Falling in Public

Katy Ryan

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FALLING IN PUBLIC: LARSEN’S PASSING, MCCARTHY’S THE GROUP, AND BALDWIN’S ANOTHER COUNTRY

KATY RYAN

There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury-lodging house window, the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his.

—Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway (226)

Suicide is difficult to read and to mourn. It unsettles fundamental assumptions, most emphatically the assumption that life, however painful, is worth living. More precisely than any other act, it illustrates the tensions between freedom and determinism, between being an agent and being a victim.1 The body turns against itself, becoming murderer and victim simultaneously. Already these words—“murderer” and “victim”—fail to work, to signify properly. What is the outside of suicide? The inside? André Breton offers an understandable complaint—“Suicide is a badly composed word: the one who kills is never identical with the one who is killed” (qtd. in Boym 151). And yet, suicide brings the body terribly together: a hand cuts a wrist, legs push off a bridge, a palm lifts pills into a mouth. The appalling hurt of self-destruction seems to lie in this instant of consolidation. She died by her own hand. He took his own life.

In this essay, I examine what happens when suicide, this almost indecipherable action, is incorporated into three twentieth-century US American novels. With “incorporated,” I allude to Sigmund Freud’s theory of melancholy and mourning as well as to the depathologizing approach to melancholy taken by David Eng and Shinhee Han. According to Freud, the melancholic

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person psychically incorporates the lost object into the ego, rather than accepting and grieving the loss. Consequently, anger that would have been directed outward turns inward, shattering a solid sense of self. Eng and Han make an important intervention into this theory, drawing on Asian-American literature and their experiences with Asian-American students: “While the ambivalence, anger, and rage that characterize this preservation of the lost object threaten the ego’s stability, we do not imagine that this threat is the result of some ontological tendency on the part of the melancholic; it is a social threat” (695). Nella Larsen’s Passing (1929), Mary McCarthy’s The Group (1963), and James Baldwin’s Another Country (1960) dramatize the force of this “social threat” and do so through what I call the queer textuality of suicide.

Suicide appears unreadable because, like other queer texts and acts, it is abundantly open, liminal, transgressive. It generates a multiplicity of interpretations and silences. It does not fit into conventional narrative. This adjectival “queer” requires some initial explanation. There is clearly no essential or causal connection between queer sexualities and acts of suicide. (There is legitimate concern, however, about a causal connection between homophobia and acts of self-destruction, attempted and completed.) By naming suicide a “queer textuality,” I do not want to contribute to an elision between queerness and death that bolsters claims by some on the religious right. Suicidal bodies, like queer ones, remain a site of surveillance and the subject of contentious debate about choice, morality, legality, mortality, and reproduction. Rather, with Sue-Ellen Case, Sharon Patricia Holland, and Peggy Phelan, I want to explore how subjectivities positioned by heteronormative culture as “the dead” (or as “the undead,” as always opposed to “the living”) do, in fact, survive—and how this survival prompts a reconsideration of “death” itself.

Margaret Higonnet compares suicide to a kind of photography, named “foto-kadry” by Aleksandr Rodchenko in 1930, that does not aim to capture the whole but to fragment the scene: “so the suicidal cut creates an oblique point of view directed toward an understanding that resides beyond the social maxim, and perhaps beyond narrative itself” (“Frames” 229-30). Both Higonnet and Elisabeth Bronfen have articulated the ways that femininity and suicide have been similarly socially constructed—as the Other, the uncanny, the scandalous, the unrepresentable. The potential of “queer” in queer theory has been similarly located in its “beyond”—in its refusal to accommodate or be accommodated by existing definitional categories.

One example of the queer textuality of suicide can be found in Judith Butler’s Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death. Following up on a question posed by George Steiner, Butler suggests that a focus on Antigone rather than Oedipus would unmake the psychoanalytical paradigm that privileges by normalizing the heterosexual nuclear family. Antigone, a woman caught in an extraordinary web of kinship relations, is not, Butler makes clear,
a “queer heroine,” but she “does emblematize a certain heterosexual fatality that remains to be read” (72). Part of what remains to be read is her suicide; Butler acknowledges this hermeneutical difficulty:

It would be easier if we could say that Creon killed her, but Creon banishes her only to a living death, and it is within that tomb that she takes her life. It might be possible to say that she authors her own death, but what legacy of acts is being worked out through the instrument of her agency? Is her fatality a necessity? And if not, under what non-necessary conditions does her fatality come to appear as necessary? (27)

The textuality of Antigone’s death—its resistance to narrative construction and only apparent necessity—constitutes a queer affront to the power of the state as well as to readings of her death (Butler focuses on those of Hegel and Lacan). Butler notes that Antigone’s verbal defiance of Creon is “chiasmically related to the vernacular of sovereign power, speaking in and against it, delivering and defying imperatives at the same time” (28). After being condemned to death for breaking the law and burying the body of her slain brother Polynice, Antigone hangs herself. Butler traces the effects of Antigone’s act/claim/death on the intelligibility and iterability of kinship itself (“the precondition of the human,” 82). Intentional death also operates as a kind of chiasmic speech act, a twin structure of revolt and accommodation.6

In the first part of the essay, I explore the mysterious and fatal falls of female characters in Passing and The Group.7 In Passing, Clare Kendry dies by falling, leaping, or being pushed from a sixth-floor apartment in Harlem. In The Group, Kay Petersen accidentally falls or purposefully jumps from the twentieth floor at the Vassar club in Manhattan. The fatal falls occur “outside” the time of the narrative; that is, readers are not given access to the instant. Another Country, which I turn to later in the essay, ends the first chapter with a suicidal fall. This novel does not skip over the decisive moment; the intention of Rufus Smith is clear and is conveyed in the first-person: he kills himself by leaping off the George Washington Bridge in New York City. As a queer black character, Rufus occupies multiple positions, including the “feminine” position of victim. Yet, the question of who or what is responsible for Rufus’s death, of what his fall means, remains equally vexed, equally unclear without recourse to American history. Interpretations of his fall within the story, like the previous ones, vary and conflict, and the rest of the novel returns to the jump, approaching it from different characters’ perspectives.

Novelistic discourse has long thrived on the pretense of access to internal thoughts through direct or indirect discourse. In Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Representing Consciousness in Fiction, Dorrit Cohn comments that indirect discourse “probably renders the largest number of figural thoughts in the fiction of the last hundred years” (13). Cohn quotes Friedrich von Blanckenburg, who, in 1774, insisted that writers should not feign
ignorance of characters’ inner lives: “A writer, lest he wish to dishonor himself, cannot hold to the pretense that he is unacquainted with the inner world of his characters. He is their creator” (8). But, Kate Homburger and Cohn brilliantly detail the irony of a narrative realism that is distinguished by the representation of consciousness. A well-rounded character is “realistic” even though access to another’s private self is highly unrealistic. Cohn writes: “the novelists most concerned with the exact representation of life are also those who place at the live centers of their works this invested entity [consciousness] whose verisimilitude it is impossible to verify” (6). Since the determination of suicide rests on a conscious intention to die, this “inward turn” signals an acutely relevant representational matter.

Passing and The Group sidestep this inward turn, staying at a dramatic remove from the interiority of Clare and Kay. While it might be possible to trace the choices made by Clare and Kay and to argue for an agency that extends to their falls, I suggest that narrative sequence and point-of-view work to dislodge the question of agency from the realm of individual psychology and imbricate it, rather, in a network of social relationships. By locating the imaginative dimension of suicide beyond the reach of a reticent narrator, these texts disperse intention over a field of inquiry and render the private act of killing oneself a thoroughly public matter. The deaths fall out of the story time and yet their meanings are imperfectly sutured back into a trembling narrative—“A secret always makes you tremble” (Derrida, Gift 53). The novels locate the meanings of suicide not within individual psyches but within a national narrative, within a “legacy of acts.” This narrative strategy, I argue, both conveys the unassimilable alterity of self-inflicted death and connects suicide to culture less through consciousness than through public space. My readings emphasize narrative sequence, yet causes cannot, as Lisa Lowe argues in another context, be read simply backward. Intention is simultaneously outside the reach of the narrator and inside community relationships, written into a nation and onto bodies. Self-inflicted death registers the overwhelming force of individual despair and/or resistance but also, and this is my concern in this essay, the intersubjectivity of intention, the blood on the frame.

“I won’t tell a soul. Did she jump or fall?”

Early in Passing, we learn that Clare Kendry fled from tyrannical, racist aunts by passing into a white marriage and that Irene Redfield fled from any hint of risk-taking into a tenuous marriage and infinite tea parties. Despite Irene’s ostensible loyalty to “racial uplift,” she does not fault Clare entirely for her choice to pass, to commit race suicide. The women first reunite, after all, at the top of the Drayton Hotel where Irene herself is passing to obtain refuge from the crowded, “burning” streets of Chicago. Irene is relieved to be in “another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that
she had left below” (176). Although this ability to pass (up) into “another world” does not come without substantial losses, Clare confides in Irene that having money is crucial to her happiness: “‘all things considered, I think, ‘Rene, that it’s even worth the price’” (190). Anxious to escape her “pale life,” Clare attaches herself to Irene and to Irene’s social world in Harlem. Irene resolves several times to cut off contact with Clare, but she never manages to do so.

In the final scene, Clare, Irene, and Brian attend a party at the ironically named Freeland’s apartment. Having discovered his wife’s secret, Clare’s husband, John Bellew, barges into the party and races toward Clare, calling her a “damned nigger.” Clare stands “at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her” (271). As John flies toward Clare, Irene hurries to her side, “her terror tinged with ferocity,” and lays her hand on “Clare’s bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free” (271). Clare must be contained by marriage, or death, in order for Irene to feel safe: Irene knows, “If Clare was freed, anything might happen” (268). The danger that Clare embodies, released when Irene opens the envelope in the first scene, culminates in this frantic confrontation between identity, desire, and the threat of freedom. The narrative pauses, as it does throughout the telling of this intense connection between the two women, to reflect back on the moment: “What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly” (271). The narrative disengages from the time of the fall, leaping forward to a partial memory. Since most of the narrative depends upon Irene’s recollection, we don’t have access to what “really happened” either. Somehow Clare falls out the window—which, coincidentally (or not), Irene had opened a moment before. This blurred event causes a great deal of speculation, inside and outside the fictional text.11

According to some readers, Irene kills Clare (Brody, McLendon, Cutter, Davis). Claudia Tate allows for the possibility of suicide, though she feels that Larsen omits crucial information. Tate concludes that “the possibility of accidental death is the least satisfying interpretation” (145). To be “satisfied,” the reader must be assured of some intent—either murderous or suicidal; a simple unmotivated fall would not mean sufficiently. Cheryl Wall reads Irene as a “psychological suicide, if not a murderer” (109): by eliminating Clare, Irene eliminates her desire for Clare. The subplot of Irene’s desire (for Clare and to be Clare—in Lacan’s double meaning of desire for the other’s desire) falls along with Clare’s body; the text “performs,” as Deborah McDowell notes, a “double burial” (xxx).12 One of Larsen’s short stories helps to clarify the third-person reticent voice that generates critical uncertainty about intention. In “Freedom,” a man leaves a three-year marriage only to discover much later that his wife died in childbirth on the same day that he left. Enraged and despondent
that her death rendered his own exit meaningless, he kills himself by leaping out a window. (Thadious Davis remarks that for men and women in Larsen’s work “the price of stepping out of the marriage plot is self-destruction” [179].) There is no ambiguity about the unnamed man’s intention.

Here are the two relevant scenes from “Freedom” and Passing:

He rose, shaking with cold, and groped toward the door. Yes, he would go to her.

The gleam of streetlight through a French window caught his attention. He stumbled toward it. His cold fingers fumbled a moment with the catch, but he tore it open with a spark of his old determination and power, and stepped out—and down to the pavement a hundred feet below. (17-18)

One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone. There was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony. “Nig! My God! Nig!”

A frenzied rush of feet down long flights of stairs. The slamming of distant doors. Voices. (271-72)

With a “spark of his old determination and power,” the man steps out the window in “Freedom.” Although this scene has been cited as a preview to the ending of Passing (Davis 180), the narratives operate in quite distinct ways. The man (who had wished his wife would die so that he could be free) is closer in character to Irene (who had wished Clare would die so that she could be safe) than he is to Clare. The third-person omniscient narration of “Freedom” enters fully into the “mental haziness” of the suicidal man who wants to reunite with his dead wife; there is no dialogue or other perspective from which to view the protagonist. And there is no break in the action sequence: he rose, he stumbled toward the window, his fingers fumbled, he stepped.

The third-person reticent narration of Passing has no access to Clare’s mind, only to Irene’s fearful constructions. This death scene is chaotic and disintegrates into phrases: “A frenzied rush [...] The slamming of distant doors. Voices.” Since “Freedom” does not instantiate race or class conflicts, a strictly gendered comparison between the two stories fails to account for other consequential differences. It is not simply a matter of one narrative withholding agency from a female character and the other granting it to a male character. Shattered by the realization of his wife’s “premature” death, the male character opts for an emotional, individual, romantic, strange, and intentional leap in a nonspecific location. No one is bellowing him out the window. The representation of Clare’s death, on the other hand, seethes with the politics of racial hatred, marriage, social mobility, male dominance, and heteronormativity in 1920s Harlem. Because the narrative glosses over her thoughts and does
not provide an action sequence—she was afraid, she turned, she jumped; or, she laughed, she was pushed, she fell—Clare passes out of literary conventions that stage female victimization or intolerable psychic conflicts.14

Still, the final moments of uncertainty and loss in Passing are complexly marked as female—both descriptively in the focus on Clare’s body and structurally in the ambiguity of the fall. On the way downstairs, Irene is struck by the thought that Clare might still be alive, “a thought so terrifying, so horrible that she had to grasp hold of the banister” (273). Clare passes, briefly, for a tragic mulatta or bourgeois suicidal “white” woman: the “blond beauty” with her “ivory skin” and “ivory face” is either a murder victim or a suicide. Yet, if Clare chooses to jump, her decision is prompted by a white supremacist husband and a desperate friend rushing at her; if Clare is pushed, she is a “composed” victim—“There was even a faint smile on her full, red lips and in her shining eyes” (271). Clare refuses to abdicate, even at her death, her “revolutionary possibilities” or her smile.15 There is something self-willed about her disappearance, about her willingness to risk everything—twice. Writing about Clarissa, Elisabeth Bronfen defines self-inflicted death as “both the literal attainment of alterity through death and the performance of an autobiographical desire” (142). In a far less protracted scene of dying than Clarissa’s, Clare achieves this dual legacy as well—but we only know the complications of her desire through Irene’s hold on the narrative. We cannot think about Clare and her death without thinking about Irene and her desire. It is this relational perception of self-destruction that moves the text—rightly praised for its psychological subtlety—away from individual consciousness, toward community and toward history. The narrative stages an active intersubjectivity that locates intention in the public sphere as well as in the tense, almost illegible, queer “and” between Irene and Clare.

Clare’s disappearance differs from Edna Pontellier’s walk into the sea, Lily Bart’s decision to risk the chloral, Anna Karenina’s leap in front of the train, Emma Bovary’s run to the chemist, and Miss Julie’s acquiescence to Jean. In these realist texts, readers “see” the action; narrators or stage directions convey the consciousness of the main character. Passing offers no such access to Clare’s thinking or to the action itself. Following Todorov and Barthes, Peter Brooks refers to narrative as “essentially the articulation of a set of verbs” (111). The expected verb in Passing is missing. What catapults Clare out the window is nothing. Nothing in the text. And, as Derrida reminds us, “There is nothing outside the text.” The conclusion of the novel—an ending that Davis calls “unrealistic and somewhat ambivalent” (319), that Wall refers to as “abrupt and unearned” (107), that Jonathan Little defends as “consistent with the internal logic and organic design Larsen sets up” (173), and that Cutter praises as “a stroke of genius” (97)—summarizes the hermeneutical crisis. Butler writes in Bodies that Matter: “As a term for betraying what ought to remain concealed, ‘queering’ works as the exposure within language—an
exposure that disrupts the repressive surface of language—of both sexuality and race” (176). This queer ending exposes what the national narrative seeks to conceal as it disrupts the very surface of a proper ending.

The pressing atmosphere of Jim Crow and white-on-black violence confounds an interpolating schema of lesbian-as-victim (Clare) or lesbian-as-murderer (Irene). After Irene has chided her husband for discussing lynching with their sons, Brian protests: “‘If, as you’re so determined, they’ve got to live in this damned country, they’d better find out what sort of thing they’re up against as soon as possible.’” Irene rejoins: “‘I don’t agree. I want their childhood to be happy and as free from the knowledge of such things as it possibly can be’” (263). Irene wants the Drayton Hotel experience for her sons—a world of safety and compromise. Alone after the fight, Irene dwells on her need for security, “the most important and desired thing in life.” Irene reminds herself that “[s]he belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American” (267). Irene’s imagined consolidation of an American identity follows the text’s most explicit discussion of racial violence. Her allegiance to the rising towers of America—towers that will return in Another Country—presages the destruction of Clare. In the dramatic “Finale,” the reader must fill in the narrative gap. Clare’s fall from the Free-land confirms that freedom and safety remain mutually exclusive choices for black women in the United States, and the absence of either obviates the possibility of the other.

Faced with the sudden loss of Clare, Irene asks herself: “What would the others think? That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backward? Certainly one or the other. Not—.” Irene realizes “there would be questions. She hadn’t thought of them, of afterwards, of this. She had thought of nothing in that sudden moment of action” (272). In the public space of the street, the readings of Clare’s death begin. A man at the party remarks: “‘She just tumbled over and was gone before you could say ‘Jack Robinson.’ Fainted, I guess. Lord! It was quick. Quickest thing I ever saw in all my life.’” An official asks Irene, “‘You’re sure she fell? Her husband didn’t give her a shove or anything like that, as Dr. Redfield seems to think?’” (274). Irene insists that Bellew did not push Clare: “‘I’m quite certain he didn’t. I was there too. As close as he was. She just fell, before anybody could stop her.’” Irene’s unexplained “fear” (273), her admission that she was just as close to Clare as Bellew, and the narrator’s report that “Irene was not sorry” (272) point toward her own culpability but cannot verify it. The police officer concludes in the last line of the novel: “‘Death by misadventure, I’m inclined to believe. Let’s go up and have another look at that window’” (275). 16

The window, a frame that separates and defines inside and outside, seems a fitting destination for the subject trying to settle the cause of death in this novel. Earlier, the narrator tells us that what Irene feels about her situation is “not so much resentment as dull despair because she […] could not separate individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry” (260). Irene cannot
distinguish herself from Clare—and the narrative voice cannot distinguish itself from Irene. Irene sees something in Clare’s eyes “for which she could find no name.” The narrator, who does not provide this missing name, further reports that Irene is drawn to Clare by something “utterly beyond any experience or comprehension of hers” (206). Again, the narrator does not intervene to name what Irene cannot. Nor, in the final scene, does the narrator fill in the crucial blank in Irene’s memory: “What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember.” There is no window into this future tense. The ambiguity here results not from the consciousness of the female character herself but from the “outer” fiction of a narrative voice that is fully implicated in the “inner” fiction of Irene. Who, importantly, is unable to separate herself from Clare. So, when Clare falls out the window, the story ends. The intersubjective binds of the narration—the narrator’s boundedness to Irene, Irene’s boundedness to Clare—are broken. Irene who cannot avoid the communality of Clare’s death faints into darkness, hearing “centuries after” the officer’s comment about the window. Time again lurches forward as Irene hears the voice of the official record insufficiently summing up disaster.

Thirty-five years after *Passing*, Mary McCarthy published *The Group* (1963), a novel that has received far less critical attention, though it enjoyed two years on the bestsellers list. A significant amount of controversy arose from the “patois of privilege that engulfs the book” (Brightman 483) and from its unusual narration. One reviewer averred that McCarthy “‘has done for the pessary what Herman Melville did for the whale’” (qtd. in “Meeting” 65). The novel follows the lives of eight Vassar graduates, detailing the women’s professional, marital, and sexual struggles. The narrative voice rotates to adopt itself to the consciousness of each group member; Brightman calls the book a “ventriloquist’s tour de force” (494). In a reading of *The Group* in November 1963, McCarthy referred to the “chorus” of the first and last chapters, which are not determined by any one character. Readers must, she explained, hear the “babble and gabble of the entire group.” Even in the intervening chapters, dominated by particular characters’ voices, the group presence remains; what McCarthy called “Heidegger’s chatter” threatens to overwhelm social differences and personal testimonies. This controlled calamity of voices tells the story.

The novel begins in 1933 with the marriage of Kay Strong and Harald Petersen, and concludes seven years later with the bombing of England and Kay’s death: “Kay was dead, at twenty-nine. It was a beautiful July day, like the June day of Kay’s wedding” (373). The group gathers for the framing events of marriage and death. Kay, the “‘girl who went east and made good’” (344), tries to pass at Vassar as someone from old money. Dottie Renfield observes that “only tiresome people, or to be frank, outsiders were concerned” about the social conventions that preoccupied Kay (51). Clare “had never been exactly one of the group, just as she’d never been merely the janitor’s
daughter” (183), and Kay “was a little bit of an outsider and nobody wanted her to feel that” (18). In her essay on Madame Bovary, McCarthy remarks that “Emma’s ‘tragedy’ from her own point of view is her lack of purchasing power” (87). The fate of Kay is not unrelated to this assessment of Emma. Kay’s marriage, relinquishment of her “Strong” name, and attachment to bourgeois accoutrements (she has a “a ruthless hatred of poor people,” 98) precipitate her fall. Kay attempts to pass her marriage off as a success—“to bind him [Harald] with possessions” (338)—but Harald is fired from his theater work, begins drinking heavily, and finally has Kay committed to a psychiatric institution for defending herself, with a butter knife, against his assaults. Kay tells Polly: “‘You know, I saw stars, the way they do in the funny papers. It was silly, but I hit him back. Then he knocked me down and kicked me in the stomach’” (327). In the hospital, Kay agrees to remain a patient, thinking she can prove her sanity; she “reminded herself that she was free to leave. It was her own choice that she was staying […] But as she advanced to the dining room, a terrible doubt possessed her. They were using psychology on her: it was not her own choice, and she was not free” (349). This realization that she is not free constitutes the last narrative entry into Kay’s mind.

Chatter replaces consciousness, and we learn from other characters that Kay loses her job at Macy’s, is dispossessed of her apartment, moves to Utah and back to New York. As World War II begins, Kay becomes “very war conscious, like many single women” (379), searching the sky for hostile planes. Her death accompanies this act of scanning the skies; “somehow” she falls out a window at the Vassar club (379). The maid at the Vassar Club explains to the police that “she had often seen Kay craning out the window and warned her against doing it” (381). If Passing leaps over the “moment of sudden action,” The Group leaps over the entire scene of death, which “happens” in the time-space between chapters. In chapter fourteen, two members of the group, Priss and Norine, meet in the park, have a conversation about Kay, and go to Norine’s apartment for coffee and more uncomfortable conversation. Chapter fifteen begins:

After that Priss chose a new location in the Park […] [S]he did not see Norine again till Kay’s funeral. Then more than a year had passed, a terrible year, and everything had changed. The war had broken out. Lakey had come back from Europe. France had fallen; the Luftwaffe was bombing England, and Kay was dead, at twenty-nine. (373)

Kay’s death is announced in a prepositional phrase, and a year, “a terrible year,” is passed over in a sentence. This proleptic chronicle situates Kay’s fall alongside the bombing of England and the collapse of France.

Chronologically, Kay’s death occurs after Elinor (Lakey) Eastlake’s return from Europe, after the fall of France and during the bombing of England. Mrs. Davison, Helena’s mother, considers Kay “‘the first American war casualty.’
‘Oh, Mother!’ protested Helena. ‘That’s a ridiculous way of putting it.’ But in a ridiculous way it was true” (379). Indeed, the group will always associate Kay’s death with “the voice of the announcer recounting the night’s casualties” on the radio (380). When the group gathers to prepare for the funeral, Libby wants to know: “‘Now, girls,’ she said, hitching forward in her chair and examining a biscuit, ‘tell me. I won’t tell a soul. Did she jump or fall?’” (378) Mrs. Davison insists that it was an accident: “‘Kay had no intention of taking her own life’” (379). She measures the window and deduces that “‘a girl of Kay’s height could easily have lost her balance and gone out.’” As additional evidence against a suicide, Mrs. Davison cites the burning cigarette that Kay had left in the ashtray, arguing that no young woman would kill herself in the middle of a cigarette (381). (Clare tosses her cigarette out the window before her fall.) Harald disagrees, assuring Lakey that Kay had committed suicide out of “sheer competitiveness”: “‘For years I’ve been trying to kill myself, ever since I’ve known her […] She decided to show me how to do it. She could do it better. On the first try’” (393). This reticence at the critical juncture—the narrative deferral to other characters’ interpretations, the absence of Kay’s consciousness for the year before her fall—secures the secret of intent. The police declare the death accidental, and Kay is spared burial in “unhallowed ground.”

As the group heads toward the cemetery to bury Kay, the narrative makes a telling turn back to April and to Lakey’s arrival: “Kay had been alive then of course, just back from Utah” (387). Lakey, “the taciturn brunette beauty of the group” (12), had disappeared to Europe and lived with a female lover. McCarthy considered Lakey “‘a kind of value center’”; “‘she is what’s not in the book’” (qtd. in Brightman 583). When Lakey disembarks with her female lover, the welcoming group is uneasy and bothered. Unable to cast off the straight paradigm entirely, Kay translates the couple into familiar terms: “It was Kay who caught on first. Lakey had become a Lesbian. This woman was her man” (388). Several queer associations unsettle the heterosexual paradigm that defines the daughters of Vassar ’33. It was Lakey who first invited Kay into the group. According to Dottie, Lakey liked Kay best “‘in her heart of hearts’” (21). Although both Helena and Kay had a “crush” on Lakey (135), Lakey believes that “poor normal Kay would not have sinned by being her prey” instead of Harald’s (397). Norine informs Priss that the doctors considered Kay’s sexuality the cause for her depression: Kay “‘had persecution delusions that focused on me. The doctors felt there was some Lesbian attachment […] They never settled on a final diagnosis. But a lot of basic things were the matter. Sex, competitiveness with men. An underlying Lesbian drive that was firmly repressed’” (363-64). Norine’s self-serving appraisal of Kay as a jealous wife ruled by “penis-envy” has little validity, and Priss interrupts Norine’s narrative to ask, “‘Don’t you think […] that the depression had something to do with it?’” (364). Priss then recounts the effects of the economy
on Harald and Kay’s strained marriage. Lakey, the surviving “value center” and queer woman “outside” the plot, achieves some mobility and freedom: “only Lakey emerges in command of her energy and power at the end of the novel” (Martin 200). Kay, the ostensibly straight woman “inside” the plot, falls out a window, a casualty of (hetero)sexist psychiatric treatment, male violence, economic instability, and international war. Her fall also moves the chatty narrative into a direct acknowledgement of homophobia.

The sequential detour back to Lakey’s arrival in the United States provokes a comparison between the two women who have been absent from the collective narration of Kay’s death. When the narrative returns to the funeral procession, Harald asks Lakey if she had been in love with Kay. Lakey, not answering Harald’s question, imagines Kay the subject of a painting, musing on her neck and waist:

“She was lovely in her sophomore year […] Like a wild flower herself. It’s a kind of country beauty I’m particularly fond of. Very paintable. Who might have done her? Caravaggio? Some of the Spaniards? Anyone who painted gypsies. Or mountain people. She had a beautiful neck, like a stem. And such a strong back and tapering waist.” (394-95)

Feigning openmindedness, Harald asks Lakey if she ever had sex with Kay; Lakey responds: “‘You ought to have asked Kay […] She would have told you. She was such an honest girl at the end.’” Harald explodes: “‘Did you corrupt the whole group? What a pretty picture […] What a filthy Lesbian trick’” (396-97). Harald frantically tries to exclude Lakey from mythic America: “‘You ought to have stayed in Europe where the lights are going out. You belong there; you’re dead […] You have no part of America’” (397). For Harald, war-devastated Europe, where Lakey had gone to lead an openly gay life, stands in for death; he desperately reaches for a weapon against the implication that his wife had been sexually intimate with a woman: she must have been “corrupted” by the “filthy” un-American lesbian.

The ending of the novel illustrates Dale Bauer’s theory that suicide operates as a metaphor “for a refusal to be conscripted; suicide forces the internal dialogue into the open” (4). Lakey has “no part of America,” and Kay, the discarded wife and disillusioned consumer, is dead, at twenty-nine. The exacting violence of a nation is registered on the body—the mutilated body in *Passing*, the snapped neck in *The Group*. Irene struggles with the physical loss of Clare, lingering on the “vital glowing thing”: “Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness” (272). Irene, who tries for the duration of the novel to move “away from the seduction of Clare Kendry’s smile,” finds herself traumatized in the stairwell by the idea of “the glorious body mutilated” (273). In *The Group*, the narrator explains, “Luckily [Kay’s] fall had been broken by a ledge on the thirteenth [floor] and she had landed
in an awning, so that she was not smashed to bits; only her poor neck had snapped” (375). And just as Clare’s death is prefaced by an argument about how to explain lynchings to black children, Kay’s funeral segues into a battle over the character of a nation, a nation untroubled by its class stratification and institutionalized heterosexism. Amid the chatter, the text launches a critique of individualism, progress, and the nuclear family. In the end, the “paintable” female body is dead on the streets of New York City, having fallen from the heights of Vassar.

Symbolically and literally, falling occurs after the point of no return. Gravity takes over. We fall in depression; we fall in dreams; we fall in love. In each circumstance, some power presumably greater than ourselves takes over, and we are rendered powerless. As Freud comments in “Mourning and Melancholy,” “In the two opposed situations of being most intensely in love and of suicide the ego is overwhelmed by the object, though in totally different ways” (589). A woman’s death by falling implicates female passivity, even as it warns against the dangerous activity of women as sexual subjects.¹⁹ Novels have thrived on this thematic, one that Richardson deployed with earnest verbosity and Flaubert with such sustaining candor. McCarthy writes of Emma Bovary’s suicide: “It is inevitable because it is ordinary” (86). Or, at least ordinary in literature.²¹

In “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman,” Freud describes an eighteen-year-old woman who had tried to kill herself by jumping over a wall onto a railway track. The catalyst for the jump was the certainty that her father had just seen her walking down the street with a potential female lover. Freud reads the daughter’s queer desire as a sign of regressive attachment to her mother, itself a retreat from the frustrations of an unfulfilled Oedipal attraction to her father. He interprets her jump as the desire to have her father’s child and notes that the German word for “fall” (niederkommen) means both “to fall” and “to be delivered of a child” (162). In her study of Freud’s metaphors, Diana Fuss questions the assumption of a prior father-daughter sexual attraction (“Why, in short, is the daughter’s rivalry assumed to be with the mother and not the father” [6]), and she identifies Freud’s tendency to “frame sexuality as an injurious event” (9). Fuss suggests that, in particular, homosexuality in Freud’s work is less about desire than identification in overdrive [...] This overdrive is also implicitly a death drive: cadere (Latin for “to fall”) etymologically conjures cadavers. For Freud every fall into homosexuality is inherently suicidal since the “retreat” from oedipality entails not only the loss of desire but the loss of a fundamental relation to the world into which desire permits entry—the world of sociality, sexuality, and subjectivity. (19)

She concludes, “What Freud gives us in the end is a Newtonian explanation of sexual orientation in which falling bodies are homosexual bodies, weighted
down by the heaviness of multiple identifications, and rising bodies are
diseases transferred by the weightlessness of desires unmoored
from their (lost) objects" (20). The suicidal subjects in Passing and The Group
(and, in a moment, Another Country) are variously marked as outsiders and
could be read through this Freudian lens of social gravity, as bodies overly
burdened with identifications. This would, I think, diminish the literal impulse
of the falling scenes—"Incorporation," writes Kevin Ohi, "is radically anti-
metaphorical" (277)—and overlook what Freud’s case study overlooks, the
violence of heteronormativity. These texts point to explicit racial, sexual, and
economic pressures rather than to a notion of "inherent" suicidality.

Go on up, said Rufus. I’m helping you up.

One lies about the body but the body does not lie about itself; it cannot lie
about the force which drives it.

—James Baldwin, Another Country (212)

Yet when a lie is told the body is cast into a state of profound disturbance. One
must choose then between oneself and society.

—Susan Griffin, A Chorus of Stones (330)

We first meet Rufus Scott past midnight, at midtown, "facing Seventh
Avenue, at Times Square" (3):

The great buildings, unlit, blunt like the phallus or sharp like the spear, guarded
the city which never slept.

Beneath them Rufus walked, one of the fallen—for the weight of this city
was murderous—one of those who had been crushed on the day, which was every
day, these towers fell. Entirely alone, and dying of it, he was part of an
unprecedented multitude. (4)

Rufus, a jazz drummer who has disappeared from his friends and family, is
dying, both "entirely alone" and "part of an unprecedented multitude." Having passed the day in a movie theater, fending off "caterpillar fingers
between his thighs," he is broke, hungry, "peddling his ass," angry, alone,
exhausted, dispossessed: "nothing of his belonged to him anymore." While
propositioned by a white man, Rufus silently threatens: "I’ll beat the living shit
out of you. I don’t want no more hands on me, no more, no more, no more."
Praying to be spared this humiliation—"I’ve go so little left, Lord, don’t let me
lose it all" (43)—he refuses to go home with the man and shows up at his best
friend’s house where the inexorable occurs to him: "nothing would stop it,
nothing: this was himself. Rufus was aware of every inch of Rufus. He was
flesh: flesh, bone, muscle, fluid, orifices, hair, and skin. His body was
controlled by laws he did not understand. Nor did he understand what force
within this body had driven him into such a desolate place” (54). The remaining 350 pages return to the question of “what force”—what force destroys and what, if any, it saves.

The first section of the novel follows Rufus’s movements and memories through the “murderous” streets. He thinks of Leona, the white Southern woman on whom he had vented his rage, a remembering that is also “- somehow—to remember the eyes of his mother, the rage of his father, the beauty of his sister. It was to remember the streets of Harlem, the boys on the stoops, the girls behind the stairs and on the roofs, the white policeman who had taught him how to hate” (6). Rufus is a man watched, by the usher in the movie theatre, the Johns on the street, the woman with “pitying wonder” (84), his friends, lovers, the police that police the novel starting with the second paragraph: “The policeman passed him, giving him a look” (3). His black male body is under surveillance. The refrain in his head comes from the blues: “I wouldn’t mind being in jail but I’ve got to stay there so long […]” (82). On the subway, in an interior monologue that anticipates Baraka’s mythic train ride, Rufus considers the “[m]any white people and many black people, chained together in time and in space, and by history, and all of them in a hurry. In a hurry to get away from each other, he thought, but we ain’t never going to make it. We been fucked for fair” (86). Rufus arrives, aware that the pain will never stop, at the George Washington Bridge. There, he sees the city on fire.

He whispered, I’m sorry, Leona, and then the wind took him, he felt himself going over, head down, the wind, the stars, the lights, the water, all rolled together, all right. He felt a shoe fly off behind him, there was nothing around him, only the wind, all right, you motherfucking Godalmighty bastard, I’m coming to you. (88)

With a curse from the “bridge built to honor the father of the country, Rufus leaps” (87).

Like the fall of Clare, Rufus’s death has generated sharp criticism both from those seeking a model of queer black survival and those unsympathetic to gay liberation.22 Most famously, Eldridge Cleaver charged Baldwin with “slander[ing]” Rufus. Although Cleaver identified Baldwin as one of the “first rate black writers” in the United States (Post-Prison 52) and “treasure[d]” his work, including Another Country (“Notes” 72), he regretted the creation of Rufus: “Rufus Scott, a pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man’s pastime of committing suicide, who let a bisexual homosexual fuck him in his ass, and who took a Southern Jezebel for his woman, with all that these tortured relationships imply, was the epitome of a black eunuch who has completely submitted to the white man” (73).23 More recently, Terry Rowden refered to Rufus as “a case of internalized racism of almost Frankensteinian proportions.” Rowden claims that his is not the death of a “tragically self-aware black man” but the overdetermined destruction of an alienated “white/black” man within bourgeois society (42).
Marlon Ross and Ohi offer quite different readings of Rufus. Ross rightly argues that the narrative insists on the impossibility of separating Rufus’s sexual and racial identities. Playing off Houston Baker’s language, Ross suggests instead that “[i]t could easily be argued that Another Country is exactly a prolegomenon for a revolution that is (homo)sexual and racial simultaneously, that the fire next time cannot merely be a fire that sears the racial existence of Americans but also must be one that disrupts their sexual psychology” (19). Ohi suggests that the “melancholic resurgence” of Rufus’s death throughout the text disturbs any reading of, on the one hand, transcendence and revelation, or, on the other, scapegoating and denial. He points out that the character we suspect will be the main protagonist dies early in the novel, a decision that “seems to risk undermining the coherence of his whole novel” (278). This risk, however, is critical to what he calls the “novel’s startlingly prescient social critique” (280). Conceptualizing Rufus’s place in the novel in terms of incorporation, Ohi considers Rufus

the figure of the crypt: The text’s syntactical reenactments of Rufus’s death point to his central, traumatic place in the characters and the narrative itself. For the characters, Rufus seems melancholically undead; he returns over and over to haunt them, asserting his presence through the reenactments that commemorate him. (278)

As the haunting inside/outside queer subject, Rufus cannot be decoded. Ohi’s analysis, which compares the crypt to the epistemology of the closet, attends most carefully to the structural force and function of suicide in the text.

Structurally, the novel reproduces the incoherence and lostness that Baldwin associated with American identity, and it never recovers from Rufus’s death. The first chapter of Book Three, “Toward Bethlehem,” returns to the George Washington Bridge. Vivaldo is dreaming. He is running in the rain, being chased, toward a high stone wall, feeling like he had “forgotten—forgotten—what? some secret, some duty, that would save him” (381). The wall is slippery and rough; he cannot climb it. Trombones, clarinets, and drums begin to play the blues. Rufus is next to him. “Go on up, said Rufus. I’m helping you. Go up! Rufus’ hands pushed and pushed and soon Vivaldo stood, higher than Rufus had ever stood, on the wintry bridge, looking down on death. He knew that this death was what Rufus most desired” (382). He sees Ida in a distant meadow and knows she is waiting, “in collusion with her brother, for his death. Then Rufus came hurtling from the air, impaling himself on the far, spiked fence which bounded the meadow” (382). The dream ends with Rufus holding out his arms to Vivaldo and Vivaldo’s grateful embrace. Vivaldo wakes to his arms clinging to Eric, not Rufus, whose lips are against his neck and chest: “Immediately, he felt that he had created his dream in order to create this opportunity; he had brought about something that he had long desired” (383). He and Eric have sex for the first time.
Rufus’s conjured presence continues as Vivaldo “surrendered to the luxury, the flaming torpor of passivity, and whispered in Eric’s ear a muffled, urgent plea” (385). This position of vulnerability and power brings him to Rufus, who had certainly thrashed and throbbed, feeling himself mount higher, as Vivaldo thrashed and throbbed and mounted now. Rufus. Rufus. Had it been like this for him? And he wanted to ask Eric, What was it like for Rufus? What was it like for him? Then he felt himself falling, as though the weary sea had failed, had wrapped him about, and he were plunging down. (386)

Vivaldo is preoccupied by Rufus, fallen and impaled, and sex with Eric is a return to the secret and the duty of loving Rufus. The night before, Vivaldo had told Eric about one of the last nights he had spent with Rufus. After putting Leona in a cab, Vivaldo had climbed into bed beside Rufus with the “weirdest feeling that he wanted me to take him in my arms. And not for sex, though maybe sex would have happened.” Vivaldo, who could not sleep, kept “vigil” over Rufus: “I loved Rufus, I loved him, I didn’t want him to die.” After Rufus jumped, Vivaldo had wondered if he could have made a difference; he tells Eric he still wonders “what would’ve happened if I’d taken him in my arms, if I’d held him, if I hadn’t been afraid” (342). With Eric, Vivaldo dreams his guilt and desire in order (he speculates) to wake into Eric’s willing arms. Sex merges with falling/death and he dozes with gratitude.26

Another Country thrives on sexual triangles (and rectangles) that connect Rufus in several directions—to Eric, Yves, Vivaldo, and Cass. Eric sees Rufus in his Parisian lover Yves; Vivaldo thinks of Rufus as he and Eric have sex; Eric sees the cufflinks that he gave to Rufus “as a confession of his love” (249) dangling “heavy and archaic” from the ears of Ida; leaving Rufus’s funeral in a cab, Cass, who had liked but not known Rufus well, “wondered why, in that moment, she had so hated the proud towers, the grasping antennae. She had never hated the city before” (126). If the memory of Rufus functions to bring two men together, giving Vivaldo the sense that there is one man on earth who loves him, it also forces Ida and Vivaldo to confront the formidable racial divide between them. In their final conversation, Ida insists that neither Vivaldo nor his other white friends really knew Rufus: “‘How could you—how can you—dreaming the way you dream? You people think you’re free. That means you think you’ve got something other people want—or need. Shit’” (413). Ida changes the tense to the present, asserting Vivaldo’s continuing ignorance of Rufus. When Vivaldo accuses Ida of hating white people (Ida must address this accusation more than once), she retorts,

“This all began because I said that you people—”
“Listen to yourself. You people!”
“—didn’t know anything about Rufus—”
“Because we’re white.”
"Because he was black."
"Oh, I give up. And, anyway, why must we always end up talking about Rufus?"
(414-15)

Ida and Vivaldo must end up talking about Rufus because his life is being misread as pathetic or inexplicable. By emphasizing Rufus's blackness, and then her own, Ida attempts to keep the conversation focused on black experience unmediated by white misunderstanding of it.

A broken body again serves as an insufficient interpretive site. Ida asserts her difference from the other interpreters, claiming that she knows more about what happened to Rufus because she "watched it happen—from the beginning. I was there" (415). Ida cannot, because of her homophobia, adequately speak to her brother's history—she was not "there" for everything—but she can describe him as a boy and what his body looked like after it was recovered.

"When we saw Rufus's body, I can't tell you. My father stared at it, and stared at it. It didn't look like Rufus, it was—terrible—from the water, and he must have struck something going down, or in the water, because he was so broken and lumpy—and ugly. My brother. And my father stared at it—at it—and he said, They don't leave a man much, do they?" (416)

The transformation of the "beautiful boy" into "it" destroys the family: "all the light went out of that house" (616). Ida feels as if she has been "robbed" by cowards (417), and both she and her father live only to be "paid back." For them, there is nothing pathetic or inexplicable about Rufus's death. He was killed. They were robbed.

Ida uses the charged language of the fall to describe her affair with the white producer Steve Ellis: "'There's always further to fall, always, always'" (426). Vivaldo, who does not reveal his own recent sexual encounter, is repulsed by the admission, unwilling to go near her: "his arms trembled with his revulsion, and every act of the body seemed unimaginably vile" (426). After Ida goes into the bathroom, he has "the spinning sensation of having been through all this before. He lit a flame under the coffee pot, making a mental note to break down the bathroom door if she were silent too long, if she were gone too long" (427). When he is assured, by the sound of running water, that she is all right, he goes into the kitchen to eat, "for he was trembling, it had to be because of hunger" (425). But the tremble also signifies that he has been through all this before, with Rufus. Derrida specifies that trembling is "no longer preliminary even if, unsettling everything so as to imprint upon the body an irrepressible shaking, the event that makes one tremble portends and threatens still" (54). Vivaldo is threatened, still, by Rufus's suicide. The comfort of his salvific night with Eric cannot ease his conflict with Ida, who had embarked on her own self-destructive revenge. If he is to stay with Ida, Vivaldo must lose his innocence, his white defensiveness and ignorance.
The reverberations of Rufus’s death force these relations into clarity. Rufus is, as Baldwin describes him, “the black corpse floating in the national psyche” (qtd. in Leeming 201). At the funeral, Reverend Foster rejects the notion that suicide is an evil act worthy of hell-fire and emphasizes that “can’t none of us say why he did what he did.” He reminds the community that destroying the physical body is not the only form of self-destruction: “I know a lot of people done took their own lives and they’re walking up and down the streets today and some of them is preaching the gospel and some is sitting in the seats of the mighty. Now, you remember that. If the world wasn’t so full of dead folks maybe those of us that’s trying to live wouldn’t have to suffer so bad” (121). The minister extends the definition of the dead to the living and calls on mourners to witness the connection between Rufus’s suffering and a lethal social climate. (In his “requiem for nonviolence” after Martin Luther King, Jr.’s death, Eldridge Cleaver similarly wondered if “America has already committed suicide and we who now thrash within its dead body are also dead in part and parcel of the corpse” [78-79].) The minister’s eulogy for Rufus attempts to perform what Sharon Patricia Holland calls “the ultimate queer act”—“Bringing back the dead (or saving the living from the shadow of death)” (103).

The interpersonal relationships that propel the rest of the plot hint at but never realize a more hopeful reconfiguration. Although there are moments of connection, intimacy, and beauty, a pervasive threat dominates, emanating from the initial “death by misadventure.” Even love is an unsure promise. Eric wants to “rescue” Cass, but he knows that “it was only love which could accomplish the miracle of making a life bearable—only love, and love itself mostly failed” (404). Another Country ends with Yves’s arrival, a child in the New World. Eric knew “that one of the reasons Yves had so stirred his heart, stirred it in a way he had almost forgotten it could be stirred, was because he reminded him, somehow, somewhere, of Rufus” (193). On the ground, without a tie, feeling suddenly “helplessly French,” and worried that he “might not be allowed to enter” (434), Yves hears a casual wish of “good luck” from a stranger as something that would be said to someone being “carried off to prison.” He arrives in the United States feeling outside and condemned. But, at the sight of Eric through the glass above his head, “all his fear left him, he was certain, now, that everything would be all right” (435). Readers know this certainty will be temporary. The novel concludes, “Then even his luggage belonged to him again, and he strode through the barriers, more high-hearted than he had ever been as a child, into that city which the people from heaven had made their home” (436). This is New York City, and the story of Bethlehem is one of unwelcome. The last word of the story, “home,” trembles with the memory of its violent, homeless beginning. Baldwin includes the date and place of the novel’s completion, from another country: “Istanbul, Dec. 10, 1961.”
Suicides lead to places. In many ways, Clare, Kay, and Rufus are, to borrow from Antonin Artaud’s essay on Vincent Van Gogh, “suicided by society”—by a peculiarly American kind of fall in its most famous city. To dismiss the suicidal moments in these texts as counterproductive articulations of victim ideology means that we ignore, or misread, literal corpses buried in this country and the political function of death in literature. The epigraph to Passing comes from Countee Cullen’s poem, “Heritage,” in which the poet-speaker disingenuously warns that he will not seek his history nor build his pride, “Lest the grave restore its dead.” Suicide in these novels signals a revolutionary call to remember and restore the dead. The narratives of the fall revise notions of self and suicide and delineate what Holland calls “a figurative death we all share” (285). The narratives pause, permanently, on the brink of knowing. Choice is attenuated and dispersed; agency is delocated and disoriented within clearly marked national borders; neither is denied. I take “disoriented” specifically from Emmanuel Levinas’s thinking about sense and meaning: “Does not sense as orientation indicate a leap, an outside-of-oneself toward the other than oneself, whereas philosophy wants to reabsorb every Other into the Same and to neutralize alterity?” (48). Philosophy shares with some literary texts—and some reading strategies—this absorbing enterprise, an approach that is insuperably frustrated by suicide. Cohn remarks: “If the real world becomes fiction only by revealing the hidden side of human beings who inhabit it, the reverse is equally true: the most real, the ‘roundest’ characters of fiction are those we know most intimately, precisely in ways we could never know people in real life” (5). We know Clare, Kay, and Rufus the way we know others in our lives—barely at all—and with the suspicion that every story is built on incomplete knowing. As readers, suspended as we are between words, between sentences, sensing impending death, we recognize this infinite sense of the other than oneself and the threat of falling in public.

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NOTES

1 For A. Alvarez, through suicide, “Some kind of minimal freedom—the freedom to die in one’s own way and in one’s own time—has been salvaged from the wreck of all those unwanted necessities” (75). Svetlana Boym asks of Vladimir Mayakovsky’s suicide in 1930: “Was it a sign of counterrevolutionary, bourgeois, individualist weakness, or revolutionary free will?” (158).

2 See especially Margaret Higonnet’s “Frames of Female Suicide” in which she argues that literary suicide does not, as Walter Benjamin and Peter Brooks suggest of literary death in general, “give final determination to meaning; it does not close the sentence as a signifying totality. Instead, it generates multiple textual readings: legal explanations, explanatory suicide notes, allusions to other suicides” (230). Similarly, in the Slavic Review, Anne Nesbet describes several high profile European suicides in the 1920s and
their later fictional representations: "a suicide creates an interpretive void that, although it demands explanatory fiction, can never be satisfied by the stories it generates" (830). Dale Bauer briefly alludes to this generative process in Feminist Dialogics: suicide "is the structural or somatic metaphor of the dialogic consciousness" (127). In his book on modern suicide in Japanese literature, Alan Wolfe argues that self-destruction is "a metaphor for resistance to narrative closure" (121). Elaine Showalter provides an interesting historical survey of theatrical productions of Hamlet that differently cast Ophelia. "The representation of Ophelia changes independently," Showalter writes, "of theories of the meaning of the play or the Prince, for it depends on attitudes toward women and madness" (91-92).

3 The editor of the Journal of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity, Warren Blumenfeld reports that gay teens are still two to three times more likely to kill themselves than their heterosexual peers (Jasmin B1). Eve Sedgewick begins Tendencies by commenting that one-third of gay and lesbian teens have attempted suicide and that minority gay and lesbian teens are at the greatest risk (1). Eric Rofes and Eve Moscicki advise caution in making generalizations: "Research on this issue is complicated by the lack of accurate information on the true rate of homosexuality in the population and by the strong emotions it generates in many otherwise objective discussions" (Moscicki 32). Rofes convincingly argues in "I Thought People Like That Killed Themselves": Lesbians, Gay Men and Suicide that the general presumption against suicide is reversed when the woman or man is identified as queer; in that case, self-destruction must be the cause of death (68).

4 With the quotes around “death,” I allude to Marina Tsvetaeva’s “New Year’s Eve”: “I have long put life and death in quotation marks, / like fabrications known to be empty,” a poem from which Svetlana Boym quotes and takes her book’s title.

5 Butler writes, Antigone “does not achieve another sexuality, one that is not heterosexuality, but she does seem to deinstitutionalize heterosexuality by refusing to do what is necessary to stay alive for Haemon, by refusing to become a mother and a wife, by scandalizing the public with her wavering gender, by embracing death as her bridal chamber and identifying her tomb as a ‘deep dug home’” (76).

6 For an insightful reading of lynchings in the United States as speech acts, see Michael Hatt’s response to Judith Butler. Like Hatt, I recognize that my application of “speech act” to a physical action, rather than a linguistic one, is not “strictly Austinian.”

7 It might be worth mentioning that on the cover to Butler’s Antigone’s Claim are two photographs of Ana Mendieta’s silueta series. Mendieta fell to her death under unclear circumstances in 1985. I want to thank Beth Nardella, a graduate student at West Virginia University, for calling this to my attention.

8 Cohn gives the example of Fielding who, in Tom Jones, writes that his character never tells anyone her thoughts, “so the reader cannot expect to see it related here” (22). Cohn mentions that Blanckenburg disapproved of the representation of death, seeing it as an untenable imposition on a character—until, interestingly, Blanckenburg read Goethe’s Werther and changed his mind (8).

9 I take the phrase “inward turn” from Erich Kahler’s The Inward Turn of Narrative.


11 It is this moment that Judith Butler analyzes in Bodies That Matter: “the narrator, who is usually able to say what Irene cannot, appears drawn into Irene’s non-narratible trauma, blanking out, withdrawing at the crucial moment when we expect to learn whose agency it was that catapulted Clare from the window and to her death below” (172). Though Butler doesn’t comment on it, her “usually” admits the moments when the narrator cannot say what Irene cannot say. Butler suggests that “Passing exemplifies precisely the cost of uplift for black women as an ambiguous death/suicide” (178).

12 Several objective correlatives for Irene’s desire act as prelude to this falling: the torn letter that Irene tosses from the back of a train, the Civil War cup that Irene accidentally drops, and the burning cigarette that Irene tosses from the open window:
“Irene finished her cigarette and threw it out, watching the tiny spark drop slowly down to the white ground below” (270). In Madame Bovary a smashed window similarly opens up a “field of vision” into class relations. See Chapter Four of Brooks's Body Work.

13 Clare is, in a sense, “blown” out the window by her bellowing racist husband whose last name plays on “blew” and “bellow”.

14 For Larsen’s subversion of the tragic mulatta convention, see Tate, McLendon, and Wall.

15 Jennifer Brody refers to Clare’s “revolutionary possibilities” (1064).

16 The final paragraph with the officer’s statement did not appear in the third printing of Passing, which concluded with the word “dark.” Davis believes that Larsen may have authorized this change since she had been dissatisfied with the ending (322). See Mark J. Madison who argues that the shortened version leaves the text more open.

17 I borrow from Jürgen Habermas, who writes: “It is not by chance that suicides set lose a type of shock among those close to them, which allows even the most heartened to discover something of the unavoidable communality of such a fate” (316).

18 According to Brightman, The Group sold more than 5.2 million copies worldwide by 1991 (436). It was banned for a period in Italy, Ireland, and Australia.

19 McCarthy described her narrative strategy on the Guggenheim application: “‘No male consciousness is present in the book; through these eight points of view, all feminine [...] are refracted [...] all the novel ideas of the period concerning sex, politics, economics, architecture, city-planning, house-keeping, child-bearing, interior decoration, and art’” (qtd. in Brightman 484). Many readers equated McCarthy with the narrator and condemned the book for its chatty tone. Norman Mailer wrote a scathing review. See Brightman 487, 492-495. Wendy Martin argues that McCarthy’s “accurate rendering of the traditional feminine style effectively exposes the cultural contradictions and absurdities with which this class of women live.” Martin also contends that The Group “deflates romantic illusions based on the mythology of love as a benevolent force, and exposes the limitations and absurdities of bourgeois individualism” (201). In an interview, McCarthy expressed her sorrow to “see young people nowadays having exactly the same fads as we had, like absolute faith in psychoanalysis and absolute insistence on modern furniture” (“Meeting” 63).

20 In The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud considers the ontological and onerice falls of white women: “If a woman dreams of falling, it almost invariably has a sexual sense: she is imagining her self as a ‘fallen woman’” (235). Freud’s colleague Wilhelm Stekel concurs with the symbolic import of falling: “‘Women who have fallen’ or who struggle against temptations, throw themselves out of the window and into the street” (qtd. in Colt 236). The fallen woman is killed, literally, by the weight of her own body.

21 Bronfen examines the cultural attraction toward the dead female body in Over Her Dead Body: Femininity and the Aesthetic. In the introduction to Death and Representation (1993), Sarah Webster Goodwin and Bronfen address the paradoxical act of representing death, of attempting to render in words, color, sound what is now absent (7) and cite the long association of death “with that other enigma, the multiply coded feminine body” (13).

22 William Cohen offers a summary of responses to Another Country and suggests that ultimately the gay black man remains, for Baldwin at this time, “unrepresentable”: “That Another Country cannot sustain a gay black subject—the one we might expect from so outspoken a gay black writer—bespeaks the liability of remaining within a liberal humanist ideology, however insistently it is extended” (17).

23 Robert F. Reid-Pharr provides in “Tearing the Goat’s Flesh” a much needed context for considering Cleaver’s homophobia as he insightfully examines Piri Thomas’s and Baldwin’s work.

24 Holland offers a fine analysis of this aspect of Baldwin’s work in “(Pro)Creating Imaginative Spaces and Other Queer Acts.” See also Baldwin’s essay, “Nobody Knows My Name.”

25 Ohi believes that the crypt permits us to “to conceptualize the opacities and resistances of the closet as a structure whose significatory potentialities always to some degree escape any intentionality that would control them, even to the extent of knowing
where to locate itself—inside or out—in relation to the closet’s formidable but elusive architectural solidity. To experience the closet is to experience the terrors and erotics of such losses of volition or intentionality, particularly around signification" (278).

26 Reid-Pharr argues that Rufus “does not die. He lives always and especially with Vivaldo who climbs in and out of bed with his lost friend, searching in the bodies of multiple surrogates for some part of himself that he imagines Rufus took with him into the waters of the Hudson” (“Dinge,” 82-83). Ohi also observes: “Syntactically, nearly all sexual episodes in Another Country enact Rufus’s suicide: The vocabulary of their eroticism is usually one of falling, drowning, or both” (275).

27 Eugene Worth, a friend of James Baldwin, jumped off the George Washington Bridge in 1946. In a 1961 interview with Esquire, Baldwin said, “I was absolutely certain, from the moment I learned of his death, that I, too, if I stayed here, would come to a similar end” (qtd. in Dievler 163). Also, see Leeming 46, 56.

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Rofes, Eric E. “‘I Thought People Like That Killed Themselves’: Lesbians, Gay Men and Suicide.” San Francisco: Grey Fox P, 1983.


