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Redefining Human in *Hotel World* and *Remainder*

In the article “Vulnerability and Ontology: Butler’s Ethics,” Susan Hekman argues that precariousness cannot exist without ethical responsibility and empathy. Her argument ultimately boils down to a claim that we are not able to create a totally inclusive definition of the human because of our reliance on the past. Yet, Judith Butler’s argument that we must reject past interpretations of ethical understandings in order to expand the contours of the grievable, normative body seems to resist Hekman’s claim. Butler works to resist the idea that the human is conditioned to embody political and social agency, and also works to expose the fact that bodies who fail to perform within the limits of societal acceptability are rendered inhuman. In this presentation, I will rely on Judith Butler’s insistence that these limits be removed to provide a more dynamic field of the human. First, by examining Ali Smith’s novel *Hotel World* as a text that resists normative bodily limits by including varying bodies and social abilities within the shared space of a hotel and second, by examining Tom McCarthy’s novel *Remainder* as a text that attempts to expand the boundaries of normative social interactions by developing a space that is completely staged for recreating real life events. It is now that I would like to examine each text individually.

HOTEL WORLD

Hotel World by Ali Smith is a novel that challenges the idea of bodily limits through the use of multiple perspectives, textual manipulation, and hindered social interactions. The novel begins “at the end” with a narrator, Sara Wilby, who has already died and is talking from beyond the grave. In the article “Examining Bodily Limits” Milica Ivic argues “the defining impact on human self-perception comes not just from the limits of the body itself, but also from the limits

and conditions of our cultural perceptions and constructions of the body and the limits of possible bodily performances within society” (Ivic 50). Since normative society defines human as having a body that is physically self-contained, and focuses on our ability to interact with other beings Sara, at first glance, is inhuman. However, a closer look at the character Smith has constructed reveals that Sara’s body is redefining the boundaries of the human body.

First, by addressing Sara’s difficulty with language. She is losing her memory and ability to remember words. When trying to describe her eyes Sara laments “the things we see with, two of them, stuck in a face above a nose. The word’s gone. I had it a moment ago” (Smith 8). Language is beginning to break down, a side effect of being a form stuck between human life and the after-life. During a conference entitled “Queer Bonds: A Symposium on Sexuality and Sociability,” Judith Butler defined “sociability” as a condition that derived from “the body itself – a body always given over to others, which exists in a field of social norms and depends on those norms, and those others, for its survival” (Butler). A person who cannot interact within the social marketplace is then seen as an “object of otherness.” The human body is meant to be sociable and constantly interacting with other bodies in order to read as an intelligible body in society. However, Sara is not a part of the society because her death removes her physically from the temporal world. And still, Sara rejects these limits of sociability by communicating with her father, mother, and sister. “I appeared to the father. I appeared to the mother. I appeared to the sister. The father pretended he couldn’t see. But the sister drained me with a terrible thirst” (Smith 13). The fact that her sister can “drain her” even though their bodily limits are different resists the idea that only normal, easily identified bodies can interact in the social marketplace. In the article “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation” Judith Butler contends that “no one escapes the precarious dimensions of social life” (Butler 148). The same is true for

Sara even though her social interactions as a ghost no longer fit the norm. The fact that Sara's non-normative form is still bound by the precariousness of social life means that the limits we impose on the society are not as definite as we assume them to be. There is room to adjust the norm in order to create an inclusive environment – one that does not reject unsociable bodies.

Finally, Sara's body rejects the physical limits of bodily temporality by visiting her own decomposing body in the ground and by having a conversation with her. "One last time I slipped into our old shape, hoisting her shoulders round me and pushing down into her legs and arms and through her splintery ribs, but the fitting was ill, she was broken and rotting" (Smith 15). Sara is able to physically insert herself into a form that is no longer her own. The use of "her" in this statement resists the argument that Sara is just slipping back into the form that she belongs in. Instead, Smith is having Sara's ghost break bodily conventions by intruding on a form that is no longer her own. Sara exceeds corporeal bodily limitations by visiting her former self and by examining the transaction between her ghost self and former self, I argue that the idea of a normal social interaction is impossible. Sara's ghost asks her former body to tell her the story about the fall that killed her corporal form and allowed her ghost self to appear. In a section of "ghost inner thoughts" sectioned off by parenthesis Sarah states that "the story had made me forget we were dead" (Smith 19). Sara's conversation with her dead self is the only conversation that allows her to remember her life's existence. Visiting her family fails and visiting the hotel is futile because she cannot remember the words to express her body's death, but listening to her own past memories provides a moment of clarity that she can "take to the surface" with her (Smith 15). Social interactions accordingly become hindered by individual experiences. We measure normalcy by our abilities to interact with others, but this measurement is strictly

opinionated and dependent upon a common, mutual understanding. This standard is impossible to reach.

In the article “Normative Violence, Vulnerability, and Responsibility” Catherine Mills discusses Judith Butler’s ideas about the “normative construction of ‘lives worth living’ and the violence that surrounds these norms in relation to ethical responsibility (Mills 134). The part that is important for this paper is that she argues norms create political agency and that bodily life is inseparable from the norms. If the body is separated it creates a “social death” for the individual and their body falls outside of the intelligible. Else, the second character introduced in the novel, is a person whose body is physically “othered” and therefore “socially dead.” Her body is deteriorating, presumably from an illness that she caught while living homeless on the street. She imagines that with each cough the wall inside of her “crumbles,” her “lungs creaking and hissing, snarled up with blood” and her muscles like “bad telephone lines, already outmoded” “as if someone was trying to wire-up some place that just couldn’t be wired up” (Smith 40). This description signals that her body does not communicate efficiently with the general public. She has “bad telephone lines” that creak and hiss and “crumble” when she coughs, laughs, her talks too loudly.

Also, her physically sick appearance wards off social interaction. People won’t even give her their spare change or look her in the eyes. Her body, according to disability theory, then becomes the rejected body or rejected self. “People go past. They don’t see Else, or decide not to” (Smith 39). This hierarchy of social bodies allows able-bodied individuals to choose to not interact with Else. However, when people come up to her and offer money for sexual pleasure Else does not have the same privilege to not interact. They approach her without considering her body’s ontology and instead subject her body to the economic marketplace, but not as a

consumer, rather a commodity. One woman even puts her arms around Else and holds her “for nearly half an hour” (Smith 53). Else’s body is then only useful when another, more socially legible body, can derive pleasure from her. This is important to note because it situates “othered” bodies outside of the common experience. Homeless individuals and bodies that are sick are not welcomed within “normal” society until a member from the normal society admits them momentary entrance. Two main examples of this are when Lise gives Else a room at the hotel and when the newspaper writes a story about Else’s homelessness.

The newspaper that prints an article on homeless people allows her body to read in a different way. Her body was then “important” and the contents of her pockets and her name “would have passed through the eyes and into the brains and maybe the memories of what could be millions of people” (Smith 74-75). She then becomes an object of “wound culture” which is another aspect of disability theory. People are able to sympathize with her body through the newspaper because it offers written proof of vulnerability. They are able to express sympathy vicariously through reading the text but are not held responsible to act because they are not in close proximity to Else. Another example of wound culture appears in Clare’s section when she is discussing her sister’s death as it was advertised in the papers. Headlines for her death read as follows: “Talented Swimmer Dead,” “Freak Accident Claims Local Girl Swimmer,” and “Tragic Teenage Death Dive” (Smith 202). Sara’s death is tragic only because her body was healthy, athletic, and young. She was a successful member of society through her achievements and the papers harped on her death as a message to other worthy community members to not act foolishly. Her body then becomes a warning for what not to do if you value your body’s corporal ontology.

Finally, is Penny. I read her as an exaggerated trope of society's expectations. By having a character try to appease all of the normative expectations Smith creates this over the top character that we are instantly not inclined to like or agree with in an attempt to expose that the current limitations are not effective. Penny spends her chapter (ironically entitled "Perfect") desperately trying to connect to Else and another character Clare (not mentioned in this presentation), but completely misreads their bodies and intentions. I debate that Penny fails because she can only operate within the socially defined standards of sociability and bodily ontology. For instance, Else is in the hotel so she must be a valid paying guest. More importantly, Penny is solely focused on creating a "good story" (Smith 131). She collects words that she is going to use in her review, kicks her computer off the bed in an attempt to create a dramatic story to tell her friends later, and follows Clare around hoping for someone intriguing to tell others in order to define her life. Yet, in the end her story is no more exciting than the rest of the characters. Her review of the hotel is mundane and encapsulates the hotel as the perfected image with "city life," "winter weekends" and "hallmark" features (Smith 180-181). Penny personifies the perfected social trope in which focusing on your wording choice and "performing" for the purpose of having a good story to define your experience is revealed and mocked. Which brings me to *Remainder*.

REMAINDER

Remainder by Tom McCarthy is a novel that reimagines the idea of the social through a character who lacks empathy and repeats scenarios. Butler poses the question of whether we are obligated to "enter into an ethical relation" with the "kinds of beings" who are not considered to be a "full" person (Butler 140). I'm inclined to argue no, but also want to express that individuals whose bodies read outside of the norm are also not required to enter into ethical relations with

those who do read normally. McCarthy's main character is an individual who has suffered from a trauma that leaves him void of any empathy and capability to interact in an easily identifiable way. However, he is not a character that "fails." Economically and politically speaking he is advanced after receiving his payoff from his injury claim and even furthers the economic community by hiring actors for his reenactments. Instead, his lack of empathy and social communication skills remove him from the limits of the normative social marketplace.

McCarthy removes the limitations of normative society first by removing the protagonist's name. As humans, we identify one another through our first and last name. It is how we call attention to one another and how we differentiate between other bodies. McCarthy's decision to remove his first name and to not identify him as a "he" until after chapter thirteen displaces his body from the easily recognizable form, legacy of legal rights, a is no longer bounded to a sense of responsibility. Until chapter thirteen the only indication that he is male comes from his brief love interest in Catherine, a female character. Yet, this assumption also reveals that the normative society is mostly full of heterosexual individuals. The idea that the protagonist could be female, or a gender outside of the biological limitations does not appear in scholarship of the novel despite the fact that for the majority of the novel he is not gendered and the fact that the novel quickly rejects a romantic formula.

Hekman continues her argument by stating that persons who are "not classified as human without existing norms" are "denied an ontology" and "have no possibility" (Hekman 456). Under her assumption, the body is then always subject to the social and to the norms of society. My question is what happens when this social setting is scripted? The only social interactions that the protagonist has with individuals that are not a part of his reenactments or a reoccurring scenario (like his coffee punch card) is with Greg and Catherine. They are the only two

characters in the novel that he does not script or control in some facet during his reenactments. They also don't appear in the novel for very long. In fact, by the end of chapter two the protagonist already states that "Catherine had begun to annoy me. I preferred her absence, her spectre" (McCarthy 39). The idea of her social body is then more preferable than actually socializing with her. It is not that she is saying the wrong words, but rather her movements and timing are inaccurate and cannot create the perfect moment of sociability.

This idea brings me back to the idea of the hotel as a public space. The protagonist buys a hotel and fills it with actors that he pays to repeat scenarios until he reaches a moment of perfection. The building is sectioned into "on" and "off" time slots in which only he has the ability to control. He even goes so far as to manipulate the psychological space, mimicking his flat off of the "remembered" "crack running down the bathroom wall" of Greg's party house (McCarthy 73). This meticulous construction of the hotel space indicates that the fantasy of the hotel as a public space that welcomes bodies to have an engaging time away from home is false. Only when you are in complete control of the space that you inhabit can the interactions be totally ideal. This is the same reason he manipulates their social interactions. In exchange, they get paid. This proves that the ideal that society is constantly striving for, a fluid social exchange, is impossible unless it is completely constructed.

The repeated social experiments reveal the disillusionment that there can be a "perfect" human experience. Milica Ivic continues her argument with the idea of performing studies and contends that the problem with the "living body" is that it is always performing and that it is not only a question of "bodily limits" but also of limit of "our ability to perceive the body" (Ivic 57-58). The protagonist is a body that is immediately defined as wounded or traumatized. Yet for all intents and purposes the doctors "heal" him. They help him get his bodily movements back, but

disregard the fact that he does not feel “right.” He wonders when in his life he had “been the least artificial, the least second-hand” (McCarthy 25). After learning each movement over again in order to heal his body he becomes more aware of the artificial actions made by human beings. We are “always performing, copying other people, things you’ve seen them do – and copying them badly too” (McCarthy 25). The protagonist takes this idea of performing and explodes it to the most extreme fashion. McCarthy exemplifies Butler’s argument that performance occurs within a socially constructed environment. For Butler, gender, sex, personality, etc. are constructed through repeated performances. In the novel, the repeated performances are staged reenactments of real life events that have already occurred. The social environment becomes the performed aspect while the individual body attempts to move through the space in an accurate reenactment. He attempts not only to perform his gender and his bodily expectations, but to perform them to perfection.

Humans are not to worry about their bodily limitations or the limitations of others. McCarthy’s protagonist contends that by stressing out about the physical boundaries of the body we miss moments of perfection. In the last reenactment when the protagonist stages a bank heist without telling his actors that it is a real bank heist one of the actors ends up getting shot and killed in real life. He writes that “the whole scene went static, like it had been on my staircase when the liver lady and I had slowed down so much that we’d come to a standstill” (McCarthy 291). This expression equates his feeling to that of a slow-motion scene in the movies. He is able to see everything clearly and defined, each movement leading to the next. This visual clarity can only come from removing oneself from the inconsistencies of real-life. If you do not know what is going to happen then you cannot possibly know what important details to look for. This is why when four is bleeding out on the carpet the protagonist whispers “beautiful” (McCarthy 291). His

unempathetic nature allows him to see past a physical death of a body and admire the visual perfection of the reenactment.

Associatively, the novel reveals that words do not matter, but the timing of the words and how the words are said do. The best example of this is after the first trial run of the hotel when the protagonist walks by the liver lady's apartment. She comes out of the door and says "harder and harder to lift up" (McCarthy 143). The protagonist immediately stops and thinks over those words. He writes that he "liked it" because it "felt right" (McCarthy 144). In this situation, it did not matter what she said or how he answered, but rather the authenticity of the moment – mainly, the timing of the words and the tone they were spoken in. He has the actors run through the scenarios on an infinite loop always trying to achieve a "sense of gliding" and "calm contentedness" (McCarthy 147). McCarthy's character ultimately achieves the "perfected" moment that society is always striving for by completely resisting normal interactions.

Words become unimportant again during the car reenactment that the protagonist funds. In this scenario, the main element that needs to be precise in order for the scene to evoke the "tingling sensation" is the car fluid gushing in the correct way (McCarthy 177). The words that are uttered are rendered meaningless if the fluid does not shoot out and soak the actor. "When the sticky blue liquid exploded, I'd meant to leave my box and go down to the car to watch, but found myself fixated where I stood" (McCarthy 178). In this situation, the words are not needed in order to achieve a bodily ontology. Instead, the actors are interacting with one another in a scripted scenario that allows them to perfect their appearance, their movements, and the timing. The protagonist also gets to watch the scene over and over again, reliving a perfected moment in time. The staged interactions are then not a failed human interaction, but rather attempts to expand Butler's insistence that the social limits of the body be expanded.

Yet, his manipulation of social interactions does not work correctly every time. The third time they run through his descent on the staircase the liver lady “steered the rubbish bag through a horizontal arc around her legs and, stopping, started to lower it to the ground when suddenly it slipped out of her hand and fell with a loud clunk” (McCarthy 147). This break in the temporal space ruins the moment of perfection that the protagonist had created. Instead of other bodies adding to the social space positively, the fault of the liver lady’s movements disturbs the protagonist’s moment of social perfection. Butler’s idea of the precarious body always in a constant state of violence and exposure is then exposed within this failed reenactment. When bodies do not perform in the expected way the social interaction splinters. The private body is then exposed to public performance and that performance must be repeated until perfection.

Herman ends her argument by stating that ethics are not a conscious enactment of responsibility by the person, but rather something that the subject has just by being a subject. By being human we are bound to ethics and these “material facts of human life cannot be denied” (Hekman 461). Yet, the protagonist does deny his ethical responsibility. He disregards empathetic situations and instead focuses on series of reenactments. The novel ends in mass murder with the protagonist circling around and around in a plane. For him the dynamic field of the human is not a body conditioned to political and social interactions. Instead, it is a dynamic field of repetitions. The body must continuously perform and reenact and manipulate the space until it feels “happy,” content, and natural (McCarthy 308). This reasoning allows his body to be free of guilt, violence, and other’s precariousness after he mass murders his actors. By definition their bodies are his to control since that is what he is paying them for. Most of us would not push that contract to the extent of murder because we are defined by the limits of appropriate interactions and bodily borders. The protagonist cannot abide by these standards without a

feeling of empathy for humans. Instead, he abides by a feeling of bodily authenticity that comes from the “perfect,” scripted moment.

The ideas that bodies are expected to uphold certain gender performances, social interactions, and accept bodily limitations in order to be read as human within the society is outdated. While Judith Butler attempts to counter these limitations by examining the normative society and pointing out their flaws, *Hotel World* by Ali Smith and *Remainder* by Tom McCarthy attempt to resist the limitations this by “exploding” the “other.” Their characters do not fit into the societal norms, yet through their manipulation of text and social interactions they are able to exploit the problems with limitations to the physical body and social network.