

Unbecoming Behavior: Insurgent Violent-Erotic Fantasies in Kate Zambereno's *Green Girl* and
Other Contemporary Works

Giuliana Eggleston
Grand Rapids, Michigan

B.A. in Creative Writing and Literature, University of Michigan, 2018

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for
the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia
December, 2021

Unbecoming Behavior: Insurgent Violent-Erotic Fantasies in Kate Zambreno's *Green Girl* and
Other Contemporary Works

Kate Zambreno's second novel, *Green Girl*, published originally in 2011 and re-released by Harper Perennial in 2014, takes its name from a line in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The line, spoken by Polonius in Act 1 Scene 3, reads in full, "Affection, pooh! you speak like a green girl,/Unsifted in such perilous circumstance" (Dover 21-22). He is, of course, speaking to Ophelia, the original "green girl," and the character from whom much of Zambreno's novel draws inspiration. But what is a "green girl?" Many of the reviews following the publication of Zambreno's *Green Girl* begin with an attempt to neatly define the eponymous label. A few examples are below:

From *Electric Literature*:

...the green girls are shopgirls, envious, young, unsure women who work behind counters in fancy department stores. Women who define themselves through the glittering images of movie stars and snippets of literature they've internalized before they're mature enough to know who they want to be. These women are still navigating the world, learning to find themselves beneath their own skin. They sell clothes and perfume, disinterested, imagining what their pensive faces will look like to others. Kate Zambreno writes these green girls with ethereal beauty and gritty, sweaty reality. Green girls are fragile, hollow. They are trying to fill themselves. (Partington)

From *The Los Angeles Review of Books*: "Green Girls are young, fresh, not fully formed. They forge ahead, clumsy and naïve, in the precarious process of becoming themselves" (Milks).

From *Fiction Writers Review*: “A green girl is a young woman, fresh and inexperienced. A woman ‘unsifted in such perilous circumstance,’ who hasn’t gathered enough common sense to know the intricate ways of the world” (Sun).

While none of these attempts at definition are wrong, they remain incomplete. Like Polonius before them, these reviews have defined the “green girl” with one eye closed, seeing the flat surface of the “green girl” without the nuanced depth. For the “green girl” to be defined, if she can be defined at all, she cannot be described in isolation. She is not merely a stage of life, or a special feminine brand of naivete. The “green girl” is not born in a vacuum; she exists in direct response to a societal gaze. The term “green girl” is not a chosen identity, but rather an externally leveled label. When Polonius calls Ophelia a “green girl” the intent is to mock her as young, naive, perhaps beautiful but decidedly unfinished. This girl does not define herself, but rather absorbs and internalizes the judgements of others. Zambreno’s use of the term “green girl” becomes clear: she exists only in the eyes of her beholder. Her life is inextricably tied to an outside gaze, so the question becomes who is the “green girl” when no one is looking? This leads us to another oft elided yet key aspect of the “green girl” as she relates to the character of Ophelia: the “green girl,” for all she is described in terms of budding life by those who see her, harbors a concealed desire to die.¹

Kate Zambreno’s novel *Green Girl* brings to light the fractured nature of this type of female identity, which is a composite of an exteriorly-leveled idealization and an interior reality which are ultimately incompatible; society creates female ideals and imposes these standards

¹ This calls to mind John Everett Millais’ painting *Ophelia*, painted between 1851-1852, now hanging in the Tate Britain. A young girl, Ophelia, dressed in an ornate gown, sinks under the dark and murky waters of the river. Her face is raised above the water, mouth open in frozen song. A trail of vibrant wildflowers floats from her hand. The riverbank is choked in greenery, spilling into the black waters but not quite reaching Ophelia, who is ringed in black. She is surrounded by life, by a verdancy so full as to suggest rotting. She is dying.

onto its female members, using its pervasive policing gaze to create an environment in which women are only legible through successful performance, meaning that when these ideals are not met they cease to be understood, effectively silenced and made invisible.² The impossibility of permanently achieving the ideals of these roles, along with the erasing punishment of failure, creates in women conflicting desires to cling to and cleave from these expectations, resulting in a continual cycle of superficial reinvention of the self to garner societal admiration, as well as inventive modes of momentarily hiding from the societal gaze to find relief. When externally validated existence is so inextricably tied to a policing gaze, the desire to elude the gaze becomes a desire to cease from existing. The prevalence of this destructive desire among female characters is not limited to Zambreno's *Green Girl*, but constitutes a pattern as old as the inception of our current gender arrangements. However, for the purposes of this essay I will focus on contemporary works that echo this desire with chilling similarities in the form of violent-erotic fantasies of physical self-destruction, with Kate Zambreno's *Green Girl* serving as the touchstone. For the "green girl," the idea of annihilation becomes an ecstatic release, and the void beyond physical definition acts as a tempting haven of amorphous non-existence. Simone de Beauvoir, in her 1949 ground-breaking book *The Second Sex*, establishes the idea that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," an idea that Judith Butler will build upon in *Gender Trouble* (1990), specifically as it relates to the performative aspect of embodying gender (de Beauvoir 283).³ I believe that if the imposed project of womanhood is to "become" the physical

² Other works by Zambreno that touch on themes of female identity include (but are not necessarily limited to) *Heroines* (2012), *O Fallen Angel* (2017), *Book of Mutter* (2017), and *Screen Tests* (2019).

³ Butler is, of course, not the first scholar to explore the constructed-ness of gender. Adrienne Rich writes in 1972, in the first line of her poem "Diving Into the Wreck" that she has "read the book of myths," the myths seemingly being the stories told and retold that make up gender construction. In lines 61 through 63 she reveals what she has dived down into the deep for, "the thing I came for./the wreck and not the story of the wreck/the thing itself and not the myth" (Rich). Butler's philosophy is in conversation with the writings of authors such as Adrienne Rich, Eve Sedgwick, Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall, even Shakespeare to an extent, among many others, who've done work that pushes beyond the boundaries of the masculine and feminine.

embodiment of a gender ideal, then the project of liberation for the female figures in these works is one of unraveling and unbecoming, destroying the physical possibility of this realization.

I: Girls Are Born with Painted Lips

At their first birth, female sexed babies are born into a system that works to predetermine their lives as “women” in a patriarchal society, providing pre-scripted roles at the very first moment of what Judith Butler calls “girling” (“Bodies That Matter” 7). If they then, at a post-pubescent age, exit the private domestic sphere and enter, alone, into the public sphere, they may experience a second birth; their monolithic parent in this sequel to biological birth is the public eye, and they are born again as the “green girl,” subject to the formative gaze of society.

It has been a project for much of feminist theory to delineate how gender-based oppression begins at birth primarily through societal influence. Sarah Ahmed elaborates on Butler in her book *Living a Feminist Life* in the chapter titled “Feminism Is Sensational,” when she writes that “Judith Butler (1993) taught us to think of ‘girling’ as a social mechanism. A baby is born: we might say, ‘It’s a girl!’ or ‘It’s a boy!’” (Ahmed 25). Ahmed, building on Butler, illuminates how gender is a societal construct with material consequences that can begin “[e]ven before birth” with the advent of technologies like ultrasounds that allow us to “watch on the screen and see whether it’s a girl or a boy, whether that is decided by virtue of the absence or presence of a penis” (note the function of the gaze in this process as well) (Ahmed 25). Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, writes at great length to provide a detailed history that spans over centuries of the process of “becoming woman” after birth, and Dorothy Dinnerstein’s *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* accounts for how the psychological imprint for male/female gender arrangements begins at birth in the unequal relationship between the infant and its female and

male parental figures (including caretakers, which Dinnerstein points out are usually female, as childcare is often considered to be domestic and therefore female-coded work)(Dinnerstein 28).

It is then well-established within feminist theory that female sexed babies are born into a set of limitations, inculcated into a system that works to produce and reproduce patriarchal norms for women over and over again, reflecting the changing and varying standards of the dominating societies accordingly.⁴ Rather than echo what has already been more eloquently iterated by feminist scholars before me, I would like to start from the premise that this first of births brings with it its own set of gender oppression that broadly encompasses the female sex. I will then focus on what I'm referring to as a "second" birth, which for the "green girl" occurs in the youthful post-pubescent years within a Euro-American society.⁵ This second birth is not necessary for all female sexed babies, and I believe that there are other ways in which female sexed babies experience a second birth that is not an entrance into "green girl"-hood.⁶

Furthermore, while I will draw extensively on general societal apparatuses such as Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" and Kate Manne's definition of misogyny in order to tease out the

⁴ The dominance of this patriarchal female ideal throughout history can be seen in its fictive counterpoint: the many mythical but ahistorical references to all-female societies/societies where women reigned, discussed in Cynthia Eller's 2000 book *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why An Invented Past Will Not Give Women a Future*, as well as the creative imaginings by authors such as Joanna Russ, who wrote the short story "When It Changed" in 1972 about the existence of an all-female society ("When"). De Beauvoir specifically points to how, in the rare cases where history does recount female reigns, they are usually unsexed in some way and still rule over a patriarchy. She gives the examples of Queen Elizabeth, Isabella the Catholic, and Catherine of Russia, all of whom "were neither male nor female: they were sovereigns" (de Beauvoir 150). And there are, of course, the many mythical examples of female error in positions of power and the necessity of patriarchal reign; Dinnerstein specifically points to the myths of Pandora and Eve, which showcase the human female's ability to conceive and work to enact "a world wider than the one she sees around her" to detrimental ends (Dinnerstein 20).

⁵ This is not to say "green girls" cannot occur outside of these geographical boundaries, only that the conditions specific to Europe and America are ideal for her production.

⁶ In terms of labels given to her by society, but not necessarily chosen by her, she may become a "manic-pixie-dream-girl," a "feminazi," a "spinster" (though certainly less common in the 21st century), among many other shifting roles she never auditioned for but was cast in nonetheless. She may also choose to embrace her own identity (including an identity that is not female identifying at all), though whether society agrees to the use of the label is not guaranteed. The point here is that "green girl"-hood is not a necessary track, nor is it a track explicitly chosen by the subject.

nuances of the “green girl” identity, this is not to say that these same forces are not at work in other subgroupings, in similar or unique ways. However, because the “green girl” identity is bound up with the societal gaze, she cannot be understood in her specifics without a synchronous examination of the general workings of the system by which she is molded.

Parameters of the System

In Manne’s *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2017), she defines misogyny and sexism separately, with sexism as “the branch of patriarchal ideology that *justifies* and *rationalizes* a patriarchal social order, and misogyny as the system that *polic*es and *enfor*ces its governing norms and expectations” (Manne 20). She then further defines misogyny as follows:

Misogyny is primarily a property of social systems or environments as a whole, in which women will tend to face hostility of various kinds *because they are women in a man’s world* (i.e., a patriarchy), who are held to be failing to live up to patriarchal standards (i.e., tenets of patriarchal ideology that have some purchase in this environment). Because of this, misogynist hostilities will often target women quite selectively, rather than targeting women across the board.⁷ (Manne 33-34)

Manne’s definition points out that misogyny acts systematically, through a policing gaze that punishes women based on their failure to adhere to “patriarchal standards.” On the flip side of these punishments, however, are rewards for success:

While misogyny’s primary manifestations may be in punishing bad women, and policing women’s behavior, a system of punishment and reward—and conviction and

⁷ Manne also points to Moya Bailey’s term “misogynoir,” coined in 2014 in her tumblr post titled “More on the Origin of Misogynoir,” which Manne cites as denoting the “distinctive intersection of misogyny and anti-black racism, in America” (Manne 23).

exoneration—almost invariably work holistically...hostility toward women is really only the tip of a large iceberg. We should also be concerned with the rewarding and valorizing of women who *conform* to gendered norms and expectations, in being (e.g.) loving mothers, attentive wives, loyal secretaries, ‘cool’ girlfriends, or good waitresses. (Manne 71-72)

We might well add “green girl” to the list, as it is defined by the Poloniuses of the world, a girl whose naivete is decidedly feminine and offers a pleasing outlet for male condescension. So, what we have is a system in which not only are women carefully watched and punished for nonconformity, which would surely be the grounds for an immediate revolution if it were only that; we have also an inverse system of approval and praise for successful incarnations of patriarchal female ideals. I believe that Manne’s idea of misogynistic policing works productively with Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze,” in that the policing gaze of misogyny is coded masculine as it stems from a patriarchal society, yet can be implemented by all who live in the society.

Mulvey, in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” writes that, “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 19).⁸ In other words, the gaze that is operating in society is masculine-coded, and the recipient of the gaze is feminine-coded. This does not mean, however, that women are incapable of wielding a masculine gaze, or that every man spends his days watching and policing women. Nor does it exclude men from the negative effects of the masculine gaze, as he too is pressured to act in a specific way under the directives of the system (often as asserting a

⁸ Mulvey uses “male” and “female” in her essay, but it should be acknowledged that the more accurate and current terms would be “masculine” and “feminine,” as the gaze is not intrinsic to biological sex, but takes on the coding of gender construction.

hyper-masculine “machismo”). Nor does the gaze benevolently pass over nonbinary, trans, or gender-nonconforming people. The masculine gaze operates in the same way as Manne’s definition of misogyny, as part of a system that polices *all* members of society generally through a masculine lens. This lens is also an overwhelmingly white lens that polices people and women of color more harshly and in ways that are unique. Importantly, the gaze is further distinctive in its weaponization against black women specifically, what Moya Bailey calls “misogynoir”:

...the term is used to describe the unique ways in which Black women are pathologized in popular culture. What happens to Black women in public space isn’t about them being *any* woman of color. It is particular and has to do with the ways that anti-Blackness and misogyny combine to malign Black women in our world. (Bailey)

Women can look at other women with a white-masculine gaze, apply some version of Manne’s patriarchal standards, and judge them accordingly. Women can look at themselves with an internalized white-masculine gaze, which is undoubtedly part of what prompts women to strive for “good” woman status and the benefits that accompany their adherence to the patriarchal standards—they are not begrudgingly adhering but rather believe their view (the internalized white-masculine) is the correct view.⁹ And there is, of course, *scopophilia* as Mulvey writes, in reference to the cinema where there is an audience made of varying gendered people: “pleasure in looking” by any viewer (Mulvey 16). Asserting the “active/male” gaze brings *pleasure* to the wielder. They become the active subject, the feminine-coded recipient becomes the passive object, subordination is established, and power and pleasure are distributed.

⁹ The point here is not that women cannot find empowerment in roles coded as feminine, but rather what’s at issue is the internalized belief by many that traditionally female-coded roles such as “motherhood” or anything in the “domestic/private sphere” are the *only* roles that should be available to women, and that there is inherently more value in being a mother and being in the domestic for women.

This leads to the question of *who exactly is the ideal woman, the one women want to be and everyone wants to watch?*, a question Jia Tolentino answers in the first line of her essay “Always Be Optimizing,” which appeared in her *Trick Mirror* collection:

The ideal woman has always been generic. I bet you can picture the version of her that runs the show today. She’s of indeterminate age but resolutely youthful presentation. She’s got glossy hair and the clean, shameless expression of a person who believes she was made to be looked at. (Tolentino 63)

Like the “green girl,” the “ideal woman” is tied to a gaze and is described in terms of appearance, judged by what are notably white-normative standards.¹⁰ She is “generic” because ideals are always so—to introduce individuality is to invite further critique, it is better to remain vague and let others fill in the details they wish to see. By maintaining a generic appearance, women can also find strength in numbers—being indistinguishable from others also striving for the ideal reinforces their own performance; one woman’s success becomes, through practiced mimicry, the success of the group. The age boundaries of the ideal woman are not explicit, but as Tolentino points out, the appearance of youth is integral to her makeup. For the “green girl” specifically, the fetishization of her blooming youth by society is what gives her life, perversely transforming her natural process of aging (a sign that she is a biological, living creature) into her enemy. She subsequently attempts to stall her life at the “green girl” stage, a period that is necessarily transient, engendering in her an unstable relationship with the continuation of her own life. In this way, the ideal woman is also undoubtedly bound up in capitalism, as maintaining a generic, youthful appearance comes at a cost. She is manicured to smooth out any

¹⁰ While not explored in this essay, it is important to note that the “ideal woman” is also subject to what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson refers to as “the twin ideologies of normalcy and beauty” which “posit female and disabled bodies, particularly, as not only spectacles to be looked at, but as pliable bodies to be shaped infinitely so as to conform to a set of standards called *normal* and *beautiful*” (Garland-Thomson 520).

human imperfections, from her clothing to her hair, makeup, skin, weight, teeth, and nails. The ideal woman is then also a wealthy woman, at least wealthy enough for basic necessities to be a given, paving the way for the sartorial to take on the ideological weight of life and death. This, finally, is the world into which Kate Zambreno's "green girl" is born and formed. She values youth and beauty, she strives for a glossy magazine finish.¹¹ She is watched by everyone, including herself. She is aware of the hostility she faces in failure, and she lives for praise of her success. She aligns herself with the generic and attempts to erase any fissure through which individuality may be expressed. She finds pleasure in seeing herself through the eyes of others. She is one of many, and she prefers it that way. The less you know her, the better. The visual signifiers of her interiority are flattened, she appears emptied out by choice. She wants you to see only what she offers, the enameled casing she constructs, aware as she is of how minutely she is monitored.

Zambreno's "Green Girl"

Zambreno opens her book, *Green Girl*, with a description of Ruth's birth into a "green girl." The first two lines read: "The pull, the blood, the cry. The agony of becoming," echoing both a biological birth as well as the "becoming" of de Beauvoir's famous phrase, denoting that this is birth part two—social birth (Zambreno 2). The subsequent events of the novel depict Ruth's life as a young American girl working in the liminal space of a temporary worker in London.

Zambreno's work is experimental, fragmentary, darkly humorous, and often devastating. We watch as Ruth grooms herself in excessive detail, embarks on sexual misadventures for

¹¹ What Tolentino takes to calling "frictionless," in her essay "Always Be Optimizing," playing off of the success of expensive shapewear/athleisure which is made of material that easily glides and smooths out the edges of the female form (Tolentino 89).

validation, aimlessly walks the streets of London, goes to work, peruses department stores longingly, and takes the tube. Largely without plot (or chapters), the reader quickly realizes that what they are reading is the relentless and spiraling repetition of Ruth's life as she navigates the interior, invisible drama of being a "green girl." The reader does not know much about who Ruth is before she becomes a "green girl"—her mother has died, her relationship with her father is tense and rarely present, she has an unnamed former lover to whom she compares all subsequent lovers, she is an American from Chicago now living in London.¹² There is little else, which suits the "green girl" just fine, as part of her identity relies on her separation from her former life in which she belonged to anyone other than the social gaze. This gaze in *Green Girl* takes the form of the ambiguous narrator, who crosses narratorial boundaries and vacillates between Ruth's creator/mother/retrospective older Ruth/hungry audience, but in every iteration this narrator is decidedly Ruth's keeper, as well as the lens through which we receive Ruth.¹³ This narrator (female, from her description of her own "maternal and massive and saggy" breasts in comparison to Ruth's "perfect French breasts") gives life to Ruth by applying her gaze to her (Zambreno 109). "I gaze down upon her. She is without form, and void, and darkness upon the face of the deep. Cast in the likeness of her creator. I give birth to an orphan girl" (Zambreno 2).¹⁴ The narrator later tells us that she is "trying to push [Ruth] out into the world," like a

¹² In an interview included with the 2014 re-release of *Green Girl* in a "P.S." section at the back of the book, Zambreno reveals that much of the novel draws on her own time living in London. Zambreno, like her character Ruth, has also lost her mother, which she writes about extensively in her lyrical essay-style book *Book of Mutter* (2017). The death of the mother is also a classic conceit in female coming-of-age stories, manifesting prominently in fairy tales such as *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Little Mermaid*. Shakespeare's Ophelia is also motherless, a maternal absence that underscores the work.

¹³ The name Ruth comes from the Hebrew Bible in The Book of Ruth, which depicts Ruth, a young Moabite widow who leaves her home to follow her mother-in-law to Bethlehem. The famous verses include the line "Where you go I will go;/ where you lodge, I will lodge;" (Ruth 1: 16). The reference in Zambreno's work comes primarily through Ruth's peripatetic nature, which Zambreno references directly at the end of the novel. Zambreno's Ruth, like her namesake, follows her adoptive mother, the gaze that makes her (Coogan 397).

¹⁴ The language here comes from The Book of Genesis: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep..." (Genesis 1: 1-2). The narrator is Mother

mother bird pushes its hatchlings out of the nest to fly or die. The narrator pushes Ruth into the public eye, which is the landscape of her new life, where she will either succeed or fail to be what she was crafted to be (Zambreno 3). After establishing that Ruth is a creation formed by the narrator's own gaze, belonging to the public sphere, the narrator proceeds to put Ruth under a microscope, commenting on the minutiae of Ruth's private life. And like the societal gaze that the narrator emulates, part of her role is praising Ruth's success, which is ultimately her ability to reduce herself to a lifeless ideal. "Ruth does not depart from her script," the narrator tells us, referring to Ruth's repetitive performance at her job hawking a perfume called *Desire* (Zambreno 7).¹⁵ In other words, she is careful with her performance, she does not improvise, which is an act that would both imply more interior thought than Ruth wishes to show, as well as open herself up to personalized derision. Rather, she stays within the safe confines of the script, which remains generic no matter who reads it. The narrator approves. Similarly, Ruth is often described as a doll by her narrator when she performs seamlessly; she has "that wonderful pouty mouth she has all of her original underclothes. What marvelous coloring. No hairline chips or cracks" (Zambreno 98). Ruth is transfigured into a frozen plaything, perfect on the outside with no visible life seeping through from the inside, wholly available for the consumption of the public. The narrator makes note of Ruth's ability to bury her emotions for the pleasure of others: "When someone antagonizes Ruth, her face only registers a moment of surprise, as if slapped, but then quickly smooths over," back into its practiced bland and vacant smile (Zambreno 11).

and God to Ruth, calling to mind Dinnerstein's theory that for the irrational infant, the primary caretaker (often the Mother) appears to have Godlike power to the infant (Coogan 11).

¹⁵ Rachel Blau Duplessis writes in the first chapter of her book *Writing beyond the Ending*, which examines the endings for female characters as they changed from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, that "[a]ny social convention is like a 'script,' which suggests sequences of action and response" (Duplessis 2). The idea of women following a "script" is therefore not a new idea, and in fact is not limited to women but rather encompasses society at large.

Ruth, the “green girl” and aspiring patriarchal female ideal, is careful not to incur the hostility of those around her, is surprised when someone is displeased with her performance, yet rather than react she reverts to her best defense of emptying herself all over again. What good is it to attack a doll?

The probing eyes do not belong to the narrator alone. Ruth also watches herself in the mirror for her own successful erasure, and when she puts on makeup, she “paints her blank canvas of a face...she looks at the glass. A girl smacks, smiles back. A polished surface. She is airbrushed to perfection. She looks happy” (Zambreno 21). Ruth, often her own audience, notes with satisfaction her ability to create her own lifeless, polished image. In addition to herself and the narrator, Ruth is of course also performing for the unnamed masses. In one scene, Ruth is watched by a man whilst sitting in a cafe, unknown to her but described by her ever-present and invasive narrator: “He is sketching her dramatic silhouette. A young girl pensive watching out the window. She is an unknown. He has discovered her. A beautiful sight. She has a beautiful figure, this slip of a girl. He wouldn’t mind poking her a bit with his pencil” (Zambreno 98). Unaware of her audience, Ruth has achieved her role. She is the *ingénue* the narrator desires her to be, contrasted to her moments of failure also pointed out by the hyper-critical narrator. In a scene where Ruth is corrected by her boss, she tries to will “her humiliation to hate,” but the narrator is quick to point out her failure to control her emotions: “My actress’s face is threatening to turn red, it is twisting. It is not very pretty and reflective as an *ingénue* is supposed to be. An *ingénue* is supposed to be ingenuous” (Zambreno 9-10). Ruth errs by revealing a definitive sign of life in the form of blood under the skin as well as a bodily reaction to embarrassment, neither of which a lifeless doll would have. Furthermore, as an “*ingénue*” Ruth should be free from the stain of embarrassment, innocent and unaware, but as her face contorts and blushes she betrays

her role. Contrast this failure with the success under the male stranger's gaze, where Ruth becomes something new to be discovered, young and beautiful and unknown. She is *green*, in the sense of being fresh and inexperienced, not a corporeal and bloody red. The male stranger also takes pleasure in watching her, as noted by the narrator's typically lascivious remarks towards Ruth—his pencil, the object through which he forms his image of Ruth transforms, fittingly, into his penis, aroused by the act of watching and actively handling the image of Ruth. The dynamics of this scene fit the formula laid out by Mulvey: masculine gaze is asserted, and Ruth becomes the passive feminine-coded object through which the viewer experiences scopophilia.

Ruth is thus constantly on display, and she sums up her relationship with this gaze neatly part way through the book: "The world is always the audience for young girls, and they were still young, weren't they?" (Zambreno 142). Ruth, and girls like Ruth, are aware of their status as consumable objects in society. They perform for an audience, and the audience claps, cheers, heckles, and boos. Their roles require lifeless perfection, but that route is clearly impossible to actualize short of a premature death.¹⁶ Eventually the doll will chip, the practiced face will slip, she won't remember her lines and she won't be able to stop the tears from revealing she's still alive somewhere in there. When the "green girl" can't become the ideal, she becomes adept at faking it.

II: Don't Look There, Look Here

¹⁶ Songs like "If I Die Young" by the band Perry, YA books like Sara Shepard's *Pretty Little Liars* (later adapted into a TV series, no doubt for the visual pleasure of the topic), descriptions of iconic characters such as Ophelia, and countless other examples fetishize the frozen beauty of girls who die young (The Band; Shepard). Young women are also often sexualized in horrific fictional deaths, as seen in countless episodes of shows like *Criminal Minds*, *Law and Order SVU*, and, recently, *Mare of Easttown* (Davis; Wolf; Ingelsby). The success of many "true crime" series is also dependent on the death of young women, banking (correctly it seems) on the viewer's fascination with the truncated lives of beautiful young women.

The “green girl” is born as a reflection, doomed to live a doubled existence of an impossible societal ideal and the internal reality that threatens it. She is, to borrow Jia Tolentino’s term, a trick mirror, reflecting back what society wishes to see while hiding her true face. She is an illusionist, a magician, using the various forms of sleight of hand to bridge the gap between the reality and the ideal. Her goal is a successful performance; her audience lies in wait for her mistakes. It is no wonder, then, that the “green girl” most often appears in literature and in life as actresses, models, reality tv stars, influencers—in roles where their to-be-looked-at-ness is integral. Roxane Gay, in her essay “Garish, Glorious, Spectacles,” which appeared in her collection *Bad Feminist*, examines the idea of the “green girl” presented by Zambreno, productively finding an iteration of the “green girl” in Maria from Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays*, an actress who seems to unravel in the wake of a coerced abortion. For Gay, Maria is “the green girl as she falls,” no longer caring to play the part (Gay 74-75). Gay also suggests reality tv stars as “green girls interrupted, green girls at their most garishly exposed, cut open for the cameras, performing the best *and worst* parts of themselves for attention, to be seen, for love to be adored, for fame, to be wanted” (Gay 78, emphasis mine). In addition to Gay’s examples, I would like to posit a series of my own “green girls,” which I will continue to refer back to: Charlotte Swenson from Jennifer Egan’s novel *Look at Me*, an aging New York model and “green girl” in her “fall,” similar to Maria; Carole from Bernadine Evaristo’s novel *Girl, Woman, Other*, a London business-world “green girl” made into a visual target due to being a black female professional in a largely white and male dominated field; Arabella Essiedu from the HBO drama series *I May Destroy You* written by Michaela Coel (who also starred), a London social media author turned influencer in the wake of a roofied rape; and, of course, Ruth, our “green girl” template who works a series of temporary customer service roles in London, including

department store perfume pusher, adult erotica store cashier, and women's clothing store employee, continually described by her narrator as a model, actress, ingénue, doll, performer, and creation.

Each of these women come from works of fiction, though each work draws on elements of reality laid out by authors such as Manne, Mulvey, Butler, Tolentino and Bailey. In Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, each chapter is told from the point of view of a different character and wholly follows her/their lives so that, while working productively as a whole, each chapter may exist on its own but is enriched by the reading of the whole. The overall work is then connected by threads, sometimes unbeknownst to the characters, and the larger plot of the novel is of a group of people whose lives interact to varying degrees with varying impacts, creating a loose web that we can imagine is what exists in our own lives. The writing often refuses punctuation and is written in fragments and poetical breaks, but the plot is firmly realist.

Egan's *Look at Me* is also written from the point of view of multiple characters but follows a more standard structure and weaves in and out of these differing perspectives throughout the work to build a cohesive plot. However, the chapters from Charlotte Swenson's perspective are the only chapters told in the first person, and she opens and closes the novel, establishing the core of the work to be her narrative. The work toggles between realist and speculative fiction, written in 2001 but eerily predicting social media functions and other digital technologies to dystopic effect.

Coel's *I May Destroy You* is an HBO mini drama series, following Arabella and her friends in London and occasionally Italy. Some episodes are flash-backs, and some contain fantastical elements that transgress the boundaries of the generally realist world Coel creates.

The episodes vary in length, but generally stick around 30 minutes. Each episode builds on the overall narrative.

These female characters I've chosen differ in many ways, including age, race, and profession. They are not simply "types," cast into the same role due to their overwhelming similarities, and yet they do share an intimate connection. They know what it is to exist divorced from themselves, displaying one part and concealing another. Their lives play out in large cities, dramatizing their positions as constant performers, blurring the inherent performativity of their varying professional lives with their personal lives, leaving little space for privacy. Each of these women, at the height of their "green girl"-hood is under constant scrutiny, watched by countless sets of hungry eyes the moment they step outside their doors. Yet, at the same time, each of the roles that they inhabit require the engagement of an outside gaze—the show is nothing without the audience. They therefore knowingly offer up part of themselves to be consumed, nurturing the chasm that opens up between their exterior and interior in order to preserve a small piece of themselves.

Mind the Gap

The existence of the "green girl" is only partial—what is seen to exist is the recognizable ideal, which is removed from the reality of the "green girl." For Ruth, this dislocation between ideal and reality is epitomized by her mantra "mind the gap" repeated throughout the novel (Zambreno 85, 100, 188, 214, 29). The term comes from Ruth's primary form of transportation (aside from walking): the tube. The "gap" to be minded then is a fatal drop between stable spaces, a void where existence can be erased. In a more pointed scene, the narrator tells us that "[t]here is some gap in between. Some dark hole in the center of Ruth that is not reflected in this mirror. She

mutes this violence and turns it on herself. She resists the urge to peel off her skin” (Zambreno 58). Like Tolentino’s trick mirror, Ruth’s reflection presents only what is desirable to be seen, eliding the “dark hole” or “gap” that exists between. This same gap is later defined by Ruth as “the gap between who she was and who everyone thought her to be,” again referring to an “everyone” that is the public audience, and a muted private interior life (Zambreno 100). Zambreno offers other moments of visual dislocation, and in one such instance Ruth receives a makeover at a department store, and at the end is told what each product is for: “This is for the eyes. This is for the lips. This is for the skin. They haggle over the skin. The skin is necessary of course. You need the skin. Without one of the tricks in the bag it all falls apart” (Zambreno 91). As Ruth later notes, “[t]hey give you a face to take home, an actual paper face with colored in instructions. These masks like *memento mori*. Faces, other faces. I can take mine off and breathe” (Zambreno 91).¹⁷ Ruth wears a costume of herself, which notably reminds her of the inevitability of death, as it is inextricably tied to the “green girl” existence.

The tie between life and death bound up in performance is repeated when Ruth goes shopping and finds an expensive “LBD” (little black dress). Ruth pictures herself wearing this dress and living “another kind of life,” and as she looks at herself in the dress, she asks “is that me?” The narrator tells us that the “dress is giving Ruth an identity crisis,” and that she “is willing to offer up anything. First born. Soul. Self” in order to become the type of woman who wears that dress (Zambreno 32). Tolentino offers insight into this phenomenon, pointing to Moira Weigel’s study of what she calls “‘enclothed cognition,’ in which clothes that come with cultural scripts can actually alter cognitive function,” and while Weigel’s study focuses on white

¹⁷ In the 21st century, with the rise of social media platforms for self-presentation, it is easy to see how face filters act in a similar way, glossing over the reality of someone’s face with “other faces” and subsequently relieving the wearer of the onus of a perfect performance. Filters have become part of the bag of “tricks” used to achieve seemingly enameled perfection.

coats as lab coats vs. painter's coats, the "cultural script" of the "LBD" is easy to extrapolate, and as Tolentino points out, the test subjects "felt like the person their clothes said they were" (Tolentino 84). As with the mask of makeup, the visual dislocation between Ruth and the costume she wears permits her to partially enact the societal ideal that allows her to exist by projecting an enhanced version of herself outward towards the public, becoming to all who see her the generalized LBD-wearing-type of woman.

The character Charlotte Swenson in Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* is a model accustomed to being seen and praised for her appearance, yet the novel begins with a car crash that shatters her face and leaves her unrecognizable. In the first pages of the novel, Charlotte reflects that, "after the accident, I became less visible. I don't mean in the obvious sense that I went to fewer parties and retreated from general view. Or not just that. I mean that after the accident, I became more difficult to see" (Egan 3). Charlotte's face, held together by 80 titanium screws, no longer projects the idealized face that allowed her image to be seen and replicated in countless magazines. As a result, she discovers the art of visual subterfuge performed by girls like Ruth. Capitalizing on the blankness of her newly invisible face, Charlotte "felt shielded—protected, somehow, by [her] dark glasses and mask of makeup, the silk headscarf tucked into the top of [her] trenchcoat to hide the bruises on [her] neck," prompting her to think, as Ruth does, "This isn't me, I thought...How could I be caught, when I didn't look like anyone?" (Egan 29-30). There is, then, a distinct separation between the "me" that Charlotte feels she is, and the visual that she reflects out to the watching world, a schism that leaves her with two separate selves.

The Dangers of Visibility

The “green girl” as an illusionist takes pride in the success of her act, and in this way she can draw pleasure from her condition of constant visibility. Yet the act is not always a success, and the fan is not always adoring. As with Ruth’s mantra of “mind the gap,” in Bernadine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other* we find the character of Carole repeating her own phrase for similar results: “*I am highly presentable, likeable, clubbable, relatable, promotable, and successful,*” repeated every morning three times (Evaristo 140). The mantra begins with “presentation” and ends with “success,” working like Ruth’s desire to embody the “LBD” as a way to change cognitive function so that Carole begins to feel that it is true. However, the internalization of the mantra alone is not enough to pull off the performance, and Carole also changes her physical appearance to conform to the industry standard of professionalism (read: white/masculine), and “she then had her tight curls straightened, Marcus [her boyfriend] said he preferred her hair natural, she told him she’d never get a job if she did that” (Evaristo 137). To solve the problem of her womanhood, “she even contemplated having her womb taken out to eliminate periods altogether, which would surely be her greatest possible career move” (Evaristo 14). All of this comes in response to Carole’s experience of erasure, which is epitomized as she recalls her experience as a black woman attending a largely white university in the UK:¹⁸

people walked around her or looked through her, or was she imagining it? did she exist or was she an illusion? if I strip off and streak across the quadrangle will anyone notice me

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that Carole’s, Arabella’s, and Ruth’s stories all take place in the UK, if not London itself, a place that is in many ways the heart of imperialism. It is where Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* begins, a place where domination emanates outwards. It is also often associated with a Jane Austen-styled romanticization of the marriage plot (the character of Catherine Morland in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* is a prime example of a “green girl” in the original sense of the label, whose fulfillment is finally achieved in marriage).

other than the porters who will no doubt call the fedz, an excuse they've been waiting for ever since they first set eyes on her. (Evaristo 132-133)¹⁹

Carole expresses here not only a desire to be seen, but also the importance for black women to be seen in a certain way.²⁰ By virtue of being constantly watched for praise, the “green girl” is also constantly monitored for moments to be ridiculed. For while the “green girl” can become less visible if she is not actualizing the societal ideal, she can become targeted for trying to achieve the ideal and failing. This derisive targeting is especially dangerous for black women like Carole, who more often face lethal consequences and regularly receive less justice. The stakes for a perfect performance for Carole become much higher than many other “green girls,” yet the emphasis on a seamless rendition of her performance remains. Visibility for Carole is a double-edged sword; if she is seen and approved by the public she has the potential for success in her career, yet if she is seen and courts the displeasure of the public the consequences can quickly become life-threatening. She is constantly policed by countless eyes; it is only when it is convenient for the public that Carole's existence is made invisible.

The hungry audience waiting to eviscerate the performer is not some horrible but thankfully small fraction of society. No, the critic lives in the masculine gaze, the pervasive misogynistic policing. Roxane Gay herself expresses a fascination with watching these women break apart, writing that she takes “pleasure in what Pozner brands ‘the cathartic display of other people's humiliations’” (Gay 79). Zambreno's narrator puts it much more simply: “She is such a

¹⁹ Carole is quite consciously attempting to shift socio-economic class by attending an elite university, taking on the itinerant aspects of the “green girl” as she sheds her past life. Carole also becomes distanced from her mother, Bummi, as a result, which we know from Ruth's motherless state is often a prerequisite to “green girl”-hood. The chapter that begins Bummi's section reads, “Bummi did not foresee the long-term negative impact of her daughter going to the famous university for rich people” (Evaristo 150).

²⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw's Ted Talk on her concept of “intersectionality” highlights how black women specifically experience injustice of varying degrees, being at the intersection of race and gender that often leads to their erasure in the public eye (Crenshaw). This erasure works in conjunction with Bailey's “misogynoir,” as Carole is both too visible as a potential target, and too easily erased as a victim who deserves justice.

trainwreck. But that's why we like to watch" (Zambreno 13). The narrator describes Ruth's success as when her appearance imitates a lifeless doll, but when she flinches and reveals interiority the narrator is quick to attack that same doll: "Oh cry cry we want to see you cry. I want to squeeze my Ruth-doll so water comes out. Is that a tear? A tear the moment of truth. A tear in the fabric of the perfected surface" (Zambreno 12). In a chilling echo of Ruth-as-ripped-fabric, in the aftermath of a three-way rape by Ruth's friend Agnes and her co-worker crush Oliver, Ruth notices that her new stockings, which she long coveted and bought for the holiday party the night before, "were ripped" and "she could just cry about those stockings" (Zambreno 147). The stockings act metonymically for Ruth, as do other fashion items such as the "LBD" – when they appear perfect, she appears perfect; when they are torn, she is torn. The rape then, by Ruth's seemingly convoluted logic, would have been prevented had her stockings remained intact and her performance seamless. Becoming inanimate and perfect in the societal gaze would have prevented Ruth from becoming an object of prey, because, as Butler writes in "Beside Oneself," "[t]he body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and violence" ("Beside" 21). Ruth tries desperately to avoid this violence by enameling over her skin and flesh, deadening her body and relinquishing agency to a scripted performance.

The danger of being too visible is masterfully laid out by Michaela Coel in *I May Destroy You* in the title of her first episode, "eyes eyes eyes," which refers to the moment when Arabella is roofied. A group comprised of friends and strangers take shots at a bar named Ego Death, and, as is a common phrase before shots (like saying "cheers") the characters all repeat "eyes eyes eyes," making eye contact with each person at the table before imbibing. The implication is that everyone saw Arabella get roofied, whether they knew it at the moment or not. Being seen, then,

is not an assurance of safety; the policing gaze does not also protect.²¹ In fact, in many cases, it takes far more pleasure in the destruction. So, while the gaze is necessary to give life to the “green girl,” it also desires her demise. This unstable contradiction manifests itself in the “green girl” Ruth, as the “slightest of recognitions inflames in her a joy that carries her through gray and wettened streets” at the same time that she wants to “peel off her skin” (Zambreno 73, 58). Living becomes a balancing act, teetering between life and death. “Look (don’t look)” Ruth thinks, “Look (please don’t look)” (Zambreno 224). This dark desire of the public is further realized in Egan’s *Look at Me*, when Charlotte books her first modeling gig after her accident, only to find out at the shoot that the vision of the photographer is to use a razor blade to make shallow cuts in the models’ faces to show ““what’s real,”” confirming that what the public really wants is the continued mutilation of Charlotte’s face if she cannot recapture her formerly idealized beauty (Egan 186). The masses desire spectacle, be it beautiful or ravaged.

2020 Means Perfect Vision

The emphasis on feminine beauty is, of course, not a recent cultural development, and the 21st century “green girl” has many sisters spanning the timeline of human existence. Yet, in the 21st century the ability to *craft* idealized beauty is becoming more and more difficult. As Jia Tolentino points out, while many beauty standards are trending towards the “natural” as a purported resistance to a conformance to the beauty ideal, “the psychological parasite of the ideal

²¹ The film *A Promising Young Woman* is another example of how extreme visibility does not protect women. The main character, played by Carey Mulligan, purposefully makes herself seen at bars appearing extremely intoxicated, waiting to be preyed upon by men willing to take advantage of her while others turn a blind eye. Additionally, the friend of the main character who commits suicide in a time before the film begins, does so after she is gang-raped on video, visible to multiple people in the room as well as subsequent viewers of the recording (Fennell).

woman has evolved to survive in an ecosystem that pretends to resist her” (Tolentino 65). The result is that:

The work formerly carried out by makeup has been embedded directly into [the aspiring idealized woman’s] face: her cheekbones or lips have been plumped up, or some lines have been filled in, and her eyelashes are lengthened every four weeks by a professional wielding individual lashes and glue. The same is true of her body, which no longer requires the traditional enhancements of clothing or strategic underwear, it has been pre-shaped by exercise that ensures there is little to conceal or rearrange. (Tolentino 64) ²²

This is bad news for the “green girl,” whose art form up until recently has been creating herself using accessible tools like makeup to create a temporary façade under which she can hide and later remove at the end of the day. This new and emerging beauty standard demands even more visibility under the trendy stipulation for “transparency” in all things. Tolentino writes that, “[t]hese days, it is perhaps even more psychologically seamless than ever before for an ordinary woman to spend her life walking toward the idealized mirage of her own self-image,” not seeing the contradiction of supposedly natural beauty standards impossible to attain (Tolentino 65). “Satisfaction” Tolentino remarks, “remains, under the terms of the system, necessarily out of reach” (Tolentino 66).

The “green girl” is left to contort herself into the image of the idealized woman for the pleasure of a growing crowd, conforming and performing, all while striving for an increasingly

²² Compare this to currently trending videos on Instagram of women taking off their makeup on camera, going through the steps of removing false eyelashes, using makeup wipes, washing the face, applying various serums to their skin, as well as videos of women removing their filters, to purportedly demonstrate how unrealistic beauty standards are—all while asking you, the viewer to *look at them, like their posts, subscribe to their channels.*

more rigorous standard of beauty that she has conveniently internalized as empowering.²³ The performance is relentless, and surely unsustainable. So how does the “green girl” keep performing show after show? She must find ways to relieve the pressure of the gaze. When the spotlight becomes too bright, the “green girl” hides.

III: Hiding in Pain Sight

In her *Emmy* award acceptance speech for *I May Destroy You*, Michaela Coel dedicated her story to “every single survivor of assault,” and said:

In a world that entices us to browse through the lives of others to help us better determine how we feel about ourselves, and to in turn feel the need to be constantly visible, for visibility these days seems to somehow equate to success: Do not be afraid to disappear. From it, from us, for a while. And see what comes to you in the silence. (*Writing, transcription mine*).

This note on visibility is seen in her show, when Arabella becomes overwhelmed with her position as an influencer, obsessing over her social media presence before finally, at the encouragement of her therapist, taking a break. In recent years the phrase “taking a break from social media” has become increasingly familiar. Everyone knows someone who simply had to take a break, citing the psychological toll they experience as users.²⁴ The rise of visual social media, such as Instagram and tiktok, has specifically made hypervisibility a problem for many. Kim Kardashian joked in her SNL host monologue on Saturday, October 9th, 2021 that the night

²³ The malleability of her body is an eerie echo of the belief defined by the original use of “hysteria” which diagnosed women with a “wandering uterus”—the belief that a woman’s uterus literally roamed about her body, marking the female body as unstable.

²⁴ Interestingly, the word “user” is applied to social media consumers as well as drug addicts, where dopamine highs and crashes are both experienced.

would be intimate for her as she is used to “360 million followers watching [her] every move” comparing it to the “like ten million” people who watch SNL (Kardashian, transcription mine). The numbers are staggering, and there doesn’t seem to be an end in sight. While an influencer/celebrity like Kim Kardashian is on the extreme end of the spectrum of constant visibility, it remains true for even an average “green girl” like Ruth that pulling back from the public eye can be difficult.²⁵ By its consuming nature, society always demands more of the “green girl,” and even if she tries to become less visible, she is still scrutinized for how she does appear. She simply has no control over the gaze once it sees her. Her only option for true relief is to hide from the countless eyes watching, if only temporarily.

Role Play

Unlike her desire to change herself to fit the role of the idealized woman—where she is herself, only better—sometimes the “green girl” will retreat from the public gaze (including the set of eyes she’s internalized) and pretend to be somebody else:

Agnes (as if in consolation): You know who you remind me of?

Ruth: No, who?

(This is a favorite game that green girls play.)

Agnes: You know who you so are? You are so Catherine Deneuve in *Repulsion*.

And Ruth has heard this before. In fact, she has heard this so many times before that now she finds herself playing Catherine Deneuve, her impenetrability.

Ruth considers the mirror again, hair pulled back with her hand, almost violently.

²⁵ Kim Kardashian is far from the original concept of “green girl,” in terms of being a girl in constant progress of becoming an idealized version of woman. Kardashian is more akin to a woman who has mastered the art of performing the ideal. In the same SNL monologue, Kardashian jokes that she is “so much more than the reference photo my sisters showed their plastic surgeons,” highlighting her successful rendition (Kardashian).

Ruth: Do you just think I should just cut it all off?

Agnes: You mean pull a *Roman Holiday*?

Ruth: I was thinking more Jean Seberg.

Agnes: Yeah, that'd be brilliant. (Zambreno 64)

Zambreno delivers this meta scene with her “green girl” actresses Ruth and Agnes reading their formatted lines from a script, fantasizing about being specific actresses. Just a page later they will watch Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* to which the narrator quips “[t]here is no subtlety in this film selection” (Zambreno 65). The film, written and directed by Ingmar Bergman, is about an actress, played by Liv Ullmann, who suffers a mental breakdown and is subsequently relegated to the care of a nurse played by Bibi Andersson. Over time it becomes difficult to tell the women apart as their individuality is elided (Bergman). Later, in an epigraph, Zambreno quotes from *Persona*:

I understand, all right. The hopeless dream of being—not seeming but being. At every waking moment, alert. The gulf between what you are with others and what you are alone. The vertigo and the constant hunger to be exposed, to be seen through, perhaps even wiped out. Every inflection and every gesture a lie, every smile a grimace. Suicide? No, too vulgar. But you can refuse to move, refuse to talk, so that you don’t have to live. You can shut yourself in. (Zambreno 155)

What is presented here, first in the script formatted scene which refers to three famous actresses, and later in the less than subtle selection of *Persona*, is the idea that one of the ways “green girls” find temporary relief from their own existence is by hiding in other women. Importantly, eluding the masculine gaze in this way has the added benefit of being insurgent, in

that it is often, though not always, accompanied by sexual release that specifically excludes men.

26

In *Green Girl*, the name-dropping of famous women (real or fictional) is overwhelming, including but not limited to Jane Fonda in *Klute*, “an Anna Karenina” type, Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, Jackie O, “Marilyn or Jean,” Eliza Doolittle, “a young Mia Farrow,” Dietrich in *Scarlet Empress*, Harlow in *Dinner at Eight*, Edie Sedgwick, Françoise Dorléac, Ingrid Bergman in *Gaslight*, Ava Gardner, Vivien Leigh playing Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Jean Seberg in *Breathless*, Falconetti playing Joan of Arc, Catherine Deneuve in Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion*, Liz Taylor, Joan Crawford, Hitchcock blondes, Charlotte Rampling in *The Night Porter*, Ginger Rogers, Katharine Hepburn, Deneuve in *Belle de Jour*, Isabella Rossellini in *Blue Velvet*, Helen Mirren, Galatea, Monica Vitti, Hanna Schygulla, Corinne Marchand, Anouk Aimee, Rita Hayworth, Greta Garbo...and of course, Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Imaginatively inhabiting the lives of these women simulates an escape from reality for the “green girl,” an intense game of pretend verging on delusion. Often, these women embody traits that the “green girl” wishes to possess, traits that she might find lacking in herself as a “green girl” (severity, aggression, confidence). It is also an intimate act to hide inside other women. The boundaries between the self and the other become blurred, and it allows for the “green girl” to love herself through loving the woman in whom she is subsumed.²⁷

²⁶ This idea is not new in feminist theory. In Kathy Rudy’s article “Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory” she illuminates the multiple and warring definitions of “lesbian” in the 1970s and 1980s. There was lesbianism based in sexuality and lesbianism based in political, separatist feminism. Rudy quotes Shane Phelan to explain how “by sleeping with women, lesbians...expressed their commitment to a world that values women.” Women could be politically lesbian, “woman-loving” as Marilyn Frye puts it, pointedly excluding men and becoming lesbians by loving women, including themselves (Rudy 7).

²⁷ Homosexuality here as an optional but temporary escape from heterosexuality is not an assertion about how homosexuality operates generally. Rather, the examples refer specifically to characters that have primarily active heterosexual lives and experience an isolated homosexual experience that offers them a release that differs from their heterosexual experiences.

The homoerotic aspect of this phenomenon is made explicit in the relationship between Ruth and Agnes in *Green Girl*. On a night that begins with the drug Ecstasy, the girls find themselves pulled closer and closer together. The impetus for taking the ecstasy is the desire “to not be Ruth for a few hours. It was a favorite hobby for these girls, to escape their heads” (Zambreno 219). As Butler notes in “Beside Oneself,” “[t]o be ec-static means, literally, to be outside oneself” (“Beside” 20). Ruth and Agnes feel that they have escaped their bodies and are able to enjoy the night unbound by the weighted feeling of the eyes that usually watch them. Later, the “girls are both on the bed, facing each other, a mirror image” (Zambreno 220). As with the women of *Persona*, the boundaries between Ruth and Agnes blur until they can’t tell themselves apart. In bed with Agnes, Ruth thinks “...is this her hair, is this my skin. They are outside of themselves. They have abandoned the premises. They have left the building” (Zambreno 221). The reference to abandoned “premises” is a repetition from an earlier sexual encounter, where Ruth submits to painful sex with a bartender, and to get through it “she deadens herself...what damaging effect can that have, that ability to vacate the premises?” (Zambreno 109). Zambreno differentiates this type of dissociative escape from the ecstatic escape Ruth finds with Agnes, playing on the multiple meanings of “premises,” referring both to an out-of-body experience as well as the “premise” for their usual roles. In other words, the “premise” left behind in the homoerotic encounter is the deference to the masculine gaze. Far from being deadened, “Ruth was filled with such violence, such sublime joy. She is enflamed with tenderness” (Zambreno 222). The idea that it is an escape from reality is enforced when the narrator tells the reader that “[t]hey never wanted it to end never wanted it to end never wanted it to,” truncating the ending to eliminate the word “end” and imply the desire for an endless continuation (Zambreno 222). The release is not only sexual, but also a release from the pressures that both Ruth and Agnes feel as “green girls.”

The reprieve is only temporary. Just a few pages later, “Ruth wonders what it would be like to hide away from all of the staring eyes of the street” (Zambreno 241). As the reader will surely note, it is disconcerting to see that Ruth already feels the need to hide again.

In *Look at Me*, the model Charlotte Swenson experiences a similar conflation with a female friend in a memory she recalls from her teenage years. Ellen and Charlotte are best friends in the small town of Rockford, Illinois, and together they prod the limits of their teenage sexuality.²⁸ They make pacts to have sex with boys their age, and later with older men. After a pact to sleep with Ellen’s brother’s college friends, the two girls agree to meet afterwards and discuss their experiences at the country club pool. It is after hours, and as Charlotte arrives, she is “revived by the thought of seeing Ellen and swapping [their] tales of woe, like always” (Egan 24). Ellen is already in the pool, having discarded her clothes in a pile on the side, and Charlotte soon joins her. It is quickly revealed that neither girl was able to complete the sexual pact, but “there was no sense of failure; only this giddiness, as if we’d broken free—finally, somehow—from an onerous fate” (Egan 24). These girls, newly minted into womanhood, are feeling for perhaps the first time the dread of becoming a sexualized object for the pleasure of men. Alone in the pool, where the water “felt identical” to the air in temperature, Charlotte recalls that she “touched [Ellen] underwater. She felt both familiar and strange—someone else, but like me...Still, the intensity was punishing—we’re killing each other, I thought. We’re killing something” (Egan 25). In a sense they *are* killing “something,” their roles as being *for men*, the versions of themselves that submit to being objectified. The girls feel the boundaries between

²⁸ *Look at Me* is not the only work by Egan that explores the growing conflation of two female characters. Her first novel, *The Invisible Circus* (1994) concerns a young woman, Phoebe, following the path of her deceased sister through Europe, hoping to find illumination about her death. In the years since her sister’s death, Phoebe has aged into a startling replica of her sister, and as she traces the same path that her sister once took, she even starts up an affair with her sister’s boyfriend at the time of her death (*The Invisible*).

them begin to disappear, finding a similar release in escape that Ruth and Agnes experience. Charlotte recalls that they “slept naked in Ellen’s single bed, pressed together with her hair everywhere, and again I had that sense, as when I’d first touched her, that she was less a separate person than a variant of myself—that together we made one thing” (Egan 25). In this private homoerotic space, a retreat from the public eye, the girls find relief. They become “one thing” and escape the burden of being individually distinguishable and therefore monitored. They can abandon, for the moment, the goal of their sexual pacts. But as with Ruth and Agnes, the relief Charlotte and Ellen experience is temporary. They lose touch quickly afterwards; Charlotte goes on to be a model in New York City with a series of male lovers, while Ellen marries a man and starts a family right in Rockford, Illinois.

Dark Narcissism

When love and longing are expressed in terms of a mirrored image, we might find our minds drawn to the myth of Narcissus as written by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. Indeed, the myth fits into the identity of the “green girl” in a myriad of ways, not the least of which is the sexualization of the reflection. For Ruth this mirrored image is Agnes, and for Charlotte it is Ellen, but both secondary female characters stand in for an incarnate mirrored self which our “green girl” character can touch, as opposed to the mirrored self which, as previously stated, is separated by a “gap” both for the “green girl” and for Narcissus who “could not clasp himself” (Ovid 64). Perhaps Egan is thinking specifically of Narcissus when she has Charlotte and Ellen touch each other under the water, bringing to a fruition the desire Narcissus feels as he “often in vain kissed the cheating pool” (Ovid 63). As in the myth of Narcissus, both the Ruth/Agnes and the Charlotte/Allen pairs see the physical characteristics of their separate images become the

physical characteristics of one being, suggesting a desire for autosexual release rather than strictly homosexual. This is part of what Irving Goh calls “dark narcissism” or “a darker care for the self” in their essay “Auto-thanato-theory: Dark Narcissistic Care for the Self in Sedgwick and Zambreno” (Goh 202). It is the desire to enter the pool and close the gap between the mirrored image and the physical self once and for all. In other words, it is the passionately fueled desire to die.

There is therefore an obvious dark side to the desire to not be seen. As the “green girl” exists in the eyes of her beholder, when she is not beheld she ceases to be. In this way, the desire for a reprieve from the spotlight might emerge as a desire to destroy the physical body that allows the “green girl” to be seen in the first place. Ruth’s desperation to escape her body becomes a desperation to erase her body. “Everywhere she goes she wants to confide: Do you know what it’s like not to be able to shake your own quality? She doesn’t want to be. She doesn’t want to live. She wants to lose herself in the crowd” (Zambreno 70). And later, the narrator asks, “[w]hat happens to a woman when the eyes are no longer on her? Is that in a way a tiny death? Or a sort of freedom?” (Zambreno 163). This leads us into the “green girl’s” most dangerous game of pretend—not the desire to be someone else, but the desire to be no one at all. For Ruth, the double-edge of this desire for escape through pretend emerges when she takes on the role of Ophelia: “Sometimes after work she takes a bath and watches herself in it. Sometimes she forces herself under water. She pretends she’s dead. She pretends she has drowned. She is Millais’ Ophelia floating down stream, clutching flowers” (Zambreno 57).²⁹ In being Ophelia, she both

²⁹ From Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*: “[Women] drown themselves more readily, like Ophelia, showing woman’s affinity for water, passive and full of darkness, where it seems that life might be able to dissolve passively” (de Beauvoir 649).

pretends to be someone else and pretends to be dead.³⁰ The elision between ecstatic escape and erasing death is complete. Violence and fantasy meet, and the product of their union is a slippery step into the unknown.

IV: Woman Unbound

“When one feels such pleasure in non-existence, one’s inclination can be completely satisfied only by completely ceasing to exist” (Zambreno 132, quoting Émile Durkheim in an epigraph). This epigraph appears around midway through Zambreno’s *Green Girl*, and is one of many epigraphical breaks in a novel that is otherwise a chapter-less onslaught of Ruth’s banal yet excruciating life. Indeed, one of the key traits of the “green girl” life is an endless repetition of the same tiring performance, creating a cyclical and spiraling pattern that reveals the moments of hiding to be integral to the machinations of “green girl”-hood, acting as a temporary stopgap that ultimately allows for the prolongation of the otherwise unbearable “green girl” existence, temporarily relieving the pressure but not solving the problem. As Zambreno’s use of the epigraph from Émile Durkheim suggests, the pleasure that the “green girl” experiences in temporary escape cannot be complete until the escape is made permanent, and with each return

³⁰ Gaston Bachelard coined the term “Ophelia Complex,” a psychological term which describes the links between femininity, liquids and drowning. There is also “Ophelia Syndrome” a medical term that describes “[t]he association between memory loss and Hodgkin’s lymphoma,” according to an article titled “The poor insane Ophelia: reconsidering Ophelia syndrome” by Carlos A. Soto-Rincón, et al (Soto-Rincón). The name “Ophelia syndrome” was given by the pathologist Ian Carr, whose daughter suffered from the malady. Soto-Rincón and his colleagues questioned the aptness of the name: “What did Dr Carr see in his daughter that reminded him of Ophelia? We suggest her innocence made mad by an external factor (lymphoma, in this case), with him watching from afar—through a glass—as Ophelia was seen through the waters in which her life ended, by an external factor (her father’s death)” (Soto-Rincón 830).

to the spotlight, each repetition of performance, the ties binding the “green girl” to her life begin to fray.³¹

Jia Tolentino notes this very phenomenon in her essay “Always Be Optimizing” when she writes of the 21st century woman striving for the ideal:

She’ll take a weeklong break from the social network, and then, almost always, she will go on exactly as before. Resistance to a system is presented on the terms of the system. It’s so much easier, when we gain agency, to adapt rather than to oppose. (Tolentino 93)

The return to the status quo for Ruth occurs over and over again, and is perhaps the most distinguishable structuring of the novel. It is what makes reading Ruth’s life frustrating, and it is ultimately what leaves many readers upset with her as a character.³² She seems to always return to where she started, denying the reader any sense of progress made. Like a carnival ride, the tilt-a-whirl or spinning teacups, the whiplash of Ruth’s life becomes sickening. “It all began to blur into the same train ride home. Doors closing. Mind the gap” (Zambreno 99-100). She experiences two pages of “bodies,” beginning with “The same shift at Harrods.³³ The same bodies. Bodies, bodies, bodies. Red bodies, yellow bodies, white bodies, brown bodies, black bodies, purple bodies, green bodies...” and ending with “bodies that tap by on heels, bodies that shuffle by, bodies bodies bodies...” (Zambreno 101-102). In perhaps the climax of the novel, if this work of relentless repetition can be said to have a climax, Ruth cuts off all her hair:

³¹ There is perhaps another violence associated with repetition not fleshed out here, and that is the violence perpetrated against women made possible by a knowledge of their routine. Ruth often sees the same people on her route, such as the preacher and the “40p man” (Zambreno 129).

³² In the same review by Megan Milks from the *Los Angeles Review of Books* quoted at the start of this essay, Milks notes that, “[w]hat was striking was...the degree of vitriol with which the haters hated [the book]. In her comments, tournament judge Edith Zimmerman wrote about Ruth, ‘you just want to shake her.’ This sentiment was echoed by a commenter: ‘Books like this, where the female protagonist just makes bad decisions and retreats inside herself for 300 pages just makes me annoyed and tired. I just want to shake girls like that and be like GET A GRIP.’ Another reader, on Goodreads, wrote, ‘I was annoyed a lot’” (Milks).

³³ Ruth’s name for Harrods, the famous London department store.

Is it masochistic? An act of self-flagellation. There is a finality to it. To cut off one's breasts in one mean gesture...I am ugly and true. I have cut off my lovely, my darling. Cut it off.

Cut, cut, it off. I stand a monument to pain. I stand naked to this world. (Zambreno 162)

Ruth is, in theory, reborn. But even this act, meant to tear asunder her image and therefore her means of being seen, is riddled with repetition. One hundred pages earlier Ruth is admiring a model who has "recently...cut all her hair off, which made her look reckless and free" (Zambreno 61). The operative word being "look," as even this supposed act of rebellion against classic female constraints serves the continued operation of the grander system. Ruth, after her own climactic cut, goes to the salon to get the style shaped, and she marvels at how she does not "recognize" herself, the dream of a "green girl" who we know is desperate to escape herself (Zambreno 167). Agnes sees her later and remarks to Ruth: "No, really, you've just changed everything," signaling to the reader that nothing, in fact, has changed (Zambreno 168). This is confirmed when, on the final page of the novel, as Ruth walks Oxford Street "[t]he crowd envelops her. More bodies, bodies, bodies. A shudder goes through her. She gasps for breath...She fingers her tiny stub of a ponytail. Oh, to shave it all off. To be reborn. To be wiped clean" (Zabreno 273). Again, there are the bodies, and Ruth's desire to be "reborn" through the shearing of her locks returns.

In another act of self-reinvention, Ruth quits her job and begins work at a women's clothing store, where "[t]he work is hellish," and there are "[p]iles and piles of clothes like deflated corpses," all of which are "anointed with girl's names" (Zambereno 268, 265). Quite pointedly, Zambreno calls the continuous refolding and reordering of these female-named clothes a "Sisyphean task" with the employees acting as "an ensemble of girls playing pick-up, The Danaids of Oxford Street, carrying water in leaky jars from the river's edge...Doomed to

repeat their task, over and over” (Zambreno 268, 269). Ultimately, the notion of a “rebirth” does not work for “green girls” as a method of lasting escape.³⁴ Perhaps what the “green girl” is really looking for is not rebirth, but, as is noted in the midst of Ruth’s haircut, the ““mythical suicide”” that Salvador Dalí called Mia Farrow’s own 1966 haircut by Vidal Sassoon (Zambreno 163). Rebirth doesn’t work, but death? Death for the “green girl” has some possibility.

Erotic and Violent Fantasies of Self-Destruction

Ruth’s desire to be made wholly new is mirrored by her desire to be wholly destroyed. Just as she continually reimagines herself as the ideal, she also “doesn’t want to live in her skin,” repeating and blurring the phrase “Sheneededwantedneeded to peel it off, just peel it off” (Zambreno 228). These twin desires share the paradoxical nature of the desire for euphoric escape detailed at the end of the last chapter. In this way, the “green girl” transgresses the boundary between violence and sex that is often horribly blurred by others to her own peril, allowing her to fantasize about violence done to her physical form as a subversive and pleasurable release.

Part of Ruth’s daily routine is taking the train, and in one instance while she waits, she thinks, “maybe it’ll miss the tracks next time,” and “she imagines her face smashed, unrecognizable. Gone in pieces like a porcelain doll” (Zambreno 4). If the idealized Ruth is perfect like a doll to be looked at and handled with approval, then her subversive desire is to

³⁴ This perhaps draws on Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto,” which decries the societal obsession with a rebirth into wholeness: “To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is to be an illusion, and so be involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other. Yet to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial. One is too few, but two are too many” (Haraway 352). This is echoed by the end of Tolentino’s essay “Always Be Optimizing,” when she writes “For the way out, I think, we have to follow the cyborg. We have to be willing to be disloyal, to undermine. The cyborg is powerful because she grasps the potential in her own artificiality, because she accepts without question how deeply it is embedded in her,” foreclosing a simple rebirth as an option (Tolentino 94).

smash that doll to pieces and render it useless. This desire lives deep inside Ruth, a dark fantasy that shocks her when she feels the threat of it turned realistically onto herself, and she avoids a man “for fear that he might push her in front of the train tracks” (Zambreno 187). That same disconnect of reality and fantasy occurs when Agnes suggests that the train is delayed because “someone probably killed themselves on the tracks” which makes Ruth wonder “People do that?” The only hint that Ruth herself has had this thought is revealed as a “shiver went through her” (Zambreno 188). Zambreno leaves it up to the reader to decide if it is from horror or pleasure. The heady cocktail of violent destruction and sexual release occurs also in Ruth’s fantasies about the mysterious “HIM,” her former lover, as she remembers the “nocturnal couplings [when] she would plead for HIM to destroy her, murder her, pound her back into the nothingness from which she began and to which she knew deep down she would inevitably return” (Zambreno 37-38). Ruth is never satisfied with any of her subsequent lovers, specifically Rhys who treats her gently, as she “did not desire to be loved and cherished and caressed. She desired a beast. Someone to destroy her. Her own Jack the Ripper” (Zambreno 208). The tipping over of sex into violence is denoted by the mention of “Jack the Ripper,” who appears in Ruth’s fantasies as she walks where he famously killed women, and “whenever Ruth thought about those prostitutes she had to hold her belly, imagining the burn of it being slashed. Then a thrill, a shiver, almost of delight” (Zambreno 130). This “shiver” verging on “delight” is exactly what Ruth experiences earlier when thinking about someone (herself) throwing themselves onto train tracks. In another moment, Ruth “lets out a sharp gasp, imagining a hot knife pushing through her ribcage, as a man in a blue jacket presses against her walking by” (Zambreno 27). Zambreno uses sexualized language, and it is easy to see how Ruth’s “gasp” at the thought of a “hot”

phallic object “pushing” into her is easily transformed from stemming from a fear of violence to a fantasy of desire.

Judith Butler writes that bodies relate to the self “against [our] will and from the start—to others [we] do not choose to have in proximity to [ourselves] (the subway or the tube are excellent examples of this dimension of sociality)” (“Beside” 21). It is interesting that she cites this form of transportation specifically, for in addition to drowning, one of the most common forms of fantasizing about “green girl” death plays out in train stations.³⁵ Perhaps this has to do with a desire to publicly end the hold that the societal gaze has on her bodily appearance; everyone sees the “green girl’s” birth, and everyone will see her destruction.³⁶ In Bernadine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other*, the chapter detailing the life of Carole begins with one such fantasy:

where this train will end
and the numerous delays due to vandalism on the tracks or leaves on the line or
sun on the line or a body under a train
how *very* inconsiderate, not to her
to choose to throw yourself in front of a mechanical iron beast weighing
thousands of tons and racing at a top speed of one hundred and forty miles per hour?
to choose such a brutal and dramatic finale

³⁵ The character of Beck in the hit Netflix show *You* is another female character that has an interesting near-death experience on the train tracks of the New York City MTA. In the first episode of the series, she falls onto the tracks trying to catch her phone. Like other “green girls,” Beck is constantly watched, this time by her male stalker-turned-boyfriend-turned-murderer, who “saves” her from a grizzly death-by-train, but ultimately subjects her to his own version of her violent end (“Pilot”).

³⁶ Perhaps this fascination begins with Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, which depicts another female character subjected to a hypercritical social gaze, ending with a death as iconic as Ophelia’s. Or perhaps the death of one person in front of a crowd in a train station subversively plays out the classic ethical dilemma of “the trolley problem,” with the sacrifice of one for the good of the many rewritten as the self-sacrifice of one in the interest of the self alone.

Carole knows what drives people to such despair, knows what it's like to appear
 normal but to feel herself swaying
 just one leap away
 from
 the amassed crowds on the platforms who carry enough hope in their hearts to
 stay alive
 swaying
 just one leap away from
 eternal
 peace. (Evaristo 113-114)

Carole's fantasy is less overtly sexual than Ruth's, but it contains the same equation of death with release and pleasure, in the form of "eternal peace," which focuses on the lasting escape of death as compared to the temporary relief of hiding from the gaze. The gaze here is notably described as the "amassed crowds," as the concept of "the crowd" has become a signifier for modernity (in terms of cities, public transportation, shared public spaces generally, anywhere that large groups of people can congregate), and is often referred to by its synonym in *Green Girl*: "the crush" (Zambreno 70).

While not a train and not a fantasy, Charlotte from Egan's *Look at Me* experiences a violent destruction of her face (à la Ruth's destroyed porcelain doll) in a car crash, but the way in which she remembers the event casts it in a similar light to the violent-erotic fantasies of Ruth and Carole.³⁷ Charlotte retroactively fantasizes about the accident, which she doesn't remember

³⁷ In a haunting comparison, Princess Diana was hounded by paparazzi demanding entrance into her personal life, ultimately leading to the car crash that ended her life. In the 2021 film biopic *Spencer* starring Kristen Stewart as Diana, the young Princess is told by Charles that "there has to be two of you, there's the real one and the one they

at all, noting that it had “acquired a harsh, dazzling beauty” in her memory” (Egan 3). In the aftermath of the accident, Charlotte has multiple reconstructive surgeries, and latches onto a term the doctors use, calling the time before the inevitable “grotesque swelling” a “golden time,” before she is left with a “gross asymmetry” (Egan 4). But despite the horrific consequences of the accident, Charlotte repeats that she is in a “golden time,” trying to comfort her sister who is visibly more distraught about Charlotte’s accident than Charlotte herself is (Egan 5). The “golden” quality given to the aftermath of the accident mirrors the afterglow of orgasm, a disembodied sense of delight after metaphorically coming apart. This positions the accident as the event of climactic release, joining the bloody violence of Charlotte’s face literally shattering with the euphoric shattering of self found in sexual satiation.

Desiring Ego Death, or Death of the Recognizable Self

The concept of *la petite mort* works as a way into understanding the cohabitation of desire and violence in the “green girl,” and in that spirit I would like to point to a definition of *la petite mort* along with a definition of “nirvana” from Melissa K. Nelson’s essay “Getting Dirty,” which details the “Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures”:

The French call orgasm *la petite mort* (the little death), where we can actually be relieved of being ourselves and disappear for an ecstatic moment. The Sanskrit root meaning of the word “nirvana” means “extinction, disappearance (of the individual soul into the universe). It is in these moments of disappearing and ego extinction in the sexual act that most of us find solace and bliss. (Nelson 230)

take pictures of” echoing the gap that the “green girl” experiences between her interior self and the self she puts forth to be seen (Larraín, transcription mine).

Nelson illuminates here a key aspect of the goal of these violent fantasies, which are essentially fantasies about being “relieved” of the burden of a recognizable self: the “extinction” or death of the ego.

For Ruth, the death of the ego comes up in her conversations with Rhys about the Christian mystics. “Simone Weil says we need to let go of our ego. You must forget the I. Says Rhys” (Zambreno 201). Ruth relates to these women when Rhys tells her that “[t]hey wanted to escape the cages of their bodies,” and “Ruth actually does understand but doesn’t know how to say this” (Zambreno 195). Ironically, she probably knows this feeling more intimately than Rhys, who is in the position of teacher in their conversations. But as the reader knows, Ruth has previously felt (on more than one occasion) “somewhere deep within a desire to cut through that glass, that image of herself. To explode outside of her small space. To destroy it somehow. To purge herself, cleanse herself, this creation, this product of others’ eyes” (Zambreno 161). She just doesn’t know how to act on the desire. This is where fiction becomes the female character’s stage of possibility.

Much of this essay has woven in and out of fiction, often referring to nonfiction essays and real women who I see as inhabiting parts of, if not the entire, role of the “green girl.” However, a distinction between the real to the fictional “green girl” needs to be made now. Only in fiction can “green girls” imagine themselves into the productive discursive space that occurs after death, and it is a space that can only be played out in fictional works. Irving Goh has put forth a definition for the type of nonfiction writing that concerns “a self that desires to be done with existence, if not a self that feels already dead,” which they call “auto-thanato-theory” (Goh 197).³⁸ While this type of writing is related to the discursive space of desiring the afterlife in

³⁸ Interestingly, Zambreno herself has come out with a work titled *To Write As If Already Dead* (2021), which according to her website “circles around Kate Zambreno’s failed attempts to write a study of Hervé Guibert’s *To the*

fiction, the key distinction between “auto-thanato-theory” and fictional imaginings of suicidal release is that while “auto-thanato-theory” puts forth a theory of care for the self that includes and acknowledges the suicidal self, it does not actively pursue or encourage entrance into the afterlife, whereas its fictional counterpart can both desire and pursue a path that opens up a coherent life-after-death space. The plurality of possibilities this space supports is specifically realized by Michaela Coel in *I May Destroy You*.³⁹

Afterlife/ves

Recall here that the name of the bar in *I May Destroy You* is “Ego Death,” and it is where the character of Arabella returns in the final episode to free herself from the excruciating existence of being a rape victim whose rapist has not been found, a constant terror and reminder of the hidden malicious intent of a public that sees but does not protect her. The character of Arabella, who is played by actress and writer Michaela Coel, is also a writer within the world of the show. In the final episode, titled “Ego Death,” she is working through the ending to her long-awaited book, trying out and scrapping multiple endings. These possible endings are played out on screen by Arabella and her friends as though they are happening in real time, and each variation centers on how exactly Arabella will find closure in the wake of rape. In one possible ending, Arabella goes to Ego Death, finds the rapist, pretends to be roofied by him again, allows herself to be brought back to the bathroom where the initial rape took place, and, with the help of her friends, injects him with his own date rape drug. They follow him out of the bar as he stumbles and wait for him to pass out on the street before Arabella fingers herself over his unconscious body, beats

Friend Who Did Not Save My Life.” She is also one of the main authors discussed in Irving Goh’s essay on “auto-thanato-theory,” specifically as concerns her *Appendix Project* and *Book of Mutter* (“To Write”).

³⁹ Notably, at the start of each episode the “You” is deleted from the title, leaving it as only “I May Destroy” (Coel).

him to death, and ultimately hides the body under her mattress. In another fantasy she goes to Ego Death, finds the rapist, considers calling the police but doesn't, snorts cocaine and then allows herself to be roofied *again*, has her friend call the police to catch him in the act, confronts the rapist in the bathroom where he breaks down and apologizes, takes him back to her home where they talk about rape and his psychological problems. Eventually the police arrive at her home, the rapist and the victim embrace before he is taken away, and Arabella cries. In yet another variation, she goes back to Ego Death and opens the doors of the bathroom stalls which reveal memories from her past (teenage years, another rape victim she met earlier in the series) while her friend confesses to her own traumatic sexual experience at the mirror. They then enter the bar, which is curiously empty aside from the rapist and his friend. Arabella and her rapist meet as though strangers and begin to have passionate sex in the bathroom, then at her apartment, where she assumes a dominant role behind him and thrusts into him to completion. In the morning she tells him to go, and he is followed by his own dead body from the first fantasy, which crawls out from under the bed. In the final loop the fantasy ends, and Arabella decides not to return to "Ego Death," having found the closure she needed in the fantastical spaces provided by her writing. What Arabella experiences in her multiple endings is expressed by Butler when she writes that,

To posit possibilities beyond the norm or, indeed, a different future for the norm itself, is part of the work of fantasy when we understand fantasy as taking the body as a point of departure for an articulation that is not always constrained by the body as itself.

("Beside" 28)

The "norm" for the "green girl" is not the future that she desires, and so the void of possibility that is life after death provides a productive space for fantasy to take root. Because it

is undefined and unbound by the physical dimension so far as we know, it becomes a haven for women whose very bodies become their enemies. “Fantasy,” Butler goes on to write, “is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside” (“Beside” 29). Intimately familiar with “limits,” the “green girl” embraces fantasy and death as places “outside” her reality. For Arabella, this outside place became a dimension of multiplicity, where she can cathartically act out variations of the same scene in fantastical ways without having to choose only one. One ending would not have been enough to provide the relief she needs, especially if she must stick to the “reality” in which her rapist is never found. Yet with the death of a structuring ego, Arabella is able to bend and shape the outcome of her rape investigation in as many ways as she desires in the space foreclosed by reality.

Often, this gesturing out into an amorphous abyss beyond physical laws is epitomized in novels in the form of an endless scream, an infinite interior cry that finds its way past the filtering ego and out into the world.⁴⁰ Ruth’s silence is noted throughout the novel, when she “mutes” herself, or simply smiles blandly rather than responds. As the narrator notes, “Ruth is my silent film star, always silent on the outside even when she is screaming within” (Zambreno 161). The silent exterior paired with a screaming interior is also noted by Ruth herself, when she sees a triptych at the Tate Museum of “three gruesome bodies set against a rage-filled orange. The open mouth. What is there to do but scream? And no sound comes out” (Zambreno 250).⁴¹ But it is in the final scene of the novel that Ruth’s cry finally surfaces, where she thinks in first

⁴⁰ Though *I May Destroy You* does not end with a scream, in episode 8 “Line Spectrum Border,” Arabella ends the episode by entering the sea in Italy, and a primordial roar is heard that stretches well into the credits (Coel).

⁴¹ The triptych is Francis Bacon’s *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944). It is also the inspiration for Zambreno’s debut novel *O Fallen Angel* (published originally in 2009 and reissued by Harper Perennial in 2017).

person rather than filtered through the narrator: “I want to go to a church and direct my eyes up high and open my arms up to the ceiling. And scream. And scream. And scream” (Zambreno 273). These are the last lines of the novel, and while it’s left ambiguous as to whether she realizes her want, the use of “I” as well as the repeated line “[a]nd scream” suggests a final barrier being broken, with Ruth at last being ripped free from her narrator, the gaze of society. She dives, at last, into the gap that exists between herself and her mirrored image, meeting herself there and creating one “I” that exists in an infinite plane beyond the physical world.

In one of the final scenes of *Look at Me*, Charlotte is filming a scene with her narrative double (Ellen’s daughter, whom she has curiously named Charlotte), which depicts Charlotte’s fiery car accident. The director of the shoot says “Charlotte Two, you lead! Charlotte One, you’re going to do what?” “Scream,” I answered. We’d been over it a dozen times” (Egan 513).

When the scene comes, Charlotte narrates:

We crashed through the corn, little Charlotte and I, my useless eyes squeezed shut, my mouth a gigantic *O* that dredged up from within me a sound unlike any I had ever made before, or even heard...It will never end.⁴² And even when it had, when it was all over and people were around us, something still was wrong. I heard it in the panicky flicker of voices, in the fact that so many hands were touching me, soothing me... ‘What’s the matter? What’s the matter with her?... ‘Charlotte can’t stop screaming...’ (Egan 516-517)⁴³

⁴² The “*O*” of Charlotte’s mouth could easily be read as orgasmic. John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* is also depicted with her mouth open (supposedly singing), as is Morrison’s *Sula*, bringing to mind Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s sculpture of The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, which captures the exquisite pain of Christian mystic experiences of ecstasy (Millais; Morrison; Bernini).

⁴³ This endless scream is reminiscent of Nel’s scream at the end of *Sula*: “‘O Lord, Sula,’ she cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.’ It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (Morrison 174).

The next scene with Charlotte begins in Part Three of the novel, titled “Afterlife,” where it is revealed that Charlotte ends up completely relinquishing the rights to her life, including her name, her image, her voice, her apartment...everything that once belonged to her. In a reflective scene, Charlotte divulges: “when I think of the mirrored room, as of course I still do, I understand now that it’s empty, filled with chimeras like Charlotte Swenson—the hard, beautiful seashells left behind long after the living creatures have struggled free and swum away. Or died” (Egan 528). She has completely severed herself from the life of “Charlotte Swenson,” intimating that her existence now is either that of someone who has “struggled free” or “died,” and it really does not matter which, since, for the “green girl” freedom and death are one and the same outside of the public gaze. But Egan, taking a page from Morrison’s *Sula* before her, allows Charlotte to find coherent autonomy by speaking in life after death; in the final words of the novel, Charlotte calls her old voice mail and hears her own voice answer: “Hi, it’s me” the voice says, to which she responds, “Hello...It’s me” (Egan 528).⁴⁴ Like Ruth, Charlotte’s story ends with a positive assertion of the self, a “me” or an “I” that is unnamed and yet powerfully present. Without the trappings of crafted existence and the pressure to “become” somebody, the “green girl” can conjure forth a “self” that is unmade and unbodied, delivered from the potent space of death.

Conclusion: Pillow Talk

⁴⁴ For *Sula*, the other version of herself that she reaches out to in speech after death is Nel. Sula dies, and in the afterlife she “felt her face smiling. ‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ she thought, ‘it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel” (Morrison 149). Other works that make use of this productive space of life after death include *Jennifer’s Body*, where Jennifer (played by Megan Fox) is mistaken for a virgin and sacrificed by a band in a demonic deal for fame, only to return from the dead in demonic form and subsequently become the consumer of men (Cody); Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*, which has the character of Amy Dunne fake her own disappearance/implies death through the creative medium of writing, allowing her to break away from her supposed role as victim, becoming the brilliant villain of the novel (Flynn); *A Promising Young Woman*, in which Cassie schedules a posthumous stream of texts and orchestrates the arrest of her killers and the rapist of her friend (Fennell).

Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests in the first chapter of her book *Writing Beyond the Ending*, “in the twentieth-century critiques, community and social connectedness are the end of the female quest, not death” and “in nineteenth-century texts, death occurs as a ‘cosmic’ or essentialist ending when a woman tests the social and historical rules governing the tolerable limits of her aspirations” (DuPlessis 16). I propose that twenty-first century fiction such as *Green Girl* embraces death at the end in a narcissistic turn towards the self that rejects the inherent “for others” quality that has heretofore defined her embodied existence. The girl who inhabits the role of “green girl,” a girl in the process of “becoming” the ideal woman, is finally completed in her own destruction. By embracing the desire laid out in the myth of Narcissus, the dark desire to plunge into the pool and unite with the interior self, the “green girl” both kills the visual presentation of herself that is the structuring ego, and births herself into a new form of existence. It is a dark baptism by water, a suicide that creates a new way of existing. She moves past the temporary release of sexual congress with a mirrored woman and joins with her own self beneath the water. Narcissus cries out in despair: “Would I might leave my body! I could wish/(Strange lover’s wish) my lover were not so near!” (Ovid 65). The “green girl” is her own “strange lover,” desiring beyond all else the permanent coupling of her fractured identities in a space beyond her own body, free from the societal gaze that would pry her apart. Narcissus does not see death as sad, for it will “end [his] sorrow” and in that death “two—one soul—one death will die” (Ovid 65). In death the two selves will become one, a subversive matrimony for a girl whose existence has always been for the pleasure of others.⁴⁵ It is an auto-erotic sexual act, signaled by an orgasmic scream, that can only beget more self. The literary “green girl” is either dead or in the process of

⁴⁵ This “union” also does the job of undermining the marriage/death binary laid out in 19th century literature, by putting forth a euphoric completion in death. It also defies the ending in death as “the price exacted for female critique” by making death not an erasing finality, but a coherent discursive space (Duplessis 16).

killing herself, and the self that remains is still swimming in the dark waters of creation. As Duplessis writes, feminist critics and women writers are acutely aware of “the untold story, the other side of the well-known tale, the elements of women’s existence that have never been revealed” (Duplessis 3). If the limits to telling this story have thus far been socially imposed, then the “green girl” jump into the abyss throws off the rules of society that come along with the gaze and begins anew in a place where “the untold” and “the other side” are churning. From there fantasy may take over, unlimited and unbound. From there she will—? ⁴⁶

⁴⁶ This ending is inspired by Joanna Russ’s 1972 essay “What Can a Heroine Do?: or Why Women Can’t Write,” in which she posits the possibility that in order for women to write they need new myths. While not quite writing new myths here, I propose with this ending that there is a definite movement of return in contemporary works to a potent beginning before mythical creation in order to harness the original tools of imaginative creation (Russ).

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sarah. "Feminism Is Sensational." *Living a Feminist Life*, Duke, 2017. 1–42.
- Austen, Jane, and Ebook Central - Academic Complete. *Northanger Abbey* (1817). First Avenue Editions, Lerner Publishing Group, 2017.
- Bacon, Francis. *Three Studies for Figures at The Base of a Crucifixion*. 1944.
- Bailey, Moya. "More on the Origin of Misogynoir." *Tumblr*, 27 April, 2014,
<https://moyazb.tumblr.com/post/84048113369/more-on-the-origin-of-misogynoir>
- Bergman, Ingmar. *Persona*. AB Svensk Filmindustri, 1966.
- Bernadine, Evaristo. *Girl, Woman, Other*. Hamish Hamilton, 2019.
- Bernini, Gian Lorenzo. *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. 1652-1647.
- Butler, Judith. "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy." *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, 2004.
- . "Introduction." *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* Routledge, 1993.
- . "Preface (1990)." *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1999.
- Cody, Diablo, screenwriter. *Jennifer's Body*. 20th Century Fox, 2009.
- Coel, Michaela, and Sam Miller. *I May Destroy You*. HBO, 2020.
- . *Writing for a Limited or Anthology Series or Movie: 73rd Emmys*. 2021,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FI6kwRFRtU>.
- Conrad, Joseph, et al. *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Coogan, Michael, et al., editors. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*. 5th ed., Oxford University Press, 2018.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. *The Urgency of Intersectionality*. 2016,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UzQ2o>.

Davis, Jeff, creator. *Criminal Minds*. The Mark Gordon Company, 2005.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex* (1949). Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, First Vintage Books Edition, 2011.

Didion, Joan. *Play It as It Lays* (1970). Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2005.

Dinnerstein, Dorothy. *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976). Other Press, 2021.

Dover Wilson, John, editor. "THE TRAGEDY OF HAMLET PRINCE OF DENMARK."

Hamlet: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare, by William Shakespeare,

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009. 1–138. Cambridge Library Collection - Literary Studies.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-century Women Writers*. Indiana University Press, 1985.

Egan, Jennifer. *Look at Me* (2001). Anchor Books, 2002.

—. *The Invisible Circus* (1994). Anchor Books, 2007.

Eller, Cynthia. *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Will Not Give Women a Future*. Beacon Press, 2000,

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/e/eller-myth.html>.

Fennell, Emerald. *A Promising Young Woman*. Focus Features, 2020.

Flynn, Gillian. *Gone Girl*. Crown Publishing Group, 2012.

- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory" (2001), rpt. in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski, McGraw Hill, 2013. 515-26.
- Gay, Roxane. *Bad Feminist*. Harper Perennial, 2014.
- Goh, Irving. "Auto-Thanato-Theory: Dark Narcissistic Care for the Self in Sedgwick and Zambreno." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol. 76, no. 1, Spring 2020. 197–213, <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2020.0007>.
- Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century (1985)." *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, edited by Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski, 2013. 344–54.
- Ingelsby, Brad, creator. *Mare of Easttown*. Zobot Projects, Mayhem Pictures, Juggle Productions, Low Dweller Productions, and wiip, 2021.
- Kardashian, Kim. *Kim Kardashian SNL Monologue*. October 9 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9P_p6rTrIM.
- "Pilot." Krieger, Lee Toland. *You*. Netflix, 2018.
- Larraín, Pablo. *Spencer*. Neon, Topic Studios, 2021.
- Manne, Kate. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Milks, Megan. "Pretty and Suffering: The Heroine of Kate Zambreno's 'Green Girl.'" *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/pretty-suffering-heroine-kate-zambrenos-green-girl/>.
- Millais, John Everett. *Ophelia*. 1851-52.
- Morrison, Toni. *Sula* (1973). Vintage International, 2004.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1975)." *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 1989. 14–26.

Nelson, Melissa K. "Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literature." *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies*, edited by Joan Barker, 2017. 229–57.

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. A.D. Melville, Oxford University Press, 1986.

Partington, Heather Scott. "REVIEW: Green Girl by Kate Zambreno." *Electric Literature*, Aug. 2014, <https://electricliterature.com/review-green-girl-by-kate-zambreno/>.

Rich, Adrienne. *Diving Into The Wreck* (1973). Bell & Howell Information and Learning, W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.

Rudy, Kathy. "Radial Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1, 2001.

Russ, Joanna. "What Can a Heroine Do?: Or Why Women Can't Write (1972)." *To Write Like a Woman*, Indiana University Press, 1995.

—. "When it Changed." *Again, Dangerous Visions*. 1972.

Shepard, Sara. *Pretty Little Liars*. HarperCollins, 2009.

Soto-Rincón, Carlos A., et al. "The Poor Insane Ophelia: Reconsidering Ophelia Syndrome." *Archivos de Neuro-Psiquiatria*, vol. 77, no. 11, 2019. 828–31.

Sun, Carrie. "Green Girl, by Kate Zambreno." *Fiction Writers Review*, Nov. 2014, <https://fictionwritersreview.com/review/green-girl-by-kate-zambreno/>.

The Band Perry. "If I Die Young." *If I Die Young*, Republic Nashville, 2010. *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4u26EevCNXMhIvE1xFBjwX?si=f55265f13c4b4b8a>

Tolentino, Jia. "Always Be Optimizing." *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusions*, Random House, 2019.

Tolstoy, Leo graf, et al. *Anna Karenina* (1877). First Avenue Editions, 2015.

"To Write As If Already Dead." *Kate Zambreno*, <https://kzambreno.com/to-write-as-if-already-dead>.

Wolf, Dick, creator. *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. Wolf Entertainment, 1999.

Zambreno, Kate. *Green Girl* (2011). Harper Collins, 2014.