

Holding It Together: Postmodern Modes of Cohesion

Adam Lowe (University of Leeds)

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that ‘cultural values emerge as the result of an inscription on the body, understood as a medium, indeed, a blank page’ (2001, p.2492). Donna Haraway, in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, likens the textual body and the act of inscribing upon that body to forms of technology which render the individual a cyborg (real/unreal, human/animal and organic/machine hybrid) (2001, p.2269). For these theorists, there is a blurring of the physical and linguistic active at cultural and individual levels. At face value, this duality of material and immaterial suggests bodies at the micro level (individuals, texts) and the macro level (communities, culture) must be diffuse and disparate, formed by textual legerdemain rather than anything fixed and tangible. Cohesion itself would seem impossible for bodies comprised of polar opposites. Thus, the postmodern paradigm appears to work against the ideas of community, self and story and thrives in the space of oxymoron and paradox.

Popular culture presents science fiction paradoxes in terms of cosmic destruction, ironic inability to change the future (where attempts to change the future are revealed, at the last moment, to be futile all along) and constantly bifurcating realities (Bondi 1986, p.177).¹ Either reality deterministically prevents paradoxes occurring or the occurrence of a paradox leads to a collapse, restructuring or splitting of reality to accommodate the paradox. How, then, can postmodern writers imagine their favoured contested bodies as functional, present and effective without first imagining their explosion, destruction and replacement? How can the exploded body be anything but shrapnel, and how can it hold together as a concrete form?

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy constructs an alternate future as a viable example of a lived postmodern community – that is, the social body. Similarly, Jeff Noon presents both images of the functioning postmodern body and a meaningful yet fragmentary body of text in *Vurt* and *Falling Out of Cars*, respectively. This suggests the postmodern does present modes of cohesion, even if it should present the opposite. Processes must exist for

¹For examples in popular fiction, see any of Robert Zemeckis’s *Back to the Future* films or *Red Dwarf VI*, Episode 6, Out of Time (Dir. by Antony de Emmony 1993) or *Red Dwarf VII*, Episode 1, Tikka to Ride (Dir. by Ed Bye, 1997).

meaning to arise from disparate parts. Donna Haraway provides irony as a solution to this disparity:

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessarily true (Haraway: 2269).

Haraway's definition of irony is a very specific one: one in which two things do not 'resolve' and are still held together 'because both or all are necessarily true' (2001, 2269). Irony serves as a tool to allow multiple truths or realities to exist at the same time with equal validity. In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, this irony is present in the twin futures of America which Connie visits. Only one can exist in any one timeline, as time is considered linear. Yet Connie visits both futures, so neither is certain but both are possible. Time itself is ironic in this schema, as it serves to bring Connie's own agency into relief whilst also denying it. If Connie can visit either future, then it must exist, but the existence of one denies the existence of the other. Ultimately, then, it may mean whatever decision Connie makes, both or neither reality may occur simultaneously and those decisions therefore become unimportant. One future cannot be averted because it will exist parallel to the other, as it was and always will be. *Vurt*, likewise, presents two alternate worlds within one reality: the physical world and the Vurtual world. These two worlds are ironic in Haraway's terms because both exist in contemporaneity. Both spaces exist at the same location in time.

Haraway's description of irony owes much to the concept of paradox and is reminiscent of the Zen concept of the *kōan*, such as 'Two hands clap and there is a sound; what is the sound of one hand?' (Attrib. to Hakuin Ekaku, in Waddell, 2002, pp.79-119). The point of a *kōan* is to allow an intellectual conflict which cannot be resolved and instead strips away ego and provides an intuitive understanding rather than a logical one. In other words, the *kōan* makes logic crumble and only makes sense when that happens (Ekaku, in Waddell 2002, pp.79-119). In this respect, postmodernism seems to gesture towards a Zen world-view where the ego disperses.

In *Falling Out of Cars*, Noon introduces us to a world where sensory input is unreliable and the ego, as in Zen, becomes indefinite. Signs float free of the signified:

All the bars and cafés, amusement arcades, cinemas; all the rundown buildings, made up for the night in cheap and gaudy neon and the colours smeared out by the rain; all the symbols and letters floating free from the signs and bringing a spell to my eyes; these ghosts of desire, this electric parade, and the streets crawling

heavy with ragged blasts of old-time rock music coming from doorways and windows; all the people that wandered and no matter the rain that fell, arm in arm, where did they come from, where were they going (. 2002, p.169)?

Popular entertainment is conflated with ‘rundown buildings’, so that culture itself is portrayed as degenerate. The reason for this is ‘the symbols and letters floating free’. What was meaningful has become meaningless, as the cultural signs of contemporary Britain dissolve into chaos. The signs themselves have not changed, nor have the things they represent, but the discerning witness who gives them meaning and quality has lost the power to reason and assemble these symbols into a logical order. It is the subject who has changed.

Marlene, the narrator, understands these signs as a ‘spell’, or illusion, stressing their unreality. The symbols are ‘ghosts of desire’, haunting the present with ‘old-time rock music’. Past melts into present and present melts into meandering aimlessness, as people arrive from nowhere (‘where did they come from’) and head in unknowable directions (‘where were they going?’) (Noon 2002, p.169). Unlike the peace of Zen, however, the undermining of rational understanding leads to a blurring of purpose. The lack of cohesion between social symbols and the things they symbolise results in the lack of cohesion in the lived realities of the people in this decaying society. Life without clear meaning becomes the same as life without any meaning. Despair, which permeates the text, is the result.

Marlene and her peers live a half-life, a virtual life, and seem unable to affect their world or be affected by it because the signs around them are beyond their grasp and thus cannot be manipulated to effect agency [‘the people that wandered and no matter the rain that fell’ (Noon 2002, p.169)]. This lack of agency translates directly to a crisis of ego. As Buddhism seeks to extinguish the ego, lack of agency and rejection of logic would be considered beneficial, but in the Western world of Marlene and her companions, where essentialism governs social signs in a modern paradigm, the more meaning dissolves, the more it is sought and the more futile this search becomes. Ego diffusion becomes problematic not in and of itself, but only because Western culture relies on foundational ideologies that promote the self, the concrete and the quantifiable. Marlene’s suffering is self-created and self-perpetuating. The cure would seemingly be to no longer resist the diffusion of ego and instead embrace it. Her illness has occurred only because her society has insisted on the power and universality of its signs and the centrality of the essential self who bears witness to them, only to discover this subjective self reveals the contingency of any power and the lack of any real universality.

Reality is under siege in this novel, its very signs in crisis. What is lived and experienced is not necessarily true because the signs that should make them understandable are incomprehensible, and what is true is not necessarily lived and experienced because interior reality is often disconnected to these external signs. Connecting with the world and grasping its signs becomes an act of will:

If I could only concentrate for long enough, keep myself in focus; but no, the letters remained indistinct. A smoke was floating there, between myself and the word. (Noon 2002, p.209)

It is important to note Marlene is not attempting to focus on the text; she is seeking to focus on *herself* – her ego. The text becomes a secondary interest. Noon reconfirms this when Marlene writes that ‘all things grow soft within my eyes’ (2002, p.286). External stimuli become unreliable only when the subjective self bears witness. It is she who creates sensory chaos, and not the external world – words and signs are indistinct because her bounded body, as the mapping of her ego, is indistinct. The body is the text, and the text can only be read if the body allows it.

If we are to believe the existence of the self relies on its recognition of difference to and its own bordering upon the external, this argument is also reflexive. Because Marlene cannot easily define the boundaries and limits of her own body, as translated via the senses, she is as indistinct as the letters on the page. The page can have no meaningful existence without a witness, one who can adjudicate its difference from something else. Therefore, the page itself cannot reliably be said to exist. If it is not different to or distinct from anything else, it cannot be said to have its own independent ontology, and must instead be a part of, and therefore equal to and indistinct from, everything around it. Therefore, Marlene is the page and is not the page, just as she is the smoke between herself and it. As the means of discernment dissolve, so do the boundaries between discrete things. Living in such a reality in its extreme, where the senses are incomprehensible, would result in epistemological and ontological confusion. No one would be able to perceive their own existence and thus the existence as we know it would not exist in any real sense.

In the Buddhist schema (and other Eastern philosophies), this dissolution should involve union with eternity or the bliss of nirvana. Marlene’s nightmare world does not offer this promise. But if we turn to the Vurt, the dreamworld that flows out of and into the real, it does offer a similar promise: togetherness and a collapse of boundaries becomes ‘sexy’; what should be inchoate is instead cohesive, but in an entangled, complicated manner (Noon 2001,

p.251). Cohesion occurs through complication rather than reduction. Scribble is connected to the Vurt, the real and his friends by complicated network links. He is part Vurt and part human; he loves his sister because she is his family and he loves her because she is his lover; he loves the Stash Riders because they form a family even though they are not related. Cohesion, then, becomes a process of entanglement and meddling, muddling affiliation seeming to speak to the works of Judith Butler. It thrives on blurred boundaries and slippage, rupture and excess, as one thing flows into and out of another. A cosmic unity is suggested, rather than the ego agency Marlene craves in *Falling Out of Cars*. The characters of *Vurt* are different to Marlene because, even though they also want to connect, they yearn for unity and not distinction.

Ontological discretion, in Marlene's world, becomes a convenient fallacy to allow the functioning and formation of an independent, reactive ego, because ego integrity relies on boundaries and without ego a body becomes a breathing object unable to defend, feed or shelter itself. Ego is a necessary product of effort where bodily survival is desired. Marlene's body is cohesive only through concentration, in both senses of the word. If she has no ego, she is just an organism that will eventually waste away to nothing. Concentration keeps it rooted to the signs around itself, so it may retain consciousness and thereby survive. The word 'concentrate' is the key: it means bringing together into a close space and applying conscious will. Effort is conflated with cohesion but also reduction in its meaning. Not only are the elements brought together through concentration, they are also drawn into focus, which implies an element of rejection and simplification to ignore some details and only consider others. What is outside the scope of focus is ignored and a tight area of interest is maintained. Reality is composed of discrete concepts bordering one another tightly. Marlene's terror, the fear that comes from failure to concentrate, is akin to agoraphobia. It is the distance between Marlene and the page that is terrifying, because it suggests failure to comprehend and a lapse in reality. The distance between these two concepts embodies the inverse: failure to separate or to envision a concrete border between the two. If what is external is not the self but cannot be decoded or categorised, its existence is uncertain. If the difference between subject and object is uncertain, so is the subject itself. Control over boundaries and limits fails and the ego is thus rendered powerless. Understanding is incomplete and so the external universe cannot be simply regarded, defined and conceptualised. Because it is not conceptualised, it is not real. It is virtually here and virtually not. It cannot be wholly seen (through the metaphorical mind's eye), and so Marlene cannot be sure of its existence or her own.

Areas of unclarity in the ego/consciousness become holes and gaps in the world as well as Marlene's understanding. These are holes that might make reality permeable and thus allow unwanted elements to enter Marlene's subjectivity and challenge the structural integrity of the phantasy self as whole. There is no regionally defined 'self' in opposition to an external, concrete world, because the world is an open, permeable confusion of holes, gaps and incomprehensible signs, and the body is indistinct from the world.

Cohesion is presented as a result of effort, then, on behalf of the subject, the one who experiences, in order to sustain bodily integrity. The subject must visualise itself as separate from the object in order to judge and witness it, and thereby create epistemological evidence for the object. When either subject or object is indistinct, it means the subject cannot stand back and see itself as separate, because the boundaries themselves are no longer clear. These two factors are not mutually exclusive: the subject sees itself as separate *because* it can create epistemological evidence for the external object, and the self creates epistemological evidence for the external object *because* it needs to see itself as separate for subjectivity to form.

Social cohesion is challenged as much as individual ego cohesion in this argument because the signs of the culture at hand have become indecipherable, rendering that culture on the surface absurd. For instance, Noon describes in various places the people 'caught in the movements of a wild dance' or 'cheering, singing a wild song' (2002, p.210). These descriptions are contextualised as descriptions of mundane activity, such as walking the street. Noon is insisting on civility/culture as comprehension of signs. Because the actions of others cannot be understood by Marlene, no matter how mundane those actions are, they become uncivilised and 'wild'. Culture crumbles when its signs become indecipherable. This world is a polar opposite to the game world of *Vurt*, where play is more important than control. The discerning subject is formed by controlling and regulating its phantasised borders; play allows engagement and renegotiation of these borders, with a necessary submission to permeability (for instance, the game can only be played when a feather penetrates the gamer through the mouth, and this then leads to a penetration of the unreal into the gamer's reality). The decipherable aligns itself with the controlled and impermeable, and the indecipherable with the submissive and permeable.

Indecipherability is, however, different to destruction, and indecipherable culture is not the same as a ruined or destroyed one. Signs and symbols do exist in Marlene's world – they are just reduced to chaos. A world without cultural signs would be a *tabula rasa* and would thus allow the creation of new signs. A world with confused cultural signs creates

ambivalence and an inability to decide and discern. Signs pull on both sides to create conflicting epistemological landscapes. The subject is thus reduced to inactivity and inertia, denying their existence through their lack of agency and interactivity with the external. This idea is inherent in the 'noise', which implies the sickness gripping Marlene is one of too much information rather than too little. There can be no clear, simple meaning in her world, only multiple, partial and contingent intimations. This might not be problematic in the Virtual schema where passivity and permeability are welcomed, and becomes an illness only because control is still craved.

As indecipherability is the symptom of the 'noise' in the novel, so the treatment is called 'Lucy' or 'Lucidity' and provides clarity and simplification as temporary respite from chaotic signs. Its adverts are pastiches of the *Big Brother* logo: an eye, such as the eye of Orwell's *1984* or the constantly watching but increasingly passive audience exposed to an overload of static-like, competing stimuli (white noise). The implications of surveillance and media saturation as a destructive force on the subject are present from the very cover of the Black Swan edition, where the eye appears in the same pixellated blue and yellow colour scheme of the *Big Brother* logo. Under constant surveillance, presumably established for greater control (that is, by the state), the self subsequently loses individual control. This may be the real cause of the noise. Pop culture references such as this are a prime example of postmodernity and provide a key to understanding of sorts. Easily recognised symbols, ironically, provide instant recognition and understanding in a novel otherwise obtuse and unclear. This is one example of how cohesive meaning can arise from a disjointed and non-linear narrative – the reference ties together certain elements and makes their dissonant echoes at once harmonious. Cohesion rests in the organisational skills of the observer who recognises, decodes and orders these elements.

Virtuality, as mentioned before, is also a key trope of contemporary postmodern theory which can be used to explain the cohesion of multiplicitious realities, and provides a scheme for organisation in the face of indecipherability and chaos. Heather Nunn argues expertly for the textual body as a virtual surface of pleasure in her essay *Written on the Body: An Anatomy of Horror, Melancholy and Love* (1996). Desire for her is mapped upon 'the post-modern surface . . . of virtual reality' in representations of love and sexuality (Nunn 1996, p.22). The body, which is inscribed upon by desire (similar to Haraway and Butler's theories of culture as an inscribing instrument) as a writing instrument or penis, is sublimated to a hybrid real/unreal existence (Butler 2001, p.2492; Nunn 1996, p.17). This theory correlates with Robert Anton

Wilson's argument for religion as a sexual narrative, and can translate to the concept of textual narrative as well (Wilson 1998, pp.778-82). Wilson argues for Jehovah, or YHWH, as 'Yod-He-Vau-He', which translates to 'Father-Mother-Son-divine ecstasy' and suggests the narrative 'muscular tension → electrical charge → electrical discharge → muscular relaxation' (1998, p.782). The narrative (Father) thus begins with equilibrium or an unaroused state awaiting arousal (muscular tension), before contact with an agent of change (Mother) sparks an electrical charge or arousal – namely, the rupture of equilibrium and the beginning of the protagonist's quest. This arousal then builds as gratification is delayed (conflict and complication). There is then a release of narrative or sexual tension at a moment of climax, followed by a return to equilibrium or the unaroused state of muscular relaxation. The narrative structure becomes one of sexual catharsis, where the tense reader undergoes a sexual release leading to relaxation.

Reading a narrative, as virtual play with sexual connotations, becomes a pleasurable act, an intercourse equivalent to sex. If a novel were a computer, narrative would be tantamount to cybersex or, using Haraway's analogy of the textual as a machine, teledildonics. There is a correlation between this virtual world and the Vurt of Noon's first novel. Life in *Vurt*, whether in the fantasy world or the real world, is governed foremost by pleasure. So for instance, when The Beetle drives, 'He likes to feel a little bit greased' (Noon 2001, p.7). This is a reference to Vaz, the Vaseline correlate that sexualises the world and makes it compliant to the user (it can be used to open locks and ease sexual penetration alike). Compliance, permeability and surface (skin, sense, appearance, site for desire) are stressed. This 'world [. . .] smeared with Vaz' is seen through a greased lens, like pornography (Noon 2001, p.5). Every element of the text emphasises the physical and the sensual, in an ironic move because the physical and the sensual are also in crisis. This is evidenced by the Thing-from-Outer-Space: a creature brought out of the Vurt, yet now manifest in a physical form:

The Thing-from-Outer-Space lay between us, writhing on the tartan rug. He was leaking oil and wax all over the place, lying in a pool of his own juices (Noon 2001, p.7).

The Thing is presented as a sexual object and a character in its own right. It blurs the fleshly and carnal ('his own juices') with the artificial and mechanical ('leaking oil and wax all over the place'). The characters also variously call the creature 'it' (inhuman, perhaps inorganic) and 'he' (human, gendered). That a fantasy creature might become physical, and that physical players can enter the Vurt and die there, suggests the Vurtual and the real are interchangeable.

Indeed, the novel recognises this, stating that any exchange between the two worlds must be equal, plus or minus ‘Hobart’s constant’, a figure of 0.267125 used to explain slight variances in worth between real and unreal items or, in Desdemona and the Thing’s case, beings (Noon 2001, p.69). Both the real and unreal can have equal worth, in a postmodern echoing of quantum physics’ although the ‘worth’ in question is entirely subjective and based on ‘How much lost ones count, in the grand scheme of things’ (Noon 2001, p.69). For Scribble, who loves the Vurt and loves Desdemona, swapping one love for another (the Thing is described as ‘live drugs’) makes sense in terms of these ‘MECHANISMS OF EXCHANGE’ (Noon 2001, pp.7, 69). Though Scribble did not intend to lose Desdemona, when he did he received something of apparently equal worth to him. Whilst Desdemona seems to be more important to him than the Vurt, this is only because the Vurt saturates the novel to such an extent it becomes unremarkable. Scribble no longer notices how central the Vurt is to his life because it factors in everything he does. The real turning point in the novel comes when he ‘rescues’ Desdemona, returning her to reality, and yet decides to remain in the Vurt himself (Noon 2001, pp.321-7). The exchange of worth is himself for his sister, thereby signifying his equivalence with her in his estimations and of her with the Vurt. He gives his sister to the ‘real’ world as a trade-off for the Vurt. It is by this point Scribble realises he is a hybrid Vurt-real being anyway, because the Vurt has permeated his ontology to such a degree that the virtual/real are indistinguishable. Life for Scribble is a virtual intercourse – a game.

If, like engagement with the Vurt, reading is a form of virtual intercourse or cybersex, the text itself becomes a virtual body with which the reader engages and cohesion arises as a result of such engagement. The reader becomes a corporeal body experiencing the narrative through another virtual body or, continuing the cyberspace analogy, avatar (the narrative persona or the protagonist). The reader is *inside* the metaphorical ‘hole’ the protagonist provides in the narrative for the entering of the reader. Reading becomes akin to possession, with the reader haunting the text, being a virtual reality. The reader engages through an avatar with an artificial world, binding both it to himself and himself to it. It is the reader, in also allowing the virtual world to exist inside his head, who acts as the computer in which the virtual reality runs. Thus, he provides cohesion by running the virtual world as a series of computer programmes combining to make sense.

Virtual engagement in this fashion can also be translated into a sexual metaphor, covering entering, penetration, holes, surfaces, pleasure and stimulation, and bears remarkable similarity to Angela Carter’s theory of pornography in *The Sadeian Woman*, whereby the

pornographic text creates an entry point (a virtual vagina) for the penetration of the reader, and where sex can therefore represent a coming together or cohesion of the two (Carter 2006, pp.3-42). Reading is voyeurism, is participation, is intercourse, is sex, is therefore pornography because it is a *representation* of sex. Cohesion in this case is established through the pattern of arousal in the reader/physical body, which gives shape to the narrative arc, and in the intercourse between reader (penis) and text (vagina). However, cohesion in this sense is multiplicitous and multifaceted, because it is entirely dependent upon the avatar's interaction with signs and symbols to stimulate pleasure in the reader. Of course, any such interaction is partial and also illusory, because the text/virtual world is laid down by an absent author. This author is still present in the text by virtue of his/her effort in arranging the signs therein, alongside the also absent (by virtue of not literally being able to enter the story) and yet present (by virtue of entering via the avatar) reader. Both reader and author are virtual and liminal to the text, engaging in a form of pleasurable play or, as in *Vurt*, gaming. Suspension of disbelief, a key element to fiction of all kinds, is itself a form of play. Both reader and writer collude to create a virtual world and behave, as virtual beings within that world, as if it were real.

Though the author as the computer behind a virtual reality strives to portray the reader's avatar's choices as organic, flowing from some free will inherent to the protagonist, and the reader is encouraged to consider those choices to be proximate to his/her own as the avatar, there can be no free will. Cohesion, or the appearance of it, arises in the spaces between and on the borders around disparate or paradoxical elements. These are the holes to be penetrated and the surfaces of erotic pleasure, establishing cohesion as a sexual process of identification, inhabitation and contact. This corresponds to the *Vurt*, which is revealed to be within the dreaming mind of Celia Hobart (Noon 2001, pp.342-5). Free will is promised but there are limits – if Miss Hobart is awakened, the *Vurt* will be destroyed, just as the novel will be destroyed if the reader cannot believe in the protagonist's actions as organic and natural to that character and his/her world. The reader must believe the protagonist is real within the terms of the virtual world and yet must also believe the virtual world is real via its presentation through the protagonist/avatar. This suspension of disbelief is a circular model: in order for the lead character to be believable, the world he is in must be believable and he must obey its rules, but it is the character that introduces us to the world's rules and makes it believable for us, in part through his obedience to and knowledge of said rules. The character reveals himself to be the embodiment of the rules he obeys/describes. Protagonist is context as context is

protagonist. This contingency of the narrative self is entirely consistent with postmodern renderings of the self as hinging upon culturally-determined circumstances.

The cohesion of such contingent and often contradictory elements becomes a form of sincretism and hybridism speaking directly to Jung's assertion of the symbolic and real as being equivalent (Jung 1968, p.283). It is the processes by which these flat, contingent components appear to interact and inform one another which provides a simulacrum of depth and specificity. Thus, the postmodern body, which is a thing of alterity and plurality, is both corporate and dis-corporate, and functional as a textual machine despite its component devices being separate and fragmented. The various elements are bound in complicated networks of entanglement stemming from their necessary interaction and connection, because even standing apart from something is an act of engagement if discernment of that discretion is possible only in their separation from each other. In being opposed or isolated from something, and being recognised as such, an implicit relationship is created. Cohesion is thus the result of witnessing and is as illusory as witnessing and discernment themselves.

The utopian society of Mattapoisett in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, like the textual and individual bodies of Noon, is another machine composed of varied component devices that still function together in a coherent way. For example, the social body/community works despite a division of the micro/biological body from traditional heteronormative function. Birth and childraising are dislocated from gender, and the individual body is disassembled and reassembled along gender lines. Hence Barbarossa:

He had breasts. Not large ones. Small breasts, like a flat-chested woman temporarily swollen with milk. Then with his red beard, his face of a sunburnt forty-five-year-old man, stern-visaged, long-nosed, thin-lipped, he began to nurse. (Piercy 2000, p.134)

Barbarossa is a composite of traditional masculine traits, but takes the role of a mother, culturally ascribed in Western culture to women. By contemporary standards, Barbarossa has no clear gender role and so he, as a device, should not function; the machine of the community body should not work. But within the cultural ideologue of Mattapoisett, he is 'normal': he fulfils a specific societal need, which many other men and women also undertake, and thus, as a device, he functions.

Connie's reaction to the dissolution of gender, as epitomised in Barbarossa, is evidently telling of our own cultural norms:

She felt angry. Yes, how dare any man share that pleasure. These women thought they had won, but they had abandoned to men the last refuge of women. What was special about being a woman here? (Piercy 2000, p.134)

For Connie, existence is ultimately gendered, and womanhood and the social need for women are inextricably linked to childbirth and childraising. Gender is equated, in her eyes, with biological function and thus the body is reduced to one simple, material aspect and clarified in essentialist, binary terms. Connie's understanding of being lacks the proliferation of ontologies Barbarossa presents: to Connie, he is clearly male, and masculine due to his beard and face, yet only partially so; and he is transgressing gender boundaries in being a 'mother', which she finds infuriating because she considers it an attack on her own purpose. He challenges the values Connie, and by extension her culture, holds and troubles the primacy and insistence she places upon motherhood in her own image of self.

The confusion of contemporary gender roles is also evident in the use of pronouns in Mattapoissett. Although Connie refers to characters as 'he' or 'she' based on her own preconceptions, the citizens of Mattapoissett refer to each other and to her as 'per' or 'perself'. 'Per' derives from 'person' and stresses the humanity of an individual and not their 'gender'. Every child, raised by three mothers, has multiple parents and is raised with other children in a communal setting. Motherhood is socially and not biologically determined. Yet, every child also knows 'per' biological mother, in a rejection of and a playful engagement with traditional family roles (Piercy 2000, p.134).

Gender is almost entirely defunct in Mattapoissett, so that Connie's notions of purpose and desire are placed in jeopardy: they dissolve into irrelevance. The things that make Connie different in her own time (ethnicity, class, gender) have different meanings in Mattapoissett. The foundational ideologies structure lived reality in a different way, so the only way Connie can assert her concrete, individual self is by focussing instead on the differences between herself and this future community. In contrast, most of the people from Mattapoissett consider her difference merely as another aspect of her personality, rather than a negative trait.

Connie's emphasis on the self is also presented as a product contingent upon late-twentieth century capitalism. In Mattapoissett the self is decentred; it is not the focus of society. Communal living is emphasised. This indicates a disengagement from ownership and the primacy of the self, which stresses cooperation over rugged individualism. For example, Connie is told by Luciente: 'We have limited resources. We plan cooperatively' (Piercy 2000, p.125). Instead: 'We coordinate by lot [. . .] For sixmonth [sic] at a time' (Piercy 2000, p.123).

Decisions are shared and the resultant social reality is consensual, stressing contingency and plural subjectivities over essentialism and heteronormativity. One absolute truth is deferred in favour of many partial truths.

Hierarchies are also diffuse: lateral networks of mutual assistance exist in place of pyramidal power structures. Connie is told: 'Whenever we decide we're ripe to join a work base, we fuse as full members' (Piercy 2000, p.123). There is no heteronormativity and no ruling elite to prioritise or denigrate alternate viewpoints. In this respect, Mattapoisett appears to obey an ideology similar to anarcho-communism, where centralised power does not exist and command is instead invested in the social group as a whole. Similarly, the concept of labour appears, within Mattapoisett, to be replaced by concepts of cooperation and play. Work is considered a wilful act of bonding and for the benefit of the community rather than the individual.

Mattapoisett stands in stark contrast to the ultra-capitalist/technocratic alternate future of Gildina, where the other is enslaved by the rich, absolute (i.e. 'pure') self (Piercy 2000, pp.287-301). The name 'Gildina' suggests gold and coinage, hinting that this is a future where the other exists as a commodity. She is aware of herself in terms of appearance and resultant monetary worth, for she is essentially enslaved into prostitution; Gildina's room is filled with mirrors in a clear obsession with the self and surface (Piercy 2000, p.287). Her image appears in proliferation, but each reflection is essentially the same. A reflection, even though reversed, denies depth of subjectivity and renders a body a simple surface, a skin. The reflection has no voice, it cannot be heard; it has no biological body; and it has no intellect or thought. The reflection is signifier detached from the signified: a symbol fetishised as an object in its own right.

The reflection which is elevated in a purely materialistic society is also the other, providing a moral and visual gauge against which the self can measure its limits. This is in direct contrast to *Falling Out of Cars*, where the sensory dissonance afflicting Britain means mirrors and reflective surfaces become detested for the nightmare images they offer. In this future, the world is over-saturated with images and signs, and the avatar has lost epistemological control of these shifting economies of the semiotic. An overabundance of meaning has rendered the textual nonsensical, as opposed to the world of Gildina, where meaning is over-clarified and refined and specific ontologies and power structures are reified.

Although Barbarossa might be denied depth simply because the proliferation of paradoxical symbols deprives him of the cultural meanings those signs present in Connie's time

period and suggest a *breadth* of meaning instead, Gildina appears to be deprived of depth by the insistence of her self as surface: reflected in the mirror; reflected in the male gaze of the higher class ‘master’; reflected in her own consideration of herself solely as a being of monetary worth (Piercy 2000, pp.287–301). Gildina, unlike Barbarossa, is not a multifaceted being; she is Connie in ideology, perverted and exaggerated. Like Connie, she places value upon her body, her biological functions and her difference-as-inferiority as core elements of her identity. Her identity is an essentialist one, which is cohesive in its absolutism. Barbarossa’s is cohesive in its contrast to this absolutism. By presenting a happy individual, whose multifaceted body troubles Connie’s absolutism, and contrasting it with Gildina, who is unhappy, miserable, exploited and utterly essentialist. Barbarossa as a disparate being is everything Gildina is not, so gains a sense of wholeness in opposition, and provides an image of the disparate as successful and functional in the face of the essential and dysfunctional.

Essentialist identity politics are also disregarded in the future of Noon’s *Vurt*. Here we have a world where identity is largely hybrid:

There are only FIVE MODES OF BEING. And all are equal in value. To be pure is good, it leads to a good life. But who wants a good life? Only the lonely. And so therefore we have the FIVE LEVELS OF BEING. And each layer is better than the one before. The deeper, the sweeter, the more completer. (Noon 2001, p.251)

These five levels of being refer to degrees of hybridity. The more hybrid a being is, ‘the better’ (Noon2001, p.251). Again, value and worth is determined by pleasure in this world. Increased states of hybridity are described in the terms of pornography: ‘deeper’ and ‘sweeter’. Indeed, the ‘FIRST LEVEL is the purest level’, which is ‘[w]here all things are separate and so very unsexy’ (Noon 2001 p.251). Union and hybridity are shown as sexy, thus stressing the physical, sexual hybridity taking place. Noon is very conscious of the self/other dynamic in hybridity, using its language with ease:

SECOND LEVEL [. . .] happens because the modes want to have sex, with other modes, different modes, otherness modes [. . .] Or sometimes the modes get grafted together (Noon 2001, p.251)

The sexualisation continues:

But you just want to have sex, right? Which delivers [. . .] the THIRD LEVEL [. . .] These are the middle beings, where most creatures get stuck; they just haven’t got the spirit to go beyond. (Noon 2001, p.251)

Since sensuality is the basis for all experience, it is engaged with regardless of proven veracity or not. Sensuality is considered truth whether real or unreal, clear or obtuse. Hybridity is presented as a natural result of sensuality, and by the terms of the Game Cat (as above), that is preferable to being 'pure'. The 'levels' of hybridity correlate to the levels of a computer game: hybridity is fun; it is achievement; it is virtual. Hybridity is also prioritised over essentialism, as complexity is over reductionism.

Angela Carter's theory of pornography again holds sway in Noon's near-future/alternate present. According to Carter, the immoral pornographer 'depends on the notion that the nature of man is invariable and cannot be modified by changes in his social institutions' (Carter 2006, p.18). Essentialism is seen here as destructive, because it denies 'the context of the world' and reduces all genders (like the people of Mattapoissett, Carter does not entertain a solely binary vision of gender) and all bodies to 'a handful of empty words' (2006, p.19). This envisioning of bodies is damaging precisely because:

[it does not] force the reader to reassess his relation to his own sexuality, which is to say to his own primary being, through the mediation of the image or the text.
(Carter 2006, p.19)

Instead, this type of cultural production reifies ostensibly natural ontologies and preserves dominant power structures. It is here that the idea of cohesion as a form of division is most stark: cohesion in this sense, pre-postmodernism, is a calcification of difference demanding the bounded absolute over an entanglement of complexities which recognises the blurring of boundaries, although it is still a result of witnessing. This form of cohesion is one that functions exactly in exactly the same way as in the postmodern view, but rather is imagined by the essentialist-traditionalist entirely within concrete terms of binarism in a fallacy to secure the normalisation of the knowable, bounded self.

Cohesion in the postmodern paradigm is proven to be a function of the same processes as pre-postmodern cohesion, but its altered signs and structures, and its preference for breadth and surface over depth, requires effort in learning the pathways and schemas to understand, and requires constant rejuvenation of such learning since the signs themselves can change without notice. The process is one that speaks with multiple tongues and in different ways. Whilst pre-postmodern cohesion speaks of the quantifiable and absolute, the essential and the pure, postmodern cohesion instead speaks of the fallible and partial, the plural and the hybrid. The process is also different in that the pre-postmodern feigns simplicity, offering a comforting, undeniable truth: a certain meaning for a passive, discerning subject. The

postmodern processes of cohesion are complicated and complicating, arising from disparate parts that reveal, and are conscious of, their own contingency. The postmodern seeks to trouble easy classifications and thereby present an understanding that is, by Haraway's definition, ironic, in that it allows partial and contingent knowledge and eschews privileging and reifying heteronormative absolutes. Postmodern cohesion accepts the fallibilities and flaws in the subjective witness (incomprehension, confusion, unreliable sensations) and revels in them (sensuality, blurring, syncretism). This cohesion, to borrow a term from *Vurt's* prequel, is due to nymphomation – that is, the merging, reproduction, promiscuity and hybridisation of knowledge. Cohesion occurs when partial or disparate elements become entangled and breed newer, more complicated elements, tied together, most importantly, through the subject who witnesses. What cohesion there is, as far as cohesion can exist in either pre-postmodern or postmodern paradigms, can be understood as illusory because it occurs in broken moments and sleight-of-hand, and can only ever be recognised by a subject looking for meaning, but it is illusory *and* real at once, and honest about this duality.

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