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Construction of Identity in Gertrude Stein's *Melanchthon*

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By

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## Recommendation Letter

This research entitled “Construction of Identity in Gertrude Stein’s *Melanctha*” by Kiran Ghimire has been carried out under my supervision from August 2009 to March 2010. I recommend it for viva-voce.

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The undersigned members of the Research committee have approved this thesis entitled “Construction of Identity in Gertrude Stein’s *Melanchthon*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Kiran Ghimire.

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## Abstract

The research carries out an issue of identity in Gertrude Stein's *Melanctha*. Its project is to intervene in the debates surrounding Stein's debt to William James's psychology in light of postmodern psychoanalytic models. James argues that individuals construct their identities by selecting only those details that pertain to their interests. The Jamesian model, however, illustrates only a single subject's ability to think the world, whereas Stein's *Melanctha* depicts the conflict between two subjects who exercise different habits of selection. The research makes an argument that Stein's work not only provides new ways of constructing aesthetics but also new ways to consider the construction of identity. To explore this new notion identity, the research draws upon Jessica Benjamin and Judith Butler's theories of inter-subjectivity. Stein tests the limits of the Jamesian model by depicting the engagement between two thinking subjects. In essence, the research illustrates how the construction of identity in *Melanctha* depends not only on the characters' capacities to select objects of attention but also on the recognition conferred on the characters by others and the social forces that construct identities that precede the characters' processes of individuation.

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## I. Stein and the New Aesthetics

Gertrude Stein saw the technological advancements of the twentieth century as a force that would revolutionize aesthetics. Her work was not so much a call for new ways of seeing old things but a testament to the transformation that occurs when old tools are put to new uses. Like many modernists Stein believed in the human capacity to reshape, rethink and re-create the environment. Much like the changing lifestyles that came with rapid industrialization, Stein suggests that the attendant aesthetic shifts were not so much the consequence of new interpretations but illustrated, rather, the inextricable co-involvement of the world and interpretation. In the opening of *Composition As Explanation* Stein explains “Nothing changes in people from one generation to another except the way of seeing and being seen, the streets change, the way of being driven in the streets change, the buildings change, the comforts in the houses change, but the people from one generation to another do not change” (20). The passage begs a series of questions that not only occupied Stein in her early psychological experiments, but also carried over into her creative pursuits. When Stein studied psychology under William James in the late years of the nineteenth century, she conducted a series of psychological experiments in search of what she called “the subject’s bottom nature.” Stein’s search for a “bottom nature” was fundamentally a search for an essential self that emerges from the origin of the life. She explores an identity that exists beyond the habits and actions of the individual or a portion of the self that remains consistent despite the continual flux of the external world. When this quest carried over into Stein’s fictional work it became wrought with the tension between her debt to nineteenth century psychology and the changing habits of a new generation. This tension becomes all the more evident as Stein further elaborates on the relationship between

habit and identity, a relationship that deeply interested the nineteenth century psychologist William James. In his theory of selective attention James argues that individuals select from the sensory impressions, only those details pertaining to their immediate interests. For example, a sheet of paper could briefly provide warmth and light if set on fire or signify surrender if waved in the air but for current purposes it might function as only something to write on. The objects and the uses to which they are put alter from one generation to the next. Therefore, the selections people make in one generation necessarily differ from the selections made by a previous generation. In *Composition As Explanation* Stein further writes:

It is very likely that nearly every one has been very nearly certain that something that is interesting is interesting them . . . It is very interesting that nothing inside in them, that is when you consider the very long history of how every one ever acted or has felt, it is very interesting that nothing inside in them in all of them makes it connectedly different. By this I mean. The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. (21)

Stein's claim that what people see depends upon what they are doing is a rough translation of the Jamesian theory of selective attention. It seems ironic, however, that Stein pays tribute to a thinker of the nineteenth century in an essay that champions the new paradigms born of a twentieth century aesthetic. Stein explains the shifts in conception from one generation to the next and the role that her own composition has played in forcing literature into the twentieth century. Yet she ironically employs the perceptual frameworks of the nineteenth century to conceptualize these shifts. If, as Stein asserts, the twentieth century requires new paradigms for seeing and being seen, then why rely on old paradigms to articulate the necessity of this shift? If the ways of seeing and being seen change from one generation to the next, then how are the

theories of James still applicable? If nothing changes from one generation to the next, save what we do, what we see, and how we are seen, then what remains the same? What constitutes people beyond seeing and being seen? The opening passage asks a question that it does not answer. Do people change or stay the same? Once we strip the individual of habits, cultivated by his or her generation, are we left with a model of timeless human essence or are we left with nothing?

Whether or not James is still applicable, ironically, depends on whether or not he formulates an essential notion of humanity.

According to James the self consists of the “I” and the “me,” the knower and the known, respectively. The “me” has three parts: the social, the material, and the spiritual, none of which are uncontaminated by external reality. The material identity refers to the possessions of the individual, the body, the estate, the home, the bank account. The social identity is multiple and defined by group alliances, social standing, and the associations of the individual. While the spiritual identity seems to suggest something beyond these external associations, according to James, it is rarely anything more than the individual’s notion of an ideal and future recognition that the present denies him or her. Therefore, this too depends upon the ways in which people see and are seen. The “I” is that which lays claim to the social, the spiritual, and the material identity, the portion of the self that can say “this is mine” or “that is not mine.” James argues that “either by negating or by embracing, the Ego may seek to establish itself in reality” (56). The individual selects a bus, rather than a dog as an object worthy of attention when the concern is to get from one place to the next. Likewise, the individual may select his dear dead dog, rather than his bus driver, as an object that constitutes his identity. The unity of the “I,” however, is not achieved through sameness, because the “I,” according to James, is the thinker and thoughts are never identical. The unity of the “I” is achieved rather through a progression or adoption of past

thoughts into the present stream of consciousness. This adoption is not so different from the manner in which the “me” forges a social identity through the adoption of external objects. James considers this “the trick which the nascent thought has of immediately taking up the expiring thought and ‘adopting’ it” (72). James goes on to claim that “Who owns the last self owns the self before the last, for what possesses the possessor possesses the possessed” (72). This statement can equally apply to the self that adopts the expiring thought of another and in applying it to a new set of social circumstances revitalizes and changes it. It also helps explain how James’s theory was still applicable to the aesthetic landscape Stein’s work redefined. While the influence of James’s theory can clearly be seen in Stein’s claims throughout *Composition as Explanation*, there is something tautological about the essay that resists James’s prescriptions. It refuses to progress. Rather than selecting a central idea and carrying it through a logical demonstration, the essay circles back around, returning to a previous idea and accumulating a series of tangential associations in the process. While the style performs James’s theory of the stream of consciousness, it clearly conflicts with his prescriptions concerning selective attention. For James, progress is the underlying purpose of honing one’s habits of attention. Without a well honed habit of selection, the individual is lost in an onslaught of sensory stimuli. He or she watches the dog, for example, and misses the bus. The tension between Stein’s debt to James and her call for new perceptual frameworks does not end in *Composition as Explanation* but carries over into her fictional work as well. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein describes *Melanctha* as “the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature” (50). Scholars such as Marianne DeKoven, Lisa Ruddick and Richard Bridgman acknowledge this step while simultaneously illustrating the influence James wielded over the work. Ruddick has described

James's influence as the backward glance Stein took when she broke into the twentieth century (368). However, it seems more accurate to imagine that Stein's debt to James is akin to that of the son in the famous anecdote that opens *The Making of Americans*. Stein begins the novel with an angry man who drags his father through an orchard, until the old man finally shouts, "Stop! I did not drag my father beyond this tree" (62). While the father's response informs us that the son's odd gesture is prompted by tradition, it also informs us of the necessary transformation tradition undergoes with each performance. The anecdote aptly illustrates that tradition is dragging the old into new terrain. Furthermore, the anecdote is reminiscent of James's stream of consciousness, in which an expiring thought is adopted and carried on by the emergence of a new thought. The son adopts an expiring tradition and carries it into uncharted territory. In performing the stream of consciousness, Stein pulls James into the twentieth century. Yet the performance carried psychological implications that James fails to foresee. Stein's perpetual return to old ideas with newly accrued meanings not only resists the progress that James prescribes, but also becomes in the narrator of *Melanctha* a third position through which readers witness the distinct selections of different subjects.

*Melanctha* is one of three novellas in Stein's *Three Lives*. Each novella tells the story of a young woman inhibited and marginalized not only by social forces but also by the form of the nineteenth century novel. "The Good Anna" tells the story of a German servant, "The Gentle Lena" tells the story of a German immigrant, and *Melanctha* tells the story of a young mulatto woman. Unlike the other novellas *Melanctha* is based on one of Stein's earlier and roughly autobiographical novellas, *Q.E.D.* While *Q.E.D.* focuses on a love triangle between three women, *Melanctha*'s central conflict exists between a man and a woman and their struggle to recognize and survive difference.

The story depicts this struggle primarily through dialogues between Jeff Campbell and Melanctha Herbert. The narrator's refusal to value one perceptual paradigm over the other presents both characters as equally valid subjects of attention. Stein's debt to James can be seen in the processes of selection and the distinct habits of perceiving that shape each of these characters. These processes of selection, however, are not performed by the narrator but by the characters themselves. Therefore, the narrator is in a position to witness the distinct selections of two opposing subjects. The narrator, who occupies the space between two interpreting subjects, opens up a third position that James's psychology does not theorize. James's psychology limits us to a self that is defined by what it claims as its own and what it rejects as foreign. While the Jamesian subject cannot persist without recognition, he or she cannot recognize difference. The other is nothing more than his or her object of attention, never another subject with the capacity to make distinct selections. The central conflict of *Melanctha* is the struggle for recognition that takes place between two subjects whose "hearts and minds have different ways of working" (153). Therefore, a way of theorizing the recognition of difference becomes imperative. The narrator's refusal to select is also a refusal to privilege one way of perceiving over the other. This means that rather than having a subject of attention and an object of attention, Stein's characters are all subjects who equally possess the capacity to embrace, negate, assimilate, recognize, reject, and project onto the other. James's psychology, which focuses on the subject's confrontation with the object of attention, is insufficient in theorizing the dynamic exchange of this engagement. While James focuses on a self that is constructed through its relation to external objects, he overlooks the threat posed by an object with opposing schemes for conceptualizing the world. This object cannot be assimilated because of its difference, but nevertheless demands the subject's recognition of this difference. In other words, it insists upon being recognized not

as an object at all but as a subject of desire, attention and interpretation. Stein foregrounds the threat of the other subject by depicting Melanctha and Jeff's relationship primarily through dialogue, in which each subject attempts to force his or her schemes for interpreting the world onto the other.

In the *Shadow of the Other*, Jessica Benjamin refers to this as the dialogic process in which the subject and the other work through difference. Benjamin draws on the Hegelian confrontation between self and other in order to illustrate the subject's contradictory desire for autonomy and recognition. According to Benjamin, the subject desires the other's recognition in order to validate his or her external existence, while also fearing the vulnerability that this dependence entails. The subject wants to retain his or her independent schemes for perceiving the world but must acknowledge that the external validation of these schemes depends upon the other's ability to accept and recognize them. This depends on discourse, a discourse much like the pages of dialogue that depict the tensions between Melanctha and Jeff. Benjamin refers to the dialogic mediation between two subjects with different schemes for interpreting the world as the intersubjective process. Benjamin's theory of inter-subjectivity provides insight into the mutual struggle for recognition between Jeff and Melanctha. Yet Benjamin's focus on the exchange between two subjects excludes the social and cultural processes that produce distinct ways of thinking the world.

Judith Butler provides another theory of inter-subjectivity. Rather than focusing on the dyad, Butler focuses on the social and political constructions of knowledge that cannot be thought apart from each subject's paradigm for thinking the world. Butler's approach allows us to theorize Melanctha's history and the social processes that constitute and constrain her identity. Furthermore, Butler's claim that the self is embedded in the other and must discover the

conditions of its existence through the other, sheds light on Melanctha's habit of wandering. In employing Butler's paradigm, the research illustrates that Melanctha's perpetual wandering is a process of socialization, in which she discovers her social power through the desire of anonymous others.

In the first chapter, I trace James's influence on Stein's writing back to *Q.E.D.* and illustrate some of the significant changes Stein made when transforming the story to *Melanctha*. This comparison will throw the challenge *Melanctha* poses to Jamesian psychology into sharper relief. While the narrative style of *Q.E.D.* illustrates Stein's adherence to James's ethical prescriptions, the wandering and repetitive prose of *Melanctha* illustrates the shortcomings of James's principal of selective attention.

While each character enacts the Jamesian process of selective attention, details, descriptions and the possibility of other interpretations consistently spill over his or her distinct schemes for seeing the world. While Jeff Campbell clearly models James's ethical prescriptions, he simultaneously serves as a vehicle for critiquing these methods.

This chapter will illustrate that despite the obvious influence James wielded over Stein, the story exceeds his theories and therefore requires another interpretive paradigm.

In the second chapter, I focus on the confrontation between two subjects with distinct schemes for thinking and engaging the world. Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity will help theorize the simultaneous desire for and repudiation of the other that arises as a consequence of this dynamic engagement. In this chapter I question whether Melanctha and Jeff ever achieve a state of mutual recognition. I illustrate that, though Benjamin's inter-subjective theory provides a useful tool for interpreting the dialogic process between two subjects with different interpretive

schemes, it assumes that these schemes are constructed independent of a larger sociality and can be cast off in the inter-subjective process.

In the third and final chapter, I show how social and cultural processes construct the conditions of recognition, deciding who will be recognized and in what way. Judith Butler's inter-subjective theory will illustrate the ways in which *Melanctha's* wandering informs her identity and how the limitations perpetually imposed on that identity, in turn, cause her to continue her relentless, and seemingly aimless, quest. Each interpretive paradigm draws on and develops a theme from the fluid and plural meanings of *Melanctha*. While *Melanctha* tells the story of two lovers attempting to exclude the external world and fully recognize one another, it also tells the story of a young woman searching for a form of recognition that her social and political environments foreclose. Furthermore, the story illustrates how identities are formed by the things individuals choose to acknowledge and the things individuals fail to acknowledge. Yet the story does not settle finally into the comfortable closure that interpretation provides. While the story concludes with an objective depiction of *Melanctha's* death, reminiscent of nineteenth century realism, the conclusion simultaneously resists the closure of a single interpretation. Just as the events exceed the character's interpretations, sociality exceeds the dyadic relationship, and the self exceeds its political subjectivity, *Melanctha* spills over the grasp of each theory.

## II. Intersubjectivity and Psychoanalysis: Jessica Benjamin and William James

Theorizing the process by which Jeff's conceptual framework is shattered is a task that demands a more complicated model than that which James provides. In discussing the conflict between distinct perceptual frameworks, we move beyond the subject/object dichotomy of Jamesian psychology, and enter into the postmodern plurality of intersubjective psychoanalysis. Inter-subjective theory provides a means of discussing the role power plays in making certain conceptual frameworks visible while occluding others. Furthermore, inter-subjective theory explains how the subject's simultaneous desire for recognition and autonomy can either explode or calcify his or her conceptual framework. Without this mutual dependence the recognition of difference would be impossible, and without the desire for autonomy difference would dissolve into submission. Jessica Benjamin's theory of inter-subjectivity emphasizes the necessity of maintaining this tension between the subject's conflicting desires. The conflict is between the individual's ability to autonomously construct a self and the individual's dependence on external tools for this construction. In *Melanctha* these tools must be discovered within the conceptual framework of the other. Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity will illuminate the insufficiency of each character's tools and illustrate that *Melanctha* is a story of failed recognition in which each character lacks the capacity to discover the other without sacrificing the self. Following the Freudian theory of identification, Jessica Benjamin opens her discussion of inter-subjectivity in *The Shadow of the Other* by arguing that the boundaries of the self are permeable, and that far from being isolated and autonomous, the self is constructed through the assimilation of external objects. This first idea is not so distinct from the theory of selective attention, in which William James argues that the self is constituted through the assimilation of objects pertaining to a specific interest, purpose or task. However, Benjamin departs from both the Jamesian and

Freudian subject-object paradigm, by distinguishing between the object and the other. Whereas the object refers to the subject's internalization, assimilation, or fantasy of the other, the other refers to the external reality that cannot be contained or controlled by the subject's psychic constructions. In Benjamin's theory, our internal construction of another being and the external reality of that other being cannot be resolved but must remain in a constant tension.

Freud's theory of identification focuses on the subject who assimilates the other in the process of self constitution. However, this process of assimilation, as Benjamin points out, takes the other as nothing more than an object of attention and therefore eclipses the real external other. While Benjamin's interpretation retains Freud's theory of identification and assimilation, it also draws on the Hegelian notion of recognition in order to establish the other as an equal subject. This move not only allows Benjamin to distinguish between the external other and the internal construction of that other but also illustrates the mutually informative roles of the internal object and the external other. While the internal object informs the subject's approach to the other, the external other informs and reforms the internal construction. Hegel, therefore, adds to the process of identification the subject's mounting awareness that he or she confronts another who is equally capable of psychic constructions. The subject therefore depends upon the recognition of this separate other. Hegel contributes to Benjamin's theory the subject's awareness of the threat posed by the other. The other, in Hegel's paradigm, can think too, and can therefore eclipse the subject with his or her internal constructions. If we think of this as the confrontation between two distinct conceptual frameworks, then the questions whether these systems of thinking can withstand the impact of other systems, or whether the logic of one system defeats, negates or disproves the logic of another.

In the text, when Jeff Campbell, the young doctor, comes to tend to Melanctha's dying mother, his conceptual framework is fully intact. Prior to their encounter, Jeff hears of Melanctha through Jane Harden, another patient, and consequently formulates an unflattering opinion of her. Jeff initially approaches Melanctha with a scorn in full accord with his system of values. Through the course of their first conversation, however, Melanctha's external attributes come into conflict with Jeff's internal idea of her. Jeff decides that Melanctha does possess a good mind after all, and not only modifies his internalized image of her, but the manner in which he engages her. The more Jeff acknowledges the goodness of Melanctha's mind the more vulnerable he becomes to her critique of his way of knowing. In recognizing Melanctha's "good mind," Jeff acknowledges not only her subjectivity but also his need for her recognition. He begins "to feel a little, about how she responded to him" (116). Her response, however, is a critique of his approach to the world. Initially he is invulnerable to this attack but the value he places on Melanctha's mind comes to lend her criticism credibility.

In recognizing Melanctha's separate subjectivity, Jeff comes to depend on her recognition of him. Yet the form of recognition Jeff demands implicitly requires Melanctha to accept his "way of working" over her own. Therefore, we are caught in a repetition, in which both characters continually reassert their conceptual framework as the only authentic means of seeing. Simultaneously, each character fails to recognize the other, which their framework excludes, as the living proof of the limitations of conceptual frameworks. In other words, they argue. Like any argument, their's consists of individuals bearing opposing truths, the validity of which depend upon the other's recognition.

What I mean Miss Melanctha by what I am always saying is, you shouldn't try to know everybody just to run around and get excited. It's that kind of way of doing that I hate so always

Miss Melanctha, and that is so bad for all us colored people. I don't know as you understand now any better what I mean by what I was just saying to you. But you certainly do know now Miss Melanctha, that I always mean it what I say when I am talking. (122)

While Jeff suggests that Melanctha does not know enough to understand, he simultaneously illustrates his need to be understood. Jeff deflects Melanctha's critique by imagining that she has simply misunderstood him. Yet Melanctha does not misunderstand Jeff's logic, she merely fails to see the wisdom in his prescriptions. Melanctha refuses to validate Jeff's ethics along with his desire to impose those ethics on "all the colored people." Instead she sees Jeff as a man deeply troubled by excitement, and interprets his ethical prescriptions as a "fear of losing being good so easy" (124). In inter-subjective terms, this is the fear of losing oneself in the other, or the fear of being negated by the other.

In Benjamin's theory, recognition requires that the subject confront difference by coming to terms with his/her own negation. Excitement, for example, negates Jeff because it exceeds his fantasy of control. If "all the colored people" would simply conform to Jeff's ethical prescriptions, then the external world would cease to conflict with his internal fantasy. Jeff, as Melanctha aptly points out, is afraid of difference and of losing his own identity in the alien other. He is afraid of what exceeds his own thinking, and the possibility that a wide gulf exists between the world as he perceives it and the world as it exists. Melanctha, on the other hand, "knows very well what it is to have real wisdom," and knows too that Jeff lacks this (117). For Melanctha real wisdom carries the connotation of sexual experience along with all of its attendant passions, excitements and "deep feelings." Melanctha speaks from a realm of experience that is unknown, unimagined, and incomprehensible to Jeff. This difference threatens and limits Jeff's omnipotence. It suggests not only a lack of correlation between his realm of

fantasy and external reality, but suggests that external reality possesses something he does not. Yet Jeff's notion of regularity, being with one's family, loving one's mother and father, depicts an experience that is equally foreign to Melanctha. Just as Melanctha's notion of real wisdom exceeds Jeff's experience, Jeff's notion of regularity is beyond Melanctha's realm of experience. If Melanctha were to accept Jeff's "way of working" as the sole means of achieving understanding, then she would negate her own experience. The same can be said of Jeff. In order to defend his and her own experience, both Jeff and Melanctha invalidate the other's experience.

Benjamin's theory of the destructive fantasy is not necessarily a scene of carnage that plays out in the mind's interior, though it can be; in most cases it possesses only so much violence as saying 'you are mistaken.' Both Melanctha and Jeff elect this rhetorical weapon as the safest means of destroying the threat posed by difference. Each must believe that the other's failure to agree illustrates their inexperience rather than indicating an entirely different set of experiences.

You certainly are just too scared Dr. Campbell to really feel things way down in you. All you are always wanting Dr. Campbell, is just to talk about being good, and to play with people just to have a good time, and yet always to certainly keep yourself out of trouble. It don't seem to me Dr. Campbell that I admire that way to do things very much. It certainly ain't really to me being very good. It certainly ain't any more to me Dr. Campbell, but that you certainly are awful scared about really feeling things way down in you, and that's certainly the only way Dr. Campbell I can see that you can mean, by what you are always saying to me. (124)

By contrasting Jeff's talk with her own certainty and reality, Melanctha positions herself in a world that Jeff "keeps himself out of." He becomes the excluded, repudiated other.

Melanctha forces Jeff to acknowledge the difference between the real world and his talking while

also retaliating against Jeff for his inability to acknowledge the latent proposition embedded in her challenge. Melanctha's critique can equally be read as a sexual proposition. This proposition, however, is beyond Jeff's realm of understanding.

He operates from a conceptual framework that excludes this possibility. Therefore, in order to proposition Jeff, Melanctha must first challenge his "way of working." He hears only the challenge, not the proposition. What Jeff sees as a defense of his goodness, Melanctha reads as rejection. Yet even as Jeff begins to acknowledge the potential to learn from Melanctha, he still conceives of this external knowledge as something that can be acquired or assimilated.

I don't say never, perhaps you ain't right Miss Melanctha. Perhaps I ought to know more about such ways Miss Melanctha. Perhaps it would help me some, taking care of the colored people, Miss Melanctha. I don't say, no, never, but perhaps I could learn a whole lot about women the right way, if I had a real good teacher. (124-125)

Although Jeff dissolves the complementarity established in Melanctha's critique of his "goodness," his desire is not necessarily to recognize Melanctha, but rather to acquire, incorporate, and assimilate the knowledge of the alien other into the closed system of his own subjectivity. Jeff's desire to employ this knowledge in the service of his own practical pursuits underscores the point that his patterns of thinking and habits of selection have yet to be shattered. Jeff remains trapped in, what Theodore Adorno has called, a "circle of identification, that finally only identifies with itself" (172). Jeff's "thinking" illustrates the desire for absolute domination that Adorno excoriates and Benjamin posits as the condition that blocks the subject's capacity for transformation.

Benjamin argues that "in the absence of inter-subjectivity, the subject can only reflect upon itself, not account for the possible transformation made by the intervention of an other whose

negativity is fully independent of the subject” (93). In claiming that the other’s negativity must be fully independent of the subject, Benjamin suggests that the subject must come to recognize a history that does not have him or her as its center. This is quite different from the processes of exclusion, retaliation and attack that arise as a direct consequence of the immediate conflict between self and other. On the contrary, recognizing the “not I” in the other’s history allows for a form of mutual sympathy in the face of difference that is irreducible to processes of homogenization or assimilation. Yet

the subject’s ability to preserve the other’s difference, while also recognizing difference, depends upon his or her ability to accept his or her own negativity.

Benjamin argues that “the notion of a transparent understanding of the other implies a transparent self, a self which does not allow the existence of its own negative, its unconscious otherness, what Kristeva calls ‘the stranger within us’” (101). In order to avoid reducing difference to something “fully knowable,” Benjamin claims that we must accept a “notion of the self that does not aim at a seamless unity of consciousness by exclusion, by mistaking a part for the whole. A self that allows different voices, asymmetry, and contradiction, that holds ambivalence” (101). Holding ambivalence and allowing contradiction, however, impedes progress, and is therefore antithetical to both

James’s moral prescriptions, and Jeff Campbell’s “way of working.” He remembered how she told him he was afraid to let himself ever know real feeling, and then too, most of all to him, she had told him he was not very understanding. That always troubled Jefferson very keenly, he wanted very badly to be really understanding. If Jefferson only knew better just what Melanctha meant by what she said. Jefferson always had thought he knew something about women. Now he found that really he knew nothing. He did not know the least bit about Melanctha. He did not

know what it was right that he should do about it. He wondered if it was just a little play that they were doing. If it was play he did not want to go on playing, but if it was really that he was not very understanding, and that with Melanctha Herbert he could learn to really understand, then he was very certain he did not want to be a coward. It was very hard for him to know what he wanted. He thought and thought, and always he did not seem to know any better what he wanted. At last he gives up his thinking.

In the first several lines, Jeff grapples with the paradox of understanding the insufficiency of his own mind. His conceptual framework cannot withstand the contradiction, yet he attempts, with little success, to resolve this tension into moral terms. As the passage progresses, the emphasis shifts from moral imperative to desire. He begins in quest of the right course of action and ends in quest of what he wants. Both quandaries fail to supply a sufficient answer. The term “play” arrives once again, yet seems to carry a distinctly different significance than that which it bore in Melanctha’s accusation. “Play” in Melanctha’s critique, implies an autonomous and unified self who engages in a game of talk that lacks consequences and leaves each competitor unaltered by its outcome. “Play” in the context of Jeff’s thinking is the intangible, unstable, mercurial multiplicity of a game lacking rules and boundaries. If Melanctha offers only instability, if she offers something that he will never understand, then he does not want to accept it. Jeff unwittingly straddles the gulf between his impenetrable system of thinking and Melanctha’s difference. He does not know what he wants because he does not know what Melanctha wants. He does not know what is right because he does not know if Melanctha is right. If Melanctha is right, then he is wrong, and if he is wrong then his conclusions hold little value. It comes down to a question of play. If Melanctha is only playing then he does not want to be involved. He might ask her whether or not she is only playing. Yet this too would be of little

use, because the different meanings of the term signal only a far more extensive difference in each character's method of valuing and attributing meaning. Both Melanctha and Jeff have used the term and have used it quite differently. Though Jeff and Melanctha agree that "play" signifies something unworthy of their attention, they disagree on what is worthy of attention. Though language breaches the gap between the internal and the external, the specific meanings that saturate a single word often depend on each speaker's internal system of value. Jeff and Melanctha employ specific words such as "play," "really" and "certainly" to signify a distinction between the real and the unreal. The problem, however, as evinced in the example of each character's use of the word "play," is that these words are rooted in distinct value systems that lend them different meanings. What is "real" for Melanctha, is often "not real" for Jeff.

In order to discover the real, concrete Melanctha, Jeff must attack. Benjamin draws on Winnicott to describe this process of destruction and discovery, "Winnicott formulated the idea that in the course of development we do a rather paradoxical thing: we try to destroy the other person in order to discover that they survive. The paradox is that only by asserting omnipotence may we discover the other as an outside center of experience" (90). For Jeff omnipotence takes the form of an uninterrupted monologue, an attempt to bridge the gap between internal and external that never reaches solid ground for its foundation. When Melanctha accuses Jeff of feigning interest in her opinion, he argues: "You always like to be talking just what you think everybody wants to be hearing from you, and when you are like that, Melanctha, honest, I certainly don't care very much to hear you, but sometimes you say something that is what you are really thinking, and then I like a whole lot to hear you talking" (135).

Jeff's notion of "real" hinges on the assumed autonomy of the individual. Thinking of what everyone wants to hear, for example, is somehow less real than thinking independently.

Jeff's conflation of autonomy and reality derives from his desire for stability. The assumption is that the autonomous self maintains a single identity, whereas the submissive self is in constant fluctuation. Melanctha's silence enables Jeff to persist in the false assumption of the self's autonomy. Melanctha's total submission plunges him into a limitless omnipotence, in which he grows increasingly unconscious of an external other who suffers the impact of his words. Jeff's incessant talk aims at eliciting a response, and thus discovering the other; yet he devalues, and often is not even

conscious of, the unspoken signs of his impact on the other. Though Melanctha's unspoken responses introduce an external center of experience, they are often the consequence of conflicting sentiments, open to multiple interpretations, shifting from one moment to the next, and therefore less viable than a self-proclamation. Jeff continues his verbal quest for Melanctha's stable center of experience by saying "tell me honest, Melanctha, which is the way that is really you, when you are alone, and real, and all honest" (139). When Melanctha fails to answer, Jeff further distinguishes her contradictory identities, the one that is sweet like a "new religion," and the other that is cruel. While Jeff wants to learn to love through Melanctha, he also wants to act in accordance with his own ethical code.

This conflict is in keeping with the tension Benjamin speaks of between the subject's need for recognition and autonomy. Benjamin argues that splitting and projection are the consequence of the subject's inability to withstand his or her own contradictory desires. Jeff clearly cannot withstand the multiplicity of his opposing needs and desires, nor can he choose between them. Therefore Jeff projects his contradiction onto Melanctha, and asks her to choose for him. If Melanctha is a "new religion," then he will trust her over his old way of thinking. But if Melanctha is unreal and unfeeling, then he will return to an old pattern of thinking that

repudiates and excludes her. Jeff seeks feeling in the form of a verbal affirmation and instead finds feeling in the bitter and silent impact of his destructive words. Yet Melanctha's silent suffering is the very center of external experience that he hoped her words would constitute. Her response serves as a further testament to their different notions of understanding:

When you want to be seeing how the way a woman is really made of, Jeff, you shouldn't never be so cruel, never to be thinking how much she can stand, the strong way you always do it, Jeff...I certainly never did know just what it was you wanted to be doing with me, but I certainly wanted you should do anything you liked, you wanted, to make me more understanding for you. I tried awful hard to stand it, Jeff, so as you could do anything you wanted with me. (141)

Understanding, as the passage illustrates, is for Melanctha an act of suffering through another. It does not imply knowledge of an external thing, nor does it imply that this external thing be fixed, stable or concrete. On the contrary, Melanctha's response illustrates that there is nothing antithetical between not knowing and understanding.

Understanding is rather a process in which the other acts upon the subject, and the subject suffers the impact of this action. For Jeff, however, as the previous description indicates, understanding involves resolving Melanctha's contradictions into a unified and singular identity. She must possess a concrete limit that can only be discovered through his violation. Yet Melanctha does not survive Jeff's destruction. Although she presents a self that can be breached and broken, she offers only the opposition of her suffering. She presents no opposing desire, but rather the desire to be and do for Jeff what he wants. To survive destruction, the subject must work through his or her own negation. Melanctha would need to reaffirm herself as the real external other in opposition to Jeff's internal construction of her. She does not. Instead she collapses under the impact of his projection. Jeff, on the other hand, discovers understanding through suffering when

Jane Harden reveals Melanctha's history. Melanctha's history is Jeff's negation, and he too collapses under the impact.

Like the intervention of which Benjamin speaks, Melanctha's history comes as something independent of Jeff, a thing which resists incorporation:

He took care of his other patients, and then he went home to his room, and he sat down and at last he had stopped thinking. He was very sick and his heart was very heavy in him. He was very tired and all the world was very dreary to him, and he knew very well now at last, he was really feeling. He knew it now from the way it hurt him. He knew very well that now at last he was beginning to really have understanding. (144)

Understanding, in this sense, implies seeing the self as it exists for the other and suffering through the impact of this difference without necessarily knowing how or why it happens.

Understanding takes on dual significance in this context, because Jeff not only suffers through Melanctha, but also discovers in his suffering Melanctha's way of knowing. Jeff becomes non-identical. He sees himself excluded from a history of others and at the same time situated among the history of others. He sees himself as he exists for another, endowed with all the accumulated meaning of a past he played no part in shaping. Jeff's understanding does not arise from learning of Melanctha's past. This information has, on the contrary, thrown his knowledge into greater confusion. Furthermore, he entertains a hope, the fulfillment of which hinges on his ability to maintain contradictions; he would like Melanctha to "teach him how it could all be true, and yet how he could be right to believe in her and trust her" (146). This hope, despite its innocent appearance, initiates the process of splitting and projection. Jeff does not acknowledge the contradiction between his desire to remain within his own controlled system of meaning and his

desire to embody what meaning Melanctha gives him. He employs contradiction as a tool to differentiate between Melanctha's past and present, and between himself and a history of others.

Melanctha's history of discarded and forgotten others anticipates the eventual abjection that Jeff will suffer at her hands. Yet if Melanctha's forgetfulness threatens their future, Jeff's memory haunts their present. A difference exists between Melanctha's history and Jeff's old ways of thinking that Melanctha lacks the desire to reconcile. When confronted with this history, she responds, "You could have asked, it wouldn't hurt nothing. I certainly never would have told you nothing" (152). The ironic play of double negatives in Melanctha's response captures the true nature of Jeff's request. Jeff does not want Melanctha to tell him her history; he wants Melanctha to tell him it was nothing. He wants Melanctha to confirm that something real exists between them which requires that her past be breached and empty. Melanctha insists upon a firm grounding in the present. Her response suggests that if, for Jeff, meaning hinges on her repudiated history, and that if, for Jeff her answer indicates whether something or nothing exists between them, then asking has injured something, and spawned an impenetrable nothing in its place. Jeff again fails to see the destructive capacity of his search for meaning. Jeff seeks concrete meaning, a stable entity that can be transformed into knowledge. Instead he is involved in the process of creating meaning with Melanctha. He creates this meaning, even as he doubts this meaning, and the meaning itself suffers destruction through his perpetual doubting.

According to Benjamin, when destructiveness has not been survived but met with aggression or an absence that does not facilitate "the emergence of feeling for and with the other, the self has a choice of condemning the other's evocations of unameliorated destructiveness, or identifying with them" (91). Benjamin goes on to argue that "the self thus limited in its contact with externality remains in the thrall of idealization and repudiation, of identifications and

projections. These then facilitate or even require submission to an authority or redeemer, or subjection to a ‘moral’ identity set up to oppose the externalized, bad object” (91). Melanctha’s refusal to respond to Jeff’s conception of her history limits Jeff’s contact with externality. Because Melanctha does not assert a self in opposition to Jeff’s internal construction of her, Jeff is forced to rely on his own conceptual tools to resolve the conflict.

Having only his realm of internal fantasy to guide him, he must either create an idealized version of Melanctha or resurrect his old moral authority. This moral authority, however, was the cause of Jeff’s former repudiation of Melanctha. Jeff, therefore, vacillates between idealization and repudiation. He resurrects his old way of thinking as the moral identity opposing the real religion Melanctha has been teaching him. ‘I certainly do very badly want to be right, Melanctha, the only way I know is right Melanctha really, and I don’t know any way, Melanctha, to find out really, whether my old way, the way I always used to be thinking, or the new way, you make so like a real religion to me sometimes, Melanctha, which way certainly is the real right way for me to be always thinking, and then I certainly am awful good and sorry, Melanctha, I always give you so much trouble, hurting you with the bad ways I am acting.’ (159) Jeff describes this new religion as “having everything together at once, new things, little pieces all at once” (158). Lisa Ruddick has suggested that this new religion shatters Jeff’s habit of selecting and organizing external data. However, Jeff’s new religion can equally be seen as the “violent rupture of the self” described in Benjamin’s *The Bonds of Love*. Benjamin explains that the subject’s experience of fragmentation and chaos produces a dominant and coherent other that the subject then takes refuge in. The fantasized object, however, is in conflict with the real external other. Jeff follows these remarks by adding, “then it comes over me all sudden, I don’t know anything real about you Melanctha” (159). Though Jeff’s discovery illustrates the tension between the

fantasized object and the external other, the statement also underscores the lack of a mutually informative relation between the two realms. Jeff knows nothing about the real Melanctha, and therefore the real Melanctha does not inform the internalized and fantasized object.

The real Melanctha has taught Jeff how to give himself over fully to experience, and the real Melanctha has given herself over fully to experiencing Jeff. So when he seeks her, he finds himself and returns again to the closed system of his own subjectivity.

Benjamin argues, in *The Bonds of Love*: The self requires the opportunity to act and have an effect on the other to affirm his existence. In order to exist for oneself, one has to exist for another. It would seem there is no way out of this dependency. If I destroy the other, there is no one to recognize me, for if I allow him no independent consciousness, I become enmeshed with a dead, not-conscious being. If the other denies me recognition, my acts have no meaning.

Just as the subject must act and see its impact on the other to affirm his or her existence, Jeff must act and see his impact on Melanctha in order to learn the value of this new religion. Rigid moral codes, on the other hand, have the advantage of absolute values. The meanings of good and bad do not fluctuate on the basis of context, effect, or impact, though the abstract nature of this meaning calls their value into question. Jeff's new religion, however, provides him no means of measuring the vice or virtue of his actions, save through their impact on the external other. When the other fails to respond to or survive the impact, then these actions have no value. In the face of the other's nonsurvival one can readily perceive the appeal of submitting to a moral imperative or authority. Submission to a moral paradigm and adopting a moral identity possess the same attraction as general submission.

Jeff's desire to find meaning through a moral code is not so different from Melanctha's desire to find meaning through Jeff or all the others that preceded and followed him. However,

submission in any form requires an act of defensive splitting, in which something rightfully owned by the self is projected onto the dominant other, or suffers exclusion at the hands of the adopted conceptual framework. Benjamin argues that [S]omething that is pushed out of one psychic place has to go elsewhere; likewise, what one refuses to recognize outside reemerges as a dangerously threatening internal object. This internal object may then reappear ‘outside’ as the dangerous other. . . . We can formulate this as the essential ‘law of inescapability’: nothing leaves our psychic universe” (102). Melanctha is right to suggest, at the outset of the novel, that Jeff’s moral rigidity, lack of understanding, and inability to really know anybody is rooted in his fear of “losing being good so easy. (124) The accusation suggests that Jeff’s fear of external danger is really a fear of the danger within. Jeff’s moral framework fosters his ability to project and attack his excluded desires onto external others. When breakdown occurs, Jeff perpetually falls back into the old habit of situating his repudiated desires in Melanctha and attacking them. Melanctha, unlike Jeff, masks her own fear of loss and abandonment in a form of submission that refuses to admit to mutual need and dependence. Eventually this leads her to blame Jeff for his ingratitude and to claim that she has always done exactly what he wanted. But by this point Jeff is afraid to even speak of what he wants: “Then it came that Jeff knew he could not say out any more, what it was he wanted, he could not say out any more, what it was, he wanted to know about, what Melanctha wanted” (161).

Jeff’s inability to “say out” what he wants signals the internalization of conflict that, according to Benjamin, results from the external other’s abandonment or failure to survive. This internalization equally signals a power shift, in which the abused other “is seen as exempt from the responsibilities of the subject” and makes a “claim to absolute restitution,” and the subject

consequently “flees his own guilt by identifying with the victim and accepting the claim” (98). While Jeff acknowledges the breakdown perpetually caused by his search for Melanctha, he also recognizes the breakdown that arises as a consequence of his inability to continue searching. The subtle breakdown in tension and the lack of reciprocal exchange between external reality and internal fantasy is performed through the spliced punctuation and resulting fragments of the passage. The fragmentation of “saying out” and “what he wanted” throws the dependency of each clause into sharper relief. The clauses “what he wanted,” “what it was,” “he wanted to know about” and “what Melanctha wanted” all stand out as isolated yet incomplete requests. The completion of each clause depends upon the inclusion of an object of action, which underscores the point that Jeff is no longer able to act on an external other. Because Jeff fears the destructive capacity of further breakdown, the relationship settles into a state of false reparation which situates Melanctha and Jeff in the polarized positions of dominance and submission. As a consequence of this breakdown and the foreclosed possibility of reparation Jeff wants “to stay away to work it out alone,” but fears Melanctha may suffer through his absence (164). His submission clearly takes the form of the guilty aggressor, and Melanctha’s dominance is that of the retaliatory victim. Melanctha begins to consider her relationship to Jeff as a form of subservience that failed to forge an unbreakable bond of identification. She acted as Jeff wanted, not as her own need demanded, and so she begins to see herself as independent of this foreign desire. Furthermore, she begins to resent all the trouble that it has caused her. In a sudden eruption against Melanctha’s victimized retaliation, Jeff finally responds:

You ain’t got down deep loyal feeling, true inside you, and when you ain’t just that moment quick with feeling, then you certainly ain’t ever got anything more there to keep you. You see

Melantha, it certainly is this way with you, it is, that you ain't ever got any way to remember right what you been doing, or anybody else that has been feeling with you.' (181)

Remembering, for Jeff, is equated with an act of loyalty that presupposes the existence of a tie binding a person to something external. These ties, however, depend either upon an abstract ethical appeal to fidelity or a sustained tension between self and other forged anew through the immediacy of evolving needs, desires and fears. Jeff's conflation of feeling and loyalty illustrates his inability to acknowledge the fundamental condition of desire: desire is sustained by non-identity, proliferation, plurality and transformation. His appeal to memory illustrates a similar misconception. He argues that Melantha's disloyalty is the consequence of her inability to remember right. It is as if the past, by virtue of its irrevocability, endowed the act of remembering with the same stability, as if the act of remembering was not a process of dynamic exchange, in which both past and present selves endow the other with their own meanings. Jeff appeals to a past that can mend the rupture of the present and set deviance on a course consistent with his memory of a time that was more loving. Jeff seeks sameness in the other, in history, and in desire. Melantha outgrows her feeling just as Jeff grows into it.

Unlike Jeff, Melantha redefines remembering in the context of shifting desires:

You don't remember nothing till you get home with your thinking everything all over, but I certainly don't think much ever of that kind of way of remembering right, Jeff Campbell. I certainly do call it remembering right Jeff Campbell, to remember right just when it happens to you, so you have a right kind of feeling not to act the way you always been doing to me. . . . No, Jeff Campbell, its real feeling every moment when its needed, that certainly does seem to me like real remembering. (181)

Whereas Jeff forces feeling into the service of memory, Melanctha forces memory into the service of feeling. "Thinking everything all over" suggests that Jeff must re-experience the past from a position in which he is invulnerable to the onslaught of sensory impressions. Only after rejecting, accepting and organizing his impressions does he gain the control necessary to begin to explore the meaning of their relationship. Right feeling, for Jeff, suggests that his actions are consistent with his feelings. Whereas, for Melanctha, acting immediately on the basis of those feelings ensures, without the interruption of thought, that one will always have a right kind of feeling. Yet the inconsistency between Jeff's previous way of thinking and the religion that he learns from Melanctha can equally account for his need to think through "what it is right for him to be doing." Jeff is forced into this habit as a consequence of Melanctha's refusal to mediate between the intra-psychic and inter-subjective realms. Melanctha opposes neither his idealization nor his repudiation of her. Alienated from contact with the external other, Jeff is forced to let these projections and idealizations fight it out within himself. It is not the case that Jeff does not know his own feelings, but rather that Melanctha does not allow herself to be known to him. From the story's outset, the meaning that Jeff attributed to the relationship depended upon the meaning that Melanctha attributed to it.

The "immediate feeling," Melanctha advocates, fosters a relationship in which the subject exists for and through another. While Benjamin champions a similar form of immediacy between self and other, she warns that without a dialogic process the subject runs the risk of becoming either dominant or submissive. The dialogic process, according to Benjamin, is the realm in which the external other refines and informs the subject's internal fantasy. Likewise, the internal fantasy refines and informs the subject's approach to the other. If the dialogue ends then the subject finds him or her self trapped in the closed system of his or her own consciousness or relying on the

recognition of a being whose consciousness is not spoken, is not known, and therefore does not exist.

Melantha, on the other hand, believes “that it ain’t much use to talk about what a woman is really feeling in her” (135). Melantha’s silence is a form of submission that perpetually returns Jeff to the closed system of his own consciousness. She provides no external self to conflict with or inform his internal construction of her, while she also demands that he abandon this internal construction. Her perpetual plea for Jeff to cease his thinking long enough to feel things is, in Benjamin’s paradigm, a plea for Jeff’s total submission. If the subject abandons his or her internal fantasy and submits entirely to the external other, then the self is lost. Melantha’s habit of losing herself in the other means that Jeff can only discover her difference when she no longer needs him. It is only after Melantha breaks the dyad and begins to wander again, when she ceases to submit herself entirely to Jeff’s desires that he begins to understand her. Melantha no longer depends on Jeff and her consciousness rises up in conflict with his internal construction of her. Furthermore, Jeff can only discover the significance of “real deep feeling” when he finally submits to Melantha and loses himself. Reading “Melantha,” through Jessica Benjamin’s theory of inter-subjectivity, suggests that it is a story of failed recognition, in which both characters lack the capacity to discover the other without sacrificing the self. This failure is based on the breakdown in the dialogic process between self and other, between internal fantasy and external reality.

Benjamin argues that the other’s history and its attendant claims on identity can enter into the dyad and challenge the internal fantasy of the dominant subject. However, for Benjamin this negation can be worked through and overcome by a dialogic process that re-establishes the dyad. The problem here, however, is that Benjamin cannot help us theorize how each subject’s “ways

of working” are informed by their separate histories. In other words, history never leaves the dyad, and history may not provide each subject with sufficient tools to work through breakdown or achieve recognition. Furthermore, the other’s tools may not provide the subject with the form of recognition he or she desires.

Benjamin’s theory hinges on the assumption that each subject is naturally endowed with similar tools to work through breakdown and repair. Her theory of intersubjectivity privileges the psychoanalytic self over the political subject, a subject that must submit to the limited tools the external world provides when constructing an identity. What we arrive at is a reading of *Melantha* in which the characters forsake their psychological selves and submit to an external other. If, however, we dissolve the psychological self into the political subject we begin to see how the character’s perceptions are constructed by their distinct experiences. This also allows us to see how being lost in the other is not submission, but rather a condition of desire and identity. Judith Butler has argued that “whatever the self is, it will find itself only through a reflection of itself in another” (147). Butler’s notion of a self that is inextricably grafted into an external world will provide a paradigm to analyze the search for self that motivates Melantha’s wandering. In the following chapter I will explore the ways in which the character’s larger social contexts inform their distinct “ways of working” and how Butler’s theory of inter-subjectivity sheds light on the political and social construction of “ways of working.” Just as Butler’s theory of inter-subjectivity extends beyond the dyad, the subject of this chapter will broaden beyond Jeff and Melantha’s relationship. In addition to this relationship, I will explore Melantha’s history of wandering and the ways in which this history informs her confrontation with Jeff Campbell.

### III. World Wisdom: Judith Butler and the Social Articulation of the Self

Stein employs the term “world wisdom” to describe the object of Melanctha’s wandering. It suggests self-knowledge, knowledge of others, sexual knowledge and a broader process of socialization that establishes the limits and conditions of knowledge. This search for wisdom is not performed within a dyadic relationship that strips each participant of gender and social position, but among a series of anonymous men whose catcalls signify a mysterious recognition. Melanctha registers in the minds of these men as a specific type of girl, yet in order to discover the conditions of this typology she must further engage with them. The indeterminacy of the phrase performs the uncertainty of Melanctha’s quest, the “strange experience,” as Stein describes it, “of ignorance, power and desire” (96). Once Melanctha discovers what the crowd of anonymous others desire, wandering begins to lose its allure. Knowing how to model the self on the other’s desire amplifies Melanctha’s power, while foreclosing the possibilities her ignorance left open. If we think of Melanctha’s identity as something that is lost in the other, rather than self-contained, then the conditions of this identity will be established by the other. Just as the production of goods precedes the consumer, the construction of identities and the laws that constrain these identities precede Melanctha’s wandering. Therefore, the constraints imposed on Melanctha’s identity do not arise as the consequence of her pathological submission to the other, nor do they operate within the confines of a dyadic relationship. These constraints are a set of social constrictions that Melanctha is born into.

In the previous chapter, Jessica Benjamin’s theory of inter-subjectivity is employed in this research in order to discuss the operation of power in the dyadic exchange between Melanctha and Jeff. However, Benjamin’s theory did not provide an adequate paradigm for considering the power differentials that animate Melanctha’s history, or the powers of a larger sociality that, in

Judith Butler's words, "precede and exceed" the process of individuation. For Benjamin the subject's power is limited by the acknowledgement of the other's complementary ability to confer or withhold recognition. Yet for Butler, the act of conferring or withholding recognition on an individual basis is preceded by a social process that decides which individuals will be recognized and in what way. When we view *Melantha* beyond the scope of the dyad, we are faced with a history of affairs, the outcomes of which are all quite similar. Melantha pursues men and women who possess knowledge and power and then leaves them upon discovering their weakness. Benjamin might argue that Melantha identifies with this power, and then through a process of splitting, projects her own repudiated desires onto the other. Yet this presupposes that Melantha already owns a viable identity and does not explain why Melantha needs others in order to discover her power. If we consider power as possessing what is recognizable, then Melantha needs others to discover herself. But what allure does power and knowledge hold out for her, and why does she no longer need all those others who are discerned as weak? Perhaps, it is because knowledge in its strength confers identities, and in its weakness constrains those identities. Perhaps, it is because Melantha's quest for a powerful and knowledgeable other is really a search for a self-reflection that is both viable and unconstrained.

Butler's primary critique is leveled at Benjamin's failure to theorize the ways in which social norms function to regulate and limit identities. Furthermore, Butler argues that social norms render certain identities invisible, while acknowledging others only through negation or prohibition. Theorizing the limitations that social standards impose on identities becomes crucial when considering that Melantha's wandering is the direct consequence of her father's prohibitions. Upon discovering that Melantha has aroused the desire of a neighboring coachman, Melantha's father forbids her to visit the stables. Melantha's father demands her

conformity to the socially established notion of a “decent daughter” (94). Indecency is recognized only insofar as it is prohibited. In illustrating the boundaries that a “decent daughter” never breaches, the prohibition points beyond this identity towards other, unrealized possibilities. Melanctha acknowledges the limitations imposed on her identity and begins to quest after the partially realized and forbidden object. While acquiring knowledge of the forbidden object means adopting the prohibited identity, retaining the identity prescribed by her father requires that she remain in a state of ignorance. Melanctha’s wandering takes place beyond the periphery of prescribed social norms. Yet even within this prohibited domain, she fails to find a position that provides a livable self-reflection. This lends further credence to the significance of Butler’s critique. Understanding the quest for recognition in terms of the constraints imposed by social norms is necessary to understanding the implications of the multiple and often paradoxical positions that Melanctha occupies. When situated within the larger social trajectory, Melanctha’s wandering assumes a meaning beyond personal pathology and suggests something about the cultural and political production of viable identities. We are then in a position to ask two questions: 1) what social identities are available to Melanctha and 2) why are they all eventually inadequate? In order to address these questions, it will be important to map out the distinctions between Benjamin’s theory of inter-subjectivity, which takes the psychoanalytic self as its point of departure, and Butler’s theory of inter-subjectivity, which takes the political subject as its point of departure.

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler criticizes Benjamin’s theory of splitting, a process in which the subject projects what is his or her own onto the other. Butler argues that theories of splitting and projection attribute wholeness and autonomy to the subject prior to his or her encounter with the other. Butler also questions Benjamin’s claim that negation can be overcome. For Butler,

overcoming negation hinges on the assumption that the external world can be excluded from the confrontation between self and other. Finally, Butler takes issue with Benjamin's notion of over-inclusiveness, a theory that recommends the "post-oedipal recuperation of pre-oedipal over-inclusive identifications" (136). Over-inclusiveness refers to the developmental stage before social constraints are imposed on the individual, a stage in which the individual identifies with multiple and often complementary positions. For example, the female subject may simultaneously identify with her mother and her father. It is not until the post-oedipal imposition of gender restrictions that this latter identification becomes forbidden to her. Benjamin argues that these prohibitions must be overcome. Her theory of over-inclusiveness allows for multiple identifications and therefore combats the processes of splitting, exclusion, and projection caused by complementary systems of identification. Though Butler is in sympathy with these aims, she argues that a system of over-inclusiveness assumes that the self is a container that can include or exclude the objects it encounters. Butler posits instead a notion of ek-static identification; a term that indicates a process of identification, in which the individual sees him or her self dislodged, decentered, and propelled beyond his or her own grasp. The self is, in other words, lost in the other and this new self must be discovered through the other. Through this theory of ek-static identification, Butler counters Benjamin's reading of the Hegelian confrontation, and provides a distinct analysis of the process and consequence of the subject's division. The aim of this chapter will be 1) to discuss in greater detail Butler's take on Benjamin's theories of negation, over-inclusiveness and the Hegelian confrontation, 2) to summarize the problems Butler has with the aforementioned theories, 3) to illustrate how Butler's inter-subjective approach is distinct from Benjamin's, and 4) to show how Butler's approach augments my previous reading of *Melanctha*.

According to Benjamin, destruction is the process in which the subject, threatened by an external other, destroys his or her internal construction of that other. The external other's ability to survive the subject's destructive fantasy proves his or her separate existence, and limits the subject's omnipotence. In other words, the subject realizes the difference between reality and thought. Thinking about shattering a vase, for example, has no actual impact on the vase. Furthermore, the subject realizes that he or she is confronting another thinking subject and is forced to recognize that he or she may be the object of this other subject's destructive fantasy. This is called negation, a process in which the subject overcomes his/her destructive fantasy only to realize his or her vulnerability to the other. Destruction of the other refers to the subject's fantasy, which is not always survived, while negation refers to the other's survival and the subject's recognition of the other's power to think differently and destroy him or her with this difference. Benjamin's theory of negation, as Butler describes it, is the process in which the self confronts the "not me." Recognition depends upon acknowledging negation, and destruction is unrecognized negation. In other words, destruction is the subject's refusal to acknowledge that the other thinks and thinks differently. Recognition is, therefore, the process of working through the negation caused by the other's different way of thinking. What Butler finds problematic about Benjamin's conception of recognition is that while recognition depends upon negation, it aims at overcoming it. So, while acknowledging the other's independent history, for example, mobilizes the process of recognizing their separation from the self, recognition seems to aim finally at excluding that separate history in order to achieve a dyadic exchange between self and other. Butler first questions whether it is possible to eliminate negation, interruption and breakdown from the process of recognition, and second, whether doing so is even desirable. In Butler's paradigm, rather than being negated by the other's history, the subject sees itself grafted

into that history, a history that both constitutes the subject outside itself and resists the limitations of a dyadic relationship. For example, when Jeff learns of Melanctha's history, rather than merely seeing that Melanctha has been loved by many others that are not him, Jeff would see himself grafted into a sequence and imbued with the accrued meaning of a history that does not belong to him. Butler argues:

If relations are primarily dyadic, then I remain at the center of the Other's desire, and narcissism is, by definition, satisfied. But if desire works through relays that are not always easy to trace, then who I am for the Other will be, by definition, at risk of displacement. Can one find the Other whom one loves apart from all the Others who have come to lodge at the site of that Other? Can one free the Other, as it were, from the entire history of psychic condensation and displacement, or, indeed, from the precipitate of abandoned object-relations that form the ego itself? (146)

According to Butler, each subject's distinct history makes it impossible to contain him or her within the dyadic exchange. Benjamin, on the other hand, argues that the third position is the mediated space constituted through the survival of destruction, and created by both subjects in the process of dialogic exchange. So while desire, for Benjamin, is engaged, co-created, mediated, exceeded and contained by this third position, for Butler desire exceeds the dyad and works through relays that, as the above passage indicates, continually threaten the subject's displacement.

For Butler, the subject desires the desire of the other, while also desiring the other as an object.

The subject thus recognizes in the other a subject and an object of desire.

Butler's formulation of desire initially appears comparable to Benjamin's notion of mediation between the internalized object and the external other. However, for Butler this object is not

merely an internal fantasy of the external other, but also exists outside the relationship as a “partially realized and prohibited” desire (140). Butler does not specify whether the other is the object of this prohibited desire or whether the other prohibits this desire. Both scenarios, however, illustrate the impossibility of containing desire within the dyad. If the other is the prohibited object of the subject’s desire, then this prohibition must come from a world beyond the dyad. If the other prohibits this desire, then the object of desire exists beyond the dyad. Butler’s vagueness on this point also suggests that the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and illustrates the ways in which desire works through multiple relays. What this means is that 1) the subject’s desire for an object outside the relationship may be a tactic for soliciting and intensifying the other’s desire, 2) the other’s prohibition may constitute the subject’s desire for the forbidden object, and 3) the forbidden object may not be pursued, and the subject’s desire for the other, who represents this prohibition, may be the subject’s desire to exclude or ward off the dangers of the prohibited desire. Employing the prohibitions of Melanctha’s father as an example will help clarify these scenarios:

In every way that he could think of in his anger, he tried to make her say a thing she did not really know. She held out and never answered anything he asked her, for Melanctha had a breakneck courage and she just then badly hated her black father. When the excitement was all over, Melanctha began to know her power, the power she had so often felt stirring within her and which she now knew she could use to make her stronger. (95)

Though Melanctha does not know what she has done, she grows conscious of the threat her action poses to her dominant father. As a consequence, this partially realized and forbidden action signifies power. Furthermore, Melanctha’s behavior has aroused the anger of an absent and somewhat indifferent father, and her pursuit of the forbidden object may be in the interest of

the attention consequentially granted by her father. In this case she seeks an object outside the relationship with her father as a means of soliciting his desire. In the second scenario, the other forbids and thus arouses the subject's interest in an object outside the relationship. Though Melanctha's desire is constituted and motivated by her father, she desires an object external to their relationship. In the third scenario the subject shares the other's anxiety over the forbidden object and employs the other as a means of warding off the dangers of the forbidden desire. Though Melanctha's loathed father does not assume this role, characters such as Jeff Campbell and Rose Johnson can be seen as surrogate fathers whose heeded prohibitions provide temporary reprieve from the instability of unbound excitement and desire. There is a fourth scenario in which Melanctha may seek an object forbidden by the father as a means of negating the father, and thus escaping the danger and pain suffered through him. Butler's point is that though the dyad can "become the venue for the convergence of these passions," the passions exceed the other and are oftentimes excluded by the other (141). In limiting inter-subjectivity to the dyad, Butler suggests that we eliminate the indirect relays of desire and repeat the same exclusionary processes of interpretation that facilitate the achievement of a dyadic relationship. Rather than choosing a single scenario from the sequence illustrated above, Butler's critique allows us to interpret desire as constituted through the simultaneous convergence of each scenario. Thus it is possible to interpret Melanctha's desire for safety and excitement not as a vacillation from one temporal sequence to the next, or as a perpetual cycle of submission to the desire of the other but as the dynamic convergence of multiple desires experienced simultaneously.

Though Benjamin subscribes to a notion of over-inclusiveness that permits the coexistence of multiple identifications and desires, Butler questions the notion of owning or self-possession implicit in Benjamin's approach. Inclusion, for Benjamin, names the process by which the

subject owns his or her desire, and therefore does not eclipse the real external other by splitting and projecting this desire onto the other. Butler accuses Benjamin of subscribing to the notion of a sufficient or whole self prior to the act of splitting. As if the subject had fully and autonomously constituted a self prior to his or her engagement with the other and suffered fragmentation only as a consequence of this encounter. Butler, on the other hand, argues that the self is fundamentally constituted through relationality. She claims that there is no self prior to the encounter with the other and that the self is fragmented from the beginning.

Initially, Butler's critique of Benjamin's theory of over-inclusiveness seems shockingly myopic, considering that over-inclusiveness is the recuperation of a pre-oedipal stage, in which the self is constituted through multiple identifications. In the pre-oedipal stage, the daughter, for example, constitutes a self by identifying with both the father and the mother. In the post-oedipal stage the daughter is forced to renounce her identification with the father. Benjamin's theory of over-inclusiveness aims at recuperating the multiple identifications forbidden in the post-oedipal stage of the subject's development. This means that the subject should construct his or her identity by relating to and identifying with multiple and often contradictory positions. Over inclusiveness describes a self that *is* fundamentally constituted through relationality. For Butler, what seems suspect is that Benjamin does not recommend a recuperation of the identificatory processes of over-inclusiveness, but rather the recuperation of a self yielded through the process of multiple identifications prior to the post-oedipal act of splitting.

This suggests that in the post-oedipal stage, as opposed to the pre-oedipal stage, the self has been formed, and any post-oedipal act of identification is only a mode of splitting, incorporation or projection. In other words the daughter should keep this identification with the father to herself, rather than splitting and projecting this identification onto the boyfriend, the husband or

the fiancé. The point is that as a child, in the pre-oedipal stage, the daughter did not possess a self but rather constituted one through her relation to both father and mother. Yet as an adult, in the post-oedipal stage, the daughter has a self and the identifications that originally forged this self are to be kept separate from her relations with the other. Benjamin's formulation hinges on a clear distinction between the intrapsychic fantasy, the external other, and the inter-subjective realm. In other words, Benjamin distinguishes between the self and all the pre-oedipal identifications that constituted that self, the external other and the dialogic process of relating to that other. The question, as I believe Butler sees it, is whether the self can ever be separated from the process of relating especially when objects and histories beyond the scope of the dyad constitute this process. A look at both theorists' interpretations of the Hegelian conflict may help clarify this distinction.

Both Benjamin and Butler ground their inter-subjective analysis in the Hegelian confrontation, yet each theorist provides a distinct interpretation of his discourse. Benjamin believes that the Hegelian confrontation introduces the tension between the subject's dependence on the other and the subject's desire for autonomy. The subject is lord and master of an imagined world. The other, who resists the subject's control, dispels this fantasy. The subject, who has thus far defined him or herself in relation to this fantasy, knows that its destruction must equally destroy him or her. The subject wants to retain his or her control by incorporating the other into his or her fantasy. However, the subject equally acknowledges that the other is outside this fantasy, and therefore his or her control depends on the other's capacity to recognize and accept the terms of this fantasy. The tension between autonomy and dependence can be understood as the conflict between the subject's desire to remain within the intra-psychic fantasy world and the desire to confirm an existence in the external world. In Hegel's paradigm the conflict is transformed into

the struggle between self and other, in which one participant gains mastery over the other and thus confirms the fantasy of omnipotence in the external realm. However, this transformation, as Benjamin argues, only reinstates the original problem. If the other does not resist incorporation in the subject's fantasy, then the other can no longer confirm the subject's external existence. Benjamin addresses the problem by proposing that rather than transforming this tension into the polarized positions of dominance and submission, each subject must retain this tension in its original form. Each subject must sustain the conflict between submission to external reality and dominance over an intra-psychic realm. To privilege one of these two realms over the other would enact the process of splitting and force the subject into a position of either dominance or submission. While Benjamin provides an alternative to complementarity, she does so at the expense of an all-inclusive process of engagement with the other.

Benjamin instates a third position that represents the process of engagement, yet she reserves a place outside this process in which the distinction between self and other is retained. Butler provides an alternative approach to the Hegelian confrontation, one which does not take the fantasy of omnipotence as its point of departure but rather sees the subject's enthrallment in the other as primary. This self, it seems, would not enter the confrontation equipped with a self-definition or a sense of omnipotence that is threatened by the other. The self, for Butler, is from the very beginning entrenched in the other, and the individual must learn the conditions of his or her existence through the other. Rather than being positioned on the periphery of the relational process, the self is lost in the process and is only returned as a different self. The self is not relating to alterity, as Benjamin would have it, but rather, as Butler puts it, "the self 'is' this relation to alterity"

(150). Interpreting a passage from *Melanctha* first through Benjamin's and then through Butler's inter-subjective lens will help clarify this distinction.

I certainly never did think, Miss Melanctha, I would find you to be so sweet and thinking, with me.' 'Dr. Campbell,' said Melanctha, still more gentle, 'I certainly never did think you would ever feel it good to like me. I certainly never did think you would want to see for yourself if I had sweet ways in me. (127)

Benjamin might argue that the preface to Jeff's claim, "I never did think," harkens back to his intra-psychic fantasy of Melanctha. The quality of sweetness that he finds in her illustrates the external other's ability to negate the intra-psychic construction. The mediation between the two realms, which the dialogue enacts, marks the inter-subjective process and is underscored by Jeff's claim that Melanctha is "thinking with him."

Melanctha undergoes a similar process, in which her intra-psychic construction of Jeff, as someone who would never like her, is contradicted by the external Jeff who does find it good to like her. However, Benjamin's emphasis falls on the self who discovers the other and occludes the subject who finds him or herself reflected in the other. For example,

Benjamin would emphasize Jeff finding Melanctha sweet rather than Melanctha finding her sweetness in Jeff. This conception implies that Melanctha possesses this quality independent of Jeff.

Butler, on the other hand, would emphasize the self that is spoken by the other rather than the self that speaks the other. Melanctha is other to herself and must learn of this otherness through Jeff. Her sweetness is constituted through the reflection that Jeff provides. The self, however, is not this sweetness, but rather the process of seeing and relating to the strange sweetness reflected by the other. Likewise, Jeff is not someone who would find it good to like Melanctha. Jeff *is*

discovering himself as one who feels it good to like Melanctha. If the self, as Butler argues, is the process of relating to alterity, then Butler's approach provides an ideal model for theorizing Stein's use of the continual present. In arguing for the primacy of relationality, Butler claims that "verb forms come closest to expressing this relationality" (150). This provides a useful tool for theorizing the character descriptions Stein provides through gerunds and present participles. Furthermore, a theory that privileges relationality over omnipotence helps theorize the relays of Melanctha's desire without pathologizing her wandering as a form of serial submission. The quest for knowledge through the other can only be seen, in Benjamin's theory, as submission or as a vicarious form of achieving the fundamental desire for recognition. Though Benjamin attempts to compensate for the complementarity of previous analytic paradigms, the application of her theory to Melanctha's wandering would nonetheless resurrect a Freudian polarization of desire, situating Melanctha as the passive female who desires the desire of the active male. Butler's theory of a self, relating to the alterity of its reflection, provides a new paradigm for interpreting Melanctha's wandering. Melanctha's wandering is not submission but the process of discovering her own power and how to use it which necessarily depends upon her relation to the other.

In the outset of the novel Stein describes Melanctha in relation to both what she has and what she sees.

Melanctha had not found it easy with herself to make her wants and what she had, agree.

Melanctha was always losing what she had in wanting all the things she saw. Melanctha was always being left when she was not leaving others. (89) If we endow verb tenses, as Butler recommends, with the power to define being, then the first sentence of the passage describes Melanctha through negation, or acts that could not be accomplished. However, the disagreement

between what she wants and what she has points beyond the constraints of not finding and anticipates the dispossession and desire enacted through the second line. The second line defines Melanctha through the simultaneous act of losing and wanting. Desire, as Butler argues, forces the self to occupy a position outside itself, which is equally a form of dispossession. In other words, the self depends upon sociality “to lay claim to what is its own,” yet entering into this sphere implies dispossession because the self does not make the tools or terms that it must lay claim to (7). The final line of the passage has a dissonant effect. Its dual meanings simultaneously contradict and complete the cyclical form of the sequence. This dual meaning hinges on the ambivalent nature of the word “when.” The first implication is that when Melanctha is not leaving, which she often is, then she is being left. The second implication is that Melanctha is never leaving what she has despite that she yearns beyond its constraints. This second implication is in keeping with Jane Harden’s vitriolic claim that Melanctha never really left one, because she didn’t “do things straight out like that” (113). Never doing things “straight out,” suggests an inconsistency, multiplicity and contradiction that is in keeping with the dual meanings. She leaves without really leaving. These dual meanings both close and rupture the sequence of Melanctha’s cycle. Melanctha yearns for what she does not have, suffers dispossession, and yearns for that which she once possessed. There is a certain friction between the lines of the sequence that suggest the contradictory nature of Melanctha’s desire. The lines resist the constraints imposed on Melanctha by what she has while lamenting her consequential dispossession. If we understand the passage as a vague reference to Melanctha’s sequence of failed relationships, then what Melanctha desires to possess and lose is a viable and limited self-reflection. She desires recognition but cannot live with the limitations that recognizable categories impose on her identity.

Butler's discussion of the livable life sheds some light on the ambivalent nature of Melanctha's desire. Butler argues that "in the same way that a life for which no categories exists is not a livable life, so a life for which those categories constitute unlivable constraint is not an acceptable option" (8). While Melanctha resists the prohibitions and constraints that are the condition of the other's recognition, she simultaneously depends on this recognition and laments the dispossession that comes as a consequence of breaching these conditions. When we conceive of identity as something that depends on and is limited by sociality, we can see Melanctha's wandering not merely as a perpetual vacillation between stability and excitement, but as a wandering quest for self-recognition.

Melanctha's quest is initiated through the reflection provided by her father. Her father situates her in relation to her own alterity, and Melanctha discovers a self that is at once powerful and forbidden. Though she receives this power through her father's recognition, his constraints provide no means of realizing that power within the context of their relationship. Therefore, the dyad is contested. Melanctha Herbert always hated her black father, but she loved very well the power in herself that came through him. (90)

The power that comes through Melanctha's father can be read either as the power that Melanctha inherits from her father or as the power that Melanctha holds over her father.

The same thing in another reading of the passage in which Melanctha comes to discover a "partially realized desire" and a mysterious power through her father's prohibition. This is the same power that she slowly begins to discover through her wandering, and that Jane Harden teaches her to use. Using this power can also be seen as one way of performing a gendered identity. Although this identity is forbidden and comes at the expense of social castigation, it confers power upon Melanctha and lends her social legibility if only through prohibition. One

might even go so far as to suggest that it is the only gendered identity that does not actively work at emptying the feminine category of its power. Social punishment is then the direct consequence of the threat posed by this power.

Before meeting Jane, the narrator explains that “it was only men that for Melanctha held anything there was of knowledge and power” (97). Knowledge cannot be separated from this power, and it is not until Jane Harden teaches Melanctha what gives “people in the world their wisdom” that Melanctha discovers her own power (106). Jane had many ways in which to do this teaching. She told Melanctha many things. She loved Melanctha hard and made Melanctha feel it very deeply. She would be with other people and with men and with Melanctha, and she would make Melanctha understand what everybody wanted, and what one did with power when one had it.

Knowing what men want gives these women power. Yet the above passage also illustrates the ways power, knowledge and desire work through multiple relays. If power depends on being the object of desire while also being the subject that recognizes this desire, then Melanctha derives her power from two sources: men, the source of desire, and Jane, the source of knowledge. Jane plays the role of mediator, interpreting desire and transferring the power of knowledge to Melanctha. Yet Jane also represents the knowledge that Melanctha wants for herself and thus becomes the object of Melanctha’s desire. Melanctha’s desire for Jane cannot be contained within the confines of their dyadic relationship. It is the desire of the external others that constitute Jane’s knowledge and therefore Melanctha’s desire. As teacher, Jane becomes the site of converging desires, yet these desires point beyond her.

Jane represents the mastery over a field of desire that Melanctha wishes to acquire. For Melanctha, possessing Jane’s knowledge means no longer needing or desiring Jane. Therefore,

the more Melanctha learns from Jane the less she needs Jane. As Melanctha discovers her power through Jane, she simultaneously acquires power over Jane. Jane loses mastery over the field of desire and her knowledge and power become constrained by the conditions of her own desire. For Melanctha to recognize the limits of Jane's knowledge and mastery is to desire something beyond their scope. Jane's strong and roughened nature and her drinking made it always harder for her to forgive Melanctha, that now Melanctha did not really need her any longer. Now it was Melanctha who was stronger and it was Jane who was dependent on her.

Jane's inability to forgive Melanctha indicates her inability to privilege transformation over stasis. She prefers Melanctha to remain fixed in the former paradigm of their relationship, despite its obvious inadequacies. She fails to provide a reflection of Melanctha's transformation. Melanctha, who entered the relation dispossessed, laid claim to what was her own and now she is returned to herself different than she was. Jane cannot reflect this difference save through negation. Thus Jane becomes the constrained reflection of a former identity. Jane teaches Melanctha what other's want and Melanctha learns how to model herself into a viable, recognizable object of desire. But Jane also "loved Melanctha hard and made Melanctha feel it very deeply" (106). Melanctha longs for Jane and learns to bend and plead with her suffering (106). While this mentorship pivots on the ardent and perhaps erotic elements of their relationship, Melanctha remembers and applies only those lessons that are socially viable. Though Jane is skilled in manipulating a field of socially recognizable desires, her weakness arises as a consequence of her own socially invisible desire. The narrator tells us that Jane Harden "liked Melanctha Herbert for the things she had like her" (105). Yet, what finally can Melanctha do with these things, save remain within the constraints of the other's desire or become socially unrecognizable? The power that Jane teaches Melanctha to use is a power that is

granted and limited by the conditions of the other's desire. Being the object of Jane's desire, however, cannot provide Melanctha with the social viability she seeks. It comes as no coincidence that Melanctha leaves Jane in pursuit of something "realler" (108). She seeks something that can dispossess her again just as she was once dispossessed by Jane. She wants to be disposed, as well, of Jane's lessons, the rules that force her to model a self on the other's desire. She wants to be the subject of desire, but perhaps this time, the subject of a socially viable desire.

Yet, if we consider Jane's knowledge as a critical perspective on social norms, then her lessons become lessons in how to perform identity on the basis of the other's desire. The desire of the other both dictates the terms of this performance and measures its viability, yet the critical perspective retained by Jane and Melanctha illustrates an excess that spills over the laws dictating this conformity. Butler argues that "the capacity to develop a critical relation to these norms presupposes a distance from them, even as there is a desire for norms that might let one live" (3). The suspension or deferment that comes through teaching Melanctha is perhaps the place where life becomes livable for

Jane. Butler goes on to claim that "the critical relation depends as well on a capacity, invariably collective, to articulate an alternative, minority version of sustaining norms or ideals that enable [one] to act" (3). This is perhaps where the breakdown occurs. Though Jane establishes a space in which to critique social norms and desire, rather than achieving an alternative ideal or minority norm, she develops strategies for mastering the dominant sphere. This critical space lacks its own sphere of meaningful action. Melanctha and Jane sustain their social viability only through the practice of continually re-entering the scope of the other's desire. Their ardent

affection and erotic attachment creates for each an impossible identity, an identity that cannot be recognized by the larger social world.

Butler claims that “the thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity” (31). In what follows I will try to discover whether Melanctha’s wandering quest for something more real is an indulgence, or a necessity. Melanctha could do anything now that she wanted. Melanctha knew now what everybody wanted. Melanctha had learned how she might stay a little longer; she had learned that she must decide when she wanted really to stay longer, and she had learned how when she wanted to, she could escape. “Doing whatever she wants” is contingent upon knowing “everything that everyone else wants,” which is indicative of the external constraints imposed by the other’s desire. The passage illustrates Melanctha’s knowledge of the rules under which she must operate and her ability to manipulate those rules. Butler’s claim that “we are constituted as fields of desire and physical vulnerability,” underscores the point that the body is given over in sociality, subject to a set of rules that are not our own making. Though Melanctha’s ability to “do whatever she wants,” initially signifies the liberating capacity of her newfound independence and knowledge, when we consider that “doing whatever she wants” is limited to the option of staying longer or escaping, it becomes evident that the terms of her engagements are not of her own making. Melanctha can stay if she accepts these terms, yet she is powerless to alter them. If she rejects the terms, then she must escape them.

In repeating the claim that Melanctha can escape whenever she wants, the narrator confines her to the perpetual cycle of captivity and evasion. It was now something realer that Melanctha wanted, something that would move her very deeply, something that would fill her fully with the

wisdom that was planted now within her, and that she wanted badly, should really wholly fill her. Melanctha did not need help now to know, or to stay longer, or when she wanted, to escape. The refrain robs Melanctha's knowledge of its liberating capacity. Repetition follows Melanctha's budding dissatisfaction, and we witness "a wanting" that distinguishes itself from her ability to do "whatever she wants." "Doing whatever she wants" is confined to the realm of possibility, whereas wanting, yearning and longing lack an object. They exceed reality, the realm of her possible action, and therefore her agency. Melanctha is forced to persist in what she knows while desire exceeds this knowledge. The opening lines of the passage suggest that what Melanctha knows is somehow less real than the wisdom and deep feeling that she desires. Yet it is this knowledge that traps her within the repetition. It is clear however, that what this knowledge privileges as real is in conflict with what Melanctha feels to be real. While the narrator perpetually falls back on the refrain that Melanctha "was never really married," reminding us of the social forces that distinguish the real from the unreal, we intermittently receive Melanctha's partially realized alternative (85). She initially believes Jeff is the real experience that she seeks. While the narrator informs us that Jeff has just begun his practice and will do good in the future, she points out that this bit of information does not interest Melanctha. It is included, perhaps, to illustrate the tension between what makes him socially legitimate, and what makes him "real" to Melanctha.

Melanctha's knowledge of social practice and institutions comes only in the form of what others desire of her. Knowing their desire thus forces her conformity. In a performance of the dead end cycle, Stein reminds us again that Melanctha's knowledge is the knowledge of what everybody wants. She now could do anything she wanted, she knew now everything that everybody wanted, and yet it all had no excitement for her. With these men she knew she could learn nothing. She

wanted some one that could teach her very deeply and now at last she was sure that she had found him, yes she really had it, before she had thought to look if in this man she would find it.

(109)

The lack of excitement illustrates a disjunction between Melanctha's feelings and activity, as if she remains in a state of passive activity. Butler has pointed out that our being depends on our doing. Yet what we are able to do depends on what is done to us. Melanctha can do anything she wants, yet what she wants is conditioned by what others want, and what she does is conditioned by what is done to her. These conditions do not prohibit other possibilities, because other possibilities are unimaginable. Instead they set an invariable standard. It, perhaps, is no coincidence that the man who finally suits Melanctha knows nothing of these specific standards, and thus seems to promise the possibility and transformation Melanctha seeks.

Jeff Campbell is good and considerate. He does not at first believe in Melanctha, and he does not know what it is she wants (108-109). We receive this brief description of Jeff prior to the foreboding lines "yes, she really had it, before she thought to look if in this man she would find it" (109). The narrator points out that Melanctha already has what she wants from Jeff, while suggesting that Jeff may not have it. Melanctha desires her own desire, the very thing that has been circumscribed and foreclosed by the fixed knowledge of the other's desire. The paradigm has been reversed. Melanctha wants Jeff before Jeff wants her, and therefore she is in a position to define the conditions of this desire. Melanctha's knowledge is the knowledge of what everybody wants. Yet because Jeff does not know what he wants, Melanctha becomes dispossessed of the knowledge that previously foreclosed her desire. She does not know if she can really find the other's desire in Jeff and is propelled beyond herself in seeking this desire. Yet the final line marks the ambivalent and socially illegible nature of Melanctha's desire. While

Melanctha's desire operates outside the paradigm established by the other, there is still some question as to whether or not her desire will be recognizable. Though Jeff brings no knowledge of desire to the relationship, he does bring a notion of social norms that explicitly exclude desire for desire's sake.

I want to see the colored people like what is good and what I want them to have, and that's to live regular and work hard and understand things, and that's enough to keep any decent man excited. Jeff Campbell spoke now with some anger. Not to Melanctha, he did not think of her at all when he was talking. It was the life he wanted that he spoke to, and the way he wanted things to be with the colored people. (117) Regularity is at once a term posed in opposition to excitement, and also a reference to the dominant social standard. In his tacit advocacy of assimilation, Jeff represents not only the regulatory processes that have excluded and condemned Melanctha but also a set of norms that Melanctha's sense of survival or power has depended on escaping (Butler, 3). Yet Jeff is not speaking to Melanctha, and his scheme does not fully incorporate all the "colored people." He speaks of "any decent man," and his exclusion of Melanctha and women in general is paradigmatic of the larger social invisibility of women in schemes for social assimilation. Assimilation and conformity threaten the only means Melanctha has of acquiring power. If regularity and excitement are considered as oppositional terms, then where regularity, in its larger social connotation, proposes conformity to existing norms as a solution to existing social differentials, excitement proposes transformation, challenges easy categories, and upsets social norms. Excitement is linked to desire, whereas regularity is linked to knowledge and understanding. Yet, regularity proposes knowledge in the scientific and objective sense. This form of knowledge excludes a notion of social contingency, individual vulnerability, and the fragility of existing social standards. Desire, as Butler aptly suggests,

propels the subject beyond itself and underscores the social ties that constitute life. This at once opens the individual to vulnerability while also opening the individual to unrecognized possibilities. To desire is to fantasize, and fantasy, as Butler argues, is the very thing that reality forecloses. Fantasy “defines the limits of reality...it allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real” (29). In this way both fantasy and desire open up possibility, and therefore contain a transformative capacity. The subject desires the renewal of his or her own desire. Yet the renewal of his or her desire depends upon its capacity to continually re-create itself. This underscores again the transformative nature of desire. In order to re-create itself, desire must become other to itself. The power Melanctha acquires through desire is at once the power of sustaining the recognition and desire of a more viable, and therefore powerful, other and the power of fantasizing something beyond the limits of unlivable reality.

In expanding the inter-subjective process beyond the dyadic confrontation, Butler’s theories help us see in Melanctha’s wandering a series of unlivable social categories as opposed to a pathological process of perpetual submission. Furthermore, we are able to see how desire for desire’s sake is not merely the excitement involved in losing control but the ability to transform the seemingly fixed status of social norms.

While desire is always a desire for recognition, Butler argues “that the terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable” (2). The fixed boundaries of social norms can be violated by the subject’s desire for the proliferation and alterity of his or her own desire. It is also through desire and fantasy that the subject becomes capable of imagining forms of recognition and ways of being that exceed social possibilities. While *Melanctha* shows the ways in which identities are embedded in social laws and practices, the story also blurs, merges

and exceeds the categories it creates. The resulting excess and indeterminacy of the novella not only illustrates the limitations of social norms, but also the limitations of the language and temporal structure of the Nineteenth Century novel.

Unlike the scientific objectivism prevalent among the narrator's of Nineteenth Century novels, the narrator of *Melantha* refuses to depict events through a cause and effect sequence. The repetitions of previous thoughts and the cyclical structure of the plot create instead an over abundance of interpretations. The continual accrual of meanings, achieved through repetition, generate an indeterminacy in which the 'real' event, the 'real' cause or the 'real' effect cannot be distinguished from the series of contrasting interpretations. The central goal of interpretation, throughout the novella, is to define the identity and character of Melancta Herbert. The narrative constructs a dynamic and often contradictory illustration of Melancta's identity through the interpretations of Jane Harden, Rose Johnson and Jeff Campbell. These interpretations are described as actions in the form of the continual present, a form that describes the process of transformation and the mutual-dependency of both subject and object. Stein's insistence on depicting these acts of interpretation as subjective processes underscores the contingency and indeterminacy of identity.

In sum, this chapter discussed the distinctions between Benjamin's and Butler's theories of inter-subjectivity. I argued that while Benjamin's dyadic model provides a useful tool for interpreting the dynamic engagement between self and other, it fails to articulate the ways in which the larger sociality predetermines the conditions of this engagement. Butler's theory of inter-subjectivity helped illuminate the social and cultural subtext of *Melantha*. It showed finally that the constraints imposed on Melancta's identity are not merely the constraints of other characters, but of a larger social process that establishes the ways of seeing, behaving and communicating.

In challenging the socially established ways of seeing and communicating, Stein's *Melanctha* not only violates aesthetic standards but also social norms.

#### IV. Conclusion

In the introduction, the research makes a connection between identity, interpretation, and action. I asked whether anything in people remained the same, when their way of doing things, being seen and seeing, all changed. Through an analysis of James's theories, I arrived at the conclusion that the adoption of former thoughts illustrates a certain consistency in the thinking subject, while the accrued meanings acquired by these thoughts signify a necessary transformation. The current thought adopts and exceeds the last thought. The uninterrupted process illustrates the individual's coherence and the excess signifies transformation. Likewise, each repetition of the indictment against Melanctha's memory depicts her as a coherent subject who has exceeded her past. Past and present are measured by the change in Melanctha's patterns of behavior, a change that is mobilized by Melanctha's growing dissatisfaction with the present. Once new habits replace the old and carry with them the attendant shifts in need and desire, memory emerges as an artificial indication of coherence and change. Melanctha persists as the same subject with a unique quality of forgetfulness, yet what we settled into as the present has suddenly become subject to a lapse in memory. It has become the past. These discrete moments in Melanctha's history become sites of excessive interpretation. Jane Harden re-interprets Melanctha's stories in light of the abandonment she suffered at Melanctha's hands. Jeff Campbell re-interprets Jane Harden's stories in light of his own relation to Melanctha. When it is no longer useful to remember, Melanctha forgets her need for Jane and her desire for Jeff.

The narrative depicts each of Melanctha's relationships as separate and distinct spans of time, yet we discover later that these relationships actually overlap. For example, the narrator maintains an exclusive focus on the relationship between Jeff and Melanctha until its conclusion. Melanctha does not remember ever wanting anything from Jeff, and we learn through the

omissions of her memory that she no longer desires Jeff. Melanctha's desire exceeds the past, but the narrator does not provide the reader with an object that this excess spills into. It is not until the outset of a new section, focusing on a new relationship, that we discover Melanctha has transferred her need and her desire onto Rose Johnson. The separation of these stories and their overlapping temporality force readers to return to the past with new insights and interpretations. This repetition, much like the repeated assertion that Melanctha cannot remember right, signals the excess, the abundance and the inadequacy of interpretations. Furthermore, both repetitions illustrate the transformation of identity and construct its artificial coherence.

In each of the preceding chapters I have returned again and again to the question of identity. Is the self constituted through relationality or is there an essential self prior to the process of socialization? James suggests that the subject constructs an identity by embracing or repudiating external objects. This theory, however, as argued in the first chapter, overlooks the subject's dependence on the other's recognition. Melanctha exercises the process of selective attention, but this process becomes a distinct feature of her subjectivity only insofar as it conflicts with an opposing interpretation. We learn that Melanctha forgets, for example, because others remember. *Melanctha*, therefore, exceeds this interpretive paradigm. The identity that Melanctha forges for herself exists in the external world only insofar as it is recognized by this external world.

Benjamin provides a theory that suggests identity is created through the process of mediation between self and other. The subject's identity is informed by the other, and depends upon the other's recognition. *Melanctha* exceeds this paradigm also. The external world and the limitations it imposes on perceptual paradigms are established prior to the inter-subjective process. Jeff and Melanctha operate under distinct perceptual frameworks that have been established through distinct processes of socialization. Neither character is free from the cultural

and social paradigms that construct the terms of recognition. Butler provides an inter-subjective theory that allows us to see how Jeff's and Melanctha's identities are constructed through processes of socialization. Yet this paradigm collapses the psychoanalytic self into the political subject. To adopt the paradigm proposed by Butler excludes the possibility of a self that possesses the distinct and inherent habit of forgetting or a self that prefers to be alone and remember. While each paradigm provides insight into particular moments in "Melanctha," the story evades the grasp of any single interpretation. Just as the repeated accusation that Melanctha cannot remember signals her transformation, the story implicates each theory of identity and then exceeds it.

The narrative use of the continual present underscores this point. Melanctha cannot be separated from her relationships, and these relationships cannot be separated from the process of relating. While the narrative provides readers with an onslaught of interpretations, it never abandons the notion of interpretation as an act performed by a particular subject. Interpretation is seeing, an act described in the continual present. It is a relational process, in which a character acts on the past in a particular way and for a particular reason. At the novel's end we do not receive an objective summary of Melanctha's past actions. Her identity does not rest finally in the determinacy of a few concluding lines. She stops acting. She dies. *Melanctha* resists the closure of the Nineteenth Century Novel, the tidy objective summation of 'things as they are,' or were. In claiming that nothing changes in people save "how everyone is doing everything," Stein defines the new identity of the new century through the continual present. This identity, like Melanctha's, resists the fixity, the objective certainty, and the determinacy of Nineteenth Century conceptual frameworks.

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