Of Female Monsters, Anorexics, Writers

Realizing Subversion in Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick*, *Aliens & Anorexia*, and *Torpor*

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Table of Contents

Introduction....3

Chapter 1 – Archeology of a Misrecognition....9

Nameless wives....10

Heterosexuality as Universality....12

Straight Ontology, Queer Potentialities....15

In Praise of Rousseau, or Against the Bastard Contract....17

The Depravity of 'My Wife' in Artificial Paradise....21

Chapter Conclusion: The Masks of Heterosexuality....26

Chapter 2 – Monstrous Articulations....29

The Blob's Subsumptive Determination....33

Perennial Silence and Submission....36

Writing (and) the Female Monster....39

Chapter Conclusion: The Fates of the Fearless....44

Chapter 3: Who gets to Speak, and Why?....49

Ecceity and Anorexia....50

Patient Anorexics....54

The Writing 'I' vs. The Personal 'I'....58

Recklessness and Care....63

(Towards a) Chapter Conclusion: On Fictionalization & Its Affordances....69

Conclusion....77

Suggestions for Future Research....81

Works cited 83

Acknowledgements 86

Introduction

> Did I tell you? I come from a people of sculptors
> / whose masterpiece was rubble. We / tried.
>
> - Ocean Vuong, "Almost Human" (2019)

To speak about speech in Kraus' trilogy *I Love Dick, Aliens & Anorexia* and *Torpor* is no easy feat, as residing at the core of these works is an anachronistic[1] impetus simultaneously connecting and disjoining the narrative(s) Kraus constructs around the question which is at the core of much of her work, among which are four novels and many works of art theory and criticism. In this thesis, I work with her self-proclaimed trilogy for reasons of scope, but also because in these works her understanding of this question is most forcefully advanced:

> WHO GETS TO SPEAK AND WHY?, I wrote last week, IS THE ONLY QUESTION.[2]

To understand the unicity of this point of inquiry, a brief outline of Kraus' most famous novel will prove useful. *I Love Dick* (1997) first introduces the reader to the characters Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer at 39 and 56 years old respectively – the most advanced ages at which we encounter this couple across Kraus' triad. With their marriage in a mediocre state and Chris' experimental film-making career having failed to get off the ground, a dinner with Sylvère's academic acquaintance Dick incites her haunting infatuation that provides her with a structure for the rest of the novel. Having a drink at Dick's place, the two men discuss French philosophy as she keeps quiet. Chris, "who is no intellectual, notices Dick making continual eye contact with her. Dick's attention makes her feel powerful."[3] The next morning, Dick has disappeared before they could have breakfast together, but the seed that fuels Chris' project of frantic letter-writing has nonetheless been planted.

In the first part of *I Love Dick*, "Scenes from a Marriage," the reader is offered date-stamped accounts of the couple's life by an omniscient narrator over the course of an odd

[1] Or 'schizophrenic', as she proposes in *I Love Dick*.
[2] Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (Serpent's Tail, 2016), 175.
[3] *Ibid*., 3.

month or so. Interspersed are ‘Exhibits’ A to N, comprising the various letters Chris and Sylvère produce; addressed to Dick, they range from confessions to musings to criticism, both to and (un)related to him. The Dick Sylvère occasionally phones is not callous but professional, and at some evident remove from the couple he regards as mere, if odd, acquaintances. The steady unravelling of Chris’ relationship to him, and in extension Sylvère's too, is definitively one-sided: many of the letters and faxes do not get sent, the phone rarely gets picked up.

About a week after their initial meeting, Sylvère calls Dick and informs him about Chris’ infatuation with him and their shared proposition to stage Dick's first encounter with the letters as a performance piece to be recorded on video, as “somehow it seems so strange that you may not be connected to it all, because we were totally convinced that you were a part of it.”[4] Dick, not particularly enthused by the idea, claims to need some time to think things over. He ends up ghosting them. At this point, Sylvère largely gives up on their liaison, and Chris sends him the below co-written fax:

> Dear Dick,
>
> Well, the “tempest in a teapot” seems to've passed without your entering it, which's fine with me. What is it we've been doing here over the law few days? I've been in limbo since disengaging emotionally from the movie and when this THING – the “crush’ – came up, it seemed interesting to try and deal with dumb infatuation in a self-reflexive way. The result: 80 pages of unreadable correspondence in about 2 days.
>
> It was interesting, though, to plummet back into the psychosis of adolescence. Living so intensely in your head that boundaries disappear. It's a warped omnipotence, a negative psychic power, as if what happens in your head really drives the world outside. Kind of a useful place to move around in, though maybe not so interesting to you.

[4] *Ibid*., 33.

> In the future, I'd like not to have to leave a room if you happen to be in it, so it seemed best not to leave things hanging.
>
> Do let me know if you'd like to read (perhaps selections from) the letters. Through all the haze, at least some of them relate to you.
>
> *All best,*
>
> *Chris*[5]

This brief note – issued at the midpoint of *I Love Dick*'s first part – foreshadows some of the central tenets of Kraus' work that I will discuss: the limbo of Chris' existence as 'woman' driving her to desperation (chapter 1); the subsequent theorization of a mode of writing that launches the denied self into an exclusive canon (chapter 2); and the enactment of such omnipotent 'monstrosity' in Kraus' oeuvre. This space of thinking proves "kind of a useful place to move around in," given Chris' material existence in a world that is violently patriarchal. This other, outward space – uninteresting to the male 'other' – conceives a reality where Chris' thought and being is finally free(er) (chapter 3).

In a sense, each book begets its own chapter – although they are of course all interconnected. Chapter 1 focuses on *Torpor*, chapter 2 on *I Love Dick* and chapter 3 takes up the prism offered to us in *Aliens & Anorexia* to synthesize most preceding propositions and apply them to all the works discussed here. As will quickly become evident, however, Kraus' works are difficult to approach as discrete entities. Yet, as I will discuss in chapter 3, taking them to constitute one whole is a grave error too. I therefore separate the different characters (referred to as Chris and Sylvie) while keeping in mind that most of the events of the books ultimately draw from the real-life history Chris Kraus (who I will refer to as Kraus). The same split goes for her husband (Sylvère vs. Lottringer); and, in chapter 3, for Dick.

[5] *Ibid*., 49.

In chapter 1, I read *Torpor* for details on the history of Sylvie's alienation in her marriage, which ultimately leads her to re-orient herself away from her husband Jerome and, in *I Love Dick*, towards another man: Dick.[6] My first consideration will be the sedimented production of the category of 'woman' using texts by Monique Wittig, Andrea Dworkin and, to nuance the former two, Judith Butler. Though some of their propositions resound, by now, as somewhat archaic, it's precisely this second wave of feminism that Kraus is mobilizing throughout her work to ironically critique heterosexuality. Through Eribon and the notion of chrononormativity, I argue Sylvie as being estranged from the normal course of time because her relationship with Jerome, and the world, is queer. Nevertheless, Jerome is guilty of many of heterosexuality's worst tendencies and – in Kraus' works – few men escape unscathed in their relation to a shared system which conditions everyone: the heterosexual contract. All that is private has been structured, at least to some extent, by a shared culture.

In chapter 2, my focus shifts from qualifying Sylvie's discontent to furthering Chris' brief articulation of a notion of female monsters in *I Love Dick*. Picking up on Kraus' reference to *The Blob* (1958), I will identify a unique sense of publicness that pervades its project. I then invoke Despentes' *King Kong Théorie* to further think the split between private and public existence under the heterosexual contract to come to a vision of the female monster which heavily leans on the work carried out in chapter 1. The female monster is traceable, speaks her mind and will never stop, as her project of subversion is one carried out across space and time.

In chapter 3, I develop this notion into being the praxis of Kraus' work, as the lived enactment of her writing. For this purpose, I draw on her own reading of Simone Weil's anorexia as the only way for one to turn outward and redirect one's attention from a cynical

[6] An event also explicitly mentioned in *Torpor* (Tuskar Rock Press, 2017): "in the month before she left Jerome, she'd started writing love letters to a man who didn't love her. In LA she continues writing to this man, and then she just continues writing. For first time, it seems that everything she wants to do can now be broken into small, achievable goals. She embraces everything that's practical and finite." (269)

culture to what really matters. Using this shift in orientation, I consider that Kraus' works and the female monster also have some ethical complications which, thought from within the heterosexual contract, might be reason enough to disqualify her writing. Towards the end of this chapter, however, I demonstrate how these critiques are only valid if one misreads the intention behind her work and fashions her writing as turning inward rather than outward. On the way, I discuss Kraus' process of fictionalization as selection and the veiling of her own and other identities throughout her works.

By way of a conclusion, I will round off this introduction with some brief remarks on methodology. Kraus' texts are incredibly dense and her arguments infinitely rich. The following will therefore by no means claim to be exhaustive; rather, I aim to develop one reading of a theory Kraus' develops and enacts as the praxis of her work: female monstrosity. Any structured approach to Kraus has its obvious limitations given the vastness of the range of her reflections on art, life, and theory. Many of the other themes of her books – money, the Holocaust, S/M – will therefore not get picked up on extensively here. Part of my argument will be that in her pursuit to understand everything – and realize the wholeness which the female monster seeks – Kraus' writing attains some kind of ungraspable character. Nevertheless, I will try to keep up with Kraus and get as close to a complete articulation of her vision of monstrousness as possible, even if that might mean that some arguments take multiple chapters to develop.

In the spirit of her own work and that of the female monster – who enacts a mode of creation that is communal and carried out by different writers across time – I adopt various authors into (my own) conversation with Kraus, including Monique Wittig, Virginie Despentes and, of course, Simone Weil. All things considered, what follows is a hermeneutical exercise that seeks to articulate and further develop the praxis of Kraus' monstrosity as lucidly as possible. I propose that the female monster not only has the answer

to the foundational question of ‘who gets to speak and why’, but also offers a tentative strategy towards an undoing of this discrimination.

Finally, two of the most important anchors throughout my argument are temporality and publicness. Chapter 1 argues that Sylvie has a queer relationship to time which structures the way she experiences the world and eventually makes her aware that she is not comfortable being just a ‘woman’. Chapter 2 proposes the female monster to stand outside of time, before Chapter 3 articulates the orientation of (Weil’s) anorexia as one strategy of recodifying time away from its present, violent continuum. The second dimension, that of the private, but above all public, follows a similar progression: chapter 1 discusses Sylvie’s struggle with ‘womanhood’ and how the publicly codified institution of heterosexuality informs her private life rather than any other way around; chapter 2 thinks the female monster as public both in her traceable being and the reinforcement of this struggle such public records permit, carried out by different individuals across time. Chapter 3 synthesizes all preceding propositions to assess the initial critical response to Kraus’ work as misjudgements. Like any facet of Kraus’ trilogy, these dimensions are both separate but also deeply intertwined and – I stress – in no way exhaustive of her many propositions. But this is the joy of the logic ultimately strived after by female monsters: that all living is complex and incredible.

Chapter 1: Archeology of a Misrecognition

> And then my mother started to say I shouldn't go into the forest because […] I was now a woman. I wasn't interested in being a woman. With all the cruelty of womanhood and the few things left to you once you become a woman."
>
> - Irene Solà, *When I Sing, Mountains Dance* (2019)

The climax of the first part of *I Love Dick* – equalling the crisis of Kraus' triad more generally – arises after the organisers of an intellectual New York party forget to put Chris' name on the list. She only gets in thanks to her relationship with Sylvère and so gets reduced to being his 'wife'. While Chris has openly recognized her outsider status as a 'failed' artist in this milieu and the rejection therefore comes at no real surprise, she does mourn the times when she frequented such circles on her own title an odd 15 years earlier. The morning after, back in Thurman with Sylvère, Chris angrily reflects on the night:

> Who's Chris Kraus?" she screamed. "She's no one! She's Sylvère Lotringer's wife! She's his 'Plus-One'!" No matter how many films she made or books she edited, she'd always keep being seen as no one by anyone who mattered as long as she was living with Sylvère.[7]

Her marriage with Sylvère has drawn a veil over the remnants of her individual existence as a participant in the public art scene and her corresponding qualities as a thinker. Regardless of her movies and editing work for Semiotext(e), in the public realm her identity as an artist – and individual – is negated by her foremost appearance as Sylvère's wife. Chris' existence is so situated in a restrictive relational term rather than in the allotment of a full-fledged identity by those in the circles of the New York intellectual world which she has desperately been attempting to penetrate for multiple decades. This event is the final straw and moves her to split up with him.

[7] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 115.

Written in the late 1990s, *I Love Dick* has been acclaimed as "one of the most important feminist novels of the past two decades."[8] To understand the initial liberatory narrative of Kraus' novel, this chapter will expound some theoretical groundwork to illustrate the (by now historical) backdrop against which her writing has been received. I will argue that, in the context of a fashioning of heterosexuality as universal and mandatory and the normative construction of the category of 'woman' as essential, Chris' relationship with Sylvère throughout all three books is somewhat alien, or queer. This interpretation will be mobilized in chapter 2 when I consider how Chris' behaviour and Kraus' writing are monstruous. This unique relational form will also help us think the public/personal distinction which, as I will continue to argue in chapter 3, is at the heart of Kraus' work.

Nameless wives

Misrecognition is a prominent happening also in the work of Deborah Levy and often functions as one anchor for the (theoretical) reflections brought forward in such works. Early in *The Cost of Living,* the second instalment of Deborah Levy's 'living autobiography' devoted to her journey after the end of her marriage, she recounts a walk she took with a male colleague in London's Hyde Park. As they bantered, he systematically referred to his spouse as 'my wife' in anecdotes without once mentioning her name or sharing any details about her interior life. Levy recalls how she felt in this moment:

> Ah, I thought, as we walked past the golden trees, *she does not have a name. She is a wife.* I wondered why my male colleague often forgot the names of most of the women he met at social events. He would always refer to them as someone's wife or girlfriend, as if that was all I needed to know.
>
> If we don't have names, who are we?[9]

[8] Eva Wiseman, *Observer Magazine*. Quoted in the paratext of *I Love Dick*.
[9] Deborah Levy, *The Cost of Living* (Penguin Books, 2019), 11.

Throughout the book, such omissions are gradually revealed to be a systematic feature of conversation rather than an incidental forgetting on her colleague's part. Many of the men she enters conversation with reveal little about their partners beyond asserting them to be someone's 'wife'. These women are denied any recall of their private identity; their relationship with men is what seemingly defines them to the degree that it supersedes the rest of their being as a whole and individual person. The narrator – Levy – points out every subsequent instance of this erasure as it occurs in the stories she details.

The systematicity of these men's denial of their wives' identities becomes less surprising if we apply the lens of Judith Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' which is their conceptualization of the cultural logic sustaining heterosexuality as compulsory and gender as essential. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler expounds Levi-Strauss' analysis of clans' exogamic rites to expose the assumptions and productions vital to its hegemonic assertion. Levi-Strauss identifies the patrilineal context of the clans as prescribing the exchange of women between different groups through marriage, serving the goal of preserving the clan's line. Yet, beyond the 'functional' purpose of reproduction, this bonding ritual does not conceive of actual relationships between men and women. Rather, the whole of the ordeal takes place between men of the different clans.

For this reason, Butler finds that "the woman in marriage qualifies not as an identity, but only as a relational term that both distinguishes and binds the various clans to a common but internally differentiated patrilineal identity."[10] Beyond her capacity to extend the lineage in the name of the man's clan, the woman is not fashioned as having an internal sexuality. She knows little to no identity: nothing more than the subject of an exchange between men, 'woman' is the material – and speaking, emphasizes Levi-Strauss! – fulfilment of the symbol that is exchanged between clans. Following Lucy Irigaray, Butler argues that "the relations

[10] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 2006), 53.

among patrilineal clans are based in homosocial desire, […] a repressed and, hence, disparaged sexuality, a relationship between men which is, finally, about the bonds of men, but which takes place through the heterosexual exchange and distribution of women."[11] What is at stake in heterosexual exogamy is not a union between a man and a woman, as that would require acknowledging the female subject as possessing some degree of agency to operationalize this desire in both partners. But this is impossible in a social world created by men and ruled by men with the interests of men in mind. In it, the woman, is taken to be 1) not possessing a personal sexuality and 2) vainly inhabiting a gender (symbol/role) constructed in opposition to the 'natural' category of the man, who are the only real actants throughout the exchange of women.

In the more contemporary (anglophone) context of Levy and Kraus – whose writing spans the 1990s and later – the heterosexual matrix does of course not manifest itself as sternly as it did in the clans Levi-Strauss describes; the rites surrounding heterosexual exogamy have morphed into different, perhaps slightly more volatile modes following modernity. Yet, a tentative response to Levy's question – 'if we don't have names, who are we?'; or, perhaps rather, 'what are we?' – takes on an eerily similar form. In reducing people's identities to nothing more than 'my wife', the man tacitly communicates her subsumption into their patrilineage. Phallogocentrism triumphs as their actual person is fashioned a mirage, subsumed into or at least hidden behind their primary (if not sole) functioning as a symbol of status.

Heterosexuality as Universality

Butler heavily draws from Monique Wittig – as well as Simone de Beauvoir and Lucy Irigay – who, in *La pensée straight* (1980), argues 'man' and 'woman' to be oppositional and above

[11] *Ibid.*, 55.

all deeply political concepts doted with meaning solely in the heterosexual context.[12] Writing at the brink of the 1980s, 'man' is the default prism from which and compared to whom thought is effectuated. This explicitly hierarchical division between constructed genders circumscribes the limits of thought of virtually every scientific discipline from history to psychoanalysis, and so also that of Levi-Strauss' work. The dominant current of the art world in the late 80s and early 90s which Kraus tried to navigate is by and large produced according to the whims of the straight mind; the inevitable outcome of a 'heterosexual contract' which tacitly postulates the male-woman binary (or at least its phallogocentric anchor) to be universal. I invoke Wittig here because she conceptualizes the structures legitimizing heterosexuality as mandatory particularly strongly:

> Je ne peux que souligner ici le caractère oppressif que revêt la pensée straight dans sa tendance à immédiatement universaliser sa production de concepts, à former des lois générales qui valent pour toutes les sociétés, toutes les époques, tous les individus. C'est ainsi qu'on parle de *l'*échange des femmes, *la* différence des sexes, *l'*ordre symbolique, *l'*inconscient, *le* désir, *la* jouissance, *la* culture, *l'*histoire, catégories qui n'ont de sens actuellement que dans l'hétérosexualité ou pensée de la différence des sexes comme dogme philosophique et politique. (Wittig, 73)

The (theoretical) limitations imposed on the straight mind are totalizing. Those (i.e., all) subject to it are inculcated with a restrictive perception of the world as normatively prescribed by heterosexuality, in which nothing but heterosexuality has ever been and will ever be possible. The straight mind arbitrarily and falsely historicizes the heterosexual contract, all the while ghettoizing those many other modes of thought and existence which people have forgotten through its quest for mandatory amnesia.

Wittig argues that it is impossible to break with the oppressive reality of heterosexual domination and the category of 'woman' without putting into question the broader societal

[12] Monique Wittig, *La pensée straight* (Éditions Amsterdam, 2018), 74. I quote here from the revised edition.

structures which perennially legitimize only the heterosexual and the power the straight mind exercises in positing itself as the universal tendency of the world. Writing from a lesbian perspective, Wittig intimately knows that the heterosexual contract's attempts to structure her life are both violent and artificial. Not grounded in any actual reality, the supposed singularity of the gender binary is culturally constructed by institutions and fables like the ones she identifies in the quote above. This legitimation acts as a vicious cycle which is difficult to break: heterosexual fictions legitimize heterosexual structures, which produce further heterosexual fictions, etc. Wittig therefore concludes that "vivre en société c'est vivre en hétérosexualité."[13] Having lived in the French and American societies of the 70s and 80s, she is compelled to recognize the 'natural' norms which condone only a heterosexual conception of life.[14]

For gay, lesbian, and other queer groups of the population, living so becomes a quest for survival in line with a fundamentally demarcated conception of gender and orientation rather than in whole embrace of the 'thoroughly and radically incredible', as Butler suggests we experience our lives at their most natural.[15] Wittig observes that "quand je pose le terme hétérosexualité je me trouve en face d'un objet non existant, un fétiche, une forme idéologique massive qu'on ne peut pas saisir dans sa réalité, sauf dans ses effets, et dont l'existence réside dans l'esprit des gens d'une façon qui affecte leur vie toute entière, la façon dont ils agissent, leur manière de bouger, leur mode de penser. Donc j'ai affaire à un objet à la fois réel et imaginaire."[16] Every attribute the straight mind uses to discern the woman from the man (and so frame her as inferior) is a 'mark' – (re)produced under the heterosexual contract – of the

[13] *Ibid*., 83.
[14] Almost akin to a more rigid and imposed version of Pierre Bourdieu's habitus – 'a structured and structuring structure' that stands in relation to a field and capital which are no longer volatile but always-already defined by entering the heterosexual contract. It is a "*way of being*, a *habitual state* (especially of the body) and, in particular, a *predisposition, tendency, propensity,* or *inclination.*" All this functions below the level of consciousness and so establishes 'naturalness' where there is none. (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge University Press, 1977: 214 [original emphasis]).
[15] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 193.
[16] Wittig, *Pensée Straight*, 84.

very oppression it legitimizes.[17] 'Instead of being born as such, 'woman' becomes the different-other (*l'autre different*) compared to 'man'. Sexual difference and the corresponding primacy of masculine domination are imaginary naturalities actively produced by heterosexuality in the minds and hearts of a supposedly 'universal' population.

Straight Ontology, Queer Potentialities

Lesbians fall outside the normative category of 'woman' as their actual desire makes them see through the irrepressible façade of the heterosexual contract. Wittig argues that by engaging in relationships grounded in radical equality between partners, the heterosexual difference, which is taken as natural, evaporates, rendering the hierarchization of the different-other impossible. In lesbian and other queer relationships, neither party constructs their role in the relationship in contrast to the privileged position of their male counterpart. Lesbianism so demonstrates an alternative conception of human relations and disproves the singularity of the heterosexual model which the contract seeks to aggressively maintain.

Lesbianism also unveils the artificial nature of the inherent attributes that structure the feminine experience under heterosexuality. The capacity for childbearing, for example, takes on a different form in the context of heterosexual civil society vis à vis the queer realm. Having children in the former is a step inscribed into a trajectory of life that, while perceived as natural, is really a widely acclaimed grand fiction of the straight mind. As big life events are ordered in a fixed chronology, the timing of childbearing – and so its cultural status – ultimately comes down, perhaps somewhat perversely, to a question of demographic planning.[18] As a lesbian, Wittig finds she is not implicated in this heterosexual life course and neither are the women she is in relationships with. The 'marks' of the heterosexual woman do not implicate them,

[17] *Ibid*., 56.
[18] *Ibid*., 55.

meaning that they are unfit 'women' as decerned under the heterosexual contract. She hence (famously) concludes that "lesbians are not women."[19][20]

Thinking the straight mind from a queer point of view offers Wittig privileged insights into the pervasive functioning of the social institutions Kraus grapples with throughout her work. The gay French theorist Didier Eribon takes on a similar yet alternative argument in his book *La société comme verdict* (2013):

> À n'en pas douter, l'hétérosexualité constitue un facteur de vieillissement social, et je ne suis pas loin de penser que, au même âge biologique, un hétérosexuel et un gay n'ont pas le même âge social ni le même âge psychologique : je crois qu'un gay a toujours plus de mal à coïncider avec lui-même, avec son identité sociale, et donc à gérer son rapport aux autres, car l'écart – avec lui-même, avec les autres, avec le monde social et ses institutions – est quasi constitutif de sa subjectivité.[21]

Queering the reflections of Sartre, he affirms the distance gays and lesbians feel to heterosexual civil society as being hardly bridgeable. Ostracized by and under the heterosexual contract, queer people need to constantly re-evaluate their rapport to the categories of gender the straight mind conjures up to sustain the heterosexual model of society as singular, as well as its legitimizing faculties. Whereas Wittig finds lesbians to constitute themselves differently from 'woman' and unleash a utopian potentiality outside heterosexuality, Eribon's conclusion in this passage is much more devastating: the subjectivity of queer people – and so the queer mind? – is always constituted in relation to the gap opened by the split between their identity and the punitive normativity of the heterosexual matrix.[22]

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[19] *Ibid*., 77.
[20] For various extensions of this analysis for gay men, see: *Pédés*, ed. Florent Manelli (Éditions Points, 2023).
[21] Didier Eribon, *La Société comme Verdict* (Flammarion, 2020), 39.
[22] Of course, the heterosexual dynamic is ultimately about the inhabitation of oppositional subject positions. While in the last quarter of the 20th century this relation may have been strictly thought applicable to man/woman relationships, I do not find it unimaginable that today the same dynamic can apply in same-sex or other queer relational forms. The most important anchors could be identified as responsibility over the household and sex in relation to one's mode of entry into the contract (see the next section in this chapter). Ultimately, as Eribon stresses, these 'social verdicts' are constructed but nevertheless very real. The fact that such categories take on different meanings over time is natural but should not be taken as a valid motive to categorically reject the existence of this relation of oppression. Rather, this constitutes an invitation to read

Wittig virtually conceives of female identity as a tabula rasa. Once blemished, lesbianism holds the key to an infinite number of suppressed potentialities which can be deployed after one's rupture with the heterosexual contract. There is no one material or discursive truth. Theorists like Jane M. Ussher have criticized this deconstructionist approach: "where we question the validity of social categories and the ideological intent behind them, we can be left with a scenario where nothing is 'real', everything is just a social label; an invention of those in power. So there is no such thing as a sexual problem, a sexual crime, or perversion. […] This can be seen to dismiss the experiences of many women and men."[23] The straight mind Wittig theorizes as the root of the construction and therefore oppression of 'woman' is practically totalitarian in nature: even the embedment of the gender binary in language is "un acte perpétré par une classe contre l'autre et c'est un acte criminal"[24] How, then, is anyone to be held accountable for this ontological violence?

In Praise of Rousseau, or Against the Bastard Contract

We know that masculine domination can take on many forms while nevertheless sharing the same basic instinct of the heterosexual contract: that 'woman' is to be subjugated. In these instances, Wittig's ontological violence can be rendered awfully material. [25] Even if, at the

heterosexuality as one theory of relational differentiality. Paul B. Preciado, for example, speculates the future debasement of heterosexuality as the norm in *Testojunkie* (Éditions Points, 2021): "de ce décalage pharmacopornographique, on peut déduire que l'hétérosexualité sera bientôt une esthétique pharmacopornographique parmi d'autres, une sexualité rétro dont différentes générations à venir pourront imiter, dénigrer ou exalter le style, sexualité éventuellement exportable à d'autres latitudes mais absolument révolue et décadente dans nos sociétés judéo-chrétiennes démocratiques. » (122)

[23] Jane M. Ussher, "Introduction," in *Body Talk: The Material and Discursive Regulation of Sexuality, Madness and Reproduction* (Routledge, 1997): 5-6.

[24] Wittig, *Pensée Straight*, 138. She notably criticizes the forced reveal of the female locutor's gender in the French language with an extra -e. This burden does not befall the man, whose grammatical form is that of 'the general' (136).

[25] Dennis Kelly offers us an interesting reflection on this issue. In his acclaimed monologue *Girls & Boys* (Methuen Drama, 2018), a nameless woman recounts the disintegration of her initially happy marriage. After her husband's company goes bankrupt, he is progressively drawn into recluse and becomes verbally abusive towards his decidedly more successful wife. He obsesses over videogames, overeats and neglects his children. When she accuses him of having had an affair, he seethes with rage and, as he affirms his intent to keep the children away from her, yells: "I don't fucking care if you're never fucking happy again, that doesn't fucking matter to me at

discursive level, there might be some merit to Ussher's theoretical caution, it does not really hold in the face of such physical manifestations. As Eribon similarly warns: "en réalité (et il faudrait peut-être écrire : en performativité), il y a une identité, une histoire, une mémoire, quand des mots, des théories viennent nommer un ensemble de phénomènes et les ranger dans une même catégorie."[26] Political reality does not become less violent just because it is constructed or can be thought otherwise; even if ontologically instable, the symptomatic marks it produces in any current moment nevertheless carry real material consequences and the social verdicts pronounced by civil society can carry terrifying consequences.

Wittig argues the heterosexual contract to be a bastard of Rousseau's ideal social contract, which people enter openly for the purpose to uplift the life of all people living in the community. While Rousseau's contract would in practice of course lead to a reproduction of the straight mind, it does endow 'woman' with more agency as the contract is entered voluntary rather than nascently. This openness is the differentiating factor to that heterosexual bastard

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all." (55) She decides to divorce and brings the children with her to settle into a new life. Despite her attempts to arrange him visits to the children, he drops off the face of the earth; signing all the mandatory papers, he otherwise entertains radio silence. Four months later, he infiltrates her new house and stabs both children to death.

After describing his violent attack in extreme detail, the woman presents the facts about this act called 'family annihilation': 95% of the perpetrators are men, and most do not have criminal records. Whereas investigators have identified four types of motivations driving family annihilators, she presents an alternative reading of her own situation:

> But do you want to know what it's really about? I'm gonna tell you what it's really about – what it's really about is control. / It's about losing control. / It's about exerting control. / It's about denying control to others. / *'I want you to listen to me – there will never come a time when you have my kids and I don't.'* / We often talk about these men as having snapped. In the papers, the news, amongst ourselves. But nothing could be further from the truth. They do not snap. They plan. They know what they are doing. / Those four months with not a peep out of him? Planning. (Kelly, 58)

This killing is an attempt to reaffirm his primordial power as the man of the household, the central actor compared to whom the nameless woman is constituted as inferior.

Kelly demonstrates the fundamental limitations of preventative measures in the face of the ontological injustice which legitimizes (both as legitimized and actively legitimizing) the straight mind as singular. The material consequences of this hierarchy are devastating. In the penultimate section of *Girls & Boys*, the woman poses another critical note to Wittig's reading

> that society - this incredibly, amazing, bizarre, wonderful and complex construction we have made out of human interaction and co-operation - has been created for men. To enable men, to empower men, for men to run and tend. I've been thinking a lot about that. / And I don't think that's true, you know. / I really don't think it is. / We didn't create society *for* men. / We created it to stop men. (Kelly 62-63)

[26] Eribon, *La société comme verdict*, 240.

contract which punitively enforces itself and does not uplift women but compromises their integrity as whole subject by demarcating their gender and economic and social position.

Contemporary society at last operates a contract one step closer to Rousseau's contract than the plainly heterosexual one, as it is trying to put measures in place which guarantee equality between men and women (see footnote 20 on Kelly for an illustration of this logic). But these actions merely try to patch up a logic that is fundamentally broken.[27] As a woman who loves other women, Wittig therefore rejects her existence under the heterosexual contract which frames and delineates her ways of being in the world: she breaks with it, severing her tacit acceptance as implied in the exercise of her societal citizenship. Gender is not expressive of sex or bearing upon any concrete – i.e., singular – artefact as the straight mind so aggressively pretends. Rather, in this system, 'woman' is a subject position from which one is dominated by the male other, which Wittig refuses to inhabit any longer. This question of the subject will be taken up further in Chapter 3.

Butler nuances Wittig's rupture by theorizing these marks to ultimately be produced internally: gender is performative. It legitimizes itself as a discursive production on the body without apparent precedent by obscuring its heterosexual ontology through the punitive regulation of one's performance of gender by various institutions.

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[27] To further think the patchwork argument, it is interesting here to compare the formation of society as Kelly describes it to the societies of sexual intercourse as theorized by Andrea Dworkin. She writes:

> "in each act of intercourse, a society is formed; and the distribution of power in that society is the state interest at stake. Who constitutes the society, what each does, the place of each in each act, the value of each, is what the state seeks to control. Gender is what the state seeks to control: who is the man here? which is the woman? how to keep the man on top, how to keep the man the man; how to render the woman inferior in fucking so that she cannot recover herself from the carnal experience of her own subjugation. (Dworkin, *Intercourse* (Free Press, 1987), 186-187)

If 'the fuck' is the primordial model according to which even the smallest of societies functions, its scalability is evident. Reading these lines on the prerogative of the state, one could also replace 'intercourse' with 'the heterosexual contract,' which indeed precludes 'woman' to ever be anything other than subjugated.

Chris also describes her first meeting with Dick as "a Conceptual Fuck. His disappearance in the morning clinches it, and invests it with a subcultural subtext she and Dick both share: she's reminded of all the fuzzy one-time fucks she's had with men who're out of the door before her eyes are open." (Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 7) Performatively, even when not invested with any physicality, the rules and dynamic of intercourse remain the same: Dick (besides his real name also a convenient play on the phallic 'I') holds all the power over Chris.

> Gender, is thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction "compels" our belief in its necessity and naturalness. The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions alternately embodied and deflected under duress.[28]

False historicization is achieved through the stylized repetition of performative acts corresponding to a certain gender which so becomes sedimented.[29] Breaking with Wittig's heterosexual contract entails doing gender differently; performing the capacities of the body radically and freely yet, as Eribon stresses, always in relation to the inescapable norms of one's time.[30]

So long as the straight mind is the hegemonic force in society, this process of rupture knows no endpoint. Gender is never stable as it will always be performance; reiterative yet ephemeral, rigid yet prone to error, however slight. One can inhabit the role of 'woman' but the lines might change. Always-already implicated as a subject under the heterosexual contract or at least the institutions legitimizing it, the subversion of problematic gender norms takes much time and effort. This makes it all the more pertinent to recall here a final observation by Eribon, on the long undertaking that is social change:

> La vérité, c'est que le travail d'émancipation – qu'il faut d'abord, et à chaque pas, accomplir sur soi-même, car la politique innovatrice est forcément une politique de soi sur soi pour desserrer l'emprise en nous de la force oppressive du monde tel qu'il est – peut faire advenir d'autres discours,

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[28] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 190.
[29] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531.
[30] Deborah Levy refers to gender performance as the 'phantom of femininity': "What is a phantom anyway? The phantom of femininity is an illusion, a delusion, a societal hallucination. She is a very tricky character to play and it is a role (sacrifice, endurance, cheerful suffering) that has made some women go mad." (*Cost of Living*, 87)

> d'autres possibilités, d'autres imaginations et donc contribuer à changer la réalité ; il ne saurait abolir l'ordre ancien comme par l'effet d'un coup de baguette magique.[31]

Just like gender performance is repetitively constituted it must be repetitively upended in the face of much resistance. Butler decentres masculine privilege and domination as they emphasize the restrictions enforced on gender under the heterosexual matrix for everyone: the personal is so always-already political. To rethink gender one must look outward rather than inward and rethink the institutions which uphold this oppressive system. No amount of prison time or conviction is truly fruitful in upending the violent hold of masculinity on the lives of men and women. Only in considering this fundamental architecture of life – i.e., the false dichotomy underlying our present notions of gender – can we think and shape the future differently.

The Depravity of 'My Wife' in Artificial Paradise

Having laid some theoretical groundwork, we can now better see through the façade of (intellectual) equality veiling the actual gender roles at play in Kraus' books. Early in *I Love Dick,* Sylvère's scoffingly rejects the term 'my wife' as "a word I'd never use, to emphasize the depth of our depravity…"[32] With this gesture, he construes their relationship as equal by situating it outside the heterosexual contract: he (performatively) claims to afford Chris an interior life unlike the men encountered by Levy rather than (traditionally) construing her identity as different/other in his shadow. Sylvère focalizes the reaction of the straight mind by suggesting this to be an act of 'depravity', an anomaly inconceivable within the heterosexual aesthetic purported as reality and punitively enforced as such. It is true that, at first glance, Chris and Sylvère's relationship in many ways appears to be coded differently from the

[31] Eribon, *La société comme verdict*, 63.
[32] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 39. In *Torpor,* Kraus writes of Jerome's usage of "wife" that it is "a term he never uses without airquotes." (*Torpor,* 7) See also the discussion on monsters later in chapter 2.

structural model in which the 'man' dominates the 'woman'. In contrast to Sylvère's previous marriage, his relationship with Chris has not produced a child. Her being as 'woman' is so stripped of one fundamental raison d'être under the heterosexual contract: reproduction. But because this book – *I Love Dick* – focuses on the situation towards the end of their marriage, it does not reveal the whole history of Chris and Sylvère.[33]

Kraus' two other books give more insight into the presence of the traditional markers Wittig identifies as essential to sustaining and producing the fiction of 'womanhood'. One central theme of *Torpor,* for example, is the having of a child as fulfilment of the structure of relationships. A big chunk of the narrative focuses on Sylvie and Jerome's (i.e., Chris and Sylvère's) journey to Romania to adopt an orphaned child, because "the only elegant means of escaping from the torpor of their lives would have been to have a baby. A baby would have forced them into some momentum."[34] The significant age gap of the Chris-Sylvère/Sylvie-Jerome couple destabilizes the temporal synchronicity of their relationship and Chris' position under the heterosexual contract more generally. Following Eribon, this situation would never allow Chris to coincide with her age as mandated by society: the fact that Sylvère is much older throws Chris/Sylvie off the linear progression ordained for women of her age. In one letter to Dick, Chris remarks this distance too: "To perform yourself inside a role is very strange. The clothes, the words, prod you into nameless areas and then you stretch them out in front of other people, live. […] So what was Chris performing?"[35]

The coincidence of one's advancement in life with societal expectations is a concept Elizabeth Freeman has termed chrononormativity.[36] While Sylvie is in a straight relationship her relationship to time is queer ever since she stepped out the bounds of the normative

[33] Though late in *I Love Dick* there is a brief mention of some of the events described in much greater detail in *Torpor*.
[34] Kraus, *Torpor*, 95.
[35] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 161.
[36] See: Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010).

framework that generally envelops relationships.[37] Helen Stuhr-Rommereim advances this argument in her reading of *Torpor*, arguing that "in their desires, in their mode of interaction with the world, Sylvie and Jerome are somehow separated from the naturalness of their lived experience and their bodies. Overgrown children, they are made ridiculous by their inability to engage on the same temporal scale as others of their age and position. Rather than the question of work/ life balance, it's the question of seriousness that plagues Sylvie throughout the novel. Ultimately, she chooses to give herself over entirely to play, embracing the supposed regression of a more queerly temporal existence."[38] To not abide by the will of chrononormativity means to fail to live up to a certain sense of productivity, to orient away from the self by refusing to internalize the propositions of the heterosexual contract. What one finds by looking outward at the world can be revolutionary.

Steadily closing in on 40, Sylvie appears to become increasingly desperate to carry a baby of her own as the narrator asserts that "without a child, it was difficult to maintain this artificial paradise [i.e., her relationship with Jerome], and so Sylvie's enthusiasm became increasingly passionate and manic"[39] But despite falling pregnant thrice, Jerome objects to her carrying their imminent child to term. All three pregnancies so end in abortions, of which one is performed prematurely which causes her to ultimately miscarry the foetus instead. Her relationship with Jerome is obviously very real, but its tenacity – at least from a chrononormative point of view – is starting to show obvious cracks by not respecting the terms or timeline for life events set out under the heterosexual contract. Her marriage with Sylvère is unstable in part because, without a child, it is not supported by the assurance that heterosexual

[37] In *Aliens & Anorexia*, Kraus does allude to her (or the character 'Chris Kraus') having entertained partnerships and/or infatuations with a woman. Queer sexuality in this sense is, however, not a focal point of the other books being discussed here and she does not mobilize it in the way Wittig or Eribon do. While I explicitly do not negate such hints of queerness as shown by Kraus, the discussion will focus on her position as 'woman' in her straight relationship with Sylvère.
[38] Helen Stuhr-Rommereim, "A Delicate Time: Queer Temporality in *Torpor*," in *You Must Make your Death Public: A Collection of Texts and Media on the Work of Chris Kraus*, edited by Mira Mattar (Mute, 2015): 26.
[39] Kraus, *Torpor*, 99.

relationships are inherently good because they serve reproductive ends. Indeed, "all these years, while she's giddily played the pert gamine Jerome could recast his guilty furtive youth with, she's noticed other people building actual lives they seemed to take quite seriously. The *things* she'd thought she loved so much […] were not enough to give their life a substance while they moved around like ghosts."[40] Should all else fail between both parties, at least there would have been a child to redeem the hardship of the relationship and so fulfil the telos of contemporary exogamy: the baby is a material testament to that certain notion of progress as concorded under the heterosexual contract. With no noteworthy art career, nor a social network or a child, little remains for Sylvie to justify her relationship with Jerome under the logic of heterosexuality.

Escaping the (normatively stipulated[41]) material orientation of heterosexuality, the oppositional nature of Sylvie and Jerome's relationship could in fact be shaped differently. Should their attraction indeed have morphed into a different type of satisfaction than physical compatibility, this would herald the unprecedented possibility of realizing a marriage on equal footing wrested away from the mostly physical 'symptoms' of femininity. But in Jerome/Sylvie's quest for an orphaned child, "sex had followed them throughout the former Soviet empire like a thunderhead, threatening to explode into a declaration that, in a certain sense, *they couldn't stand each other*, and so instead they marveled at the Spartan graciousness of Soviet décor."[42] Sex – especially since it does not serve the purpose of reproduction – remains a slumbering, compulsory undercurrent in their relationship in a way that it is not for Wittig and other lesbians who inhabit a subject position that is other-than-woman. Kraus' character finds a temporary fix in *I Love Dick* by orientating her sexual relations with Sylvère

[40] *Ibid*., 188.
[41] Through the privileged enchantment of certain orifices and related sexual compatibilities over others potential combinations. See: Butler, *Gender Trouble*, chapter 1.
[42] Kraus, *Torpor*, 32.

away from him and towards Dick; but, even in this 'conceptual fuck',[43] Chris initially remains the different-other compared to Sylvère and Dick, who, in most respects, fit the hegemonic cultural norm of the heterosexual matrix like a glove – including the canonical occidental intellectual tradition in which all three attempt to manoeuvre themselves.

The fragile state of Sylvie and Jerome's union is thus exposed through a sexual impulse which haunts the entirety of their relationship. Their meeting occurred at a moment when Jerome was already a tenured professor at Columbia and had a rotating schedule of girls coming in to satisfy him during his lunch breaks. During their argument over her second abortion, Chris/Sylvie breaks:

> […] "I don't know why you married me," she finished softly. "I was 27 when we met. What kind of monster would marry someone so much younger, someone who expects to have a child, if he didn't want to have a baby?" […] Jerome: "Oh Sylvie, don't you get it?" Jerome finally shouted back. "It's not like I *set out* to marry you. I had lots of other girlfriends. I didn't want a life with you, especially."[44]

Here, Kraus (in a knowingly performative manner) affirms Sylvie's desire to embed herself into a schedule of life that is decidedly heterosexual. At the same time, Jerome tacitly confirms Dworkin's analysis of hetero-sex as a self-effacing affair for the 'woman' who is ritually subjected to a socially curated phallic fantasy. His roster of 'other girlfriends' seems to acknowledge that "most women are not distinct, private individuals to most men; and so the fuck tends toward the class assertion of dominance."[45] Jerome accuses Sylvie of nagging her way into marriage rather than ever having been a singularly appealing partner to him. No matter of how rejective he positions himself vis à vis terms like 'my wife,' this foundational gender

[43] See footnote 27.
[44] Kraus, *Torpor*, 218.
[45] Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 83.

disparity and its violence does inscribe him into the dominant subject position of the heterosexual contract.

Chapter Conclusion: The Masks of Heterosexuality

As a closed off system, the heterosexual matrix offers a perfect logic according to which one can live a completely ordained life. Deborah Levy also finds herself to have become an ordinary 'wife'. Unlike Kraus, however, she did have children. Still, in her emptying nest, the unequal burdens of the household gradually became clearer to her and the cost of such living grew – i.e., as her husband's 'wife' under the heterosexual contract – much too high. Wanting to finally release herself from this role prescribed by society and instead entertain the long-kindled wish of living one of those proscribed potentialities instead, she decides to divorce her husband and carve out a new life. Levy reflects on the strenuous process of undoing her status as different/other in *The Cost of Living*.

Towards the end of this book (and undecided on whether this was in fact the right course of things) she reflects on an encounter she had with 'the father of her children' years after her divorce.

> "There was no way we could console each other for the undisclosed hurt that had contributed to sinking the boat, or for our lack of desire to swim back to it. Yet it was true that the societal mask of husband and wife, which we had worn for so long, had slipped, and we could see each other again. Perhaps what we saw was too human to bear. We stood up, put on our coats and kissed each other goodbye."[46]

The mandatory enforcement of heterosexuality and the relegation of people into categories of 'man' and 'woman' causes an immense amount of pain and grief. Compulsory delusions surrounding gender strained Levy's marriage to a degree that divorce was her only way 'out'

[46] Levy, *Cost of Living*, 185.

of masculine domination. The 'societal mask of husband and wife' obscures the non-codified tenets of love that make a relationship worthwhile beyond the imagination of heterosexuality, that sustains it out of will rather than plight. Having the ability to take on an alternative role to the one she was allotted as 'woman' – and so the natural appointment as the caretaker of a household she herself did not feel welcome in – could have provided the opportunity needed to realize a more sustainable and fulfilling way forward with her husband.

In the above passage, Levy also focalizes the logic of the straight mind not unlike Sylvère did by harshly framing his denouncement of the 'my wife' trope as a supposedly depraved act. Levy is more tender in her assessment and, writing as a divorcee without a new partner, perhaps even somewhat sorrowful. Underneath the masks of heterosexuality resides something 'too human to bear'; a way of finally seeing each other not through a male-female gaze but as unique humans who happen to possess bodies and subjectivities performing these restrictive genders. What remains is something so far removed from violent marks produced by conformance that a heterosexual system of perception is conceptually unable to handle it.

In all books of her trilogy, Kraus' character develops an awareness of her subjection as 'woman' under the heterosexual contract and becomes attuned to the broader systematic impulse of domination propagated by this system. Rather than escaping the matrix of heterosexuality like Levy does, Chris, in *I Love Dick*, gives herself "the job of solving heterosexuality (i.e., finishing this writing project) before turning 40. And that's tomorrow."[47] In this chapter I have attempted to pinpoint some of the most pivotal relations of the heterosexuality which Kraus struggles and toys with but also ultimately rejects in her work. Because her attempts at wresting herself away from the heterosexual lead to "… those moments where you can no longer count on any of the mythologies you've believed in and

[47] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 154.

you don't have any new ones to replace them. Things don't come out. They fall apart."[48] As discussed above, Eribon insists that a tension is produced in the gap between queer subjectivity and the orders of the straight mind. What resistance can foment in this gap?

In the next chapter, I will make a first attempt at theorizing monstrosity as one position in stark opposition to the heterosexual contract discussed in this chapter. Through chrononormativity, heterosexuality is violent in temporal ways: it dictates the orientation of "woman" in time according to a logic that promotes a false sense of certainty. I will propose to read the figure of the female monster as one way of thinking a resistance which is queer in the face of such normative temporality. The argument will also pick up on the foundational claim of this chapter: that it cannot be possible for the identity of "woman" to be private, because the discursive regulation of this gender role is deeply public. Its performance and restrictive embodiment are constituted in relation to all other members of society. The female monster is deeply public and thus a powerful antidote to this dangerous logic of relegation.

[48] Kraus, *Aliens*, 110.

Chapter 2: Monstrous Articulations

> You have a good heart and you think the good thing is to be guilty and kind but it's not always kind to be gentle and soft, there's a genuine violence softness and kindness visit on people. Sometimes self-interested is the most generous thing you can be.
>
> - Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* (1991)

The figure of the monster takes on a prominent role in all three of Kraus' books. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Torpor* exposes the monstrosity of the heterosexual contract which is the origin of Chris' discontent and the most important instigator for her own turn to a certain 'monstrousness' in both *I Love Dick* and *Aliens & Anorexia*. Whereas Levy writes from beyond the break with her husband, Kraus' character – in the sections discussed in the first chapter – is still on the cusp of her liberation. Any perspective on a life resembling the one heterosexuality sets out for a 'woman' of her age is steadily disintegrating and her marriage with Jerome is already showing deep cracks. When the events of *I Love Dick* occur, the debacle surrounding their childlessness has already highlighted the scarce foundation which their relationship leans on and various disputes over money render Sylvie's situation even more (de)pressing. A tacit ghostwriter for Jerome's commissions and the maker of their home, her life waddles on, Sylvie still "wonders what it might be like to write things under her own name and buy her own shoes."[49]

Several years after the events of *Torpor* and at the midpoint of *I Love Dick*, however, Chris finally attunes to the decidedly heterosexual hierarchy operative in their marriage when she is rejected at the New York party. In spite of their 'deconstructed' sex life and other soothing attempts by Sylvère to obscure this truth, she realizes that she is seen as nobody more than Sylvère's 'wife.' This constitutes the pivotal moment of *I Love Dick*, because only through this realization does she truly awaken to the actual structure of her relationship and

[49] Kraus, *Torpor*, 186.

embark on her project of writing that I shall argue to be monstruous.[50] Sylvère, in any case, tries to escape the blame for this incident:

> "It's not my fault!" Sylvère yelled back.
>
> But she remembered all the times they'd worked together when her name had been omitted, how equivocal Sylvère'd been, how reluctant to offend anyone who paid them. She remembered the abortions, all the holidays she'd been told to leave the house so Sylvère could be alone with his daughter. In ten years, she'd erased herself. No matter how affectionate Sylvère'd been, he'd never been in love with her.[51]

Chris figures that not only has she been erased in the eyes of others by becoming Sylvère's 'wife', but she also performed acts in the private domain of their relationship which further effaced her agency. In a sense, she appears to carry quite a bit of guilt over not asserting herself when it came to the abortions, and the possible alternative codifications of the physical dimensions of her relationship with Sylvère. Levy, once also a 'wife', was at least a successful one as she subsumed herself totally into the household. Chris is unable to lay claim to even this victory. She finds herself to have failed to perform the expectation under both the heterosexual contract and to have lacked the ability to seek out one of the many alternatives constituted outside of it. Her womanhood is constructed in opposition to Sylvère's virility and later Dick's, and Chris so never transcends her position as different/other. She experiences many of the punitive effects of womanhood, including erasure, without the internal stability afforded to women in tune with their age and position in society.

After this decisive moment in *I Love Dick*, Chris begins to slowly think and live her life differently. She definitively abandons the one formal constraint of her letter-writing project: upholding 'Dick' as a person of flesh and blood. Whereas Sylvère had given up on

[50] It is pivotal also on a meta-level, as this realization is what pushes her to write *I Love Dick* and turned her into a 'writer', which caused her subsequent books to also see the light.
[51] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 100-101.

their game early in the book (causing the resurgence of their relational ennui), Chris persists in her fantasy and tentatively scopes out ways of reimagining her project – and therefore Dick. The image she constructs of him is increasingly abstracted from his actual person as her letters become longer and more personal; she confides in him as a despondent listener, "finding new ways to be close to you."[52] Because after presenting him the first part of the letters she wrote and having sex once, Chris finds that musing on theory, female experience and liberation is a lot more interesting than making a desperate effort to seduce Dick. She realizes in writing about the 'kike art' of Ron Kitaj and Hannah Wilke and reckoning with the schizophrenic impulse structuring her own writing that she is doing something which is more important and subversive than he can imagine. "I can't stop writing even for a day," Chris notes, "I'm doing it to save my life. These letters're the first time I've ever tried to talk about ideas because I need to, not just to amuse or entertain."[53] Post-hoc, Chris is forsaking the Dick who was on the phone and at dinner. "'Dear Dick,' she wrote, 'I guess in a sense I've killed you. You've become Dear Diary…'"[54]

I Love Dick originated in letters that Kraus actually wrote to Dick. There is thus a trajectory in his diminishment from a physical human being Kraus writes to in reality; who then becomes a literary character and the addressee of Chris in *I Love Dick*; and, ultimately, ends up a manipulated version of this character as Chris' fantasy of the phallic. In the first two instances, Hebdige/Dick engages with Kraus/Chris as well as the letters. This movement to a final, abstracted form of "Dick", is a uniquely self-referential feature of Kraus' text, which I will primarily discuss in this chapter. The shift from the real-life to character-form will be taken up in the final chapter.

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[52] *Ibid*., 59.
[53] *Ibid.*, 176.
[54] *Ibid.*, 74.

Palpable in this shift from the epistolary address to character-Dick to his function as the absent receiver is a tension between the public and the private nature of Chris' writing. On the one hand, her letters appear to have become more private ever since 'Dick' became a symbol of the heterosexual dominant instead of a true recipient. Wrested away from a framework of interlocutory exchange at least performatively upheld, her writing now knows no prospective reader. But in staging them – as a proposed performance in the narrative of the book or as (re)produced in the text of *I Love Dick* – this lack of reception is also liberating. Her letters are written with little view to their perceived quality under any conventional framework, which otherwise might have reproduced elements of the phallic unicity sworn off by Wittig. "I'm torn between maintaining you as an entity to write to and talking with you as a person. Perhaps I'll let it go,"[55] Chris asserts in the second part. In the concrete gaze of others, she finds herself erased.[56] Relinquishing Dick as the object of her writing offers her the unique chance to attempt something not inscribed in the terms of the heterosexual contract: to become a woman existing in public, or monstruous.

In this chapter, I will attempt to articulate some of the parameters of her project of monstrosity by close reading passages from *I Love Dick* in junction with selections from Virginie Despentes' work *King Kong Théorie*. Kraus' articulation of monstruous writing, I will argue, resides in the open yet undefined plane of existence opened up by her temporal distance to heterosexuality (discussed in the preceding chapter). The female monster mobilizes this gap to orient herself in a deeply public way and in a different yet related manner to the way monsters are generally theorized. In the next and final chapter of this thesis, I will proceed to consider and apply the monstruous strategy theorized here as the praxis of Kraus' own work.

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[55] *Ibid*., 114.
[56] I employ the term 'gaze' here as a nod to Laura Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze'.

The Blob's Subsumptive Determination

Concluding the chapter titled 'Monsters' in *I Love Dick*, Chris

> explained to Warren about the difference between male and female monsters. "Female monsters take things as personally as they really are. They study facts. Even if rejection makes them feel like the girl who's not invited to the party, they have to understand the reason why."
>
> Monstrosity: the self as a machine. *The Blob*, mindlessly swallowing and engorging, rolling down the supermarket aisle absorbing pancake mix and jello and everyone in town. Unwise and unstoppable. The horror of *The Blob* is a horror of the fearless. To become *The Blob* requires a certain force of will.
>
> Every question, once it's formulated, is a paradigm, contains its own internal truth. We have to stop diverting ourselves with false questions. And I told Warren: I am to be a female monster too.[57] (Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 202)

The Blob is a flopped 1958 sci-fi horror movie turned cult classic. It chronicles the arrival of a shapeless red creature from space to a small Pennsylvania town. Once its asteroid shell cracks upon impact, the Blob gorges on the community's inhabitants and infrastructure, each time growing further and acquiring a deeper shade of red. The protagonists Steve Andrews and police officers Dave Barton and Jim Bert attempt to kill the Blob to little avail. Indeed, as Chris remarks in the quoted passage, the monster is metastatic – if not, in the movie, for its vulnerability to the cold. The trio ultimately conquers the threat by paralysing the Blob using fire extinguishers and dropping it in Antarctica by parachute to keep it permanently frozen; all while Jane Martin (Steve's girlfriend) is watching from the sideline.[58]

Crucially, the Blob is a (p)renascent being: once released from its dormant state, it becomes a boundless automatic that is unstoppable. The solution could therefore have never

[57] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 202.
[58] Irvin S. Yeaworth Jr. (dir.), *The Blob* (Paramount Pictures, 1958).

constituted a true undoing of the Blob. The movie ends with a scene depicting the crash landing of the Blob onto Antarctica as the music triumphantly swells and 'The End' is overlayed as a title. But this conclusive statement then morphs into a question mark just before the screen rapidly fades to black.

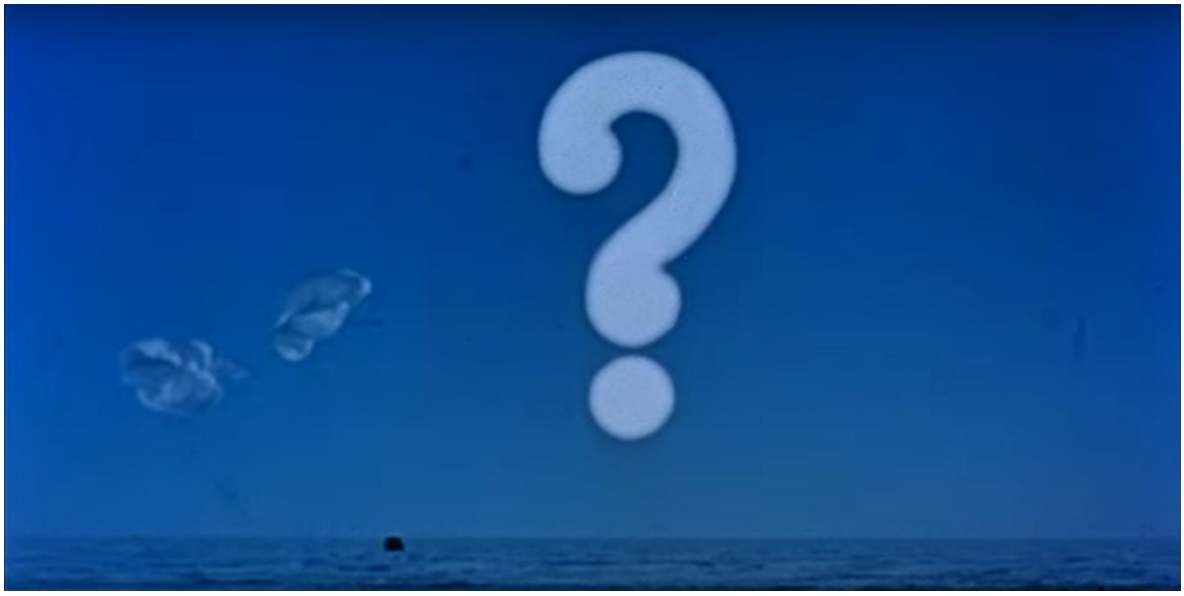


Figure 1 - The final frame of The Blob *(1958). The black dot on the left, attached to the parachute, is what is left of the Blob.*

The Blob is haunting precisely because it cannot be appropriated; it is monstruous because, once unleashed, there is no way of stopping it from destroying everything in its path. Chris finds in the Blob an equal for the determination of female monsters; people who decide it time to reckon with the patriarchal world by devouring the institutions that legitimized the violence committed against them. "The horror of the Blob is a horror of the fearless" because this category of monsters knows that no ousting will be eternal. The Blob is banished to Antarctica in 1958 under the presumption that arctic conditions are permanent and will sustain its paralysis forever. But, over 75 years later, this belief has turned out to be wrong: as the earth warms further and polar caps are melting rapidly, it is only a matter of (deep) time for the Blob to revitalize and resume its project of absolute destruction. The question mark at the end of the film so suggests that no solution, however rigorous, can ever be permanent.

This makes the monster even more powerful than Chris could have ever foreseen. Less speculatively, the resurrection of the Blob is explained by the film's 1972 sequel *Beware! The Blob* in which an oil pipeline worker stationed in the Arctic finds a piece of the Blob and takes it home as a keepsake. Back in the U.S., his wife innocently dethaws it and the Blob is on the loose once again. [59]

In the scenario of both movies, the Blob is a neutral actor. Yes, its rampage is absolute and the subsequent damages enormous, yet this carnage is precisely its raison d'être. There is no underlying ploy to upend the stability of society: the logic of the Blob is at a far remove from any conventional framework of consequence because the status quo of the world is little but an impediment to its self-realization. The Blob is fearless precisely because all it seeks is to become whole, turning outward to fuse itself with all the world regardless of hierarchical order.[60]

To realize its project, however, the Blob depends on the interference of some other actor to discharge from its shell and enter the world. The female monster's ascension to her rampage is not circumscribed by a definitive material limitation but rather a discursive one. She must do away with the shackles of the heterosexual contract that surround her; this release being that what requires a "certain force of will" to muster the fearlessness requisite to monstrosity. As an auto-emancipatory act, rising to monstrosity is therefore a mode of self-realization: one is not born, but rather becomes, a monster, i.e., wrested from a tradition of oppression that codifies the femininity of 'woman' as obediently heterosexual. Because the

[59] The 1988 remake does away with the space-like nature of the Blob and conceives it human-made instead, an experimental instrument of warfare during the Cold War gone too far. Here – combining the scenarios of both films – the Blob is eliminated fully except for a minor piece which is held onto by an eschatological reverend as a promise to power.

[60] See chapter 3 for the continuation of the argument regarding this 'turning outward' as the undivided devotion of attention, specifically in relation to Kraus' theorization of anorexia. This chapter primarily discusses it as the monster's orientation in relation to its self.

rites of the heterosexual contract are rooted deep in most institutions, the havoc she wreaks is to be at once general and specific.

Perennial Silence and Submission

In thinking this relation between monstrosity and the public, Virginie Despentes can offer us some insights to work from. She opens her essay *King Kong Théorie* (2006) by revealing the position from which she is writing : "j'écris de chez les moches, pour les moches, les vieilles, les camionneuses, les frigides, les mal baisées, les imbaisables, les hystériques, les tarées, toutes les exclues du grand marché à la bonne meuf ;"[61] an enumeration of labels for those outside the heterosexual contract, of which a good number could therefore equally be applied to Kraus (see chapter 1). Both authors writing from the mid '90s onwards, Despentes' books are notorious for their daring approach to themes of sex and porn which puts women centre-stage; both such themes as well as her focus on them in relation to women being a big taboo at the time. In fact, the controversy surrounding the film adaptation of her bestseller *Baise-Moi* (1994) – which skirted the lines of moral decency by including unsimulated sex scenes[62] – is her primary motivation to deal with the same issues in a more theoretical way and grapple with the unease present in society that made her movie into a national polemic. *King Kong Théorie* offers readers Despentes' public reckoning with her experiences regarding sex, porn, rape and prostitution in an attempt to understand these events of her life and their public controversy. Like Chris' female monster, she must 'understand the reason why'. Despentes scrutinizes the (French) societal attitude towards these subjects through a decidedly theoretical lens, lucidly demonstrating the violence contained within the feminine roles

[61] Despentes, *King Kong Théorie* (Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2006), 9.
[62] See : "Baise-moi, de Virginie Despentes : Déflagration littéraire, scandale cinématographique", *RadioFrance* (July 13, 2016). https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/affaires-sensibles/baise-moi-de-virginie-despentes-deflagration-litteraire-scandale-cinematographique-5242321

allotted to the 'others' of society. Along the way, she thinks her stature as a writer and creator who is also female.

In the chapter she devotes to rape, she writes that "c'est le projet du viol qui refaisait de moi une femme, quelqu'un d'essentiellement vulnerable."[63] She opposes the widely-held belief that rape is an unhappy accident, an error in a heterosexual system of behaviours which normally ensures virtuous sexual relationships. Rather, Despentes argues, rape is the purest embrace of a societal program in which the masculine players hold all the power over the feminine one(s); its survivor can only ever be a subject on which more violence is inflicted – even if only by themselves. Both in the case of rape and prostitution, Despentes fervently condemns the societal consensus to disavow such acts and regard them as incidental. Such disregar, namely, further privatizes the violence of rape and forces the subject to continue it against themselves: "en France, on ne tue pas les femmes à qui c'est arrivé, mais on attend d'elles qu'elles aient la décence de se signaler en tant que merchandise endommagée, polluée. Putes ou enlaidies, qu'elles sortent spontanément du vivier des épousables."[64] Her and other victims' existences are ostensibly paradoxical: she is the victim of the epitomic act of heterosexuality – one that most plainly reveals the brutality of its underlying power structure – while she is simultaneously ought to remove herself from its playfield after the fact. The heterosexual contract stipulates the realization of both these terms at once. 'Woman' is so fashioned a tragic character: heterosexuality prescribes she undergoes rape with the very feminine disposition (i.e., forbidden to stand up for herself, an (in)aptitude produced through a combination of knowledge withheld and the enforcement of social norms) which subsequently disqualifies her as a feminine subject.

[63] Despentes, *King Kong*, 47.
[64] *Ibid.*, 48-49.

Prostitution subverses a different yet related societal expectation: that every female working as a prostitute is, by default, a victim. Despentes contends that France's eagerness to drive out prostitution from its cities and formal regulation is because it reveals an uncomfortable truth about the heterosexual contract, namely that "le pact de prostitution 'je te paye tu me satisfais' est la base du rapport hétérosexuel."[65] The basis of the traditional husband-wife dynamic is the same as that of client-prostitute; the husband/client provides for the wife/prostitute economically, in return for which he receives a functioning household and/or sex. Analysing her first steps in the business, Despentes found prostituting herself to not pose many issues: the men were kind, she could dictate the working conditions herself, and because the sole thing legitimizing the relation she had to her clients was money, the actual sex was also rather uncomplicated: "quand on est une pute, on sait ce qu'on est venue faire, pour combien, et tant mieux si par ailleurs on prend son pied ou on satisfait de la curiosité. Quand on est une femme libre de son choix, c'est beaucoup plus compliqué à gérer, moins léger, finalement."[66] Choice is the major difference between the housewife and the prostitute: in the former, one is a 'woman' living a private life following a trajectory dictated by heterosexuality; in the latter, the female lives a semi-public experience which affords herself agency.

This sense of ownership is what Despentes her gang rape several years earlier almost completely took away from her. Rape temporarily reduces its victim to heterosexuality's prime subject, before moving to demonize her – using that same logic of submission – into detaching herself from her sexuality and the idea that she could ever still be wanted. In this context, Despentes reflects that prostitution offered her a framework in which she could explore sex in a dignified manner and get a stable income in precarious times. Crucially, it

[65] *Ibid.*, 80.
[66] *Ibid.*, 71.

made her realize that sex was not something that could ever truly be taken away from her. The actual work of prostitution was thus uncomplicated. Talking about this period in her life publicly, however, is certainly not easy. Given the many judgements about prostitutes and the general taboo associated with the work, Despentes stresses that she finds it difficult to discuss her experiences objectively – even in her present writing.[67] In both the case of rape and prostitution, women are coerced into a silence which protects the logic of heterosexuality from being unveiled.

Writing (and) the Female Monster

Reflecting on a time in which one was free and whole is, thus, a difficult thing. Despentes formulates a tentative reasoning as to why this is the case:

> il y a un lien réel entre l'écriture et la prostitution. S'affranchir, faire ce qui ne se fait pas, livrer son intimité, s'exposer aux dangers du jugement de tous, accepter son exclusion du groupe. Plus particulièrement, en tant que femme : devenir une femme publique. Être lue par n'importe qui, parler de ce qui doit rester secret, être exhibée dans les journaux… En opposition évidente avec la place qui nous est traditionnellement assignée : femme privée, propriété, moitié, ombre d'homme. Devenir romancière, gagner de l'argent facilement, provoquer la répulsion autant que la fascination : la honte publique est comparable à celle de la pute. Soulager, tenir compagnie à ceux dont personne ne veut, partager les intimités d'inconnus, accepter sans jugement divers types de désirs…[68]

Both as a writer and a prostitute, Despentes is a female existing publicly and, perhaps above all, no longer a 'woman' but someone with decisive agency over her life's story and its direction. When men refer to their spouses as 'my wife' and expect to have conveyed enough information about their (private) lives, it is precisely because to be 'woman' means – in the

[67] "C'est d'en parler qui est difficile. Ce que ça implique dans la tête des gens, fac à qui je me retrouverai ensuite. La condescendance, le mépris, la familiarité, les conclusions déplacées" (Despentes, *King Kong*, 73).
[68] Despentes, *King Kong*, 84.

limited heterosexual context – to embody a strictly delineated subject position; to perform gender predictably and submissively. Writing, prostitution (and, of course, lesbianism à la Wittig) break with this script and realize new modes of existence in the world, which are received with shock, horror and rejection by heterosexual society and usually followed by social banishment or further othering.

What falls outside of the feminine, for Despentes, is all that which shall be traceable, or public. Recalling the many rules of the conventionally feminine, she writes:

> Être complexée, voilà qui est féminin. Effacée. Bien écouter. Ne pas trop briller intellectuellement. Juste assez cultivée pour comprendre ce qu'un bellâtre a à raconter. Bavarder est féminin. Tout ce qui ne laisse pas de trace. Ce qui est domestique, se refait tous les jours, ne porte pas de nom. Pas les grands discours, pas les grands livres, pas les grandes choses. Les petites choses. Mignonnes. Féminines.[69]

In her book, then, Despentes affirms, albeit in slightly different terms, the analysis of heterosexuality set out in chapter 1. The household, meticulously depicted by Levy, is what pins females down; 'woman' ought to be, ideally, an unremarkable wife, constantly repeating acts constitutive of and legitimizing her own inferiorisation. In Butlerian terms, 'woman' reifies her own subjection while eroding the history of her constitution. She leaves no big statements which one can dispute or situate; 'woman' – at once atemporal and never transcending her concrete social context – quite simply, is. And so, she is denied the realization of a volatile futurity afforded to men in modernity.[70]

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[69] *Ibid*., 127.

[70] Of course, there have been 'great' female authors and thinkers all throughout history who proved exceptions to this rule. Yet, sometimes they exist as intellectuals first and female second – that is, if they embrace this latter category at all. Hannah Arendt, for example, would not qualify as a female monster. She often responds evasively to questions about the influence of her gender on the sense of belonging she feels in the male-dominated field she partakes in. Kimberly Maslin suggests that she does this to enact her very fundamental philosophy, which seeks to go beyond political categories of, for example, ethnicity, and so possibly equally gender. See: Kimberly Maslin, "The Gender-Neutral Feminism of Hannah Arendt," *Hypatia* 28, no. 3 (2013): 585–601. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24542004.

To become a female monster, one needs to be as fearless as the Blob. But in Chris' letter it does not become clear what or whose fear exactly needs to be overcome. Levy, in *The Cost of Living*, rejects the apparently infinite process of obstruction as described above and so offers us a potential clue: "to become the person someone else had imagined for us is not freedom – it is to mortgage our life to someone else's fear. / If we cannot at least imagine we are free, we are living a life that is wrong for us."[71] To live as 'woman' is to live a life out of a fear that is, all things said, masculine; this is a fear concocted by the heterosexual contract; a fear that, I suspect, is perhaps not so much a fear *for* liberation but rather a fear *of* the freedom one has to realize it. This moment inciting the female monster's undoing is what I shall henceforth term realization, involving both implications of the word: first, the attuning to the existence of one's fundamental liberty, and therefore, second, mobilizing the corresponding 'force of will' which can subsequently bring about one's release. In Levy's fearlessness, women are equally afraid as men. Standing in front of the abyss of infinite possibility and incredible gender, the female monster should seize all the power it possibly can. Essential to freedom is this understanding of one's radical potentiality, as well as the related awareness of how realizing it may strain one's position in heterosexual society.[72]

Appropriation of this societal rejection can prove a promising tool in upending the broader support of the heterosexual project.[73] In *I Love Dick*, Chris is acutely aware of this move to power as she writes to a receiver who is at first unwilling and therefore, in a sense,

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[71] Levy, *Cost of Living*, 122.

[72] This image echoes Sartre's *L'être et le néant* who terms this moment anguish. Chris Kraus prefers fearlessness; and privileges Joseph Condrad's image of 'glamour' as "that moment when you're standing on a cliff not knowing what will happen next, about to jump: that 'absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure…'" (*Aliens & Anorexia*, 114). The inclusion of practicality as a key element of monstrosity is particularly relevant in light of the earlier discussion of queer temporalities (see Chapter 1).

[73] The following analysis borrows, in part, from the influential work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe. She proposes 'agonistics' as a way of thinking the political world as fundamentally conflictual: different stakes are fundamentally incongruent and Habermasian consensus is a myth to be done away with in a radical democratic politics. She prefers thinking politics in terms of hegemony as set out by Antonio Gramsci: political rule requires legitimization by most institutions of civil society. Mouffe proposes that art is powerless when it attacks politics directly: only in targeting the strata of civil society can the stable base on which the current hegemony rests be unsettled. See: Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics* (Verso, 2013).

absent, but later completely non-existent as Chris addresses only the non-existing image she has of him. Nevertheless, Chris/Kraus always writes with an eye to the eventual public rendering of these letters through performance (Chris) or publication (as Kraus envisaged in the release of this text, i.e., *I Love Dick*). Earlier in the chapter she concludes by expressing her will to become a female monster, she reflects on the reason behind her project of public (letter-)writing:

> I'm moved in writing to be irrepressible. Writing to you seems like some holy cause, 'cause there's not enough female irrepressibility written down. I've fused my silence and repression with the entire female gender's silence and repression. I think the sheer fact of women talking, being, paradoxical, inexplicable, flip, self-destructive but above all else *public* is the most revolutionary thing in the world.[74]

Like Despentes, Kraus diagnoses the feminine condition as one of obedience to ordonnances that restrict her to a realm of privacy; an entirely uninteresting affair when one can be themselves – and therefore whole – instead.[75] Perhaps her reduction to complete privacy as Sylvère's 'wife' at the eve of the New York party acted as the final catalysing factor towards her insistence on the importance of publicness, or at least the need for her to acquire a different role than that of the 'Serious Young Woman' which decisively relegated her to the sideline. 'Woman' in general is repressed from the realm of the public into the depths of the household, she leaves few traces in the history of civil society and most of what she does create is misinterpreted or even obstructed.[76]

The Blob is terrifying because it searches a wholeness that can never be satisfied given the constraints of the world; it operates a logic fundamentally incongruent with the

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[74] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 194.
[75] Despentes, continuing her positioning in *King Kong Théorie* : « je ne m'excuse de rien, je ne viens pas me plaindre. Je n'échangerais ma place contre aucune autre, parce qu'être Virginie Despentes me semble être une affaire plus intéressante à mener que n'importe quelle autre affaire » (8).
[76] Despentes is particularly insistent on this point of knowledge production/obstruction. She argues that the lack of French translations of contemporary American sex-positive feminist texts is an explicit form of epistemological violence that sustains the normative sexual passivity of 'woman'.

prevalent conceptualization of sociality. Crucially, the Blob subsumes rather than consumes; it uses everything on its path to realize its greater self, taking on a deeper shade of red with each act. This colour stands in relation to the blood of its victims,[77] but, having merged its being with them, it is equally the blood of the Blob. Given its transparent nature, the Blob cannot hide its project behind a façade of s(i)miles; there is no deception involved, everything comes from a place of realness. Amorphous, agender and asexual, the blood of the Blob exposes that what most deeply sustains its life and endows it with purpose, however unagreeable or ungraspable. The female monster is destructive in relation to heterosexuality; she espouse her grievances towards the heterosexual contract and find in this active stance of rejection a new mode of being.[78]

The realness from which the Blob engages the world is not to be confused with reality, which is a circumscribed experience of the world mediated by the heterosexual contract. Levy stresses this distinction while reflecting on her own praxis of writing:

> "If I ever felt free enough to write my life as I felt it, would the point be to feel *more* real? What was it that I was reaching for? Not for *more* reality, that was for sure. I certainly did not want to write the major female character that has always been written for *Her*. I was more interested in a major unwritten female character."[79]

Reality is a poor subtraction of the potentialities contained within the world and therefore ourselves; writing reality therefore means to write in a conformance to a worldview which is but one social construction. Writing 'Her' reproduces the foundational myths propagated by

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[77] Or, as advanced in the context of the Red Scare during the period of the film's release, communism.
[78] The Blob is more transparent in its motivation than Despentes' King Kong in this regard, who is "hybride, avant l'obligation du binaire", demonstrating a determination which "le cinema [soit le monde hétérosexuel] veut capturer, exhiber, dénaturer puis exterminer." (112) King Kong needs to be more calculated than the Blob because it is circumscribed in its being and has the capacity to engage discreetly with humanity. Despentes, writing of its relation to the girl: "il n'ya pas ici de seduction érotique. Mais un rapport sensuel evident, ludique, où la force ne fixe pas de domination. King Kong, ou le chaos d'avant les genres." (114) King Kong is harmless: it playfully navigates its moment of queer temporality and orientation in the world. Only because its engagement with the girl is interpreted as heterosexual (and the ape is positioned as 'man') is King Kong fashioned a danger. On the subject of queer orientation, see also: Sara Ahmed, *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others* (Duke University Press, 2020).
[79] Levy, *Cost of Living*, 174-175.

heterosexuality. For Levy, narratives become most interesting once they are speculative and experimental, moving in a free space between (socially induced) fact and fiction that refashions the past, imagines bold futures and creatively toy with the present. Her task is to avoid becoming 'Her'; to eschew legitimizing the conditions which give rise to 'woman'. The female monster is equally transparent in her motivation to write: offer fearless resistance against the current of heterosexuality which restrained her and other females by putting into question the naturalness of its institutions. She is determined, above all, to leave overt traces of the rampage which, as an exercise in thinking, is both tentative and effectual.

Besides a fearlessness of the uncodified and therefore an eschewal of reality, the female monster's fearlessness is also one of engaging in a struggle that might not be completed before the end of her lifetime. The notion of traceability ties into Chris's conceptualization of the female monster as a shared struggle. The female writer is everything she is ought not to be as 'woman' under the heterosexual contract: public, complex and speaking, she can expect to face resistance or be silenced. Documenting her efforts allows future participants in this project of undoing to pick up from where she left. Female monsters not only give voice to themselves but also others in reading widely, thinking voraciously, and recuperating their shared history whenever possible. Her public praxis so connects her with all others who devote themselves to what Despentes calls a 'collective adventure' of a feminism centred around undoing social structure for all humans involved.[80]

Chapter Conclusion: The Fates of the Fearless

At some point in her letters to Dick, in a paragraph completely separated from the surrounding discussions, Chris recalls the following concept:

[80] Despentes, *King Kong*, 145. People of all genders should partake in this adventure as the ultimate purpose is to dismantle traditional institutions which affect everybody, like (nuclear) families and labour, for example.

> "Maktub" in Arabic means "it is written."
>
> Write a narrative in which the speaker starts to understand that events, as they happen in his/her life, can not be seen as surprises but as an uncovering – the systematic revelation of fate.[81] (Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 116)

If monstrosity as the unleashing of real existence is a neutral affair, then it reverberates this idea of fate. The private is a public affair; fate is not individual but shared, part of a greater conception of the world – a wholeness, perhaps. The course previously thought as one of a decidedly personal behaviour turns out to be determined by a current bigger than the individual. In the face of this all-transcending logic operating in the life of any one person, the only recourse is its (eventual) fearless embrace. The temporality of Maktub as a spiritual concept is therefore particularly poignant: the future is decided by that what has always-already been committed to being in the past. Events are so not erratic surprises but instances of a slumbering undercurrent rising to the fore. More than Aristotle's telos – which requires human intervention to be fulfilled and can be upended – Maktub always drives the individual to realize its plan or at least operates it upon them.

In a seminal volume taking a first comprehensive stab at 'Monster Theory' (1996), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen offers various theses reflecting on the role of monsters in art. They are enigmatic creatures whom humans concoct as their aide in thinking through precarious moments: "the monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place."[82] Their more-than-human nature allows for a freer and more speculative way of engaging with reality and can, at times, even stretch the limits of our imagination. Hence why in his final thesis, titled 'The Monster Stands at the Treshold of Becoming', reads:

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[81] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 116.
[82] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

> Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self knowledge, human knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside. These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them.[83]

Cohen primarily sees monsters as useful lenses through which we interrogate our societies. They are a permanent presence in our cultural imagination precisely because of our inability to pin them down and define them. Diverting our gaze from them given their own incomprehensibility, monsters force us to scrutinize rather our relation to them or even ourselves, positing an invitation to reflect on changes in our bond since they were absent.[84] *Frankenstein*, for example, teaches us a lesson in grace and unlikely companionship (as does King Kong, according to Despentes); in their interaction with humans they magnify or even manipulate specific power relations that structure our lives. Even if popular culture has given the original character a run for its money, the multiple interpretability of the monster in Frankenstein and the diversity of challenges it poses to human society in all the richness of its eloquent reflections are primary reasons for its continued success and recurrence.

The acts committed by the Blob are, in a sense, playful. Its logic is so simple, its behaviour so unsurprising and stable that as a monster you would almost come to love it, were it not for its metastatic growth. The horror of the Blob – and monsters generally, argues Cohen – is that they will always return. In the age of climate change, however, the Blob can

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[83] *Ibid.*, 20.

[84] Cohen's conceptualization of monsters strongly resembles Mieke Bal's theorization of the 'concept' as constantly travelling; given their instability, we need to confront concepts head-on by letting them enter the conversation between critic and object as a third participant. This (dialectical) exchange produces and furthers the position of all three stakeholders in such a conversation, which is the backbone of the humanities. See: Bal, "Working with Concepts," *European Journal of English Studies* 13, no 1 (2009): 13-23.

never be truly gone; I propose the same holds true for female monsters. They can be dispersed across the globe and their have their spirits trampled, but at some point they will reach you again. Chris writes that "female monsters take things as personally as they really are. They study facts. Even if rejection makes them feel like the girl who's not invited to the party, they have to understand the reason why." The Blob is endlessly adaptable because it sees beyond the totalizing architecture of heterosexuality: it engorges anything upon its path in a quest to bring about something real. Each ousting of the female monster only fuels her determination to investigate (i.e., to realize) the way such things really are; not personal, but public. No social ousting can outcast her forever as she is collective and each rejection only inspires future generations of monsters to engage in the same combat. While the Blob is singular, the female monster includes a plurality of actants. What unites them is their uncodified desire to mould the world – or at least relate to it – in their own image.

The female monster's fearlessness is a hopeful model for societal upheaval. If we take Chris' infatuation with Dick as one monstruous strategy of undoing, then we can begin to understand why thinking can be 'kind of a useful place to move around in', that is, "living so intensely in your head that boundaries disappear. It's a warped omnipotence, a negative psychic power, as if what happens in your head really drives the world outside." Fearlessness does not necessarily have to realize direct confrontation; it can also be a way to step outside the normal codes of heterosexuality, to think one's relationships outside of arbitrary restrains. Cohen argues we should read monsters as charitable tools used to think salient moments of our time that need to be engaged with. In this light, Chris' letter-writing is evidently one conceptual exercise of monstrosity rather than the end of the work in itself.

In the next chapter, I will consider the primary reason for *I Love Dick*'s first reviewers to heckle the book, and how perhaps they missed that "every question, once it's formulated, is a paradigm, contains its own internal truth" and that "we have to stop diverting ourselves

with false questions" of decency.[85] Taking Kraus herself to be female and a fearless monster, I propose we can read her books as enactments of the monstruous strategy she proposes. Her texts should be understood at far remove from the terms set out by the heterosexual contract; away from any fictional notion of apersonality, her works can impossibily be disqualified as confession because all writing is confessional of something. More concretely, I will explore how monstrosity relates to a female 'I' and what implication this notion of publicness has on the privacy Kraus owes Dick Hebdige when she constructs his identity as 'man'.

[85] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 202.

Chapter 3: Who gets to Speak, and Why?

> No one can play alone, I said. Even when there is no one else in the room, there must be an imaginary other.
>
> - Siri Husvedt, The Blazing World

In what follows, I will formulate the core of my response to Kraus' fundamental question. This chapter is the most like Kraus' own writing in style, because it attempts to pin something down which, in a certain sense, escapes definition – in speaking of the 'I' one already brings that into practice which one is attempting to theorize. As I argued in chapter 1, one is always-already implicated in the heterosexual contract. I pick up this line of argumentation here to demonstrate that, as part of its claim to unicity, heterosexuality also normatively manipulates the (literary) system of enunciation. This has an impact on the meaning of privacy and fictionalization, questions which arose surrounding *I Love Dick*'s original publication in 1998. Dick Hebdige tried to shut Kraus' book down because he did not consent to his person being presented. I propose that reading this debate through a lens of monstrosity as developed by Kraus nullifies its importance in proving the point of Kraus' book.

More concretely, in the first section I will discuss Kraus' reading of several texts. I first turn to a piece she wrote outside the trilogy, on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of ecceity and the implication of its acceptance for the position of the 'I'. Here, she constructs parts of the argument she later wages throughout *Aliens & Anorexia*, namely that Weil's anorexia seeks to re-orient her 'I' outward and make it public. The second section will discuss anorexia specifically in relation to time, the heterosexual contract and the female monster. In the next part, I move to frame Kraus' praxis of writing as emblematic of the logic of female monstrosity and evaluate the controversy surrounding *I Love Dick*'s initial critical reception in light of her specific approach; above all, this section attempts to demonstrate that life is indeed always-already public as argued in chapter 1. In the fourth section, I discuss this claim

and Kraus' monstrosity in relation to Dick Hebdige's defacement case and compare it to a recent novel by Christien Brinkgeve. In the final section I will think the relation of Kraus' practice of fictionalization as selection to female monsters.

Ecceity and Anorexia

In 2001, Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen edited a volume assessing the state of *French Theory in America*, with contributions from Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Jean Baudrillard, among many others. The supplements include a short piece by Chris Kraus, titled "Ecceity, Smash and Grab, The Expanded I and Moment."[86] In it, she departs from Deleuze's notion of ecceity – the ungrapseable multilateral push and pull of the composite logic constitutive of one's reality – to eventually issue a critique of their (dis)use of the 'I': "their [Deleuze and Guattari's] rhetoric evades the basic question: who are we? Is there a we? Who is speaking, and to whom?"[87] This question is of course related to the one at the heart of her project in *I Love Dick*, i.e., "who gets to speak and why?" Yet, in "Ecceity," Kraus goes even further in questioning the conditions of all articulation and so touches on something fundamental to her – and for that matter, everybody's – writing.

Meticulously tracing the critical reception to her work in *Aliens & Anorexia*, Kraus argues Simone Weil to be the only French thinker to confront such issues in a whole manner; that is, by putting her body on the line in starving herself to enact her philosophy – a stance which, for many, disqualified her from ever having been a thinker as serious as her contemporary male counterparts. Indeed, "all the things she wrote were field notes for a project she enacted on herself. She was a performative philosopher. Her body was material."[88] Like the proponents of ecceity, Weil sought to demonstrate that everything – and

[86] Chris Kraus, "Ecceity, Smash and Grab, The Expanded I and Moment" in *French Theory in America*, ed. Sylvère Lottringer and Sanda Cohen (Routledge, 2001): 303-308.
[87] *Ibid.*, 305. Sic.
[88] Kraus, *Aliens*, 49.

notably our suffering – is a shared construction; the 'I' is not decidedly personal or public but should rather turn outward, onto all beautiful things in the world.

Critics of her work, however, try to deny this argument and prefers to "treat her philosophical writings as a kind of biographic key. Impossible to conceive of a female life that might extend outside itself. Impossible to accept the self-destruction of a woman as strategic. Weil's advocacy of decreation is read as evidence of her dysfunction, her hatred-of-her-body, etc."[89] Standard critical reception found it impossible to separate the writing 'I' from Weil's personal 'I' and read her work as adding to the ongoing modernist conversation. In an interview with *Brooklyn Rail*, Kraus asserts that

> "as a female her [i.e., Weil's] "I" has been pathologized – she can't get fucked, she's manipulative and anorexic, she's ugly and she dresses badly – her "I" was never read as universal and transparent. That, to me, points towards this great disgust with female-ness. As if a revelatory female self cannot be anything but compromised and murky."[90] (Brooklyn Rail)

While the author is always present in their text, this presence is certainly not as binary as critics make it out to be. As demonstrated in chapter 1, the gendered-ness of the personal is always-already impersonal and vice versa. To categorize one's existence either in the realm of privacy or publicity is ontologically impossible; it cannot be either/or but it must be 'and' – ecceitic. An 'I' can thus also never be fully consecrated to femaleness; a categorical refusal to engage with Weil's thought on the basis of its worthless and gendered idiosyncrasy is a thinking mistake, as femininity is a deeply public affair. Weil's critics see her writing as failing to live up to a standard of 'objectivity' as celebrated in the intellectual landscape she finds herself in. This makes her work unserious. But it's precisely this display of the female self which subverts the great lie propagated by male modernist philosophy: that the 'I' can at once be public and completely impersonal at the same time. Even at its most detached,

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[89] *Ibid.*, 49-50.
[90] "Chris Kraus in conversation with Denise Frimer," in *Brooklyn Rail* (April 2006).

underneath all writing resides a speaking person; and in Weil's case, they happen to be female.[91]

In the wake of the initial publication of *I Love Dick* in 1997, reviewers charged Kraus' book with employing a vulgarly confessional register that has no place in serious literature. Her text gets reduced to a unidimensional and superficial rant on femininity and the unjustness of her position of the art world, and the character of Chris is equated with her author Kraus, who stresses this to be a fundamental misreading of her work. When asked about this early critical reception, Kraus questions her work to be

> "Confessional" of what? Personal confessions? There's a great line from a book we published by Deleuze: Life is not personal. The word 'confessional' is not a good descriptor of my work. We were talking about the New York School poets – they were the ones who pioneered this use of this "I," an active "I" that's turned out onto the world. "I" in this case isn't the point – That would be memoir. The story of "I." And mostly I hate that – everything else becomes merely a backdrop to the teller's personal development. It's an utterly false, uninteresting view. Writing *I Love Dick*, I understood that women have been denied all access to the a-personal."[92]

The argument she wages in *Aliens & Anorexia* is that such an 'I', which turns out onto the world, is literalized in Simone Weil's writing and life; she is the only one who got it right, this self-effacement pursuant of a Blob-esque wholeness. Sharing a history of anorexia, Kraus argues that "anorexia is not evasion of a social-gender role; it's not regression. It is an active stance: the rejection of the cynicism that this culture hands us through its food, the creation of an involuted body."[93] Weil found it unimaginable to participate in a façade of upscale dinners

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[91] In *Everybody*, Olivia Laing writes that "the enemy body is always portrayed as being fashioned from grosser material, obscenely sexual or avaricious, greedy, primitive, uncontrolled, infectious, spilling over, barely human, a kind of disgusting fleshy jelly. It makes me wonder if what drives prejudice is at root horror of the body itself. After all, as Sade observed, the body can be a terrifying place: open and insatiable, helpless and dependent. Hatred is a way of displacing this annihilating fear onto other bodies, asserting a magnificent autonomy, a freedom from the sullying, hopelessly interdependent life of flesh." (Picador, 2021: 272) The fiction of the enemy body is much like the Blob. Simone Weil's thought could then disqualified because she commits the greatest sin: revealing the implication of (feminine!) flesh in apersonal thought.

[92] "Chris Kraus in conversation with Denise Frimer," *Brooklyn Rail.*

[93] Kraus, *Aliens*, 182.

and lazy brunches when there is so much suffering in the world, in the face of which pleasing the 'I' becomes the lowest priority.

In Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (1947), he sets out an existentialist vision of human emancipation. The satisfaction of hunger is the primordial act of destruction necessary to realize a "real objective World, which is a non-natural World, a cultural, historical, human World" in which (phallic) dominance over "Nature" – mediated through work – is codified and difference so arbitrarily sedimented.[94] He argues that

> "the being that eats […] creates and preserves its own reality by the overcoming of a reality other than its own, by the "transformation" of an alien reality into its own reality, by the "assimilation," the "internalization" of a "foreign," "external" reality. Generally speaking, the I of Desire is an emptiness that receives a real positive content only by negating action that satisfies Desire in destroying, transforming, and "assimilating" the desired non-I."[95]

It is not, then, anorexia which is a lack, but rather Desire: a negative construct endowing the 'I' with a yearning for something it does not have. To destroy this Desire, the 'I' must assimilate the object of this Desire into their 'I'. In the case of food, this process typically entails the violent killing of animals (who, in Nature, are close kin; we are animalistic in our primary desires), or the appropriation of crops – the division of which, given the global chain at work or even their general, local scarcity, risks causing imparity. Food is a most basal politics because this same movement of domination applies for all relations between the Desiring 'I' and the desired 'non-I'.

Anorexia is misunderstood and pathologized because the logic of food is foundational to the systemic organisation of human societies and of this 'I'. Kraus argues that "so long as anorexia is read exclusively in relation to the subject's feeling towards her own body, it can never be conceived of as an active, ontological state."[96] But, if Kojève's analysis is right and

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[94] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Cornell University Press, 1980), 26.
[95] *Ibid*., 4.
[96] Kraus, *Aliens*, 162.

Desire is lack, then anorexia is a lack of Desire; the absence of deficiency; a disposition which is neither positive or negative because it plainly is not. Anorexia can impossibly take on a constitutive function because lack is what renders the 'I' meaningful and orients it as dominant in relation to one's world.[97] Even more, Kojève argues that

> "Desire is what transforms Being, revealed to itself by itself in (true) knowledge, into an "object" revealed to a "subject" by a subject different from the object and "opposed" to it. It is in and by – or better still, as – "his" Desire that man is formed and is revealed – to himself and to others – as an I, as the I that is essentially different from, and radically opposed to, the non-I. The (human) I is the I of a Desire or of Desire."[98]

Without Desire the 'I' does not exist; if decreation is Weil's goal, then purging Desire is a sure way of achieving this state. As Kraus recalls both in "Ecceity" and *Aliens & Anorexia*, Weil urges that "'if the 'I' is the only thing we truly own, we must destroy it,' […] 'use the 'I' to break down the 'I'."[99] Thought as an 'active, ontological state', anorexia does away with even the primary animalistic Desire of food; a Desire which establishes the 'I' as the superior object from which one gets to know each 'subject' in the World. To do away with the 'I' is to search for an alternative way of inhabiting the world and research new ontologies.

Patient Anorexics

Towards the end of *I Love Dick*, Chris writes to Dick that "what hooks me on our story is our different readings of it. You think it's personal and private; my neurosis. […] I think our story is performative philosophy."[100] Chris' (speculative) contention that Dick

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[97] Tobi Lakmaker, in *De Geschiedenis van mijn Seksualiteit* (2021), offers a related yet different reading of their bulimia: "je moet je eten echt niet uitkotsen. Het brengt je helemaal nergens, behalve in je eigen hoofd. Dat is waarom mensen dat doen, geloof ik. Omdat de wereld gewoon veel en veel te groot is, en je met man en macht snakt naar *omkaderingen*. Wanneer je iedere dag alleen nog maar havermoutpap eet, wordt je wereld heel klein. Je kunt de randen dan aanraken, en dat is waarom mensen zoiets doen: omdat je naar aanraking verlangt, en je almaar niemand vindt die dat te bieden heeft." (*Das Mag*, 114).
[98] Kojève, *Hegel*, 3-4.
[99] Kraus, *Aliens,* 50. This is a direct quotation from Weil's book *Gravity and Grace*.
[100] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 195.

regards her as neurotic reproduces the classical subjugation of 'woman' to the realm of the private and runs parallel to their aptitude for emotionality as postulated by Jean-Paul Sartre. Kraus summarizes his theory in *Aliens & Anorexia* as one which holds that "emotion has no reality or integrity, it's a default; an imaginary world constructed by a frightened individual."[101] Emotion, for Sartre, is an escape from the rationality which humans – specifically those executive of the heterosexual contract – are uniquely endowed with. As a mental state, emotion is not productive, especially when it is read as expressive rather than strategic. Sartre finds evidence for his theory in the 'manipulative' character exhibited by a patient called Janet:

> Une malade vient trouver Janet, elle veut lui [the psychologist] confier le secret de ses troubles, lui décrire minutieusement ses obsessions. Mais elle ne le peut pas : c'est une conduit sociale trop difficile pour elle. *Alors* elle sanglote. Mais sanglote-t-elle *parce qu'elle* ne peut rien dire ? ses sanglots sont-ils des efforts vains pour agir, un bouleversement diffuse qui représenterait la decomposition d'une conduit trop difficile? ou bien sanglote-t-elle précisément *pour ne rien dire* ?[102]

Sartre suggests that Janet sobs uncontrollably in order not to have to articulate what has happened to her in precise and reasonable terms which would allow the problem to be dealt with. She makes herself incapable to speak of her turmoil because she is unwilling, or perhaps even uncapable, to ascend to rationality. Janet does not want to seize the radical freedom each individual is endowed with, i.e., the proper 'conduit sociale' of self-liberation and disentanglement. "Ainsi le malade s'est il délivrée du sentiment pénible que l'acte [of speaking about her troubles] était *en son pouvoir*, qu'il était libre de le faire ou non. La crise émotionnelle est ici abandon de responsabilité. Il y a exagération magique des difficultés du monde."[103] In conformance with her submissive role as 'woman,' Janet conjures up

[101] Kraus, *Aliens*, 132.
[102] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Esquisse d'une Théorie des Émotions* (Hermann, 1965), 27. Original emphasis.
[103] *Ibid.*, 48.

imaginary roadblocks because she is afraid to see the world as it really is: a phallic arena offering freedom to all people who choose to ascend to rationality, inhabited by 'I's that can only be truly free if they eschew emotion and cut ties with their past and future.

Kraus invokes Janet to ultimately make a point about the credibility of Weil's and her own anorexia. What does it mean for the 'I' to orient itself outwards? Synthesizing this charge in some of the final propositions of the main text, Chris/Kraus argues that

> because it's mostly girls who do it, anorexia is linked irrevocably with narcissism. But girls don't make good monsters. Their narcissistic bodily dis-ease is so fragile, shaky, so lacking in a center, that their self-starvation can only be a garbled plea for sympathy and attention. Seven decades later, the female anorexic has no more credibility than Janet's pathetic patient. Female acts are always subject to interpretation. We don't say what we mean. It's inconceivable that the female subject might ever simply try to *step outside* her body, because the only thing that's irreducible, still, in female life is gender."[104]

In a culture that restricts Chris to the category of 'woman' she cannot have the agency that would allow her to step outside of this role. The anorexic 'woman' must be neurotic and weak, because she is not allotted the calculated intent for her to deviate from the script of femininity. Just like Janet was unable to participate in the social reasonability needed for psychology because she was emotional, anorexia is likewise read only as the evasion of one's 'I' rather than its most full assumption. These instances of social violence on the part of women are then never strategic but emanate rather from their general (feminine) incompetence or infantility.

As discussed in the preceding chapters, 'woman' is to leave no trace; "the girls in our town used to play a game based on the stations in a woman's life," the Austrian writer Peter Handke recalls in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*; the life of his mothers and all women of her generation can be reduced to a series of bodily states: "Tired/Exhausted/Sick/Dying/Dead."[105]

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[104] Kraus, *Aliens*, 162.
[105] Peter Handke, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* (Pushkin Press, 2019), 16.

By doing away with food, anorexia breaks up the continuum of time: it removes the ritualistic markers of its passing; Weil refused the rhythm of breakfast, lunch and dinner in favour of an infinite yearning for decreation – even if the hunger stays. Chris/Kraus stresses food's "intensely social" nature: "in its journey to the table, was this food handled by anyone who cared or understood it?"[106] The contemporary food chain is a far cry from the immediate destruction of Desire as Kojève would have it, grounding and binding us to our local environment. Chris/Kraus concludes this line of thought by affirming that "to question food is to question everything. / To question food is to recognize the impossibility of 'home'."[107] Yet, the making of the household is what gives rhythm to the codified life of 'woman': "today was yesterday, yesterday was always," begins Handke a description of any day in the life of his mother.[108] These lives are bodily and grounded in a recursive sense. Anorexia, on the other hand, is bodily in a destructive sense; relentlessly beating on until it becomes impossible to hold on any longer.

Wrested away from this culture of conformism, Weil wishes to engage the world in the most whole manner she can. Food configures the relation of the 'I' in terms of object-subject; the hierarchical privileging of one position over another – above all over that original 'non-I' which is a futile point of departure for survival, and eventual triumph. Still, Weil's sadness prompts her to aspire to get as close to this 'non-I' as possible; to experience the world in the most open and gracious way possible. Kraus argues that Weil is not anorexic because she hates the way her body looks, but rather because food restrains her to a place in the world which promotes self-importance; she wants her body to become involuted by codified standards because she aspires to be a female monster:

[106] Kraus, *Aliens*, 164.
[107] *Ibid.*, 165.
[108] *Ibid.*, 50.

> "But let a girl choose death – Janis Jopline, Simone Weil – and death becomes her definition, the outcome of her "problems." To be female still means being trapped within the purely psychological. No matter how dispassionate or large a vision of the world a woman formulates, whenever it includes her own experience and emotion, the telescope's turned back on her. Because emotion's just so terrifying the world refuses to believe that it can be pursued as discipline, as form."[109]

Complex and public – operating a logic that is indestructible and insurmountable – Weil struggles with reality until her body gives up. Her project can be picked up by Kraus because monstrosity is a collective endeavour: liberation is a collective struggle to continually evade the boundaries thrown up for each member across space and time. "Those who seek out Aliens form groups and give up little pieces of themselves. The empty spaces in each person turn into receptors allowing Aliens to enter through the porous surface of your skin," writes Chris/Kraus in *Aliens & Anorexia*. Looking up to the shared sky from which the Blob fell at the beginning, anyone can be moved to action, thought, emotion.

The Writing 'I' vs. The Personal 'I'

The non-I is not a tangible state, as every disposition enacts an object-subject relation which realizes it as 'I'. The 'I' is therefore present in all writing: one cannot but reveal a locus of articulation. This permanent impliedness of the 'I' makes it all the stranger that Deleuze and Guattari should refuse to reveal themselves and claim to be a-personal, as Kraus points out in "Ecceity": "for all their exhortations toward achieving a state of translucent subjectivity, [Deleuze and Guattari] never take that simple leap of identifying themselves to the reader. One is to accept the metaphysical cartography that brain is 'high,' body is low. In all those *milles plateaux,* we never actually see them in the room or find out what they think when they're not thinking."[110] In their oeuvre, Kraus argues that Deleuze and Guattari argue the

[109] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 180.
[110] Kraus, "Ecceity", 305-306.

fomentation of the 'I' as non-singular and "lived experience" as the succession of various non-qualifiable intensities enacted upon the body.[111] The 'I' is deeply ungraspeable but cannot be destroyed; it cannot be abstracted because intensities work upon both mind and body – without Cartesian separation – and the 'I' therefore remains forever present and material. Likewise, any distinction between the personal and the public is futile as the fluxes that work upon the body and the ecceity of every moment is mutual.

Instead of acknowledging their writing as stemming from their respective 'I's, Deleuze and Guattari perpetrate the foundational myth of absenteeism in an oeuvre which argues againt this very idea. Indeed, concludes Kraus, "real time is not continuous. It does not occur in isolation. And the body is the source of all intensities, not concepts."[112] The writing of each text occupies a certain temporal moment; it necessitates a presence in space, the directioning of attention, the specific orientation of a body towards the process of writing. Kraus concludes that all texts are produced by an 'I' at the juncture of lived experience which is decidedly unpersonal. Why, then, she wonders, would Weil's revelation of her 'I' disqualify the seriousness of her writing? And why should Kraus' own books be read as confessional memoir rather than fictive interventions?[113]

In an interview with *The Creative Independent,* Kraus has stated that "I don't write about myself as a subject, the subject is always something else. But the first person is deceptive, and people assume you're the 'I.'"[114] In the end, like Weil, Chris and Sylvie

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[111] *Ibid.*, 306-307.
[112] Kraus, "Ecceity," 307.
[113] Deleuze and Guattari also make appearances in each part of Kraus' trilogy as both thinkers and characters. Prior to exclaiming her love story with Dick to be 'performative philosophy', Chris recalls a quote by Claire Parnet and Deleuze: "the greatest secret in the world is, THERE IS NO SECRET."[113] (*I Love Dick*, 195) In the final pages of *Aliens & Anorexia*, the couple appears against: "the philosopher Gilles Deleuze got anorexia right (his wife was one) by nothing that it isn't anything to do with "lack." "Anorexia," he told his girlfriend and collaborator Claire Parnet, "is a matter of food fluxes. The question is: how to escape predetermination, the mechanical sign of the meal" (163). Kraus continues the argument waged in "Ecceity:" that each 'I' exists in relation to all others and that the notion of a private 'I' must be undone in the quest for liberation. Guattari's appearance in *Torpor* will be mobilized later in this chapter.
[114] "Chris Kraus on figuring out your process," *Creative Independent* (August 10, 2017). https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/chris-kraus-on-figuring-out-your-process/

always turn outward. Their interior life is not the point; in fact, it can never be the point, because the structures underpinning it are public. The action of the novels – and perhaps this goes for the genre more generally – therefore resides in the many characters' interrelation with each other and the social context they find themselves in. "I favor a more anthropological, sociographic outlook," says Kraus in a conversation with Anna Poletti. "A person is always navigating structures; they are what forms the person. You could say that defines my sensibility as a writer."[115] Among many other themes, in *I Love Dick*, the structure she interrogates is the position of 'woman' in the U.S. art world; in *Aliens & Anorexia*, Kraus analyses the global industry of film production and the impact of female writing; while in *Torpor*, she discusses the push and pull of financial (in)dependence from Thurman to Paris, as well as the navigation of Holocaust trauma. The books mobilize her and Sylvère's life stories not as singular moments in time but rather as 'case studies,' instances of a communal logic. Kraus firmly groundes her works in these experiences while at the same time approaching the issues put forward from many different angles. In *I Love Dick*, Chris proposes this as one logic underlying her (letter-)writing: "… for the first time it occurred to her that perhaps the only thing she had to offer was her specificity. By writing Dick she was offering her life as Case Study."[116]

Case studies are always instances of broader societal tenets. They illustrate the larger currents of a culture and so lay little claim to being uniquely personal affairs. As quoted above, the goal is never to offer "the story of 'I'" against a superficial backdrop; rather, Kraus attempts to excavate all the powers which keep her shackled. Perhaps this is why Kraus remarks that "it really bothered me when people picked up on my first two or three books and said "it's all about failure", as if failure was this abject thing that I was trying to redeem. But I

[115] Anna Poletti, "The Anthropology of the Setup: A Conversation with Chris Kraus," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 10, no. 1 (March 2016), 134.
[116] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 81.

don't think there's anything abject about it at all. It's completely natural."[117] Failure, like life, is not personal. Redemption is then impossible on the individual level; Kraus hence rejects the idea that her novels chronicle her coming-of-age. Instead, they are studies of the tension between individuals and social systems, of "the gap between our desires and expectations and reality [which] is always a comic gap. People may call that failure, but to me, it's the comic gap between reality and the ideal."[118]

The 'comic' nature of this gap might be a first clue as to Kraus' attachment to her intellectual project and the discrepancy between the position of Chris/Sylvie and her own – the core issues at stake in the rest of this chapter. To deal with the latter first: Chris holds her letter-writing project to be 'performative philosophy,' a claim that we might very extend to all three of Kraus' books. As discussed above, Kraus qualifies Simone Weil's project as such because she involves herself wholly in her philosophy, without compromising her 'I' or resorting to mimicry of the phallic. In one of her letters to Dick, Chris remarks that "art superced[ing] what's personal [… is] a philosophy that serves patriarchy well and I have followed it for more or less 20 years. / That is: until I met you."[119] Early reviewers of her book like David Rimanelli still adhered to this arbitrary dichotomy, argues Jennifer Schlosberg in a letter to the editors of *Artforum*. She proposes that Kraus could very well incorporate elements of her personal life – so incriminating herself and others – while still construing a project that supersedes the mere publication of a private notebook filled with "psychic vomiting" about 'innocent' men, as Rimanelli held in his review.

In a second passionate response to the editors, Liz Kotz asks for

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[117] Lia Quezada, "Chris Kraus on Personal Writing, Being Motivated by Desire and Remaining Present," *Polyester* (date unknown). https://www.polyesterzine.com/features/chris-kraus-on-living-editing-amp-failing. Consulted on May 7th, 2025.
[118] "Chris Kraus in Conversation with Keegan Brady," *NovemberMag* (2024). https://www.novembermag.com/content/chris-kraus/.
[119] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 214.

> someone [to] please tell me what was going on with David Rimanelli's review of Chris Kraus' novel *I Love Dick* [*Bookforum*, Spring]. I like Rimanelli's art criticism, which is often very sharp, but this was less a review of the book than a review of gossip about the book. It's hard to tell if he even read it.
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> As I'd think you'd know by now, there is this whole tradition of novels—yes, *novels*—that seem to use "real life" characters and references, where the lead character has the same name as the author, and so forth. These are *not* diaries. Funny how your reviewers never seem to have a problem figuring this out when it comes to work by male writers like, say, Dennis Cooper. But with Kraus' book, the reviewer ignores anything having to do with how the book is put together, with what it does, to take issue instead with whether certain events really "happened" and to pass some kind of strange moral judgment on the whole thing. Weird.[120]

Rimanelli appears more concerned with identifying Dick as Dick Hebdige and defending his position in the matter. In his response to Kotz' accusation of deflection, Rimanelli embarks on a lengthy reflection on the tensions between the autobiographical and the fictional throughout literary history, offering a long bibliography of male authors. He ultimately concludes by stating that the case in point is very different from this tradition of ambiguity because Chris Kraus named her character "Chris Kraus," Sylvère Lottringer is involved as "Sylvère Lottringer," and hence it could logically be deduced that "Dick ___" would be Dick Hebdige. He then proceeds to personally attack Kotz:

> You can have your opinion, Liz, but I take offense at your implication that somehow I am insensitive to literary language, considering that my education was preponderantly literary and that to this day I read more novels and literary criticism than I do art books and magazines. You seem like the kind of person who more or less subscribes to the broadly inclusive (and by now thoroughly historicized, even dated) poststructuralist dispensation. And yet in your letter of complaint you turn on a dime because it suits you for a moment to come off as a '50s epigone of New Criticism—the author's life and intentions are irrelevant, the text is a tightly sealed system of purely internal relations, impermeable to other

[120] "Letters to the Editor," *Artforum* 36, no. 10 (Summer 1998): https://www.artforum.com/columns/letters-to-the-editor-10-224510/.

> influences, etc. I call this volte-face bad faith. You know, Liz, I think you've probably spent too much time at Judith Butler University. You need to take the air.[121]

The ultimate defense of Rimanelli amounts to an aggressive regurgitation of the cultural theories which put women like Chris Kraus down purely because they are female. Another question Chris poses in *I Love Dick* seems apt to recall here: "why does everybody think that women are debasing themselves when we expose the conditions of our own debasement? Why do women always have to come of clean?"[122] The fact that debasement and its declarative conditions – or, the apparently personal and the public realm which ousts one – go hand in hand escapes Rimanelli. Perhaps Kraus' "poststructuralist dispensation" means the sacrifice of her 'I' in pursuit of unveiling the phallic mask of theory, the reconfiguration of the rules of a game in which critics like Rimanelli and creatives like Dick have a lot more to lose than insignificant female artists like Kraus.

Recklessness and Care

The female monster fearlessness can, in this context, be seen as pursuing her mission with a certain recklessness. This issue is also raised by Kraus in *I Love Dick*, when Chris recalls a phone conversation with Dick about his response to her letters, as well as her proposition to publish them:

> "I never asked for this!" you said. And on the phone I was ashamed. My will had ridden over all your wishes, your fragility. By loving you this way I'd violated all your boundaries, hurt you. […]
>
> "I wanted you to understand I'd never use this writing to 'expose' you. "Look," I said. "I'll change the names, the dates, the place. It'll be a past narrative about cowboy love. I'll call you 'Derek Rafferty' instead of Dick."
>
> You sounded less than thrilled. Was there any chance of redeeming things, this situation?[123]

[121] *Ibid.*
[122] *I Love Dick*, 195.
[123] *Ibid.*, 220.

In the real world, Kraus was shocked to hear that Dick Hebdige attempted to shut down her project with a cease and desist case. She offered him to co-write an introduction to the book, "and people will think we cooked up the whole joke together."[124] All the while, Kraus had already changed all biographical information and descriptions of his appearance which ended up in the published book. Hebdige's identity would therefore not have been traceable except for those 'in' the same circles as him and Kraus. He remained unable to make peace with even just his first name being mentioned, which, Kraus wanted to keep for the sake of the title.[125] In conversation with Jacqueline Krass, she dismisses this whole dispute as having been ludicrous and unnecessary.

> [Chris Kraus]: So, tell me, what is so scandalous about *I Love Dick*! People acted like it was the first time somebody had named a name in a work of fiction! And I didn't even name his last name – he named his last name!
>
> [Jacqueline Krass]: Right, that's why everyone knows who he is now.
>
> [Chris Kraus]: Yeah, he was so eager to be quoted, that New York magazine thing, you know, she's a crazy bitch, quote Dick Hebdige. Otherwise he could have said, that's not me![126]

While the letters Kraus wrote in real life were obviously addressed to Dick, the book was never specifically about him. Chris is a fictionalized version of Kraus and the same holds even stronger for Dick, whose character Kraus has treated with a lot of care. Beyond the fact that Chris is writing to an abstraction from his character in the book, his physical person was never really involved in the whole conversation beyond one hookup and some phone calls or dinners. The bulk of *I Love Dick* directs its attention to other facets of the world, perhaps taking this fictional Dick as its anchor in exposing the conditions of a broken field but never as the end of the writing process.

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[124] Elaine Blair, "Chris Kraus, Female Antihero," *The New Yorker* (November 13, 2016). https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/chris-kraus-female-antihero
[125] *Ibid.*
[126] Jacqueline Krass, "A conversation with Chris Kraus," *Textual Practice* 32, no 1 (2018): 8.

Chris' statement that "to experience intensity is to not know how things will end"[127] becomes particularly important in the context of this discussion; only in the radical unknown does the female monster have any direction, in the space between what society wants her to be and her refusal of that vision can she move freely. The actual reckless decision was then perhaps made by Hebdige, who latched himself onto this fictional character and propagated a reading of the work as a linear, targeted attack on him specifically. Indeed, as Kraus states in another interview, "the writing might have been addressed to Dick, but it came out of an extensive and ongoing two-decade-long conversation I'd been having with Sylvère."[128] At the end of *Torpor*, Sylvie stumbles upon an old picture of herself from the early days with Jerome, and she finds that "the woman in the picture is inescapably immersed in an expectant emptiness."[129] In the context of this emptiness (discussed in chapter 1) she initially orients herself towards Dick and then away from him as she aims to – for once – do something real, beyond the limits of the heterosexual contract's imaginary. Rimanelli insists to read her book as being a case in point of this fantasy, whereas Kraus is trying to ironically make clear that society prefers every female to be 'woman' by default.

During the years she wrote her trilogy, Kraus had already definitively split up with Sylvère and moved back to L.A. This city hosted an insular art world that privileges a sense of arbitrary epistemic (re)production. The narrator of *Torpor* argues that it is a realm "free of arcane references and ambiguity. There are no alternate hierarchies of glamour here. Those who work outside the gallery system are simply *losers*. Any artist any good will be professional."[130] Hebdige worked for CalArts during the period of Chris' infatuation and had a relatively successful career, with many publications and public appearances in his own

[127] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 205.
[128] Blair, "Chris Kraus, Female Antihero."
[129] Kraus, *Torpor*, 273.
[130] *Ibid*., 268. Kraus develops this critique more extensively in her 2004 theory book *Video Green: Los Angeles Art and the Triumph of Nothingness* (Semiotext(e)).

name. Meanwhile, the Kraus-character in *Torpor* spent years ghostwriting for Jerome and performed editing work at Semiotext(e) to little recognition. Kraus herself nor her characters were so ever professionally 'in' the system; she dabbled around making films not many people wanted to screen (these rejections are painfully recalled in *Aliens & Anorexia*) and pursuing various sorts of performance in New York, before marrying Sylvère and getting more stable gigs.

By the point she began writing *I Love Dick*, she had already decided to make her living from managing several rental units all throughout the U.S. (a process she describes in *Torpor*), in order to not have to depend on the scarce income from her creative output.[131] Financially, the books are therefore in no way a helpless reckoning or last resort to ascend to fame. Yes, the discursive stakes for Chris (and so perhaps Kraus) are evidently high, as she writes that "now [she] can't stop writing in the 1st, it feels like it's the last chance I'll ever have to figure some of this stuff out."[132] But strictly materially speaking, Kraus, will be fine if Chris does *not* make it out because of the financial stability allotted to her as a landlord. As the co-director of her publishing house, even artistically things might be alright if *I Love Dick* would not have become a hit.[133] Given their separation in time, I propose that between Kraus and Chris exists a gap opened by the former's financial and professional independence from the art world she is critiquing using the latter; the performative assailment of the work gains in strength and flexibility precisely because of Kraus' non-implicatedness in this realm. Nobody has expectations for her which restrict her to a 'proper' way of doing things. Kraus'

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[131] "At one point, instead of getting a tenure-track job, I decided to make real estate investments and operate these properties as lower-income, affordable housing. Buying and fixing, and then renting and managing, was a way of engaging with a population completely outside the culture industry. Kind of like in gay culture, where hookups are a way of escaping your class. [Laughs]." From: Sheila Heti, "An Interview with Chris Kraus," *The Believer* (September 1st, 2013). https://www.thebeliever.net/an-interview-with-chris-kraus/.

[132] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 122.

[133] Though, one a personal level, the recognition she finally got for her work did feel very important to her: "oh, I nearly wept after I published my first book and started to give readings, and people wanted to talk to *me*—and they looked me in the eye and said my name! That was so wonderful." (Heti, "Interview with Chris Kraus," *The Believer)*

relation to the art world is both that of an insider (through her publishing work and earlier artistic ventures in New York) and outsider (due to her financial independence from it).[134]

In yet another letter, Chris provocatively questions whether "sincerity [isn't] just the denial of complexity?"[135] The standard of transparency she and Weil are held to is unique to women in public positions: female artists are expected to be clear about their intentions and straightforward in their being. Without room for complexity, there can also be no separation between the author and her philosophy. Chris Kraus must be "Chris Kraus," that hopelessly infatuated and delusional woman trying to launch an obsessive attack on Dick Hebdige. She could not possibly be taken seriously if her book is (mis)read using such a normative model of sincerity. The 'I' of Chris or Sylvie – who (perform to) regard heterosexuality almost puritanically – is not the 'I' of Kraus at the point of editing the letters (*I Love Dick*) or drafting the material (*Aliens & Anorexia, Torpor*). In recent interviews, Kraus has been stressing that it also certainly is not the 'I' of her today: "when I wrote I Love Dick, I guess I was coming from a place of total repression. The culture has changed a lot since then, women are so much more present. Except for the most blue-chip galleries, gender representation in the art world is pretty much equal. I think the greater remaining dividers are class and race. The fight for gender representation has been won by many, many people. My last two novels, Summer of Hate and The Four Spent the Day Together have much more to do with class and race divisions in the U.S."[136] Operating at some remove from the 'I' of Chris and Sylvie allows Kraus to position them differently from herself and even construct contradicting

[134] At the same, of course, it might equally be true that her financial independence would allow her to be even more of an insider, as she can inject her own projects with funding – especially relevant in the context of L.A, where belonging to any institutional circuit might so be bought. Chris goes a more traditional route, however, and merely puts her work out into the world. The point I'm trying to make here is that not all of her living is devoted to a narrowly constituted artistic realm.
[135] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 165.
[136] Quezada, "Chris Kraus on Personal Writing".

versions of herself, fictionalizing her experiences where necessary to illustrate certain angles or emphasize a point.

This split between Kraus and her characters perhaps literalizes her proposition to offer her life as case study; in each book, she constructs it anew to shed light on different yet related phenomena. Perhaps this stratification of her self and others is the greatest illustration of the care she affords the subjects of her books. Christien Brinkgeve – the author of a successful memoir *Beladen Huis* (2025) on her failing marriage to famed intellectual Arend Jan Heerman van Voss – has a slightly more pronounced reason to refer to her late husband simply as 'A':

> dat heb ik gedaan om het van de persoon af te trekken, en van de sensatie. Ik ben me ervan bewust dat hij iemand is die enorm werd gewaardeerd en geëerd, […] dat heb ik niet willen ontmaskeren. Maar dit is het portret van een complexe relatie waaruit we allebei niet konden ontsnappen. Ik had geen zin om er fictie van te maken, ik wilde iets uitzoeken en onderzoeken en dat zo waarachtig mogelijk. Maar door hem abstracter te maken als A werd het verhaal minder particulier en dat beviel me. […] Het gaat niet om onderdrukking of slachtofferschap, het is een veel ingewikkelder verhaal over interactie en eigen aandeel, over hoe complex liefdesrelaties zijn en hoe je elkaar kunt verliezen. […] Ik denk dat het goed is dat niet zo verborgen te houden."[137]

Brinkgeve specifically interrogates the oppressive reign A held over the household, which she theorizes similarly to Levy. Like any good female monster, Brinkgeve "takes things personally as they really are."[138] Publishing on her own 'I' and framing the book as memoir rather than fiction, she in no way commits to anonymizing her late husband. Rather, she abstracts him by distilling the essential qualities that shaped him in their relationship, before interrogating those through a sociological lens. Writing almost 30 years after Kraus and 45

[137] Marjolijn de Cocq, "Christien Brinkgeve schrijft memoir over complex huwelijk: 'ik weet niet of mensen dit verdragen, het zal ongemak teweegbrengen'," *Het Parool* (January 23rd, 2025). https://www.parool.nl/kunst-media/christien-brinkgreve-schrijft-memoir-over-complex-huwelijk-ik-weet-niet-of-mensen-dit-verdragen-het-zal-ongemak-teweegbrengen~b93dd95b/.
[138] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 202.

years after Wittig, Brinkgeve rejects casting herself in the role of a 'victim' of the heterosexual contract; after all, she was able to make a name for herself in the world of academia and publishing, so the state of affairs throughout her life has become less putative than it was theorized back in the 1980s and 90s. But the relational working of oppression that heterosexuality sketches remains very real; even if theorists like Brinkgeve think it more as volatile (and ecceitic?) subject positions whose nexus can produce complex modes of suppression.[139]

Brinkgeve's move to publish this book has led to some controversy and criticism, most notably by her sons. Her husband – and their father – only recently died; so why does she wish to tarnish his reputation? By casting their story as non-particular, Brinkgeve affirms Kraus' embrace of Deleuze's mantra: that life is not personal. As a sociologist, she knows that all the forces which strained her relationship and structured her own debasement are public. She is not interrogating or blaming A on a personal level but is rather committed to questioning the conditions in which their relationship took shape. Brinkgeve too is offering her life as a case study, though more explicitly than Kraus, who made the active effort of anonymizing Hebdige's character as much as possible (which still was not enough reason for him to not sue her). An extra layer of concern surrounding the publication of Brinkgeve's memoir resides in the inability for van Voss (i.e., A) to respond to her work at all, as he died in 2022. This is something she is aware of herself, too. Perhaps this influenced her more tender point of departure for her inquiry: how could something that was once so beautiful have ended up so dysfunctional? How, to recall Levy's image, have the masks they wore crashed their marriage, probably to little fault of any personal character?

(Towards a) Chapter Conclusion: On Fictionalization & Its Affordances

[139] See also footnote 22 in Chapter 1.

On the strictly narrative level, Chris' claim to the performative is supported by her earlier proposition to stage Dick's reception of the letters as performance, as well as her suggestion that – when asked about her newest art project by a 'boring' friend over dinner – "it's changed. It's turned into an epistolary novel, really."[140] As a character, Dick remains entirely uninteresting; he is a tabula rasa in relation to which Chris scrutinizes the conditions for ascension in the art world and subsequently exposes them to be premised on phallic supremacy. Kraus flirts with breaking the separation of "Chris Kraus" and herself, between the supposed fiction of this epistolary infatuation and the reality of her recorded thoughts by making the reader encounter Chris' statement. They might begin to wonder if they hold the very novel she is describing, i.e., *I Love Dick.* Sometimes fate does need a little hand, though. In later interviews, Kraus has readily admitted that much of the content of her letters to Dick was reporting on experiences she sought to live for the express purpose of writing about them.[141] She asserts that

> naturally this writing was very physical, and I was terribly shocked when it was widely perceived at face value, as a cheap confession. Because in the book I talked over and over again about operating at a Third Remove, using a Kierkegaardian sense of irony when dealing with the banal facts that comprise straight female life: the Crush, when will he call me?"[142]

Reading the book carefully –through an explicitly narratological lens – it becomes evident that there are multiple narrative voices. Besides the character-bound focalization of Chris, at times a second narrator takes over who is not necessarily bound to her context. The separation between paragraphs in some of the letters suggests a metaleptic jump even deeper into theory, i.e., beyond what Chris is actually offering Dick. This becomes more prescient in

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[140] Kraus, *I Love Dick,* 99.
[141] "In the beginning, I'd create these experiences, just to have something to report on. That's what it was with *I Love Dick.*" From: "Chris Kraus, My Influences," *Frieze* (2012). https://www.frieze.com/article/chris-kraus-my-influences.
[142] Selah Saterstrom, "Q&A: Chris Kraus," *Tarpaulin Sky* (August 2006). https://www.tarpaulinsky.com/Fall06/Kraus-interview.html.

Aliens & Anorexia, in which it often remains unclear whether the narrator is the character Chris or this second narrative instance. Throughout her three books, the notion of 'I' constantly shifts: in *I Love Dick*, Chris' is central but not the centre; in *Aliens & Anorexia*, the 'I's usage is reduced to focus on interpreting the legacy of thinkers like Simone Weil and artists like Paul Thek; and, by *Torpor,* its explicit use is wholly effaced in Kraus' adoption of a third-person narrative.

Kraus insists that "the writer is always somewhat present in the work. No matter how transposed or how literally, the writer is present. That's what makes it a literary text."[143] In the case of *I Love Dick*, one could advance the argument that Kraus' text is more the documentation and/or processing of a performance than a fictional novel. The letters and obsession were – at least to a certain extent – really lived by Kraus, and large chunks of the novel are so more the result of the editing of these letters which she once addressed to real-life Hebdige than any fabulation.[144] In *Aliens & Anorexia,* the reader gets to see the oeuvre of Simone Weil as interpreted by her character Chris and therefore, by extension, some insight in the way she is read by Kraus. The 'I' is difficult to escape. *Torpor* has the most explicit narrator of the books due to its third-person setup. The focalization is usually character-bound, though sometimes the narrator's voice takes precedence in judging or even interpreting the actions of Sylvie and Jerome, or contextualizing moments with information from events chronologically yet to come. While Kraus 'I' appears most hidden in *Torpor* due

[143] "Chris Kraus in Conversation with Keegan Brady," *NovemberMag*.
[144] Sheila Heti asks: "can you speak about editing *I Love Dick*? You had two hundred letters to work from. What was the process?" Kraus: "well, I just went to the desert and I rented a cabin for a semester, and every day that I wasn't teaching, I was at the cabin. And I was like, Right, I'm going to do five pages a day, here's the pile of letters, there's the pile of finished pages, and I got right to it. There was no angst." (*The Believer*)

to Sylvie's apparent detachment from Chris (if only by name), I propose it might, paradoxically, be most overtly present in this book over the others.[145]

The narrator's juggle with the disclosure of information in *Torpor* is a logic Kraus puts at the heart of the book. In the footsteps of her invocation of Maktub as the movement present in *I Love Dick* (see chapter 2), Kraus proposes the notion of parataxis in *Torpor*:

> Parataxis is a strange literary form, born at the beginning of the Middle Ages. Old epic stories that had once been handed down by tribal elders pass into the hands of storytellers. Flashing back and sideways, holding back the outcome of events, these tellers fracture old familiar and heroic tales into contradictory, multiple perspectives. It becomes impossible to move the story forward without returning to the past, and so the past both predicates the future and withholds it. (Torpor 70)

Given the interlocked nature of her works as demonstrated above, however, I propose this overt recall to perhaps also function as descriptive of the overarching logic of her project across three stylistically diverging texts. Whereas it might perfectly well be possible to read each of the books in isolation, the intertextual references and context deepen each of these book's individual projects.

A point in case: *I Love Dick* contains a letter in which Chris raves about 'Dick's' book *Aliens & Anorexia* and offers a concise summary of the main argument proposed in the book: "by recognizing the aloneness of your body it's possible to reach outside, become an Alien, escape the predetermined world."[146] There is a direct link between the character of Chris and the book by Kraus which she did not yet publish when *I Love Dick* came out; perhaps this is a literal instance of the 'I' looking out into the real world. More practically, of course, it's

[145] For the purposes of this analysis – and in the spirit of Kraus' at times unorthodox appropriation of theory – I hereby wilfully commit a narratological sin, at least according to Mieke Bal's acclaimed narratological handbook. Bal insists that narrators should only ever be read as functions of a text. Any connection to a notion of authorial voice or presence is strictly prohibited, as it goes against the goals and purposes of narratology: to understand textual structure in a clear, uncompromised manner. As much as I'd like to grant Chris her conceptual, Weil-esque wish of becoming completely apersonal, I cannot remain faithful to Bal's approach in the face of Kraus' overt insistence that perhaps, after all, the author *is* alive. See also: Mieke Bal, *Narratology – Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (University of Toronto Press, 2017, 4th ed.).
[146] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 120.

probably a stand-in for one of Hebdige's works that Kraus might have referenced in the original, unedited letter. Another example relates to the path Kraus paved for other monstrous female writers by initiating the *Native Agents* series at Semiotext(e) from 1989 onwards. In *Torpor*, the narrator (sarcastically) brings up this work; it does not become entirely clear in this passage whose thoughts are being focalized:

> "in fact, since 1989 she'd [Sylvie] edited a fiction series for Jerome's press, a kind of occupational therapy they've devised to fill the (thousands of) spare hours she has while waiting for her movies to be funded. The series features first-person fiction written by Sylvie's friends and former friends. Because most of them are women, Sylvie sees the series as a philosophical intervention. Though written in the first-person, the books are well-constructed rants, not introspective memoirs. Finally, she thinks, a female public *I* aimed outwards towards the world, more revolutionary than the 20th century male avant-gardes!"[147]

I Love Dick was first published in this Native Agents series. I do not find it unthinkable that Kraus would include a reading of these – and so her own – books as 'well-constructed rants' and decidedly 'not introspective memoirs' as a dig to reviewers like Rimanelli. To reduce the work of female monsters to personal experience is to negate their foundational claim: that all the private is public; and that, according to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of ecceity, nothing can exist in pure isolation, including the apersonal 'I'.

The decision on what to render public is then not inhibited by any sort of real consideration for decency, affirms Kraus.[148] Rather she describes her process of fictionalization as selection from reality. Every account of reality is a fiction, because one must always decide what to put into which words and what elements to leave out; each person will so have experienced their own version of reality when you invite them to

[147] Kraus, *Torpor*, 177.
[148] Though, she asserts that "my ethic was always to change the name if I was going to say something less than flattering. Sadly, I antagonized a few people for life by writing about them this way.." (Poletti, "Anthropology of the Setup", 130).

reconstruct it. "I hardly ever make anything up, it's all in the selection," affirms Kraus, an operation "which, if you think about it, is almost infinite."[149] For each version of her character, this process will have been different, as Chris finds herself in different stages of her life in *I Love Dick* and *Aliens & Anorexia* which means that her experience of reality is mediated differently. Regardless of whether the source material is real or invented, Kraus finds that all characterization and narrativization is a process of fictionalization.[150]

The space Kraus carves out in between reality and her fictionalized presentation of the real prove to be a most 'useful space to move around in.' In this realm between the performative and performance, Kraus can accuse the influential theorist Richard Schechner of problematic conduct during his theatre workshops. Privately intrigued by her intellectual prowess, Schechner shamed Chris for "being too cerebral and acting like a boy. And weren't all these passionate interests and convictions just evasions of a greater truth, my cunt? I was an innocent, a de-gendered freak…"[151] Finding it impossible for her to simultaneously be a 'woman' and to speak about theory, he disqualifies Chris. She goes on to describe how he pushed her and Liza Martin to get into topless dancing, before revealing that Schechner also bumped somebody to his class after receiving a blowjob from her. By this point in *I Love Dick*, Kraus has established a link/pact between her as an author and her readers. Even if parts of the work are fictionalized, this does not negate the simple fact that all the text in the book is composed by her. When Kraus – a real-life person – writes the character-bound

[149] Sophie T. Lvoff, "The Center is Not the Center: An Interview with Chris Kraus," *LA Review of Books* (February 23rd, 2019).
[150] An explication of this dynamic can be found in Kraus' and Lottringer's short film *Voyage to Rodez* (1986), in which the latter recounts – in French – a moment in the life of Antonin Artaud. The film also has a female narrator who muses on her own travels to France and eventually acts as Lottringer's translator. While the actual content of the story he tells remains the same in both voices, the embellishments and run-ons he adds are decisively left out by the female narrator. Many unnecessary instances of his 'I' are removed. Their narration is split onto two channels, which means the audio comes from two different directions. Hypothetically, the viewer could opt to silence one of the two voices: who gets to speak, and why? Perhaps the narrator does not experience Lottringer's 'I' as important enough to recognize. He is stumblingly hesitant in his account. Kraus exercises female monstrosity avant la lettre by issuing a tentative blow to the importance (and omnipresence) of the phallic 'I' by ironically reproducing the erasure perennially faced by 'woman.'
[151] Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 157.

narration that exposes Schechner – also a real-life person – to have committed sexual misconduct, the reader will, and probably should, take this accusation to be true. It makes little sense for the narrator to merely be a function of a text rather than some representation of Kraus' voice, especially in this instance and given her aptitude for monstrosity.

Parataxis, then, might not only be a narrative structure but also one way of living in the world: the female monster, on a quest of which the end is not yet in sight, cannot know how things will end in the scale of time described in epic narratives. Kraus manipulates time by digging up old hurt; Weil breaks its ongoing stream through her anorexia; Levy filed her divorce to take a first step into a radical unknown which can only be understood post-hoc. All these female monsters feel the pulse of their collective dream and reconfigure their 'I's to much discontent of the hegemonic culture. At the same time, they also engage in concrete forms of resistance, grappling with the physical impact of these arbitrary categories of the heterosexual contract. Kraus, for example, directly calls out its violence in the case of Schechner. The fact that, in the grand scale of things, nothing about life is personal does not absolve those committing violence from responsibility. The female monster is fearless precisely because she fights on various fronts at once without knowing how things will end.

By opting for publicness over vain notions of domesticity, female monsters undo some of the ills of heterosexuality by seeing past a culture that is contrived and harmful, in which one needs to choose between helpless or the agency of being alone. Ecceity puts any experience at risk of evanescence and wars can be fought over the words used to describe because the fictionalization of our lives is a natural process. What matters most of all is Kraus' interrogation of the relations which structure these moments of life; the questioning of her body's supposedly mandated orientation towards and obedience to 'man'. Exposing her own life as case study does not reveal anything important about the particular coordinates of her life; rather, they expose the compass which guides many of us. Across time and space, the

works of female monsters launch signals that momentarily light the skies for us. If we try, this temporary glow of communality might enable us to see, for once, the direction we are headed, and inspire us to become monstrous too.

Conclusion

> The glittering of multitudes is there. The shifting, stirring tossing of multitudes. Nothing is eternal.
>
> - Han Kang, *The White Book* (2016)

Kraus proposes that fictionalization is at the core of our reality under a heterosexual contract which is but one selective interpretation of what life could be. All reality is performative: from the cynicism surrounding food to delimitations surrounding gender, Kraus sets out to interrogate various restrictive logics which have put her and other female monsters down. Across different books, she shifts in and out of different focalizations to reappraise certain events in her unpersonal life. The embrace of ecceity brings with it the assurance of instability and ungraspability – as theoretical kin of sorts to the physical involution sought by the anorexic in her rejection of a culture that is deeply cynical.

The constitution of this culture was interrogated in chapter 1. Through the lens of Wittig's heterosexual contract, I argued that many remnants of Levi-Strauss' exogamic logic remained in Kraus' 1990s context. Heterosexuality is the specific configuration of relationships between the dominant 'man' and the submissive 'woman'. While the husband can do whatever he wants, his 'wife' is ought to show restraint in everything she does – except in her responsibility for the household (as Levy demonstrates). Chrononormativity is one of the most prominent forces espousing this logic; it dictates life events to follow a chronological path with limited timeframes allotted for each moment. Following Eribon, I argued that Chris, Sylvie and Kraus are queer in their relation to this normative conception of life achievement. Kraus performatively mobilizes this pressure of heterosexuality in *Torpor* to expose the dominant position of Jerome in relation to Sylvie. The violence of the heterosexual contract resides in the fact that people never consented to live under it. People are simply forced to play certain roles; they put on masks that can make the original spark of their love, and knowledge of the self, sizzle out.

Against this background of heterosexuality I waged a first articulation of the female monster in chapter 2. By entering *The Blob* and Despentes in conversation with Chris' proposition in *I Love Dick*, a vision emerged of the female monster as deeply public (in stark opposition to everything 'woman' is prescribed to be) and persistent. I proposed to read the inciting moment as realization in a dual sense: first, as the recognition that one is radically free to sever ties with the heterosexual contract, and, second, as the consequent active mobilization of this knowledge to rise to female monstrosity. The project of the female monster is one of undoing all the notions heterosexuality falsely historicized as singular. Multiplicity, involution and unsettlement are her antidotes to a society which has rendered the everyday violence of exclusion and belittlement frictionless. Kraus' writing is revolutionary because one condition of the heterosexual contract is that woman is to live an unrecorded life; the system's hegemonic legitimization is anchored in a form of collectively mandatory amnesia. To produce accounts which are real is therefore a great stride; even more because they enable future generations of female monsters to pick up where the previous one left off in case their fearless effort does get silenced.

I discuss how Kraus puts such intergenerational solidarity into practice in chapter 3. In *Aliens & Anorexia*, she reappraises the oeuvre of Simone Weil and reads her life as the enactment of her philosophy. Weil's reflections have often been ridiculed in connection to her self-destructive anorexia which was read as symptomatic of her self-hatred and mental instability. Kraus had a similar experience when she published *I Love Dick*, which some reviewers perceived as deranged confessions above all offensive to Dick Hebdige's dignity. In an essay published elsewhere, Kraus makes the same argument regarding Weil as Chris does in *Aliens & Anorexia*: that her 'I' is not private, but rather a vessel for her to turn outward and look at the world as it really is. Anorexia is not a will to death but rather a final attempt to do away the cultural notions surrounding the 'I' – its destruction is the last

roadblock to be overcome in order to live a radically unstructured life and be able to finally *see* the sadness of the world without prejudice. Attachment promotes that self-importance which prevents a culture from escaping its own cynicism and, for once, address injustice.

The discursive constructions which all the writing discussed here grapples with know grave bodily repercussions. This is why Kraus – like Weil – seeks to perform some of her work and make it report on lived experience; not in order to establish a reflective memoir like Brinkgeve, but rather to demonstrate that queer orientations remain strenuous in the face of the delimitations set in place by heterosexuality and other regulatory constructs. Kraus develops a praxis of monstrosity which looks outward: a self-proclaimed anthropologist, her works seek to expose the rules of the socialities that bind some and discourage others from living freely. The casting of her monstruous speech as merely a hysterical rant, a private breakdown which should never have seen the light of day, equally implies the repression of the enactment of this new mode of being in the medium she is attacking, upending the language that once legitimized her oppression by excluding all traces of her from its domain.

Because writing is a physical activity, the 'I' can never be escaped. The selective reservation of the realm of the 'apersonal' to non-feminine authors is therefore a product of the greater culture Kraus is trying to upend. To write a female character whose motivations are convoluted does not relegate her work into a private domain; instead, a female monster so negates the reproach that any philosophy can be truly neutral under heterosexuality. She proposes that – theoretically – everything is ultimately apersonal; and that no reason therefore exists for her writing to be discarded just because there is an 'I' in it.

I stress that my reading of Kraus' argument does not render the personal irrelevant as such; rather, it proposes that all personal aspects of life are always-already public because they are socially constructed. So long as its relationality is always taken into account (as Brinkgeve stresses), one can learn a lot from a thorough study of the personal. Indeed, the

female monster uses her 'I' to orient her attention outward; she wants to abolish all her mandatory relations to the world to see what is really going on. For Kraus to recentre domestic life in her writing does not mean that she wallows in the personal or is mounting any sort of particular grievance against those other subjects of her book. Rather, she flips the logic of authorial distance on its head to point out what really instructs us in the art of living: a pervasive system of heterosexuality which conceives of the world and theory in absolutes, which privileges 'man' over 'woman' and negates many of her contributions. In her framework, privacy too ends up an irrelevant notion because we only live relational intensities that are by nature shared and exist outside of the person. Every story is but a case study which might elucidate parts of this greater logic (be it Maktub or parataxis); but the material effects remain very real. Her awareness of these effects allows Kraus to strategically position her character either closer to reality or further away from it depending on the point she is making. It also permits her to call out real-life injustices like Richard Schechner's improper conduct.

To conclude, I will quote Kraus one final time. In the 24th proposition of her chapter "Add it Up", Chris writes that

> according to Charles Olsen, the best poetry is a kind of schizophrenia. The poem does not "express" the poet's thoughts or feelings. It is "a transfer of energy between the poet and the reader."[152]

Throughout her trilogy, Kraus, in various ways, confronts us with the state of our being. She invites us to indulge in her practice of monstrosity for at least the amount of time we choose to spend reading her words. Approaching the 30-year anniversary of *I Love Dick*'s publication, perhaps we can begin to count Kraus as one of the female monsters who came before us. Her conception of a lived philosophy that refuses simplification and encourages fearless resistance in the face of all-powerful structures takes on a special significance in our

[152] Kraus, *I Love Dick,* 225.

current societal climate. I sincerely hope that future generations of female monsters will be able to conclude that we are indeed living a moment of parataxis, in which the world needs to set itself back, before it can suddenly jump forward.

Suggestions for Future Research

The female monster's attention is radically undivided: she wants to grasp everything she can and knows that real answers can only be found by turning outward with little direction but also from an 'I' that will ultimately influence her position. This mode of positioning means there are some obvious limitations to my argument, which can equally, in the spirit of the female monster, serve as some preliminary suggestions for research to be carried out at some point in the future.

First, throughout this thesis, I have interrogated Kraus' work only in relation to Wittig's heterosexual contract and other feminist thinkers of the 80s and 90s. I decided on these authors to historicize the moment from which Kraus wrote her trilogy and begin (but not end) my articulation of the female monster accordingly. All of the authors I discuss come from a U.S. or European context.[153] I emphasize, for this reason, that the scope of the female monster's theorization in this chapter is limited. This is also partially the result of Kraus' limited engagement with other categories of domination in the books which I have selected to discuss in this thesis. If you were to expand the scope of the discussion to include some other works by her, like *Summer of Hate* (2012) or compare the monstruous figure across texts from different authors, I suspect it to be very much possible for the struggle to take on an intersectional dimension. In the past 20 years, Kraus has moved on from this wave of

[153] Chris Kraus also lived in New Zealand for a period time, which I count to rank among the other Occidental countries listed here.

feminism and sees other issues which need to be addressed. Endowing monstrosity with a broader direction therefore appears urgent.[154]

A second, related limitation is the limited consideration of newer feminist theories on the heterosexual contract and the establishment of a relation of dominance. *Aliens & Anorexia* contains a subplot where Chris lives a series of (telephonic) S/M hookups with a producer named Gavin. Writers like Mary Gaitskill have explicitly mobilized discussions around S/M to revolt against the feminist movement's essentialization of womanhood as a submissive category under heterosexuality. It could prove fruitful to bring such texts into conversation with Kraus and read further on these aspects of her work.[155]

A final suggestion for more research is to interrogate the intermedial tenacity of the argument I (and Kraus) wages in chapter 3 surrounding the 'I'. In the 2017 series adaptation of *I Love Dick* by Jill Soloway, for example, Kraus' narrative is reconfigured by making Dick into a character of flesh and blood who Chris and Sylvère keep running into while they are attending his retreat. The letter-writing so becomes more performative and more naturalistic, but the role of Chris as the narrator of her own experiences pales in comparison the book. Many of her theoretical musings contained in the letters are relegated to other (new and female) characters, her 'I' so becoming more shared and less specific. It might even be pertinent to compare the execution of this series against Kraus' own catalogue of films.

[154] Houria Bouteldja, in *Les Blancs, les Juifs, et nous : Vers une politique d'amour révolutionnaire* (La Fabrique Éditions, 2016) could be argued to develop a framework that might be more productive in this regard. She proposes to unite all oppressed classes of society in a radically solidary body (a capitalized 'Nous') that directs their attention to whiteness – a political disposition that marks the colonial, patriarchal and economic domination of the Occident since Columbus. Whereas the female monster could appear to yearn mostly for a reckoning and the abolition of societal categories, Bouteldja's 'We' is focused on the dismantling of a specific institution of oppression rather than specific social categories.

[155] See, e.g.: Mary Gaitskill, *Bad Behavior* (1988).

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To see yourself as who you were ten years ago can be very strange indeed.

- Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick*

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