sexual favors. It does not matter that Francescho is a better artist who uses more expensive materials, she is valued less because she is not a man.

The Critical Reception of the Hall of Months

The Hall of Months frescos, including del Cossa’s panels, are considered emblematic of Ferrara’s contribution to the Italian Renaissance, European history, and the development of humanism. The four walls of the Hall of Months are divided into nineteen panels with twelve specifically allotted to the months of the year, beginning with March (according to Italian chronology). The months are placed chronologically in a counter-clockwise band around the room, and each section is divided into horizontal

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102 Ibid., 134.
thirds. The top portion of the panels is devoted to scenes of the Olympian gods and the various mythical and symbolic features associated with each particular month. Placed within the rich indigo background of the center panel are the month’s respective zodiac sign and what Aby Warburg has identified as each sign’s three decans, the Hellenistic astral deities that divide each thirty-degree zone into ten degree segments to further diversify the astrological significance of the months. The bottom of each calendrical section is devoted to scenes that celebrate the Duke and his court by representing the seasonally appropriate functions of his government. Painted between each panel and along the bottom of the entire fresco are architectural features such as columns and a running dado rail. Since there is little record of how the Hall of Months frescoes were produced, their design is often thought to be the work of important historic figures such as Pelegrino Prisciani, Leon Battista Alberti, and, of course, Tura, all of which happen to be some of the most prominent humanists of Renaissance Italy.

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104 Though Warburg links these decals to a Grecian tradition, specifically Teucer’s *Sphere Barbarica*, he finds influences of Arabi and Indian astrology as well, which supports his thesis that the Hall of Months frescoes represent a collection of motifs that transcend boundaries. Charles M. Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara During the Reign of Borso D’Este (1450-1471): A Study in Court Patronage* (Ann Arbor: U of P Press, 1974), 190.

105 Ibid., 189.

106 Warburg’s interpretation of the astrological influences not only calls attention to the calendrical cycles, but it also links them together as a piece that was planned and coordinated by Pelegrino Prisciani, a prominent humanist and astrologer in the Este court. Though Charles M. Rosenberg argues that Prisciani did not hold enough status among the Este court at the time of the fresco’s conception to be tasked as the sole organizer of the project, he credits Prisciani and possibly two other astrologers with conceptualizing the project. See Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara During the Reign of Borso D’Este*. D’Ancona, however, surmises that the artist Tura, himself, oversaw the planning of the frescoes as his influence can be read throughout the panels. D’Ancona, *The Schifanoia Months at Ferrara*, 91. Finding evidence in both the layout and execution of the frescos, art historian, Hannemarie Ragn Jensen, correlates the hall’s design with Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise, *De Pictura*—a point substantiated by Alberti’s connection to the Este court. Hannemarie Regn Jensen, “The Universe of the Este Court in the Sala dei Mesi: A
Warburg, one of the preeminent scholars on the Hall of Months, aligns the iconography of the upper sections with the twelve Olympian gods in Book II of Marcus Manilius’s astrological poem, *Astronomica*, which creates a system of patronage that helps explain the Hall’s overarching scheme. The poem associates each of twelve triumphant Olympian deities with a corresponding zodiac sign, as depicted in the calendrical frescos. For Warburg, the classic deities and the myths associated with them are part of an iconographic system consisting of particular motifs that transcend the boundaries of time and space. Though the imagery keeps with the Grecian tradition, Warburg traces their migration through Asia Minor, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Arabia, and Spain. In *The Signature of All Things*, Giorgio Agamben writes that Warburg located within such iconography not only the ability to represent something, but also the signatures or traces of a mystical energy. In his essay for *Frieze*, which is accompanied by a selection from del Cossa’s panel, Jan Verwoert cites Warburg’s interpretation as...

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107 The poem links each of twelve triumphant Olympian deities with a corresponding zodiac sign, as depicted in the calendrical frescos, creating a system of patronage that helps explain the Hall’s overarching scheme. Furthermore, the connection that Warburg makes to *Astronomica* distinguishes the Hall of Months as the only calendrical system based on the Olympian gods as opposed to the traditional astrological premise. Furthermore, the connection that Warburg makes to *Astronomica* distinguishes the Hall of Months as the only calendrical system based on the Olympian gods as opposed to the traditional astrological premise. Kristen Lippincott, “The Iconography of the Salone dei Mesi and the Study of Latin Grammar in fifteenth-century Ferrara’ in La corte di Ferrara e il duo mecenatismo, 1441-1598” in *The Court of Ferrara and its Patronage*, ed. Marianne Made, Lene Waage Petersen, and Daniela Quarta (Modena: Panini, 1990), 95. See also D’Ancona, 15-18 and Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 565.


evidence of del Cossa’s particular ability to breathe life into the “Greek heart”: Cossa’s “empathic painterly style permits the planetary protagonists to become full-blooded agents once more.”

Though Verwoert appears less interested in the source of the fresco’s particular iconography, together these critics emphasize the way that del Cossa’s artwork achieves something extraordinary within an already impressive artifact of Renaissance humanism. Specifically, it is del Cossa’s ability to capture the signatures of these figures, the mystical energy that gives them life and transcends boundaries, that continues to captivate scholars today.

As Smith rewrites the artist’s history, she shifts the source of those mystical energies from an aesthetic aligned with male greatness to one grounded in a hidden woman-centered form of knowledge. Smith disrupts the elitism within previous interpretations by rewriting history to credit Francescho with the fresco’s most important innovations. Unlike her contemporaries who received apprenticeships with established artists, such as Tura, Francescho, a woman and the child of a brickmaker, honed her abilities by learning from those around her. She poured over the treatise on painting by Leon Battista Alberti and Cennino Cennini, memorizing their most important lessons. Francescho’s father, Cristoforo, also instructed her in the lines and perspective of architecture by having her draw the buildings and structures he was commissioned to work on. While the rest of the court artists were studying under Cosmo, the fictional Cosmé Tura, Francescho was learning by observing the world: the curve of her father’s

\[\text{110 Jan Verwoert, “Francesco del Cossa’s frescoes, Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara,” Frieze, March 2013, 112. *note, Verwoert refers to the Olympians as planet gods, but Warburg’s assertion that the gods are actually representations of Manilius’s poem frames them as zodiac representations instead the traditional astrological way of depicted the gods.}\]
face, the lines in a brick wall, the perspective of a bell tower. Thus, the energy that infuses del Cossa’s work is attributed to Francescho’s artistic appreciation of everyday moments. Smith also accounts for the influence of Prisciani, writing him into the novel as the Falcon, who is assistant to the Duke and oversees the Hall of Months. Though Francescho is often forced to adopt the Falcon’s suggestions, the foundation of her painting, both its style and technique, set her work apart from the other painters, who are unquestionably deferential to the authority of Cosmo and the Falcon. Thus, while maintaining the influence of both Prisciano and Tura, *How To Be Both* deflates the hierarchy of the fresco production by crediting Francescho, who lacks both the status and formal training of her contemporaries, with infusing the panels with her own artistic genius.

Smith continues to undermine male authority by rewriting Alberti’s contribution to del Cossa’s artistic style. Though Francescho is clearly indebted to Alberti’s rules for composition, even quoting them at length, she often stretches her interpretation of these lessons to accommodate her own ideas about art and aesthetics. When describing her process, for example, Francescho references a passage from Alberti in which he lists the many historia that artists should include to make a picture appear full and to elicit pleasure and emotion: “Throughout I did as the great Alberti in his book suggests the best picture makers should always do and included people of many ages and kinds, plus chickens, ducks, horses, dogs, rabbits, hares, birds, and of all sorts, all in a lively commerce in and about a variety of landscapes and buildings.”¹¹¹ However, Francescho goes beyond flora and fauna to include those who otherwise would not be considered

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¹¹¹ Smith, *How to Be Both*, 120.
worthy of artistic representation. In a gathering of the Fates, she paints a group of working women, including faces she remembers from “the streets and workshops and the pleasure houses.” Courtly maidens become portraits of the prostitutes who first introduced her to sexual pleasure and her closest friend, Barto, brings life to the expressions of various gentlemen. Looking back on this, Francescho admits, “I painted my brothers. I painted the figure of my mother resplendent. I painted a ram with the look of my father. In these ways I filled the Marquis’s months with those who had peopled my own on the earth.” While critics find traces of Greek mythology in these figures, Smith imbues them with affective resonances: Ginevra, Angola, and Isotta, three women, sex workers from the brothel, who were each significant to Francescho and who all met questionable, if not violent, ends are immortalized in the Graces. In doing so, Francescho links the companionship and sexual pleasure these women offered her to the Graces, who’s faces represent “where all human life and much pleasure originates.” Francesco even contradicts Alberti’s assertion that painting a goddess in ordinary clothing is like dressing a god like a woman:

I met many female Marses and Joves in the house and many Venuses and Minervas in and out of all sorts of clothes. None of them earned anywhere near her true worth in money: all of them suffered misuse, at the very least the kind of everyday misuse you hear any night through the walls of such a house, and though these women and girls were the closest thing alive I ever met to gods and goddesses, the work they did would first pock them on the surface like illness then break them easy as you break dry twigs then burn them up faster than kindling.

112 Ibid., 120-121
113 Ibid., 121.
114 Ibid., 125-6.
115 Ibid., 90.
While the symbolism of each image depicts traceable Grecian influences and adheres to the mythology it represents, the text suggests that these details are merely a matter of fulfilling the requirements of her commission; Francescho paints Greek gods because that is what is expected and what she was hired to do. However, it is not the faces of gods and goddesses that give this work life—it is actually the beauty of those erased and discarded by society. Specifically, Smith’s rewriting of del Cossa’s life imbues these paintings with traces of women’s knowledge while both celebrating and mourning their experiences.

In an interesting play on Warburg’s assertion that del Cossa’s technique breathes life into the traditional Grecian figures, Smith’s novel rewrites one of the most celebrated of del Cossa’s works: the third decan of Aries. An image of this particular motif accompanied Verwoert’s essay in Frieze as evidence of Warburg’s interpretation.116 Smith, however, rewrites this image to prioritize affective moments over the grand symbolism and motifs that center Greek myths in secular art. Dressed in white rags with noticeably dark skin and a pensive, searching look, the figure stands out among the more classically formed men that fill the frescoes in the rest of the hall. Following Warburg’s interpretation, Italian art historian, Paulo D’Ancona reads this figure as Andromeda, the sacrifice that Perseus saves (hence his torn clothing).117 Warburg, however, accounts for this figure’s more peculiar details—the dark skin, ragged white garment, and the cord around his waist—by attributing them to Abū Ma’šar’s, an Indian astrologer.118

Smith’s novel, the Falcon instruct Francescho on the figure’s Grecian characteristics:

“The first decan of Aries should be dressed in white. He should be tall, dark, powerful, a masterful man of great good power in the world. He is to be the guardian not just of the room but of the whole year.”\(^{119}\) Francescho, however, takes liberties with this figure, depicting him as a man she met on her way to Ferrera:

> he’s one of the working men...his white clothes are ragged, but less from poverty, I see as I come closer, than from what seems the strength of his own body, as if it can’t help but break through: his sleeves are frayed by the strength of his hands and forearms: his knees have made holes in the cloth, being so strong: the line of dark hairs above his groin sits visible: his eyes are reddened by work.\(^ {120}\)

Francescho’s memory essentially recasts the war-torn Andromeda as an infidel who is strong and defiantly powerful. The image is brimming with energy not because it depicts a god, but because the man Francescho paints is full of life. This figure is also infused with the emotional and sexual energies of their trist: “It was all: it was nothing: it was more than enough.”\(^ {121}\) As if capturing the duality of Francescho’s own sexuality, the figure is simultaneously conventional and overflowing with subversive potential.

Smith’s rewriting of this image also plays with the interpretive possibilities by juxtaposing the Falcon’s reaction to Francescho’s third decan with a feminist analysis of the image’s symbolism. Though the Falcon cannot put into words what he finds offensive or shocking about the figure, he is clearly upset and tells Francescho that she must change it. However, Carol, who has degrees in art history and women’s studies, immediately notes the figure’s subversive imagery. She explains to George that the man is not only captivating in his power but also imbued with sexual undertones and gender ambiguities.

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 111.
\(^{120}\) Smith, How to Be Both., 97.
\(^{121}\) Ibid., 99.
She points to the vaginal shape outlined by the figure’s breastbone, a contradiction on such a “virile and powerful figure.” The belt around his waist—a rope that Francescho gave him—complements his form in a way that Carol points out is both “dangling and erect phallic symbolism.” She also notes that though the man is clearly modeled on a black slave or Semitic, he is the hero of the entire room; his power even overshadows the many images of the Duke. Though Carol’s reading pulls on twentieth-century ideas about gender, sexuality, and race, the text offers her reading alongside Francescho’s memory. In doing so, this rewriting presents an alternative woman-centered interpretation that contradicts the narrative art historians have construction, which aligns the decan’s power and virility with Grecian masculinity.

Smith continues to play on signification by rewriting the figure opposite the third decan as a self-portrait of Francescho that captures the dualities of her own identity. This image contrasts the infidel’s fierce and imposing stature with the elegant lines and softness of a more feminine physique. The figure is dressed in a flowing garment and stands gracefully balancing an arrow in one hand and a hoop in the other. Both Warburg and D’Ancona assume the figure is a young man and align the symbolic hoop and arrow with the fresco’s astrological influences. While Verwoert’s more contemporary reading

122 Ibid., 296.
123 Ibid., 296.
124 Ibid., 296.
125 Though the image is not mentioned in Warburg’s original lecture, he later correlated it with Abū Ma’sar in a table that denotes each decan’s Indian counterpart. Warburg’s notes describe del Cossa’s representation as “Youth, fair curly hair, well dressed, arrow in right hand, hoop in left hand.” His notes on Abū Ma’sar’s decan read: “Man, of white and reddish tint, red hair, angry and disturbed, holding in his hand a wooden bracelet and a staff, dressed in red clothing.” Warburg, The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity, 572. Similarly, the figure is addressed only momentarily in D’Ancona’s analysis as “a young man with the attributes, this time in strict adherence to the rulings of astrologuers, of the hoop and
emphasizes the figure’s androgyny and even considers the possibility that the circle may be an embroidery hoop, the image is still interpreted as the embodiment of male youth and virility.\textsuperscript{126} Smith’s novel accounts for these details through the Falcon’s directions to Francescho that the figure should capture the essence of youth with an arrow to represent skill and aim.\textsuperscript{127} While traditionally read as an adolescent male on the brink of physical development, hence the traces of femininity, the novel instead presents this figure as an embodiment of queerness. Specifically, as a self-portrait the figure captures Francescho’s own ability to be both male and female. The phallic arrow symbolizes a male youthfulness in the classical Greek sense, but Francescho adds the feminine embroidery hoop as a representation of her personal duality. Thus, this figure holds in each hand a symbol that balances the male and female—a juxtaposition that carries over into the dress-like garment and the handsome, yet beautiful, face. Ultimately, this androgynous figure distorts gender signification in move that unsettles the heteronormative assumptions within traditional interpretations.

Together with the rest of the March panel, these figures also subvert the primary intent of the Hall of Months as a testament to the Duke and, more indirectly, as an artifact of the hierarchal structure of fifteenth-century Italy. Above the two decans, in the band dedicated to Manilius’s Olympian gods, is a scene with Athena, spear in hand, a collection of her votaries, and a group of women engaged in various forms of needlework and weaving (aligning with the prediction that those born under the sign of Aries are

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\item[	extsuperscript{126}] Verwoert, “Francesco del Cossa’s frescoes, Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara,” 112.
\item[	extsuperscript{127}] Smith, \textit{How to Be Both}, 111.
\end{enumerate}
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destined to be expert weavers). The section below the decans shows a busy scene with infidels hard at work, courtiers gathered in discussion, and, perhaps, most importantly, the Duke dispensing justice to an aging infidel below an archway with the the last syllable of the word justitia inscribed alongside the Estes armor and four angels. Each panel in the Hall of Months glorifies a different function of the Duke’s reign. Thus, the Olympian gods and their corresponding decans reinforce the virtue of each governmental duty by lending celestial authority to the depictions of the Duke in the bottom scenes. In March, Athena’s wisdom informs the Duke’s authority and capacity to adequately administer justice. According to Rosenberg, as part of the hierarchical structure of Renaissance society, the Duke’s main function was “the administration of an equitable judicial system and the maintenance of peace”—both of which Borso d’Este has been renowned for fulfilling. Despite Rosenberg’s esteem, the Duke maintained his power by employing the law mercilessly to eradicate his enemies, often creating public spectacles out of punishments for even the smallest of crimes. Furthermore, as his refusal to adequately compensate the artists of the Hall of Months demonstrates, the Duke

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128 Though Rosenberg associates the goddess in this section with Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, according to D’Ancona, the symbolism corresponds well to Athena as the goddess of war and also wisdom. See Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara During the Reign of Borso D’Este* and D’Ancona, *The Schifanoia Months at Ferrara*, 15. Warburg also identifies the men in this section as Athena’s votaries, specifically “physicians, poets and lawyers,” but D’Ancona describes them as Borso’s jurists and humanists whom he had entrusted to reform the statutes of the Duchy of Ferrara. See Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 572 and D’Ancona, *The Schifanoia Months at Ferrara*, 15.


132 Ibid., 18.
was strategic in his application of justice, often choosing to enact the virtue primarily for political gain.

Though Francescho’s painting must contain a scene that depicts the Duke performing this virtue, the text reimagines the details of the mural to once again subvert both the Duke’s authority and traditional interpretations of del Cossa’s work. Feeling they are not being adequately compensated for their work, the artists come together to petition the Duke for more money. However, the Duke responds by presenting each with his medal, which is stamped on one side with his silhouette and on the other with a likeness of the virtue Justice. Though the medals were meant to signify an honor bestowed by the Duke, Francescho explains that the Duke had given out so many of these medals that they no longer carried any monetary value. Francescho, who uses better quality materials and produces more elaborate images, decides to write the Duke directly asking for more money. After receiving word that the Duke refuses her request, she retaliates by peeling away the first syllables of justitia—just enough to make it barely legible. She then paints the remaining space below the arch in black and replaces her original portrait of the Duke with a replica of his profile from the medal. Francescho then paints an empty hand floating within the crowd as if waiting for justice. To finish, she holds a mirror up and paints her own eyes into the scene just above the Duke’s head. These small details disrupt the link between Athena and the Duke’s enactment of justice. They also call attention to significant moments within the art that have been overlooked in favor of the more overpowering Grecian iconography.

133 Smith, How to Be Both., 123.
134 Ibid., 136.
In Smith’s rewriting, these details, especially the eyes above the Duke’s head, demonstrate how the power of art often depends upon the ability of viewers to find meaning within an images symbols and motifs. Though Francescho denies that the eyes are hers, Ercole, her assistant, tells her that he has studied her face as a fellow artist and knows it better than anyone. However, Ercole explains that the eyes are read differently depending on the viewer: “All the women who come to look go away talking about how the eyes are a woman’s eyes. All the men who come to look go away sure the eyes are a man’s. And you know how you made it only half a face, a face without a mouth? Like there are things that can’t be said? People come for miles to see it and nod their heads at each other about it.”135 According to historians, the image of the Duke dispensing justice confirms his reputation for righteousness, but Francesco’s insertion of the eyes undermines such readings. Specifically, Francescho paints evidence of her betrayal into the fresco’s imagery. Though the eye’s meaning is essentially hidden within the broader symbolism of the fresco’s Grecian imagery, this subversion is recognized by many of the Duke’s subjects. More specifically, for the poor and working class, the eyes confirm what they already know—that the Duke’s sense of justice is based on feudal law and the reification of class and race stratification.

This sense of knowing is also reinforced through the image of the infidel discussed above. While painting the March panel, Francescho hears about an infidel uprising in which a group of field workers are punished for demanding more food and money: “10 men beaten cause of the actions of 1 man, and rumour that some of the 10

135 Ibid., 168.
were near death and that the 1 who organized the rising was already cut in pieces.”

Francescho’s painting of the infidel is not only infused with personal meaning, but it also stands as a symbol of defiance against the Duke’s reputation for justice, which is clearly dependent upon the enslavement of Muslims. The Falcon understands the implications within Francescho’s imagery and warns her that the Duke will have her whipped. In the end, the infidel remains as Francescho painted him and the Duke is none the wiser. However, word of the fresco spreads throughout Ferrara and soon large numbers of field workers, infidels, and poor locals visit the palace to pay tribute:

The story goes…when the workers passing through the room of the months get anywhere near the far end of that room they veer towards the month of March where they stop below your worker painted in the blue and stand there for as long as they can. Some have even started coming in with their sleeves full of hidden flowers and at a given signal between them all they let their arms fall to their sides and the flowers fall out of their clothes on to the floor beneath him.  

Though Francescho denies wanting to cause such a reaction, she admits that her work often has a life of its own. Previously, when the Falcon accused her of purposefully painting subversive imagery, Francescho explains that “the life of painting and making is a matter of double knowledge so that your own hands will reveal a world to you to which your mind’s eye, your conscious eye, is often blind.” Francescho’s explanation links the life and energy within del Cossa’s art to a type of double knowledge that is hidden below the surface. The Duke, like historians later on, believe the frescoes celebrate his greatness, which is corroborated by the many people that come to bow before him. However, Francescho realizes that her art attracts the common people because they see

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136 Ibid., 122.
137 Ibid., 169-70.
138 Ibid., 127.
their own experiences represented in the infidel and paying tribute to the Duke is the price they pay for this secret knowledge.

Conclusion

Through Smith’s rewriting of del Cossa’s artwork, the novel explores how Francescho’s ability to conceal her gender allows her to transcend the limitations of fifteenth-century society. For Francescho, artistry requires concealment; she must put on a man’s clothing to paint professionally and she must work within accepted forms and motifs. And yet, dressing as a man allows Francescho to enter spaces that would otherwise be unknown to her, including the pleasure houses where she is free to explore her sexuality. Francescho also maintains a sense of duality by balancing her outer appearance with subversive attempts to maintain her femininity. For example, she chooses the male name Francescho specifically because it contains the feminine -ch sound, which reminds her of the floral notes that characterized her mother’s French sounding name. Francescho also adopts the feminine form of phrasing and the habit of placing a colon between clauses to capture the breath that belongs there—both attributes of her mother’s more feminine use of language. This sense of duality captures the subversive ways that women’s knowledge is often communicated. In this way, Francescho’s life mirrors her artwork in that women’s experiences are often expressed within existing, and socially acceptable, frameworks.

Though in many ways, Smith’s rewriting of del Cossa’s life and the influences that shaped his artwork offers a counter-history to Western narratives about his art and life, Francescho’s story is ultimately undermined by the novel’s multidimensional
representation of time. While Francescho tells the story behind the March panel and the many people she immortalized in paint, George is simultaneously sneaking off to the National Gallery or imagining what her mother found so captivating about that infidel. As she jokingly tries to speak in Francescho’s voice, George considers how her mother might teach her empathy by sending her the artist’s ghost: “She thinks how typical it’d be. You’d need your own dead person to come back from the dead. You’d be waiting and waiting for that person to come back. But instead of the person you needed you’d get some dead renaissance painter going on and on about himself and his work and it’d be someone you knew nothing about and that’d be meant to teach you empathy, would it?”

This comment gestures to the appearance of Francescho’s ghost at the end of George’s section, when she sits in the National Gallery staring into del Cossa’s painting—a moment which happens to coincide with the events at the beginning of Francescho’s section. The narrator of George’s story suggests that Francescho’s presence is needed for George to move from that present moment into the future—a future that may or may not exist within Francescho’s story. In this way, both George’s future and Francescho’s past are only ever possibilities. The only thing for certain is that both stories exist in the present moment. In this way, the novel creates what Smith refers to as “the moment in which an encounter with an image can explode the continuum of history.”

This multidimensional time ultimately unsettles notions of narrative truth and historicity to interrogate the systems that grant these structures power. The brilliance of Smith’s form lies in the novel’s ability to accommodate ambiguity and resist establishing

139 Ibid., 325.
140 Higgins, “Baileys Prize Winner Ali Smith.”
any type of cohesive counter-narrative. In doing so, the novel’s historic rewriting prioritizes the gaps in del Cossa’s history to allow multiple truths to exist at once. Francescho’s story fills those gaps with affective moments and a secret knowledge grounded in women’s experiences; George’s story opens the gaps further to allow for more questions and possibilities. Instead of simply rewriting del Cossa’s story to contradict claims that the great Renaissance painters were men who recreated classic motifs, Smith opts instead to break apart the entire form that holds such narratives together.
Chapter Three
Excavating Bluebeard’s Bloody Chamber in Helen Oyeyemi’s Mr. Fox

While discussing Mr. Fox in an interview with Vogue, Helen Oyeyemi addresses the ways in which violence is coded into stories about women being killed: “the ever-present potential for violence… seems to lurk within the love men have for women. Is it real? If so, how can we survive it? Can the violence be overcome once and for all, or is it something that dies down and has to be renegotiated every time it flares back up again?”141 This line of questioning ultimately drives the novel’s plot and the ways in which Oyeyemi engages several intertexts, including the “Bluebeard” fairy tale and romance novels such as Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre and Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca.142 Oyeyemi points to several themes central to both the fairy tale and the romance novel: “the repulsive, attractive figure of the wife killer and the psychology of fidelity” and “the demands made by romantic allegiance.”143 In Mr. Fox, Oyeyemi pulls on the violence within these stories, connecting the literary representations of romance with the prevalent phenomenon of violence against women.

142 Though Oyeyemi, herself, references the “Bluebeard” intertext in her many interviews since the publication of Mr. Fox, she links this fairy tale to both its many variants and its literary retellings. According to an interview with fellow writer Ali Smith, the spark that inspired Mr. Fox came to Oyeyemi while reading Rebecca, itself a rewriting of Jane Eyre. From there, Oyeyemi approached Jane Eyre and Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea but found herself “intimidated to the point of paralysis” by these texts. http://www.fantasy-matters.com/2011/09/conversation-with-helen-oyeyemi.html
143 Ibid.
This chapter argues that the intertextuality in Oyeyemi’s novel engages a vast network of texts and genres to locate a genealogy of violence within Western aesthetics. Specifically, I argue that Oyeyemi links the incarceration of Bertha in Rochester’s attic, the murder of de Winter’s first wife in Rebecca, and the corporeal dismemberment of Bluebeard’s wives with the very real issue of violence against women as it plagues our contemporary moment. In this way, Oyeyemi situates “Bluebeard” within a web of both literary and cultural texts—from the novels and stories that replicate these misogynic impulses to the headlines that catalogue them. In doing so, Mr. Fox traces Bluebeard’s lineage through these overly romanticized portrayals of violence against women.¹⁴⁴ In each of its rewritings, Mr. Fox interrogates these cultural artifacts to critique the ways in which aesthetics are often tied to larger systems of oppression, including misogyny and gender-based violence. Therefore, I argue, Mr. Fox is not just rewriting “Bluebeard” but confronting the entire constellation of texts that are indebted to Bluebeard’s misogynistic impulses. Specifically, in this chapter I argue that throughout Mr. Fox, Oyeyemi uses the “Bluebeard” tale type to excavate the gendered violence within Brontë’s Jane Eyre, ultimately revealing a continuity of misogynistic aesthetics across Western forms and genres.

At its core, “Bluebeard” is a story about violence and the subjugation of women.¹⁴⁵ There are many versions of the fairy tale, but each is similarly invested in

¹⁴⁴ Though Oyeyemi admits she was initially put off by “Bluebeard” because it is blatantly didactic, reading the fairy tale variants together with Brontë’s Jane Eyre and du Maurier’s Rebecca actually revealed for her a continuity in how violence is coded into such stories. Megan Kurashige, “A Conversation with Helen Oyeyemi,” Fantasy Matters, September 27, 2011, http://www.fantasy-matters.com/2011/09/conversation-with-helen-oyeyemi.html

¹⁴⁵ In her introduction to the “Bluebeard” tale type, Maria Tatar notes that the “narrative
female curiosity and the uncovering of Bluebeard’s bloody secret, which is almost always hidden away in a secluded room.¹⁴⁶ In Charles Perrault’s story, which was the first recorded and the most widely known, an ambitious young woman marries Bluebeard, a wealthy and much older aristocrat.¹⁴⁷ Bluebeard gives his bride the key to a secret room but forbids her from ever using it. Once he leaves her alone, the curious protagonist opens the door and is confronted with a gruesome truth: “the floor was covered with clotted blood and that the blood reflected the bodies of several dead women hung up on the walls.”¹⁴⁸ Bluebeard immediately detects her disobedience and threatens her with the same fate; however, the girl is saved by the timely arrival of her two brothers. Perrault’s story ends with two morals: the first, a warning against female curiosity and the second, a proclamation that “No longer are husbands so terrible.”¹⁴⁹ Much like Perrault’s version, economy of Perrault’s text, the verbal energy is invested almost exclusively in exposing Bluebeard’s wife to horrors of extraordinary vividness and power.” Tatar goes on to point out, Bluebeard’s wife pulls on feminine archetypes from throughout history such as Eve, Pandora, and Psyche, all of which faced dire consequences as a result of their search for knowledge. According to Tatar, “Perrault presents Bluebeard’s wife as a figure who suffers from an excess of desire for knowledge of what lies beyond the door.” María Tatar, “Introduction: Bluebeard,” The Classic Fairy Tales (New York: Norton, 1999): 138, 141, 139. See also Maria Warner’s From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers, Heta Pyrhönen’s Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and Its Progeny (4), Casie Hermansson’s Reading Feminist Intertextuality through Bluebeard Stories, and María Tatar’s “Bluebeard’s Curse: Repetition and Improvisational Energy in the Bluebeard Tale” in Bluebeard’s Legacy: Death and Secrets from Bartók to Hitchcock.¹⁴⁶ According to the Aarne-Thompson Index, “Bluebeard” has three main tale types: “Bluebeard” (AT 312), “The Robber Bridegroom” (AT 955), and “Fitcher’s Bird” (AT 311). Though each of these tale types has its own distinctive characteristics, María Tatar identifies three primary features that unite them all: “a forbidden chamber, an agent of prohibition who also metes out punishments, and a figure who violates the prohibition.” Tatar, “Introduction,” 138-139.¹⁴⁷ Charles Perrault’s version was first published as part of his fairy tale collection Historires ou contes du temps passé (1697). Charles Perrault, “Bluebeard,” The Classic Fairy Tales (New York: Norton, 1999): 144.¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 145.¹⁴⁹ Ibid.
two of the Brothers Grimm stories, “Fitcher’s Bird” and “The Robber Bridegroom,” recount similar tales of female curiosity and male violence, but the protagonists use their own cunning to escape Bluebeard. The only outlier within this tale type is the British version, Joseph Jacob’s “Mr. Fox.” In this story, the protagonist actually confronts Bluebeard in the battle of words that Oyeyemi references above. Despite the heroine’s many different fates, all of these stories reinforce cultural notions about female knowledge, the dangers of curiosity, and disobedience.150

In *Mr. Fox*, Oyeyemi confronts the representation of violence in art and literature through a series of short stories that each reenacts a different type of narrative discourse, from the conventions of the romance novel to traditional fairy tales. Though each is given its own title and can be read as a stand-alone story, the novel links these stories together through the interplay of St. John Fox and his muse, Mary Foxe. St. John is an author whose work represents a variety of genres, including everything from popular forms of detective fiction to more high-brow literary realism. Though Mary began as a creation of St. John’s imagination, the muse that fueled his creative genius, she has come to life in order to impress upon him the need to stop mutilating the women in his stories. To help

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150 This pursuit of knowledge often has sexual undertones, which aligns it with a threat to the social concepts of female virginity and purity. Even Perrault’s first moral, which warns against female curiosity, is infused with sexual undertones. Perrault cautions that curiosity often brings serious regret because every day thousands of women succumb to its pleasures. Echoing Perrault’s words of caution, modern critics and folklorists continue to align this female curiosity with a transgressive form of sexuality. For example, Bruno Bettelheim reads the protagonist’s search for knowledge as a marital infidelity. Similarly, Aland Dundes points to the blood-stained key as a symbol of the protagonist’s defloration. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976): 306 and Alan Dundes, “Projection in Folklore: A Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics,” in *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980): 46.
him understand the gravitas of the situation, Mary pulls St. John into the pages of the text so he can experience first-hand his responsibility as an author and the tenuous connection between art and real life. Mary tries to express the author’s responsibility when she tells St. John: “What you’re doing is building a horrible kind of logic. People read what you write and they say ‘Yes, he is talking about things that really happen,’ and they keep reading, and it makes sense to them.”\(^{151}\) The novel replicates this logic, often reenacting the many gratuitous functions of violence to deconstruct the aesthetic force behind literary embodiments of female mutilation. In a bold move, \textit{Mr. Fox} ultimately indict the male author for perpetuating such violence under the guise of artistic license.

Though the critical conversation surrounding \textit{Mr. Fox} has recognized the significance of the novel’s intertextuality, Oyeyemi’s technique is often considered an artifact of postmodernism.\(^{152}\) For example, in their characterization of Oyeyemi’s form, Chloé Buckley and Sarah Ilott turn to existing theories that frame texts as inevitably intertextual.\(^{153}\) Buckley and Ilott go on to define Oyeyemi’s form as a rhizomatic structure that results in “a rupturing of united structures or narratives, shattering a seemingly familiar story only to start it up again along new lines.”\(^{154}\) Critics like Buckley and Ilott also tend to situate Oyeyemi’s rewritings within a tradition of revisionist myth-making that includes the work of prominent feminists such as Angela Carter and


\(^{152}\) While her formal innovations often feel fragmentary and playful in a postmodern sense, Oyeyemi’s approach to form is deeply tied to the sociopolitical contexts that each narrative occupies.


\(^{154}\) Ibid., 3.
Margaret Atwood. Helen Cousins, however, notes that Oyeyemi’s rewriting pulls on a vast cultural web that includes both European and Yoruba myths and beliefs. Cousins argues that Oyeyemi’s intertextuality confronts Eurocentric norms within British society to ultimately delegitimize exclusionary definitions of Englishness. Reading the “Bluebeard” intertexts throughout Mr. Fox, Cousins suggests that Oyeyemi prioritizes both race and gender to call attention to the ways in which Carter’s The Bloody Chamber, which opens with a “Bluebeard” retelling, ignores such intersections. Building on this previous criticism, my argument shows how Oyeyemi’s intertextuality interrogates the novel’s source texts to locate within them a continuity of misogynistic violence.

My methodology traces this lineage by focusing on the relationships amongst Oyeyemi’s rewritings and the novel’s source texts. In addition to rewriting several versions of the “Bluebeard” tale type, the stories that make up Mr. Fox are also deeply indebted to Brontë’s Jane Eyre. From St. John’s name to the threat of madness that plagues several of the female characters, I argue that the text’s allegiance to Jane Eyre is important to understanding how it interrogates the issue of violence against women.

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156 Helen Cousins, “Black British Writing and an English Literary Belonging,” Blackness in Britain (2016): 84.
157 Ibid., 85.
158 In her essay on Jane Eyre’s critical history, Cora Kaplan points out that the novel’s “narrative and its mode of telling memorialize no single event but a shifting constellation of stories, images and interpretations.” This constellation consists of the many Jane Eyre adaptations that exist in both literature and popular culture as well as the scholarship that has continued to shape how we engage with and understand the novel. It is especially important to acknowledge this history given Jane Eyre’s troubled legacy as a both a feminist icon and foundational text within the Western canon. Since Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published their seminal text, The Madwoman in the Attic, in 1979, Jane has been upheld as exemplar of the feminist spirit at work in pre-twentieth-century literature. Yet, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s pivotal essay, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” makes blindingly clear, the female subjectivity of Jane Eyre
Though he does not lock his wife, Daphne, up like Rochester does to Bertha, St. John’s patronizing and dismissive behavior threatens her sanity in a similar way. Much like Rochester, St. John’s cruelty manifests through his psychological manipulation and his complete disregard for his wife’s subjectivity. Additionally, each of the short stories within Mr. Fox, casts St. John as a different manifestation of Bluebeard, tying both Rochester and de Winter to the more explicitly violent fairy tale character. In linking these stories, Oyeyemi unearths the violence hidden within Brontë’s novel, situating Jane Eyre’s romantic hero within a genealogy of Bluebeard characters that stretches across time and literary genres. Using the short story form and a constellation of intertexts, from Brontë’s Jane Eyre and Perrault’s “Bluebeard” to more recent adaptations such as du Maurier’s Rebecca, Mr. Fox confront the violence inherent to overly romanticized

privileges an individualist feminism that is deeply rooted in colonialist discourses. According to Spivak, Jane Eyre’s subjectivity, which has been celebrated by mainstream feminists, is based on an individualistic social rise that comes at the expense of the native Bertha. From the representation of soul-making as participation in the nuclear family to the immolation of Bertha, which affords Jane her happy ending, the text narrates Jane’s movements strictly within the discursive field of imperialism. In this way, the very structure of Jane Eyre mobilizes imperialist ideologies and aligns nineteenth-century individualist ideals with the foundational characteristics of the novel form. Since Spivak’s objection to the text’s cult status, critics have gone on to similarly repudiate its problematic portrayals of race, class, and (dis)ability to further emphasize that Jane’s iconic status tends to reinforce a toxic and outdated version of feminism that is deeply rooted in various systems of oppression. Despite these trends in criticism, Kaplan points out that Jane Eyre has survived because its themes and affective registers continue to resonate with generations of readers. Together, these factors contribute to Jane Eyre’s problematic status as a literary masterpiece that holds tremendous cultural capital while continuing to trouble readers and critics alike well into the twenty-first century. For the purposes of this chapter, I will expand Kaplan’s metaphor of the constellation to also consider how Jane Eyre pulls on the uncanny nature of Charles Perrault’s “Bluebeard” to frame Bertha’s incarceration in Rochester’s attic. Cora Kaplan, Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007): 17. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” Critical Inquiry, 12:1 (Autumn 1985), 235-61.
embodiments of female mutilation. Specifically, I argue that Mr. Fox resurrects the bloody chamber to demonstrate a continuity of aesthetic violence within the Western literary tradition. In doing so, Oyeyemi unearths the violence hidden within Brontë’s rewriting of “Bluebeard” and uses the bloody chamber as a means of transformation, a way to deconstruct the cynicism that pervades contemporary discussions about the portrayal of violence against women in art and literature.

Rochester’s Bloody Chamber

Though Jane Eyre reveals traces of several fairy tales, I argue that the “Bluebeard” intertext is especially important to understanding the complex ways in which Brontë interrogates the social systems and cultural practices of Victorian England. Specifically, Jane Eyre pulls on the uncanny nature of Perrault’s “Bluebeard” to frame Bertha’s incarceration in Rochester’s attic. In this way, Brontë uses the “Bluebeard” tale to address the incarceration of women in what Elaine Showalter aptly calls the Rise of the Victorian Madwoman. According to Showalter, Victorian society “perceived women as childlike, irrational, and sexually unstable but also rendered them legally powerless and economically marginal,” which led to increasing numbers of women being diagnosed with mental illness. Furthermore, Victorian doctors held the “medical belief that the instability of the female nervous and reproductive systems made women more vulnerable to derangement than men.” Together, these medical beliefs coupled with the legal

160 Ibid., 73.
161 Ibid.
conditions of coverture, created a situation in which women were increasingly forced into madhouses. The novel also explicitly connects Bertha’s incarceration with the fairy tale when Jane first encounters the third floor of Rochester’s house: “narrow, low, and dim, with only one little window at the far end, and looking, with its two rows of small black doors all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard’s castle.”162 In this way, the novel frames Bertha’s confinement in that attic, be it a wrongful incarceration or a form of medical institutionalization, as a looming threat to female subjectivity.163 Furthermore, in rewriting the “Bluebeard” tale, Jane Eyre aligns both Bertha’s captivity and the Victorian phenomenon of forced incarceration with the violence contained within Bluebeard’s bloody chamber.

Though “Bluebeard” is clearly a story about the dangers of female curiosity, within Brontë’s novel this narrative, or more specifically the bloody chamber, becomes a metaphor for the lack of legal status afforded married women under coverture.164

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163 Though Showalter reads Bertha as a “Romantic stereotype of female insanity,” the novel frames Bertha’s illness as a gradual decline that worsens upon her incarceration in Rochester’s attic. Showalter demonstrates how Brontë’s novel explains Bertha’s condition using common medical terminology from the period. Specifically, Bertha’s madness is inherited from her mother, which “echoes the beliefs of Victorian psychiatry about the transmission of madness: since the reproductive system was the source of mental illness in women, women were the prime carriers of madness.” Furthermore, Bertha’s illness is presumed to be a result of her sexual appetite and menstrual cycle. According to Showalter, these three aspects of Bertha’s illness indicate that Brontë was pulling from Victorian psychiatry to depict Bertha’s madness. See Showalter, The Female Malady, 66-7.
164 Though coverture’s terms tended to shift according to legal precedence, Tim Stretton and K. J. Kesselring define coverture in England and its colonies as the “husband’s legal identity covered that of the woman he married” (7). For clarity, Stretton and Kesselring go on to quote a 1760’s text by jurist William Blackstone: “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the
Specifically, it speaks to the existential change that occurs once the door is opened and the young bride understands her position within the larger legal and social structures that have afforded her no agency. For Jane, the revelation that Rochester has a secret wife locked in his attic signals a shift in the novel. Jane evolves from a naive young governess into a woman on the brink of a major decision. In her focus on the realist novel, Hilary Schor shifts away from the image of a doomed heroine whose curiosity is too much in that she opens the door and receives her husband’s wrath—or not enough and she ends up living out her days in ignorance—to the state of knowing that comes once the door is open.165 In this way, “Bluebeard” can be read as a tale about marriage and the bourgeois sexual contract that coverture law engenders.166 In “Bluebeard,” this knowledge is achieved through the protagonist’s confrontation with the corporeal reality of her complete subjugation under the law. Upon seeing the dismembered bodies of Bluebeard’s former wives, the protagonist realizes her body is forfeit and she has been contracted away.167 This holds true for Jane as well; however, it is not a corpse within Rochester’s

166 Ibid., 10.
167 Ibid., 8.
secret room but a wife who is still very much alive. In this way, the knowledge that comes from opening the door ultimately saves Jane from a similar fate.

Coverture law not only erased female legal identity, but it also made it easy for husbands to use mental asylums as an alternative means of guardianship for their wives, whether they faced mental illness or were simply no longer wanted. Christine L. Krueger substantiates the link between wrongful incarceration and coverture law by tracing this trend through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature: “As early as 1706, Daniel Defoe had brought public attention to the practice of confining wives in asylums as an easy option for husbands unwilling or unable to undertake the onerous proceedings for divorce under eighteenth-century statutes.”\(^{168}\) Krueger goes on to explain that this phenomenon continued well into the nineteenth-century and was part of ongoing discussions about “property and civil rights, marriage and divorce law, state versus private interests, and legal versus medical expertise.”\(^{169}\) As Krueger’s argument demonstrates, forced institutionalizations and wrongful lunacy incarcerations violated the personal liberty of men, but married women were not legal agents within coverture; rather, marriage and property laws prevented women from having any form of recourse or protection.\(^{170}\) *Jane Eyre* demonstrates how easily men could manipulate this system at the expense of women’s financial and legal freedom. Rochester’s father, unwilling to divide his estate between his two sons, seeks to marry him to Bertha because she is set to inherit thirty thousand pounds. While Rochester claims to have been ignorant of Bertha’s

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\(^{169}\) Ibid., 132.

\(^{170}\) Ibid., 134.
inheritance and a victim of the entire matchmaking scheme, he clearly benefits from the fact that after their union he comes into possession of her entire fortune and easily disposes of her at Thornfield Hall.

For Brontë, then, the “Bluebeard” intertext becomes a political statement about both the conditions of coverture and the threat of forced incarceration, a particularly pointed statement considering the prevalence of this phenomenon in Victorian England. Though it is impossible to ascertain exactly how many inmates were wrongful incarcerated, print media and legal documents from the period show a number of cases were brought to the public’s attention. It is also widely acknowledged that three of Brontë’s contemporaries, Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer Lytton, and William Makepeace Thackeray, threatened their wives with allegations of lunacy. After beginning his affair with actress Ellen Ternan, Dickens petitioned the superintendent of Manor House asylum in Chiswick, Thomas Harrington Duke, to have his wife, Catherine, diagnosed as morally insane.\(^{171}\) The doctor refused, but the threat was enough for Catherine to agree to Dickens’ request for a separation. Bulwer Lytton, on the other hand, used an allegation of lunacy as retaliation against his wife, Rosina Bulwer Lytton, after she confronted him at a parliamentary campaign rally for failing to uphold their separation agreement. Lytton had this wife certified insane and locked up in an asylum.\(^{172}\)

\(^{171}\) For more on Dickens’ separation from Catherine and the possible threat of institutionalization, see Helen Small’s *Love’s Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800-1865* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1996). Using a cache of letters recently uncovered at Harvard, John Bowen has substantiated the claim that Dickens used an accusation of “moral insanity” to gain a separation from Catherine. The letters were written by Catherine’s neighbor, Edward Dutton Cook. See John Bowen, "Madness and the Dickens Marriage: A New Source," *The Dickensian* 115, no. 507 (Spring, 2019): 5-20.

\(^{172}\) Krueger, *Reading for the Law*, 143-44.
Thackeray, a close friend of Brontë, left his wife in the care of a woman in Camberwell after she suffered postpartum psychosis and attempted to take her own life.\textsuperscript{173} Though Isabella’s condition warranted medical attention, Brontë was critical of Thackeray for placing her first in an asylum and later in an inexpensive home.\textsuperscript{174} Though Brontë’s criticism of such cases is treated more astutely in \textit{Villette}, Bertha’s incarceration in \textit{Jane Eyre} clearly communicates the precarious situation women faced when they became too burdensome for their husbands.

In addition to satirizing the prevalence of wrongful incarcerations, \textit{Jane Eyre}’s representation of the bloody chamber is also a metaphor for the physical and mental conditions imposed upon women under the pretense of medical treatment. Despite the Lunatics Act of 1845, conditions in asylums and privately run madhouses were deplorable well into the later half of the century.\textsuperscript{175} These institutions, nearly always underfunded and neglected, became so nefarious that they were actually referred to as the Bluebeard’s cupboard of the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{176} Women who found themselves locked away in these asylums were often victims of barbaric treatment at the hands of medical professionals and asylum administrators who practiced mechanical restraint and attempted to cure patients through experimental, and often very painful, procedures.\textsuperscript{177} Though bourgeois and rich women were usually placed in private asylums or contained in a home, the effect of such incarceration was also detrimental. Showalter explains that “the suffocation of family life, boredom, and patriarchal protectionism gradually destroys

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\footnotetext{173}{Showalter, \textit{The Female Malady}, 53.}
\footnotetext{174}{Krueger, \textit{Reading for the Law}, 144.}
\footnotetext{175}{Showalter, \textit{The Female Malady}, 17-18.}
\footnotetext{176}{Ibid., 27.}
\footnotetext{177}{Ibid., 30-33.}
\end{footnotes}
women’s capacity to dream, to work, or to act.”\textsuperscript{178} For both bourgeois women and those of the lower classes, incarceration represented a state in which women were forced into complete subjugation of both body and mind.

For women, the threat of the insane asylum was further influenced by the mutability of Victorian gender norms. As Showalter notes, many of the symptoms described by historic medical accounts equate insanity with a failure to uphold codes of feminine or maternal conduct.\textsuperscript{179} Evidence of this can be found in Dickens’ claim that Catherine “does not - and she never did - care for the children”—a common justification of lunacy diagnoses during this period.\textsuperscript{180} Bulwer Lytton also accused Rosina of being much more interested in writing novels than tending to their children.\textsuperscript{181} According to Showalter, “the sexual division of labor advocated by psychiatrists followed these beliefs. Women’s work was clearly motherhood, which fulfilled and exercised her nature as it also served the needs of society and the race.”\textsuperscript{182} Mental illness then was often viewed as the result of a breakdown in domestic behaviors.\textsuperscript{183} Women who deviated from the cultural expectations placed upon them, from a failure to adequately serve their husbands to an interest in intellectual stimulation, provided grounds for a husband to pursue a lunacy diagnosis.\textsuperscript{184} Coupled with the loss of self-possession that coverture predicated,

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\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{181} “Edward Bulwer Lytton’s Committal of His Wife Rosina to a Private Mental Asylum in 1858.” Accessed March 2, 2020.
http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/bulwer/latane.html.
\textsuperscript{182} Showalter, \textit{The Female Malady}, 123.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{184} This is not to suggest that mental illness in women is entirely a byproduct of restrictive social situations or physical confinement. Rather, as Showalter argues, many factors likely contributed to the statistical asymmetry of lunacy diagnoses in Victorian
the threat of institutionalization loomed over Victorian women, constraining their behaviors and participation in both family and public life.

*Jane Eyre* clearly responds to this phenomenon by sketching out Bertha’s gradual decline into madness and her subsequent confinement at hands of her husband. Rochester’s description of Bertha’s illness actually substantiates the connection between social deviancy and female madness. When Rochester tells his story to Jane, he explains that it was Bertha’s failure to act as a proper bourgeois wife that first alarmed him:

> Even when I found her nature wholly alien to mine; her tastes obnoxious to me; her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger—when I found that I could not pass a single evening, nor even a single hour of the day, with her in comfort: that kindly conversation could not be sustained between us, because whatever topic I started immediately received from her a turn at once course and trite, perverse and imbecile—when I perceived that I should never have a quite household, because no servant would bear the continued outbreaks of her violent and unreasonable temper, or the vexations of her absurd, contradictory, exacting orders—even then I restrained myself…

In his description, Rochester refers first to Bertha’s lack of refinement and her ineptitude at providing him comfortable companionship, two of the highest expectations facing a woman marrying into such a position. He then refers to her temper and lack of command over the household. Throughout his explanation, Rochester clearly aligns Bertha’s mental state with her lack of femininity, her inability to fulfill the basic requirements of her class and gender. As he continues, Rochester reveals that Bertha’s behavior increased in violence and unpredictability for four years, during which she was indulgent and unchaste. In this way, Rochester’s accusation continues to link Bertha’s mental state to

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186 Ibid.
her sex, specifically her sexuality and reproductive cycles. Showalter points out that the timing of Bertha’s worst attacks align with the moon, pulling on the common misconception that women’s menstrual cycles naturally align with the lunar phases.\(^{187}\)

Throughout his defense, Rochester reveals that Bertha possesses both an overabundance of femininity and a lack of control over those gender attributes—in other words, a complete failure to be the Angel of his house. Though Bertha was eventually diagnosed as insane and her mental condition has clearly deteriorated by the time Jane confronts her in the attic, Rochester’s explanation justifies her incarceration first and foremost as a result of her failure to fulfill her social and marital obligations.\(^{188}\)

Much like Bluebeard’s curious wife, Bertha has failed to adhere to the strict expectations placed upon her. Brontë further underscores the horrors of Bertha’s incarceration by calling upon Bluebeard’s bloody chamber. Though she avoids pools of blood and corpses in her description, Brontë captures the uncanniness of “Bluebeard” to create a haunting image of Bertha’s condition. Upon entering the room, Jane struggles to decipher what she sees: “What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal.”\(^{189}\) In confusion, Jane continues to misread the spectacle before her, describing Bertha as a hyena in clothes and a bellowing maniac.\(^{190}\)

\(^{188}\) In his notes for the Norton critical edition of *Jane Eyre*, Richard J. Dunn links Bertha’s supposed marital infidelity with her eventual diagnosis of madness by suggesting she had contracted syphilis. However the text reads, “her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity,” which also gestures to her excesses of emotion and sexuality, or her lack of a socially acceptable and adequately restrained femininity. See Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 261.
\(^{189}\) Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 250.
\(^{190}\) Ibid.
further emphasizes Bertha’s lack of humanity by referring to her repeatedly as it.\textsuperscript{191} While Jane’s dehumanizing description is clearly problematic, it appears that Brontë’s language attempts to give dimension to the physiological markers of Bertha’s incarceration. In other words, Bertha’s mental subjugation manifests in her lack of human characteristics—or, rather, her monstrous appearance—which is communicated here through Brontë’s language. For Jane, it is easy to write Bertha off as non-human because she is both the colonized Other and the unfeminine. She exists in a liminal space without nation, class, or gender. As a result, Bertha’s body is mutilated and her agency, both legal and otherwise, has been contracted away much like Bluebeard’s infamous wives. When Jane finally sees through the uncanniness of Bertha’s exterior, she tells us: “I recognised well that purple face—those bloated features.”\textsuperscript{192} However, even when she claims to see her, it is not Bertha whom Jane recognizes but a potential version of her future self.\textsuperscript{193} In this way, Bertha’s character is juxtaposed Jane’s and the horror of Bertha’s story can be read as Brontë’s attempt to communicate the perilous status of the Victorian \textit{feme-covert} through language appropriate for Victorian sensibilities. For Jane, the bloody chamber is both Rochester’s secret and her potential loss of subjectivity should she choose to remain at Thornfield. However, for Brontë, the bloody chamber represents a parallel between the mutilated corpses of Bluebeard’s wives and Bertha, the incarcerated woman. Using the bloody chamber, Brontë also codes the violence of Bertha’s incarceration within the

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{193} This is also another instance in which Jane represents the type of feminism that Spivak ties to colonial individualism. In other words, when Jane recognizes a symbolic reflection of herself rather than Bertha as a human being, she sacrifices Bertha for her own individualistic journey. My reading is not justifying the usage of Bertha in this way, it is problematic; rather, I am interested in what Brontë is trying to communicate here.
conventions of the romance genre—ultimately silencing and burying it deep within the text.

Mr. Fox’s Aesthetic Alibi

Though the end of coverture marked a move away from the phenomenon of forced incarceration, the patriarchal systems that predicated women’s legal subjugation continue to manifest in the twenty-first century. The violence once contained safely within the bloody chamber, the corporeal dismemberment of the objectified female, has become an artifact of our contemporary moment. Since Edgar Allan Poe wrote in “The Philosophy of Composition,” that the death of a “beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world,” overly-romanticized images of violence against women have continued to shape some of our most prominent cultural expressions. From Poe’s own literature to contemporary cult classics, images of disfigured female bodies have become commonplace. Elisabeth Bronfen elaborates on this trend by linking it to the suppression of our cultural fascination with death: “because the feminine body is culturally constructed as the superlative site of alterity, culture uses art to dream the deaths of beautiful women.” In literature and art such representations are often shielded from criticism under the umbrella of artistic freedom of speech, what Martin Jay has coined the aesthetic alibi. Specifically, Jay argues that within a liberal society the restrictions on free speech are relaxed even more when “that speech (or any symbolic action) is deemed to have aesthetic value.” Jay goes on to point out that “what would

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194 Elisabeth Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body: Death, femininity and the aesthetic, xi.
be libelous or offensive in everyday life is granted a special dispensation, if it is understood to take place within the protective shield of an aesthetic frame.”

This is precisely the argument Bronfen evokes in her defense of artistic representations of female death: “it seems as necessary to stress the fundamental difference between real violence done to a physical body and any ‘imagined’ one (which represents this ‘dangerous fantasy’ on paper or canvas without any concretely violated body as its ultimate signified).” Bronfen’s argument enacts Jay’s point that the artistic alibi relies on the demarcation between aesthetic representation and real life. And, while her point is valid, Bronfen’s argument ignores the sociopolitical context surrounding such representations of violence. As Alice Bolin points out in her collection of essays, Dead Girls, the mutilation of women in fiction reflects a broader cultural obsession with gendered violence and a refusal to acknowledge female subjectivity. Specifically, Bolin frames the Dead Girl trope as a male fantasy of the perfect woman—beautiful, innocent, and dead—onto which the male author can project his own ego. In other words, the aesthetic representation of violence against women is an expression of male desire and hostility against women, one that has for too long been granted protection within the discourse of the aesthetic alibi.

The prominence of the Dead Girl trope in literature and popular genres of fiction is foregrounded in Mr. Fox within St. John’s own writing. Specifically, representations of gendered violence litter the pages of his fiction, clearly indicating that much of his

197 Ibid., 15.
198 Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body, 59.
success comes at the expense of his female characters. Reading through St. John’s notes, Mary calls attention to this habit and criticizes his tendency to carelessly treat female mutilation as a plot device:

Can you tell me why it’s necessary for Roberta to saw off a hand and a foot and bleed to death at the church altar?… Especially given that this other story ends with Louise falling to the ground riddled with bullets, the mountain rebels having mistaken her for her traitorous brother. And must Mrs. McGuire hang herself from a door handle because she’s so afraid of what Mr. McGuire will do when he gets home and finds out that she’s burnt dinner? From a door handle? Really, Mr. Fox?

Mary’s questions for St. John begin to deconstruct the many gratuitous functions of such violence while pointing out how conventional these types of scenarios have become. First, she frames Roberta’s death as an unnecessary attempt to find beauty in the sacrifice of a female character, a sacrifice that is even more poetic because she mutilates her own body much like a religious sacrifice. Though her death comes at her own hand, the story’s violence is a gruesome echo of Bluebeard’s dismembered wives. Next, Mary’s critique of Louise’s mistaken identity calls attention to the expendability of female characters. Here, Louise’s death evokes a deep sense of pathos to emphasize the tragedy of war. Mary’s final remarks point out the senselessness of Mrs. McGuire’s death while also calling attention to St. John’s complete disregard for the female subject. In each of these examples, St. John’s treatment of the female body gestures to Poe’s brand of sexualized aesthetics, which was perhaps most prominent in his detective stories. In “The Murders in Rue Morgue,” for example, the unnamed narrator shows complete indifference towards Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter, using their bodies to map out his superior intelligence and deductive reasoning. Perhaps, even more importantly,

\[200\] Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox*, 5.
however, Mary’s critique calls attention to the fallacy that these are stories about women. As Bolin points out in *Dead Girls*, such narratives are not really concerned with women at all; rather, “the victim’s body is a neutral arena on which to work out male problems.”

201 Much like Poe’s detective fiction, St. John’s stories are really about violence and men’s perceptions or participation in that violence.

Throughout this encounter, St. John’s reaction to Mary’s accusations demonstrate how difficult it is to confront this problem because the hegemonic structures that empower the male author offer such formidable protection. As Jay points out, artistic freedom is so entrenched in the fabric of our culture we enthusiastically seek out opportunities to reaffirm its value.

202 When confronting the depiction of women, social discourses tend to reinforce paternalistic attitudes and notions about female sensibilities. St. John’s reaction to Mary’s allegation that he wrongs his protagonists perfectly enacts such attitudes. When she calls him a villain, St. John meets her cold frosty stare with a whistle before telling her: “A villain, you say. Is that so? I’m at church nearly every Sunday, Mary. I slip beggars change. I pay my taxes. And every Christmas I send a check to my mother’s favourite charity. Where’s the villainy in that? Nowhere, that’s where.”

203 St. John begins his defense with a patronizing tone that infantilizes Mary and undermines her anger. Specifically, St. John implies that she is overreacting, calling upon a long history of treating women’s emotions as hysteria. In listing off a few trite qualifications as evidence of his good nature, St. John also shifts the focus away from his actions and instead defends his character—after all, he does abide by tax law. His rhetoric appeals to

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203 Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox*, 4.
the Nice Guy mythos, which grounds his authority in a form of masculinity based on arrogance and entitlement. After all, how can Mary accuse of him of treating women poorly when he is such a nice guy? In the end, St. John’s reaction, which he partners with a smirk and sly chuckle, mimics the way popular discourses disregard female experience while disguising male hostility towards them by cloaking it in sarcastic humor.

Ideologies surrounding aesthetics do not just work to dismiss criticism, though; rather, free speech and artistic license actually excuse such behavior as long as it falls within the purview of art. The protective shield that separates art from real life appears to be such a natural boundary that failure to respect this demarcation often incites resentment. More than just a defense of free speech, though, the aesthetic alibi also works as an out—a way to shirk responsibility when artistic license is challenged. When Mary first confronts St. John, she attempts to dissolve the distinction between the narrative’s reality and St. John’s fiction by labeling him a villain and serial killer. In other words, Mary implicates St. John in the violence he writes about. St. John’s response, though, is to call upon the doctrine of aesthetic freedom: “It’s ridiculous to be so sensitive about the content of fiction. It’s not real. I mean, come on. It’s all just a lot of games.” Though he does not directly reference his own creative genius, St. John does gesture to the role of the artist as unbounded by conventional expectations. According to Jay, art idolizes “the creative genius as a figure of unconstrained power, who produces art by breaking rather than following rules.”

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205 Oyeyemi, Mr. Fox, 8.
206 Ibid., 5.
responsibility is to align literary representation with a game, which establishes separate rules outside of and in contrast to those of the real world. In a direct application of the aesthetic frame, St. John goes on to tell Mary: “These are our circumstances. I’m just trying to make sense of them.”²⁰⁸ In this way, St. John correlates his artistic responsibility with the act of representation—not the consequences of that representation. When Mary calls attention to the violent means by which he goes about killing his heroines, he again deflects responsibility by telling her: “I doubt it’s ever a pleasant experience. So does it really matter how it happens?”²⁰⁹ Each of these rationalizations further underscores the sense of protectionism that surrounds artistic license, making it clear how difficult it is to discuss representations of gendered violence without evoking the aesthetic alibi.

Because St. John’s defense mechanisms are so entwined in the very fabric of our cultural consciousness, Mary must show St. John what is behind Bluebeard’s door rather than simply tell him. She does this by pulling him into his own stories and reenacting the types of violence that St. John relies upon. As if borrowing the Dead Girl trope, Mr. Fox casts Mary as the dead or mutilated woman in each story to shatter the aesthetic frame that St. John relies upon for artistic license. Though she often dies, the novel’s logic allows her to live again once the story has ended and the characters return to their framing narrative. In the first of these endeavors, Mary pulls St. John into the story “Dr. Lustucru,” where he immediately decapitates her. As Dr. Lustucru, St. John explains that though she was not very talkative, “he beheaded her anyway, thinking to himself that he could replace her head when he wished for her to speak.”²¹⁰ The story’s title recalls a

²⁰⁸ Oyeyemi, Mr. Fox, 141.
²⁰⁹ Ibid.
²¹⁰ Ibid., 7.
series of French prints from around 1660 that depicts a man identified as Dr. Lustucru using a hammer and anvil to pound the disembodied heads of women, crafting them into the docile wives their husbands desire.\footnote{Marie Warner, \textit{From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers} (New York: Noonday Press, 1994): 27-9.} One of these prints actually includes an inscription that lists the offensive behaviors of women that Dr. Lustucru can eliminate: “shrewish, loud-mouthed, devilish, angry, mad, haggard, bad, annoying, obstinate.”\footnote{Ibid., 27.} Dr. Lustucru’s shop is also advertised by a sign with the figure of a headless woman and the caption: “Everything about her is good.”\footnote{Ibid., 28.} Though in \textit{Mr. Fox} Dr. Lustucru’s wife seems to possess none of these offensive traits, he beheads her anyway in order to control her ability to speak. He soon regrets this decision, however, because the beheading ruins her ability to properly take care of him. Realizing his mistake, he tries to put her back together again, but she is irreversibly broken. Finding her erratic behavior too disturbing to tolerate, Dr. Lustucru locks his wife up in the nursery until she escapes one night—a clear allusion to Bertha’s incarceration in Rochester’s attic. The Dr. Lustucru intertext here also gestures to Bluebeard’s dismembered wives who lost their lives because they failed to live by his rules. When they exit this story, St. John defends his violent reaction by telling Mary: “that’s just the way the story went. I didn’t know that was us.”\footnote{Oyeyemi, \textit{Mr. Fox}, 10.} Mary refuses to grant him such reprieve, though, and responds, “Oh, you knew. Of course you did.”\footnote{Ibid.} St. John’s excuse attempts to obscure the fact that Mary’s beheading was too easy for him—he did it simply because the imaginative space of the story and Mary’s apparent
immortality allowed him to kill her without consequence. However, the ease by which he resorts to violence links St. John to the Lustucru character, which is often considered a precursor to Perrault’s “Bluebeard.” Ultimately, this lineage demonstrates how St. John’s behavior is a product of Western masculinity and the unchecked entitlement that grants men dominion over women’s bodies.

Another story that Mary pulls St. John into, “Fitcher’s Bird,” calls attention to the overly-romanticized embodiments of such violence that defined the plots of early fairy tales. The story opens with an ordinary girl, Miss Foxe, who possess a passion for fairy tales. According to Miss Foxe, she loved the transformations they contain and the fact that the narrative arc guaranteed order would be restored in the end. Miss Foxe is an ordinary girl who has trouble finding a man, so she places an advertisement in the paper: “Fairy-tale princess seeks fairy-tale prince.” Fitcher answers her advertisement by sending his card along with a single foxglove, which to Miss Foxe, who understands the language of flowers, symbolizes both beauty and danger. Despite his reserved personality, the two appear to be a fairy-tale match. The story ends, however, in an abrupt act of violence when Miss Foxe hands Fitcher a sword and tells him to cut off her head. The unspoken consensus between the two is that, like her favorite fairy-tale

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216 This story’s title, “Fitcher’s Bird,” is also a reference to the Brothers Grimm 1812 version of “Bluebeard.” In this German version, a sorcerer offers an egg to three sisters and tells them not to peek into a forbidden chamber. The first two sisters in turn defy him, dropping their egg into the blood that pools beneath a basin in the room. The sorcerer sees the stained egg and chops up the bodies before offering the egg to the next sister. When the story gets to the third sister, she maintains her composure so the egg doesn’t fall and give her away. She is able to save herself and her sisters in the end.

217 Ibid., 74.

218 Ibid., 76.

219 Ibid., 79.
character, Miss Foxe is really a princess trapped in a plain, animalistic body. It is up to Fitcher, then, to release her so she can transform into the princess she was meant to be. Fitcher complies, and “without further argument he unsheathed the sword and cleaved Miss Foxe’s head from her neck. He knew what was supposed to happen. He knew that this awkward, whispering creature before him should now transform into a princess—dazzlingly beautiful, free, and made wise by her hardship.” Fitcher’s role in Miss Foxe’s beheading, mimics what Kate Millet refers to as the institutionalized ritual of defloration. With his phallic sword, Fitcher reaffirms male dominion in a reenactment of sexual penetration that is meant to transform Miss Foxe into an ideal woman. Interestingly, the beheading also gestures to the mutilation of Fitcher’s wives in one of the two Grimm versions of “Bluebeard.” In this story, Fitcher chops each wife up after her disobedience and throws her body parts into a basket. Linking together “Bluebeard” and “Fitcher’s Bird,” Mr. Fox’s rewriting calls attention to the violence inherent in traditional fairy tales; specifically, the link between such violence and the transformation of a woman into a male fantasy. Miss Foxe’s request also demonstrates the role of fairy tales in socializing women to accept this fantasy and the violence that comes along with it. However, in Mr. Fox the story ends with the simple declaration: “that is not what happened,” which signals that Miss Foxe’s transformation is never fulfilled. Fitcher’s failure ultimately transposes male authority with impotence in order to disrupt the fairy-tale ending and suspend the aesthetic force of St. John’s misogynistic violence.

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220 Ibid.
221 Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*, 48.
222 Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox*, 79.
While the violence in stories such as “Dr. Lustucru” and “Fitcher’s Bird” presents an aesthetic that feels a bit hyperbolic and artificial, Mr. Fox quickly shifts into a narrative that demonstrates how quickly such situations become familiar and replicate patterns of violence pulled from women’s experiences outside literature’s imaginary space. Particularly, the novel links overly romanticized forms of gendered violence found in fairy tales and fiction with brutally honest representations of violence and abuse. For example, in the story “My Daughter the Racist,” a Muslim woman’s neighbors threaten her life after she rejects a marriage proposal by the village chief and befriends a U.S. soldier. The woman’s choices put her in a precarious social position within the community; she has refused a powerful man something he desires, primarily her submission, and she has further insulted him by inviting a U.S. Soldier into her home. The woman’s behavior soon upsets the entire village, and she becomes an outcast. As a final warning, a friend comes to her and relates a story about another woman who had angered the village’s men: “there had been a young widow who talked back all the time and looked haughtily at the men. A few of them got fed up, and they took her out to the desert and beat her severely. She survived, but once they’d finished with her, she couldn’t see out of her own eyes or talk out of her own lips.” Though the circumstances of the violence are much difference, the reasoning behind the woman’s punishment parallels that of both Bertha and Bluebeard’s wives. This story reinforces the constant threat that women face in response to behaviors or actions that are displeasing to men in positions of power. However, it also comments on how the neocolonial occupation of Afghanistan under the guise of the “War on Terror” complicated an already complex patriarchal

223 Ibid., 251.
society. As part of their military presence, the U.S. soldiers in Oyeyemi’s story infantilize the Afghan men: “They fight us and they try to tell us, in our own language, that they’re freeing us.” The occupation of their land and their communities leads the Afghan men to aggression, which—since they cannot fight the U.S. soldiers—is focused on women who transgress the community’s rules and threaten to betray their loyalty. In this way, the text rewrites the traditional war story, shifting focus away from the experiences of men towards the women who are all too often silenced or sacrificed within such narratives.

*Mr. Fox* further blurs the demarcation between art and life by presenting a story that is so real, so raw in its emotion and violence, that St. John himself cannot determine whether it is fact or fiction. Relating what he believes is a memory, St. John tells Mary that he once killed her in a fit of brutal rage. His tale begins when Mary asserts her autonomy by moving into an apartment of her own. For St. John, Mary’s position outside his dominion threatens his masculinity, and he finds he is obsessively compelled to infiltrate her space. In a false show of sincerity, St. John deceives a mutual friend into revealing where her apartment is by turning on the waterworks. The show of false emotion is so threatening his friend quickly surrenders so that St. John will get his “manhood back…” (St. John acknowledges the irony of this statement by letting the sentence trail off with an ellipsis). When he gets to Mary’s new apartment, it is the chain on the door, or the physical barrier that she puts in place, that triggers his rage: “When I saw that you had that chain on, I knew I was going to hurt you. I was going to get in there and hurt you. It was kind of like caging up an animal—something—the bars, the

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224 Ibid., 240.
225 Ibid., 113.
226 Ibid.
boundaries hard and cold like that—it just makes the animal as mad as hell.”

In an important parallel to the “Bluebeard” tale, St. John mutilates Mary, beating her in a violent explosion of anger before slitting her throat. He tells her that he had trouble holding his hand steady as he went ear to ear: “It was a real mess. A real mess.”

Throughout his description, St. John focuses on his own actions, framing the story according to his experience and his emotions. In this way, Mary’s apartment becomes a bloody chamber in which St. John’s misogynistic rage explodes into a gruesome act of domestic violence. And much like his Bluebeard predecessors, St. John’s bloody chamber is a secret room that safely circumscribes his sadistic impulses, keeping them locked away and out of public site. However, while the novel situates St. John within this Bluebeard legacy, it simultaneously foregrounds the domestic element within all of these stories. In other words, the novel exposes how each incarnation of Bluebeard is really a story of domestic violence that is simply camouflaged by Western aesthetics and genre conventions.

When St. John’s finishes recalling this memory, Mary presses him to acknowledge the motivations behind his attack, but he once again slips on a veil of ambivalence. His initial response is sarcasm and wit, and he falls back on easy answers: “I was in a killing mood, I was afraid of time, I was fooled by some inexplicable assurance that I was merely dreaming out my revenge, making myself safe for the daylight hours… trying to create an emergency that would scare love out of hiding.”

Mary will not have his excuses though, and instead pushes him to acknowledge the

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227 Ibid., 114.
228 Ibid., 116.
229 Ibid.
emotions behind his attack: “You hated me. Because I wouldn’t come back and I was making you hate yourself, making you think there was something wrong with you.”

Mary’s version of the events reveals St. John’s vulnerability, his inability to reconcile his own self-loathing with the violence he enacts upon Mary’s body. When Mary tells St. John that the events he just narrated were really part of a story he wrote some time ago, his response is instant relief: “Thank Got it wasn’t me. Thank God I wasn’t capable of doing such a thing.” However, his exclamation also belies the instability of his conviction; the thank God is an indication that St. John must rely on a higher power rather than his own faculties to prevent such violence from occurring outside the fiction he writes. It is also important to note that St. John does not deny the possibility that he could enact such violence; rather he is primarily concerned about losing control of the animal and letting himself follow through with his desires. When Mary shows him the manuscript, St. John focuses on the physical demarcation it creates between the world of fiction and his real life. Despite being genuinely affected by this scenario, his reaction gestures once again to the aesthetic alibi; as long as the plot remains safely within the aesthetic frame of his literature, St. John does not need to acknowledge his responsibility—or his capacity for such violence. Though St. John’s defense mechanisms are still firmly in place, for readers this scene marks a turning point. The shift from fairy tale to realism disrupts St. John’s facade of ambivalence and ultimately breaks down the novel’s barrier, linking the novel’s imaginaries with the global epidemic of violence against women.

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230 Ibid., 117.
231 Ibid.
To disrupt the cynicism embedded within St. John’s authorial license, Mary ultimately helps him realize that his violent fantasies are intrinsically linked to his sense of masculinity. Specifically, Mary turns the table on St. John and helps him confront the trauma that continues to haunt him. During a story that St. John narrates himself, he tells the reader “Mary saved my life once. She has a vested interest, of course—if I go, she goes. But she didn’t do it as if she had a vested interest. She did it as if she cared.” St. John’s prelude to this story works to remind us once again that Mary emerged from his imagination, much like the characters in his stories. As he continues, St. John reveals that he is still haunted by his participation in the First World War, or, rather, his failure to come home with the physical markers of trauma that war tends to leave on the bodies of veterans: lost limbs, missing eyes, and shrapnel scars. For St. John, these markers are not just casualties of combat but signifiers of bravery and strength. Within the hyper-masculine world of combat and warfare, the mutilation of soldiers’ bodies grounds their emotional experiences with the physical realities of combat. In his story, St. John, holding a gun to his head, tries to rectify the disparity between his unmarred body and the inner turmoil created by his emotional trauma, what we know today as shell shock. Mary shows up just in time to carefully coax the firearm from his grip and talk him through the episode. In the end, St. John’s story reveals his inability to adequately express the violence of war: “I couldn’t write down the echo of an exploded shell. I couldn’t smear the smell of trench across the page. I couldn’t do this thing so that anyone could see what I meant. The things that had happened.” The halting syntax and sensory diction within

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232 Ibid., 111.
233 Ibid., 111-12.
his confession reinforce St. John’s inability to express in writing what he needs to: the very real, and often traumatic, violence of war. As a manifestation of his own imagination, Mary has become his only outlet for the violence he needs to release onto the page. He created Mary to serve his own purposes, and, whether as a character in his stories or as a figment of his imagination embodied before him, he kills her over and over again.

The final move *Mr. Fox* makes to dismantle the power of the aesthetic alibi is to shift its own narrative away from the male as creator of women to women as agents, both on the page and off. Up until this point, the text has focused on St. John as a participant in a larger cultural phenomenon and an abuser of the power structures that masculinity depends upon. However, the text enacts the shift in subjectivity necessary to disrupt the aesthetic alibi and the representation of violence against women by transferring the narrative energy to the novel’s female characters. In a rewriting of du Maureir’s *Rebecca*, a story called “What Happens Next,” the romance plot is sidelined as the narrative focuses instead on female relationships. With a parallel to the scene mentioned above, St. John’s character in this story, a Maxim de Winter rewrite, confronts the pain and responsibility he is still hanging on to after his wife’s suicide, which is symbolized by his own bloody chamber: a basement full of all the furniture he hid away after his wife’s death. After this revelation, the narrative focuses on Mary and Daphne, St. John’s wife, who enters this story as the ghost of the dead wife. Mary’s character is dealing with her own trauma after growing up with an abusive father who is now in prison for killing her mother. After moving in with St. John and learning about his wife, she attempts to take her own life by sticking her head inside the cavern of his ancient Aga oven. It is Daphne
who finds her and disrupts the aesthetic potential of her dead body. Pulling her out of the oven, Daphne convinces her to try living again: “You listen to me, Mary Foxe, or whatever your name is. Stay here. There’s a decent man here who will probably fall for you if you don’t make mess of things. He’ll take care of you. And you take care of him. No point in having any more death.”\textsuperscript{234} While du Maurier’s \textit{Rebecca} ends by casting de Winter’s first wife as a wicked woman who provoked him to violence—an ending that allows the reader to sympathize with the romantic hero despite the fact that he killed Rebecca and threw her body into the sea—\textit{Mr. Fox} rewrites this story to focus instead on the psychological pain that each character grapples with. Most importantly, the story moves us beyond the aesthetic force of the mutilated female body to a narrative invested in the subjectivity of its female characters. In doing so, the story confronts the willful ignorance of women, both writers and readers, who continue to participate in the conventions of the romance plot despite knowing the violence that lurks within.

Conclusion

For Brontë, the bloody chamber offered a powerful way of communicating the horrors of forced incarceration within the conventions of the romance novel. When Jane peers into Rochester’s attic room, she is confronted with the perilous status of the Victorian \textit{feme-covert}. For Bertha, as it was for thousands of women in Victorian England, coverture predicated a loss of legal status and subjectivity. Failing to uphold the expectations of a proper bourgeoisie wife, Bertha’s confinement is justified according to social conventions. Using the bloody chamber, Brontë links Bertha to the mutilated corpses of Bluebeard’s wives, creating a warning for Jane that ultimately saves her from

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., 200.
a similar fate. In this way, Brontë prioritizes knowledge and agency, using female curiosity as a weapon against the constant threat of incarceration.

Though Brontë’s rewriting turns to “Bluebeard” to expose the social and cultural conditions surrounding the rise of the Victorian madwoman, it is important to remember that it does so at the expense of Bertha. Jane is saved when Rochester’s secret is exposed, but Bertha remains in captivity. In this way, Jane follows in the footsteps of Perrault’s heroine who, according to Oyeyemi, “denies having seen all the bodies in the Bloody Chamber” because “she hopes that by denying the other corpses she will save her own life.” Not only does Jane liberate herself, but she also achieves a social rise and a marriage in the end. Bertha, on the other hand, is reduced to a mere plot device—sacrificed to restore Rochester’s eligibility as a romantic hero and guarantee that Jane’s is a companionate marriage. Though the bloody chamber allows Brontë to confront the phenomenon of forced incarceration, her rewriting simultaneously buries the violence of Bertha’s captivity within the conventions of Victorian literature.

In rewriting both the “Bluebeard” tale type and the constellation of texts surrounding Jane Eyre, Oyeyemi’s Mr. Fox excavates this violence to investigate how the Dead Girl trope has become a byproduct of our cultural moment. By pulling St. John into his own stories, Mary breaks the demarcation between art and real life and confronts the protectionism of the aesthetic alibi. Mr. Fox rewrites Jane Eyre to link Rochester to a genealogy of Bluebeard characters that reaches back through each fairy tale variant all

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235 Megan Kurashige, “A Conversation with Helen Oyeyemi”

236 When we consider Bertha’s identity as a Creole woman from the Caribbean plantations, this sacrifice is even more problematic. As Spivak has already emphasized, Jane’s happy ending is the epitome of Western individualism and her marriage further reinforces the link between the nuclear family and British imperialism.
the way to the ancient images of Dr. Lustucru. Each of the stories in *Mr. Fox* enacts a
different type of narrative violence, from the hyperbolic tone of fairy tales to the tragic
registers of war literature, creating a series of bloody chambers that exposes the
misogynistic attitudes behind each type of representation. Reading Oyeyemi’s novel is
like walking down the narrow passageway in Bluebeard’s castle, opening door after door
to view the secrets once contained safely inside. However, while Bluebeard’s wife turns
away from the bloody image before her, Mary boldly throws the doors open to expose the
mutilated corpses within.

Ultimately, Oyeyemi’s novel does not just rewrite or revise the Bluebeard
color; rather, it engages a dialogic mode of intertextuality that interrogates the
misogynistic impulses within artistic representations of gendered violence. In *Mr. Fox*,
the bloody chamber is transformed from a metaphor for such violence into a tool aimed at
the very structures that predicate the corporeal dismemberment of the objectified woman.
The result is a novel that interrogates the whole of Western literary history and the
culture concept of artistic license. Furthermore, Oyeyemi’s novel demonstrates how
intertextuality can be used as a deliberate writerly strategy to engage in social and
political critique. Specifically, in excavating Bluebeard’s bloody chamber, this
intertextuality confronts the knowledge of male violence as it bleeds from the imaginary
spaces of literature into the real world. Moreover, exposing our knowledge of this
violence implicates both the writer and reader in a form of willful ignorance. In the end,
Oyeyemi asks us what it means to be a reader once this knowledge is exposed.
Conclusion

Digital feminism has been an essential form of political activism since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Recently, the hashtag activism of #MeToo, #TimesUP, and #SayHerName have demonstrated the political power of such movements to actualize social and political change. One of the strengths of digital feminism is its ability to transcend traditional national or geographic boundaries. In other words, the fast pace and worldwide reach of digital feminism enables global engagement and solidarity amongst women and genderqueer individuals. Though digital feminism is most often recognized for its hashtag activism, feminist artists and activists have employed digital technology and cyber spaces to create works that often blur the boundaries amongst traditional aesthetic forms. Their presence alone disrupts assumptions about technology as a masculine domain, and yet many of these artists are also responsible for reinventing the digital world.237

Within this broader movement, I locate a politically committed form of dialogical intertextuality that echoes the literature of Ní Dhuibhne, Smith, and Oyeyemi. Focusing on Janelle Monáe’s emotion picture Dirty Computer and the feminist remixes of Elisa Kreisinger, I foreground how contemporary women artists from across the digital

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237 Judith K. Brodsky points to Gamergate and the lack of women in Silicon Valley as two definitive examples of the various ways in which women have been systematically excluded from technology. According to Brodsky, women and transgender digital artists disrupt this heteronormative context by transforming technology. Judith K. Brodsky, Dismantling the Patriarchy, Bit by Bit: Art, Feminism, and Digital Technology (London: Bloomsbury, 2022) and Rebecca Bengal, “‘You Don’t Own or Control Me’: Janelle Monáe on Her Music, Politics, and Undefined Sexuality,” The Guardian, February 22, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefined-sexuality.
landscape produce aesthetic forms of intertextual activism. Both Monáe and Kreisinger weave together individual “texts” to create intertextual videos that interrogate gender- and race-based forms of oppression. Monáe’s extended emotion picture brings together the individual music videos released in anticipation of her full-length album, *Dirty Computer*, within a science fiction frame narrative about a dystopian autocratic future. Monáe creates an intertextual web of associations by drawing on the work of prominent feminists such as Naomi Wolf, Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, Mary Beard, and Toni Morrison. Kreisinger creates remixes that pull texts from various contemporary sources to splice them into new videos that interrogate the representation of women and LGBTQ individuals within pop culture. Together, Monáe and Kreisinger demonstrate how intertextuality is capable of sociopolitical activism through experiments in digital modalities.

Since the release of her first EP, *Metropolis*, Monáe has built a prolific career within the music industry as a performer, creator, and producer. She is known for appropriating various genres and styles, often fusing them together to create futuristic sounds. Some of Monáe’s most recognizable influences include Prince, Stevie Wonder, James Brown, the Jackson Five, and David Bowie. As co-founder of the Wondaland Arts Society, Monáe has immersed herself in a nurturing group of musicians, writers, and artists who live and work communally. Monáe is perhaps best known for her Afrofuturist world-building, which is centered on her alter-ego, the rebel android Cindi Mayweather who first appeared on *Metropolis*. After her first EP, Monáe released two full-length

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238 Elisa Kreisinger, “Queer Video Remix and LGBTQ Online Communities,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* no. 9.

239 In addition to her music career, Monáe has also acted in the films *Hidden Figures* and
albums, *The ArchAndroid* and *The Electric Lady*, both installments in the *Metropolis* concept series. In Monáe’s Afrofuturist world, the android is a metaphor that appropriately represents a wide array of socially and politically marginalized peoples. Monáe’s appearance, which is characterized by her androgynous suits and carefully styled hair, often reinforces the android theme and the sense of futurity her music achieves. Monáe is also known for staying in the Cindi Mayweather persona when she gives interviews or speaks in public. In many ways, the conceptual world of Monáe’s music successfully veils her real identity in a cloud of ambiguity.

Throughout her career, Monáe has also built a reputation as a political activist by supporting several social justice issues, including women’s rights and Black Lives Matter. In 2016 Monáe led a march in Chicago with the mother of Sandra Bland, a young black woman who died after being wrongfully arrested and assaulted by Texas police. The following year, she spoke at the 2017 Women’s March on Washington the day after Trump was inaugurated. Since then, Monáe has been deeply involved in the women’s movement and BLM, often using her platform to confront and raise awareness about social justice issues. She also launched the grassroots organization #FemTheFuture with Lupita Nyong’o to support women in the media industry. Monáe is perhaps most recognized for the speech she gave at the 2018 Grammy Awards in support of #TimesUp: “We come in peace, but we mean business. And to those who would dare try to silence us, we offer two words: ‘Times up’. We say ‘Times up’ for pay inequality; time’s up for discrimination; time’s up for harassment of any kind. And time’s up for the abuse of

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*Moonlight.*
power - because, you see, it’s not just going on in Hollywood; it’s not just going on in Washington. It’s right here in our industry, as well.”

With the release of *Dirty Computer*, which critics tend to frame as a coming-out album, Monáe offers her audience a much-anticipated glimpse beyond the Cindi Mayweather persona. In many ways, the android character allowed Monáe to conceal herself and avoid exposure. As an embodiment of a post-human and post-gender future, Cindi Mayweather also played with the performative nature of gender signification. However, with *Dirty Computer*, Monáe signals a shift in how she negotiates these aspects of her identity in the public sphere. After coming out as queer in the 2018 *Rolling Stone* article, Monáe has since taken to social media to announce that she is pansexual. Though Monáe’s work has always hinted at these aspects of her identity, *Dirty Computer* is an explicit celebration of queer sexuality. As an album, *Dirty Computer* also reaches an affective register that Monáe’s earlier work avoided. Specifically, *Dirty Computer*

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241 Though the release of her album coincided with the Rolling Stone cover article in which Monáe first spoke about her queer sexuality, Monáe’s music and imagery has arguably always been queer. Since 2018, Monáe has publicly come out as pansexual and discussed her aversion to doing so previously in numerous interviews. Specifically, Monáe describes a fear of rejection that she overcame with *Dirty Computer*. However, both Monáe and critics have recognized the queer themes and motifs throughout her previous work. See Laura Passin, “‘Dirty Computer’ is Not a Coming Out Album—Because Janelle Monáe’s Music Has Been Queer All Along,” *Electric Lit*, May 17, 2018, https://electricliterature.com/dirty-computer-is-not-a-coming-out-album-because-janelle-monaes-music-has-been-queer-all-along/.
embraces the many emotions that coincide with Monáe’s political affiliations in a move that breaks through the polished theatricality of her previous albums.

The film opens on a sci-fi scene in which Jane 57821, played by Monáe, is strapped to a table and submitted to the Nevermind, a gas that erases memories. In a voiceover, Monáe explains how this dystopian future slid into totalitarianism: “They started calling us computers. People began vanishing, and the cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all. And if you were dirty, it was only a matter of time.”242 As the technicians at The House of the New Dawn submit Jane to the cleaning process, her memories are played and then deleted. These memories are actually the standalone music videos for *Dirty Computer* that Monáe released prior to the album. The rest of the film alternates between these memories and Jane’s experience being cleaned. As the technicians scroll through Jane’s memories, we see her fall in love with Zen, played by Tessa Thompson, and engage in a subversive life full of joy and “Black Girl Magic” even as she is on the run from authorities.243 Spliced between these affective moments, the film depicts Jane attempting to resist the effects of the Nevermind by holding on to her memories. She is guided through the treatments by Mary Apple, who was Zen before being cleaned and reprogramed as a Torch, a servant of the House of the New Dawn.

Throughout this narrative, Monáe weaves together a complex landscape of intertexts to expose and interrogate the gender- and race-based forms of oppression that

242 Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.
243 Ibid.
thrive in our contemporary moment. In the first of these short videos, “Crazy, Classic, Life,” Monáe sings an ode to black youth culture while celebrating diversity and love. Throughout the video, which is set at a rave held in an abandoned pool, Monáe dances with an entourage of young, black women while the camera spans across a multi-ethnic and racially diverse group of partygoers. This celebration of diversity is abruptly disrupted by a rap interlude in which Monáe sits at the center of colorful re-creation of Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* while she verbally eviscerates the whitewashing contained within the rhetoric of multiculturalism. Specifically, Monáe character addresses racial profiling and police brutality by juxtaposing her treatment as a young black woman with that of a white college boy—both were caught partying, but he was let go. The imagery of Monáe’s last supper also gestures to the impending betrayal and persecution that Da Vinci’s painting symbolizes. The video then cuts back to the rave, where people are frantically fleeing the authorities. Before concluding, the camera pans across a row of black faces—party-goers who have been targeted and apprehended for cleaning.

Monáe’s “Django Jane,” which was inspired by Dora Milaje from *Black Panther*, pulls on several pop culture, literary, and art texts to continue this line of interrogation. The track, which is primarily composed of Monáe rapping, explores the various modes of oppression the artist has faced in both her personal and professional lives. In a confessional style, Monáe describes being kept out of the public’s sight while working a retail job and being criticized for looking too much like a man. Monáe also addresses discrimination, and her own lack of recognition, within the music and film industries: “Runnin’ down Grammys with the family / Prolly give a Tony to the homies / Prolly get

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a Emmy dedicated to the / Highly melanated.” These personal moments are punctuated by a reference to Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*, which Monáe combines with the image of a round mirror placed in her lap and reflecting her own face. Monáe pulls on the confessional style of the play’s episodic structure to frame her own monologue. In doing so, Monáe gestures to the play’s iconic status as a product of white feminism and the criticism it has garnered for its trans-exclusionary depictions of womanhood. To rewrite Ensler’s play, Monáe fills her own monologue with references to black women’s experiences, both their successes and their unique challenges. She does so while center stage in a variety of vignettes that place her in a position of power. Monáe trades her traditional black-and-white for suits of vibrant pink, blood red, and emerald green. Together, these images and the spoken word of Monáe’s rap reclaim Ensler’s legacy, rewriting it to achieve a more inclusive, intersectional feminism.

The last video that I will focus on here is Monáe’s “Pynk,” which is perhaps best described as an ode to pussy power. The video opens on a group of black women dressed in pink leotards that are accentuated by floral pants resembling female genitalia. The pants flutter in the breeze as the dancers open and close their legs. Overall, the song is playful and cheeky with Monáe singing that she’s “got the pink” and referring to “the lips around your, maybe.” Though the song is explicitly sexual, it successfully deflects the traditional male gaze to create a female space for women to revel in their own bodies. Monáe credits several significant sources as inspiration for this track:

Prince’s mischievous smile as he played organ on “Hot Thang” and watched Cat Glover shimmy across the stage in “Sign O’ The Times” and by Kali, Sheela Na Gig, Isis, Sheba, Athena, Medusa, Mary and all the Mothergoddess sculptures and

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245 Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.
246 Ibid.
paintings in pyramids, churches and castles around the world; midnight conversations and debates about The Great Cosmic Mother; insights from The Vagina by Naomi Wolf, and Interior Scroll by Carolee Schneemann, and the calligraphy of Sun Ping; and Paul Simon’s quote that “pink is the only true rock n’ roll color.”

While several of these sources add to the overall feel and theme of the song, Monáe pulls more directly on the woman-centered works of Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor’s The Great Cosmic Mother and Naomi Wolf’s Vagina, to create a celebration of sisterhood. “Pynk” compliments Wolf’s scientifically grounded biography of the vagina, offering an aesthetic experience that captures the book’s groundbreaking discoveries about female anatomy. However, Sjöö and Mor’s text provides Monáe an opportunity to rewrite the Eurocentric mother goddess that The Great Cosmic Mother puts forth. More specifically, Monáe counters the universal heritage that Sjöö and Mor’s work assumes, replacing it with an image of black sisterhood. Together, this network of intertexts and influences frames “Pynk” as a space where women can explore their embodied experiences through a sense of playful agency.

Perhaps the most formally innovative of Monáe’s works, Dirty Computer brings together each of these individual music videos to create a full narrative. Though the individual memories tend to feel fractured and incomplete, these aesthetic qualities lend the narrative a sense of authenticity. Each video is a moment or glimpse into the memories that Jane is frantically trying to hold on to. Watching Dirty Computer is like being immersed in an imaginary world full of clues and references—to past worlds, other artists’ work, and the sociopolitical realities of our own moment. Monáe pulls these various threads together to create a multimedia experience that interrogates the

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247 Monáe, “I Am a Dirty Computer.”
intersections of various forms of oppression. But *Dirty Computer* is also a celebration of the beauty and intelligence found within each of these various types of experience. Monáe’s film ends with the emancipation of Jane and Zen. Despite being cleaned and essentially wiped free of all their subversive memories, both women persist.

While Monáe pulls a vast web of intertexts into her media, Kreisinger’s most popular remixes generally focus on a single intertext. Kreisinger’s work splices clips pulled from pop culture and rearranges them into videos that critique the original text. For example, Kreisinger’s “Ann Romney Loves Women?!” remix compiles excerpts from Ann Romney’s speech at the 2012 Republican National Convention to create a mash-up that exposes the hypocrisy within Romney’s political messaging. This remix appropriates Romney’s own words to undermine the Republican Party’s anti-LGBTQ platform. According to Kreisinger, video remixes such as this one are a form of queer activism aimed at challenging or provoking heteronormativity. Kreisinger’s remixes are known for appropriating clips from popular media, pulling them out of their original contexts, and rearranging them into new videos that subversively interrogate the source content.

Kreisinger began producing remix videos during the early days of *YouTube*. She worked within a “community of remix and mashup artists using the platform for artistic expression and pop culture experimentation.” Her work eventually caught the attention

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250 Elisa Kreisinger, “Video Artist,” elisakreisinger.com, accessed March 12, 2022,
of *YouTube* and was targeted for violating copyright law. The videos were removed, but Kreisinger’s testimony with the U.S. Copyright Office led to several allowances for remix art in the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. Since then, Kreisinger has contributed on free speech and fair use law in both public and academic publications. Though Kreisinger’s remixes have garnered quite a bit of attention, she is most known for her work as a writer, producer, and host on various media platforms. She was executive producer at Refinery29 where she worked on both video content and the podcast *Strong Opinions Loosely Held*. Since then, Kreisinger has moved on to lead of digital at *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*. These various roles demonstrate Kreisinger’s ability to participate in the production of popular culture while simultaneously producing art that interrogates the heteronormative portrayals of gender and sexuality within these cultural artifacts.

Though Kreisinger’s remixes target a variety of popular shows and public figures, she has repeatedly focused her critique on the period drama *Mad Men* and the supposedly sex-positive *Sex and the City*. In “Don Draper Falls in Love with Roger Sterling,” Kreisinger mashes clips from across the series to create a homoerotic video that interrogates the show’s investment in toxic and outdated forms of masculinity. In her *Sex and the City* remixes,

https://www.elisakreisinger.com/#work-section.

Kreisinger plays on the heteronormative assumptions bound up in the show’s post-feminist depictions of contemporary dating scenarios. In “Carrie Bradshaw Comes Out - Season 1,” Kreisinger splices together cuts from across the show’s initial season to create a narrative in which Carrie, the show’s protagonist, grapples with her sexual attraction to women. This remix displaces the show’s original voiceover so that Carrie’s internal monologue suggests she has feelings for her new editor. This remix ultimately undermines the show’s commitment to heterosexual relationships. Kreisinger’s work demonstrates how the artist employs intertextuality to interrogate the heterosexual norms within mainstream culture.

Together, Monáe and Kreisinger’s work illustrates how technology is currently being employed by digital activists to interrogate and reshape popular media. Monáe’s emotion picture has expanded both the music video and video album genres by creating intertextual multimedia experiences that require formal innovation. More specifically, Monáe’s Afrofuturist narrative works because it accommodates the album’s separate music videos, working them into the overarching frame narrative as a series of episodic memories. Similarly, Kreisinger’s remixes pull on existing texts to interrogate the social norms responsible for erasing LGBTQ experiences within popular media. These short videos decontextualize clips pulled from across a show’s seasons, mashing them together in new ways to undermine heteronormative practices in popular culture. Both Monáe and Kreisinger reveal an emerging moment in digital activism of feminist artists and creators.

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turning to a dialogic mode of intertextuality to confront social justice issues and reimagine a more inclusive future.
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