

Contested Meaning(s): Freedom as Responsibility in Three Nonfiction Texts

by

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This thesis interrogates the social/political stakes in three nonfiction narratives of life and death: Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, Peter Gzowski's *The Sacrament* and John and Jean Silverwood's *Black Wave*. An analysis of Nietzsche's concept of "freedom as responsibility," as developed by contemporary theorists of freedom and the body, especially Wendy Brown and Judith Butler, provides the ground for this theoretical examination. Additionally, Fred Alford's consideration of "freedom with" and Laurence Gonzales's interrogation of the conditions of survival help delimit this site of contest. Each of the texts is critiqued in terms of its engagement with freedom as a practice of responsibility grounded in recognition of mutual vulnerability and enacted through a contest for meaning.

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Jesus Christ, for an unwavering practice of responsibility grounded in mutual vulnerability.

Dedication

To those others who struggle with their vulnerability and pursue a vision of freedom with.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The impetus for this thesis began in a senior undergraduate class during a discussion of Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*. We were practicing reader-response criticism, so emotional responses were expected--but always with an eye to analysis. Nonetheless, I think we were all a little surprised at the sudden and violent polarization that occurred when one student stated that Christopher McCandless was wrong to ever leave his family because it caused them so much pain. Having shared the majority of our upper-level English classes, we were a very small and close-knit cohort, yet anger erupted as we argued the morality of Chris's decision. The class was split in two, with one side arguing Chris's right to leave a hurtful home situation and the other arguing the absolute moral responsibility children have to their parents--even going so far as to condemn Krakauer for even attempting an apology on Chris's behalf. I was deeply, personally engaged on behalf of Chris--his journey echoed my own desire to escape a hurtful family environment. Yet some students, presumably from happier homes, could not allow the existence of such a position. Within minutes, the discussion had degraded to the point that the teacher intervened, suggesting we take a break.

Needless to say, that discussion had a lasting impact--not simply on our classroom interactions, but also on my thinking. I continued to contemplate what was at stake in the text that raised such sudden and fierce conflict; some central problematics were identity, freedom, autonomy, knowledge/power and human existence--each a huge question in its own right. However, I began to find grounds for analysis as I considered the similarities between *Into the Wild* and Peter Gzowski's older work *The Sacrament*. In

his text, which also deals with human life and death in the wilderness¹, Gzowski deliberately engages with the issue of cannibalism. He situates it within a larger historical and cultural context--arguing that while some people may find it offensive, it is a culturally acceptable behaviour in survival situations. Like Krakauer, Gzowski devotes a portion of his text to apologetics--seeking to explain and defend the behaviour of the people in his story. Both texts aim at rendering intelligible--as human--behaviours to which many are vehemently opposed. Neither writer simply states that his protagonist(s) made the best decisions (as if that could be easily determined), but, much more modestly, that their behaviours were not without cultural precedence and rationale. In short, the protagonists did not surrender their humanity by their actions, but rather their actions mark their humanity.

A further expansion of this line of thought came from Laurence Gonzales's *Deep Survival* in which he argues that survival is not a matter of hard skills (fire-starting, shelter-building, etc.), but rather a matter of life practices. He suggests that everyday approaches to life are more or less successful in a given environment and that survival hinges on an attitude of adaptability. He argues that the same skills that make people successful in culture help them succeed in nature. In his own way, he seeks to make survival itself intelligible. Certainly this could descend into a thoroughgoing rationalism that undermines the body, except that he links survival to loss--survivability is dependent upon being able to lose/surrender rigid, unworkable understandings and approaches to everyday life. He links survivability to behaviours and practices already in place and to a

¹ I use this term to refer to a physical site (relatively) isolated from society and civilization in which the terms of survival are foreign to modern life--rather than any essential conception of "wilderness". For further discussion, see William Cronon's "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature."

depth of cultural resources. He writes, "The more you have learned and experienced of art, music, poetry, literature, philosophy, mathematics, and so on, the more resources you will have to fall back on" (272). Connecting Gonzales to Krakauer and Gzowski, I began to see how culture was implicated in wilderness survival. This was further reinforced as I recalled Krakauer's use of extensive literary quotations--both from his own reading and from Chris'.

As I began to shape this line of thought into a workable thesis, I discovered a third text, *Black Wave*, which engages similar questions of intelligibility and culture. In addition, my analysis was deepened through an engagement with Judith Butler's most recent work, namely *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, Wendy Brown's *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, and finally Fred Alford's *Rethinking Freedom*. Butler connects the problem of intelligibility to one of human vulnerability and responsibility, Brown connects responsibility and intelligibility to freedom, and Alford considers freedom in the paradigm of "freedom with"--implying responsibility based on awareness of vulnerability. Together, these thinkers form the core of my theoretical approach to these texts.

I will begin this thesis by outlining my theoretical approach, tracing my thought through Brown, Butler, Alford, and Gonzales. In each of the succeeding chapters I will apply the theoretical questions raised to one of my three nonfiction texts--Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, Gzowski's *The Sacrament*, and John and Jean Silverwood's *Black Wave*--interrogating each text's unique engagement with freedom as responsibility at the juncture between author, subject and reader. Finally, I will link these explorations back to my central consideration of freedom as responsibility.

Chapter 2: Freedom as Responsibility

"For what is freedom? That one has the will to assume responsibility for oneself." - Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

This thesis traces what Daniel Lehman terms a "contest for meaning" (467) in three texts of "literary nonfiction² about [life,] death and trauma" (478): Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, Peter Gzowski's *The Sacrament*, and John and Jean Silverwood's *Black Wave*. These texts are significant because they "claim to tell the truth about death, even as their premises trouble the foundation on which truth lies" (Lehman 467).³ Their descriptions of life and death (survival) experiences foreground vulnerability, while the contrasts between community and isolation, in each text, bring social co-constitution into sharper focus. On these grounds, each text interrogates freedom in terms of responsibility.

Although the concept of freedom as responsibility can be traced at least as far back as Nietzsche, Wendy Brown and Judith Butler are two significant thinkers who have continued to refine and explore its implications in relation to contemporary politics. In a world increasingly torn by contests over identity secured by disciplinary power--deployed

² Nonfiction is a contentious term, but it engages the problem of freedom in particularly interesting ways. In *The Nonfictionist's Guide*, Robert Root asserts that "creative nonfiction is... about the craft of living" (24). It is innately focused on our interactions with the world around us--"a desire or a need or a drive to understand a portion of the world... and respond to that understanding" (6). It ties responsibility and intelligibility to specific, concrete, historical human bodies--connecting theory with practice. Daniel Lehman, in "The Body Out There," argues that "What counts [about nonfiction] is not so much whether the events are historically fixed, but that they also are available to and experienced by readers and subjects outside of the written history" (467), thus complicating authorial control and autonomy.

³ Lehman is immediately concerned with Krakauer's work, but the statement applies equally well to my other texts.

socially, politically, economically, and militarily--their analyses have become increasingly relevant. This chapter will trace the idea of freedom as responsibility in Brown's *States of Injury* and Butler's *Precarious Life* in conversation with other relevant lines of thought. Building on their work, I will characterize the contest for meaning as a non-zero-sum contest for freedom, where freedom is understood as responsibility grounded in mutual recognition of bodily vulnerability and enacted as a contest for meaning.

States of Injury

In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown problematizes the relationship between freedom and power as it is often configured in contemporary discourses of rights. Most significantly, she argues for a critical return to the language of freedom as a way forward from the current dismemberment of the (political) body by the atomistic pursuit of rights. For her, where politics was once the realm of mutual struggle and contest for power, rights discourse has removed political contest into the voice of law and the body of the state. Power is increasingly deployed to secure atomistic identities against invasive others rather than responsibly employed to build a healthy social environment.

In order to critique rights discourse, Brown reconfigures freedom, not as an abstract philosophical ideal, but as a historicized practice. This reconfiguration draws upon "the thinking of Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Foucault, and selected contemporary feminist and cultural theorists" (3), most notably Butler. She positions freedom as a question of desire, rather than telos, asking whether "the realization of substantive democracy [might] continue to require a desire for political freedom, a longing to share in power rather than be protected from its excesses, to generate futures together rather than

navigate or survive them?" (4). This formulation posits power as inherent to life rather than the divisive characteristic in an oppressed/oppressor binary. In contrast with this uninhabitable binary in which one can either seek an absence of power (Nietzsche's death drive) or survive in spite of it, Brown's freedom is *freedom to use power together*, to share.

In *Rethinking Freedom: Why Freedom Has Lost Its Meaning and What Can Be Done to Save It*, Fred Alford suggests that freedom only makes sense in terms of togetherness--as "freedom with" (34). He traces what he calls a borderline experience of freedom marked by extreme splitting (binary thinking): "If I am not completely free, then freedom is meaningless, and I might as well be in chains. So give me power instead" (29). Elsewhere he characterizes a split between freedom as mastery (power) and freedom as relaxation or respite (20). I have termed these "freedom over" and "freedom from," respectively. To resolve this split (binary) conception of freedom, Alford suggests "freedom with" which is "the paradox of needing and using others in order not to be dependent upon them" (35); "freedom with" is independence founded upon dependence. This is a dangerous freedom that exists along "the borderlines of losing and fusing" (36)-- a dangerous experience of interdependent togetherness.

According to Brown, the loss of this togetherness, this "we," has undermined any exploration of freedom as a meaningful term in contemporary critical discourse. As "freedom" has been deployed as a cover for "cynical and unemancipatory political ends" (Brown 5), it has come under further suspicion as part of the discourse of the subject. According to Brown, "freedom" has been abandoned in favour of "the proliferation of... claims of rights, protections, regulations, and entitlements" (5). Paradoxically, these

challenges to the sovereign political subject have not led to a politics of freedom, of "we," but to a retreat into state-secured identities. However, she argues that

despite these assaults on its premises, freedom persists as our most compelling way of marking differences between lives whose terms are *relatively* controlled by their inhabitants and those that are less so, between conditions of coercion and conditions of action, between domination by history and participation in history, between the space for action and its relative absence. (5)

This is not a binary difference, but a difference of gradation--a spectrum of freedom rather than an either-or equation. Furthermore, while other terms might also serve to mark relative differences of participation and space for action, freedom continues to remain especially relevant. While Alford notes that the term is beginning to lose meaning for many younger North Americans due to a confusion or "bewilder[ment]" (Brown 5) over the meaning of the term, people continue to speak of freedom.

Unfortunately most are unable to reconcile "its division into mastery and relaxation" (Alford 140). When freedom is conceived as both escape from power and possession of power, this confusion is no surprise--yet the desire for freedom remains. Rights discourse continues to establish its potency under a rubric of freedom.

The problem is not to reintroduce freedom as such, but to re-skew it in light of power and subjection. Toward this end, Brown suggests that "freedom is not a philosophical absolute nor a tangible entity but a relational and contextual practice" (6). It cannot be possessed or bartered; it is not a commodity, but neither is it an abstract truth. Rather, it is both a response to opposition and a critical engagement with power.

Freedom is always practiced and conceived in a particular context, and the removal of freedom from context is part of what renders it meaningless. Freedom without context becomes a site of colonization rather than contest, of securing rather than relating-- instead of freedom as a certain fluid network of power relations, freedom is circumscribed in concrete relation to power. In short, "freedom institutionalized transmogrifies into its opposite" (8). Thus, freedom "depends upon a formulation of the political that is richer, more complicated, and also perhaps more fragile than that circumscribed by institutions, procedures, and political representation" (9). It cannot be captured by power, but is actualized in a contextual, relational sharing of power; it belongs to leaking, limited bodies.

In turn, Brown problematizes freedom in relation to the political discourses of "resistance" and "empowerment." While she concedes that "the first imaginings of freedom are always constrained by and potentially even require the very structure of oppression that freedom emerges to oppose" (7), she also points out that "resistance" is "at best politically rebellious; at worst, politically amorphous" (22). Resistance is always caught up in the system it seeks to oppose. It is "by no means inherently subversive of power... [and] only by recourse to a... [moral binary is] it possible to equate resistance with that which is good, progressive, or seeking an end to domination" (22). In other words, resistance is co-constitutive of oppression and inscribes freedom in a strictly oppositional mode--an extreme and self-contradictory formulation of freedom as respite. This is not freedom with, but freedom *from* (always transitive).

On the other hand, "empowerment" depends on a "radical decontextualization of the subject" (22). Empowerment does not depend on opposition to a particular regime,

but rather elides the question of domination altogether. Power is internalized, rather than externalized, which "converges with a regime's own legitimacy needs in masking the power of the regime" (23). This is freedom as mastery in which mastery is always only internal and depoliticized--not freedom with, but freedom *over* (nothing of consequence). Indeed, Brown notes that while empowerment is not "always only illusion or delusion," it is commonly deployed in terms of an "undeconstructed subjectivity" (23). The problem becomes "that one can 'feel empowered' without being so" (23). A subject can be nominally free or equal or empowered, yet have no political, social or economic power--no freedom with or even over.

Freedom as Responsibility

Having problematized freedom in these various modes, Brown turns to Nietzsche in order to build a provisional understanding of freedom as a contextual practice--freedom with. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes that freedom is "that one has the will to assume responsibility for oneself" (qtd. in Brown 25). Responsibility can only be assumed because it is always precarious; it cannot be possessed. Brown explains that freedom cannot be rendered permanent; it is contingent in character (23-24). She adds that freedom "constrains us to an extraordinary responsibility for ourselves and for others" (24). As we use power, we are responsible for the impact of our actions on ourselves and others. Freedom has been formulated as license (absolute freedom over/from) in an attempt to escape this "paradoxical weight" (24). However, this turns freedom back into an all-or-nothing relationship with power, back into oppression.

Freedom cannot be cast in opposition to responsibility because "freedom of the kind that seeks to set the terms of social existence requires inventive and careful use of

power" (25). To draw upon Foucault, freedom is a practice--always contextual and always responsive to change. Furthermore freedom is always dependent upon the judicious use of power (25). In Brown's formulation, "it is a permanent struggle against what will otherwise be done to and for us" (25). In Nietzsche's words, "the free man is a warrior" (qtd. in Brown 25). This formulation of freedom as responsibility is certainly powerful (!), but also dangerous. Brown points out that in our age, this conception invokes deep anxiety: "The dimensions of responsibility for oneself and one's world that freedom demands often appear overwhelming and hopelessly unrealizable" (25). Thus, we should not be surprised at Alford's "critique of contemporary freedom as a borderline experience" (140). When mastery is impossible, respite becomes a viable alternative, and vice versa. Fear of responsibility impels a seesaw motion between pursuit of mastery and pursuit of respite with neither yielding freedom.

This fear motivates what Nietzsche terms "ressentiment"--vengeful aggression, even nihilism in response to the burden of freedom. For Brown's explicitly political aims, resentment motivates a particular litigious mode expressed in the discourse of rights. She quotes Foucault in noting how the proliferation of state-secured identities "impose[s] a law of truth on [the individual] which he must recognize" (qtd. in Brown 29). The contest for meaning is removed in favour of a legislated and adjudicated "freedom" conceived as equality. Rather than a risky struggle for freedom, there is recourse to a state-supported law of truth. This law of truth is also supported by social and cultural power. That resentment is where my engagement with these texts began--each of them more or less explicitly engages with specific resentment levelled against the protagonists. In particular, Krakauer's *Into the Wild* addresses the rancor and

judgement many have turned against the deceased Chris McCandless, but, in similar fashion, Gzowski confronts disgust over cannibalism and the Silverwoods argue that their dangerous journey was vital and valuable. Each text, rather than speaking a law of truth against dissenters, engages in a (responsible) contest for meaning; each works toward freedom with, rather than freedom over or from.

Precarious Life

Judith Butler picks up the question of responsibility in the aftermath of 9/11. She interrogates the nature of a(n American) freedom which depends on securing one group of bodies against another. In *Frames of War*, she writes that "since we are also living, the apprehension of another's precarity is implicitly an apprehension of our own. ...At the same time, precarity is distributed unequally" (xvii). Although she employs the language of equality, her emphasis on mutual precarity--in which we are responsible to each other--echoes Brown's exploration of freedom as responsibility. In *Precarious Life*, Butler writes that "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies" (20)--bodily vulnerability is the motivating force behind any contest over meaning and freedom. Were we immortal and invulnerable, there would be no need for responsibility; however, because we are capable of both doing harm and suffering harm (to/from each other) on multiple levels (physically, emotionally, mentally, socially), we must engage in a contest for freedom *with*--in a particular social context.

In Butler's terms, (freedom as) responsibility hinges on the apprehension of our own vulnerability. She writes, "our capacity to feel and apprehend hangs in the balance. But so, too, does the fate of the reality of certain lives and deaths as well as the ability to think critically and publicly about the effects of war" (xxi). Vulnerability can be

recognized or effaced as bodies and lives are rendered more or less intelligible. Thus precariousness is formulated as a problem of intelligibility, where the ability to write, to make oneself intelligible, "is linked with survival, and the capacity to survive, or survivability" (*Frames of War* 56). To survive, we need to speak our stories and contest the meaning of events in which we are involved, however distantly. This contest for meaning is especially apparent in nonfiction.

Nonfiction is a contentious term, but it engages the problem of freedom in particularly interesting ways. In *The Nonfictionist's Guide*, Robert Root asserts that "creative nonfiction is... about the craft of living" (24). It is innately focused on our interactions with the world around us--"a desire or a need or a drive to understand a portion of the world... and respond to that understanding" (6). It ties responsibility and intelligibility to specific, concrete, historical human bodies--connecting theory with practice. Daniel Lehman, in "The Body Out There," argues that "What counts [about nonfiction] is not so much whether the events are historically fixed, but that they also are available to and experienced by readers and subjects outside of the written history" (467), thus complicating authorial control and autonomy and situating the contest for meaning as a central problematic.

The contest for meaning is grounded in the the recognition and inhabitation of legitimate speaking positions. This positioning is not about possessing the ability or power to speak--as in he/she *can* speak or *can* write--but as a relational transaction--he/she is recognized as a legitimate speaker. Butler writes, "the limits of the sayable, the limits of what can appear, circumscribe the domain in which political speech operates and certain kinds of subjects appear as viable actors" (xvii). She invokes Emmanuel

Levinas's figure of the "face" as that which "communicates what is human, what is precarious, what is injurable" (xviii). This is what can be effaced by media representations and cultural discourse. It is not enough to recognize a face as belonging to a body, rather the face must be recognized as belonging to a person, a being who can also be injured, who also "bleeds," as Shylock said. The faceless retain physical faces, but they are not recognized within the political domain, within the contest for meaning. In this framework of recognition and representation, "dissent is quelled, in part, through threatening the speaking subject with an uninhabitable identification" (xix). The speaking subject can thus speak without being heard--without being intelligible. They are thus disbarred from the contest for meaning. In turn, Butler argues that "dominant forms of representation can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended" (xviii). Each of my texts disrupts dominant forms of representation in significant ways--emphasizing the precariousness of life.

Narrating Freedom

From the exchange of stories, the contest for meaning based in mutual intelligibility, comes the possibility of freedom as responsibility. Butler writes "my sense is that being open to the explanations... that might help us take stock of how the world has come to take this form will involve us in a different order of responsibility [freedom]" (8). For her, this openness is a radical desubjectification--"the ability to narrate ourselves... from, say, the position of the third [person], or to receive an account delivered in the second" (8). This is a freedom to take other positions than my own--to inhabit, however inexactly and fleetingly, other bodies, other positions of intelligibility--a freedom to move beyond the conditions of my subjectification to recognize myself as one

among, or one *with*. Of course, this "freedom with" brings Butler back to the paradoxical danger of freedom. She writes, "we need to distinguish, provisionally, between individual and collective responsibility. But, then we need to situate individual responsibility in light of its collective conditions" (15). While this is most easily read as a legal responsibility, it also offers a way to make limited responsibility intelligible.

Within this framework, we can assume responsibility for ourselves, as individuals, and yet speak of the limitations of responsibility in a way that undoes atomistic conceptions of the individual. As Butler explains, this allows us "to rethink the relation between conditions and acts. Our acts are not self-generated, but conditioned" (16); as Brown puts it, freedom is always contextual. The social context of an act is vitally important in negotiating responsibility. (Un)freedom is always relevant to a particular social context; every contest for meaning happens within a particular set of fluid, malleable relationships. Freedom is always predicated *in* and attendant *to* a social and cultural context, and narration of any experience is necessarily a contextual contest for meaning, for intelligibility, for freedom as responsibility.

To further clarify, Butler distinguishes between explanation and exoneration. She writes of the conflation of the two following 9/11 in which explanations of "'Why do they hate us so much?' were dismissed as so many exonerations of the acts of terror themselves" (3). In order for the US to position itself as righteous aggressor, its Other had to be rendered faceless and unrecognizable (6). However, Butler argues that "to ask how certain political and social actions come into being... is not the same as locating the source of responsibility for those actions or, indeed paralyzing our capacity to make ethical judgements on what is right or wrong" (9). Offering an explanation is not the

same as offering exoneration, except perhaps within a conception of freedom as license. Detached from responsibility, freedom enacted in a contest for meaning becomes *only* a matter of exoneration--a binary conflict between good and evil or a judgement of "guilty" or "innocent." Context becomes irrelevant. Butler ties this to a causal determinism in which to say that the United States contributed to the *context* of 9/11--the hatred--is to say that the United States *caused* 9/11 (9-10). She points out that this merely reproduces the United States as singular, sovereign, supreme subject--First Cause, if you will--ultimately responsible for *all* actions.

Mourning

In contrast, Butler argues for (freedom as) "collective responsibility" (10). To realize this freedom, "we need to imagine and practice another future, one that will move beyond the current cycle of revenge" (10). She points to mourning as a site of change via the recognition of our shared vulnerability.

In Butler's narrative, mourning is an unsettled term. She writes "I am not sure I know when mourning is successful, or when one has fully mourned another human being" (20). Yet, she advances a provisional understanding of mourning as practice, saying "one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever" (21). This loss "seems to follow from our being socially constituted beings, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (20). Loss is an encounter with vulnerability--survival is dependent on our acceptance or denial of that loss. Butler further speculates that:

perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned. One can try to choose it, but it may be that this experience of transformation deconstitutes choice at some level. (21)

Mourning thus becomes a meaning-making act, a practice of freedom as responsibility engaged in a contest for meaning. To mourn is to admit one's own vulnerability, to recognize it and to grapple with it and with the attendant implications for freedom as responsibility--it is a vital recognition of our own social constitution as subjects, our interconnectedness to others. The choice in a situation of loss (or survival) is not whether one will experience the loss, but how--will it be an occasion to recognize one's vulnerability, or an occasion to reassert one's sovereignty and atomistic individuality. In Butler's words, "when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us" (22). In a sense we lose ourselves in the loss of another. Our choice is one of recognition--do we accept our loss or deny it? My texts engage specifically with this negotiation of loss, especially in light of our connectedness--our responsibility--to others. The characters in each narrative encounter this co-constitution in an experience of loss, and the author of each text further figures it this way--contesting normative conceptions of identity and autonomy, contesting the meaning of the stories in a practice of freedom, and telling them as a practice of freedom. This practice of freedom is certainly subjective, but founded in a critical subjectivity

which is necessary if we are to move beyond exclusive binary responses to the question "what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?" (Butler, *Precarious Life* xv).

Survival

Each of my texts narrates vulnerability and responsibility in terms of a life and death (survival) experience. In *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, Laurence Gonzales contends that the connection between loss, mourning and survival is not simply a (non)fictional comparison, but an intrinsic likeness. He enunciates and explores this connection through an analysis similar to Butler's. While he foregrounds human reactions to vulnerability in a primarily physical form, he argues that it extends to all aspects of life. To paraphrase, survival is about "what you do next"--after the emotional reaction, after the pain, after the loss, after the encounter with vulnerability (27). This parallels the concept of freedom as responsibility grounded in mutual vulnerability--what matters are the choices we make when we are faced with our own vulnerability.

Gonzales problematizes vulnerability and risk with a quotation from an aircraft engineer: "Shit happens, and if we just want to restrict ourselves to things where shit can't happen . . . [sic] we're not going to do anything very interesting" (108). The problem is "a public that expects every risk to be mitigatable to zero" (108). This is a practice of freedom as mastery (over) in terms of safety that turns into rights discourse and a drive for legal and juridical mitigation of the possibility of injury. To return to Brown, the answer lies not in increased disciplinary (state) power, but in personal responsibility, in personal engagement--or else we surrender our freedom in the name of security, along with the ability to respond and relate in any meaningful fashion. In Gonzales's language, "Rather than accept[ing] friction, [we try] to overcome it. ...[T]he harder we try, the

more complex our plan for reducing friction, the worse things get" (122). His alternative is "to admit reality and work with it" (122)--to be responsive and responsible. Or, more succinctly, "be here now" (122). Survival, like mourning, depends on recognition and acceptance of loss.

Gonzales's conception of presence and awareness as critical to survival, in spite of vulnerability, pivots on the ability to engage with (respond to) a changing environment in a productive fashion. This responsibility depends on a process of recognition and acceptance. Paralleling Butler's conception of mourning, Gonzales makes the statement that "being lost... is not a location; it is a transformation. It is a failure of the mind" (157). Being lost is the result of a failed "mental map" (157). Survival is premised on one's response to the transformation entailed in this failure. He makes a critical distinction between denial--"attempting to make your mental map fit what you see" (157)--and acceptance--changing or adapting your mental map to fit your environment (160). However, changing or adapting entails the loss of previous mental maps of the environment and one's self.⁴

With regards to freedom, Alford might term this a "[failure] of imagination" (77). He points out that "freedom is imagination, the ability to imagine oneself as resident of a material present, enriched but not distorted by the imagination" (33), reflecting Gonzales's maxim: "Be here now." Imagination is vital "not just to empathize with others

⁴ This conception applies to a changing social environment as well, except that one may possess the power to force mental maps upon social environments--often via legal or juridical means. Physical survival emphasizes the problem of responsibility because one is significantly less able to change the environment in order to secure oneself. Either way, one's ability to respond to a complex and changing situation is directly linked to one's freedom to exist. By extension, when we efface the humanity of those we encounter by refusing to respond, our own freedom to exist is fundamentally altered. We become trapped in our denial.

but to grasp what is so simple that it is almost incomprehensible--how different other people are from ourselves and how similar too" (95). In this sense, imagination is vital to responsibility because it enables recognition and acceptance of a changing (social) environment.

Alford links imagination to the concept of "freedom with" through the figure of jazz improvisation. He figures jazz improvisation as a matter of imagination based upon "the negotiation of wills" where the will is necessarily "merged with talent" (34). One might consider this as will merged with the capacity--power/knowledge--to respond in a creative and meaningful way. This is a dangerous practice of freedom that exists along "the borderlines of losing and fusing" (36). In turn, this echoes Butler's figuration of mourning as submitting to a transformation wherein the total outcome is not knowable in advance. In this practice of freedom as responsibility, the self is figured as responsible (responding and responsive) to the environment instead of in binary opposition to it. This freedom is a loss of self, but also a reclaiming of self as mental maps are surrendered and survival or freedom (as responsibility) becomes possible. As Gonzales explains, "then it [doesn't] matter where you are" (158). This is not to say that context is irrelevant--while freedom is always contextual, freedom as responsibility is not tied to a particular context. Rather, it is a practice of accepting and engaging with ever-changing contexts.

Chapter 3: *Into The Wild*: The Cost of Freedom

Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* engages the problem of freedom as responsibility in both form and content by staging the story as a site of contested meaning. Like his other books, it is a narrative of death and loss, representing a search for understanding and a process of mourning. However, in *Into the Wild*, he pays special attention to the problem of recognition, asking, in Butler's terms, whether Chris McCandless's life is a grievable life. He argues for recognition of Chris as grievably human by arguing for his own life as grievably human. In addition, by acknowledging various competing perspectives and voices, he situates the text and the (hi)story as sites of contested meaning in which freedom as responsibility is at stake.

In "The Body Out There: The Stakes of Jon Krakauer's Adventure Narratives," Daniel W. Lehman argues that, in nonfiction, "both the author and her subjects engage in a contest for meaning" (467). This contest continually (re)establishes the limits of intelligibility, deciding whether a life is or is not grievable. Lehman writes that the power of Krakauer's texts "depends on a claim to tell the truth about death, even as their premises trouble the foundation on which truth lies" (467). Knowledge/power is called into question in the very act of pursuing "true" knowledge as nonfiction. This is not simply a ritualized or regulated telling of facts and sensations, but a very subjective, engaged, creative narration of events, aimed at an intelligibility in which the right to speak and even to exist is at stake. The truth of Krakauer's nonfiction (and my other texts) lies not in authoritative legitimation--not in a discourse of "right"--but in a contest, in a pursuit of explanations (not exoneration), in the construction of a ground for mutual recognition and responsibility.

Central to this contest is the way in which Krakauer's work "allows readers to weigh the social ramifications of his textual decisions" (Lehman 471). Lehman contrasts this social framing with a formal objectivity in which the author (apparently) risks nothing. More profoundly, he points out that "Krakauer's writing... enacts a drama of risk and abandonment that forces competing alternatives of death or recovery" (474). He thus situates Krakauer's work in conjunction with vulnerability. Krakauer's writing is not simply a matter of uncovering or revealing the one true narrative, rather it is a social practice in which Krakauer recognizes his own vulnerability as an embodied author and claims responsibility for what he writes.

Contested Meaning(s)

In *Into the Wild*, Krakauer engages the contested meaning of Chris's story through deliberate structural choices, as well as his choice of content. Instead of telling the story in pure temporal sequence, Krakauer pulls the narrative apart and interweaves it with other narratives. This ruptures objective notions of causal determinism, but it also gives Krakauer time (and space) to explain Chris's behaviour--to render his life intelligibly human--before asking us to mourn his death. There are four main threads to Chris McCandless's story: historical precedents and before, during, and after the event. Additionally, Krakauer inserts his own body and narrative(s), modelling his response to the story and his engagement in the contest over its meaning. Thus, the story features four beginnings and four major sites of contest. Chapter 1 begins, as expected, with Chris's departure into the wild. This strand narrates the central event of the text. However, Krakauer quickly departs from this thread until the end of the book (Chapters 16 and 18). Next, Krakauer begins narrating the story of Chris's body--a story of

mourning and (un)intelligibility which will again be deferred until Chapters 10, 13 and the Epilogue--after the next two threads have been largely resolved. This section also coincides with Krakauer's encounter with the story. Third, Krakauer narrates Chris's journey from his disappearance from Atlanta (and his family in Annandale) in May 1990 until his departure from Carthage for Alaska in April 1992 (Chapters 3-7). This thread is interwoven with accounts from the people he encountered in his journey--those who have mourned or are mourning his death. It traces his social co-constitution and recognizes him as fallibly and vulnerably human. Krakauer later adds significantly to this picture of Chris in Chapters 11-12 by describing his family and childhood until his disappearance in May 1990. Finally, having introduced these three strands, but having resolved only one, Krakauer turns, for further explanation, to similar stories of idealistic young men who died in the wilderness (Chapters 8-9). Krakauer later adds his own experience to this strand, introducing himself as an idealistic young man who nearly died in the wilderness (Chapters 14-15).

Not until he has introduced each of these threads and woven a complex narrative (and presumably built the understanding and trust of his readers) does Krakauer drop the full weight of Chris's dead body--perhaps hoping it can now be supported, recognized, and mourned. The last four chapters of the text (including the epilogue) alternate between the first thread describing Chris's last days and the second thread describing the aftermath of his death and Krakauer's own involvement.

Interestingly, the first thread does not offer clear answers or understanding. Rather, Krakauer notes two major points of disagreement and contest: whether the animal Chris killed was a moose and the precise cause of his death. He admits errors regarding

both details in his initial account and presents his most recent understandings. However, in spite of scientific evidence, these points remain sites of contest, subject to alternate interpretations.⁵ The second thread offers resolution only through an acceptance of loss and a recognition of mutual vulnerability. There is no easy resolution or restoration, only a deeper understanding of life and self--and the choice of response in light of this knowledge, in light of this narrative.

In addition to this broad interweaving, Krakauer emphasizes the co-constitution of this narrative in each chapter. Although he has authorial oversight, the book echoes with the voices of those Chris and Krakauer encountered--both living and dead. On the one hand, each chapter begins with a pair of relevant quotations, many of them culled from the annotated books found with Chris's body. The quotations Krakauer selects link Chris's behaviour to a much larger cultural context--drawing from famous literature, news reports, biographies, survival manuals and a number of other texts. On the other hand, every chapter (excluding Krakauer's personal story in Chapters 14-15) introduces at least one new speaking body--one of the many people more or less directly affected by Chris's life and death. These many voices speak to the meaning of Chris's journey in ways that Krakauer cannot fully control--which is not to say his use of them is innocent, but rather to foreground the social construction of meaning. These voices espouse alternate perspectives suggesting varied concepts of freedom and intelligibility in a contest for meaning. Rather than tracing Chris's wilderness experience as an experience of isolation from culture, society, and responsibility, by these structural techniques

⁵ Sean Penn's 2007 film adaptation of *Into the Wild* and Ron Lamothe's 2007 film *The Call of the Wild* present alternate explanations.

Krakauer deliberately stages Chris's life and story as a site of contested meaning, as a vulnerable body.

Likewise, Krakauer and his text are revealed as co-constituted/ing bodies--formed through encounters with other vulnerable bodies (in or capable of mourning). In turn, the reader is drawn into the contest for meaning and challenged to respond in a meaningful and understanding way. As Lehman points out, "Krakauer's work--because of its many levels and its uncommon amount of candor--allows readers to weigh the social ramifications of his textual decisions" (470-471). Through these movements, Krakauer claims responsibility for the story he tells and enters a contest for meaning in which he has significant bodily stakes--while recognizing that the story itself remains (a body) beyond his control. Thus, Krakauer addresses freedom as a problem of recognition, as a practice of responsibility grounding in mutual vulnerability and enacted through a contest for meaning.

Responsibility

Before beginning the narrative, Krakauer explicitly problematizes his narrative as a site of contested meaning in which intelligibility and responsibility are at stake. In his Author's Note, he writes:

A surprising number of people have been affected by the story of Chris McCandless's life and death. In the weeks and months following the publication of the article in *Outside*, it generated more mail than any other article in the magazine's history. This correspondence, as one might expect, reflected sharply divergent points of view: Some readers admired the boy immensely for his courage and noble ideals; others fulminated that

he was a reckless idiot, a wacko, a narcissist who perished out of arrogance and stupidity--and was undeserving of the considerable media attention he received. My convictions should be apparent soon enough, but I will leave it to the reader to form his or her own opinion of Chris McCandless.

Aside from the obvious media sensationalism, the impact of Chris's life (and death) stretches far beyond his family and the strange and varied network of people with whom he interacted on his journey. As highlighted by my own classroom experience, the story has a powerful polarizing tendency. Readers are both wounded and healed by Krakauer's narrative and he recognizes this without any attempt to excuse himself. Indeed, he has already suggested how deeply the story impacted him: he wrote the book because he was "unwilling to let McCandless go" (Author's Note). Something about Chris's vulnerability resonates with readers--raising complex socio-political questions of responsibility and freedom. Krakauer, in a characteristically disruptive move, notes his own bias--not via an explicit statement, but as a rather more subtle, though no less powerful, positioning of himself as an implicated voice. He is not free of connection to McCandless, but rather writes from the site of his connection, from his own vulnerability as a son and wilderness adventurer. Of course, he does not fully reveal his own co-constituted, vulnerable body until the epilogue, preferring, as with Chris, to defer the question of recognition until thorough explanations have been presented.

In Chapter 17, Krakauer briefly details his first trip to the bus, reintroducing his vulnerable authorial body in order to discuss a previous authorial error--a critical contested interpretation of evidence. In his journal, Chris recorded killing and butchering

a moose (166-167). However, when Krakauer visited the site with some local hunters, they "insisted--adamantly and unequivocally--that the big skeleton [found near the bus] was the remains of a caribou, and they derided the greenhorn's ignorance in mistaking the animal he killed for a moose" (177). This leads to hunter Ken Thompson's statement that "the kid didn't know what the hell he was doing up here" (qtd. in Krakauer 177).

Krakauer recognizes the sign of the skeleton as a site of contested meaning, upon which McCandless is judged ungrievable or "stupid" (Gordon Samel qtd. in Krakauer 177). In the article he wrote for *Outside* magazine, Krakauer trusted the "veteran Alaskan hunters... [and] duly reported McCandless's mistake" (177). This "confirm[ed] the opinion of countless readers that McCandless was ridiculously ill prepared" (177)--his death was due to (inhuman) stupidity, incompetence and arrogance, rather than human vulnerability. However, in this text Krakauer admits a mistake and points out that "the animal was a moose, as a close examination of the beast's remains now indicated and several of McCandless's photographs of the kill later confirmed beyond all doubt" (178). Krakauer stages his vulnerability and limited knowledge in terms of a responsibility to his readers and the McCandless family, admitting his error and foregrounding the contest for meaning in terms of intelligibility and mutual precarity. Interestingly, this reversal carries the implicit suggestion that those "experts" who mis-recognized the bodily remains of a moose could likewise mis-recognize the (social) bodily remains of Chris. Perhaps denunciation of him by countless readers was based on a similar mis-recognition of his dead (social) body.

Mutual Vulnerability

This problem of mis-recognition is central to Krakauer's narrative. He seeks primarily to explain Chris's behaviour in order to render his body recognizable (intelligible). Central to these explanations is Krakauer's recognition of his and Chris's mutual vulnerability. He writes:

My suspicion that McCandless's death was unplanned, that it was a terrible accident, comes from reading those few documents he left behind and from listening to the men and women who spent time with him over the final year of his life. But my sense of Chris McCandless's intentions comes, too, from a more personal perspective. (134)

Although Krakauer presents other evidence for his claim, this personal account forms the basis of his most direct and cogent argument for recognition of Chris's humanity. Here he takes up the contest for meaning in a manner that foregrounds mutual precarity and implicates him in a particular responsibility to Chris and those affected by his death. By staging his experience as a means of understanding Chris's questionable behaviour, he invites the reader to enact responsibility through a similarly personal engagement with Chris's story.

Krakauer recognizes Chris's life as grievable in part by recognizing him as an estranged son. Krakauer describes his own anger at his father in parallel with Chris's anger--an anger grounded in Chris's discovery of a site of contested meaning in his family history.⁶ Chapters 11-12 follow the thread of Chris's family life until his departure in May 1990. The account begins with Chris's parents--before his birth. In

⁶ This serves to shift some responsibility to the family.

explanation of Chris's behaviour, Krakauer describes a complex personality (115) co-constituted by family toward particular ends. However, the critical motivating event is Chris's discovery of his father's practical bigamy. While Chris already had significant differences with his parents--perhaps, in the words of a friend, "with the whole idea of parents" (qtd. in Krakauer 115)--this revealed history was unforgivable (122). For Chris, it was as if his "entire childhood [was] a fiction" (qtd. in Krakauer 123). This apparent breach of trust, this deep wounding--a revelation of Chris's own vulnerability--led to his decision to break completely with his parents, to seek escape from their control and influence.

Krakauer situates his own youthful (mis)adventure in the context of his relationship with his father, writing that "like McCandless, figures of male authority aroused in me a confusing medley of corked fury and hunger to please" (134)--a desire for connection, for mutual recognition and responsibility, all too often exploited as vulnerability. He writes, "my father was a volatile, extremely complicated person, possessed of a brash demeanor that masked deep insecurities. If he ever in his entire life admitted to being wrong, I wasn't there to witness it" (147). Both fathers seemingly lived from a fear of vulnerability enacted through a practice of freedom as mastery. Unfortunately, both fathers were revealed as vulnerable. In the end of his life, the senior Krakauer literally lost all mastery, as his vulnerability, manifested in post-polio syndrome, led him into madness (149). Not surprisingly, Krakauer notes that only after this decay did he begin to recognize his father as human--and begin to recognize his own responsibility to his father (149). Chris's rage seemingly stemmed from a similar realization that his father's apparent invulnerability was a fiction.

Interestingly, Krakauer connects his own mis-recognition of his father--his resentment--to the "unusual freedom and responsibility [he had been granted] at an early age" (148). He perceived it as oppressive, especially in light of his father's apparently denied humanity (148). Unable to handle the weight of responsibility, Krakauer sought to escape it entirely. This very formulation of freedom *and* responsibility--as if they are separable--perhaps contributed to that response. Brown points out how "the admonition to adolescents that 'with freedom comes responsibilities' misses the point... insofar as it isolates freedom from responsibility" (25). She contends that "freedom of the kind that seeks to set the terms of social existence requires inventive and careful use of power rather than rebellion against authority" (25). In contrast, Krakauer's formulation necessitates rebellion as a means of escaping power in pursuit of "freedom."⁷ Likewise, Chris sought to escape power, perhaps due to his father's failure to model a responsible negotiation of power.

In this context, Krakauer parallels Chris's journey with his own experience on the Devils Thumb--noting that "the fact that I survived my Alaska adventure and McCandless did not survive his was largely a matter of chance" (155). Rather than being a mark of freedom (as mastery) or adult control over life, Krakauer's survival was *in spite* of his vulnerability, not because of a lack thereof. Thus he argues, "I now recognize that I suffered from hubris, perhaps, and an appalling innocence, certainly; but I wasn't suicidal" (155)--he didn't deserve death any more than Chris. Not that this exonerates the

⁷ Although Krakauer does not conceive of freedom as responsibility, his writing pays careful attention to the ways power is negotiated. While he directly challenges certain claims and arguments, recognition is more important than resistance. His own understanding and meaning-making is positioned as primary, refusing the figuration of freedom as license, as escape from mis-recognition by recourse to authority (the power to force recognition).

foolishness of either, but it offers an explanation for and recognition of vulnerability. If he had died, it would not have been a testament to his failure to achieve humanity, but a mark of his vulnerability as a human being.

This is poignantly foregrounded in Krakauer's description of his wait for airdropped supplies. When the plane departs after finally being able to make the drop, he finds himself alone. He writes, "as silence again settled over the glacier, I felt abandoned, vulnerable, lost. I realized that I was sobbing. Embarrassed, I halted the blubbing by screaming obscenities until I grew hoarse" (141). His isolation makes him painfully aware of his vulnerability--he might have died without the airdrop. He mourns an unnameable loss, but is embarrassed, even in his isolation, by this recognition of vulnerability. He is embarrassed *by* his vulnerability, so he responds with all the violence he can muster--"screaming obscenities" until he is physically incapable of continuing to do so, until bodily limitations stop him. Perhaps it speaks to Krakauer's practice of freedom as responsibility that he can now reveal this vulnerability without obvious embarrassment. Regardless, this reiterates our (human) ambivalence toward vulnerability: we both love and fear our dependence on others, our need for responsibility, and their need that we be responsible.

Within *Into the Wild*, alongside his non-innocent personal narrative of vulnerability, Krakauer positions other vulnerable, invested characters. These voices, these speaking bodies, present a variety of engagements with the story and with Chris himself. In contrast with Chris's apparent desire to write an isolated, monolithic life-story in which he was not responsible to anyone, Krakauer's story is littered with broken relationships--the grieving people Chris left behind in death. Among these people,

Krakauer notes Ronald Franz as "more powerfully affected by his... brief contact with the boy" than anyone else (48). Although they only spent a few weeks together in early 1992 (48), Franz left his secure home and began living and travelling in a GMC Duravan after receiving a letter Chris sent shortly before he walked into the wild (58). Before Chris, Franz had lived a "solitary existence for many years" (55), but his encounter with Chris and the eventual loss of that connection wounded him deeply (56). When he heard of Chris's death, he renounced his faith and tried to drink himself to death (60). Franz's story is one among many highlighting the problem of an autonomous subjectivity, of the pursuit of freedom as mastery/respite--as escape from responsibility. Krakauer describes Chris's departure from Franz this way:

McCandless was thrilled to be on his way north, and he was relieved as well--relieved that he had again evaded the impending threat of human intimacy, of friendship, and all the messy emotional baggage that comes with it. He had fled the claustrophobic confines of his family. He'd successfully kept Jan Burres and Wayne Westerberg at arm's length, flitting out of their lives before anything was expected of him. And now he'd slipped painlessly out of Ron Franz's life as well. (55)

Presumably, in addition to his desire to avoid experiencing pain, Chris desired to avoid causing pain to those he met--except perhaps his family. Thus, his behaviour appears paradoxical at times. Sleight identifies with the boy, saying "we like companionship, see, but we can't stand to be around people for very long" (qtd in Krakauer 96). Jan Burres recalls "he was no recluse" (44). His actions evince the desire for some form of connection--of social recognition--but without the "messy emotional baggage" of

responsibility. Unfortunately, even his brief encounters could not avoid that responsibility. He built connections quickly and deeply, and in spite of his attempts to minimize vulnerability, many people felt the loss of his presence. His departure from the lives of those he encountered was, in the end, anything but painless.

Krakauer takes this pain very seriously, introducing a continual series of vulnerable characters that highlight mutual precarity. Interestingly, what drew many of these people to Chris *was* his vulnerability. Krakauer writes of "a vulnerability that made Westerberg want to take the kid under his wing" (16), apparently paraphrasing from an interview. Burres describes him as looking "pretty pitiful" when they first met (30). She says, "I thought maybe we could give him a meal or something" (30). Likewise, Krakauer describes how Franz's "long-dormant paternal impulses were kindled anew" when he met Chris (50). Chris's vulnerability may have been the mark of his isolation⁸, his family wounds, the bodily toll of his travels or some intrinsic characteristic. Regardless, many of those most deeply impacted by his loss recall responding to that vulnerability. Additionally, many of them had also suffered familial loss (30, 50). Their responsibility to him (and his to them) was situated in their recognition of mutual precarity (loss).

Desire

In response to criticisms that Chris was (just) another of a number of "idealistic, energetic young guys who overestimated themselves, underestimated the country and ended up in trouble" (Nick Jans qtd. in Krakauer 73)--dead of his own arrogance, foolishness, stupidity, or even insanity--Krakauer takes up a directly apologetic thread,

⁸ In a way, the isolation of his death only mirrored this internal isolation.

tracing a few of these historical precedents in Chapters 8-9. However, having considered the marginal identifications offered by these stories, Krakauer rejects them⁹--arguing for a more human recognition of Chris:

McCandless didn't conform particularly well to the bush-casualty stereotype. Although he was rash, untutored in the ways of the backcountry, and incautious to the point of foolhardiness, he wasn't incompetent--he wouldn't have lasted 113 days if he were. And he wasn't a nutcase, he wasn't a sociopath, he wasn't an outcast. McCandless was something else--although precisely *what* is hard to say. A pilgrim perhaps. (85)

Krakauer categorically rejects any conception of Chris as deserving of death for somehow being less (than) human--insane, imbecilic, or criminally incompetent. He works to render him intelligible to the degree that we might recognize our individual human vulnerability in Chris's body--and that we might recognize and mourn our own loss(es) in his death.

Although Krakauer does not fully reveal his own response at this point, he begins to situate the problem of (bodily) vulnerability as a problem of desire. He writes, of these young men, "one is moved by their courage, their reckless innocence, and the urgency of desire" (97). As Butler explains, "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies--as a site of desire and physical vulnerability" (*Prearious Life* 20). The desiring body is a vulnerable body; perhaps conversely, the

⁹ Interestingly, while Krakauer apparently writes these others off as "bush-casualty stereotypes," his defense of Chris also serves to contest the meaning of their stories. This is especially obvious in his lengthy treatment of Everett Ruess (87-97).

body without desire is invulnerable, but the only body lacking desire is the corpse. He quotes Ken Sleight's explanation: "We like companionship, see, but we can't stand to be around people for very long" (96). Here, the desire for intimacy and/or recognition comes into conflict with the desire for mastery. As Butler notes, our desire for recognition renders us vulnerable: since "we are constituted by virtue of the address, a need and desire for the Other... To ask for recognition... [is] to stake one's own being, and one's own persistence in one's own being, in the struggle for recognition" (*Precarious Life* 40). Intimacy requires a certain vulnerability because recognition is always tenuous. Conversely, pursuing freedom as mastery or respite (freedom over/from) leaves us equally vulnerable due to isolation. The desire for freedom is doubly problematic when freedom is conceived in these all-or-nothing terms.

Perhaps this is where Chris's story becomes truly contentious--he attempted to pursue this mode of thought to its logical end, as a total escape from co-constitution, only to be frustrated by his own vulnerability. Alford suggests the reason many people live within this paradoxical (borderline) experience of freedom is because "they are not fully invested" (62). In contrast with this "ironic detachment" (62), Chris's attachment to this broken conception of freedom motivated him to pursue it at the cost of his own life--with "reckless innocence." Sleight notes, "Everett was strange. Kind of different. But him and McCandless, at least they tried to follow their dream. That's what was great about them. They tried. Not many do" (qtd. in Krakauer 96). Their passionate pursuit of freedom is what marked both young men as outsiders--and even in-human, where humanity is understood as a certain secure, atomistic autonomy. Against ironic detachment, they wielded their desire (for recognition and freedom). Unfortunately, their

desire rendered them spectacularly (!) vulnerable--perhaps achieving, in their deaths, the recognition they so desired in life.

This desire is precisely why vulnerability, responsibility and freedom are so problematic. The desire for freedom (with) depends upon recognition and thus entails a terrifying responsibility and vulnerability. Freedom as mastery and respite ostensibly offer a means of vitiating responsibility and mitigating vulnerability, in turn; unfortunately, neither is able to protect against desire. Perhaps this is what makes stories like Chris's so unsettling, what provokes such powerful and passionate responses--they challenge us with a pursuit of desire (for freedom) which foregrounds responsibility and vulnerability without mitigating them. This vision of freedom is both intoxicating and terrifying. It is a form of address which demands a response--either of recognition (of a similar desire and vulnerability) or of (self)denial (of desire and vulnerability). It begs the question: is this passionate desire, this intense vulnerability, human? As Butler writes, there is no other place to start; while recognizing the absence of "a human condition that is universally shared," we must ask the question: "Who counts as human?" (*Precarious Life* 20). Her (and my) concern is not to define humanity in strict terms but to negotiate the terms of freedom with on the basis of a tentative "we." Butler explains that "loss has made a tenuous 'we' of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire" (20). We are vulnerable by virtue of desire, but recognizing this vulnerability is costly--and renders us doubly vulnerable. Thus some choose, because vulnerability cannot be escaped, to at least be recognized as invulnerable--to live in spectacular denial of that vulnerability. She describes how this self-conception

shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure, where it exploits those very features in others, thereby making those features "other to" itself. (41)

In contrast with this denial (of recognition), some live (and die) in spectacular vulnerability, desiring to be recognized as human--a recognition that is doubly co-constitutive. Thus, for those seeking to deny their own vulnerability, any recognition of, or responsibility to, Chris McCandless as an intelligible, grievable human is a denial of self-identity, of a habit or practice of self-recognition.

Most critically, Butler suggests that the recognition of vulnerability, grounded in interdependence, can be "an experience of humiliation for some adults" (26). The humiliation such a recognition would entail is an unacceptable display of vulnerability threatening (for some) unintelligibility and social non-existence. Any recognition of Chris's humanity in his failure to achieve adulthood (autonomy and irresponsibility) is necessarily to call into question that very conception of adulthood, of humanity. These are significant political stakes in this contest for meaning; the denial of intelligibility and responsibility is thus a necessary political response. Krakauer recognizes the import of his narrative and thus his argument for intelligibility and responsibility will eventually lead to another beginning--his personal response to the text, the grounds of his own recognition of Chris as human--but only after a lengthy process of explanation.

(Risk of) Loss

Having established how Walt and Billie's secret had profoundly impacted Chris, in Chapter 13, Krakauer turns to the McCandless family's experience of loss--an, at times,

extreme experience of pain and suffering. As he notes in the close of Chapter 12, "such bereavement, witnessed at close range, makes even the most eloquent apologia for high-risk activities ring fatuous and hollow" (132). This is a strangely paradoxical statement as Krakauer continued to write about and participate in high-risk activities--most notably the 1996 Everest expedition--after writing *Into the Wild*. It might even provide argument for those who decry Chris's foolishness and mark him as deserving of death, as ungrievable.

Butler provides useful insight into this statement. In *Precarious Life*, she states that "what grief displays... is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us" (23). This grief is understood as "the moments in which one undergoes something outside one's control and finds that one is beside oneself, not at one with oneself" (28). In a sense, this experience of loss parallels the experience of high-risk activities, in which one is not fully in control and is faced with the imminent reality of bodily vulnerability. Perhaps grief itself is what motivates high-risk activity--not as a neat psychological causality, but rather that to discover your vulnerability is to discover a vital, but unexplored, facet of yourself. Perhaps, for Chris, the grief over losing family--a particular, meaningful story of family--necessitated a journey to rediscover himself after the loss, to ascertain the capacity and limitations of a body altered by loss. Krakauer details his own high-risk experience on the Stikine Ice Cap in relation to his father--a complex grief over loss of a certain connection, perhaps requiring, for him, a similar process of bodily rediscovery.

Conversely, making bereavement--the experience of loss and vulnerability--an argument against high-risk activities is, in some sense, a denial of vulnerability. As Butler argues, "we cannot... will away this vulnerability" (*Precarious Life* 29). To avoid

an activity because it may result in loss or harm feeds "a fantasy of mastery [that] can fuel the instruments of war" (29)--freedom as mastery at its most destructive. This is a binary conception of freedom which ultimately depends on total power to remove vulnerability--a conception of the world in which everyday (civilized, en-cultured) life is *safe*, as opposed to the dangerous un-freedom of wild, natural, uncivilized life (death). In *Last Child in the Woods*, Robert Louv reports that

in [June] 2001, the *British Medical Journal* announced it would no longer allow the word 'accident' to appear in its pages, based on the notion that when most bad things happen to good people, such injuries could have been foreseen and avoided, if proper measures had been taken. (131)

This is a critical recognition of the problem of vulnerability. Loss happens. Certainly responsibility helps avoid and mitigate loss, but it cannot prevent it. As Louv points out, the alternative is a practical belief "that life is too risky but also not real--that there is a... remedy for every mistake" (131).¹⁰ Risk is a contingent part of vulnerability--and we are all vulnerable. This is the paradox of freedom--we cannot be free while conversely securing ourselves against loss and harm. To be free is to risk losing and being lost--responsibility simply recognizes and accepts that fact.

In his statement, perhaps Krakauer is driving at responsibility rather than regulation--at conscious awareness of our interconnectedness as we undertake high-risk activities. Yet, given Chris's story, perhaps this might better be understood as conscientious action in all aspects of life, especially in our most vulnerable relationships. Certainly Chris was wounded by the discovery of his father's duplicity. While adultery is

¹⁰ Butler connects this to "a radical desire for security" in response to vulnerability (*Prekarious Life* 39).

not conventionally termed "high-risk," Walt's activity certainly caused Chris significant pain. This is not to say that relationships carry the same *form* of risk as some outdoor activities, but rather to emphasize that relationships, especially close ones, can be understood as "high-risk"--threatening social bodies as other activities threaten physical bodies. This seems the most consistent understanding of Krakauer's concern--not as an impassioned argument against high-risk activity, nor as a glib reflection on the nature of grief and loss, but as a complex and personal reaction to witnessing grief--a claiming of responsibility for "high-risk" behaviour in the face of loss. Risk is unavoidable. We are vulnerable; we will suffer loss. Responsibility is about our negotiation of risk and loss, not our removal of it. Reading Chris's death without considering his own negotiation of loss and risk (re)figures freedom in an all-or-nothing mode which leaves little room for life.

In "trying to understand why some people seem to despise him so intensely for having died [in Alaska]" (180),¹¹ Krakauer responds to comparisons between Chris and Sir John Franklin, "a nineteenth-century British naval officer whose smugness and hauteur contributed to some 140 deaths, including his own" (180). Krakauer writes:

McCandless's arrogance was not of the same strain as Franklin's... Franklin regarded nature as an antagonist [an unintelligible other] that would inevitably submit to force, good breeding, and Victorian discipline. Instead of living in concert with the land [responsibly], ...he attempted to insulate himself from the northern environment... McCandless, on the

¹¹ In *Frames of War*, Butler notes that "apprehension of precariousness [can lead] to a heightening of violence, an insight into the physical vulnerability of some set of others that incites the desire to destroy them" (2). However, this is different from an apprehension of mutual precariousness which recognizes my vulnerability in the other.

other hand, went too far in the opposite direction. He tried to live entirely off the country--and he tried to do it without bothering to master beforehand the full repertoire of crucial skills. (181-182)

Franklin died from a pursuit of freedom as mastery--disregarding vulnerability and responsibility. The environment was not to be recognized, but subjugated and controlled. He sought to secure himself against it and failed. In contrast, Chris claimed a responsibility for which he was inadequately prepared. However, Krakauer argues that "it probably misses the point... to castigate McCandless for being ill prepared" (182). He asserts that Chris "was fully aware [of the risk he took]. He knew precisely what was at stake" (182). Given what Brown calls the "overwhelming" appearance of responsibility (25), this can hardly be termed a failure. Certainly one can argue that Chris might or should have prepared more for his adventure, but, as Brown notes, freedom as responsibility requires a "sustained willingness to risk identity" (25). Although mastering a greater repertoire of skills might have aided Chris in responding intelligibly to his environment, Franklin demonstrates that mastery is no guarantee of survival. Freedom as responsibility requires accepting vulnerability and lack of security--negotiating an subjectively acceptable level of risk, rather than an objective reduction. That acceptable level must be co-constructed in response to one's social environment, but it remains a personal choice. Chris made that choice with full awareness of his vulnerability. If freedom is grounded in vulnerability, then his story is not a failure of freedom because of his death, but a successful practice of freedom which inadvertently resulted in his death. As Krakauer puts it, "he demanded much of himself--more, in the end, than he could

deliver" (184). He was undone by his vulnerability, but went into the wild aware of that risk--willingly risking his bodily (social and physical) identity.

Krakauer reiterates the significance of these stakes in a quotation from Roman Dial, one of the men who accompanied him to the bus:

When I first started coming to Alaska, I think I was probably a lot like McCandless: just as green, just as eager. I'm sure there are plenty of other Alaskans who had a lot in common with McCandless when they first got here... including many of his critics. Which is maybe why they're so hard on him. Maybe McCandless reminds them a little too much of their former selves. (186)

I agree that the reason for the tremendous response to McCandless's story--both positive and negative, is identification. To recognize Chris's vulnerability is to recognize our own; as stated before, this prompts a question of responsibility in which identity itself is at stake. To respond to (this) narrative is to make a choice--an unavoidable decision which has social/political implications.

Bus 142 (Epilogue)

In (the) Epilogue, Krakauer briefly narrates returning to Fairbanks Bus 142 alongside Chris's parents. Although the chapter follows the structural norms of the preceding chapters--beginning with a pair of quotations and a stylized chapter header, it is not numbered. This final chapter ends the narrative after Chris's death--finalizing mourning as acceptance and opening onto a (hopefully) transformed life. It opens the possibility of new beginnings and bridges the boundary between inside and outside, connecting the text and Chris's narrative to a larger context--to the "present day"

experience of Krakauer and the McCandlesses. In contrast with the simpler endings of the past two chapters, this chapter traces multiple entanglements. Krakauer's identification with Chris, Walt and Billie's grief and desire to understand, the complexities of family relationships, the draw of the wilderness, and the far-reaching impact of Chris's death are chief issues in this chapter. Rather than providing the reader with closure, Krakauer forces a response to vulnerability and grief--foregrounding freedom as responsibility enacted as a contest for meaning.

Most significantly, Krakauer finally comes to bodily inhabit his own text--he is no longer simply another history, but a living (grievable and grieving) human enacting freedom by engaging in this contest for meaning. Although Krakauer positions himself as an observer relating Walt and Billie's experience of the bus, Lehman points out a strange entanglement between Krakauer as father-less son and Walt as son-less father. Krakauer writes "there is much about Chris that still baffles [Walt] and always will, but now he is a little less baffled. And for that small solace he is grateful" (203). In Lehman's words, "although his own father is dead, Krakauer takes faith from the symbolic reunification of father and son, merging memoir and reporting in a scene of reconciliation that joins the report and Chris McCandless" (477). Like Krakauer, Chris apparently fled from a father who could (or would) not recognize his own vulnerability; in contrast, the younger Krakauer outlived the elder. Now, by virtue of tragedy and loss, the elder McCandless and the younger Krakauer find themselves confronted by a (mutual) dilemma of recognition (of vulnerability); perhaps, as Walt recognizes (mutual) vulnerability in/with his son, Krakauer finds reconciliation through recognizing his father's vulnerability in Walt. In conjunction with Krakauer's self-revelation in Chapters

14-15--especially his reflections on his father's mortality--the epilogue presents Krakauer as a vulnerable body, responding and responsible to Chris's family (among others), seeking and offering recognition. In a critical sense, this narrative is Jon's narrative--staging his pursuit of freedom as responsibility on the contested site of Chris's death (and life).

The text closes with an image of Fairbanks Bus 142, where Chris died: "a tiny white gleam in a wild green sea" (203). The bus is a fitting symbol because it belongs to no one; it is both an artifact of culture and a part of the wild--fading into the "wild green." It is the symbolic site upon which contests over the meaning of Chris's survival experience are staged, marking our vulnerability and responsibility as social creatures; although Chris died there, he also lived there in a space created by others. While it remains a tiny space in an immense world, it is of vital importance for some who stage their own pursuit of freedom in the shelter it (metaphorically) continues to provide.

Conclusion

In *Into the Wild*, Krakauer problematizes and practices freedom as responsibility by engaging (in) the contest for meaning over Chris McCandless's life and death. He is particularly interested in the problems of desire and recognition as they impact our ability to mourn lives which may differ from our own. However, recognition and responsibility are only possible when we are engaged in a contest for meaning in which we always risk loss. Thus, Krakauer has constructed the text as a site of contest by his use of framing to position himself as personally involved and responsible to readers and the other characters in the text, his complex sequencing of the story--with many beginnings and few endings--and finally, the multivocality of the text, in which he presents himself as a

vulnerable body responding to a story of loss and vulnerability alongside many others. This responsibility to Chris renders Krakauer vulnerable--but as this analysis has illustrated, Krakauer's responsibility and recognition are only possible because he was already vulnerable.

Certainly, some will contend that Krakauer is always already implicated as an authoritative voice by virtue of his authorship, yet this is only a problem for freedom understood in the all-or-nothing mode of mastery/respice. If, rather, as I have argued, freedom is understood as responsibility, the difficulty becomes negotiating power in a responsible way. Krakauer has sought to mitigate the effects of his authority in order to maximize his responsibility--in part through a potent staging of his own vulnerability. This is dependent on a certain careful use of power.

Likewise, while Krakauer introduces many voices and narrates details of many experiences, he only offers (partial) resolution for three strands: his, Chris's and Chris's parents'. Each of these is grounded in a singular experience of vulnerability and loss--Krakauer's deeply personal engagement and identification with Chris, Chris's loss of life, and Walt and Billie's loss of their son--and each remains open to contest, as Krakauer states in the Author's Note. Furthermore, each beginning has a central speaker, a more or less intelligibly human face; each beginning is situated in a relationship, situated as freedom with. To paraphrase Butler, Krakauer's narrative functions to delineate the ties we have to others, to show us that these ties constitute what we are.

Krakauer's critical presentation of Chris's story echoes Gonzales's assertion that survival hinges on a specific practice of life rather than any singular act or skill set. Rather than being the simple narrative of a tragic death, this telling opens into a vibrant

consideration of life itself. Death is performed as a reflection of life--as offering insight into life, especially in light of our social vulnerability. Krakauer poses a difficult question to the reader: in Butler's terms, is McCandless intelligible as a human being--is his death grievable--or must we continue to secure ourselves against explanation for fear that it will motivate (and exonerate) death? Krakauer suggests that we are all vulnerable. He invites us to recognize our own vulnerable bodies in the body of Chris McCandless--but the choice is ours.

Chapter 4: *The Sacrament*: (W)Rite of Life

Although Peter Gzowski's survival text, *The Sacrament*, addresses similar issues to Krakauer's, it has significant differences. Most notably, the story is told in a more traditional way, beginning with the crisis as initiating event and ending with Brent Dyer and Donna Johnson's return to their family. Gzowski traces their decisions and actions through a plane crash in the mountains of Idaho and the subsequent weeks as they cannibalize Don Johnson and eventually walk out of the mountains and return home to Estevan, Saskatchewan. In parallel, he narrates the responses of various family, friends and professionals involved in the account. The story is broken into four chronologically ordered parts: The Crash, The Canyon, The Walk, and The Survivors. Each includes relevant historical and cultural explanations. Additionally, Gzowski is much less explicit about his role as author. Besides these structural differences¹², Gzowski also benefited from direct access to the protagonists of his story. Where Krakauer's text is a reconstruction of the last years of McCandless's life, Gzowski's text purports to relate the story he was told by Brent and Donna, with some corroborating evidence and research (225). However, at a basic level, both texts are engaged with a question of freedom as responsibility, with the problem of intelligibility and its bearing on the self, and with complex contests for meaning.

The titular concern of Gzowski's book is cannibalism, as Brent and Donna were forced to "consume some of the flesh of" [Don] Johnson's body (223). Gzowski explores the significance of this cannibalism with regards to the way relationships are always

¹² Further research might determine how much of this difference is due to authorial style and how much to historical context; these two texts were published fifteen years apart and reflect very different cultural milieus.

about consumption--the breaking of bodily boundaries and the exchange of the very materials of self. This is a radical, bodily manifestation of co-constitution, of freedom with. It also inverts the liberal reading of freedom as freedom to consume. Not surprisingly, Gzowski foregrounds the relationship between Brent and Donna as pivotal to their survival--in their mutual vulnerability, they were stronger. This chapter will follow these interconnected concerns in turn, with reference to Carl Rollyson's *A Higher Form of Cannibalism? Adventures in the Art and Politics of Biography*. His analysis of biography provides a framework for considering Gzowski's entanglement with the body/ies of his text.

Biography

In his aforementioned text on biographical writing, Rollyson suggests that what is at stake in the genre is a particular contest over meaning which reveals the protagonist's vulnerability and lack of control over his or her life. He explores how biography reveals our co-constitution and situates a particular form of responsibility--not to "respectability" (117), or to the person being studied, but to a larger socially-constructed reality. He never denies the concept of biography as a "higher form of cannibalism"--a phrasing he attributes to Rudyard Kipling¹³ (94)--but rather plays with the implications of biography as cannibalism. He argues that "biographers blind themselves to the ramifications of their work... because they are so wrapped up in telling their stories" (17). While Krakauer works to acknowledge the impact of *Into the Wild*, this passage is especially enlightening with regards to Gzowski's text. Inasmuch as his (biographical) text attempts to relate events which "are available to and experienced by readers and subjects outside

¹³ See Chapter 5 "The Committee of Ways and Means" and Chapter 7 "The Very-Own House" in Kipling's *Something of Me: For Friends Known and Unknown*.

of the written history" (Lehman 467), Gzowski's analysis and defense of cannibalism can be read as forms of self-analysis and self-defense of his authorial use of bodies.

Of particular import for this paper, Rollyson argues that "living subjects of biographies have thought of their struggle with biographers as a life-and-death matter" (22). Considering Butler's argument that intelligibility is linked with survivability, this is not an exaggeration. The conflict over biography, which Rollyson details, is a contest for meaning with very real stakes for the players. Interestingly, he suggests that "part of the hostility toward biography and biographers has to do with the reader/critic's belief that no one can speak for another" (21). Thus, particularly in the North American culture within which Gzowski writes, his text challenges the concept of freedom as license/mastery based on an atomistic concept of self. Biography and nonfiction give the lie to the assertion that we are masters of our own destiny. They reveal the degree to which our existence is socially co-constituted and to which we are vulnerable to others.

Rollyson purports to "subscribe to a conflict-of-interest theory of biography" in which the biographer's concerns are "mutually exclusive" with the subject's (176). While this foregrounds the extent to which responsibility is always enacted as a contest for meaning, it perhaps overplays this contest as between two independent individuals. By contrast, a recognition of mutual vulnerability would seem to break any binary opposition between individuals; this was the foundation of mutually assured destruction as a stable nuclear situation. Certainly no one is entirely bound by their relationships to others, but neither are they entirely autonomous--and perhaps Rollyson is aware of this. He quotes Richard Ellmann as saying "biography is or should be an act of fellowship" (qtd. in Rollyson 173) and notes that he does not "object to this formulation so much as... gasp at

all it leaves out" (173). This idea of fellowship certainly parallels the idea of freedom with; however, perhaps what Rollyson gasps at is how "fellowship" sounds so neat and clean. It does not ignore messy bodies, but neither does it foreground them.

I think Rollyson's reaction outstretches my own. Biography is a contest for meaning, but there is no reason that contest cannot be the grounds of fellowship--of freedom as responsibility. Rollyson's conflict-of-interest is essentially a social contest. The figure of the independent, autonomous man haunts his "mutually exclusive" conception. While he recognizes the contested nature of biography, writing that "every time someone comments on our behavior, our sense of ourselves is violated" (103), he seems to simultaneously deny the social nature of self and identity in favour of an autonomous author. This is a strange move in which cannibalism (human consuming human) becomes parasitic--denying humanity even under the sign which marks it. Nonetheless, Rollyson's conception of biography as cannibalism provides unique insight into Gzowski's work.

Cannibalism

As stated before, cannibalism is the central event and concern of Gzowski's narrative. Having survived a plane crash high in the mountains of Idaho, Brent and Donna quickly consume all available foodstuffs. All that remains is the body of Don Johnson--Donna's father and Brent's father-in-law. In their vulnerability, they realize that their only means of survival is to consume some of Don's body. This option is thinkable from both cultural and relational perspectives. On the one hand, Gzowski writes that "each of them had seen, and been moved by, the movie *Survive!*" (96) in which the crash survivors of Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 resort to cannibalism. Gzowski explains

that "their own feelings... were that [the survivors] had chosen, logically and inevitably, in favour of life" (96). Their (previous) engagement with the story as a cultural resource afforded a responsible path of action even in their relative isolation from society and culture. On the other hand, they considered that "if [Don] had been so willing to give his *life* so that [Donna] might live, then surely [he] would not mind if they took of his body. He would want them to" (96). In their vulnerability, the only responsible behaviour--especially to the deceased--would be to consume Don's flesh. So they chose cannibalism--while recognizing that the meaning of their behaviour might be contested when they returned to society at large.

At this point, Gzowski detours into an exploration of the moral intelligibility of cannibalism. Rather than disregarding it as an extreme, unmentionable (unintelligible) behaviour belonging to the wild, he writes "the idea of cannibalism is much closer to the surface of Western life than most people realize" (98). It is latent in humour and slang¹⁴ (98). Consider also the contemporary fascination with flesh-eating zombies. "But," he writes, "in spite of the familiarity with which we mention cannibalism, very few of us understand even our own attitudes toward it" (98). Cannibalism occupies our subconscious, but often in unexamined (unrecognized) ways--we rarely contemplate its meaning. Interestingly, Gzowski again subverts the illusive binary between nature and culture by tracing a contemporary academic debate which was "as far from the young couple's consciousness as its participants... [but] deal[t] with exactly those [questions] Brent and Donna were trying to sort out" (98): morality and intelligibility.

¹⁴ Gzowski references Johnny Carson, bumper stickers, popular magazines, and slang for sex and work such as "'He'll chew your ass out'" (98).

The line Gzowski traces through this debate is particularly interesting. Instead of exploring contemporary reactions to *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors* or even the aforementioned *Survive!*, Gzowski turns to a scholarly contest over the meaning of cannibalism in Aztec society. He briefly outlines the debate between Marvin Harris's cultural-materialist assertion that cannibalism was a economic source of food and Marshall Sahlins's contention that it was religious--as other, better food sources were available (99). Gzowski contends that the passionate disagreement between the two scholars and their opposing camps was due to "a difference of viewpoint about the very essence of human nature" (100). Unfortunately, he never clarifies this statement. However, in a letter contemporary to and connected with the debate, William Arens distinguishes between Harris's view of humans as strictly material "dogs" and Sahlins's "more noble" view of humans as spiritual beings ("Cannibalism: An Exchange"). On this point of spirituality, Gzowski enters the debate. He suggests that "the most troubling question about human cannibalism may very well be not why we have practised it, but why we haven't practised it more often. As a species, we have no *instinctive* reluctance to eat the flesh of our own kind" (100-101). By implication, dogs would not hesitate to practice cannibalism, while the fact that we do unsettles biological determinism as the sole cause for human behaviour. A corollary of this is not that we are human in so much as we transcend biology and the body (through asceticism or other forms of mastery), but as we respond and are responsible to other (embodied) humans--as we practice freedom with.

Gzowski emphasizes the spiritual and religious significance of cannibalism. He argues that while "in [her] exhaustive bibliography [on cannibalism], Carolyn Nelson

found examples on virtually all continents and from virtually all races," the majority of these examples "were ritualistic, sacramental in character" (101). Endophagy (intra-tribal cannibalism) was a means of honouring the dead and occasionally a rite of passage into community, a mark of interconnectedness. On the other hand, exophagy was a means of absorbing the power of one's enemies--a material practice of boundary crossing and literal co-constitution. In Western culture, Gzowski observes that the Roman Catholic dogma of transubstantiation echoes these rituals (although in a more mystical form--without actual bodies).¹⁵ This, he argues, might explain why

alone among practices that were accepted and sometimes even encouraged by "primitive" cultures but rejected and deplored in the "civilized" world, from incest to female infanticide and even blatant sexual promiscuity, cannibalism has been neither banned by law nor forbidden by religion. (102)

In spite of Pope Innocent IV's condemnation of cannibalism, to make it a punishable offence in Western society would be to outlaw rituals that continue to hold deep meaning for many people. Simply put, "as long as there was a ritual base to the practice, other societies were able to comprehend it" (102). Gzowski thus positions cannibalism as a question of intelligibility moreso than morality--meaning-making within a contested space.

¹⁵ Gzowski's consideration of cannibalism in terms of communion is not new. In *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors*, Piers Paul Read quotes survivor Pedro Algorta as saying, "It's like Holy Communion. When Christ dies he gave [sic] his body to us so that we could have spiritual life. My friend has given us his body so that we can have physical life" (67). Read doesn't follow up with analysis the way Gzowski does, but each, in his own way, highlights the connection to ritual which makes cannibalism intelligible.

Gzowski also explains cannibalism in terms of necessity. He points out that "European and American literature of exploration, famine, and survival is studded with instance of people eating the bodies of their dead... Yet without exception we have welcomed back into the mainstream those who have chosen cannibalism over death" (103). Perhaps even more than the ritual intelligibility of cannibalism, this allowance for necessity is part of the reason cannibalism is not outlawed. Pope Innocent IV apparently drew a distinction between cannibalism and communion, yet in a society where explorers and adventurers are so highly celebrated, cannibalism is perhaps simply a means to an end. Gzowski cites American Jesuit Richard McCormick's argument that cannibalism in a survival situation "is the moral equivalent of a heart transplant" (103). Cannibalism itself is not morally questionable--perhaps culturally repugnant, uncomfortable and abnormal, but not immoral.

Conversely, both the Andes survivors and Brent and Donna chose cannibalism because of a moral valuation of life over death (Piers Paul Read 61; Gzowski 96). Gzowski explains that to Brent and Donna, "the South Americans had seemed more heroic to them for coming to grips with their disgust than they would have seemed if they'd succumbed to their fate" (96). Perhaps that is a significant part of what is at stake in cannibalism--not moral or legal prohibition, but intelligibility and responsibility in the face of an emotional reaction. Unfortunately, disgust is often readily translated into moral imperative and legislated into prohibition, which, in the case of cannibalism, would be a serious problem for millions of Catholics as well as those unlucky few who have been forced to resort to cannibalism in extreme situations.

However, this is not to say that cannibalism is without moral or legal entanglement. Gzowski notes "two boundaries to our tolerance" (103). The first and foremost limit is murder: "Thou shall not kill, we say, even to eat--or, perhaps, *especially* to eat" (103). With the possible, though highly contested, exception of the Aztecs, cannibalism was tied to rituals of community (survival), rather than dietary requirements. Gzowski notes that "in many parts of the 'primitive' world, the person who killed for meat was an aberration" (103). He specifically notes the Algonquian legend of the Windigo and its power to turn humans into cannibals; in that culture cannibals were killed as a threat to the tribe. This prohibition against killing humans for food is a prohibition against a most radical exploitation of human vulnerability--beyond murder in self-defense, emotional murders and even serial killing is the (Windigo-possessed) cannibal who kills for coldly material reasons, consuming human flesh (presumably in the midst of abundance). This behaviour profits from the vulnerability of others--driven by an *irresponsible*, exploitative desire for possession.¹⁶ Secondary to this prohibition and linked with it, is the prohibition against finding pleasure in cannibalism (103). It may be necessary, but it should never be desirable--with or without murder--perhaps because this pleasure plays too close to exploitation. Cannibalism as pleasure is predicated upon the most extreme vulnerability of human bodies. Therein lies the problem: except in conditions of extreme vulnerability--in the company of death--cannibalism is irresponsible because it exploits that very vulnerability; it is possible only as others succumb to their vulnerability.

¹⁶ This line of thought could certainly be extended into a critique of capitalist ideology, perhaps along the lines of Thorstein Veblen's critique of conspicuous consumption in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

Certainly this configuration of cannibalism is complex; it implicates desire and responsibility in the very site of human vulnerability--the body. Gzowski answers this complexity very simply: "The intellect is not enough. The question is of the spirit" (104). Interestingly, this is not a pure, rational, Platonic spirit free of the body, but an embodied spirit--entangled in questions of its own vulnerability and capable of consuming and being consumed. Gzowski continues, arguing that this refusal of cannibalism is not simply a matter of decreasing our own vulnerability to the possibility of cannibalism, but a condition of responsibility itself: "part of what links us with what we call divine" (104) and, I would add, with each other. Conversely, our exceptions also constitute our responsibility, "as the taking of communion is an expression of a spiritual love of the flesh that is consumed. We can consume what we love because we love it; the consumption is a matter of the soul, and only the soul can understand it" (104). Communion as consumption echoes Butler's assertion of the social co-constitution of our bodies. We do not possess our bodies in isolation from our social environment; rather, those bodies are formed by the very act of socializing--of responding in recognition of our mutual vulnerability, consuming and being consumed in the practice of freedom.

This intersects Rollyson's conception of biography as cannibalism. He contends that "the truth is that biography remains invasive" (36). Certainly biography is contentious in its claim to speak the truth of a life, especially when the biographer is gaining the means of his or her life from the body of another. However, Rollyson seems to leave no room for any fellowship, for any mutual responsibility. For him, biography is always an exploitation of vulnerability, "an exercise in bad taste, and a rude inquiry" (178). There is no possibility of fellowship because the biographer is only responsible to

him- or her-self. Yet, this seems to elide the way in which a biographer is co-constituted by virtue of his readers. Without a readership, the biographer cannot profit from his or her cannibalism. Neither does the biographer control the body of his or her text (corpse or corpus). As Lehmann points out, the events and bodies of nonfiction "are available to and experienced by readers and subjects outside of the written history" (467). While Rollyson disregards the social nature of the contest for meaning, he emphasizes the sometimes unsavoury reality of nonfiction: it renders a body which is not whole, but always already in the process of co-consumption and co-constitution--and foregrounds the problem of responsibility, even as he denies its possibility.

The issue of cannibalism strikingly illustrates Brown's argument that "freedom institutionalized transmogrifies into its opposite" (8). When freedom is understood as a responsible practice of life, a "longing to share in power rather than be protected from its excesses, to generate futures together rather than navigate or survive them" (4), it can accept the possibility of cannibalism as a responsible behaviour in extreme situations. However, when the emotional vulnerability disgust implies is denied in favour of moralization and legislation (against cannibalism), it undermines the very conditions of freedom and of life itself. To outlaw cannibalism would render life unlivable for those who, in extreme situations, resort to it as a necessary means of survival. Likewise, excessive legislation to protect against vulnerability creates a situation where freedom as responsibility, as a responsive/responsible practice of life, is inadvertently crippled (especially at the margins). Rather than providing a ground for freedom as responsibility, this kind of legislation can undermine the conditions of that freedom. The two limits placed upon cannibalism are concerned with protecting the material possibility of

responsibility--the vulnerable body. Beyond this point, responsibility becomes not a matter of true dialogue and exchange (of embodied self), but of repetitive manufacture, in which the sacraments of life are always already appropriated by authority and bodies are mass produced for convenient possession. Responsibility becomes a figure of freedom rather than a reality, always constrained by particular juridical discourses of intelligibility¹⁷.

Journalism

Not surprisingly--in light of Rollyson's conception of biographer as cannibal--Gzowski hides the bodies he is feeding on until after he has justified Brent and Donna's cannibalism. A few pages into chapter eight, Gzowski details how Brent kept a diary of his experience and shares a few significant passages from the diary. This is especially revealing, because the diary details events which Gzowski shared earlier in the book, such as the decision to eat pieces of Don's body (96, 108) and the recovery of his watch (73, 109). Here Gzowski presents the reader with parts of the body upon which he has been feeding--exposing a vulnerability, as if to say, "By this body I (as author) am constituted, by this communion I (as author) live." Instead of a neat integration of these excerpts, Gzowski unveils a messy contest between himself and Brent; his revelation is multi-vocal--but not necessarily lacking in fellowship, not necessarily the absolute war Rollyson seems to envision. Backlit by his defense of cannibalism, Gzowski indirectly stages his own practice of freedom as responsibility and the contest for meaning with which he engages in this text. This is a very different staging from Krakauer's in its

¹⁷ The legal and juridical implications of this discussion reach beyond the constraints of this paper, but perhaps a relevant question might be who is being protected and who excluded by a given prohibition? Or, to paraphrase Butler, what bodies are rendered unintelligible by this law?

subtlety and flavour, but it is no less significant for its rending of the autonomous self-constituting ego.

In addition to Gzowski's subtle haunting of this passage, he appears again in the conversation about cannibalism near the end of the book. Having traced the media revelation of Brent and Donna's cannibalism, he states simply that they are not "ashamed of what they had done" (219). Although cannibalism is significant in Gzowski's telling, he explains that it "is a part of their story. There are other parts too" (221). In the midst of this explanation, his shade appears again. He writes,

self-conscious visitors will sometimes find themselves groping for euphemisms for cannibalism, or trying to avoid figures of speech that may seem to have unfortunate ramifications. ...Only by listening to them carefully can one learn how comfortable with their actions they truly are.
(221)

In this passage, Gzowski again stages his co-constitution as author feeding upon the bodies of Brent and Donna, but only in a most tangential and indirect way. His presence is a mere shade of his body; the reader is only dimly aware of him as one among many who have (apparently) discussed the story with Brent and Donna. Gzowski hides himself among the "self-conscious visitors" who never appear in the story. Perhaps Gzowski hides in this crowd because he is not (as Rollyson asserts of a number of biographers) as comfortable with his own actions as Brent and Donna are. In order to mount a defense for his own behaviour, it is vital that they willingly give their bodies to him. While this fellowship may be called into question, it is, nonetheless, a staging of fellowship as

possibility--dependent more upon their willingness to be consumed than upon his apparent comfort with the consumption.

Of course, their willingness to share--indeed, the very possibility of fellowship--is something Rollyson cannot accept. Interestingly, Gzowski also seems troubled by it; perhaps his is a fear of being vulnerable, of being exploited as vulnerable--being attacked as less than an *objective* mind. If he is constituted by their telling, then he is vulnerable. However, for co-constitution and vulnerability to be mutual and responsibility to be possible, this openness is absolutely necessary. As Butler suggests, "our capacity to feel and to apprehend hangs in the balance" (*Precarious Life* xxi). We cannot be free except as we admit this vulnerability, otherwise we are always already bound by an intangible fear of the (unintelligible) other--and conversely of being (mis/un)recognized as unintelligible ourselves.

This fear is precisely what Gzowski highlights in his account of the revelation of Brent and Donna's cannibalism. He writes of

a phenomenon that continued to be evident through the dissemination of the news: people who heard about it felt *they* themselves understood, but they were often worried about what *others* might say. The "others" were never named; they were simply people who would be less understanding of the realities of the case. (219)

In a telling turn, he compares this phenomenon to the bodily workings of censorship. He reflects on the incongruity between (disembodied) "experts"--who are not constituted by viewing explicit content--and (embodied) "others"--who will apparently be negatively constituted by the same (219). This comparison highlights the problems of both

intelligibility and vulnerability. These experts deny their own vulnerability in order to legitimate their rendering of a judgement of "unintelligible"; put another way, their refusal to consume (or denial of consumption) justifies their rejection of the explicit content as consumable. Unfortunately, their refusal to consume is predicated on an inability to consume and be constituted by what they experience; it is predicated on a denial of their (co-constituted) bodies. This creates a binary between the disembodied, self-constituting, rational expert and the embodied, co-constituted, irrational other. Against this binary, Butler suggests that "perhaps there is some other way to live such that one becomes neither affectively dead [expert] nor mimetically violent [other]" (*Precarious Life* 42). Put another way, perhaps one can address the problem of cannibalism (as co-constitution) without either ignoring the personal stakes of vulnerability or remorselessly over-powering that vulnerability in order to feed (as Rollyson seems to argue for).

The paternalism evident in this censorship also parallels Butler's consideration of "adult" autonomy and vulnerability. She writes that

there is bound to be some experience of humiliation for adults, who think that they are exercising judgment in matters of love, to reflect upon the fact that as infants and young children, they loved their parents or other primary others in absolute and uncritical ways--and that some of that pattern lives on in their adult relationships. (26)

What is at stake in this experience is a recognition of vulnerability and its implications for autonomy harnessed to a particular conception of freedom as license and/or mastery. The adult who was (is) constituted by his or her vulnerability is not free of restraint or

limitation--rather, he or she is defined by it. Likewise, the expert constituted by his or her viewing becomes an other and intelligibility (as expert) is threatened. If I am one of them, co-constituted/ing with them, my autonomy is threatened and I am no longer "free"--except where freedom is conceived as responsibility to (with) them rather than absolute individuation *from* them. Conversely, especially in censorship, intelligibility (my ability to understand and to render myself intelligible) depends upon this distinction between self and other--as in, *I* can comprehend the meaning and evil of this explicit content, but *they* cannot; it is intelligible to me, but not them. Although the fear of otherness is not neatly reducible to a problem of intelligibility, that is precisely what is at stake in this fear that Gzowski addresses--not that he/I/we/they should be bodily attacked by an embodied other, but rather that in telling my story, I might be unintelligible. I might speak or he might write and we will not be intelligible as vulnerable bodies, as grievable lives--as livable lives.

Nakedness

Alongside this complicated examination of cannibalism, Gzowski sustains a provocative exploration of vulnerability and responsibility within *The Sacrament*. Of course, physical vulnerability is never far from the scene of a plane crash, yet Gzowski seems especially interested in the emotional vulnerability of his protagonists and the strange freedom (as responsibility) that develops from it. The first hint of this comes as the two realize that Don is dead--but that he apparently died giving his coat to Donna. Gzowski writes that "unable even to reach for each other..., to hold each other in comfort against their grief and fear, the two wept until exhaustion overcame them again" (32). Even without physical bodily contact, Brent and Donna apparently find solace in their

shared grieving--their shared acceptance of change and acknowledgement of vulnerability.

This shared grieving is foundational to the deeply responsive relationship they develop which contributes to their eventual return to society. In *Precarious Bodies*, Butler writes that grief "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility" (22). This is especially apparent for Brent and Donna as their grief is triggered by the recognition that Don's last act was a giving of himself to Donna. Their grief, in a large sense, is directly linked to their awareness of their "fundamental dependence and ethical responsibility" for and to each other--in light of Don's example. From this relational awareness they practice a deep responsibility to each other that contributes significantly to their survival.

In Chapter Three, Gzowski writes

they talked often of love, and the talk was naked and without shame. In the same way that physical necessity was stripping away their modesty about their bodies, the circumstances of their lives... were eroding the reticence they'd felt from childhood about their own emotions. (58)

Surprisingly, in the midst of this life-and-death experience, where Brent and Donna are in constant pain (57) and dealing with grief and shock, Gzowski inserts an allusion to Eden--"naked and without shame." Faced with death and the bare essentials of life, Brent and Donna apparently (re)discover deep responsibility to each other--predicated on the vulnerability of their bodies, their physical and emotional selves. (Interesting how "naked" implicates bodies in emotional connection.) Perhaps this is part of what Chris

McCandless sought--not a limit experience which would lay bare the "truth" of life, but a bodily experience of vulnerability upon which a practice of freedom as responsibility might be enacted--an encounter with limitations that are regularly denied and/or supplemented for in modern society.

Interestingly, Gzowski records Brent becoming "convinced that he wouldn't have survived" if he had been in the same situation with his wife instead of Donna (79). His ideals for the role of a husband would have prevented the mutual responsibility he shared with Donna. Instead, he would have "been [too] busy worrying about her... *ma[king]* her lean on him" (79-80). Surprisingly, part of this nakedness was "a kind of distance" which allowed him to "give in to his anger" with Donna (80). Furthermore, this aggression was productive, "often... *snap[ping]* Donna out of her tears in a way that sympathy might not have done" (80). This indicates a place for aggression in the practice of freedom with--not an aggression which seeks to destroy or efface an unintelligible other, but an aggression which recognizes the other and acts to protect shared vulnerability. If we are co-constituted--if I depend on you--your withdrawal into self-pity and depression impacts me in ways that threaten us both.

For this particularly elusive concept, Butler's consideration of grieving offers a framework of sorts. In *Precarious Life*, she writes that "we're undone by each other" (23)--situating our awareness of vulnerability in grief. The person who withdraws into grief allows one loss to overshadow all other relationships. At some level, loss is overwhelming--that is the nature of grief. But perhaps we might fruitfully distinguish between grieving *a* loss and grieving loss itself: the first reminds us of our vulnerability, while the second seeks to escape or deny the vulnerability that constitutes us. Butler

suggests that "one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever" (21). This mourning is the completion of grieving, an acceptance of vulnerability (not necessarily absolute) which opens the possibility of deeper responsibility grounded in a deeper recognition of vulnerability. Perhaps then, aggression might be productive as it serves to foreground vulnerability in spite of overwhelming grief. If I am hurt, I cannot deny that I am vulnerable and that my vulnerability constitutes me as a social being--in being vulnerable, in being reminded of my vulnerability, responsibility becomes possible (again). One might then distinguish between various forms of aggression, but for the sake of this paper I will simply note a difference between an aggression that reminds one of the possibility of loss and an aggression that inflicts loss. Conversely we might distinguish between a responsible aggression aimed at mutual health and survival versus an aggression which seeks to efface or destroy the other in order to deny my vulnerability--an aggression borne from grieving loss.

From this perspective, we can also identify an apparent responsibility (as Brent's to his wife) which actually depends on a denial of vulnerability and circles back into the autonomous subject: I am co-constituted by you, but only as I dictate, as I set the terms and limits of that co-constitution. This is a practical effacement of the other by fetishization--the other becomes a symbol of myself and my "free" will. This parallels Slavoj Žižek's discussion of "interpassivity" as epitomized by tamagochi. He explains that tamagochi "allows you to satisfy your need to love your neighbour... without bothering your actual neighbours" (109). Interpassivity maintains the illusion of responsibility while "postpon[ing] indefinitely the confrontation with the abyss of the

Other's desire" (109). In other words, I am responsible/responding to the symbol of the other (projected by myself), rather than to any actual, bodily other; I "respond" to the vulnerability of the other while simultaneously denying my own. This gap might explain Brent's ability "to open up with [Donna], to show her his own weakness in a way he might have been reluctant to do with his wife" (80). Accordingly, this recognition of vulnerability enabled a vitally important practice of freedom as responsibility.

As with cannibalism, Gzowski redeploys the idea of naked vulnerability at the end of the text--after Brent and Donna have returned from the wilderness. There is an implicit contrast between the naked vulnerability Brent and Donna share in the plane and the nakedness which their families feel in the close scrutiny of the media. Gzowski describes how the media attention "had been a steady reminder of how public their private fears had become; they felt naked" (215). This exposure contrasts with Brent and Donna's not necessarily because of a desire to share, but because of the responsibility enacted upon that sharing. Brent and Donna's vulnerability was mutual, while the family was stripped naked by a disinterested media--consumed not in love, but for profit; instead of a practice of freedom as responsibility grounded in mutual vulnerability, the press deployed freedom as mastery and exploited the vulnerability of the families involved.

Gzowski is careful to position this contest as a matter of co-constitution--of mutual vulnerability. Certainly, being a reporter, he is necessarily implicated in the media's behaviour--he, too, is cannibalizing those involved; yet he continues to argue for responsible fellowship rather than shameless consumption. Indeed, to simply deny the humanity of the reporters is to circle back into the struggle for mastery. Reporters, like biographers, are in a special sense dependent upon the bodies of others for survival and

are thus vulnerable to loss of connection. But, as Gzowski points out, "the press failed to sympathize with [the families]" (215). Where they might have admitted a mutual vulnerability and come as equals--as vulnerable bodies--many of the reporters rushed headlong after the story, "forget[ting] that for the people [involved], these events [might be] isolated and overpowering" (214). This behaviour seems to follow on Rollyson's conflict-of-interest model. However, it is grounded in an exploitation of vulnerability. It is equally irresponsible to assume that every reporter involved was exploitative in this way. Gzowski argues that there is "reason to believe that some of the reporters who followed the story knew of the cannibalism but decided, out of concern for the families, not to publish what they knew" (217). This suggests a kindness and decency which is "too easily taken for a weakness of will [in the news business]" (218)--and thus denied. Those reporters who may have acted responsibly risked unintelligibility--but responsibility remains a choice even where it might be unintelligible.

My point here is not to condemn the media or even engage the question of media responsibility, but to highlight the complexities of vulnerability on a personal level (recalling that the personal is political). In this passage, Gzowski emphasizes that a responsible contest for meaning is possible; it need not be a zero-sum game in which one party renders the other unintelligible in order to maintain its autonomous self. Rather, in recognizing our mutual co-constitution, a responsible consumption becomes possible. However, this responsible behaviour risks unintelligibility when freedom is conceived as mastery/license and the individuals are defined as autonomous and self-constituting.

Conclusion

Rather than explicitly problematizing his authorial position, as Krakauer does in *Into the Wild*, Gzowski follows a line of inquiry into the nature of human co-constitution. He is especially concerned with the bodies of his protagonists--not surprisingly, since those bodies are the means of his continued well-being. In contrast with Rollyson's assertion that this constitution must always be a conflict of interest, Gzowski emphasizes the possibility of fellowship and mutual responsibility in light of our bodily vulnerability. Where Rollyson disregards sacrifice as a meaningful act, thus disregarding any possibility of communion, Gzowski centers his narrative (and himself) on this concept. He traces the story of Brent and Donna as they engage in a shameless practice of co-constitution both in their relationship with each other and their literal consumption of pieces of Don's body. This is a hopeful picture of the possibility of community and freedom with.

If we are co-constituted by means of our social and bodily vulnerability (each indistinct from the other), the question becomes a matter of negotiating the contest for meaning in a way that recognizes the need and desire of the other. I cannot write, I cannot read, I cannot consume without enacting my dependence upon other bodies--and vice versa. Thus, I must protect other bodies as well as my own--this can never be freedom as license or mastery whereby I seek to escape dependence and vulnerability. Rather, it must be freedom as responsibility: giving my body for communion even as I consume pieces of others--always under the knife, always giving thanks as I begin to cut the flesh.

Chapter 5: *Black Wave*: Sharing the Same Boat

In *Black Wave*, John and Jean Silverwood, rather than exposing the body they have been cannibalizing, recount their experience of co-constitution and vulnerability. They narrate their family's shipwreck on Scilly Island in the South Pacific and their journey both to and from that point in time--from their decision to leave a comfortable upper-middle class California life to spend two years at sea through their return home and their recovery from the experience and the loss of John's leg. Although they present other bodies, their own vulnerable, co-constituted/ing bodies are at the center of the text. Recognition is less explicitly problematized, because the book is autobiographical. Where the biographer seeks to ground recognition in his or her writing, the autobiographer must, to some degree, assume that recognition (as human) in order to speak. However, while the autobiographer might construct him- or her-self as an autonomous, self-constituting liberal subject, to their credit, the Silverwoods do not. As Butler points out,

I might try to tell a story here about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very "I" who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling; the very "I" is called into question by its relation to the Other, a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations.

(Precarious Life 23)

Though Butler is specifically concerned with the way grief reveals these connections, her consideration of mourning as acceptance of change expands this co-constitution onto a larger frame. Unless an autobiographer tells the story of an eternal, unchanging "I" (not really a story at all), there will be change. Biographies are engaging specifically to the extent that they reveal change and various responses to it. Furthermore, there is no "I" in isolation from the constitutive conditions of embodied, social life. We are originally constituted by others, and any autobiography necessarily bears those marks. The story of "I" is also the story of my contest with others. This undoing is where the Silverwoods take up their story and enter the contest for meaning.

Their tale is striking for the way it stages this contest. Most importantly, the book has two authors--two stories of the same event(s). Although the stories are certainly connected, and in some way form a singular (family) story, this fellowship of authors entails contest in a more radical way than either of the other texts. Each author portrays his/her co-constitution in a deliberate and particular way. While in Jean's narrative familial co-constitution is central, John focuses primarily on historical and cultural co-constitution. Furthermore, the two books follow a roughly temporal sequence--Jean narrates the night of the wreck and the events leading up to it, while John narrates his (and the family's) recovery after the wreck, as well as the historical precedent of the *Julia Ann*. This is not to say the texts don't overlap, but that each has a different emphasis. Both authors are concerned with the meaning of their ocean journey and its abrupt end. While their narrative focuses primarily on intra-familial contest, they also explicitly engage a larger contest over the meaning of their journey. Each of the Silverwoods affirms that, despite the high cost (John's leg), the journey was worth the risk and loss.

The Silverwoods' journey helped them accept and respond to (and in spite of) their mutual vulnerability. Struggling through their mutual vulnerability, as family and as seafarers, enabled a new practice of freedom which was (and is) critical for their children's growth as well as the continuation of their own marital relationship. Their mutual (experience of) vulnerability is both the family's greatest weakness and their greatest strength as it both enables and undermines responsibility.

Though this text lacks many of the easy signposts of Krakauer's and Gzowski's works, it offers similarly potent engagement(s) with the concept of freedom as responsibility grounded in mutual vulnerability and enacted through a contest for meaning. However, because of the direct involvement of the two authors, their engagements follow unique lines of thought. This chapter will trace each author's telling in turn, considering their overlapping and divergent practices of freedom as responsibility.

Jean: Family

Family is the central concern in Jean's narrative. Although in modern culture "family" stands in for a variety of ideals and realities, both positive and negative, Butler reminds us that family is the foundational site of our co-constitution. For better or for worse, my body is "given from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do" (26). This is not to suggest that family is a perfect prototype (or even a universally recognizable one) for freedom as responsibility, but simply to foreground its constitution in this foundational vulnerability. This foundational vulnerability is the means of both destruction and salvation--Jean's

narrative relates how she is both undone and saved by her co-constitution with her family, by (practicing) freedom with.

Although they struggle with despair and their overwhelming vulnerability, Jean and her family respond to the chaos around them. They resist. This resistance centers particularly on their mutual response to John's vulnerability. She describes Ben begging forgiveness for being so childish throughout the trip (27) then accepting responsibility for his family: "'Mom,' Ben called. 'We're going to need your help.' ...This was too hard, but it was [his coming-of-age]: Ben had become an adult in this hour" (29). Faced with incredible vulnerability and his father's probable death, Ben engages on behalf of the family. He plays a critical role in saving the family: helping Jean free John from under the mast, helping her free the life raft, and finding a refuge on the reef as their boat is finally destroyed.

Likewise, Amelia enacts a singular responsibility in caring for her father in the life raft. Jean describes her standing in bloody water holding the life raft clear of the coral in spite of her fear of sharks and the blood in the water around her (107). Later she recounts that "Amelia was inside the raft to keep John warm; this was not an easy thing to do, as the raft was filled with a soup of seawater, blood, vomit, and pee. She lay down in it next to John. That is love" (109). That is also a responsibility to the other in spite of her own vulnerability, in spite of cold and filth.

Jean situates John's vulnerability and the teens' responsibility against his struggle with alcohol. She writes that "they had matured quickly, really starting with John's bout with alcohol" (70). Later, she explains how this was critical especially for Amelia: "it had made her see him as a human being, like herself, like anyone, who got through the

day with courage and character" (119). His vulnerability is explicitly cited as contributing to the teen's growing sense of responsibility to the family--a responsibility that plays a critical role in their experience on the reef.

On the other hand, John's vulnerability to alcohol is contrasted with his life-threatening vulnerability on the reef--in terms of responsibility. Jean explains that "in those first three hours, he would lose three-quarters of his blood, which should have killed him. And it would have done so had he not been too worried about us to leave us" (32). Remarkably, he managed to live through the night and most of the next day without any medical attention beyond the tourniquets made by Ben and Amelia. For Jean, this was an act of will: "This was all too familiar; all too much like the urge to have a drink. Dying would be the ultimate escape, and he wasn't going to leave his family like that again" (47).¹⁸ John, a recovering alcoholic, had returned to the habit when family conflict became too painful. Instead of freedom as responsibility, he pursued freedom as license, as escape from the vulnerability he felt in the complexly contested space of the ship.

In the end, he nearly left the family as alcohol slowly eroded his ability to respond. Jean writes, "I sort of pushed him off the boat--not exactly, but he ended up in the water just the same... I guess I did push him" (48). Interestingly, Jean takes significant responsibility for her contribution to this event. She says that, when he started drinking again, "I did not see it. Maybe I wasn't seeing him much at all" (57). Rather than continuing to respond, she had also disengaged. Fortunately, pushing him into the water turned things around; it was a vital experience of vulnerability and (lack of)

¹⁸ John later reiterates this thought: "I couldn't just die and leave them there" (194).

responsibility. In contrast with that disastrous moment, on the reef Jean refused to leave John, and vice versa. While he clung to life, in spite of severe trauma and blood loss, she fought for his life--literally--against both sea and ship. She describes an irrational fury in her struggle to free the trapped raft when she realizes it is the only way to get John to safety--"a fury of muscle and mind... I was an animal, struggling under one wave for my mate and my offspring, and under the next for myself" (95). In spite of vulnerability--the risk of drowning, of sharks, and of becoming entangled herself, she waged a determined contest for the raft. Paralleling Jean's behaviour, John chooses life as a singular act of responsibility to his family, against what should have been fatal vulnerability.

Vulnerability itself was virtually undone by these acts of responsibility grounded in the awareness of their co-constitution. Although John loses his leg, and the family loses the ship and their possessions, they live through the wreck of the *Emerald Jane* by their practice of freedom as responsibility in the face of overwhelming vulnerability.

Mourning

Instead of telling her version of the story in a straightforward manner, Jean frames the family's entire two-year voyage within the events of the night they were shipwrecked. Through a series of flashbacks, she reveals the history of the family leading up to that moment. In this way, the substance of the family itself--the relationships that hold it together, the members' mutual responsibility--is situated in terms of their vulnerability to the sea and to other forces of life. Conversely, that vulnerability is situated within a larger context in which they were always already vulnerable to loss by virtue of their being a family sharing the same (contested) space.

In a short description of the family's last peaceful moments before the wreck, Jean foregrounds their mutual vulnerability and responsibility within a contested space. She writes, "Everybody was finally happy to be together--it had taken a few thousand miles, but the family now seemed in synch and content. I don't mean that it was perfect, but we had learned to live together in a tight space without too much drama" (4). She is careful to point out that this is not some relational nirvana, a place of perfect peace occupied by a disciplined crew. Rather, it seems a critical, temporal practice of responsibility by which they shared an especially small space--not without conflict, but with a practiced ability to work together, even to synchronize. This exemplifies the significance of enacting freedom as responsibility through a contest for meaning. Responsibility depends on continual renegotiation and recognition of our mutual (human) vulnerability. It is not a static practice in which recognition and responsibility can be eternally pre-determined, but a continuing, contextual engagement as we continue to change--a dynamic practice of mourning as acceptance.

In spite of her family's apparent synchronicity, Jean writes, "I guess I was worried about what might become of our marriage after this long adventure" (4). She was anxious about the loss of their shared shipboard life. While the family members had learned to depend closely on each other, there was a risk inherent in the drastic lifestyle change of returning to land--to a different form of everyday life. As Butler reminds us, risk is inherent in "our being socially constituted bodies" (*Precarious Life* 20)--we cannot control our relationships. Butler further points out "the various forms of rapture and subjection that formed the condition of my emergence as an individuated being and that continue to haunt my adult sense of self with whatever anxiety and longing I may now

feel" (27). Jean's anxiety emphasizes her growing awareness of her co-constitution and her inability to prevent loss. This is an unavoidable risk. Perhaps, in a neatly bordered home like the *Emerald Jane*, it is easy to assume that relationships would continue relatively unchanged and unbroken; yet, as the story reveals, this is not the case. Rather than being a question which is answered by the story to follow ("Will my husband leave me? No."), this statement serves to rhetorically foreground the inherent vulnerability of (socially-constituted) bodies--a theme which resonates throughout Jean's narrative of the wreck. Her hope and fear, her strength and weakness, lie in her relationships to her family, in their mutual responsibility and negotiation of meaning.

Jean's fear of loss can be better understood in Alford's terms. Any answer to the question "Will he leave me?" has meaning only in a particular, limited context (like freedom). Thus, the question foregrounds action, where action can be formulated as a matter of freedom: either freedom as license/mastery--"How can I prevent the loss his leaving would entail?"--or freedom with, freedom practiced as responsibility--"How can I maintain the health of this relationship?" Certainly (fortunately?) this is not a neat binary as maintaining a relationship generally contributes to its continuation, thus avoiding loss--although not necessarily--and conversely, any thorough plan of prevention must consider maintenance. However, the subtle shift of focus is critical. In response to social vulnerability, do we engage in a (dis)course of protectionism, seeking either to prevent loss or to desensitize ourselves to it, or engage in a responsible practice of freedom which accepts the possibility of loss (but does not accept it as necessary)? Butler points out that when we are confronted with vulnerability and (the possibility of) loss, "our general response is anxiety, rage; a radical desire for security" (*Precarious Life*

39). Responsibility does not deny this desire and rage, but rather, through a process of mourning, recognizes mutual vulnerability. In turn, freedom is enacted as freedom with, rather than freedom from/over (others). Thus Jean's narrative "displays... the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, ...in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 23). Her story is bound up in the history of her family, in the context of their journey and their continually re-contested and responsible relationships to each other. To the question (of the risk of loss) that co-constitution poses, her response is not a simple yes or no, but an affirmation of continued responsibility--there is no guaranteed security against vulnerability, only the hopeful practice of freedom with.

This question can also be considered in terms of my (or Jean's) relationship to my (her) environment, social or otherwise: am I *part of* it--responding to it and being responded to--or am I *apart from* it--in which case any loss of distinction is a violation or loss of (my) self? Not surprisingly, Jean's response to the wreck follows a complex negotiation of this problematic as she attempts to come to terms with (to mourn) her husband's injury and the loss of the *Emerald Jane*. The book itself figures into a larger process of mourning wherein Jean negotiates (contests) the meaning of the voyage in terms of the wreck and the family's return to their California home--each a part of the loss of their seafaring lifestyle.

Imagination

Recognition is central to that process of mourning and contest (and responsibility). Gonzales's first rule of adventure/survival is "Perceive, believe" (270)--recognize your vulnerability within your environment. He explains that action "begins

with the paradox of seeing reality--how hopeless it would seem to an outside observer--but acting with the expectation of success" (271). This acceptance ("I'm here, what now?") contrasts with denial, as freedom from ("this isn't happening"), and (angry) panic, as freedom over ("I won't allow this to happen"). It embraces what Brown terms the "overwhelming" appearance of freedom (as responsibility) (25) without surrendering to despair. Instead, it opens the possibility of a practice of responsibility which, in Alford's words, "bring[s] imagination and reality into mutual contact" (124) as freedom with. Imagination is as important as awareness in this practice of freedom with, for it enables an apprehension of the world in which absolute security and autonomy (freedom from/over) are not the foundation of freedom.

Thus, it is not surprising that as Jean writes about the wreck she stages the problem of vulnerability against a deeply romantic (imaginative) picture of sailing. She writes of "steering a course through the stars" (10) and "experienc[ing] a perfection of awareness" (11). John becomes Peter Pan, flying the family to Neverland (11). This image emphasizes the significance of imagination: it is a critical component of responsibility, but it can also exacerbate vulnerability when it is deployed in the service of freedom as license/mastery. Imagination doesn't remove vulnerability. Even in Neverland Peter Pan nearly dies; even on their sea voyage into the wild, the Silverwoods remain vulnerable. In the midst of her imaginative description of their journey, Jean reminds her readers, "there is a hidden reef ahead somewhere--but isn't there always? We are mortals resigned to that ending. When it arrives so unexpectedly in the night ready to take not only you but your children, you will pray aloud for the morning. But it happens. It has happened so many times" (11). Although responsibility to the (ocean) context

around us can perhaps reduce the probability of shipwreck, vulnerability and loss are ever-present and often unavoidable. Peter Pan refused to grow up, to accept change (and loss) as an inevitable part of life, but he could not escape vulnerability. However, in the end, his life is saved by Tinkerbell's response to his vulnerability.¹⁹ When John nearly dies on board their ship, his family responds in a similar way to save his life.²⁰

Jean's Peter Pan story is not about a choice between responsibility and freedom, but about the entanglement between responsibility and inescapable vulnerability. Her Peter Pan (John) has taken the family on a wonderful journey, but he remains vulnerable--he needs them. The wreck becomes a central experience of meaning-making for the family--both as members and as a whole. The question "Will my husband leave me?" is transmuted into "Will I leave my husband?" and all Jean can offer is (her) responsibility, limited as it (always already) is by her mutual vulnerability.

Illusion

As her family's boat is smashed upon the reef, Jean is overwhelmed by the terror of it all. She writes, "I tried to have one clear thought... My mind had nowhere to go with what I was seeing" (14). Jean's imagination failed. She was overwhelmed by her responsibility: she, alone, could not save her family. (One might rightfully ask whether she ever could.) As Brown reminds us, "the dimensions of responsibility for oneself and one's world that freedom demands often appear overwhelming and hopelessly

¹⁹ He in turn (along with limitless readers and/or viewers) saves her life. One could figure this as a problem of intelligibility and recognition ("I do believe in fairies"), but the analysis of freedom as responsibility in *Peter Pan* lies beyond the scope of this paper.

²⁰ This is not to say John denied vulnerability in the same way as Peter Pan, only that he was similarly vulnerable, even as the brave (male) leader.

unrealizable" (25). There is no safety net which can prevent loss and vulnerability. Yet, as Gonzales points out, we must act with the expectation of success.

Alford suggests that "illusion" (32) is what enables us to act with the expectation of success in an apparently hopeless situation. He explains that illusion is "the capacity to bring imagination and reality into mutual contact" (124). It is "not the illusory belief in a freedom that does not exist" (33)--but illusion as "the medium of transitional experience" (32). Without it, freedom is abstracted from practice. He describes how, in a borderline (all-or-nothing) experience of freedom, "imagination and material reality belong to separate categories of existence that never meet, which is another way of saying that the realm of illusion has fled" (34).²¹ This is what Jean (temporarily) lost. The practice of freedom requires illusion because it connects the practice of (freedom as) responsibility with the hope of freedom; it enables one to act with the expectation of success while accepting what Brown calls the "overwhelming and hopelessly unrealizable" dimensions of responsibility (25). Put another way, illusion enables the practice of freedom as responsibility without disconnection from desire and loss. Disillusionment, as the loss of connection between reality and imagination, left Jean in a state of shock (20).

She describes "walk[ing] up and down the swaying starboard deck in a daze" (20). In Butler's terms, she was undone by her experience of grief as the recognition of her co-constitution "in ways that challenge[d] the very notion of [herself] as autonomous and in control" (23). Fortunately, while she wandered in shock, "Ben seemed to have done what [she] could not: accept that John was very likely not going to make it, and that the rest of

²¹ In the borderline experience of freedom, reality is overwhelming because imagination is seen as a means of escape (from), rather than a means of engagement or contest (with).

the family needed leadership and help" (20). While she was trapped in her grief, Ben was able to accept the possibility of loss and submit to "a transformation... the full result of which [he could] not know in advance" (Butler 21). Thus Jean writes "I was on [Ben and Amelia's] list: Get Mom functioning again" (20). In the midst of her fear of vulnerability--of losing control (responsiveness) and losing her family, the response of the family, within which she was co-constituted, enabled her own acceptance of vulnerability and her return to responsibility--as limited as it was.

A singular image illustrates the significance of illusion. Jean writes, "we all looked at each other and knew without saying that we needed to be ready to go now, coral or not. If we were going to die, we were going to die with our flip-flops on. We were going to be *doing* something, not standing waiting for our death" (16). Illusion enables action, when any action appears as significant as flip-flops against razor-edged coral and pounding surf. As John later explains, "the coral [was] so sharp that the beach flip-flops the kids were wearing were cut through by the blades of the reef" (188). In the face of vulnerability, any response is limited; against the reef and the ocean which conspired to destroy their ship (home) and their bodies, the Silverwoods' power to respond was as flimsy as the flip-flops they wore. Yet they acted with the expectation (illusion) of success and lived; they were able to bring imagination and reality into contact, enabling responsibility in spite of overwhelming vulnerability. The small actions of Jean's family helped her move through mourning to acceptance--and action. As she puts it, better "to be doing something [than] standing waiting for death." Of course, as Gonzales reminds us, that "something" must necessarily be responsive, grounded in awareness and acceptance, or we might as well be standing waiting for death. Illusion

makes that responsibility possible, in spite of apparent hopelessness; it enables (free) action in the face of loss of control and certain death. While this responsibility cannot undo our (mutual) vulnerability, it can alter it in fundamental ways.

Risk

Like Krakauer, Jean defers the critical question of intelligibility and meaning until she has given ample grounds for recognition. After telling her story of her family's intense experience of vulnerability and freedom as responsibility, Jean answers the "big question...: Was it worth it?" (143). Twice she says yes (144, 220). She admits significant personal loss--noting that, in addition to the loss of their investment in the boat, she "still [does]n't feel comfortable on the freeways" (218)--but with both affirmations she speaks of deepened connections with family (220), a heightened awareness (and acceptance) of her co-constitution. She also writes of the positive impact on her family: "The kids are much closer now. They learned that they live extremely privileged lives compared to most of the world" (218). They witnessed the vulnerability of less privileged people, but they also lived through an extreme experience of their own vulnerability. The entire family has a new sense of responsibility to each other and to those around them because of a recognition of mutual vulnerability. They survived as a family, responding to and taking responsibility for each other--and were fundamentally changed by the experience. They underwent a transformation "the full result of which [they] could not know in advance" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 21), but each of them affirms the value of that experience (Silverwood and Silverwood 143) in spite of the losses they suffered.

More importantly, Jean describes how their experience on the reef translated back into their normal California lives. Returned from the wilderness to the safety of home and community, the family found themselves similarly vulnerable when fire threatened their home a few years later (219). Certainly the stakes were not quite as high in this evacuation, but Jean writes, "Even when I didn't know what I would see when I made the last turn up our street, I knew I had changed in those long hours holding John on a distant reef. Some things matter and some don't. You can build a new house if you must" (220). We are vulnerable--even in the apparent safety of modern, Western life. Jean's awareness of that enabled her to accept the potential loss of her home and to respond freely and meaningfully. As she phrases it, "for so much of our lives, we are afraid to really live--afraid not only to burn the candle at both ends, but even afraid to burn one end for fear we will burn it all up someday. And yes, Life is a death trap. But that's all right: The whole thing is just beautiful" (109).²² This is not a simple platitude but a critical awareness of the problem of freedom as license or mastery. There is no escape from risk, from vulnerability. There is only the opportunity to respond in a continual contest for meaning--in which freedom and life itself are at stake. Maybe all our responsibility is only as potent as flip-flops against the razor edges of life, but that's all right: The whole thing is just beautiful. Better the contest for meaning than surrender; better to be continually risking freedom (as responsibility) than pretending to be free while the world falls apart.

²² This resonates with Alford's concept of illusion. Beauty might be another way of conceiving the capacity to bring imagination and reality into mutual contact--Jean's disillusionment could be read as a loss of the ability to see beauty in her situation.

John: Culture

In contrast with Jean's story of family co-constitution, John traces his co-constitution through a larger, cultural framework. Where Jean reviews their journey together to make sense of her family's response to the wreck, John looks to historical accounts within which to place his family. As he explains, "I would later study old accounts... to help make sense of our own experience" (151). Among more general historical references, John specifically connects his experience with the stories of William Bligh and the mutiny on the *Bounty*, and the wreck of the *Julia Ann* on the same reef as his ship was wrecked. He also refers to *Moby Dick* and a hymn, "The Gallant Ship Is under Way"²³ (which he links back to the *Julia Ann*). This cultural meaning-making demonstrates another aspect of Alford's concept of illusion. He writes that "the illusion of freedom... [refers] not to what is commonly called fantasy, but to the ability to use the resources of culture, such as books, music, and movies, to make the present reality shine with new possibilities" (33). Although Alford emphasizes primarily artistic creations, history (or nonfiction), as a site of contest, is also a part of "culture." John uses both art and history in his contest for meaning.

Moby Dick and Captain Ahab figure prominently in the Silverwoods' narrative contest for meaning. After the dedication, but before either the map or Table of Contents, a quotation describes the loss of the *Pequod's* quarter boat, and speaks to the limitations of responsibility: "all the start I have to meet it [an ocean wave], is just across the deck here" (qtd. in Silverwood and Silverwood). Likewise, the book closes (before the

²³ John suggests that the hymn is "based on an old poem by Robert Southey" (157). However, the connection seems limited. Full texts (with links to original source material) are available on *HymnWiki* ("The Gallant Ship Is under Way").

Afterword) with a quotation describing how Ahab has "driven one leg to death" (qtd in 215) like John. Additionally, Jean's book features a single quotation describing Ahab as "a queer man... but a good one" (qtd in 37) as a reflection on John first taking charge of his (family) crew on board the *Emerald Jane*. Interestingly, Jean's quote is very positive--emphasizing John's ability and experience. Her three other allusions are also primarily positive, playing on her children's perceptions of John as a "monster Ahab" (25) and "the Ahab of their fears" (43) with whom she identifies as equally responsible. The third allusion describes John's great weakness when he is "lashed to the white boat [by the fallen mast] as surely as Ahab was tangled to his great whale" (28). These references both echo and subvert images of Ahab (and John) as tragic hero. While, like Ahab (and Chris), John risked his life and crew in passionate pursuit of a goal, his death was averted by the responsibility his family practiced toward him and by his sense of responsibility to them--his refusal to leave.

John takes up the story of *Moby Dick* in greater detail than Jean. His first chapter closes with a quotation regarding Ahab's (and his own) reaction to losing a leg. The mourning of that loss figures centrally in John's narrative, alongside his struggle to make sense of the wreck. However, John soon describes an even stronger connection to the book, writing "I *so understood that story now* [after the wreck]. What a course it was in literature that long night!" (155).²⁴ In a significant way, illusion helped John through the wreck and through his recovery. Recognizing the connection between his life and the imaginative story of *Moby Dick* enabled him to practice responsibility with in spite of his

²⁴ John also notes that "the *Pequod*, Captain Ahab's ship... sailed to its imaginary end just up on the equator northwest of our doom."

intense vulnerability and loss. His continued reflection emphasizes the inevitability of risk and loss:

I understood now how you can pay a great price to be so compelled to meet Life head on, how you can tangle in your own ropes and go down with the monster, or nearly so, and how it can take your leg or as much as seems right for the sacrifice to Life. It will eventually get all of you, so why wait around half-dead somewhere when you can get into it right now for the small price of a limb or what have you? (155-156)

Like Krakauer (and Chris), John recognizes the inevitability of death and loss and argues for a practice of freedom as responsibility as opposed to a pursuit of freedom over/from. Like Gzowski (and Brent and Donna), he invokes the language of sacrifice to describe the cost of freedom as responsibility--the paradox of co-constitution, of consuming and being consumed in the practice of freedom. Like Jean, he affirms the value of freedom as responsibility in spite of overwhelming vulnerability: better to be doing something than standing waiting for death. In contrast with Ahab (or perhaps in defense of him), John portrays his own drive not as a reckless obsession (though it did end in a wreck), but rather as a full-hearted pursuit of the beauty of life (214). On the other hand, perhaps John lived because of a reckless responsibility, in spite of severe trauma and blood loss.

In addition to his literary entanglements, John marks various historical connections. Toward the end, he attempts to explain the crash, saying "I think we drifted farther than we realized [while fixing the broken boom bracket], and somehow our electronic compass was not working with the autopilot" (209). However, he also wonders whether their charts might have been faulty--due to their potentially being

charted by William Bligh just prior to the mutiny on the *Bounty* (161). John explains, "I expect... our error came from elsewhere [than the charts], but I do not know for certain" (161). Nonetheless, he notes that that distant historic event may have critically impacted his family. This is just one example of John's assertion that "history... can catch up with you" (161). He writes that "there was so much history along the way [of their journey]" (153). And later, "in our last evening on the sea, we sailed among the ghosts of mariners past, ...where gold-seekers and missionaries and so many others had sailed" (155). Throughout the trip, in addition to their entanglements with family, ship and others, the Silverwoods were deeply entangled in histories of seafaring, exploration and violence. They were never self-constituting, autonomous subjects, but were always already shaped by their social vulnerability and co-constitution. Most critically, their story was entangled with that of the *Julia Ann*.

Near the beginning of Book II, John writes that "this ship, the *Julia Ann*, was our sister ship in the book of fate, and I became quite attached to her captain and crew and her passengers, who were remarkable people. We had shared a reef, shared a long night, and shared a sunrise" (151). Like Gzowski, John clearly reveals the bodies he has cannibalized in his own act of meaning-making. As those on the *Julia Ann* were "remarkable," so were the crew and passengers of the *Emerald Jane*, his family. Conversely, John contributes his own pen to the history of the *Julia Ann*; as he takes it into himself, he also gives of himself, marking the body by his presence, by this act of consumption. He writes, "memory serves me well to emotionally understand what they were experiencing" (174). His story is entwined with the story of the *Julia Ann*--each is

co-constituted with the other. They are connected by a shared bodily experience of vulnerability on the reef.

Patriarchy

Interestingly, as John narrates the wreck of the *Emerald Jane* in terms of the wreck of the *Julia Ann*, he does not identify himself with Captain Pond. While he assumes an identification with Captain Ahab and with Captain William Bligh (154), he seems reluctant to mark himself as captain of the wreck, claiming marginal identifications with a tragic hero and a legendary tyrant rather than with the more successful and classically heroic Pond. Jean repeatedly identifies him as the captain on their voyage (36, 66, 99) and even after he is pinned beneath the mast (17, 36). However, in John's telling of the wreck, Ben is figured as the captain (200). Although John's captaincy could be implied, he only figures himself as captain in light of his vulnerability and inability to respond: "there is nothing quite like... the feeling that, as captain, you have failed to protect those in your care, and that they might die on account of your error or weakness" (200). His assumption of power extends as far as the limitations of his vulnerability. However, even this limited assumption is ultimately subverted. In contrast with what might be a generic figuring of patriarchal dominance, John is marked by his vulnerability.

From the beginning, while his journey is compared to Ahab's mad pursuit, it is dependent upon his family's response to him. Jean decides they should pursue the voyage and thus claims (equal) responsibility for it and the subsequent wreck (25). Additionally, Jean figures his fall into alcoholism as grounded in her (and the family's) irresponsibility toward him (57). Thus, John's vulnerability is central to his captaincy and power. The

family is not on the voyage because he made an autonomous, patriarchal decision, but because of a family decision. He is co-constituted by and vulnerable to his family. This is especially foregrounded in the events of the wreck. Each of the family members enacts a certain responsibility toward him. Rather than being the source of power and responsibility who rescues his family from the danger into which he has brought them, the family rescues him from his own experience of vulnerability and loss. He is not the self-constituting, patriarchal source of meaning and power, but a vulnerable co-constituted member of the family, ultimately dependent upon their responsibility to him--as he practices responsibility to (freedom with) them, rather than exercising a power over (freedom from/over) them. This inversion of patriarchy also resonates with the other two books--Chris's rejection of patriarchal dominance is central to Krakauer's narrative and Don Johnson's sacrifice for his family also subverts norms of patriarchal exploitation (and consumption). Certainly power continues to circulate in each of these stories (as it must), but it is fundamentally altered by the recognition of mutual vulnerability and co-constitution. The practice of freedom as responsibility (freedom with)--especially as demonstrated in the Silverwoods' story--undermines conventional patriarchal deployments of power.

Extreme(s of) Responsibility

Toward the end of his book, John makes two significant comments about responsibility and co-constitution. First, he writes that, as he lay dying and Jean struggled to save him, "she was not interested in merging with nature, accepting mortality" (193). Although responsibility is grounded in mutual co-constitution and vulnerability, it is not an abandonment of self to the group or the environment. Freedom

with implies multiple identities, not a singular "we." Responsibility is not assimilation. This is why the contest is central. It is the continual negotiation between self and other-- between I and thou²⁵ (or I and it), always thought in relation to each other. This negotiation is not a zero-sum game but a continual, temporal practice of freedom. As Gonzales points out, the acceptance of vulnerability is paradoxically the grounds for meaningful struggle. What Alford terms "the paradox of freedom with" is most visible in Jean's raging struggle to free the life raft (94-95). As she is consumed by her desire to free the raft in order to save John, she becomes a singular force of will, "struggling under one wave for my mate and my offspring, and under the next for myself" (95)--both consumed and consuming as she responds to the ocean and the loss of the *Emerald Jane*.

In contrast with this frenzied struggle against mortality, John notes another useful practice of freedom. In the last chapter of his book, he writes that "happy endings do not usually come clean-cut. The survivors [of his two wrecks] struggled for months" (204). Returning home does not negate the need for mourning; it does not undo the changes wrought by an experience, especially one as life-altering as the wreck of the *Emerald Jane*. While there is certainly room for resistance or struggle, he explains in parallel to Butler that there comes a point for letting go, for "accepting pain when there's no other choice" (210). John calls this a "fisherman's reef" in recollection of a trick learned on the *Emerald Jane* during a particularly powerful storm. He explains how, when the wind threatened to tip the boat on his training voyage, he was taught how to let the sail go in the middle of a storm. While he does not mention using the technique with his family on board the *Emerald Jane*, he employs it metaphorically after returning home. He says,

²⁵ A more detailed analysis would have to consider Martin Buber's discussion of I and thou.

"that's what I did, finally, when the whole amputee thing was too much wind on me. Just let it go loose and fly by" (213). Responsibility sometimes means letting go and surrendering the contest into the hands of community. This is part of the strange and difficult practice of freedom as responsibility: knowing when you are too vulnerable to continue the contest and being able to let go and depend on the responses of others. Of course, this is ideally predicated on a responsible social environment--on bodies which have flesh to give for your consumption and which are willing do so. John explains that the strength of his family "infused [him], giving [him] the will to survive" (184). Alternatively, this might be a radical acceptance which recognizes that some conditions cannot be changed, some vulnerabilities are overwhelming. Perhaps it is a matter of distinguishing between meanings which one has the power to contest and those against which one is rendered powerless by vulnerability--a fine distinction, indeed.

Conclusion

The subtitle of this book, *A Family's Adventure at Sea and the Disaster that Saved Them*, early marks the Silverwoods' particular engagement with freedom as responsibility grounded in vulnerability. In spite of the wonders, trials and growth they experienced throughout their journey, the wreck marks a critical transformation. As their journey nears its end, Jean still questions the future of their marriage and John still stalwartly pursues his dreams--perhaps at the expense of the family. The wreck changes that. Ben and Amelia grow up, a point both parents belabour, and John makes a fundamental decision to stay with his family in spite of mortal vulnerability. Whether as a result of his family's support and response to him, as John argues, or as a result of his decision not to leave his family again, as Jean argues--probably as a result of both--John

lives through the experience in spite of losing most of his blood and suffering exposure and the loss of a limb. This critical vulnerability becomes a rallying point for the entire family as they work to save Dad. In contrast with the father's sacrifice in *The Sacrament*, giving his body for his children, here the family members give of themselves to save their father. This is in some ways a much more radical practice of responsibility--predicated on their social co-constitution and mutual vulnerability. The journey was John's dream, yet his family worked to make sure he returned from it.

This picture of family is a singular realization of freedom as responsibility--enacted through a contest of meaning. Their journey was not entirely happy or free of disagreement, but ebbed and flowed; however, faced with crushing vulnerability, the contest shifted and they became mutually responsible and responsive in new ways. Conversely, their social co-constitution reached far beyond the family, as John makes clear in his portion of the text. They followed numerous and diverse histories throughout their journey--both taking of the world and contributing to it. This is especially clear in the form of the text itself: the Silverwoods write their own (hi)story into various sites, while marking other (hi)stories--other voices of contest--from the passengers and crew of the *Julia Ann*, to the *Bounty*, to the *Pequod*. Furthermore, their own history is not a singular marking, but a blending of voices, a contested story, a space of contested meaning and a responsible story born from a practice of freedom with. Additionally, their engagement with these various fictional and historic narratives foregrounds the importance of illusion--as the capacity to bring imagination and reality into mutual contact--to the practice of freedom as responsibility. They are able to use culture to

enable their own practice of freedom with--to struggle or surrender as the situation requires, to respond in meaningful ways.

Perhaps that is what comes of autobiographical cannibalism: recognition of histories and relationships both near and distant to oneself. The question then becomes not a matter of legislating against this form of consumption, against the injuries we (may) suffer at the hands of others, but of being responsible in our cannibalism. As Butler reminds us, "we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own" (28). To wilfully ignore that co-constitution except in the face of disaster is our loss--of freedom and perhaps even of the conditions of life itself. In John's closing words, "why should anyone have to work so hard to see and feel and live the beauty of life? It's all around us" (214).

Chapter 6: Conclusion

"When we act freely (and thus exhibit the kind of control that grounds moral responsibility...), we are, to put it metaphorically, writing a sentence in the stories of our lives."

- John Martin Fischer, *Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death, and Free Will*

Each of these texts wrestles with freedom in terms of responsibility grounded in recognition of mutual vulnerability by engaging in a contest for meaning. Krakauer stages his own bodily vulnerability alongside Chris'. He suggests that death is a matter of chance rather than any (inhuman) desire. Life is always at stake in the practice of freedom, on both social and physical levels, and vulnerability is not a secondary characteristic of human, bodily existence, but rather a defining factor--we are human, we exist socially, because we are vulnerable.

Gzowski takes this further, figuring our co-constitution as an act of (cannibalistic) sacrament. We consume what (or who) we love and are consumed in turn. No act or person is self-extant; rather each of us represents a convergence of (hi)stories. The storyteller is simply one who is more obviously implicated in this co-constitution. Fischer eloquently argues that freedom is not an absolute control of (our) story, but the ability to alter it--we write sentences, but this does not exclude the influence of other authors.

For the Silverwoods, the recognition of this co-constitution is the very site of greatest freedom. We are free (to respond) only as we accept that we do not self-generate our stories in their entirety. The task is to accept our stories, to own them, as it were, and to respond as if they were our own, in spite of our vulnerability. Responsibility is

predicated on an awareness of overwhelming impotence, but depends on illusion; flip-flops against sharp coral and a pounding surf are nothing, but they can make the difference between life and death. Conversely, responsibility sometimes manifests as a loss of identity and control--an overwhelming experience of loss and mourning, as Butler terms it; knowing when to let go and depend upon a (hopefully) responsible community is critical for the practice of freedom.

In contemporary culture, freedom continues to be deployed for political ends, as a tool of power, rather than a negotiation of power--free speech, free market, free election, free country and so on. Certainly these terms can be useful in terms of the illusion necessary for responsibility, but too often they are staged in absolute, concrete terms. While we may find such deployments unsettling and potentially exploitative, the problems often remain unintelligible and unrecognizable until they impact us bodily. At such times, the political contest for meaning becomes particularly relevant. However, we are only equipped to engage in the political contest to the degree we engage in social contest for meaning, both seeking intelligibility and recognition and extending them (however temporarily) to others.

The concept of freedom as responsibility (or freedom with) provides a way to negotiate the subjective experiences of vulnerability, pain and loss without recourse to oppressive figurations of power/knowledge and mutually exclusive (either-or) interpretations of events. It allows for multiple voices and explanations whose truth does not depend on the eradication of dissent and other (inhuman) speaking bodies. In terms of my opening anecdote, conceiving freedom as responsibility allows recognition of the tangled responsibilities and vulnerabilities of Chris and his family. Chris was not a

monster seeking to harm his family and himself, nor was he a paragon of virtue, abandoning earthly connections in pursuit of freedom; rather, he was simply, vulnerably human. When we recognize this mutual vulnerability, we are able to engage in a contest for meaning which is not zero-sum--in which recognition is mutual and freedom is a shared experience.

The recent discussion of Facebook's facial recognition technology provides a relevant point of engagement in the heart of modern social practices. In an article for *PC World*, Megan Geuss explores the technology in terms of privacy concerns, rendering loss of privacy as loss of control (and thus a loss of freedom from/over). In parallel, she notes the problem of mis-identification in terms of being "implicate[d] in dubious activities" ("Facebook Facial Recognition: Its Quiet Rise and Dangerous Future"). However, this discussion figures freedom as a problem of legislation--of privacy rights and juridical oversight; facial recognition is only *really* a problem when it impinges on my comfort and control. In contrast, I contend that the technology is problematic not in terms of power relations, but in terms of contested meanings. Certainly power is not absent, but what facial recognition removes is precisely the act of recognition and its grounding in social contest. Instead of negotiating the meaning of my (human) body in response to/with (human) others, meaning is assigned by (inhuman) decree. When recognition and intelligibility cease to be negotiable, responsibility becomes irrelevant, if not impossible; when vulnerability is no longer mutual, life is reduced to a binary of exploited/exploiter and freedom becomes a zero-sum game. Furthermore, under the name of "convenience," mourning becomes a virtual impossibility; there has been no loss--relations are always already one-sided and constitution is a singular act of

automation. As meaning is made through (inter)action, it is unmade by the removal of (inter)action. When we engage in a shared contest for meaning and recognize our co-constitution, there is no definitively free act--because there is no definitive recognition or meaning--but there are singular practices and experiences of freedom.

Recognition is never complete, especially as life continues to ebb and flow around us; freedom (as responsibility/with), like mourning, is an ongoing, contextual practice. Responsibility is, in this sense, a bottleneck--not a stoppage, but a point of contact and friction wherein we both recognize our inescapable vulnerability to loss and act (live) as if we have nothing to lose. Recognition and acceptance are never fixed amounts, but continuing processes of narration and negotiation with countless co-constitutive and co-constituting authors that continuously re-contextualize and re-problematize freedom in singular ways. This is the paradox of Chris's life and death, of Brent and Donna's cannibalism, and of the Silverwoods' life-giving disaster.

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