

“THE DANCE OF MASKS”: DESIRE AND IDENTITY IN LEONARD COHEN’S

BEAUTIFUL LOSERS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Leonard Cohen's postmodern novel *Beautiful Losers* (1966). It considers the novel in relation to common themes in Cohen's body of work, and the social context in which it was published. It applies postcolonial and philosophical theories of desire to examine how colonial hierarchies of race structure representations of desire. Through the lens of queer theory, it also examines how homosexuality is constructed, reflecting the homophobia of the time and unsettling concepts of sex and gender. This study argues that desire is integral and instrumental in the construction of identity, particularly of race and gender.

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For Kelly

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Introduction

The term *enigma* has become a well-worn label in standard biographies of Leonard Cohen. His life is full of mysterious contradictions. Endeavoring to define him in light of his artistic career, I am tempted to mimic the opening lines of *Beautiful Losers*, and ask: Leonard Norman Cohen, who are you? Are you (1934–)? Are you a “well-tailored bohemian, an infamous lover who lives alone,... a Jew who practices Zen,” or even “part wolf and part angel”? (Nadel 1). Cohen was born in Montreal and might have inherited his ancestral vocation (the surname Cohen comes from a Hebrew word meaning *a priest*), or taken over his father’s clothing business, but instead began publishing poetry shortly after graduating from McGill in 1955. Cohen’s first book of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956), was well reviewed, but it was his second book of poetry, *The Spice Box of Earth* (1961), that cemented his reputation internationally. With a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, Cohen traveled to London, England, and then to the small Greek island Hydra. Cohen then published his first novel, the semi-autobiographical *The Favorite Game* (1963), and two poetry collections: *Flowers for Hitler* (1964) and *Parasites of Heaven* (1966). He published new and old work in *Selected Poems: 1956-1968* (1968), earning himself the Governor-General’s Award, which he declined for political reasons. Shortly after completing *Beautiful Losers* (1966), Cohen relocated to New York. He devoted himself mostly to music, successfully writing, recording, and performing folk songs around the world, eventually settling in Montreal. He continued to publish poetry, including *The Energy of Slaves* (1972), *Death of a Lady’s Man* (1978), *Book of Mercy* (1984) and *Book of Longing* (2006). He has been quiet and reclusive at times, prolific and pastoral at others. Throughout his career, he has remained

enigmatic, however, and he has cultivated a charming, egoistic public persona that he readily admits is a con. In Cohen's second and last novel, *Beautiful Losers*, the poet attempts to transcend his overwhelming ego. As Michael Ondaatje writes, it is "most successful because, for the first time, Cohen has been able to completely eradicate himself" (55).

Beautiful Losers is very much a cultural document of its time. To put it into context,

Cohen began work on *Beautiful Losers* at a time when [there] was a new experimentalism that allowed for a challenging sexual and linguistic freedom. Drugs and a counterlife shaped the three essential texts that redefined the nature of fictionalized popular culture: Alexander Trocchi's *Cain's Book* (1960), William S. Burrough's *Naked Lunch* (Paris, 1958; New York, 1962), and Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963)." (Nadel, *A Life In Art* 69)

Beyond the literary realm, Cohen's work was also informed by the political chaos back in Canada, as the Quiet Revolution was transforming Quebec into a more secular society. The French Canadian demand for political sovereignty was linked to the collapse of Church influence, since by "breaking the stranglehold of the Catholic Church and democratizing education Quebec started to produce qualified professionals who could compete with Anglophones" (Dickinson and Young 316). Control over education was "largely taken away from the Church and entrusted to a generation committed to secularism, nationalism, and modernism" (319). Separating themselves from their religious roots, "Quebecers looked increasingly to the state as the defender of national

life and francophone culture” (336). In 1963, the Front de Libération du Québec was terrorizing Montréal with bombs, violence that Cohen references in the novel as the character F. bombs a statue of Queen Victoria. French Canadians were expressing a desire to protect and develop French culture in Quebec just as African American civil rights groups were demanding equality in Washington. At the same time that Francophones were asserting nationhood, “through the influence of radio, movies, magazines, television, the automobile, and other attractions of consumer society, the working classes [in Quebec] had long been undergoing a process of integrating American values into their culture” (Dickinson and Young 318). Faced with growing hostility in Quebec in the 1960s, Church leaders had “strong motives to establish an American profile for Catholicism” and to find a saint that could “root the Church in American soil,” naturalizing the Church’s place in Quebec (Greer 194). Part of the attraction for the Catholic Church to canonize Catherine as a saint was her native status. Thus, Greer notes that “in all the writings and images from the time of Chauchetière on, Tekakwitha’s identity as an ‘Indian’ is a central concern” (198). The novel reflects this political tension, depicting an intensely sexualized separatist rally, reminding French Canadians of their own extremely bloody past, and attempting to reappraise the *idea* of a meaningful political identity, such as what it means to be Canadian.

Cohen’s mental state at the time of composition was just as tumultuous. The author is quoted by Goldstein as saying, “I wrote *Beautiful Losers* on Hydra, when I thought of myself as a loser, financially, morally, as a lover, and a man. I was wiped out; I didn’t like my life. I vowed I would just fill the pages with black or kill myself. After the book was over, I fasted for ten days and flipped out completely. It was my wildest

trip. I hallucinated for a week” (44). Such feelings of inadequacy can be read in the pathetic complaints of the book’s primary narrator, the Historian,¹ who laments his “old belligerent life” (5). In another discussion of his writing experience, Cohen says that *Beautiful Losers* “was written with blood. It took me nine months and at the end I was writing 20 hours a day and going only on pep drugs and hashish” (qtd. in Lumsden 72). Cohen, of course, is given to extremes. Reflecting this manic stage in Cohen’s life, the style of the novel is appropriately erratic, esoteric, and unorthodox. Michael Ondaatje has said that “to write *Beautiful Losers* in a safe formal style would have been to castrate its powerful ideas and its vulgar sanctity” (49).

Beautiful Losers is, according to one reviewer, “the most revolting book ever written in Canada” (qtd. in Nadel, *Various Positions* 138). Pushing the boundaries of genre, the novel is a collection of charismatic sayings, surreal fantasy, and erotic sketches. It is a post-modern mash-up of seemingly random fragments, including letters, radio broadcast transcriptions, snippets of an English-Greek phrase book, advertisements, historical narratives, footnotes, catalogues, poems, journals, song lyrics, mythologies, and comic-book dialogues, assembled with an “encyclopedic energy [that] exceeds the limits of its forms” (Nadel, *A Life In Art* 74). The original dust-jacket description offers a similar list of categories to choose from. Cohen describes the book as a “love story, a psalm, a Black Mass, a monument, a joke, a tasteless affront, a hallucination, a bore, an irrelevant display of diseased virtuosity, a Jesuitical tract...in short a disagreeable religious epic of incomparable beauty” (qtd. in Nadel, *Various Positions* 137). Writing a

¹ Although he is not named in the novel, most Cohen critics refer to this character as “I.” Throughout this thesis I will refer to him as the Historian because his profession distinguishes him from other characters in the book, namely F.

short introduction to one Chinese edition of *Beautiful Losers* in 2000, Leonard Cohen offers this *caveat lector*:

This is a difficult book, even in English, if it is taken too seriously. May I suggest that you skip over the parts you don't like? Dip into it here and there. Perhaps there will be a passage, or even a page, that resonates with your curiosity. After a while, if you are sufficiently bored or unemployed, you may want to read it from cover to cover. In any case, I thank you for your interest in this odd collection of jazz riffs, pop-art jokes, religious kitsch and muffled prayer, an interest that indicates, to my thinking, a rather reckless, though very touching, generosity on your part.

Beautiful Losers was written outside, on a table set among the rocks, weeds and daisies, behind my house on Hydra, an island in the Aegean Sea. I lived there many years ago. It was a blazing hot summer. I never covered my head. What you have in your hands is more of a sunstroke than a book.

Dear Reader, please forgive me if I have wasted your time. (31)

Here, Cohen distances himself from “the frenzied thoughts of [his] youth” that he says are expressed in the book (31). He also offers readers a summary of the unconventional peculiarity that makes reading *Beautiful Losers* a bewildering but fascinating experience. It is “the sort of book Susan Sontag’s *Against Interpretation* argues for, the sort of work you watch but don’t attempt to explain” (Duffy 30). To some readers, Cohen’s apologetic introduction is a circuitous invitation to find meaning and sense in something that appears fragmented, disordered, and totally pointless. While this book can be an interpretive

challenge, a “sunstroke,” as Cohen describes it, the following thesis shows why *Beautiful Losers* is worthy of study because it brings together so many apparent binary oppositions in an attempt to transcend categories, classification, and power structures.

Based on the historical figure Catherine Tekakwitha and writings about her prior to 1966, *Beautiful Losers* is organized into three books, each with a distinct narrative voice relating, relating to, addressing, and attempting to understand Catherine. The novel is divided into three sections. Books I and II, narrated by the Historian and F., respectively, are characterized by the “psychomachia of white masculinities” (Rae 85), as the Historian struggles with his grief and loss, and F. writes a long letter in the hope of inspiring a great spiritual revelation for the Historian. These sections are intensely focused on desire, including F. and the Historian’s libidinal desire, F.’s lust for power, and the Historian’s longing to know Catherine as an object of study. Here, Cohen forces readers to confront what he perceives to be the widespread repression of sexuality in the second half of the twentieth century. The impulse to escape such repression is given voice by the exhortations of the Historian: “Undress, undress, I want to cry out, let’s look at each other. Let’s have an education” (15). The novel, especially Book I, appears to be a very self-conscious, fetishistic fantasy, but it is actually based on a reading of historical narratives. In *Various Positions*, biographer Ira Nadel lists “several core readings” that influenced Cohen’s writing at the time:

P. Edouard Lecompte’s *Une Vierge iroquoise: Catherine Tekakwitha, le lis de bords de la Mohawk et du St. Laurent (1656-1680) (1927)*; *Kateri of the Mohawks* by Marie Cecilia Buehrle; a volume entitled *Jesuits in North America*; an

American comic book from 1943, *Blue Beetle*; a farmer's almanac; a passage from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*; and Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*. (131)

Book III, perhaps the most intriguing section (it was anthologized in the recently published avant-garde collection *Groundworks*, edited by Christian Bök and Margaret Atwood), offers no clear synthesis, but rather a surreal dissolution of identity. It is in Book III that readers are likely to become confused, since individual characters are confused, fused, or lost. Here, many readers get the distinct impression that they had missed a very important clue. In fact, the main characters of Book I and II become almost unrecognizable in Book III in a conclusion full of religious significance. One critic tries to make sense of the overall structure of the novel, writing that "throughout his narrative, the historian desires revelation; he is driven by a desire to *see* beneath Catherine Tekakwitha's blanket...[but] the staging of the historian's project ends not with revelation but with dissolution and invisibility that the historian has tried to counteract from the beginning of his own narrative" (Wilkins 44).

While *Beautiful Losers* is definitely experimental in form, it closely follows the ideas, concerns, and themes established throughout Cohen's *oeuvre*. Ondaatje writes that Cohen "has seldom strayed too far from the ideas he blueprinted in his early work" (6). Before *Beautiful Losers*, in *Flowers for Hitler*, Cohen was beginning to "make heroes and saints out of the perverse" (Ondaatje 39). In fact, many critics refer to the novel as the culmination of Cohen's work. Linda Hutcheon notes in *Leonard Cohen and His Works* that *Beautiful Losers* "provides the single most relevant intertext for all of Cohen's poetry" (28). Douglas Barbour writes that it is

the only work which completely transcends the various limitations of his poems, and of the heavily autobiographical *The Favorite Game*.... [T]he language of *Beautiful Losers* completely cuts away the over-Romantic cuteness and flabbiness of the early poems...shocking us into new states of awareness as it does so. The massive assault of numerous techniques, the extravagant language, the outrageous humour, and the apocalyptic vision which they all serve, profoundly affects us as the ritual poems of *The Spice Box of Earth*, for all their pre-Raphealite beauty, fail to do.

(147-48)

Cohen is obsessed in his writing with religion, mythology, and achieving transcendent spirituality through sexuality. These themes, so prevalent in Cohen's poetry, are still a part of *Beautiful Losers*, but they are presented in a far bolder, more shocking style, Barbour argues. Especially as Cohen attempts to embrace spiritual and sensual polarities, his work is paradoxical. Because the novel portrays explicit sexuality alongside Catherine's religious chastity, Pacey asks, "What are we to make of all this? Is Cohen upholding virginity or promiscuity? Sexual abstinence or sexual orgies?" (91) In fact, Cohen is elevating neither, necessarily, but working towards a resolution of the two. Hutcheon writes that "Cohen's words challenge the Word"; that is, while "Cohen may invert the religious tradition out of a need to resist it...the reader perceives that the structures of that subverted faith and of others form the skeletal frame of his work" (17-18). As much as *Beautiful Losers* is an experiment in form and a celebration of transgression, the essential "structures" of Cohen's "subverted faith[s]" remain fundamentally important to any reading of the novel.

The main focus of Cohen's novel is the achievement of sainthood. The sainthood of Catherine Tekakwitha, a seventeenth-century Mohawk convert to Christianity, fascinates both main characters, F. and the Historian. Cohen is not content to worship customarily, and so he proceeds to profane sacred images of sainthood with what many consider to be pornographic filth. Such an approach is ironic, since Catherine's status as a saint is often attributed to her sexual abstinence.² This strategy of making the serious absurd, making the repulsive attractive, and making the sacred profane (and vice versa), extends throughout the book. Unsettling these distinctions and demanding that readers make connections between them, Cohen asks us to consider "lameness [a]s an aspect of perfection, just as weeds are flowers which no one collects" (*BL* 106).

The main focus of this study is identity (whether that is religious, sexual, racial, or ethnic identity), and how, as Hutcheon writes in "All the Polarities," "the poles [in *Beautiful Losers*] are no longer moral ones of good and evil, but existential ones of identity and alienation" (43). In the first chapter, I will discuss how historical texts are parodied, emphasizing how constructions of racial identity are broken down by the Historian's contradictory avowal and disavowal of sexual desire in relation to sexual difference. Here, I discuss how both racial difference and desire are often depicted in the novel through references to the colour red. The process of painting the akropolis red becomes a metaphor throughout the novel for the undercutting of colonial discourse and the unsettling of racial difference. In Chapter Two, my argument turns to gender and

² Catherine, according to Koppedray, satisfied the three general requirements for saintliness, including "doctrinal purity, heroic virtue, and miraculous intercession after death" (291). Her virginity was also a key component to her saintliness, as Koppedray notes, "for Kateri's Jesuit biographers, situated among people they believed to be prone to excesses of the flesh, chastity as an expression of mastery over the human self was doubly significant. In Kateri's case, it served to gain her mystical communion with Christ; such union in itself was a powerful indication of saintliness" (290).

sexual identity. While Cohen utilizes the common and homophobic association between non-normative sexualities and insanity and criminality, in this text the association is inverted. In Cohen's carnivalesque mode, embracing irrationality becomes a way to access the divine. Here I examine how male homosexuality threatens to disrupt gendered identity, and throw into crisis power relations based on masculinity, including colonial power relations. In Chapter Three, I attempt to synthesize the various symbols, images, allusions and metaphors operating throughout the book in order to come to an understanding of the novel's model of identity. Throughout the thesis I use the term "identity" in a few different senses: identity can be one's projection of him or herself; identity can be how others define the individual; and identity can be an individual's social function or public role. I show that in *Beautiful Losers*, characters are never static essences, but subjects-in-process. Considering the novel's fundamental renunciation of names and naming, I map out conflated and sometimes conflicting identity markers, concluding that the process of metamorphosis and translation is central to the book, and that sexual perverts can be saints just as easily as losers can be beautiful.

CHAPTER ONE:
PAINTING THE AKROPOLIS WITH “TIBETAN DESIRE”

When Leonard Cohen’s second novel *Beautiful Losers* was published in 1966, “the critics went at it with whips,” writes Michael Ondaatje (45). He uses an appropriate metaphor; because the book is so loaded with images of whips, thorn coats, cannibalism, torture-by-fire, sado-masochism, sexual violence, and incendiary relationships it received much negative attention. In the novel, one character exclaims in prayer, “My Brain Feels Like it Has Been Whipped” (*Beautiful Losers* 58), echoing a sentiment shared by many puzzled and often affronted readers of the novel. Such images, however, are not simple expressions of deviant desire; they are interrogations of the very power relations that have suppressed, denied, or re-defined them. Appearing when the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec had only just surrendered control over education and culture (Dickinson and Young 336), the novel is in many ways an extreme reaction against the traditional sexual mores sanctioned and promoted by the Church. When the maniacal F. insists on painting his white plaster model of the Greek akropolis red with nail polish, he illustrates how everything and anything held sacred will be parodied in *Beautiful Losers*, from the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church to the Quiet Revolution, and from the study of history to the sexual liberation movement of the sixties. Focusing on the relationship between sexual desire and racial difference in terms of colonial relationships, I will consider the ways in which the Historian sexualizes everything around him and thus throws his historical knowledge and his self-concept into uncertainty. This chapter will show that *Beautiful Losers* is an exploration of desire meant not only to push the boundaries of fiction, but to unsettle identity.

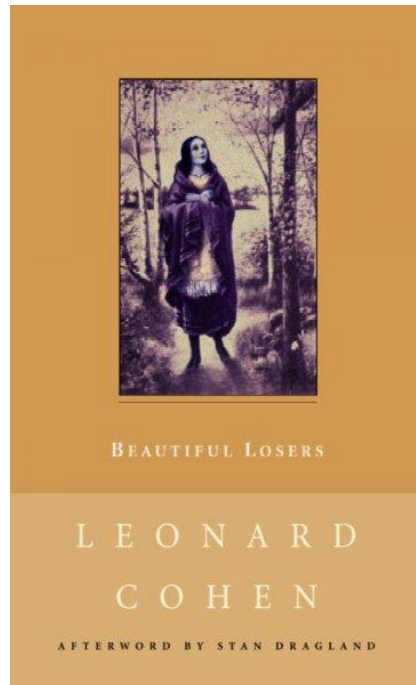
Cohen's sardonic re-telling of history is unapologetically inflected with libidinal desire. *Beautiful Losers* is a novel directly inspired by Cohen's reading of P. Édouard LeCompte's biography *Une vierge iroquoise: Catherine Tekakwitha, le lis de bords de la Mohawk et du St. Laurent (1656-1680)*,³ first published in 1927 (among other source-books) (Nadel 131⁴). The portrait covering a McClelland and Stewart edition of *Beautiful Losers* published in 1991 is taken from a frontispiece of LeCompte's biography of the Mohawk saint. Details of the image are woven into the Historian's erotic reverie from the first pages of the novel. He asks Catherine, "Can I love you in my own way?" (3). Gesturing toward the vulgar, he wonders about Catherine "how far up [her] moccasins were laced," and he goes as far as to say menacingly, "I've come for you, Catherine Tekakwitha" (3). When the Historian addresses Catherine, saying "I fell in love with a religious picture of you," he is speaking not of any *specific* illustration, but of the ideal image repeated over and over in children's books, historical biographies, and religious paraphernalia (*BL* 3). Catherine Tekakwitha's short life "happens to be more fully and richly documented than that of any other indigenous person of North or South American in the colonial period" (Greer vii). Yet her image was formulated and disseminated by her Jesuit confessors, Cholenec and Chaucetière, who became Catherine's first biographers (Koppedraye 281). Interestingly, Koppedraye notes that "the writing of Kateri's biography was an autobiographical exercise for Fathers Chauchetière and Cholenec...[who] co-opted her voice to argue their presence in the New World" (296).

³ LeCompte was a Jesuit priest and historian who wrote other works, including a history of Jesuit missionaries.

⁴ Leslie Monkman's "investigation of Cohen's sources indicates that almost all of the details of Catherine's life are taken from Edouard LeCompte's [*sic*] *Une Vierge Iroquoise Catherine Tekakwitha: Le Lis des bords de la Mohawk et du St-Laurent (1656-1680)*" (57). According to Koppedraye, LeCompte's biography (and many others) were based on the first texts written by Cholenec and Chaucetière.

Not only did they compile her life story in order to point out their own successes as missionaries, they modeled Catherine’s story “on the well-known hagiography collection *Lives of the Saints*” (Koppedrayer 280). Catherine was “born a Mohawk, but died a symbol” – namely, a symbol of chastity that ultimately “reflected favorably upon the efforts of the missionaries” (282, 280).

Illustrations of Catherine Tekakwitha almost invariably picture her surrounded by trees, birds, and wildlife, clutching a cross, and wearing beaded deerskin robes, with her dark hair wrapped in a headband and tied into braids.



She is never pictured bearing any evidence of the smallpox that killed her parents and “left her face severely scarred and her vision permanently impaired” (Koppedrayer 282).

A patroness of nature and ecology in the way that First Nations are often stereotyped as being close to nature, Catherine is consistently described communing with plants and

⁵ Images based on the frontispiece illustration of Kateri Tekakwitha in Édouard LeCompte’s above-mentioned biography of Kateri Tekakwitha. A version of this image appears on the cover of the McClelland & Stewart New Canadian Library edition of *Beautiful Losers* (1991), pictured on the right.

animals. Later in the novel, F. writes: “I imagine she spoke to the fishes and raccoons and herons” (204). F.’s and the Historian’s descriptions of Catherine are both venerations and perverse, satirical mockeries. Cohen thus sexually fetishizes the iconic image of Catherine as a stereotypical indigenous woman connected to nature, and as a virginal saint, in the most extreme, hyperbolic, and self-conscious manner.

The Historian’s genuine and desperate desire to complete the historical record, to tell the story of Catherine Tekakwitha and to understand her, is consistently couched in terms of explicit or implicit lust, as when he says he wants to “know what goes on under that rosy blanket” (3). The conflict between gathering fact and producing fantasy not only creates an intense case of cognitive dissonance in the Historian, but a striking paradox that extends throughout the novel. As a scholar, the Historian should aim to conduct an objective investigation of our collective past and create a narrative of logical cause and effect; he would be expected to know and recount every detail regarding his historical subject. However his desire, as a student of F., is to escape into fantasy, or as he puts it in reference to the “magic” of the movie theatre, to break through the “impenetrable curtains of possibility” and “Fuck a saint” (23, 12). He recites LeCompte’s writing on the Iroquois long house: “La maniere dont les familles se groupent dans les cabanes n’est pas pour entraver le libertinage [The manner in which families are grouped in cabins is not to hinder the libertine]” (22). LeCompte’s descriptions of indigenous architecture and his comments on its relevance to sexual behavior are all the Historian needs to insist that LeCompte is “whetting our sexual appetite in his expert Company manner” (23). He thus concludes this passage with a desperate, passionate plea: “In the gloomy long house of my mind let me trade wives, let me stumble upon you, Catherine Tekakwitha, three

hundred years old, fragrant as a birch sapling...” (23). Longing for a complete understanding, to “know” Catherine in both the intellectual sense and in the Biblical sense, the Historian interpolates LeCompte’s response with visceral and poetic descriptions of his own lust. The Historian’s descriptions of Catherine could not be more anti-clerical. They also strongly contrast the writings of Catherine’s early Jesuit biographers, who, according to Greer, “struggled to gain acceptance for the view that a Mohawk woman stood out as a radiant example of holiness, virtue, and of necessity, virginal purity” (180). In other words, it was very important to the Jesuits that Catherine be portrayed as pure. Nevertheless, Greer writes that Cohen is shrewd and not entirely whimsical in “picking up on and caricaturing the exotic/erotic theme that runs through the writings of Cholenec, Chateaubriand, and their imitators” (192). Sylvia Söderlind outlines the Historian’s conflict in terms of language: “The language of history is that of signification, located in the brain, while the language of desire is one of intensity whose place of origin is the body” (52). Paul Milton sees the Historian’s internal struggle as a “psychomachia between the impulse to write and the impulse to get it right, between free play and the rule of historical veracity” (249). Perhaps challenging notions of history as objective, in what Linda Hutcheon, in *The Canadian Postmodern*, calls a postmodernist historiographic manner, Cohen depicts in Book I an Historian whose analytical method of inquiry is dominated by romantic impulses and masturbatory fantasies.

In the context of colonial discourse, the expression of desire and the construction of identity are complex, sometimes contradictory reflections of each other. Edward Said’s concept of the ethnic “other” as a representation instrumental to the production of an (implicitly superior) Western “self” provides the basis for a relevant analysis of colonial

desire. Robert Young suggests that perhaps “the fixity of identity for which Englishness developed such a reputation arose because it was in fact continually being contested, and was rather designed to mask its uncertainty, its sense of being estranged from itself, sick with desire for the other” (2). Yet the Historian fails, while his wife Edith is alive, to see the integral connection between his desire and his identity as an English-speaking Canadian. As Michael Ondaatje phrases it, “his mind is locked by a kaopectate of formal history, of poetic art, of the strict rules of courtly love” (47). At one point, the Historian describes his former self as “an ignorant custodian who walked his days in a dream museum of self-pity” (*BL* 27). He does not allow himself to discuss frankly his own desire because he does not want to debase his relationship with Edith. When F. attempts to open channels of communication between the Historian and Edith, the Historian responds with anger and revulsion:

— I want her to love me in *my* way....

—Then ask her.

— What do you mean, “ask her”?

— Please make me come with your mouth, Edith.

—You’re disgusting, F. How dare you use that language in connection with Edith? I didn’t tell you this so that you could soil our intimacy.

— I’m sorry.

— Of course, I could ask her, that’s obvious. But then she’d be under duress, or worse, it would become a matter of duty. I don’t want to hold a strap over her.

— Yes, you do....

— How should I ask her?

— With whips, with imperial commands, with a leap into her mouth and a lesson in choking. (26-27)

This exchange speaks to the Historian's actual desire for Edith to perform fellatio, and his crisis of identity as an English-speaking Canadian. To F., all libidinal contact in some way connotes power hierarchies; to the Historian, "intimacy" is sullied by the acknowledgement of such hierarchies. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of ambivalence, Young argues that "the fantasy of colonial discourse" carries a "characteristic ambivalent movement of attraction and repulsion [in which] we encounter the sexual economy of desire in fantasies of race, and of race in fantasies of desire" (90). This ambivalence is thus manifested in a "compulsive libidinal attraction disavowed by an insistence on repulsion" (149). The Historian cannot acknowledge what he wants because he does not know who he is. He identifies with his "fictional victims," his object of study the A— tribe, and admits that his interest in "this pack of failures" betrays his character (*BL* 7, 5). At the same time he is in a definite position of power; he enjoys the benefits of his "anthropological status" as "an authority on the A —s" (5, 4). The Historian has a noticeably uncertain self-concept and is, to repeat Young's phrasing, "sick with desire for the other."

The Historian, colonized intellectually and traumatized in his personal life, is shaped to a large extent through sexual domination and manipulation. Interestingly, the Historian uses a colonial analogy to describe F.'s influence when he says that F.'s "voice has got into my ear like a trapped fly, incessantly buzzing. His style is colonizing me" (43). When F. and the Historian are driving to Ottawa, where F. will make his maiden speech in Parliament, F. is aroused simply by the fact that he is in the "world of men"

(97). Given access to a higher secular power, F. guards his altar like a Catholic priest, and insists that his masturbation while driving is “between me and God” (97). The Historian is drawn hopelessly towards F. He says: “Let’s stop the car. F., I love you, I love your power. Teach me everything” (97). But it is a dangerous, war-like power, and Cohen directly relates the car ride to the campaign of French troops who destroy Mohawk territory with fire earlier in the text. As they drive, the Historian says, “A Main street flared up in our headlights – we left it in cinders,” and “The old Indian land sunk in soot behind us” (97). Unlike F., the Historian is unable to come, left “suddenly without desire” as the car rips through a fake wall constructed by F. for this very purpose (99). A cruel lesson meant to teach the Historian to submit to the inevitability of death and to surrender to chaos demonstrates the absolute power that F. wields over the Historian. As in Hegel’s Master/Slave relationship, neither a slave nor a master on their own can be considered independently self-conscious; they are dependent upon each other. This scene presents a kind of Hegelian Death Struggle, in which the master emerges as master because he doesn’t fear death, and the slave out of this fear consents to slavery. Here, however, power is equated with and confirmed as the ability to achieve orgasm. The Historian is like F.’s other sexual conquests, “four teen-age A —s,” none of whom “achieved orgasm” (10). As the Historian explains, his sustained scholarly interest in the A —s, a tribe “characterized by incessant defeat,” “betrays his character” (10, 5). Because the Historian passively defines himself in relation to others, when he is left widowed and alone he is therefore mired in what Terry Goldie calls a “void of non-identity” (95). The Historian, particularly in this drive to Ottawa, is victimized by his unfulfilled desire.

The Historian's work is a process of sexualized appropriation, reflection, and projection. The Historian realizes his desire to change, to be someone else, through his understanding of the Huron "Andacwandet," or "Fuck Cure" (*BL* 140). As the Historian explains, "The Indians ascribed disease to an ungratified wish.... It often happened that the patient dreamed his own cure, and his demands were never refused, 'however extravagant, idle, nauseous, or abominable'" (135). When Catherine Tekakwitha's uncle becomes ill, he "dream[s] his cure": to gather the young women of the village and watch them couple with their chosen lovers under one roof (136). As Catherine's uncle wanders from one end of a long house to the other, "red-eyed as a movie addict on 42nd street," his voyeurism is like that of a modern theatre-goer (138). The Iroquois long house and the cinema are parallel places that offer the same freedom (real or imaginary) from social convention, serving the narrator's desire to "Bring back Hidden Sex!" (23). The "atmosphere of a movie theatre" is like the long house, a place of primal coupling, according to one of F.'s claims (23). F. says that "in the ventilation system [of the movie theatre] the mystic union is consummated: the smells absorb each other" (23). Watching the young lovers in such a virtual or vicarious manner, the Uncle experiences a spiritual epiphany:

[A]s he crawled from pair to pair, from these lovers to those lovers, from sweet position to sweet position, from pump to pump, from gobble to gobble, from embrace to embrace – he suddenly knew the meaning of the greatest prayer he had ever learned, the first prayer in which Manitou had manifest himself, the greatest and truest sacred formula. As he crawled he began to sing the prayer:

— I change

I am the same.

I change

I am the same...(138-39)

The narration of this passage, with its repetitive variation, as the couples experience one and the same thing, reflects a model of identity that is in a constant cycle of both change and uniformity. With the Uncle's "cure complete," he can prepare himself for the final, static identity: death (140). The Uncle's cure taps into and exposes a dynamic libidinal unconscious, often linked symbolically to death in *Beautiful Losers*. Importantly, the movie theatre alluded to here is also the public place where fantasy meets reality, and the old man/F./Historian character of Book III experiences his ultimate revelation, transformation, and rebirth.

Cohen's appropriation of the Andacwandet suggests that desire itself is revolutionary, on more than one level. Kevin Flynn writes that in Cohen's poetry romantic love involves a "loss of self," since to surrender to a lover often entails the "letting go of one's jealously guarded personal identity" (56). When the Historian asks, "Catherine Tekakwitha, are you at work on me already?" he is speaking to the transformative power of his own desire (*BL* 9). As he longs for the "world to be mystical and good" the Historian exclaims that "Desire changes the world!" (6, 5). In fact, each character in this book changes dramatically, either through a physical self-improvement "system," such as F.'s, through embracing a radical philosophy, or by undergoing an extreme religious conversion. Since the nuclear family is generally thought to be the most important site of the maintenance, regulation, and containment of sexuality, it is interesting to note that the family is conspicuously absent from *Beautiful Losers* –

Catherine, Edith, the Historian, and F. are orphans.⁶ These characters each express a kind of libidinal desire that is certainly exceptional. Perhaps because “we learn to desire things through learning what is considered to be ‘desirable’” (Howe 10), challenging definitions of appropriate desire can be very unsettling. Deleuze and Guattari ask, “what is a ‘real’ desire, since repression is also desired? How can we tell them apart?” (116). They explain:

If desire is repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society: not that desire is asocial, on the contrary. But it is explosive; there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors. Despite what some revolutionaries think about this, desire is revolutionary in its essence...and no society can tolerate a position of real desire without its structures of exploitation, servitude, and hierarchy being compromised. (116)

Discussing the history of the Iroquois and Mohawk, the Historian draws specific attention to the racial barrier he is crossing, at least imaginatively, by expressing such desire. He argues, albeit crudely, that desire inevitably crosses barriers:

Right now I feel about [Catherine] as many of my readers must feel about pretty Negresses who sit across from them on the subway, their thin hard legs shooting down from what pink secrets. Many of my readers will never find out. Is this fair? And what about the lily cocks unbeknownst to so many female American citizens? Undress, undress, I want to cry out, let’s look at each other. Let’s have education! (14-15)

⁶ Dickinson and Young note that, among other factors contributing to rapid change in Quebec during the Quiet Revolution was “the decline of the traditional family” (307).

Here, the Historian exoticizes the Other while acknowledging that such a position of desire threatens to disrupt hierarchies of racial difference. He turns his back on traditional notions of “education” in favour of carnal knowledge. Sexual desire is not only at the forefront of *Beautiful Losers*, it unsettles and disrupts a predictable reading of its central characters.

Eroticized and sexualized images of intense pain illuminate several approaches to identity construction in *Beautiful Losers*. In the midst of Catherine Tekakwitha’s sexual awakening, she imagines a young handsome hunter’s “strong brown arms, the circles he would force through the lips of her cunt, the circles of her breasts pressed flat under him” (53). But the “circles of love” suddenly “tighten[] like a noose” and become violent instruments (54). They are “made of whips and knotted thongs. They bound her, they choked her, they tore her skin, they were shrinking necklaces of fangs” (53-54). Her desire for sexual fulfillment is transformed into a desire for extreme disembodiment, so intense that she imagines that “a burning circle attacked her cunt and severed it from her crotch like the top of a tin can” (54). The pain eases only when she has “disclaimed the ownership of her flesh” and is freed by the simple knowledge of her new identity: “she was Virgin” (54). In the novel’s subsequent narrative of Catherine’s life, she exhibits an unusual desire for pain – a desire often confused by others with self-denial or the sacrifice of pleasure. Cohen’s depictions are based on historical documents. According to Koppedrayar, Jesuit biographies of Catherine detail a practice of Christianity that included “flagellations, branding, exposure, fasting, metal spiked belts, thorn-filled beds and so on” (287). Cholene notes that her “zealous ardor for mortifications” spread throughout the mission and would surpass that of even the most “austere monasteries”

(qtd. in Koppedrayer 288). However, Cohen's narrative uniquely sexualizes Catherine's story in order to make an interesting parallel. Mark Migotti, like many Cohen critics, notes that "*Beautiful Losers* portrays F.'s 'cult of ecstatic sex' and Catherine Tekakwitha's cult of ecstatic anti-sex" as "deeply complicit...spiritual-erotic postures" (47).⁷ When she begs Father Lamberville to baptize her, she insists that the toe she has stubbed should "go on hurting" (*BL* 92). In a novel that sexualizes violence and depicts so much sado-masochism, it is difficult to separate pleasure in pain from authentic religious penitence. In Cohen's representations of her, Catherine longs for spiritual consummation, but she also takes a sexual delight in experiencing pain – a substitute for (or form of) sexual expression.

Compared directly to "St. Therese," known for extreme self-mortifications, because she feels joy in suffering, Catherine's religious asceticism is eroticized (206). Once Catherine deduces that the most "horrible painful thing" must be fire, she proceeds to spend "several slow hours caressing her pathetic legs with hot coals, just as the Iroquois did their slaves" (206, 207). The sensual connotations of "caressing" are noteworthy, since readers are soon told explicitly that Catherine "did not pray that her soul should be favored in heaven. She did not fast so that her marriage would never nourish history. She did not cut her stomach with stones so that the mission would prosper. She did not know why she prayed and fasted. These mortifications she performed in a poverty of spirit" (207). Catherine might outwardly rationalize her desire as spiritual devotion, but her motives are much more immediate. She insists on being beaten with birch switches first, F. explains, because, "when it was her turn to whip, her

⁷ Dennis Lee writes similarly that "Traditional asceticism and the cult of ecstatic sex are alike in the sinister appetites they release" (Lee 88).

effort would aggravate the lash opening she had received at the hand of her friend” (211). Still at war with the French, several Iroquois ask to be baptized, “desiring that ceremony which appeared to confer such courage” to French martyrs (212). When they are refused, Catherine suggests that “They should have got it. It doesn’t matter what it’s used for” (212). For Catherine, the masochistic means are indivisible from their apparently religious ends. The young saint’s disregard for and disavowal of her own body speak again to the fact that she “had sailed her cunt away and it did not matter who came to claim it, a Mohawk brave or a Christian hunter” (205). Catherine’s asceticism, like the Christian village and “every community,” according to Cohen, is “ultimately secular” (205). Appropriately, her spiritual appeal to the priest quickly degenerates into a bizarre pornographic parody. Father Lamberville insists on rubbing, sucking, kissing, and then “biting” each toe playfully as Catherine persistently asks to be baptized a Christian and answers the Priest with a repeated enthusiastic “Yes!” (92-93).⁸ Catherine’s asceticism is inseparable from libidinal desire.

Edith’s identity construction similarly reflects a desire to transcend the flesh through masochism. The more explicit and obscene depictions of sexual desire in *Beautiful Losers* tend to subscribe to an aesthetic of pain, torture, and abjection. The Danish Vibrator (D.V.) episode explores this aesthetic using the most extreme and provocative images in the novel. Edith is sexually unsatisfied, and only when F. recites the story of Brébeuf and Lalemont’s torture-by-fire is she aroused, suggesting the connection between sexual pleasure and the punishment (self- or otherwise) of saints and

⁸ This episode is apparently based on historical writings. Father Lamberville wrote of an experience he had with Catherine, who had remained alone on account of a foot injury while others worked in the fields, during which he visited her in her cabin. They discussed Christianity, and Lamberville became convinced that Catherine should devote herself to his instruction (Koppedrauer 284).

martyrs. Like the Historian in Book I, Edith re-experiences traumatic historical events in order to be sexually stimulated. But the meticulous description of “a number of revolting tortures,” F. says, “had seemed only to bring her closer to a summit she could not achieve. She moaned in terrible hunger...” (184). Edith is finally able to achieve orgasm when the D.V. is unleashed. “The implications of her pleasure are enormous,” writes F., since the D.V. is not simply an instrument of pleasure, but an active, desiring machine (191). Like an aggressive, insatiable lover that “*has learned to feed itself*” without batteries or a power supply, the D.V. leaves little room for choice or consent (190). It ravishes both F. and Edith, and Edith becomes “nothing but a buffet of juice, flesh, excrement, muscle to serve its appetite” (191). The D.V. scene furthermore connects Catherine and Edith to each other, as they both want to relinquish possession of their bodies and declare an identity staked to an outside authority – in one case spiritualized, in the other mechanized. Edith gives her body to the D.V. (read by Desmond Pacey and many critics as *Deo Volente*, or *the will of God* [Gnarowski 92]) in order to achieve sexual fulfillment just as Catherine gave her “fuck away” to the Catholic God in order to transcend (and perhaps mimic) the sexual in the mutilations of her body (*BL* 91).

In surrendering to a higher power, Edith, Catherine, and F. create what is described in the novel as an “egoless” experience (193). The same “egoless sadness that [F. and Edith] did not own or claim” when the D.V. escapes into the sea also permits F. and Edith to overlook the fact that they sexually desire the most notorious personification of evil in modern history. When she is with F. on an adulterous liaison in an Argentinean hotel room, Edith confesses that she is “pretending [F. is] someone else” (177). F. admits that he too had noticed a waiter with a “mustache” offering soap “derived from melted

human flesh” (177, 194). Although never named, readers recognize the figure as Hitler, since F. says, “he made us kiss the whip,” and afterwards “nothing remained of him but the vague stink of his sulphurous flatulence” (194, 195). F., having failed to support the Second World War effort as a Member of Parliament, thus literalizes his complicity with evil by taking on the masochistic role of compliance and humiliation. The scene also allows Edith to express the same empathy for Hitler as she does earlier in the book for a member of her own A ——— tribe. She cradles Hitler’s “famous head against her breasts,” saying “For a second [she] thought he was an A ——— ” (195). F. and Edith’s abject desire is so chaotic that it destabilizes symbolic distinctions between good and evil. Because Edith reveals herself (in a comment written in Greek and untranslated for the reader) to be the Greek Goddess Isis, the orgy also destabilizes the distinction between the divine and the vulgar, as Catherine’s self-immolation did earlier. The emphasis on sado-masochism furthermore suggests a process involving a willing submission to the master that demands the dismantling, or erasure, of one’s own ego. Edith isn’t just destabilizing boundaries between divine and vulgar, but rather is also subverting the concept of identity itself.

It is these moments of free indirect discourse, narrated by the Historian and F. but including the thoughts and speech of Catherine and Edith, in which we can imagine Catherine and Edith constructing themselves through their desires. The passages in which Edith becomes “egoless” and submits to both the D.V. and Hitler (193), and in which Catherine’s “circles of love” eventually “tighten[] like a noose” (54), are passages that strive to pull away from the Historian and F.’s storytelling authority (however provisional and suspect their authority may be). Beyond the Historian’s erotic construction of

Catherine, and F.'s retelling of the D.V. episode, Cohen also inflects religious, spiritual, and political identity models with desire.

In *Beautiful Losers*, prayer is often the expression of very intense, fraught desire. When it becomes known that Catherine is nearing her early death, her cabin becomes a mecca for those who “wanted to be remembered in the prayers of the departed girl” (221). While Cohen has a solemn respect for sacred rituals and the mystical power of prayer, he also pokes fun at the faithful with a litany of absurd pleas:

— I stepped on a beetle. Pray for me.

— I injured the waterfall with urine. Pray for me.

— I fell on my sister. Pray for me.

— I dreamed I was white. Pray for me. (221)

Here, the desire for a racial reversal and a change in political position is thought of as a sin, suggesting the contradictory desire of colonized people to both renounce their oppressor and take their oppressor's place. Instead of wishing the ill Catherine good health, or a safe journey through the afterlife, they leave “her with their pitiful spirit luggage until the whole cabin resembled one vast Customs House of desire” (222). In one crucial passage, the Historian prays for a bowel movement: “Please make me empty, if I'm empty then I can receive, if I can receive it means it comes from somewhere outside of me, if it comes from outside of me I'm not alone!” (41). In this case, prayer is a paradoxical attempt to de-center and dissolve the self, to be the ideal empty vessel, in order to receive divine love. As Desmond Pacey explains, “here, incidentally, is another of the links between religion and sex – sex leads to anonymity, into that loss of self-consciousness which is the prerequisite of religious experience” (92). Conversely, Peter

Wilkins writes that prayer in *Beautiful Losers* might be understood as “an act of humility and supplication that preserves an essential distance between the desiring subject and the object of desire, allowing the other to remain other” (34). To pray is to refuse self-mastery, to deny one’s abilities, strengths, and self-sufficiency, and instead to share one’s solitude, isolation, and powerlessness with a supernatural being.

Especially in Book I, Cohen mocks the gravity of prayer by mimicking its repetitive structure. The Historian prays: “O God, I Am Alone In The Desire Of My Education But A Greater Desire Must Be Lodged With You. I Am A Creature In Your Morning Writing A Lot Of Words Beginning With Capitals” (*BL* 58). The Historian prays to Catherine, the beloved he cannot have, believing that the answer to his prayers will finally bring him sexual satisfaction: “Can an old scholar find love at last and stop having to pull himself off every night so that he can get to sleep?” (4). But prayer can also be a “translation,” an impetus for self-transformation. When F. gives the Historian an English-Greek phrasebook, he explains that prayer “is translation. A man translates himself into a child asking for all there is in a language he has barely mastered” (71). Most importantly to the narrator and to these devoted Christian converts, prayer is a simultaneous expression of helplessness and desire.

Like prayer, revolutionary politics are inflected with desire in *Beautiful Losers*. The Parc Lafontaine rally shows that when the Historian attempts to claim a nationalistic or ethnic identity he must submit to a greater will, just as the supplicant must do with regard to his or her soul during prayer. As F. and the Historian stroll through Montreal, they inadvertently come across a separatist demonstration in which “everyone had a hard-on, including the women” (125). The Historian slips into the crowd and, feeling an

anonymous hand slip down the back of his trousers, is quickly swept up in the passion of the mob: “We began our rhythmical movements which corresponded to the very breathing of the mob, which was our family and the incubator of our desire” (128). Even the voice of the young man with the microphone is described in sexual terms: “His voice caressed us, just as my fingers her...in the sweetest bursting daisy-chain” (128). Cohen distills the mob members’ efforts to reclaim their nationality, ethnicity, and ancestral inheritance, their “blood,” into crude demands for sexual stimulation: “Rub Harder! I shouted...” (129). Engaged in mutual masturbation, the narrator joins the crowd in an ironic, deflective chant: “Fuck the English!” (126). As Söderlind explains, “The bonding of the group entails a loss of the individual ego, which is manifested as the crowd tries to identify him: ‘He looks English! – He looks Jewish.... – This man is a sex pervert!’” (130). While the Historian is singled out, no longer anonymous and therefore threatened because he is “odd,” his mysterious partner slips back into the milieu (130). F. is able to pacify the crowd by “certifying” (falsely, since he is an orphan) the Historian’s “pedigree” (130). Wilkins notes that in the case of Quebec, the “idea of a linguistically and culturally based unity...runs the risk of excluding ethnic others in the same way that nationalist Québécois themselves have been excluded” (38). Thus, the rally scene condemns “Quebec nationalism as merely a way of reinstating oppression in the form of different oppressors” (18). Serving more to stoke a shared need for a nationalist ego than to demonstrate *real* solidarity, the rally itself suggests that even genuine aspirations for political change are based on collective delusion. The nationalist dream will never be fully actualized, just as the Historian fails again: “I didn’t come” (*BL* 131). Andrew Lesk writes that the rally “parodies how nationalist rhetoric mirrors the often blind nature of

sexual fervour” (59). History in the 1960’s became a powerful weapon for Quebec separatists, so the Historian’s place in this rally points to another irony: he should be at the center of reclaiming history, and yet his own sexual discourse is violently repressed. The suggestion remains that politics and sexual desire overlap, and might even propel each other.

The importance of the Historian’s desire to his construction of self is illustrated in one important passage. In it, Edith, whose “Indian” complexion has been effectively whitened by F.’s skin treatment program, wants to “be other people” in a failed attempt at sexual role play (*BL* 15). The Historian remembers:

One night in our seventh year of marriage Edith coated herself with deep red greasy stuff she had bought in some theatrical supply store. She applied it from a tube. Twenty to eleven, back from the library, and there she was, stark naked in the middle of the room, sexual surprise for her old man. She handed me the tube, saying: Let’s be other people. Meaning, I suppose, new ways to kiss, chew, suck, bounce. It’s stupid, she said, her voice cracking, but let’s be other people. Why should I diminish her intention? Perhaps she meant: Come on a new journey with me, a journey only strangers can take, and we can remember it when we are ourselves again, and therefore never be merely ourselves again.... I should have gone with Edith. I should have stepped out of my clothes and into the greasy disguise. Why is it that only now, years past, my prick rises up at the vision of her standing there so absurdly painted, her breasts dark as eggplants, her face resembling Al Jolson? Why does the blood rush now

so uselessly? I disdained her tube. Take a bath, I said.... My mean little triumph had made me hungry. (15-16)

The comparison to Al Jolson is visually evocative and terribly ironic. Jolson's blackface was a blatant appropriation and racist parody of African-American culture. The irony here is that Edith's red face paint is a stereotypical impersonation of her actual indigenous heredity, too "other" and too absurd for the tacitly racist narrator to accept, even for a night. An unsettling experience for the Historian at the time, it speaks to the ambivalence that disturbs his relationship with Edith. As Bhabha writes:

The ambivalence of mimicry – almost but not quite – suggests that the fetishized colonial culture is potentially and strategically an insurgent counter-appeal.... Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledge of the priority of race, writing, and history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point in which it deauthorizes them. Similarly, mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its 'otherness,' that which it disavows".
(323-24)

Bhabha is referring to how the "mimicry" of the colonizer by the colonized, in its ambivalence, upsets colonial authority. Edith is not mimicking any such colonizer. She is, however, mimicking the very image of the indigenous other, and in doing so creates for the Historian the same kind of ambivalence – wanting one thing *and* its opposite, a simultaneous attraction and repulsion – which disrupts the very authority of his self-image. Edith's performative act reminds him of his own desire for the racial other, ironically confronting him with his (and his culture's) role as colonizer. This reading is

further supported by the argument that “desire itself is a cognitive phenomenon which does not exist outside the subject’s construal of themselves” (Howe 14). More than simply suggesting that the Historian might transcend the boundaries of the self in role play, Edith unsettles the very concept of racial difference on which he, an English-speaking Canadian historian deeply invested in the representation of the indigenous other, has constructed his entire identity. To step outside the limits of the subjective self, to take on the perspective of another, to take “a journey only strangers can take,” and therefore “never be merely ourselves again” is an experience the Historian longs desperately to have only after Edith has committed suicide and it is too late.

Of all the polarities disrupted in Cohen’s text, the opposition between the white “self” and the indigenous “other” is the most important. Hutcheon believes that the “basic conflict of the novel” is “between White Man and Red Man,” illustrated by the repeated imagery of red overtaking white, and vice versa (44).⁹ Indeed, the battle is personified, eroticized, and racialized, as “The great wrestling match between Ioskeha, the White One, and Tawisara, the Dark one, the eternal fight would fizzle out like two passionate lovers falling asleep in a tight embrace” (*BL* 93). The red/white *mêlée* is again presented in terms of lust and sexual conquest, as this agonistic miscegenation (both destructive and constructive) comes as the narrator discusses the attempted conversion of the Mohawks by the Jesuits. The spiritual battle for souls between apparent opposites is shown yet again when Catherine’s body, miraculously turned white post-mortem, becomes another symbolic victory for Christianity. Rather than an equation of whiteness with saintliness,

⁹ Winfried Siemerling argues that the colour white is associated with “the distances and distinctions posited by thought and language” while red “comes to stand for the magic perception of fulfilled (and thus abolished) desire, congruent with the end of time, of limits, and of identity in language. The colour red thus expresses the wish of thought to be present at its own absence, and to lose its self-defining boundary with the other” (46).

the transformation shows that the Jesuits have succeeded in writing the history of Catherine, and won her soul – at least for now. Using and abusing the written history of the Roman Catholic Church and the saintly significance the Jesuits have ascribed to Catherine, Cohen “encompasses both an awareness of the traditional view of Catherine and an extreme reaction against this conventional perspective” (Monkman 58). Catherine’s story, as discussed above, was instrumental in justifying the work of the Jesuits in North America.¹⁰ This is why the Historian declares to Catherine, “I have come to rescue you from the Jesuits” (5). In the Historian’s attempt to rescue Catherine, the narrative thus becomes a counter-text to the very hegemonic narratives from which Cohen draws.

Importantly, when Catherine spills her wine at the French dinner party, a “miracle” which is not mentioned by “any of the standard biographers” occurs (105). The red stain of the wine spreads from the tablecloth to the snow outside and continues spreading until “the moon itself absorbed an imperial hue” and “a total chromatic metamorphosis took place in a matter of minutes” (104). The “miracle” feast mythologizes F.’s decree: “Let the mundane Church serve the White race with a change of colour” (225). The image of red inexplicably overcoming white at the banquet is interpreted by the Historian as “apocalyptic,” a term which he says “describes that which is revealed when a woman’s veil is lifted” (105). The Historian can not help but to whine like a scorned lover, and relates the “miracle” back to his own desire, making spiritual revelation and sexual submission equivalent: “What have I done, what have I not done, to

¹⁰ As Koppedrayer writes, Catherine became a political “weapon” and proof of the success of the Jesuits’ work in New France, success that they “apparently wanted to ensure [the] recognition [of] through publication” (293-94). Importantly, Koppedrayer notes that her “life story gave expression to their lives in the New World. She was what they sought to realize; her life was their experience” (294).

lift your veil, to get under your blanket Kateri Tekakwitha?” he asks (105). Ironically, it is Catherine’s spreading stain which is the tangible effect of her saintly power, her unattainable virtue. As Frank Davey summarizes it, Catherine’s wine stain is “both the stain of imperialism unveiled...and the stain of race, of negritude, which the imperial glass has been unable to contain” (18). The red contamination further shows that any colonial project, even if it is as righteous as the Jesuits believed their mission to convert indigenous people to be, is doomed to fail, tainted like the tablecloth by the very otherness it attempts to assimilate, subdue, and convert.

If, throughout the text, Cohen associates the red stain with magic, or passionate experience, then the painting of F.’s model of a Greek akropolis, which has been interpreted in a number of different ways,¹¹ illustrates the translation of a language of reason, history, and theology into a language of the body and libidinal desire. It is a parodic translation – a kind of mimicry that recalls Edith’s red paint mentioned above, and that is at once a replication and a mockery. In *Beautiful Losers*, painting things or people red is both a gesture related to race and colonization, and a metaphor for desire. The Historian explains that while F. meant to coat the akropolis with colorless nail polish “as a preservative,” he “succumbed to his flamboyant disposition at the drug store counter,” and chose a colour called Tibetan Desire, “which amused him since it was, he claimed, such a contradiction in terms” (*BL* 10). Importantly, F. completes his project while humming “The Great Pretender,” a popular song about concealing loneliness and

¹¹ For example, Paul Milton argues in “Beyond Agonistics: Vertiginous Games in the Fiction of Leonard Cohen” that “The whiteness of the classical image signifies purity and classicism, which F. parodies by employing a colour called ‘Tibetan Desire,’ simultaneously gesturing eastward and rejecting the Apollonian reserve associated with Hellenism” (251). Nadel writes that the contradiction represented by “Tibetan Desire” “represents the unholy union between renunciation and longing and the difficulty in divorcing one from the other” (202).

longing (10). Resuscitating his miniature akropolis, F. happily turns the model from “white to viscous red, one column after another, a transfusion of blood into the powdery ruined fingers of the little monument,” making disappear the “leprous metopes and triglyphs and other wiggly names signifying purity, pale temple and destroyed altar...under the scarlet glaze” (10). Of course, the Historian cannot appreciate what F. is trying to teach him. He recalls in another passage that Edith’s red grease was “useless to me as F.’s akropolis that morning” because, unlike F., the Historian refuses to be a “Great Pretender” when invited by Edith (48). The urge to simultaneously preserve and alter the akropolis model also reflects Cohen’s sexualized appropriation of Christian, Judaic, Greek, and American indigenous mythology throughout the book.

By inflecting sacred narratives and images with extreme profanity, Cohen shows that our construction of identity, whether acknowledged or not, is always informed by desire. Like the Orientalist who claims special access to the mysterious culture of the East, the Historian claims to know the liberating sexual secrets of the Mohawk, Iroquois, and Huron, saying, “I know sexual information about the Indians which is heavenly psychiatry...” (135). Unlike British Orientalists, for example, Cohen acknowledges that there is no sacred, pure, Archimedean point. As Wilkins points out,

Beautiful Losers insists that any relationship with the other, whether in the context of Canadian history’s ethnic and racial fissures or in a broader context of human relations in general, must heed subjective limitation if it is to avoid isolating abjection or totalizing mastery, each of which is oppressive in its own way. (47)

Inverting the ambivalent tension of historical texts written by Jesuit historians by injecting explicit sexuality, the characters of this novel show a relentless desire not only for that which is normally considered repulsive, but for the necessarily repulsive “other.” The adornment of F.’s akropolis, Edith’s red grease-covered body, and the banquet table coloured by Catherine’s red wine stain all represent a kind of reciprocal magic that can reverse the white-wash of recorded history and reintegrate alternative narratives in an insightful way. In Cohen’s darkly prophetic mode, the Tibetan Desire paradox makes perfect sense; one might experience a spiritual renewal by acknowledging and embracing the impurity of the flesh. Rather than re-inscribing the Jesuits hagiographies written of Tekakwitha’s life and death, *Beautiful Losers* unsettles the very possibility of a fixed identity, or a stable, accessible historical narrative, and so resists the colonial discourse on which it is based.

CHAPTER TWO: THE WORLD OF MEN AND ITS “LONELY, EXCESSIVE REFUGEES”

My first chapter attempted to show that desire disrupts classifications of racial difference upon which colonial hierarchy is maintained. This chapter will examine how gender, sex, and sexual orientation inform constructions of identity in the novel.

Constructions of race and sexuality are analogous, as both are the effects of hierarchical classification and a politics of bodily surveillance (Marcus 208). Both racial minorities and queers have similarly “been marked as abnormal and unnatural, different and primitive” (208-209). In fact, “recent scholarship on race and sexuality shows that both concepts emerged as effects of modernity’s epistemological commitment to classification” (209). Not surprisingly, the sexual ambiguity of the main characters in *Beautiful Losers* has caused confusion for some critics. Dennis Duffy writes that

the protagonist of *Beautiful Losers* is either sexually ambiguous, searching for his sexual identity, or out for what he can snatch.... The novel also makes an attempt at showing how being a hung-up, identity-less Canadian fits in with all this. It's nice to know Artists are still thinking about Being Canadian, but the theme isn't integrated too well into *Beautiful Losers*. (29-30)

In fact, *Beautiful Losers* is more than anything a parody of such identification, and this chapter will show that it confounds any such meaningful political division or classification of sexual orientation. In this novel identity is central, yet tenuous. It inflects relationships of power, and can not be analyzed in isolation from sex and gender.

Masculine desire – both sexual and political – pivotally informs Cohen’s asymmetrical love triangle between Edith, F., and the Historian. Along with his depictions of interracial

desire, Cohen's depictions of homosexuality present a second point of tension, ambiguity, and contradiction in the construction of identity.

Beautiful Losers is a book that affirms the ascendancy of the male world. Terry Goldie writes in his treatment of the novel that "regardless of the references to 'lesbians' and 'dykes,' it is difficult to see even the potential of anything like a 'female world' in *Beautiful Losers*" (105). This is obvious in reading F. and the Historian's drive to Ottawa. In this passage, the time-worn symbol of femininity is absent. The Historian says that although it was night, "there was no moon" (96). F. and the Historian celebrate F.'s achievement of male power, the fact that F. has "finally made it" as a Member of Parliament, by masturbating (96-97). The Historian's frantic desire to touch F. turns into a worship of phallic power. The Historian says:

Oh, what a greasy tower he there massaged! I might as well have addressed myself to the missing landscape we flung in our wake, farm houses and oil signs bouncing like sparks off our fenders as we cut open the painted white line at ninety, fast as an acetylene saw. His right hand beneath the steering wheel, urging, urging, he seemed to be pulling himself into the far black harbor like a reflexive stevedore.... A Main Street flared up in the headlights – we left it in cinders. (97)

The two men, in their passion, cut like a saw, burning the "old Indian land" like the invading French troops described in the novel, and hurtle towards Ottawa while "Kamikaze insects splashed against the glass" (97-98). The sexual magnetism between the Historian and F. is intensely focused on political ("I'm in the world of men," says F.), spiritual ("This is between me and God," he also says), and sexual power ("My God! I've never seen you so big!" says the Historian). The Historian says explicitly: "F., I love you.

I love your power. Teach me everything” (97). It is a love scene in which the two lovers never actually touch each other, and it is loaded with metaphors of violence, war, industry, destruction, and mastery. This scene and this novel are undeniably masculinist.

The Historian refers to F. as his “friend” (*BL* 4) predominantly, but their relationship is defined very early on as being sexual. According to the Historian, it has been sexual for a long time. When F. is transfixed by the Charles Axis ad, the Historian is pre-occupied with sex, and describes it as a foregone conclusion: “I wanted to get on with what we had come for, the scuffling, the dusty caresses, the comparison of hair, the beauty of facing a friend and binding two cocks in my hand, one familiar and hungry, one warm and strange, the flash along the whole length” (75). Following the apparent suicide of his wife, the Historian recalls spending the night with F., after which they “pulled each other off, as [they] did when [they] were boys” (9). The two men’s relationship is nurtured by the ordeal. The Historian describes the events of the evening, as they “talked until we exhausted ourselves,” making it clear that their connection has been strengthened by Edith’s death (9). The feminine beloved is absent, just as is the moon on the way to Ottawa. Although characterized by agonistic rivalry, the relationship between F. and the Historian is also characterized by affection, esteem, and love. The Historian pleads with F. not to sacrifice himself for the Revolution, saying that “something like love tore the following words from my throat with a thousand fishhooks: BECAUSE I NEED YOU F.” (143-44). F. is equally affectionate in his long letter: “Our love will never die, that I can promise you, I, who launch this letter like a kite among the winds of your desire” (164). Although F. is the Historian’s old friend and teacher, and their relationship might

sometimes appear to be platonic, F. is a constant lover and object of desire for the Historian. Cohen leaves no doubt as to the sexual nature of their relationship.

Despite this, the Historian goes to specific pains to disavow his homosexuality and avoid defining himself according to any specific orientation. In one long hyperbolic confession, he accuses the Church of everything from his sexual misadventures to his bad hygiene. Here Cohen parodies French writer Émile Zola's 1898 open letter "J'accuse...!", in which Zola voices outrage over the injustices committed by the French President and his government. The Historian writes: "I accuse the Roman Catholic Church of Québec of ruining my sex life and shoving my member up a relic box meant for a finger, I accuse the R.C.C. of Q. of making me commit queer horrible acts with F., another victim of the system..." (50). This deflection of responsibility illustrates the Historian's latent homophobia. In fact, several times in the novel, he refers to his and F.'s sexual activity in a pejorative manner. The Historian learns that F. and Edith conspired together to assemble the fake wall and stage a near-death experience, and he is agitated by the thought that Edith might know about this affair: "Edith knows about our filthy activities?" (100). In the same conversation, he becomes even more explicitly homophobic and self-deprecating, asking F. if Edith "knows we're fairies?" (100). Earlier in the novel, he claims that he has "suffered a fairy attack from" an unnamed "confessor" (22). When F. admits to having an intimate experience with Edith, the Historian scorns the place in which it occurred in a particularly homophobic manner. Of the System Theatre, the Historian says to F., "I know that dirty basement lobby! There's always some fairy hanging around there, drawing cocks and telephone numbers on the green wall" (31). Certainly, these "anti-fairy" rants "border on self-disgust," as Andrew Lesk points

out (64). Most importantly, these homophobic sentiments reveal the Historian's "homosexual panic," a panic which is "the most private, psychologized form in which many twentieth-century western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail" (Sedgwick 89). In expressing such anxiety over his sexual endeavors with F., in deflecting responsibility, revealing guilt, and at times expressing panic at the possibility of being publicly discovered, the Historian shows the extent of his homophobia.

Like the hierarchy of race, the hierarchy of sex and gender gains power through differentiating, classifying, and distinguishing between types. Eve Sedgwick writes in *The Epistemology of the Closet* that the word heterosexuality never came into popular use until the word homosexuality was introduced into the English lexicon (2). Othering the homosexual became necessary in order to construct stable male/female gender identities. Judith Butler similarly argues that "heterosexual melancholy is culturally instituted and maintained as the price of stable gender identities related through oppositional desires" (89). Since "the sexed surface of the body thus emerges as the necessary sign of a natural(ized) identity and desire," for gender to remain stable, it must be tied to heterosexual desire (Butler 91). Butler goes on to argue that social taboos "effectively create the distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' dispositions to describe and reproduce the distinction between a legitimate heterosexuality and an illegitimate homosexuality" (92). The definition of a straight male is solidified through opposition, and finds its place at the top of the hierarchy of sex and gender. Often, masculinity and homosexual desire have been distinguished from each other as opposites in a linguistic and cultural binary. In *Beautiful Losers* venerations of masculinity get so tangled up in

depictions of homosexual desire that it is difficult to distinguish what is sexual desire, what is emulative desire, and what is indicative of a simple desire for power. As Goldie points out, any such inscription of the “closet/outing pair is potentially ubiquitous” to any gay reader, and “whether the text is overtly homophobic or overtly gay or neither, the aura of the secret is sustained.” Importantly, Goldie asserts, just as “each text is never so blind as when it claims best to see” (6), the text is never so gay as when it claims not to be.

The Historian’s homophobic anxiety reflects a very real concern over losing his place in the gender hierarchy and being stripped of male privilege. The following dialogue brings to light the incoherencies of heterosexual gender and sexual object-choice. When the Historian denies feeling guilt, F. presses him:

— You do. But don’t. You see, F. said, this isn’t homosexuality at all.

— Oh, F., come off it. Homosexuality is a name.

— That’s why I’m tell you this, my friend. You live in a world of names. (*BL* 18)

To disavow homosexuality as just “a name,” could be read in one of two ways: either as a rejection of homosexuality as an inadequate linguistic category or as a rejection of homosexuality as a sexual orientation inferior to heterosexuality. Given F.’s consistent rejection of the world of names throughout the book, readers might assume that he will utter something profound to qualify his statement. But, F. elaborates:

— You mustn’t feel guilty about any of this because it isn’t strictly homosexual.

— I know it isn’t, I –

— Shut up. It isn’t strictly homosexual because I am not strictly male. The truth is, I had a Swedish operation, I used to be a girl.

— Nobody's perfect.

— Shut up, shut up. A man tires in his works of charity. I was born a girl, I went to school as a girl in a blue tunic, with a little embroidered crest on the front of it.
(19-20)

F. avoids defining his actions as homosexual by claiming to be a transsexual person. This is one of F.'s "most remarkable lies" (18), as the Historian reminds F. that he was definitely "a boy when we went to school. We played doctor in the woods" (20). A feminist might read the passage as a tasteless attempt to poke fun at female-to-male transsexuality, but the Historian's sardonic retort that "nobody's perfect," emphasizes his extreme misogyny, suggesting that for him, women can never be perfect. In denying his homosexuality by claiming to have been a female, F. is actually addressing the "the terror and anxiety that some people suffer in 'becoming gay,' the fear of losing one's place in gender or of not knowing who one will be if one sleeps with someone of the ostensibly 'same' gender" (Butler xi). In this way, F. threatens to unsettle the Historian's gendered concept of self, which according to Butler is a danger that "constitutes a certain crisis in ontology experienced at the level of both sexuality and language" (Butler xi). The concept of bisexuality, although it might provide a more accurate description of the Historian, does not appear in the novel. This passage emphasizes the difficulty in categorizing their sexual relationship, despite the fact that they do have gay sex. It also displays the Historian and F.'s implicit misogyny and the potential crisis of gender that their homosexuality presents.

The most extensive treatment in the novel of the topic of homosexual identity comes when F. insists that the Historian "mustn't feel guilty about" their sordid affair,

which he says includes “sucking each other, watching the movies, Vaseline, fooling around with the dog, sneaking off during government hours, under the armpits” (18). F. is right to assert that what they are doing is not strictly homosexual, since if anything, readers can deduce that their sexuality might better be defined in relation to activities and pleasures rather than gender preferences. Goldie describes this orientation as “an ultimately liminal sexuality which confounds regulation, a highly Sadean principle” (107). Indeed, in this novel “homosexuality is but an integer to be increased by exponential perversions” (Goldie 108). The sexual orientation presented here has a far greater potential for transformation, ambiguity, and doubleness than a simple homosexual orientation based on same-sex desire.

Cohen’s depictions of queer otherness confound expectation and regulation. They might be informed by straight male ideologies that equate homosexuality with perversity and insanity, but they are anything but straightforward. Andrew Lesk argues that in *Beautiful Losers*, F. and the Historian “affirm a world of male subjectivity: rational, transcendent, powerful, and hence dominant” (57). However, Cohen uses and abuses the then-prevalent psychological association between insanity and homosexuality. Considering the two male characters are not only characterized as extreme, but as mentally ill, male subjectivity in *Beautiful Losers* is not necessarily rational – in fact, F.’s system of thought often seems to follow a pattern of irrationality. The Historian angrily refers to F.’s sometimes contradictory instruction as “crazy education” (34), and he describes the effect of this frantic teaching method: “Now that I look back he seemed to be training me for something, and he was ready to use any damn method to keep me hysterical. Hysteria is my classroom, F. once said” (69). Concluding that F. is insane, the

Historian regrets telling his secrets “to an insane person” (35). Readers are told that F. dies “in a padded cell, his brain rotted from too much dirty sex” (*BL* 4). (That F.’s madness stems from a sexually transmitted disease, making his sexual promiscuity pathogenic in itself, is an important implication.) Throughout the book, F. is repeatedly characterized as insane or diseased. The Historian recalls that F. “raved like a lunatic, spit flying with every second word. I guess the disease was already nibbling at his brain, for he died like that, years later, raving” (13). Particularly in the Historian-narrated Book I, Cohen relies on references to insanity, pathogenic disease, destructive psychosis, and mental illness in order to characterize F. Cohen’s use of apparently homophobic categorizations and associations do not, however, make the novel homophobic, *per se*; rather they reveal the novel to be a response to an aggressively homophobic society.

In the cultural context of *Beautiful Losers*, published in 1966, associations between non-normative sexual orientation and mental disorder were common. The American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, widely used to classify and treat mental disorders, defined homosexuality in 1952 as a “sociopathic personality disturbance” (Drescher 434). By 1968, a subsequent edition redefined homosexuality as a “sexual deviation,” and by 1973 it was removed entirely from the manual (Drescher 434). The prevailing psychoanalytic theory on homosexuality at the time was that posited by Edmund Bergler, who argued that homosexuality was a disease, curable with proper treatment (Drescher 432). As Terry Goldie points out, Bergler’s *Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life?* was at the time “a central text on homosexuality” (93). Cohen was clearly interested in neurotic behavior when he wrote this text. The Historian has a long list of psychological ailments detailed

throughout the novel, including his obsessive thoughts about Catherine, his compulsive behaviour (reflected in his frenetic style and relentless sexualization of the world around him), and his social and interpersonal maladjustment (he lives in seclusion amidst his own excrement) that make him a lamentable victim and a hapless failure. F., for his part, is a narcissistic, sadistic megalomaniac. His extreme sense of Byronic entitlement appears to reinforce Bergler's harmful view of homosexuality.¹² In the cultural context in which this novel was published, homosexuals were thought of as being inherently neurotic, and are portrayed as such in this novel.

Despite the fact that Cohen was writing and publishing in a cultural environment that classified the homosexual as insane, pathogenically ill, or psychologically immature, the novel also presents the symptoms of mental illness as potentially positive, creative attributes. As Goldie writes, "*Beautiful Losers* is drawn to homosexuality for the same reasons Bergler seems to despise it" (93). In some instances, access to the realm of the irrational is described as a source of transcendental power. F. points out that he is drawn to insanity during his "incarceration in the hospital for the criminally insane" (199). F. writes to the Historian that he "tried to dominate Insanity so [he] could steal its Information. [He] tried to program the Computers with Insanity" (190). And perhaps reflecting a latent desire to take F.'s place in the hospital, the Historian admits that he too wants to "be a man in a padded locker room telling a beautiful smutty story to eternity" (39-40). Repeated references such as these elevate F.'s apparent madness as part and parcel of his extreme but charismatic method. Goldstein notes that in *Beautiful Losers*,

¹² Goldie elaborates on Bergler in a footnote. Bergler presented psychoanalytic studies asserting that "Moral arguments are wasted on homosexuals, for when they flout the conventions they are satisfying their neurotic pseudoaggression. Threats of imprisonment are equally futile: the typical homosexual's megalomania allows him to think of himself as an exception, while his unconscious masochistic tendencies make the danger of imprisonment seem alluring" (qtd. in Goldie 93).

the moral lesson that Catherine teaches the Historian is that “suffering is madness, but it is also the sacred ground where Man encounters God” (Goldstein 43). Similarly, one reviewer argues that “If the book has a message at all, it is that the state of grace lies beyond the boundaries of sanity” (n.a. in Gnarowski 37). F. writes to the Historian that “it was I who feared the rational mind, therefore I tried to make you a little mad. I was desperate to learn from your bewilderment. You were the wall which I, batlike, bounced my screams off of, so I might have direction in this long nocturnal flight” (*BL* 161). In this description, F. claims to learn and benefit from the Historian’s irrational mental state. F. also recognizes his ability to “make” the Historian “a little mad” – yet another demonstration of F.’s power over his disciple – and argues that their shared experience of madness might enable positive bonding and give F. a sense of direction. In *Beautiful Losers*, insanity is a mode of access to an exclusive and powerful realm of knowledge; it allows for the inversion of rules, order, and rational systems. Like Catherine, whose irrational behaviour results in miracles such as the wine stain which turns the Jesuit banquet red “in a matter of minutes” (104), F. adopts an irrational system that becomes positively transformative. F. denounces his “intellectual head” in favour of the irrational (166). The “sweet burden” of F.’s teaching equates God with magic: “God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is alive. Magic is afoot. God is afoot. Magic is alive. Alive is afoot. Magic never died” (167). As the above-quoted critics suggest, this irrationality provides the opportunity to achieve a spiritually transcendent state of mind. Goldie writes that “In *Beautiful Losers*, homosexual acts and the possibility of a homosexual identity are not just ‘traffic in alterity,’ but a response to a society, Canada in the 1960s, in which homosexuality was shorthand for sexual perversity” (107). By suggesting that there is

virtue in irrationality, Cohen turns a negative into a positive attribute, connecting “all the polarities” and queering the text (*BL* 18).

However, the text is less concerned with “gay or straight sex” than it is with “male sex” (Goldie 95). As Goldie notes, in *Beautiful Losers*, “the only possible ‘world’ is a male one” (105). Lesk calls the pivotal relationship between F. and the Historian “hom(m)sexual” after Luce Irigaray, arguing that it ultimately serves to strengthen the “male domain” (57). While the Historian’s primary fascination appears to be Catherine, parallel to and at times indistinguishable from Edith, these women are merely objects to be acquired in a game of male power. F. writes to the Historian about how exceptional “our Edith” was to him (*BL* 156). He writes, “surely you know by now that Edith could not belong to you alone” (156). When the Historian learns of Edith’s infidelity, his possessiveness and anger towards F. is very real. He sarcastically demands that F. “help a fellow out. Don’t fuck his wife for him” (9). The Historian’s jealousy comes to light again when the prospect of nude tanning is raised:

The three of us were using the sunlamp in our basement apartment. F. said that I was the only one who could lie naked because both he and Edith had already seen my prick, but they had not seen each other’s parts (a lie). F.’s logic was infallible but still I felt queer about taking down my pants in front of them, and it was true I would never have let Edith get nude or let F. strut around. (111)

His extreme possessiveness of Edith forbids her from becoming nude, and his jealousy of F.’s physique prevents him from allowing F. to “strut around.” The Historian’s sense of physical insecurity and rivalry with F. over the female object is inseparable from his obsession with his own masculine self-worth; he feels “queer” (meaning strange and

suspicious, or homosexual in nature) about taking his pants down in front of them because both his nude body and his willingness to become nude reveal this weakness. Most importantly, his anger reveals a gendered double-standard: the Historian is upset at being cuckolded, while ironically in the midst of an ongoing intimate affair. As Sedgwick explains in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosociality*, “‘To cuckold’ is by definition a sexual act, performed on a man, by another man” (49). In this sense, the erotic relationship between the Historian and F. is a reflection of their mutual power over Edith. When the Historian first discovers Edith’s infidelity, his anger is merely transmuted into sexual intimacy with F., showing that the relationship between these two men is primary and pivotal for all others. Edith commits suicide in an elevator shaft, and the male bond is further strengthened; the Historian recalls that he and F. “ordered chicken from the same place and we talked about my poor squashed wife, our fingers greasy, barbecue sauce drops on the linoleum.... We talked until we exhausted ourselves, and we pulled each other off as we did when we were boys...” (7, 9). As rivals for Edith, F. and the Historian form a bond that is stronger than the bond between either of them and their beloved. While F. insists that the Historian is “stuck with two great loves” – Edith’s and his own – it is obvious throughout the novel that *male* love supercedes heterosexual love (27).

Readers cannot ignore the intense connection that arises between F. and the Historian because of their mutual desire for female objects Edith and Catherine. Edith completes the love triangle in which the Historian and F. teach, motivate, and encourage each other. In F.’s letter he gives priority to himself and the Historian:

I was your adventure and you were my adventure. I was your journey and you were my journey, and Edith was our holy star. This letter rises out of our love like the sparks between dueling swords, like the shower of needles from flapping cymbals, like the bright seeds of sweat sliding through the center of our tight embrace, like the white feathers hung in the air by razored bushido cocks, like the shriek between two approaching puddles of mercury, like the atmosphere of secrets which twin children exude. I was your mystery and you were my mystery...(164)

The men mirror each other as actors, and the object, or destination, is Edith. In other words, they are twinned, and love each other as equals. While she is ostensibly worshiped as the “holy star,” Edith is the odd woman out. Again F. prioritizes the male relationship, as he writes to the Historian: “Something in your eyes, old lover, described me as the man I wanted to be. Only you and Edith extended that generosity to me, perhaps only you” (161). F. characterizes his and the Historian’s relationship as one between equals who have been each other’s “teacher” (164) and which solves the philosophical mystery of self-identity. Despite the fact that women in this novel are venerated in the extreme, bonds between women and men are not given the same attention as the primary relationship between the Historian and F.

The simultaneous veneration and subordination of women in this novel is key to maintaining male power structures. As one critic has argued, “the Trinitarian woman as saint, wife, and fertility goddess” can be “read as the romantic vehicle and holy manna en route to male transcendence” (Leahy 34). Edith, although she is described as a saint, is also a spiritual conduit for F. and the Historian. She is a tool for the men’s salvation, and

for their miraculous cure. F. tells the story of how Mme. Roaner is cured of her ailments by a package of mud “from the tomb of Catherine” (231). When Mme. Roaner’s husband is “seized by a violent pain in the kidneys,” she offers the package of mud to him (231). As F. explains, “his pain stopped immediately, but she staggered, stricken again, crying out that her husband was murdering her” (231). As the package moves back and forth between the couple, F. imagines “the miserable old Roaners...clawing each other like animals on the stone floor of their kitchen” (231). Importantly, the story lends meaning to Edith, F., and the Historian’s love triangle. F. asks, “Did Edith move between us like a package of mud?” (231). The anecdote reiterates the fact that Edith is primarily an instrument for male transcendence, and that F. and the Historian simultaneously worship and traffic in women.

Following Sedgwick, Goldie writes that “the power balance suggests the women are only a means to influence relations with men” (95). This form of patriarchal heterosexuality utilizes a traffic in women as “exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (Sedgwick 26). At one point the Historian attempts to get beyond this concept of the female as an object of exchange by blessing F. and Edith’s relationship. He says, “what [F.] did with Edith matters not at all, indeed, I marry them in their unlawful bed, with an open heart I affirm the true right of any man and woman to their dark slobbering nights which are rare enough, and against which too many laws conspire” (13). But the sentiment does not last for long, as the Historian laments “how quickly pettiness returns, and that most ignoble form of real estate, the possessive occupation and tyranny over the two square inches of

human flesh, the wife's cunt" (13-14). The game of male rivalry over Edith as female object prevails.

The relationship between F. and the Historian, distinguished as it is by apparently equal amounts of homophobia, homosexual desire, and heterosexual desire, is best described as homosocial. Male homosocial desire describes an entire continuum of desire between men – whether platonic, sexual, political, or material (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 1). While Sedgwick does not argue that every relationship between men is inherently homosexual, she acknowledges that there are “structures of desire” that bond persons of the same sex, and that these structures change radically throughout history (1-2).

Analogous to but not necessarily distinguishable from homosexual desire, male homosocial desire characterizes everything from “male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry and hetero- and homosexuality” (1). Focused especially on relationships of power, particularly as they relate to gender, Sedgwick argues that

in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence. For historical reasons, this special relationship may take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the two. (25)

According to this approach, sexuality might sometimes function “as a signifier for power relations” (Sedgwick 7). Most importantly, the expression of such homosocial desire

involves the exercise of male power and privilege while at the same time restricting behaviour between men.

In *Beautiful Losers*, F. goes to great rhetorical lengths to mask homosexuality as heterosexuality. F. writes to the Historian: “Like two mammoths, tusk-locked in earnest sport at the edge of the advancing age of ice, we preserve each other. Our queer love keeps the lines of our manhood hard and clean, so that we bring nobody but our own self to our separate marriage beds, and our women finally know us” (164-65). Reinscribing the standard hetero-normative image of masculinity as strong, powerful, and proven in fighting, F. describes an agonistic relationship that is characterized by both rivalry and love. Their games, contests, and love “preserve” their masculinity and renew their heterosexual desire and marital integrity. Goldie quotes the same passage to argue that “homosexuality becomes the source of masculinity sufficient to deal with heterosexuality” (Goldie 104). In other words, sex between men, in *Beautiful Losers*, strengthens and clarifies one’s masculinity. In the following paragraph, however, F. justifies his mammoth analogy and his devotion to the Historian as merely an exercise meant to impress his nurse Mary Voolnd. He explains that

she watched me compose the above paragraph, so I let it run on rather extravagantly. Women love excess in a man because it separates him from his fellows and makes him lonely. All that women know of the male world has been revealed to them by lonely, excessive refugees from it. Raging fairies they cannot resist because of their highly specialized intelligence. (*BL* 165)

Here, F. justifies homosexuality as valuable because it serves an ultimately heterosexual end. Even the most ostentatious “raging fairies” serve a purpose within a heterosexual

framework, facilitating male-female understanding with their “specialized intelligence.” F.’s sexual endeavors with men, according to F.’s claim, are merely ways to brandish power over women. He again uses this rhetorical camouflage to justify his pursuits: “I followed women into the beds of men so that I could learn what they found there” (165). F.’s homosexual desire is ideologically subsumed into the realm of heterosexual normalcy and is wielded to maintain patriarchal power.

F.’s sexuality has more to do with a need to achieve dominance than with satisfying desire. Lesk argues that F. fornicates indiscriminately “in order to achieve dominance in social and legislative arenas” (63), and F.’s sexual behaviour indeed appears to be based predominantly on his lust for power. Thus, Lesk concludes that “F.’s role as rising political star is rooted in the need to dominate society; to this end, he literally and figuratively fucks everyone, thereby asserting the phallically inspired nature of his ongoing conquest” (63). Certainly, power is one of F.’s obsessions. For him in particular, sexuality signifies authority and control over others, evident as the Historian says that F. “took full advantage of [the Historian’s] anthropological status to fuck all four” remaining members of the A ——— tribe (*BL* 5). Insatiably drawn to power, F. makes his confession: “I followed women into Parliament because I know how they love power” (156). F. definitely benefits from his sexual liaisons, as he “ate free at almost every soda fountain in the city” because of “a few homosexual encounters with restaurateurs” (10). While F.’s romantic devotion to the Historian suggests that he is not only exhibiting what Sedgwick calls “ideological homosexuality,” many of his sexual endeavors are motivated by his lust for power.

A unique, asymmetrical power structure emerges in the love triangle between these three characters. The first and most obvious example of this distortion stems from the fact that F. and the Historian, as men, hold a disproportionate power over Edith as a woman, as discussed above. While Edith is an essential point in the triangle, she is a conduit rather than a partner, and ultimately serves to strengthen the relationship between these two men. In fact, F. goes to specific pains to exclude Edith from his great, revolutionary plans as he writes to the Historian: “These were my dreams for you and me, vieux copain – New Jews, the two of us, queer, militant, invisible, part of a possible new tribe bound by gossip and rumors of divine evidence” (172).

The second asymmetry emerges from an analysis of the novel’s politics of race. Recalling my previous chapter’s argument that Cohen unsettles racial differences with desire, the Historian and F.’s triangulated desire for Edith also reflects their mutual power over her. Beth Kramer offers an insightful application of Sedgwick’s model of desire in her reading of postcolonial American texts. Kramer points out that “many scholars only address the similarities between imperial oppression and masculine domination of women, while ignoring the homosocial bonds that exist to preserve these structures” (2). Kramer uses Sedgwick’s triangle to highlight the “specific ways in which the suppression of a woman in a homosocial context correlates with power structures of governmental or national control” (2-3). According to Kramer, a distinctly

asymmetrical relationship emerged in twentieth century nations between the former colonizer, the emerging nationalist elite of developing nations, and the former colonized body or indigenous people. We can imagine a homosocial triangle, in which the former colonizer and new nationalist elite mutually gain

strength at the expense of the continued oppression of the former colonized body.

(3)

The political analogies in *Beautiful Losers* have been commented on extensively. For Hutcheon, this is a “novel of identity” that “associates the fate of the individual with that of the nation” (45). From her perspective, the “identity of the nation is thus inextricably bound to that of the man. The narrator [the Historian] unwilling is forced to speak for Canada: ‘O Tongue of the Nation! Why don’t you speak for yourself?’” (Hutcheon 45). Of the three main characters in the novel, Hutcheon says “we are never allowed to forget their background and the symbolic weight they bear” (47-48). Edith (a member of the ill-fated A — tribe) and Catherine are the indigenous, feminine object(s) to be conquered, converted, and won. F. is an emerging Québécois nationalist, eager to revisit the violent cycle of victimization and oppression that characterizes Canadian history. F. says: “The English did to us what we did to the Indians, and the Americans did to the English what the English did to us. I demanded revenge for everyone” (199). He longs to be “President of the new Republic” (163).¹³ As for the Historian, he appears to be “an English Canadian, raised in a Montreal Jesuit orphanage,” as Hutcheon points out (47).¹⁴ As discussed earlier, Edith is a valuable commodity shared and traded between men, and F. and the Historian’s relationship following Edith’s death gains “strength at the expense of the continued oppression of the former colonized body,” as Kramer phrases it. In this way, Cohen’s asymmetrical erotic triangle between Edith, F., and the Historian, reflects the dramatically changing imperial image of Canada. It also reflects the fact that, as

¹³ Franz Fanon speaks of this fantasy as common to postcolonial literature: “[The native] is in fact ready at a moment’s notice to exchange the role of the quarry for that of the hunter. The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor” (53).

¹⁴ Some critics have challenged these complacent assumptions of identity, including Frank Davey, who argues that all three major characters are likely “not native English speakers” (14).

Canadian artist Adrian Stimson has phrased it, sex and conquest go hand-in-hand (Bell n.p.).

Historically, personified images of the colonizing and colonized nation have been carefully gendered. In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock writes that “all nations depend on powerful constructions of gender” in their declaration of power and nationhood (353). Traditionally, masculine language and imagery reinforce the nation’s ultimate projection of power. Furthermore, “women are typically constructed as the bearers of the nation, but are denied any relation to national agency” (McClintock 354). Thus the image and narrative of Catherine’s life is ultimately “rented to the Jesuits” at the conclusion of the book, reiterating her status as an indigenous personification of Canada and her commodification and traffic in patriarchal power structures (*BL* 25). According to Kramer, the “mighty British Imperial image” gained further strength by “associating colonized lands with the oppressed feminine body” (4). Inevitably, the “stereotypical translation of the colonization paradigm into sexual power relationships seems inevitably to entail the – more or less metaphorical – equation of territorial aggression with rape” (Söderlind 44). Thus, in *Beautiful Losers*, readers encounter several scenes of sexualized violence analogous to the cultural, geographical, and economic exploitation of Canada and indigenous Canadians, including a scene in which a thirteen-year-old Edith is raped in a stone quarry by a group of men who laugh and call her “*sauvagesse*” (64). As he narrates the story Edith had told him, the Historian curses *and* seems to give tacit approval to the men who assault Edith, saying, “Damn every one of them. I can’t blame them” (62). Patricia Morley writes that the raped Edith represents “an exploited land,” explaining that

Cohen is very much a man of his times in his pro-Canadian stance.... By the mid-sixties... Canadians were just beginning to realize that their very existence as a nation was endangered by American economic and cultural imperialism. They were also waking up to the plight of their native peoples and to a consciousness of guilt for the way in which the Eskimo and the Indian have been and still are being treated. (94)

The homosocial triangulated model of desire outlined above is echoed in the power disjunction inherent in the relationship between the (feminine) colonized and the (masculine) colonizer(s). In such violent depictions, Cohen seems once again to be affirming two contradictory discourses. The text both endorses and condemns the realities of (neo)colonial power structures and their effect on women.

Women in this novel are paradoxical figures, at once worshipped as the saintly ideal, yet passive, ineffectual, and subjected to horrendous violence. As Kramer shows, the “love triangle is useful” as an analytical concept “because of its double nature.” Kramer argues that “the postwar, postcolonial novel may have been forced to employ desire along the triangulated model because it captures both the power structures of colonization and the threat of revolution to these structures” (12). The triangle reveals contradictions within the very structure of sanctioned desire. As my first chapter shows, desire in *Beautiful Losers* disrupts the hierarchy of race upon which power is derived in colonial political structures. Likewise, homosexual desire threatens to unseat the categories upon which masculine privilege is based. The love triangle enriches patriarchal bonds between men who oppress women, while at the same time disrupting distinctions between and confusing power with desire. By sexualizing relationships that transfer

power between men, Cohen exposes the contradictions of colonial discourse, unsettling strict heterosexual notions of masculinity and drawing attention to the ambivalent attraction and repulsion at work in structures of power.

As much as *Beautiful Losers* examines national, ethnic, racial, and religious identities, it examines sexuality, a primary currency of identity in our culture. Sedgwick writes that as

modern Western culture has placed what it calls sexuality in a more and more distinctively privileged relation to our most prized constructs of individual identity, truth, and knowledge, it becomes truer and truer that the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know. (*Closet* 3)

The definition of sexual orientation, therefore, is at once central, yet ambivalent, since it extends into and inflects so many dimensions and cultural spaces that supposedly have nothing to do with sexuality at all. To write about sexuality in *Beautiful Losers*, as I set out originally to do, would be mistakenly to hypostatize an all-pervading, driving force of the novel: male desire. While the text and its surreal conclusion seem very detached from real social contexts and political aims, they nevertheless offer insight into how and why we might refuse to categorize sexual orientation. After all, sexual desire is not the consummation of a set of political beliefs; rather, “sexuality and belief are related in a much more complex fashion, and very often at odds with one another” (Butler xi).

Cohen’s depictions of what have been called deviant sexualities utilize and subvert normative ideas about sexuality and identity politics. For example, even though they are characterized pejoratively as insane, the Historian and F. elevate their neuroses

to transcend their loss. They are contrapuntal and contradictory. Hutcheon suggests that Cohen is “deliberately trying to prevent the reader from creating a system of interpretation, leaving him caught between unresolved dualities” (55) Similarly, as Terry Goldie writes, many of the “claims and counterclaims” of homophobia in the text “lead to negations which appear somehow to be assertions or assertions which negate” (94). As he describes it, in many relevant passages

the apparent negatives can be changed to positives and vice versa.... While the book seems somewhat homophobic and certainly misogynist, it is difficult to dismiss it for such positions given the clear desire of the text to grasp any ‘diamond shit’ which can disrupt complacent assumptions. Still, the effect is, perhaps not surprisingly, often the opposite of the apparent intention. While so much of the novel seems in search of identity, it is arguably using subterfuge to make room for the void of non-identity.... (95)

And, although the sexual nature of F. and the Historian’s relationship is obvious, claiming *Beautiful Losers* as a queer text is questionable. As Goldie writes, “there are homosexual acts in *Beautiful Losers*, but there are most definitely no homosexuals” (94). Such a paradox stems from the fact that Cohen is not presenting a homosexual identity in the political, strategic sense. Rather, Cohen uses homosexuality to subvert expectations. Reiterating this point, Goldie writes that “the only important classification for any character in *Beautiful Losers* is whether or not he or she participates in this [sexual] subversion” (106). The text is focused on pushing the limits of experience, not on claiming homosexuality as a viable alterity. Cohen’s depictions of homosexuality, far from being celebratory of a queer political identity, unsettle the hegemonic concept of

heterosexual male identity. Lee Edelman argues that by definition “queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (17). Like F.’s painting of the Akropolis, the novel’s presentation of sexual minorities presents a double operation: resisting and inscribing masculinist power structures that have historically defined Canada. While Cohen’s text is deeply immersed in the “world of men,” his characters are essentially “lonely, excessive refugees” from it.

CHAPTER THREE: “A DANCE OF MASKS”

In the first chapter, I discussed how Cohen employs desire in his constructions of racial difference to disrupt colonial hierarchies of power, deconstructing his fictional and non-fictional characters and questioning the veracity and value of written history as he goes. Chapter Two outlined how Cohen’s text at once reinforces patriarchal dynamics and disrupts them with a homosocial dynamic of desire. Working against the standard biographical impetus to fix identity in order to know the other, *Beautiful Losers* describes Catherine Tekakwitha in terms of multiplicity and contradiction, and its main character, the Historian, in a state of complex transformation. This chapter will show how the conflicting identities discussed in the first two chapters are mythologized, translated and blurred. The characters in this text resist interpretation in many ways, and appear to be in a constant state of metamorphosis, (re)presentation or identity translation. Linda Hutcheon argues that in the novel “two opposite systems are presented: the religions of the spirit and of the flesh. In their extreme forms both demand a denial of individual identity in favour of some vaster, more inhuman, but not higher purpose” (43). These two systems are not wholly opposite; their apparently conflicting values are resolved in the novel. The Historian’s process of extreme transformation remains faithful to religions of the spirit and of the flesh, since the final pages of the text represent him breaking sexual taboos and undergoing an ecstatic spiritual awakening. To understand Catherine Tekakwitha, he must engage in a literal translation of historical texts and, embracing the extremely profane, pervert her sacred image. Ultimately coming to no conclusive

understanding of Catherine, the Historian translates who he is, making a perverse mockery of sainthood itself.

In *Beautiful Losers*, personal change and self-improvement narratives mirror the divine metamorphosis from sinner to saint. Catherine Tekakwitha's life is meaningful not simply because she is an object of obsessive desire for the Historian, but because she represents "a desire impossible to fulfill (that nevertheless transforms the desiring subject)" (Siemerling 41). The Historian's supplications to Catherine quickly turn into self-reflections. His comments emphasize the distance between them, as he asks himself, "Do I have any right to come after you with my dusty mind full of the junk of maybe five thousand books?" (*BL* 3-4). She is a sacred figure, an ultimately unknowable character who transforms the Historian by emphasizing his limits, what he can never know. According to her life story presented in the novel, after her death an "infinity of miraculous cures" ensue: a visit to her grave cures gout, a vision of her ghost appears, and mud from her tomb brings people back from the brink of death (230). Her disfigured corpse is suddenly "beautiful," exuding a "sweet...ineffable fragrance" (224, 226). She is an orphan scarred by smallpox, a misfit redeemed by her religious devotion and extreme mortifications. Her story, as far removed in time from the present action of the novel as it may be, suggests to both male protagonists that they too can achieve saintly power, because she inspires a belief in miracles. The Historian pays reverence to her Catholic sect for inspiring a belief in miracles: "I love the Jesuits because they saw miracles. Homage to the Jesuit who has done so much to conquer the frontier between the natural and the supernatural" (105). F. claims that "creators," such as poets, Hitler, and Jesus, are special because each is loyal only to the "notion that he is not bound to the world as

given, that he can escape the painful arrangement of things as they are” (59). Michael Ondaatje reasons that “If Catherine could transform all the banalities of her lifetime, all the petty squabbles that followed her death, all the minor cures of couples and cows and other animals into some sort of significance because of her excessively peculiar mental state that makes her a saint, then so can F.” (52). In *Beautiful Losers*, to transform oneself radically, to escape the limits of “the world as given,” is to be divinely capable.

F. “believes” that becoming part of the “super-world,” is not only desirable, but possible – whether his example comes from Jesuit legend, children’s comic-books, or the familiar commercial narrative of self-improvement (76). For F. and the Historian, the influence of Catholicism is at times superseded by the modern American myth of the man-turned-superhero. In *Beautiful Losers*, “Hollywood provides modern saints” (Hutcheon 47). The Historian and F. can believe that they are predestined for a great metamorphosis because Plastic Man, the Blue Beetle, and Captain Marvel are, like them, disadvantaged misfits, even criminals, before achieving superhuman powers. Like Charles Axis, the novel’s self-improvement spokesman, and Catherine Tekakwitha, these superheroes somehow transcend normality and are able to break into “the edge of the spirit world” (*BL* 76). Axis, F. says, is just like “one of us slobs who dwells pages behind Plastic Man” (76). After reading about superheroes and subscribing to Charles Axis’s bodybuilding program, F. decides that he wants “fantastic imaginary muscles,” devoting “fifteen minutes a day” to increasing his chest measurement (76-77). His self-transformation requires no acts of traditional religious devotion, little physical exertion, and no faith in anything more mystical than cause and effect. Yet, in the hyperbolic world of *Beautiful Losers*, Axis promises a “celestial manifestation exploding in terrific silence”

(75). The Historian remains passive, while F. is actively dedicated. F. becomes frustrated at the Historian's lack of effort:

You disdained the coupon because of the sin of pride, didn't you. Charles Axis wasn't enough for you. In your greedy brain you cherished an unspeakable desire. You wanted to be Blue Beetle. You wanted to be Captain Marvel. You wanted to be Plastic Man. Robin wasn't even good enough for you. You wanted to be Batman.... You wanted to be Superman who was never Clark Kent. You wanted to live in front of the comic.... To become a New Man in just fifteen minutes a day meant absolutely nothing to you. Confess! (123-24).

Trapped in F.'s wrestling hold, the Historian acknowledges that he wanted "miracles," and that he "didn't want to climb to success on a ladder of coupons!" Rather, he "wanted to wake up suddenly with X-ray Vision!" (124). The Historian counters F.'s devotion to and faith in the work of self-improvement by asserting his place among the spiritually elect and believing in his own predestination to have superpowers. When the Historian and F. "dream and redream nightmares of identity," they are repeatedly enticed by the promise that they might become someone else (142).

Cohen ultimately brings the Charles Axis self-improvement narrative to a problematic conclusion. In the Axis testimonial, as in the comic-book original, the radically transformed weakling becomes the "HERO OF THE BEACH" and gives an obnoxious bully his comeuppance (75). More than an image of the physical ideal, however, Axis is a spiritual inspiration. F. refers to Axis in Christian terms: "Charles Axis is all compassion, he's our sacrifice" (77). The Historian is initially unimpressed, saying, "But it's for thin guys. We're fat" (75). F. explains that Axis "calls the thin but he

means both the fat and the thin, he calls the thin because it is worse to be fat than thin; he calls the thin so that the fat can hear and come and not be named” (77). F.’s words have ecclesiastical overtones; his rhetoric recalls that of a priest. The repeated image of the “REAL body” that Axis can give the everyman “Joe” begins a process of ideological interpellation in which the Historian and F. are addressed and produced as subjects, called to regardless of the fact that they cannot relate to the “weakling” pictured in the cartoon panel. The image of Axis (and Joe) therefore is an image of masculine power that *produces* F. and the Historian’s desires, desires it seems merely to represent. The Axis advertisement shapes political, ideological subjects at the very same time that it claims to offer an apparently liberating program of personal and physical self-improvement. Importantly, it works for F. and the Historian in the same way that Jesuit dogma operates on Catherine, molding her identity as she exercises the freedom to give her body to God. Ironically, when F. and the Historian finally find themselves humiliated by a real bully in a narrative that mimics the Axis advertisement, F. realizes that the bully harassing him is Charles Axis himself (77-78). F. parallels Axis in that they are each a victim-turned-victimizer, and F.’s experience with Axis shows that “those who attempt to possess the ideal will suffer as much, if not more, than those oppressed by bullies” (Wilkins 38). This passage furthermore illustrates that in his method of radical transformation, F. “risks becoming totalitarian [since] heroes become bullies as easily as victims become oppressors” (Wilkins 26). F.’s method of transformation proves to be risky; his obsession with superpower demonstrates his despotic character and blurs the distinction between hero and villain.

While F. is obsessed with religiosity and saintliness, in his totalitarian attempts to transform the Historian he becomes violent and cruel. The Historian explains the narcissistic nature of F.'s pursuit: "I felt that F. was using me like an advertisement for his own body. I was the tattered billboard for his reality" (*BL* 111). As children in an orphanage, F. slices a wart off of the Historian's hand, publicly humiliating his friend. F. says:

– To me the wart is ugly. I'm a simple man. There's enough talking as it is, far as I see. To me a wart is a secret I don't *want* to keep. When I see the wart I think scalpel.... When I see wart I think Speedy Removal. I think Before and After. I think Miracle Drugs. I think In Just Ten Days.... I think Yours For Only. I think Try This SCIENTIFIC HOME Method. I think RUSH ME MY FREE. Grab him, men! (110)

Cohen's mixing of "high" and "low" cultural concepts is reflected in this passage. Even though it is part of a sincere attempt to herald beauty and perfection, F.'s blatant and tawdry use of advertising language turns this episode into a dark satire. And although he is making an implicit claim to be eradicating ugliness, F. is torturing the Historian in a way that the Historian must describe in militaristic terms. As F. "said his last word he had shot his hand out in a salute. The salute ended in a penknife, just as a bayonet illumines unmistakably the use of a rifle" (110). Perhaps readers are meant to connect this childhood torture to the torture of Brébeuf, a Jesuit priest "scorched" with fire and dismembered by "Indians" in 1649, an event later described in detail in the novel (183). This parallel is suggestive of the fusion of characters throughout the novel, and thus related to the giving over of individuality in favour of communal identity. Ultimately, the

Historian suffers; he is like Edith, who “cried in pain,” Catherine, who “was Mangled Every hour in Mysterious Machinery,” and F., who “Suffered Horribly in His Last Days” (58). Even Charles Axis is imagined “suffering on the outer limits of the Bat cave” (76-77). F. explains in Book II why he insists on making the Historian suffer: “Your baffled cries as I tormented you, you were the good animal I wanted to be, or failing that, the good animal I wanted to exist” (161). F., and his wart slicing torture, marks the Historian’s place as that of a spiritual martyr.

The violence and saintly aspirations of F.’s pursuit are symbolized by F.’s “famous soap collection,” which is eventually inherited by the Historian. F.’s “famous soap collection” is apparently quite valuable, since it is the soap that magically “cured Edith’s acne” (142). However, the soap collection is in fact “derived from melted human flesh,” bought by F. from the nameless waiter during the “Argentine vacation hotel weekend shack-up with Edith” (194, 175). The soap is not simply a cosmetic luxury, but a source of power not unlike the power of physical supremacy promised by Charles Axis, a figure linked by many Cohen critics to the Axis powers of WWII. F. explains that when he bought the soap, he coveted its power: “I wanted it. I wanted it. My lust for secular grey magic” (175). Obviously, F. is obsessed with fascist power. Michel Foucault, in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, points out that there is “fascism in us all, in our heads and our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us” (xiii). The soap is at the same time a symbol of F.’s desire for power and a symbol of F.’s submission to power. F. compares himself to Holocaust victims: “In perfect sleep we took the soap and waited for the showers” (174). In this context, the soap itself is a deceptive device; to take and use

the soap is to accept one's helplessness and futility. After the D.V. episode, when the hotel "room is a mess, the floor spotted with pools of fluid and suds," F. finally sees that Edith has transcended physical imperfections, self-improvement, and mortal flaws. He cries: "Oh, Edith! It doesn't matter what I've done to you, the tits, the cunt, the hydraulic buttock failures, all my Pygmalion tampering, it means nothing, I know now. Acne and all, you were out of my reach, you were beyond my gadgetry" (195). F. finally indicts his own "futile" improvement program, suggesting that technology cannot liberate Edith's "true" self, nor is it responsible for the crisis of identity that prompted its use in the first place. Edith is scarred, but she is nevertheless a saintly figure. The image of the soap embodies the dichotomy between purity and corruption, and is further complicated with every iteration, repetition, and re-contextualization of it in Cohen's tightly woven text.

The ongoing and related themes of identity transformation and metamorphosis are central to the ambition of the book's protagonist: to know and define the divine. The metaphor of translation further informs these themes. As George Steiner writes, "Translation is an exemplary case of metamorphosis" (260). By explicating the meaning of *Hiro-Koué*, for example, which combines the assertion "like I said" with "a cry of joy or distress, according to whether it was sung or howled," the Historian attempts to cross boundaries, to "pierce the mysterious curtain which hangs between all talking men" (*BL* 8). The Historian notes that, "at the end of every utterance a[n Iroquois] man stepped back, so to speak, and attempted to interpret his words to the listener" (8). The Historian is reiterating the fact that every speech act implies an assertion of self. And, because he wants desperately to know *who* Catherine is, he asks her to "answer me in *Hiro-Koué*" (8). The Historian's subsequent translation of historical narrative "betrays the commonly

(and communally) accepted ‘meaning’ of the saint” by invoking her in terms of a sexually desired other (Siemerling 37). Catherine’s image is thereby altered by the Historian’s attempts to understand her, just as meaning is inevitably altered in the process of translation from one language to another. The Historian constantly draws attention to himself as language translator by employing code-switching,¹⁵ alternating between English narration and citations in other languages. Most often these are French or Latin passages in italicized form without an accompanying translation, but twice Cohen employs the Greek alphabet in passages spoken by Edith/Catherine/Isis. Although only some of the words in other languages are translated, Cohen’s phrase-by-phrase translations suggest that “his entire story of Catherine Tekakwitha is a translation of a French text into an English one” (Rae 86).¹⁶ Besides simply unsettling the reader (especially since untranslated passages in the Greek alphabet are inaccessible to the average reader and unutterable to English readers), such code-switching allows the original message to retain its sacred or mythical value. Especially in relation to Catherine, “all definition, all explanation... is translation” (Steiner 260), because it crosses the line between sacred and profane; from a teleological point of view, language translation is a process of communication, the point of which is to impart knowledge to a foreign reader. This process of communication is paralleled in the act of breaching the divide between sacred and profane, which is another act of alteration and, most importantly, apocalyptic revelation.

¹⁵ Code-switching is a common technique among post-colonial authors that involves “switching between two or more codes” without translation, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (71).

¹⁶ According to Leslie Monkman’s investigation in “*Beautiful Losers: Mohawk Myth and Jesuit Legend*,” Lecompte’s book supplies quotations used by Cohen throughout *Beautiful Losers*, including those ascribed to Fathers Cholenec, Chauchetière, and Remy (57).

The Historian is parodying the authoritative language of written history by offering his own sexually inflected interpretation of LeCompte, *et al.*, and perverting the sacred Greek language of Isis by suggesting that Isis (Catherine, Edith) can be better and more intimately “known” sexually. Translated from the novel’s Greek, Edith says: “I am Isis, born of all things, both what is and what shall be, and no mortal has ever lifted my robe” (Söderlind 66). In lifting her robe, the old man of Book III is therefore transformed, no longer a mortal. The robe, the veil, and the blanket are important symbols representing the divide between human beings and the divine. In Judaic theology, the image of the veil is an important symbol both of God’s “ineffable transcendence,” God’s necessary separation from us, and the equally important “connection human beings need to an idea as abstract and difficult as transcendence,” allowing “transcendence and intimacy to coexist” (Gelernter 65). According to Gelernter, the veil posits a solution to the Jewish paradox of coexistent transcendence and intimate nearness by evoking an image of “God and man [*sic*] face to face but separated by a veil” (56). The image is also inescapably sexual, since it suggests a bridal veil: “the prophets imagine God and Israel as married lovers” (56-57). The veil is a woman’s veil specifically, and so in *Beautiful Losers*, sexual and spiritual revelation are one and the same: lifting a woman’s veil is “apocalyptic” (*BL* 105). As discussed in chapter 1, the Historian interprets Catherine’s miracle feast as “apocalyptic,” a word which “comes from the Greek *apokalupsis*, which means revelation” (104). When the Historian asks “What have I done, what have I not done, to lift your veil, to get under your blanket, Kateri Tekakwitha?” (105), he evokes the penetration of the symbolic veil *and* identifies himself as the subject of translation who will undergo the metamorphosis from mortal sinner to saint.

The Historian's transformation from sinner to saint in the final moments of the novel is possible in the same way that his work affords cultural and linguistic translation. While F. is more concerned with physical improvements, the Historian undergoes a transformation of consciousness. Book I concludes with an apparently irrelevant sequence of translation exercises featuring Catherine Tekakwitha. With F.'s Greek-English phrase-book "on [his] knees," the Historian imagines anachronistic scenarios such as "KATERI TEKAKWITHA AT THE TOBACCONIST'S" and "KATERI TEKAKWITHA AT THE BARBER'S SHOP" (147).

ΣΤΟ ΦΑΡΜΑΚΕΙΟ	AT THE DRUG - SHOP
Παρακαλώ, έτοιμάστε μου αυτή τη συνταγή	Please, get this medical prescription ready for me
παρακαλώ, περάστε σε εί- κοσι λεπτά. Θα είναι έ- τοιμη	please, call after twenty minutes. It will be re- ady
θα περιμένω. Δεν πειράζει!	I shall be waiting. Ne- ver mind!
πως πρέπει να παίρνω αψ- τό το φάρμακο; πρωί, μεσημέρι και βράδυ	How must I take this medicine? In the morning, at noon and in the evening
πριν από το φαγητό μετά από το φαγητό αυτό το φάρμακο είναι πο- λύ ακριβό	before the meal after the meal this medicine is very dear
είμαι κρυωμένος. Δώστε μου κάτι για το κρύο	I caught cold. Give me something for the cold
κάτι για τον πονοκέφαλο	something for the hea- dache
κάτι για τον λαιμό κάτι για το στομάχι μου	something for the throat something for my sto- mach
το στομάχι μου με πονεί έχω ένα τραύμα στο πόδι	my stomach aches me I have a wound on the foot
παρακαλώ, περιποιηθήτε αυτό το τραύμα πόσο κοστίζουν όλα; δέκα σελίνια. Εύχαριστώ	please, nurse this wound how much does all cost? ten shillings. Thanks.

While the passages are written in English, the full-page insertion of Greek phrases side-by-side with their English translations (reproduced above) suggests that the Historian is no longer expressing himself in English (151). As he appears to be transcribing truncated, elementary Greek phrases, readers recall F.'s earlier guidance that "prayer is translation. A man translates himself into a child asking for all there is in a language he has barely mastered" (60). Migotti notes that in this sequence, the Historian "speaks like a child, struggling to make himself understood" (51). In these passages the Historian attempts to understand Catherine by translating himself into the Greek language, and poorly translating Catherine into a one-dimensional service attendant. While the exchanges consist of little more than product specifications, greetings, and salutations, the Historian realizes that he has "asked for everything," and that even in his "coldest terror, [he] did not know how much [he] needed" (*BL* 150). The Historian's translation/prayer, his attempt to "beseech the Virgin everywhere," is ultimately his most meaningful endeavor so far to disavow himself, to go beyond his own language, experience, and identity (146). Yet the dream-like scenarios bring neither the reader nor the Historian any closer to understanding Catherine. Instead, they demonstrate that translation is always a kind of imperfect mimicry.

Such translations of self reveal the Historian's apparent *raison d'être*: his "cause is the loss of the self" (Scobie 107). But this abdication of selfhood operates on a linguistic level throughout the entire text, not merely at the apocalyptic conclusion. F. teaches the Historian to abandon the "world of names" (*BL* 18), and emphasizes that, "of all the things that bind us to the past, the names of things are the most severe" (43). This is especially true of Catherine, whose many names reflect the powerful cultural entities

for whom naming represents mastery. Throughout his research, the Historian cannot avoid the fact that there is no one name for Catherine. “Kateri” is her Iroquois name; she is referred to by the Jesuits as “the Iroquois virgin” and “the Lily of the Shores of the Mohawk River” (3); she is Catherine Tekakwitha in English (variously spelled Tekakwitha, Tegahkouita, Tehgakwita, and Tekakouita) (41). Throughout the book, the Historian is referred to by F. only in terms of endearment such as “darling” and “friend” and becomes an unstable, empty ‘I’. Winfried Siemerling writes:

Cohen typically seeks the mobility of linguistic shifters (rather than the stability of names) in order to ‘define’ these positions of self and other, a fact that explains the often-noted frequency, instability, and interchangeability of pronouns in his corpus. The ‘I’ occurs, in this process, as a relational function, instituting a subject in language momentarily with respect to that other it brings forth as much as it is brought forth by it as an initially apprehended and then altered form. One of Cohen’s ‘favorite games’ thus consists of multiple interpretations and re-readings of configurations marked by personal pronouns. (24)

In allowing his protagonist to be primarily a “relational function,” known by the implicit marker “I,” Cohen invites his reader to think of the “I” both as a shifting cipher and a strong assertion of self. While the “I” Historian struggles to assert his individuality and centrality, his namelessness makes it difficult for the reader to know and define *him* with any clarity. F. describes how Catherine Tekakwitha “stumbled over the names of Jesus and Mary, mispronouncing them” (*BL* 223). This is because, F. claims, “she was playing with the name, she was mastering the Good Name...she knew the Tetragrammaton!” (223). The Greek Tetragrammaton is a four-letter word (perhaps inviting readers to recall

the novel's other uses of four-letter words, and again blurring the line between sacred and profane) used in the Hebrew Bible to mean God. These characters' names become unknowable, sacred, like the indeterminate name of God. To be nameless, indeterminate, and unidentifiable is, for Cohen, a means to collapse the boundaries between self and other.

F. dreams of fashioning the Historian into a saint, whom he calls "The New Jew" (171). F.'s elaboration of The New Jew, however, embraces many contradictions. F. explains that

The New Jew loses his mind gracefully.... He has induced amnesia by a repetitious study of history, his very forgetfulness caressed by facts which he accepts with visible enthusiasm.... He demonstrates that yearning brings surprises. He uses regret as a bulwark of originality.... He confirms tradition through amnesia, tempting the whole world with rebirth. He dissolves history and ritual by accepting unconditionally the complete heritage. He travels without passport because powers consider him harmless.... Sometimes he is Jewish but always he is American, and now and then, Québécois. (171-72)

According to F. The New Jew must leave History behind through "induced amnesia," and elude any singular identity, travelling without a passport because he is constantly being reincarnated under the guise of various nationalities. The New Jew, then, is like the Jesuit to whom the Historian pays "Homage"; he appears "under countless disguises, now as a Cabinet Minister, now as a Christian priest, now as a soldier, a Brahmin, an astrologer, now as the Confessor to the monarch – by a thousand arts, luring, persuading, compelling men to acknowledge, under the weight of recorded miracles, that the earth is

a province of Eternity” (105). He exists in multiplicity. As Söderlind explains, “the emblematic, anti-oedipal, extraterritoriality of the Jew is thus clearly equated with the unnamable that is tantamount to magic. It is when ‘Magic is afoot’ (197) that the tyranny of naming, the imprisonment in systems, is finally overcome” (52). The New Jew does not have the “flaw of naming,” as F. calls it, that entails bias or constrained perspective of his identity (*BL* 201). To be a nameless orphan like the Historian is to be unbound from history, detached from guilt, responsibility, and inheritance, and to see everything without prejudice or irrational judgment. F.’s “desire to ‘slip out of history’” is therefore also the desire to “slip out of categories that deprive the subject of everything they exclude...” (Davey 18). F.’s new ambitions for the Historian furthermore involve the “triumph of election over discipline,” a triumph that describes the Historian’s earlier refusal to subscribe to the Charles Axis program, even as F.’s discipline paid off (171). In fact, F.’s New Jew is appropriately blighted, like “a pimpled movie star.” In his paradoxical vision, F. suggests that sainthood is a mixture of loss and beauty, ruin and creation, in which identity changes and shifts dramatically. The Historian’s character transformation is in many ways defined by F.’s image of a modern saint as someone for whom identity is not fixed.

The mythical Algonquin figure Oscotarach is central to how Cohen ascribes mythological importance to the Historian’s identity transformation. In Book II, F. quotes historical texts and recounts the importance of Oscotarach:

The Indians believed that after physical death the spirit made a long journey heavenward. It was a hard, dangerous journey, and many did not complete it. A treacherous river had to be crossed on a log which bounced through wild rapids. A

huge howling dog harassed the traveler. There was a narrow path between dancing boulders which crashed together, pulverizing the pilgrim who could not dance with them. The Hurons believed there was a bark hut beside this path. Here lived Oscotarach, meaning Head-Piercer. It was his function to remove the brains from the skulls of all who went by, ‘as a necessary preparation for immortality.’ (195-96)

In the context of rebirth, Oscotarach is benevolent, helping the dead travel in their journey to the afterlife by removing the burden of self and memory. Oscotarach is also extremely violent (like F.). Earlier in the novel, on his death-bed, Catherine’s uncle describes what will happen when his “spirit begins to leave my body,” echoing the story told by F. (121). Readers of *Beautiful Losers* should suspect that F. himself, in various masks and guises, is present in most of the characters in this novel, since the Historian’s retelling of the Uncle’s journey through the afterlife uses much of the same diction and imagery as F.’s.¹⁷ All of the imagery in passages describing Oscotarach is touched upon obliquely or overtly at other points in the novel, including the “treacherous” river, the “howling dog,” the bark hut, and the removal of brains in preparation for an afterlife or second life. For example, when F. escapes from the mental hospital with nurse Mary Woolnd, they are both pursued by police dogs. Mary is mutilated, failing to find “balance in the chaos of existence,” and so can not safely escape, or metaphorically arrive at Oscotarach’s hut. When the Historian recalls Edith’s red painted body, he evokes the river of the myth: “Perhaps she had some landscape in mind where she always meant to travel, just as I envisage a northern river, a night as clean and bright as river pebbles, for

¹⁷ Dennis Duffy writes that “In time (around page 190 for me), the reader senses that [the Historian] and F. are the same demented wretch” (30).

my supreme trip with Catherine Tekakwitha” (15). The pilgrimage to Oscotarach’s hut is integral to F.’s definition of a saint as “someone who has achieved a remote human possibility...a kind of balance in the chaos of existence. A saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did the world would have changed long ago.... It is a kind of balance that is his glory” (101). Just as the Algonquin pilgrim must “dance with the boulders” and find balance amid chaos, so F.’s saint must “ride the drifts like an escaped ski” (101). As Monkman points out, Oscotarach might even be linked to the Charles Axis narrative and the beach bully, since “the comic book advertisement promises immunity to beach bullies through only fifteen minutes of exercise each day and Cohen’s narrator must learn to oppose the threats assaulting him in his world just as the Indian pilgrim must withstand the harassment of a howling dog biting at his heels” (58). The repeated imagery of the river, howling dogs, and dancing boulders utilized in these retellings makes the Historian’s suffering and victimization meaningful on a mythological level.

The story of Oscotarach is also significant to the Historian’s abdication of identity. In Book I, the Historian wants desperately to be stripped of his psyche, to receive a “dentist drill in forehead bone” (*BL* 145). He gives himself over to the Head-Piercer, asking F. to

raise the blunt tomahawk and try once more. Poke the stone spoon among the cerebral porridge. Does the moonlight want to get into my skull? Do the sparkling alleys of the icy sky want to stream through my eyeholes? F., were you the Head-Piercer, who left his hut and applied to the public ward in pursuit of his own operation? Or are you still with me, and is the surgery deep in progress? (141)

The Historian also marks his position in the middle of his transformation in Book I, crying “I’m freezing to death in this damn treehouse,” the “hut” of the Oscotarach story (117). As for F., he invokes imagery of piercing needles in reference to himself, including in the Dr. Frankenstein passage, in which he describes his “needle going so madly” to stitch together limbs strewn everywhere in a car accident (187).¹⁸ He asks the Historian explicitly, “Was I *your* Oscotarach?” (196). All of these references, realistic and surreal, deferential and irreverent, suggest that Oscotarach, at least figuratively, performs the same “head-piercing,” mental refashioning common to any kind of meaningful transformation, not only that involved in the journey into the afterlife.

The Historian’s process of metamorphosis culminates when the old man of Book III emerges. In Book I, when he admits that he is “lashed to the past,” the Historian declares that he wants to “talk to men in taverns and buses and remember nothing” (36). He reasons, “How can I begin something new with all of yesterday in me?” (40). Importantly, “Memory loss is a pre-condition for self-loss...[and] they are both desirable to Cohen’s protagonist” (Söderlind 46). Book I ends with the Historian praying for a translation, Book II with the apparent escape of F., and Book III with a new focalizer described by an omniscient third-person narrator. When the nameless old man, whose adjectivally “old” identity suggests that he is not a new character but a familiar one, emerges from his hut in Book III, “An Epilogue in the Third Person,” he has complete amnesia (*BL* 243). He “did not know how long he had lived there” and is reminded of nothing:

¹⁸ This passage subtly alludes to the myth of Isis and Osiris, in which Isis gathers the pieces of the dismembered Osiris in order to bring him back to life. She is unable to find one piece, however, and must fashion a phallus out of gold before her magic can resurrect him. Also connected to the figure of the old man, who emerges from inside a treehouse, Osiris is enclosed in the trunk of a tamarisk tree.

the young perfume in the air produced no nostalgic hefts in the heart beneath his filthy matted beard. The vaguest mist of pain like lemon squeezed from a distant table caused him to squint his eyes: he scraped his memory for an incident out of his past with which to mythologize the change of season, some honeymoon, or walk, or triumph, that he could let the spring renew, and his pain was finding none. His memory represented no incident.... (246)

When the old man emerges without a name or memory from a “curious abode, a treehouse battered and precarious,” the imagery suggests that he is a transformed person (246). Söderlind explains that “the period in the treehouse is part of the process of brain removal, an initiation which, like all such rites... involves transformations of identity” (48). The old man’s amnesia marks his place on a journey much like the mythologized journey to the afterlife, the final stage of which is not heaven but a deconstruction of the self.

The old man of Book III finally realizes many of F.’s far-flung prophecies of metamorphosis, translation, and revelation. In the old man, F.’s sermonizing, his word, is made flesh. When F. the separatist says that he wants “a country to break in half so men can learn to break their lives in half,” he is saying that he wants to see others admit multiplicity in and of themselves (*BL* 199). The old man in Book III is broken both physically and symbolically, since the crowd that surrounds him in the Main Shooting and Game Alley arcade notices his imperfect hand:

— It's all burnt!

— He's got no thumb.

— Isn't he the Terrorist Leader that escaped tonight?

- Looks more like the pervert they showed on T.V. they're combing the country for.
- Get him out!
- He stays! He's a Patriot.
- He's a stinking cocksucker!
- He's very nearly the President of our country! (256)

That the old man has no thumb suggests that he is either F., crippled from a botched attempt to bomb a statue of Queen Victoria, or the Historian, injured from his failed attempts to light fireworks, or both. Addressed as “Uncle” by a young boy, he evokes the only other uncle in the text: Catherine Tekakwitha’s. And when the old man gives the young boy a “lecture on the importance of proper squatting for the development of his buttock muscles” he “echoes remarks of F.’s to the narrator” (Migotti 53). F. tells the Historian that he “saw exactly how low your buttocks should descend” when “squatting in front of me” (*BL* 170). The Historian, referred to as “I” in most Cohen criticism, becomes along with F. an indistinguishable old man (IF), or a representation of “All Chances at Once” (258). He is not a normal, mortal man, since he refuses to eat and “no longer foul[s] the shack with excrement” (246). Like Edith, whom F. and the Historian never saw eating, and Catherine, who refused food, this man is somehow divine. Running away from his hut, the old man, who readers now understand is a wanted pedophile, escapes the “Catholic posse” (also referred to as the “Provincial Police”) that has chased him out of the woods (249-50). He hitches a ride with a “beautiful” girl, “maybe a blond housewife” (250). Wearing only a pair of moccasins (suggesting that she is an embodiment of Catherine), the woman who picks him up demands he give her oral sex,

reversing the Historian’s earlier craving to receive oral sex from Edith. Like Edith following the D.V. scene, this woman identifies herself, in Greek, as Isis. But the old man is “not in the least interested” in who she is since, he says, “foreigners bore me” (251). The significance of finally achieving F.’s impossible ambition to “Fuck a saint” is ironically lost on the old man, since he “is not interested in identities of self and other anymore [and his] fascination and desire of the self for the identity of the other have ended” (Siemerling 51). The timeline of events becomes confused by references to individuals participating in events that have already occurred at various points in time, such as the claim that the Terrorist Leader’s escaped “tonight,” even though the old man has been occupying the treehouse “for years” according to the little boy (249). As Hutcheon points out, “the confused temporal sequence further accentuates the merging of identities” (51).

Emerging from the treehouse, a place of alienation, the old man still evades concrete identification. However, the story that the old man tells the young boy as he emerges comes closer to revealing who or what the old man is. A list of the five tribes of the Iroquois nation, translated into three languages, it is not a story at all:

IROQUOIS	ENGLISH	FRENCH
Ganeagaono	Mohawk	Agnier
Onayotekaono	Oneida	Onneyut
Onundagaono	Onondaga	Onnontagué
Gweugwhono	Cayuga	Goyogouin
Nundawaono	Seneca	Tsonnontouan (249)

This passage appears verbatim in American historian Francis Parkman's *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century* (1867), suggesting that the old man is the Historian of Book I. But F. also quotes Parkman verbatim, noting his own "photographic memory" (209). Furthermore, the passage reiterates the arbitrary nature of naming itself, since each unique name, or "identity," is simply a translation from one language to another. The old man, like every character in this book and the five tribes of the Iroquois nation, is determined by multiple signs. He resists being understood as a singular subject, and is perhaps more accurately thought of as a "multiple object," since he "reflects and emits a multiplicity of meanings, overdetermined like the name of Catherine Tekakwitha" (Siemerling 54). A translator of names like the Historian, the old man is a product of the Historian's imagination, a performative subject without an identity. He is symbolic of the multiplicity that each character metaphorically evokes throughout the book. He is not singular, but in an indeterminate state of being between the original "text" and the many possibilities which it might become.

The "sacred formula" that Catherine's Uncle discovers through his Andacwandet further illuminates the Historian's process of transformation throughout the book. Dreaming his cure, the dying Uncle demands to see all of the young men and women in the town couple together in one cabin. The ritual is important to the Historian's "pilgrimage" in this sense because it is a "heterological ceremony of un-naming that undoes the boundaries of the self" (Siemerling 44). A "heterological ceremony of un-naming" would disconnect a name from the thing that it describes, making the name itself heterological, or non self-referential. After Catherine's Uncle chants the prayer "I change / I am the same," the Historian explains the significance of the "sacred formula":

It was a dance of masks and every mask was perfect because every mask was a real face and every face was a real mask so there was no mask and there was no face for there was but one dance in which there was but one mask but one true face which was the same and which was a thing without a name which changed and changed into itself over and over. (*BL* 140)

This “formula” complicates the foundation of same-ness on which we presumably build a conception of self. Masks, which are like names according to Siemerling, “posit identity by signifying difference” (45). Wearing a mask, like being named, reflects the “true face” only temporally, insofar as it consigns a concrete identity marker to a constantly evolving subject which “changed and changed into itself over and over” (*BL* 140). Therefore to change, by becoming other through the “dance of masks,” is in fact to leave the limits of the authentic self, the “real face,” and to return to a multiplicity of selves collected under one signification. The process of estrangement from the self is in fact what Siemerling argues “turns out to be the ‘identity’ of [the Historian] ‘I’” (45). The *Andacwandet* reveals the name to be a mask, essentially *unmasking* naming and language as a disguise of singularity and stability. The Uncle’s *Andacwandet* shows him that the person trying to define him or herself in terms of an unchanging individual identity is trapped in constant translation, in the “perpetual, inescapable condition of signification” that Steiner defines translation itself to be (260).

The conclusion of the book presents the transformed subject in a state of mimicry. The old man “disintegrate[s] slowly,” in a “remarkable performance” that eludes description, since the third-person narrator does “not intend to describe” it (*BL* 258). Like Osiris, he “greedily” reassembles himself – not back into his original form but into a

projected “movie of Ray Charles” (258). He not only performs a visual spectacle, he becomes the spectacle itself. The vision of a man becoming an image of Ray Charles in a movie theatre emphasizes the function of the movie theatre in general. Linda Hutcheon reminds us that it provides a “vicarious experience” offering “the possibility of understanding things one cannot know personally” (much like the Uncle’s earlier *Andacwandet*) (19). Importantly, the word “film” is etymologically connected to “veil,” a word that connotes a “covering of haze, mist, or the like” (OED). We are also reminded of the epigraph that precedes the novel, attributed to Ray Charles singing “Ol’ Man River”: “Somebody said lift that bale” (*BL* n.p.). Söderlind comments on the significance of the epigraph: “in modern Greek, the letter B is pronounced C; thus, carried over into the language of the scripture, the words ‘bale’ and ‘veil’ would be homonymous. The lifting of the bale about which Ray Charles sings in the epigraph becomes, when pronounced orally (or sung) from [a Greek] position, the lifting of the veil” (64). Not only has the old man lifted the veil of Isis, but he finally becomes the film itself, thus answering F.’s plea to the Historian: “do not be a magician, be magic” (175). Also in the final pages, the “Canadian view of snow as surface (veil that cannot be lifted) is countered by a reference to the penetration of it in the colonizing version of the eternal hunt, ‘Williams De Luxe Polar Hunt’ at the Main Shooting and Game Alley where American explorers plant their flag in a drift (301)” (Söderlind 51). Far from offering a neat and tidy conclusion, the densely layered imagery of the passage invites the reader to see multiple realities. Echoing the Historian’s earlier prayer that he be pierced by Oscotarach and let the moonlight get “into [his] skull,” the old man has “the moon” occupy “one lens of his sunglasses” (258). As if he were an actor on stage, the old man

“offer[s] spectators a vision of All Chances as Once!” (258). Before the episode concludes, an audience member exclaims: “Hey! Somebody’s making it!” (259). This exclamation could refer to a man supernaturally penetrating a divine realm of ineffable transcendence, piercing the veil of God, his presence arresting time “like the shape of an hourglass”; or it could be a man masturbating in a movie theatre in a pathetic attempt to “fuck a saint...with a steel hourglass up [his] hole,” according to F.’s advice (258, 13). The old man’s final transformation is not so much a conclusion as another mutation, representing him in yet another extreme state of mimicry that blurs the boundary between pervert and a saint, between the divine and mortal. His final translation is a performative act, a translation, a mimicry, and a mockery of sainthood all at once.

Like Cohen’s sexualized representation of the saint Catherine Tekakwitha, the Historian’s transformation from sinner to saint is ultimately a parodic translation – a kind of mimicry that is at once a replication and a mockery. By dwelling on the metamorphosis from sinner to saint, from weakling to superhero, even from victim to victimizer, *Beautiful Losers* presents no stable identities. Characters in the text are overloaded with multiplicity, hybridity, and ambivalence. Throughout the text, Edith is conflated with Catherine, Catherine with Isis, and Isis with Edith. F. aggressively adopts and encourages extreme improvement programs in pursuit of what he believes constitutes a saint: someone who can balance the chaos, abdicate control, and “give himself to gravity and chance” (*BL* 101). Systematically rejecting the world of names, F. forces the Historian to forget what he knows and change what he thinks. The old man, like an Algonquin pilgrim traversing the afterlife, is pierced by Oscotarach and stripped of his conscious baggage. F. teaches that “To discover the truth in anything that is alien, first

dispense with the indispensable in your own vision” (89). The Historian must break down the illusion of subjective autonomy from which he began. Rae writes that “While F. gives ‘I’ an English-Greek phrase book and instructs him to study it and pray with it, Cohen gives the reader a guide to identity translation and hopes the book will facilitate their prayers” (86). Coming to an understanding of Catherine Tekakwitha requires that the Historian translate himself into a subject which can “grasp its own limit, and thus ... understand what it is not and what (by definition) it cannot understand without becoming other to itself” (Siemerling 41). The Historian does this not simply by praying for translation, but by realizing the “sacred formula” of the Andacwandet and transcending himself in the “dance of masks.”

Conclusion

Beginning with the way in which Cohen sexualizes the iconic image of Catherine Tekakwitha, both as a stereotypical indigenous woman and as a virginal Catholic saint, *Beautiful Losers* disrupts the traditional Western notion of a stable identity. The Historian's foray into sexualized fantasy reflects the fact that he is "sick with desire for the other." The Historian's narrative of longing emphasizes a distinct ambivalence, a simultaneous attraction and repulsion, and in this specific case, an attraction to that which is considered repulsive: the Indigenous other, codified as inferior in historical texts. As outlined in the opening chapter, race is yet another category that Cohen attempts to dissolve. From Catherine's perspective, we can imagine how the desire for spiritual consummation is equally ambivalent, since Catherine's devotion to Catholicism is represented in terms of abject, masochistic, libidinal desire. In an attempt to transcend her apparently flawed, material self, Edith submits to mechanical sexual stimulation, and the D.V. takes on a forked meaning: it is the Danish Vibrator and *Deo Volente*, the will of God. Cohen's language of desire interrogates and enters into dialogue with sacred Christian, Judaic, Greek, and American indigenous mythologies throughout the book. Finally, the protagonist translates himself, undergoing a metamorphosis from sinner to saint, revealing the concept of a singular, stable identity to be false – one of many masks in the "Dance of Masks." The Historian, who profanes the sacred image of Catherine Tekakwitha with his longing, mimics and thus mocks the idea of pure sainthood. Desire, or the repression of desire, presents a fundamental conflict in the construction of identity, this text suggests.

Along with his depictions of interracial desire, Cohen's depictions of homosexuality present a second point of tension, ambiguity, and contradiction in his concept of identity formation. The relationship between F. and the Historian is homosocial, characterized by contradictory elements of homophobia, homosexual desire, and heterosexual desire. Their relationship is one based largely on masculine privilege, and their mutual desire for female objects (Edith and Catherine) cements the bond between them, ultimately facilitating male transcendence. And while Cohen depicts homosexuals as irrational and insane, irrationality and insanity become another source of spiritual transcendence in the book. It is important to keep in mind Cohen's postmodern exploration and crossing of boundaries. Cohen blends genres, places comic books and sacred myth on equal footing, mixes formal prayer with extreme obscenity and profanity, and essentially *queers* the concept of sainthood. The text disrupts and unsettles conventional understandings of sainthood as a state of being that is pure and devoid of desire. Ultimately, F.'s goal of transforming the Historian attempts to "break down the restrictive laws and values that limit the narrator, to become [the Historian's] Mephistopheles and lead him through madness and total freedom into sainthood" (Ondaatje 47). Transgressing boundaries and overcoming "restrictive laws and values" is central to the novel's definition of sainthood.

Cohen's model of identity formation, dependant as it is on structures of desire and renunciation, suggests that identity is relative, and never static. The final paragraph of the novel employs a direct address to the reader. Employing rhythm and rhyme, it reads like poetry, not prose:

I have come through the fire of family and love. I smoke with my darling,
I sleep with my friend. We talk of the poor men, broken and fled. Alone
with my radio I lift up my hands. Welcome to you who read me today.
Welcome to you who put my heart down. Welcome to you, darling and
friend, who miss me forever in your trip to the end. (260)

But considering how uncertain identity becomes by the final pages of the novel, the reader must ask who the “I” addressing a “darling and friend” is. Since the image or idea of the other is a construction that depends upon one’s definition of self, we can only understand others by understanding ourselves. In fact, the Historian’s study of Catherine and the authoritative narratives of her life suggest that, far from claiming to know her specific and discrete difference, Cohen confesses his own limits. Cohen’s response to a structure of colonialism is itself colonialist in a sense, since by using the indigenous mythological figure of Oscotarach he is blatantly appropriating a cultural object that he arguably has no right to use. At the same time, the Historian invokes the myth in order imaginatively to erase the boundaries of his own ego – to bring about the death of his identity. Rather than claiming to have mastered an understanding of the other, the Historian strips himself of the ego that demands the existence of the other to define it.

Apparent negatives become positives in this text because it is, essentially, a parody. Noting how Cohen utilizes many Biblical allusions in order to subvert their original meanings, Hutcheon shows in “All The Polarities” how “the novel often seems an ironic or demonic parody of the Bible” (43). Cohen has lived monastically, so he obviously takes prayer very seriously. Yet he mocks the gravity of prayer in this text, and pokes fun at those who pray to have their desires fulfilled. The novel’s concept of

identity is likewise ambivalent. Claims of a unique cultural or collective identity were beginning to be utilized as political tools around the time period in which Cohen was writing *Beautiful Losers*. Strategic essentialism was endorsed by some postcolonial critics as an imaginary kind of solidarity that could be wielded for political change. Naming and claiming difference became, instead of a rhetorical operation used to push minorities closer to the political margins, a source of emancipatory power. Naming, so fervently rejected by F. throughout the novel, is also “the beginning of regulation, as so many texts about language and onomastics tell us” (Goldie 107). The distinction between queer politics and queer theory is helpful in distinguishing Cohen’s postmodern playfulness from his representations of homosexuality. Goldie defines queer politics and queer theory as two different things: the former is “unsettling to the self,” and the latter is unsettling to the “hegemonic ‘normal’” (“Introduction: Queerly Postcolonial” 17). The effect, in Cohen’s novel, is double; *Beautiful Losers* playfully inverts definitions of the “normal” by revealing contradictions and by undermining the very concept of an autonomous, stable “self.”

The contradiction inherent in Cohen’s portrayals, particularly of the Historian, demonstrates the “psychomachia of white masculinities” discussed by critics. Psychomachia is a term that describes a “conflict within the soul, or between the soul and the body” (OED). Traditionally, the soul ought to win the war, virtue will trump temptation, and earthly flesh will be transcended. The conflict between white and red, referenced throughout the novel as a racial conflict between European and indigenous world views, is also the psychological conflict between the language of reason, history, and theology and the language of the body and libidinal desire. Connected also to the

threat of Catherine's racial difference, symbolized by the spreading wine stain, Edith's red paint, and F.'s endeavor to paint the akropolis red with Tibetan Desire, is a value system that embraces the flesh, synthesizing the sacred and profane. Nadel writes that the contradiction represented by Tibetan Desire "represents the unholy union between renunciation and longing and the difficulty in divorcing one from the other" (*Various Positions* 202). As chapter one discusses in detail, the Historian suffers from a conflict between his vocation as a scholar aiming for veracity, and his sexual fantasizing. Analogous to Catherine and Edith's racial difference is the Historian's homosexual difference – a threat to the integrity of his gendered concept of self. His conflict is a psychomachia between the intellect and the body.

Cohen's text suggests that longing and renunciation are integral to identity, and to the power structures that maintain discrete definitions of identity. While they may be flawed, Cohen's depictions of men who love men and a woman who loves God suggest that he attempted to think beyond himself. Andrew Lesk points out that Cohen's representations of women and homosexuals demonstrate a "traffic in alterity," one that assumes that "simply evoking otherness will imply knowledge or understanding of that Other's specific and discrete difference" (56). In fact, understanding Cohen's project of transgressing boundaries is central to understanding the author's treatment of "otherness." Homosexual desire, for example, is as blasphemous to the fascist Nazi party as it is to the Roman Catholic Church. It is as if Cohen sets out to offend everyone – including himself – equally, mirroring our fears, prejudices, and hate, and unsettling and inflecting everything with desire. In a very imaginative, surreal, and sometimes frightening way,

Beautiful Losers shows that our constructions of identity, while significant to almost every aspect of our lives, are merely a “dance of masks.”

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