AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Amy Kennedy for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on September 14, 2015.

Title: Running Athwart the Human: Queer (Un)Intelligibility and Animal Connections in Justin Torres’ *We the Animals* and Mario Bellatín’s *Beauty Salon*

Abstract approved:

______________________________________________________
Evan Gottlieb and Christina A. León

This thesis examines notions of social unintelligibility produced within queer spaces in two primary texts: Justin Torres’ *We the Animals* and Mario Bellatín’s *Beauty Salon*. Chapter One discusses the racial and queer marginalization of the unnamed narrator and explores his turn towards an “animal language” in his moment of exposure before his family. In order to articulate the family’s misrecognition of the narrator, I read the final scene of the novel through Judith Butler’s “Giving An Account of Oneself.” Chapter Two examines the ways in which the queer, isolated community in *Beauty Salon* experiences social unintelligibility as they are threatened by violence of the outside world. In this chapter, I employ Butler’s notions of precarity and mourning to show how the community’s need to mourn is disavowed and their relationality with others is foreclosed. Finally, I am attentive to the ways in which the narratives loosen up at the conclusion of both *We the Animals* and *Beauty Salon*. Each of these endings lacks closure and the characters’ futures remain ambiguous — and, in turn, create the possibility for new connections and becomings.
Running Athwart the Human: Queer (Un)Intelligibility and Animal Connections in Justin Torres’ *We the Animals* and Mario Bellatin’s *Beauty Salon*

by

Amy Kennedy

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Presented September 14, 2015
Commencement June 2016
Master of Arts thesis of Amy Kennedy presented on September 14, 2015

APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing English

Director of the School of Writing, Literature, and Film

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

____________________________
Amy Kennedy, Author
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’d like to first offer sincere thanks to my fantastic committee. Evan Gottlieb, thank you for supporting my project in all of its developments and for your guidance and encouragement throughout the entire process. Christina León, I was thrilled when you were interested in becoming co-director with Evan for my thesis. Thank you for introducing me to the gorgeous novels that I worked with and for your willingness to talk through ideas at every stage of my writing. To Ray Malewitz, thank you for serving on my committee and for your fantastic feedback. And thank you Susan Shaw for graciously agreeing to serve as my Graduate Council Representative.

To my cohort—I have loved getting to share life with all of you during my time here and am so grateful for your friendship. To all my amazing roommates (and fellow MAs!): André Habet, Kaely Horton, Kristen Burkett, and Hayley Trowbridge. Thank you for all the laughter, late night talks, shared meals, and movie nights; these past two years definitely wouldn’t have been as wonderful without all of you.

To my partner, Erik. Thank you for your love and support this last year—I know I’ve been more than a little difficult at times. Thank you for essentially being my right hand when I broke my dominant wrist at the start of the year, as you helped me with all of my everyday tasks from opening a water bottle to attempting to put my hair into a ponytail. This past year has had lots of new challenges and you have encouraged me through all of them.

And to my family—my parents, Anne and Brad Kennedy, and my brother Jake and sister Jill—I couldn’t have done any of this without your love. I am so fortunate to have the incredible family that I do.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter I: “I Behaved Like an Animal”: Exposure and Ethical Responsibility in Justin Torres’ *We the Animals* | 7 |

Chapter II: “No One Cares if a Fish Disappears”: Precarity and Ungrievability in Mario Bellatín’s *Beauty Salon* | 28 |

Works Consulted | 55 |
“Queer theory has long been suspicious of the politics of rehabilitation and inclusion to which liberal-humanist values lead and because ‘full-humanity’ has never been the only horizon for queer becoming…The queer, we could say, runs across or athwart the human. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reminds us, ‘The word ‘queer’ itself means across—it comes from the Indo-European root –twerkw, which also yields the German quer (traverse), Latin torquere (to twist), English athwart.’ To say that the queer transverses the human is to understand their relation as contingent rather than stable: it needs to be read up from particular situations, not proclaimed from above” (189).

~Dana Luciano and Mel Chen from “Has the Queer Ever Been Human”

“We struggle in, from and against precarity. Thus, it is not from pervasive love for humanity or a pure desire for peace that we strive to live together. We live together because we have no choice, and though we sometimes rail against that unchosen condition, we remain obligated to struggle to affirm the ultimate value of that unchosen social world, and affirmation that is not quite a choice, a struggle that makes itself known and felt precisely when we exercise freedom in a way that is necessarily committed to the equal value of lives.”

~Judith Butler from “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation
In July 2015 a Minnesota dentist named Walter Palmer traveled to Zimbabwe to hunt and kill a lion named Cecil—a popular lion at a Zimbabwean national park. Palmer paid 50,000 to hire professional guides who helped him plan and then carry out the attack on Cecil—a practice known as “trophy hunting.” Palmer’s slaughter of Cecil quickly went viral and it sparked massive public outrage and disgust. Soon after this story surfaced, Roxane Gay wrote a piece for the New York Times called “Of Lions and Men: Mourning Samuel DuBose and Cecil the Lion.” In this piece, Gay mentions a comment she tweeted: “I’m personally going to start wearing a lion costume when I leave my house so if I get shot, people will care.” Although she says this tweet was a joke, her piece addresses how the endless list of black lives brutally subjected to violence in this country typically do not carry the “same emotional tenor” as the shooting of Cecil. Gay does not suggest that Cecil’s life should have been mourned less than it was—for this was, without a doubt, a cruel attack on a valuable life. But she does bring to our attention how some deaths are far more publicly mourned than others. As she writes, “A late-night television host did not cry on camera this week for human lives that have been lost. He certainly doesn’t have to. He did, however, cry for a lion and that’s worth thinking about.”

Some of the larger issues Roxane Gay’s piece addresses relate to my own project—issues such as social intelligibility, vulnerable bodies, and the question of whose life counts as a grievable life. The questions central to my work on Justin Torres’ *We the Animals* and Mario Bellatin’s *Beauty Salon* are: How is the category of the human produced? Who falls within the category of the human? What happens when a being is excluded from that category? What connections are created as a result of this exclusion? As I take up these questions, I also turn to
Judith Butler’s “Giving an Account of Oneself” and *Precarious Life*, especially as I focus on notions of vulnerability, mourning, and precarity. Butler’s examination of what constitutes livable lives and grievable deaths is linked to the ways in which vulnerability is distributed unevenly in particular social spaces. Because some bodies and groups are made more vulnerable to death and violence than others, their lives are rendered more precarious and their deaths often go unnoticed. Finally, I consider how animality functions in each novel and the ways in which categories of the human and animal are blurred—thus, creating spaces for other forms of relationality.

In both *We the Animals* and *Beauty Salon*, the central characters inhabit spaces and communities that are small and isolated, sometimes to the point of being restrictive. In *We the Animals*, the narrator’s family lives in a white, working class neighborhood. The narrator’s father is Puerto Rican and his mother is white, and so the three brothers (of which the narrator is one) are the “half-breed” offspring. The family—especially the three boys—is often marginalized from their neighborhood community and so they create their own, insular world, with its own “language,” rules, and rituals. In *Beauty Salon*, the physical space in which the characters live (and die) is radically hermetic and isolated from outside influence. In this novella, the narrator who owns and operates a beauty salon transforms it into “the Terminal.” Once the salon is converted, the narrator allows dying men—who are all infected with the same disease (as is the narrator himself)—to live out their final days there. The narrator only allows the sickest men, whose bodies are “unrecognizable,” entrance into the Terminal; once they enter, they stay and die there. The Terminal is regularly subjected to violence and threats from the neighborhood, which does not want the disease to spread beyond the Terminal’s walls and infect the larger community. The isolation experienced in each of these novels is of a different nature: in *We the
Animals, the family experiences marginalization and so turns in on itself, while in Beauty Salon the confinement of the “guests” at the Terminal is far more urgent. As I have explored the confined spaces (figuratively and literally) in which the characters exist, I have been interested in examining how the novels deal with notions of belonging.

In We the Animals, the narrator initially belongs within his tight-knit family structure, but as the novel progresses, he begins to recognize his difference from the others of his family—namely, his queerness. As already explained, the narrator, along with the rest of his family, is marginalized from their neighborhood community, primarily because of their racial difference. As the narrator gradually perceives his alienation from his family because of his queerness, he experiences a sense of exclusion that is doubled. In Beauty Salon, the isolation of the guests at the Terminal is present from the opening pages, and their separation from the outside community occurs because of their unnamed disease, which—although not explicit—is primarily a result of their queerness. The narrator mentions that he is a transvestite, as are his coworkers from his days of running the beauty salon. Queerness here is more subtle than in We the Animals, but the narrator does mention the all-male bathhouses he used to visit, his “intimate” relations with one of the dying guests, and the “traders” who exchange sexual favors for money. The dying men at the Terminal all are inflicted with the same shameful disease—a disease that appears to be related to their sexuality. In both We the Animals and Beauty Salon, then, the central characters are cast out of their respective communities because of their queerness and their inability to conform to normative categories of the human. Although it would seem as though the narrator in We the Animals is more radically alone in his exclusion from his family than are the guests at the Terminal, since they all live in the same shared space, this is not necessarily the case. From the narrator’s perspective (and we are only allowed his perspective), his continued time at the
Terminal makes him feel more alone and isolated than ever in his life. Besides the narrator’s intimate contact with the one guest, the guests seem to have no relationship with each other—in fact, they are all nameless and the narrator never discusses any of the guests with specific detail (again, apart from the one mentioned guest). In both works, the characters’ isolation seems to occur primarily as a result of their queerness, which forces them to disavow their connections to others and results in their social unintelligibility.

In order to make better sense of this social unintelligibility, I read both novels through the lens of Judith Butler’s theories in “Giving an Account of Oneself” and Precarious Life. Although Butler’s earlier works are more focused on notions of gender performativity and queerness, I choose to focus on two of her later pieces because I am drawn to their formulations regarding vulnerability, ethical responsibility, precarity, and mourning. In my chapter on We the Animals, I use Butler’s ideas to show how the narrator’s exposure before his family members results in their misrecognition of him, and his subsequent unintelligibility to them (and himself). In my chapter on Beauty Salon, my attention is still towards social unintelligibility, but of a different sort. In this chapter, I mobilize Butler’s concept of precarity—which describes how certain populations are made more vulnerable to death and violence through social/ economic/ political institutions that deny them protection—to consider how the lives of the guests inside the Terminal are rendered ungrievable. I am particularly interested in Butler’s work because in both “Giving an Account” and Precarious Life, she is concerned with questions of relationality and with what happens when a person’s or population’s relations to others are foreclosed. As she explains, our social existence is established on the basis of our relationality to others; therefore, when a being’s connections to others are disavowed, that being is made socially unintelligible.
In *We the Animals*, I argue that the crucial scene is the “encounter” between the narrator and his family at the conclusion of the novel. Because Butler’s “Giving an Account” is keenly focused on a singular event—the moment of encounter when one is exposed and vulnerable before others—I carefully analyze this one scene as it relates to Butler’s articulation of the event. My scope in this chapter, then, is on a smaller, more focused scale. This is necessary to explore how “encounters” with others establish our responsibility for their lives, since this encounter creates the option of either responding to the other with ethical responsibility or with violence. My work in the second chapter builds on these foundations, since I am still interested in notions of ethical responsibility and unintelligibility. The second chapter, however, does not focus on the singular encounter with others, but rather on encounters of a wider scale, as I explore how social/political/economic institutions deny protection and support to the “guests” at the Terminal, thereby creating their precarity. While the guests at the Terminal are far more physically isolated from the outside world and their circumstances are more immediately dire than the family’s in *We the Animals*, the influence of social and economic forces as they affect the lives of the guests are also more explicit in *Beauty Salon*.

In addition to the issues raised by Butler’s work, another essential commonality between these two novels is their focus on animality. In *We the Animals*, animality is established through the characters’ comparison to animals and animal behavior, and sometimes the characters are dehumanized. As I trace multiple ways animality functions in the novel, I also read the final “encounter” scene between the narrator and his family for the ways in which the narrator “becomes animal.” In *Beauty Salon*, the animal focus is on the fish inside the aquariums. As I show, the fish often serve as a way for the narrator to externalize his emotional attachments for the guests at the Terminal. Unlike the narrator’s turn towards animality at the conclusion of the
*We the Animals*, the narrator in *Beauty Salon* actually turns away from animality in the final pages. In both novels, I am interested in how the categories of human and animal “rub on, and against, each other, generating friction and leakage” (Luciano and Chen 186).

Although animal studies scholars like Kelly Oliver have criticized Butler’s work for being too anthropocentric, I employ Butler’s theories in my work because notions of vulnerability and precarity are extremely salient as they relate to animality. It is our exposure, vulnerability, finitude, and our capacity to be hurt that makes bodies precarious—and these are all traits that we share with animal others. Shared vulnerability creates our sociality and interdependency and establishes our responsibility for others’ lives. If we recognize that vulnerability, exposure, and finitude are the basis of our relationality to others, then animal attachments and connections are entirely plausible—even if they run athwart to our expectations.

Finally, I am attentive to the ways in which the narratives break down and loosen up at the conclusion of both *We the Animals* and *Beauty Salon*. Each of these endings lacks closure and the characters’ futures remain ambiguous. I am fascinated by the movement in these novels from insular, restrictive spaces and communities to their endings that “open up.” I read *We the Animals* and *Beauty Salon* for ways in which the characters’ lives are made unintelligible, especially as these lives do not conform to categories of the human. Both novels, though, force us to go without closure—and, in turn, create the possibility for new connections and becomings.
Chapter One

“I Behaved Like an Animal”: Exposure and Ethical Responsibility in Justin Torres’

*We the Animals*

At an intense moment in Justin Torres’ *We the Animals*, Paps—the father in the novel—avows: “‘We’re never gonna escape this…Nobody…Not us. Not them. Nobody’s ever escaping this.’ He raised his head and swept his arm out in front of him. ‘This’” (60). *We the Animals*, published in 2011, revolves around a family living in a poor, working class, and predominately white community in upstate New York. The family consists of Paps, who is Puerto Rican, Ma, who is white, and the three “half breed” boys. The youngest of the three boys is the unnamed narrator of the novel, although the narrative voice is typically told from the perspective of “we” as the narrator speaks for himself and for his brothers. When Paps declares that the family will never escape “this,” he is seemingly referring to their poverty, to their narrow chance at escaping their socio-economic position. The family’s lives, and particularly the boys’ lives, are made even more difficult by the fact that they do not fit easily into their larger community because of their mixed racial status. The family, because of this exclusion, turns in on itself and the novel is almost entirely focused on the family—with infrequent reference to the world outside the family. Just as the family’s social situation seems unchangeable, the boys’ positions within the family appear fixed as well, as they are presented with the violent nature of their father and the weak nature of their mother. Throughout the novel, the boys attempt to negotiate their place within the familial norms and order, but as the novel progresses, the narrator’s difference from the family begins to concretize—namely, because of his queerness. As I analyze belonging within the novel, I also trace some of the ways in which characters are compared to animals—as they are
described in terms of their animality and as they are dehumanized. In the latter half of the chapter, I read the final scene of “encounter,” when the narrator’s queerness is revealed to the family and the narrator retreats into an unintelligible “animal” language. This scene—in which the narrator is “exposed” to his family and is undone by their “ferocious” gaze—coincides with Judith Butler’s discussion of an ethical encounter with the “Other” in “Giving an Account of Oneself.” I am most concerned with Butler’s notions of vulnerability and misrecognition as they relate to this final scene, since I argue that it is the narrator’s inability to be “recognized” by his family that causes his unintelligibility. As I analyze the narrative breakdown at the end of the novel, I also explore the ways in which the ambiguous ending leaves room for alternate possibilities and openings that are foreclosed to the narrator by his family.

In *We the Animals*, both the narrator’s parents and the boys are often compared to animals or described in terms of their animality. In a scene where the boys are sitting in the tub, watching their parents make love, the narrator explains:

> We saw everything—how our skin was darker than Ma’s but lighter than Pap’s, how Ma was slight and nimble, with ribs softly stepping down from her breasts, how Paps was muscled…He was like an animal, our father, ruddy and physical and instinctive…Ma’s shoulders were clipped, slipping away from her tiny bird neck. She was just over five feet and light enough for Manny to lift, and when Paps called her fragile…he sometimes meant that she was easily broken. (45)

As the narrator describes, the parents represent antithetical sides of animality. Paps, who is Puerto Rican, is typically characterized by his strength and by his instinctual, “animal” impulses, often towards force and brutishness. Ma, who is white, is described here in bird-like terms, which indicates her fragility, and as the narrator mentions, implies weakness, since she is “easily
broken.” Throughout the novel, the parents have a volatile relationship: Paps is violent and abusive and Ma does not know how to defend herself against his cruelty. The parents seem to present two alternate ways of relating to world: Paps instinctively and aggressively acts out, while Ma is acted upon. In this scene, the brothers watch the parents and try to make sense of their own place within this complex relationship. As they recognize that their skin color is a shade somewhere between Ma’s and Paps’, the boys see that they both are and are not like their parents. Throughout much of the novel, the boys attempt to negotiate their place on either side of this dichotomy—and they are left with little alternative but to align with either Paps’ violence or Ma’s fragility.

The boys—as the offspring of their parents’ mixed-race relationship—are sometimes called “mutts” and “half-breeds,” even by their own father. At one point in the novel, Paps is dancing with the boys in the kitchen, and he asks them to dance in different ways: first as rich, then as poor, then as white, then as Puerto Rican. After the boys dance, the father says to them, “Mutts…You ain’t white and you ain’t Puerto Rican. Watch how a purebred dances,” and then the narrator comments, “He danced, and we tried to see what separated him from us” (10). The father in this scene defines the boys in negative terms; rather than them being both white and Puerto Rican, he says that they are neither white nor Puerto Rican. The father’s negation of the boys’ identities suggests that they do not easily fit into their fathers or mother’s racial identities—at least, not according to the father, who establishes the order of the family.

Just as the three brothers are sometimes separated from their parents because of their mixed-racial identity, they are also unable to fit properly into the larger community in which they live. At one point in the novel, the brothers speak to a white neighborhood boy, who is a few years older. The narrator observes, “This type of boy was everywhere around us, but mostly we
kept separate, us three half-breeds in our world, and the white-trash boys in theirs. We had been warned against them as they had against us” (90). Although much of Torres’ novel is centered on the narrator’s family, there are moments like these that indicate that they boys live in a white, working-class community, to which they do not fully belong. The children are warned against each other because of this pervasive fear of miscegenation.

In an earlier scene in the novel, the brothers invade the garden of an elderly neighbor. When they look around to see if they’ve been caught, the neighbor, whom they call Old Man, is watching them, and calls them “animals” and “locusts.” While he does not directly mention the boys’ race, his categorization of them as “locusts” suggests that he feels threatened by the boys on racial terms. In Mel Chen’s book, Animacies, she discusses how human beings have created a system of hierarchizing animals, resembling a “great chain of being,” in which different animals are deemed more or less important, often based on how much they conform to qualities that are like humans. Humans are, of course, at the top of this animal hierarchy, as the “subjective” beings. Chen explains, “Many nuances of racism, while in some ways articulated around “race,” are themselves felt upon many complex animacy hierarchies (animality being one), each of which can potentially implicate directly the charge of racial abjection without reference to race itself” (35). In other words, sometimes when humans are associated with “lower” animals within an animal hierarchy, they are dehumanized because of their race, even when race is not directly mentioned.

Such dehumanization that is racially marked also happens in major media sources. Researcher Santa Ana Otto, in the article "Like an Animal I Was Treated' Anti-immigrant Metaphor in US Public Discourse,” reports findings of a case study that examine metaphors found in the 1994 Los Angeles Times. Otto explains how the dominant metaphor used to describe
immigrants in the *Times* is related to “immigrants are animals” as “animals to be lured, pitted or baited, whether the token was intended to promote a pro-immigrant or an anti-immigrant point of view” (200). The fact that even pro-immigrant articles use animal-metaphor language suggests that they too have been infected by language that dehumanizes racial groups. Otto’s article shows how, when immigrants are associated with animals through metaphor, they are ascribed a “non-citizen” status, since animals do not have a citizen, legal-rights status. This example shows one way that racialized others are dehumanized because they do not conform to the dominant cultural standards; in this case, because they do not have “rights” as the so-called “legitimate” United States citizens do.

To return again to the scene in the garden with Old Man, his label of the boys as “locusts” dehumanizes them along racial lines because a locust is a highly invasive, unwanted species. The boys ask Old Man to explain what locusts are to them, and the narrator says, “Old Man spoke crooked and singsong—a Missouri accent, it turned out—and we didn’t understand half the words he used, but locusts, the threat and possibility of locusts seized our imaginations…We even made him draw us a picture of locusts, a flurry of black marker dashes near the top of the page, the sky, more and more dashes…until the top half of the page was filled with black” (34). The boys, although they do not understand the man’s “language” very well, are both terrified and mesmerized by the threat of locusts, which indicates their own ambivalence towards this impending threat. Old Man’s drawing of the locusts taking over suggests that he is threatened, not merely by the boys stealing all of his vegetables, but by them as racialized others populating his community. Locusts are often associated with plagues, with invasion, with destroying land. Locusts, as an unwanted animal species, would certainly be low on an animal
hierarchy. Therefore, Old Man is able to dehumanize the boys through his designation of them as animals, specifically as locusts.

Because the brothers are often not recognized within the social context of their community, they are always together and form their own “tribe,” sometimes creating their own, shared “language”. Even the narrative voice reflects this unity in its use of the plural “we” as it speaks for all of the brothers. These boys create their own clan and they are always together. At one point, the narrator remarks, “When we three were together, we spoke in unison, one voice for all, our cave language” (25). The boys’ identities are closely bound up with one another, and even as they argue and fight, they always seem to speak the same language. Additionally, although there are moments in the novel when the boys feel separated from the parents, there are other times when the family shares the same language as well. In a chapter called “Night Watch,” Paps has to take the boys to his night shift with him, since their mother is also working night shifts. Paps is not allowed to have the boys with him at work, and although he attempts to hide them, a man who works after Paps sees the boys. The two men talk privately, and while it is unclear what goes on between them, Paps is obviously deeply upset and there is an implication that he has lost his job. On the drive home, Paps “started making odd, wheezy, gasping noises. He slammed the dashboard with his palm, then closed his fist and started thumping with force, but slow and steady, as if he was beating down a nail” (58). The boys are unsure if their father is crying; they have never seen him act this way before. Eventually, as the narrator explains: “Joel started smacking his own fist against the window, in time with Paps…Then it was Manny against his window matching the beat. Paps didn’t turn back or acknowledge us at all; he just kept up his pounding, so I pounded on the hard plastic armrest in the middle, and it felt like we were building something, a tribe—us four together, us four angry and giddy and thump-crazy
together” (58-9). After the boys start chanting, they all break out in laughter, including Paps. The boys, although they do not necessarily understand Pap’s reaction to what happened with the other man, match the beats he is making and mimetically reproduce their own type of rhythmic “language.” The narrator’s words used to describe this language that Paps initiates and the boys mimic—words like “slamming,” “beating,” “thumping,” “pounding,” and “smacking”—are in line with Paps’ behavior throughout the novel, as he is often forceful and violent. The narrator’s comment that they are all four “angry and giddy” as they create this shared “language” in the car suggests the power that the father has over them, as they are swept up in his feelings of anger and frustration, but are also “giddy” with excitement. This giddiness is more difficult to account for, and could suggest their excitement in engaging in a shared experience, but also excitement in participating in an act that provides a sort of physical release. This scene highlights a moment when the father and boys attempt to create their own shared language and community, since this seems to redeem them in moments of anger.

Even though the brothers and family often form a small community with their own language, it becomes evident that the narrator is different from his brothers. In a chapter called “Niagara,” the narrator, for the first time in the novel, goes somewhere without his brothers. Paps takes the narrator out of school for a couple days to accompany him on a trip to Niagara Falls; the other two boys cannot go because they are flunking in school. While the father is running an errand, he leaves the narrator at a “little museum of curiosities,” and hands him some money. During the time the father is gone, the narrator decides to watch a three-minute film about men in barrels disappearing over the edge of the falls. This short film is projected on a loop, and the narrator watches it repeatedly. At one point, the narrator stands up in front of the projector, so that the waterfall is projected onto his body and he dances. He says that he pretended he was a
“mer-boy prince” and, “I danced a special underwater dance…spinning on my toes and looking down at my body, the water slipping and rushing over me, I slithered my arms and wiggled my hips against the current” (100). The narrator does not realize until afterwards that his father has been standing near the door, watching him dance. Paps does not immediately make any comment about his son’s dance, but then later in the car remarks, “I stood in that doorway, watching you dance, and you know what I was thinking?...I was thinking how pretty you were…Isn’t that an odd thing for a father to think about his son? But that’s what it was. I was standing there, watching you dance and twirl and move like that, and I was thinking to myself, Goddamn, I got me a pretty one” (101-2). This scene is the second dance scene in the novel—the first is when the boys dance in the kitchen with the father. In that scene, the boys dance together and the narrator describes the father’s dancing in this way: “He pursed his lips and kept one hand on his stomach. His elbow was bent, his back was straight, but somehow there was looseness and freedom and confidence in every move” and the father says to the boys about his own dancing, “This is your heritage” (10). In the first dancing scene, the father is teaching his sons what he believes is an important aspect of Puerto Rican culture and he wants them to emulate him. The narrator’s dancing in this later scene—which he performs by himself—does not, however, coincide with what the father has tried to teach his sons. The narrator pretends that he is a “mer-boy prince” and he spins and “slithers” and “wiggles,” rather than mimicking the father’s dance—as he mimics having a partner, with his elbow bent and back straight. Even though the father tries to teach the boys about their heritage, this scene indicates that the narrator does not conform to the father’s idea of Puerto Rican masculinity. The father, as he reflects on his experience of watching his son dance, calls his son “pretty,” a term that recognizes the femininity of the narrator. This dance scene is significant not only because the narrator is physically separated
from his brothers for the first time in the novel, but also because the father acknowledges the narrator’s difference from himself and likely from the other two sons as well.

The narrator’s distinction from his brothers and family continues to concretize after the dance scene just described. In the final chapters of the novel—beginning with the chapter “Niagara”—the pronoun shifts from “we,” to “them” and “I,” which designates the narrator’s recognized difference from the brothers. The narrator, in the first part of a chapter called “The Night I am Made,” observes the brothers and remarks on their toughness, on how they are boys who “spat in public... who looked you in the eye only to scare you off... They weren’t scared, or dispossessed, or fragile. They were possible” (105). The brothers, who emulate the toughness and power of the father, are contrasted with the narrator, who says, “Look at me. See me there with them, in the snow—both inside and outside their understanding. See how I made them uneasy. They smelled my difference—my sharp, sad, pansy scent” (105). While the father’s use of the term “pretty” to describe his son implicates femininity, the word “pansy” here is more definite in its designation of the narrator as queer and effeminate.

In a following scene that is marked by a contrast in language between the brothers, the narrator says:

Look at my brothers—their saggy clothes, their eyes circled like permanent bruises, their hangdog hungry faces. I felt trapped and hateful and shamed. Secretly, outside of the family, I cultivated a facility with language and a bitter spite. I kept a journal—in it, I sharpened insults against all of them, my folks, my brothers. I turned my eyes to them, a newly caustic gaze. I sensed a keen observation in myself, an intelligence, but sour (109). In this scene, the narrator refers to the brothers in dog-like terms, as he describes their “hangdog hungry faces,” which appears to dehumanize them. The narrator, in fact, feels superiority over
his brothers and his parents because of his “facility with language.” The narrator, as the “intelligent” one in the family, is able to use language to separate himself from his family, since he has the potential to escape their poverty because he is smart (although his intelligence does not guarantee an escape from poverty). While he maintains superiority over his family through his use of language, this is complicated by the fact that he still feels “trapped and hateful and shamed,” and while he is intelligent, he is also “sour.” The narrator appears to resent his difference from the brothers. A few moments later in the scene, the brothers mention how Ma tells them that the narrator is “capable of anything” because he is so “bright.” Joel, one of the brothers, also says: “And you know what else? She said you were capable of destroying yourself…the way she talks about you…like you’re a fucking crystal vase” (111). The brothers also call him a “fucking golden egg” and a “sacred lamb” (111). Ma’s use of the word “bright” relates to the narrator’s intelligence, since he is the smart one in the family who may be able to escape their poverty. It is also connected to the other phrases used here to describe the narrator: crystal vase, golden egg, and sacred lamb. All of these phrases contain an element of both whiteness/lightness and of fragility. The implication is that the narrator’s intelligence makes him more “white,” while it also makes him weaker and more vulnerable. This is related to the mother’s fragility described earlier, when the narrator mentions how she is “easily broken.” While the brothers emulate the toughness of the father, the narrator here is associated more with the mother—not necessarily in terms of intelligence, but instead with her whiteness, her fragility, and her femininity. The narrator does not align with the masculine norms of the family—as they are established by the father—and his queerness continues to concretize towards the end of the novel. I will turn to Judith Butler’s “Giving an Account of Oneself” to read the final scene of
encounter between the narrator and his family as they confront his queerness, as well as the ethical implications of the encounter.

In the chapter “The Night I Am Made,” the narrator tells of his first sexual experience with another man. The narrator explains, “For weeks I’d been sneaking to this bus station, lurking, indecisive. I hid in the stalls, peeked through the cracks. At the sink, I washed and washed my hands, unable to return the frank stares in the mirror. I didn’t know how to show these men I was ready” (113). Then, one night at the bus station, a bus driver allows the narrator into his empty bus, supposedly so the narrator can use the restroom. The narrator says, however, that the man stopped pretending and said to him, “You want me to make you…I’ll make you. I’ll make you.” There is no description of what happens between the men, only the declaration that the narrator is “made” and an implication that the bus driver has engaged in a sexual act with the narrator. This section of the chapter concludes with the narrator screaming “He made me! I’m made!” This chapter follows a linear narrative structure, as the narrator waits for the sexual experience, has the sexual experience, and declares that he has been radically changed by this experience. The narrator is, essentially, giving an account of his first sexual encounter as a gay man.

Immediately following the scene in which the narrator is “made,” the narrator tells of how his family discovers his queerness. He says:

They were gathered in the front room, and the air reeked of grief. The force of their eyes pushed me backward toward the door; never had I been looked at with such ferocity. Everything easy between me and my brothers and my mother and my father was lost…in that moment I realized that not just Ma, but each and every one of them had read the fantasies and delusions, the truth I had written in my little private book. (116-17)
This scene marks an “interruption” in the narrator’s supposed cohesive narrative about his sexual identity. As he is gazed upon forcefully and ferociously by the family, he simultaneously recognizes that the family has discovered his secret desire by reading his private journals. In Butler’s “Giving an Account,” she speaks about how, when a person attempts to give an account of her/himself, the account is always interrupted through an encounter with the Other. Butler explains, “There are, then, several ways in which the account I may give of myself has the potential to break apart and to become undermined. My efforts to give an account of myself founder in part upon the fact of my exposure to you, an exposure in spoken language and, in a different way, in written address as well” (27). When the narrator encounters the family, he is radically exposed to them, and this exposure occurs through both their violent gaze and through their reading of his private journal. In this encounter, the narrator’s account breaks apart; he goes from believing that he has been “made” by a sexual experience to feeling completely undone as he stands, vulnerable and exposed, in front of his family.

As Butler explains, the interruption of a person’s account always occurs because “we cannot exist without addressing the Other and without being addressed by the Other” (25). She writes, “In a sense, my account of myself is never fully mine, and is never fully for me, and I would like to suggest that this ‘interruption’ of the account always takes place through a loss of the sense of it being mine in any exclusive way” (26). In other words, we always exist in relation to the Other and while we may constantly attempt to give an account of ourselves, this account always fails because we can never fully know ourselves or the Other. The failure to give a complete account of oneself, then, reveals the impossibility of achieving “self-identity.” The recognition that one cannot tell her/his own story, since she/he belongs to the Other (whom one does not fully know), can produce a response that is overwhelming, a response that is “too
much.” Butler writes, “In the language which articulates the opposition to a non-narrativizable beginning resides the fear that the absence of narrative will spell a certain kind of death, the death of the subject who cannot, who can never, fully recuperate the conditions of its own emergence” (35). This “death of the subject” that Butler speaks of is, I would argue, precisely what the narrator in *We the Animals* experiences as he encounters his family. In an online conversation between Thomas Dumm of the *Massachusetts Review* and Judith Butler, she writes, “One is transformed by the other, by the loss of the other, by the prospect of that loss, but also—and this is the part that moves beyond the purely personal—one can come to see what ‘sociality’ might mean when it is precisely not a collection of egos, but a set of relations by which we are, as it were, done and undone” (101). Butler, here, emphasizes how our sociality—who we are as social beings—is entirely established by our relations to others.

As the narrator in *We the Animals* stands fully exposed and vulnerable before his family, he is forced to acknowledge his lack of control in telling his own narrative about his identity formation because of his relationality to the others of his family. In fact, he acknowledges, “Even later, I will come to doubt whether I ever really believed such a book would not be found—maybe my words were all for them, that they might discover themselves, and discover me” (117). This would suggest that while the narrator wrote his confessions in a “private” journal, they were never really private—they always existed in relation to himself and to his family. Although the narrator, upon later reflection, concedes that his narrative is possibly not just for himself, in the moment in which his family interrupts his narrative account, the narrator responds to them in violence. He first says to his family, “I’ll kill you,” and then writes, “I behaved like an animal. I tried to rip the skin from their faces, and when I couldn’t, I tried to rip the skin from my own…I said and did animal unforgivable things” (118). As the narrator is forced to recognize the
impossibility of telling his own narrative about his queer identity, he experiences a death of self. At this moment of exposure before the family, the narrative structure breaks down. In the pages that remain, the narrative tense shifts for the third time in the novel, as the narrator mostly stops referring to himself as an “I” and instead speaks of himself in the third person—as if he is watching himself from the outside. And while the sexual experience with the bus driver was narrated linearly, the narrative after this loses any cohesive structure, as it jumps about in both time and place—it becomes impossible to trace when or where events occur, or even what becomes of the narrator.

Although the narrator fails to achieve self-identity as his story is interrupted, Butler suggests that this “failure” actually opens up the possibility for ethical, responsible engagement with others. Butler writes, “I am wounded, and I find that the wound itself testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the Other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control” (38). This common woundedness and vulnerability does not absolve us of responsibility, but serves as the basis for our responsibility, since it helps people to acknowledge that we are all limited, that all of our stories always belong to others as well as to ourselves. Butler asks, “What would it mean in the face of violence to refuse to return it?” (39) here referring to the violence that occurs when we encounter the Other, who demands that we give an account of who we are. As Butler suggests, one can either respond with violence to the call of the other—as the narrator does—or one can respond with ethical responsibility. Although Butler does not exactly give a prescriptive account of what this ethical responsibility looks like, she does suggest in “Giving an Account” that it is constituted by a “disposition of humility and of generosity” and that one remains “open” to the Other since as she says, “we let the Other live.” (28). This directly opposes the narrator’s threat to “kill” the family at the moment of his exposure before them.
In order to better make sense of the narrator’s response of violence to his family, it is necessary to consider the notion of recognition, as it is discussed by both Butler and Catherine Mills, in Mills’ article “Normative Violence, Vulnerability, and Responsibility.” In “Giving an Account,” Butler draws from the work of Adriana Cavarero to make a couple of points about the encounter with the Other as it relates to recognition. The first point Butler makes is what I have already articulated: “We cannot exist without addressing the Other and without being addressed by the Other, that there is no wishing away our fundamental sociality.” The second point, as Butler explains though, “limits the first point,” as she writes: “No matter how much we each desire recognition and require it, we are not therefore precisely the same as the Other, and not everything counts as recognition in the same way” (25). Catherine Mills discusses the possibility of misrecognition in the encounter with an Other: “The subject is always already vulnerable to the injurious risk of misrecognition, which has as its consequence the failure to fully appear as subject within the social” (137). If one’s social existence is only established through its relations to and encounters with others, then one runs the risk of not being recognized by the other, and therefore, not being allowed entrance into social existence with others. And while it is true that, as Butler explains, one can never fully know or recognize either oneself or the Other, Butler and Mills also suggest that some beings are far more “recognizable” than others. I want to return, then, to the scene of encounter with the family in We the Animals to suggest that it is the narrator’s fear of misrecognition by his family, because of his queerness, that causes him to respond to them in violence.

As mentioned earlier, at the moment of exposure before his family, the narrator says to them, “I’ll kill you.” Immediately following this line, the narrator explains, “Paps lunged, and my brothers for the first time in their lives, restrained him. But that restraint shifted before my
eyes into an embrace; somehow, at the same time that they were keeping him back, they were supporting him, holding Paps upright, preventing him from sliding to the floor himself” (117). As the narrator describes this scene, the brothers, while they are holding their father back from lunging at the narrator, are also holding him close in an embrace. Although the father has had a highly unstable relationship with the boys throughout the novel—as he is often wild and violent—this moment marks a turning point because the narrator’s brothers choose to embrace the father and they help him stand, rather than let him fall. In this moment, the brothers respond to the father in openness and vulnerability, rather than in violence. The brother’s embrace of the father, though, also indicates their support of his prejudice and homophobia. They are standing in solidarity against the narrator’s queerness.

After this scene in which the father is embraced by the brothers, the narrator describes in more detail his own exposure before his family. The narrator says,

Let us look at me kneeling on the living room floor: my soft curly black hair, days unwashed…my arms extended on either side of me, palms up; my slender fingers, the fingers of a piano man, Ma said; my chin lifted, my eyes on my family, who froze before me like a bronze sculpture of sorrow. Paps had his arms around my brother’s shoulders; he leaned into them, and they kept one hand each on his broad chest; they had grown as tall as he; their bodies were whittled-down versions of his own, our common face; and Ma had risen from her seat; she too had moved over to calm Paps, to place a hand on his chest, to lend her support. Each was radiant, gorgeous. How they posed for me. This was our last time all five in a room together. I could have risen; I believe they would’ve embraced me. (118)
This scene, in some ways, parallels the scene with the father. In the first scene described, the father lunges down at the narrator, and the brothers help raise him up and embrace him. In this scene, the narrator is on the ground, arms extended, palms up—a bodily position that is one of radical vulnerability before the family. The narrator, at the end of this passage, suggests that if he had risen up to the family, they would have embraced him. It seems that the narrator believes that an embrace would have been possible because he has just witnessed the family’s embrace of the father. The father is “recognized” by the family and is retained within it. It seems, however, that the narrator’s perceived belief that the family would have embraced him may reflect the narrator’s desire and need to be recognized by them, but this does not mean that the narrator would actually have been embraced like and with his father.

While the narrator does say, at one point in the passage, that the family has a “common face,” every other description in this passage marks the narrator’s difference from his family. The narrator, as he describes his own body, mentions his “soft curly black hair” and his “slender” fingers, which his mother calls the fingers of a piano man (note that it is his mother, not his father, who comments on his delicate fingers). These more feminine descriptions stand in direct contrast to the brothers and father. The father’s chest is described as “broad” and both the brothers and the father are said to be tall. In fact, the narrator says how the brothers’ bodies are merely “whittled-down” versions of the father’s, suggesting that they will grow, in time, to be as tall and broad as the father is. The family, as they stand in a statue-like, “posed” position before the narrator, are all touching the father’s chest, so that the father is at the center of the scene, while the others circle around him. Even the mother, whom the narrator is more associated with in terms of his fragility, is in support of the father here, as she moves over to him to touch his chest with the brothers. Also, no member of the family lowers him or herself to lift the narrator
up, as they lifted the father; the family seems to stand united together, but entirely separate from
the narrator. This passage is in line with the latter part of the novel, where the narrator’s
distinction from the family becomes more apparent, as a result of his queerness.

Even though he desires to be supported by the family, the narrator also separates himself
from them and is, likewise, separated by them as they stand apart. It is impossible to know what
would have actually happened, had the narrator “risen” to the family—they may have embraced
him as the narrator longs for, or they may have responded in violence and hatred. However, what
is clear is that the narrator senses enough of a difference between himself and his family that he
is unable to rise to them, and as he says, “Instead, I behaved like an animal.” I suggest that it is
the narrator’s fear of being misrecognized—and therefore the fear of being cast out of the insular
community of his family—that causes him to retreat into an unintelligible “animal language.” As
Catherine Mills explains, “The emergence and survival of the subject depends not only on the
address of the other but also on the intelligibility of its own speech. In other words, the risk of
social death, of falling outside the domain of intelligible life as subject, lies not only in the
failure to fully enter into the terms of recognition conferred by the other but also in the failure to
render one’s own speech intelligible to the other” (142). What is at stake here is not only that the
narrator is forced to recognize himself in relation to others through the encounter with the family,
but also that the narrator must be recognized by the others as a subject, as a member of their
social community. Additionally, the perceived threat of the narrator’s misrecognition by the
family ultimately does cause him to be misrecognized. The “animal language” he speaks renders
him unintelligible to them, and therefore, unable to participate in the social life of the family.
The narrative breaks apart after the violent, traumatic encounter with the family, and there are
allusions to the narrator being taken to a mental institution. In the final pages of the novel, the
family is packing the narrator’s belongings so they can take him somewhere else, away from the family, away from the home. The narrator is not recognized as a social being because of his marked difference from the masculine, sexual norms of the family; therefore, he is not intelligible to them.

Even though the narrator loses intelligibility before the family, his turn towards animality and animal language offers him another way of being, outside the prescriptive norms of the family. The family only offers two possible identities: that of the brutish, violent father and of the fragile, defenseless mother. The brothers align themselves with the father—and castigate the narrator because he does not conform to the father’s masculinity or sexuality. The narrator, who seems more associated with the mother, still is not supported by her in his moment of exposure before the family, as she supports Paps too. The narrator’s turn towards animality is also a turn away from the insularity of the family, which has narrow ideas of what constitutes a proper member. In “Has the Queer Ever Been Human” Dana Luciano and Mel Chen write, “When the ‘sub-human, in-human, non-human’ queer actively connects with the other-than-human, what might that connection spawn?” (186). For the narrator, we do not know what connections his animality spawns, but we are left with the possibility of connections that extend beyond the limits of his family.

Additionally, at the climactic scene in which both the narrative and the narrator’s speech break down, a fascinating moment occurs that is unique to the entire structure of the book: the narrator directly implicates the reader. As the narrator describes the scene of exposure before his family, he says, “Let us look at me kneeling on the living room floor” (76). This phrase “let us” suggests that the narrator is calling the reader into the narrative to witness the events. In the following chapter, the narrator continues to direct the narrative towards the reader, as he
repeatedly uses the word “look,” such as, “Look, a father gently lowers his son, fully clothed, into a tub filling with bathwater” and “Look at the son, lulled by the sounds of him, the ritual” (119). As the narrator describes the moments before he is, apparently, taken away from the family and home, he addresses the reader, demanding that we “look” at what is happening to him. These moments of address to the reader, in both the “let us” and the “look,” are the first and only times in the narrative in which the reader is directly addressed. I argue that the reader is invoked in these moments because this opens up the possibility for an ethical encounter between the reader and narrator.

The narrator loses the capacity for intelligible language as he stands exposed before his family. In this scene, he appears separate and alone as he is cast out of his familial community. Yet in this moment, the narrator also directly addresses the reader (“Let us look at me”), which disrupts any notion that he is alone. Judith Butler, in “Giving an Account,” says, “If it is an account of myself, and it is an accounting to someone, then I am compelled to give the account away, to send it off, to be dispossessed of it at the very moment that I establish it as my account. No account takes place outside the structure of address, even if the addressee remains implicit and unnamed, anonymous and unspecified” (26). It seems, then, that even while the narrator gives an account of his profound separation from his family, he acknowledges that his account is also directed toward the reader, even if, as Butler says, the addressee (in this case, the reader) “remains implicit and unnamed, anonymous and unspecified.”

In fact, the narrator’s call to the reader opens up the possibility for an ethical, responsible encounter—precisely what is denied him by his family. As previously mentioned, the narrative breaks apart after the narrator’s encounter with the family, and it becomes difficult to follow any time frame or plot structure. In the final, single page chapter called “Zookeeping,” the narrator
says, “These days, I sleep with peacocks, lions, on a bed of leaves. I’ve lost my pack” (125). This passage suggests that the narrator is no longer with his family, but there is no indication of where he is at, whom he is with, or how much time has passed since the final moment of encounter with his family. While this ending is unsettling because of the total lack of narrative structure, by not forcing a linear narrative and letting the ambiguous end remain ambiguous, the reader is invited to engage in an ethical, responsible reading of the narrator’s account. As Butler says:

If, in the name of ethics, we require that another do a certain violence to herself, and do it in front of us, offering a narrative account or, indeed, a confession, then, conversely, it may be that by permitting, sustaining, accommodating the interruption, a certain practice of nonviolence precisely follows. If violence is the act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity, then nonviolence may well follow from living the persistent challenge to mastery that our obligations to others require. (35)

Because the narrator asks the reader to witness his account, the reader has the option of responding to this call with violence or with responsibility. As Butler suggests here, the nonviolent, ethical response is one that sustains and allows the interruption (the interruption, in the case of We the Animals, being the encounter with the family) rather than demanding mastery or unity of the narrative. If we take the narrator’s call to the reader seriously, the narrator invites us to respond ethically to the text. This ethical reading would not demand a certain account of the narrator, but would remain open to his account, in all of its ambiguity. The narrator’s invocation to the reader at the moment of encounter creates opportunity for intelligibility, even though the narrator is rendered unintelligible before his family. By denying readers a cohesive account of the final scene, the text forces us to go without full closure or explanation—and in doing so, the reader lets the text (and the narrator) live.
Chapter Two

“No One Cares if a Fish Disappears”: Precarity and Ungrievability in Mario Bellatin’s

*Beauty Salon*

Mario Bellatin’s *Beauty Salon*, published in Spanish in 1994 and translated into English by Kurt Hollander in 2009, is a novella that takes place in an unnamed city and focuses on a small population of people who are all suffering from a disease. In the novella, the unnamed narrator converts what was previously his beauty salon into what he calls the “Terminal.” The narrator allows dying men infected with the disease entrance into the Terminal, where the men, whom the narrator calls “guests” spend their final days. The narrator cares for the men by himself, and he also takes care of fish that populate aquariums in the Terminal. Curiously, the narrator often speaks at greater length and with more detail about the fish in the aquariums than he does about the dying human guests at the Terminal. For example, the narrator opens *Beauty Salon* with these remarks: “A few years ago my interest in aquariums led me to decorate my beauty salon with colored fish. Now that the salon has become the Terminal, where people who have nowhere to die end their days, it’s been very hard on me to see the fish disappear” (1). These opening lines are off-putting: rather than lament the deaths of the diseased guests, the narrator focuses all of his concern instead on the loss of the fish at the Terminal. At moments like these in the novella, it seems that the narrator forges connections with the fish and expresses his care for the guests at the Terminal through his discussion of the fish. As I analyze the

1 The disease that plagues the city in *Beauty Salon* both is and is not an allegory about the HIV/AIDS epidemic. While there are indications that would suggest as much, the disease also is not reducible to HIV/AIDS in the novella.
complex relationship between the narrator and the fish, I also read *Beauty Salon* through Judith Butler’s concept of “precarity.” I argue that the narrator and the guests at the Terminal are made socially unintelligible by social and economic institutions that deny them protection and support, thus rendering their lives highly precarious. I will then turn to Judith Butler’s consideration of grief to show how the narrator’s need to mourn the lives of the guests is disavowed, which forecloses his relationality to others and makes his own life “unlivable.”

From the outset of *Beauty Salon*, the narrator seems most interested in the fish that he brings first into the beauty salon, and then into same building, after it has been converted into the Terminal. The narrator’s relationship to these fish is complex, and vacillates from admiration and awe to sometimes disgust and indifference. While his feelings about the fish are often contradictory, what is clear is that he spends a great deal of his time carefully observing the fish, as he reflects on their unique characteristics. For instance, he speaks about the royal guppies, which are the “toughest fish and therefore the easiest to breed” (1), the golden carp, from which the narrator “derived tranquility from observing them” (5), the “delicate” black tetras (22), and the strange, “ferocious” axolotls (45). The narrator’s interest in the fish remains consistent throughout the novel, as he considers which new breeds to bring into the salon and as he cares for them—and his care for each type of fish is dependent upon their particular qualities. This fascination with the fish seems unusual, especially because the narrator acts as the sole caretaker for a number of sick, dying people who seek refuge at the Terminal. At one point, the narrator remarks, “You might not believe me but I can almost never identify the guests. It’s come to a point where they’re all the same to me. At first I would get to know them, I even got close to some of them on occasion. Now, however, they are nothing more to me than bodies on the verge of disappearing” (15). In fact, none of the guests are ever named, nor is the narrator himself
named. This anonymity of the guests creates an interesting narrative effect: it refuses to let the reader feel particularly close to any of the dying people in the novel. Additionally, the narrator’s unwillingness or inability to even identify the guests whom he cares for seems to reflect a deeply flawed, callous nature. How could he care more for the fish than for the people at the Terminal? As I will show, though, it is not that the narrator feels no emotional attachment to the guests, but rather that he does not have a socially intelligible way to express his emotions. I argue that the narrator’s discussion of and care for the fish reflects an externalization of his emotions for the guests, a way for him to make sense of his responsibility for the guests.

Early on in the novella, the narrator reveals one of his reasons for keeping fish at the Terminal: “I wanted something colorful and full of life so that when there were no clients in the salon I could watch the fish chasing each other or hiding behind the aquatic plants” (6). As the narrator explains later, the sick guests enter the Terminal in waves, and sometimes he is left alone. The fish, then, are a form of distraction for him, as he admires them for their beauty and watches them play together. These qualities of the fishes’ vitality and color are probably the most frequently mentioned in the novel. As the narrator watches the golden carp, he says: “I spent hours and hours admiring the light reflected by their scales and tails. Someone later remarked on this strange form of entertainment,” and immediately after he says, “The increasing number of people who come to die in the beauty salon is no form of entertainment at all” (4). Here, the fish divert his attention away from the sickness and death of his guests at the Terminal. The narrator, who recognizes a certain “alive” quality of the fish, often desires to keep the sickness of the guests separated from the fish. He remarks at one point, “I’ve placed this fish tank somewhat away from the guests. I don’t want their rot to reach the water; I don’t want the fish to be infected with any fungus, virus, or bacteria. Sometimes when no one is looking I put my head
into the fish tank and I even go so far as to touch the water with the tip of my nose. I breathe in deeply and it feels as if life emanates from the water” (19). The narrator tries to immerse his body into the aquarium, seemingly to absorb some of its vitality. This reveals the narrator’s desire to preserve life and color, even amidst suffering and death that ceaselessly occupy the Terminal.

However, while the narrator often praises the fish for their life and resiliency and they also seem to distract him from the death of his guests, there is, from the beginning, death and sickness in the aquariums, as well as outside of them. The first type of fish that the narrator discusses in the novel are royal guppies, which he chooses because the people in the fish store tell him they are the toughest and easiest to breed—ideal for beginners. The narrator, though, says:

I didn’t have much luck the first time I began to breed fish. I bought a mid-sized aquarium and put a pregnant female and a male with a long, colored tail inside. The next morning, the male was dead...A relentless persecution was unleashed when the pregnant female gave birth. The other females tried to eat the babies. The newborns, however, were blessed with strong, fast reflexes, which kept them alive. Of the eight that were born, only three fish survived. The mother died a few days later for no apparent reason. (2-3)

This initial scene does not depict a vibrant, vital world inside the aquarium, but rather, reflects an aquatic world that is brutal, disturbing and is marked by senseless killing, as the fish hunt and eat each other. Later, the narrator describes how the angelfish—who had survived for a long time up to this point—get a fungus on their bodies and, over the course of a few days, sink to the bottom of the tank and die (28). While the narrator consistently focuses on the fishes’ ability to survive,
it is clear from the beginning that the fish are vulnerable to being killed by their own kind and to
disease—much like the guests at the Terminal.

I argue that as the narrator carefully observes the happenings inside the aquariums, he
recognizes the precariousness of the lives of the fish—that the fish are vulnerable to exposure,
pain, and injury. The narrator at one point reflects on past experiences in an exclusively male
bathhouse that he visited often, as he describes:

A strange feeling overtakes your body while you’re walking down the stairs, and your
sense of space quickly becomes confused inside of the steam emanating from the main
room. A few steps more and your towel is immediately stripped away. From then on,
anything can happen. At that moment I always felt like I was inside one of my aquariums.
I felt revitalized by the thick water, by the oxygen bubbling up from the pumps, by the
jungle of underwater plants. I also experienced the same strange feeling as when the
larger fish hunted the smaller ones. At that moment, the lack of any possible defense and
the thickness of the clear walls of the aquarium became a very palpable, all-
embracing reality. (10)

In this scene, the narrator describes his bodily exposure to other members of the bathhouse, as he
seems to experience both anticipation and apprehension of what will happen to him.
Interestingly, he comprehends his vulnerability before others at the bathhouse through a
comparison to the fish in his aquariums. Just as the smaller fish are defenseless before the larger
ones, he feels hunted and trapped, presumably by the stronger, more dominant men of bathhouse.
He also describes the hazy steam in the bathhouse, which inhibits his sense of boundaries. This
physical description of the bathhouse does indeed coincide with his descriptions in the novel of
the aquariums, which are often cloudy and hard to see through. Additionally, at a later point in
the novel, the narrator knows he is infected with the disease his guests have, and his face shows visible sores—a sign of the disease\(^2\). As he considers how outsiders would react to his face if he were to leave the Terminal, he imagines how many people would be repulsed and would “run away in fear” (51). He says, “At my age and in my condition I’m not prepared for that kind of experience. I feel like a fish covered in fungus from whom even its natural predators will flee” (51). Again, the narrator apprehends his own vulnerability before others through a comparison of himself to fish. Because he has observed how fish are treated by other fish when they carry a disease, he is able to speculate on how others might treat him if they were to see visible proof of his sickness.

As I have shown, the narrator’s recognition of the fishes’ vulnerability, and by extension of his own, has to do with exposure before others. Judith Butler in “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” writes,

> We are, however distinct, also bound to one another and to living processes that exceed human form. And this is not always a happy or felicitous experience. To find out that one’s life is also the life of others, even as this life is distinct and must be distinct, means that one’s boundary is at once a limit and a site of adjacency, a mode of spatial and temporal nearness and even boundedness. Moreover, the bounded and living appearance of the body is the condition of being exposed to the other, exposed to solicitation, seduction, passion, injury, exposed in ways that sustain us but also in ways that can destroy us. In this sense the exposure of the body points to its precariousness. (141)

As Butler describes, because our bodies are not entirely bounded entities, we are given over to the lives of others, who can sustain and also destroy us. We are always in the hands (or fins, in

\(^2\) These sores the narrator describes provide the strongest indication that the disease the guests and narrator have is HIV/AIDS (the sores as Kaposi’s sarcoma).
the case of the fish) of others, and so our lives are always precarious. The narrator, who describes the fishes’ boundedness to other fish—as they can be eaten, hunted, killed, threatened—recognizes that the fish have precarious lives. In fact, the fish are not only exposed to the violence or care of other fish in the tank, but their lives are dependent on relations outside of the tank as well, since they are at the mercy of their owner. The narrator, who owns the fish, provides the fishes’ food and cleans their tanks—he also can decide to sustain or destroy the fish. The fishes’ lives, then, are doubly precarious, since their exposure before others is established both in and outside of the aquariums. According to Butler, it is our precariousness that establishes our interdependency with others and also our responsibility for others.

In her book *Precarious Life*, Butler explains precariousness in this way: “To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself. This cannot be an awakeness, to use his [Levinas’] word, to my own life, and then an extrapolation from an understanding of my own precariousness to an understanding of another’s precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other. This is what makes the face belong to the sphere of ethics” (134). Here, Butler is directly responding to Emmanuel Levinas’ ethical discussion of an encounter with “the face” of the Other. As Butler explains, when one has an ethical encounter, one is able to apprehend the precariousness of the Other’s life, because there is a recognition that one can do violence to the Other. In the above passage, Butler articulates that one is *first* “awakened” to the Other’s precariousness, and *then* is able to better understand one’s own precariousness, rather than the reverse occurring. For Butler, it is this starting with the precariousness of the Other that makes encounters with others ethical, since one does not reduce the Other to some version of oneself.
In *Beauty Salon*, it seems that the narrator first recognizes the precariousness of the fishes’ lives before he sees his own life as precarious. This awareness of the fishes’ precariousness, as their bodies are exposed to death and disease, seems to be what grounds the narrator’s interest in and care for the lives of the fish; in other words, this is what establishes his responsibility for them. In the final pages of the novel, the narrator remarks, “It was only yesterday, when I was looking at the fish tank with the greenish water, that I realized that no one cares if a fish disappears. I was the only one all this time who was affected by the death inside of the aquariums” (54). The narrator, then, cares such a great deal for the fish and for what happens to their lives because he sees that their lives are precarious.

While Butler discusses how everyone is precarious, because every body is exposed and vulnerable to others, she also emphasizes how precariousness is dependent upon and sometimes produced by economic and social relationships. She explains in “Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable”:

*We can make the broad, existential claim, namely, that everyone is precarious, and this follows from our social existence as bodily beings who depend on one another for shelter and sustenance and who, therefore, are at risk of statelessness, homelessness, and destitution under unjust and unequal political conditions. As much as I am making this claim, I am also making another, namely, that our precarity is to a large extent dependent upon the organization of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions. In this sense, precarity is indissociable from that dimension of politics that addresses the organization and protection of bodily needs. Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency.* (170)
Butler’s point here is crucial: every being is precarious and our relationality with others is founded by this precariousness, but precarity is also dependent on larger political/economic/social institutions, since these are what support, or do not support, certain bodies and populations. In “Disability as Vulnerability: Redistributing Precariousness in Democratic Ways,” Amber Knight says, “While human vulnerability is a shared condition, it is not shared equally in a context of inequality. Political, social, and economic institutions are designed to respond to some people’s vulnerabilities better than others, so risk and exposure is manifested in uneven ways. Put simply, our political arrangements make some populations more vulnerable than others” (18). Both Butler and Knight argue that vulnerability is not distributed equally among beings because social institutions do not meet the needs of all beings in the same ways. As I will show, the guests at the Terminal are not supported by economic and social institutions, which exacerbates their precarity.

I have, up to this point, been using the term “precariousness” in my discussion of Butler’s work. It is important, though, to distinguish between the terms precariousness and precarity. I find that Amber Knight’s explanation of these terms is useful here:

Critical to Butler’s treatment of vulnerability is how she distinguishes the universal condition of vulnerability from its particular experience. Here she makes a heuristic distinction between precariousness and precarity, emphasizing that by definition human vulnerability is affected by power relations. While human lives are universally vulnerable, precariousness is not distributed equally and is therefore experienced in particular ways. Butler refers to the unequal distribution of precariousness as ‘precarity.’ Precarity designates a politically induced condition in which certain populations are dehumanized and become disproportionately exposed to injury, violence, and death. (19)
As Knight explains, “precarity” is the term Butler uses to designate the specific ways that populations are affected by power relations that make some groups and beings more exposed to violence and death than others. As I will show, it is the precarity of the guests’ and narrator’s lives at the Terminal that make them particularly vulnerable to harm, since their lives are uniquely affected by political and social power relations.

In Beauty Salon, the narrator frequently points out how the lives of the guests at the Terminal, as well as his own life, are subject to violence and inadequate economic and social support. Early on in the novel, the narrator mentions how he likes to add a bit of gold to the dresses he wears at night, when he goes out on the town; he says he gets this idea because of his observation of the golden carp. He explains, “I believed that wearing something gold would bring me good luck, perhaps save me from bumping into the Goat-Killer Gang that operated in the center of the city. Many people were killed by their attacks, but it was even worse if you survived a run-in with them. The victims of the attacks were treated with contempt when they were brought into the hospitals. Often they weren’t even allowed in for fear of infection” (5). The narrator and the guests are threatened by multiple forms of violence: the Goat-Killer Gang who frequently attack and kill their victims, the public, who treat people with “contempt” after an attack, and the hospitals, who will often not let the attacked enter for fear that they will infect others. It is unclear exactly who the Goat Killer Gang attacks, but it seems as though the narrator, who is a transvestite and queer man, is more vulnerable to these attacks than others in his society. It is also unclear how the Goat Killer Gang attacks their victims, but there appears to be implication of sexual attack, since the victims are treated with “contempt” and are denied hospital care because of potential infection. It seems that an attack by the Goat Killer Gang is
socially disgraceful. At a later point in the novella, the narrator explains the situation that instigated his decision to convert his beauty salon into the Terminal:

   My co-worker told me how one of his closest friends was on the brink of death and no hospital would take him in. The sick person’s family didn’t want to take care of him either and so due to a lack of economic possibilities his only option was to die under one of the bridges by the river that runs parallel to the city...My co-worker begged me to take him in an I agreed without thinking much about the consequences. (37)

Again, this co-worker’s friend (and the narrator at another point comments on how his co-workers are transvestites as well) is denied admittance into a hospital, even though he is “on the brink of death.” Not only is this man barred from state-supported hospital care, he is also refused care by his family. Because the man does not have money to afford private care, he is left no option but to die under a bridge. This man’s life, which is completely denied protection from economic and social institutions, is highly precarious.

In a scene that most explicitly details the precarity of the narrator and guests’ lives at the Terminal, the narrator describes what happens when the neighborhood wages a “smear campaign” against him. The narrator says that the “neighbors tried to burn down the beauty salon, claiming that the place was a breeding ground for infection and that the plague had spread to their homes” (24). The narrator explains the chaos that ensues: the neighbors organize, sign a petition demanding that the narrator and guests vacate the premises of the beauty salon immediately, the narrator ignores their demands, and the following day a mob gathers and throws rocks at the salon, smashing the windows. After this, the narrator is forced to leave the guests “at the mercy of the crowd” and he runs to the police station, asking for help in fending off the mob. The policemen, who at first make “sarcastic remarks” about the narrator (likely because he
dresses in women’s clothing), finally agree to accompany him to the salon, where they are able to disperse the angry crowd. Then, however, the policemen, who know nothing of the existence of the Terminal, begin to ask questions and “mention a health code.” The narrator says that the only thing that eventually gets the police to leave is that the narrator has a few connections to organizations that offered him help when he first started his work at the Terminal; these organizations convince the police not to bother the narrator. After the police leave, the narrator barricades the front of the Terminal, in an attempt to protect himself and the guests from future harm. The narrator, from this point on, only leaves once every day to buy food for the soup that he makes the guests. This scene marks one of the first times in the novel when the narrator admits to being truly scared for his life and the lives of his guests. Also, the incident makes the guests’ status as outsiders radically clear, as they are vulnerable to being hurt and killed at anytime by members of their own supposed neighborhood community. The angry crowd violently threatens the narrator and guests, apparently because they are terrified that the disease inside the Terminal will spread further beyond its walls, infecting their homes and neighborhood. In addition, the police’s mention of a “health code,” reveals their attempt to shut down the Terminal for bureaucratic reasons. I will turn my attention towards Michel Foucault’s concept of biopolitics to show how precarity functions within governmental frameworks in the novella.

In Foucault’s “Society Must Be Defended” lectures he discusses the difference between authority in the Middle Ages—which he calls sovereignty—and political power as it functions in today’s world. He describes the distinction between these two types of power as such:

I think that one of the greatest transformations political right underwent in the nineteenth century was precisely that, I wouldn’t say exactly sovereignty’s old right—to take life or let live—was replaced, but it came to be complemented by a new right which does not
erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it. This is the right, or rather precisely the opposite right. It is the power to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die. The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die. (141)

Foucault explains how the sovereign power of the Middle Ages (or the ruler) was able to either take a person’s life or let a person live. The transformation of political power, which Foucault calls a “new technology of power,” sees humans as forming a “global mass,” or a “man-as-species.” Foucault explains how this new power, which he calls biopolitics, uses mechanisms to “achieve overall states of equilibrium or regularity; it is, in a word, a matter of taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined but regularized” (246-7). Biopolitical power—as it seeks to “regularize” the massive human population—makes some people live and “lets” some people die. For instance, with new technologies in the modern world like vaccines, some populations are granted medical protection from diseases and some populations are denied access to these protections. In Beauty Salon, the police’s mention of a “health code” at the Terminal demonstrates a biopolitical mechanism that attempts to regulate a specific population. The police eventually leave the site of the Terminal, dropping the issue of the health code. This indicates that the police, who see the destitution of the guests at the Terminal, decide to let this population die, since they are, in fact, almost already dead. As Foucault explains about death:

It is only natural that death should now be privatized, and should become the most private thing of all. In the right of sovereignty, death was the moment of the most obvious and most spectacular manifestation of the absolute power of the sovereign; death now becomes, in contrast, the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on
himself and retreats, so to speak, into his own privacy. Power no longer recognizes death.

Power literally ignores death. (248)

Biopolitical power “ignores death” and privatizes death because it is concerned with the human-as-species and in order to properly function, it must let some populations die off. On the one hand, the Terminal, after this incident with the mob and police, does isolate itself further from the outside world, since the narrator fears they will be attacked again. On the other hand, though, this isolation of the Terminal reflects the narrator’s attempt to refuse the regime of biopolitical power that “manages” life.

Since biopower determines who lives, who dies, and how long some populations take to die—and biopolitical mechanisms used in state-supported hospitals often prolong life—the narrator creates a space where death is allowed to happen, outside of the mechanisms of biopower (like health codes, medicines, and treatments). This is why the narrator explains, “Doctors and medicine are prohibited here, as are herbal and spiritual healers and moral support from friends and families. The rules of the Terminal are inflexible” (21). It seems that the narrator’s refusal to allow any form of outside support—whether through moral, spiritual, or health-related means—reflects his desire to create a place where nothing manages how the guests die. The “rules” that the narrator imposes in some ways allow the guests respect and dignity as they die, since no one is there to pity or shame them or unnecessarily prolong their lives. While the narrator does attempt to create a space that refuses biopolitical mechanisms that would control the guests’ lives or deaths, it is important to consider how else this insular space affects the lives of the guests and narrator. As he reflects on the incident of the smear campaign, the narrator comments, “During that period I fell into a deep depression, although at no time did I fail to take care of the guests. The only difference is that I spent more time holed up in my
shack” (27). Although the narrator seems to resist biopower that would control the way people die at the Terminal, he also makes it clear here that this isolation from the outside, social world causes him to close himself off more from others, as he retreats inwardly into depression. The Terminal, while it gives the dying guests a place to end their days, is also a place where the guests lose their sense of identity. It seems, then, that the option afforded to the narrator when he and the other guests are left to die is not a hopeful one, even if it does allow the narrator the chance to resist biopolitical power. The option to close the Terminal off from the outside world denies them social intelligibility, since their deaths are privatized and ignored. Biopolitical power, as it produces mechanisms to make some populations live and let others die, is related to precarity because both concepts acknowledge that some populations are made more vulnerable to death and disease through power relations.

The narrator of Beauty Salon recognizes the guests’ precarity—as they are denied economic support and protection from hospitals and familial and neighborhood communities—and this seems to be what causes him to take responsibility for their lives, just as he does for the fishes’ lives. The narrator remarks at one point, “When the beauty salon changed I also felt an inner transformation. When I started to take care of guests I became, among other things, somewhat more responsible” (35). However, the narrator’s responsibility and care for the guests seems radically different than for the fish. As discussed earlier, the narrator describes each type of fish in great detail, expounding on their unique qualities. The narrator also devotes a lot of time and attention to catering to the individual needs of each fish species; he buys particular equipment and food in the hopes that the fish will thrive. This specialized type of care is radically different from the care he provides the guests. At one point, the narrator explains some of the rigid order he attempts to instill when the guests enter the Terminal:
Once I take them in I make sure to bring them all to the same point in terms of their state of mind. After a few days of living together I manage to impose the appropriate atmosphere. I don’t really know how to describe this state, though it’s something like a total lethargy in which even the possibility of their inquiring about their own health no longer exists. This is the ideal state in which to work. In this way it’s possible to avoid becoming involved with any particular individual. It’s easier to handle the workload and the chores get done without interference. (31)

In contrast to the individualized care he gives the fish, his desire for the guests is to bring them all to the “same point,” since this is what allows him to avoid involvement with the guests on an individual basis. As he attempts to bring the guests to a state of uniformity, he emphasizes the need to impose the same frame of mind, in which they no longer ask about their state of health. The narrator says at another point that he only admits guests who are in the final stages of the disease when “their bodies [are] unrecognizable” (39). Arguably, then, the narrator does not find the guests’ inquiries about their health helpful for himself or for them, since they are going to die in a matter of weeks or even days. Nevertheless, the narrator’s description of how he creates a particular atmosphere and frame of mind within the Terminal sounds cruel or at least dictatorial—it seems as though he cares nothing for the lives of the guests. However, although the narrator’s inflexibility may seem too rigid and callous, this is a direct result of the narrator’s inability to appropriately mourn the lives of those who die at the Terminal.

Central to Judith Butler’s argument about precarity and the social and economic institutions that make some bodies and populations more vulnerable than others, is her discussion about whose lives count as grievable lives. Butler writes in Precarious Life: “Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of
subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?" (XIV). As an example (and I am, admittedly, simplifying her argument here for brevity), Butler discusses the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, who are not “considered ‘subjects’ protected by international law, are not entitled to regular trials, to lawyers, to due process” (XV). Because these people are not legally considered subjects, they are, as Butler concludes, not counted as human; their lives, therefore, are not “livable lives” and are thoroughly precarious. According to Butler, because the prisoners’ lives at Guantanamo Bay are radically denied socially intelligibility, their deaths are never recognized either—thus, their lives are never grieved. Butler affirms the necessity of grieving lost lives, since this constitutes our interdependency with others. As she explains, “Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it 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” (Precarious Life 22). As Butler makes clear, people typically believe grief to be a solitary experience, a process that people go through on their own, behind closed doors. Butler’s refutation of grief as a private, individualized experience is tied to her discussion in other works about Antigone—a woman who publicly buried and openly grieved her brother, even though it was illegal for her to do so (“Antigone’s Claim” 2). Before I move on to why Butler believes grief can create political community, I want to focus on a point she makes in other works: that grief is also often associated with femininity.

In her discussion of Antigone, Butler speaks about how grieving has historically been (and still is) not only a private act but is also considered a “feminine” act—an act that is
relegated to the home and to a female sphere (as opposed to the public, male sphere). I find this association of mourning with femininity particularly salient when we consider the narrator in *Beauty Salon*. The narrator mentions multiple times how he is a transvestite, as are his friends and co-workers; he regularly speaks about the dresses and other women’s clothes that he wears. Also, his clients at the beauty salon are women and he and his colleagues dress in women’s clothing when they attend to clients. The narrator also speaks about how there are certain spaces he cannot go dressed as a woman, especially when he goes out with friends at night in the city. He explains, “We couldn’t travel dressed as women for we had already gotten into dangerous situations more than once” (13-4). While he doesn’t specify what these “dangerous situations” are, it is clear that he and his friends have been harmed as a direct result of dressing in women’s clothing during their travels. The narrator and coworkers’ dressing seems, in large part, to influence their precarity as they move about public spaces, for this exposes them to physical harm. The beauty salon, as the narrator explains, is a place for him and his coworkers to dress as women, away from danger. This space is both liberatory, because they can dress as they please, but it also creates an insular, privatized community—and one that is “feminized” too, because of their choice to dress as women and because most of their clients (prior to the opening of the Terminal) are women. Since the narrator’s precarity seems, at least in part, established by his transvestitism, it is necessary to consider what type of private space the narrator creates (and is created by) at the beauty salon—and how this private, individuated space affects the way he is able to grieve.

To return again to Butler’s *Precarious Life*, she argues that grieving those who die is a highly political act because it helps us to make sense of our relationality with others; since our lives are bound up with each other, losing a life or lives cuts off some of those relations.
According to Butler, this relationality holds true whether or not we recognize it. For example, even though most U.S. citizens may not have known nor cared about the Guantanamo prisoners, our lives are still made more precarious by their deaths, since these deaths affect us all. James Stanescu, in “Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals,” explains mourning this way: “Precariousness forces us to examine our connections, our methods and meanings for coexistence. Because we all are precarious, because we exist in a state of shared vulnerability, we will all die. Mourning is a testament to such a life, to such a notion of existence” (577). Mourning the lives of those who die is an essential component of recognizing our ethical responsibility for others’ lives, since “those we make connections to can, and sometimes do, perish” (Stanescu 577). Grief as a political act is also a public act—an act that creates interdependency and community, since it acknowledges connections to those who die. The question I want to consider, then, is what happens to those who are not able to grieve publicly.

Judith Butler and James Stanescu, who both discuss the necessity of grief and mourning when a being dies, also explore the consequences when a lost life is not mourned. Butler asks, “How do our cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kinds of losses we can avow as loss? After all, if someone is lost, and that person is not someone, then what and where is that loss, and how does mourning take place?” (Precarious Life 32). These questions coincide with her example of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay: if people are not recognized as subjects, legally or socially, in the first place, then how can we mourn their lives when they die—especially when no one is told that they perish, because they are not deemed valuable enough to “deserve” this recognition? While this may seem like an extreme example, Butler’s argument here applies to numerous populations who are denied social intelligibility. As was already
discussed, our economic/social/political institutions make some people and groups far more precarious than others by denying them protections and support that others receive, often automatically. Those people who are denied social and economic protections are deemed less valuable; therefore, their lives are made less livable, and their deaths are less grievable. As Stanescu explains, when someone is denied the ability to mourn a lost life, those lives are made unintelligible too, since one’s connection to the other is not recognized. He writes:

Disavowing the life of another (and being unable to mourn always disavows the life as such) does not just cede the one whom you care for into social unintelligibility, but also cedes part of yourself into social unintelligibility. A part of you becomes unreal and ghostly. The connections we make with others are what gives us livable lives; denying those connections renders our lives less livable. Mourning is a way of making connections, of establishing kinship, and of recognizing the vulnerability and finitude of the other. The protocols that refuse to recognize our mourning refuse all sorts of tangible, social intelligibility. (569)

When mourning is rendered impossible, not only is the person’s life being mourned made unintelligible or even erased, but the mourner is made unintelligible to her or himself and to others as well. As Stanescu further discusses what it means to be socially unintelligible, he says, “Social unintelligibility is connected to, but not always the same as, discrimination, oppression, or repression. It is, rather, a failure of recognition by others...It is an erasure of existence, an erasure of sense, and an erasure of relations. To have your grief for one you care about rendered unintelligible does not invite simple ridicule; it invites melancholia and madness” (579). Since grieving the loss of another’s life affirms one’s connections to others, being refused the ability to
grieve denies one’s relationality to others. I will again turn my attention towards *Beauty Salon* to explore what happens when the narrator’s grief is not socially recognized.

As I have shown, the narrator and the guests at the Terminal live highly precarious lives: they are refused hospital care, they are violently threatened by their neighbors, they are mistrusted by the police, they do not have the economic resources to support themselves, and they are all dying from a deadly disease. Because the guests are denied virtually all forms of economic and social support—and thus, their lives are made unlivable—the narrator accepts men who are in the final stages of the disease, who have very little time left to live. The narrator attempts to maintain distance from the guests and he claims to not be able to distinguish them from one another. There is one man in the novel, though, to whom the narrator does devote a great deal of attention. Although the narrator never gives this man a name, he tells some of his story: he often travelled abroad, had a wealthy lover who abandoned him when he got sick, and was forced, by his lover, to smuggle drugs by “introducing little bags into different parts of his body” (16). The narrator says, “The fact that a person as beautiful as he was had been used in such a way by his lover really shook me up. I guess I felt something special towards him, for I stopped looking after the other guests and throughout his time of suffering I only cared for him” (16). The narrator even explains how he “came into intimate contact with his ruined body” and that the man was still, somehow, able to experience pleasure. This man is the only person in the novella whom the narrator shows any special care towards, the only guest whom he mentions ever coming into physical, intimate contact with. Then suddenly, with no clear explanation, the narrator starts to treat the man distantly. The man dies of tuberculosis and the narrator says how, “by that time the boy’s body was just another body I had to discard” (17). While the narrator’s
sudden detachment is off-putting and hard to figure out, his care for the man becomes clear later in the novel.

The narrator’s care for the man who died of tuberculosis is apparent because the narrator continues to mention him throughout the novel. Stanescu explains that, “We come to be haunted by those we mourn. The beings whose lives are gone still continue with us when we mourn them” (577). The narrator does, indeed, seem to be haunted by the man’s life, even after he dies. The narrator explains at one point:

Despite the indifference I showed when the boy entered the last stretch, I must confess I was secretly worried about the kind of burial he would receive...Unlike the others, his body did not wind up buried in a common grave in a nearby cemetery. I made sure he received a more dignified burial. I went to a funeral home and bought a dark-colored coffin. I pushed aside the furniture in the shack where I sleep and held a wake in which I was the only mourner present. I hired a black pick up truck and selected a gravesite. (32)

The narrator, who formed a special connection with the man as he was dying, expresses concern over how the man will be cared for after he dies. The narrator devotes time to ensuring that the man has a “dignified” burial, and he conducts a funeral for him. The narrator, it seems, is mourning the man’s life; in fact, he even calls himself the only “mourner” present. I find Butler’s discussion of the importance of grief helpful here. Because the narrator seemed to apprehend the man’s precarity, he establishes a relationship with him; when the man dies, this connection is severed and the narrator, therefore, mourns the loss of his life, which he valued and cared for. Put simply, the narrator apprehends the man’s life as grievable. The care that the narrator devotes to this man after he dies is radically contrasted with the lack of care the other guests at the Terminal receive. As the narrator explains, the others end up in a common grave and “their
bodies are wrapped in shrouds that I myself create... There is no wake. They remain in their bed until the men I hire take them away on stretchers. I don’t accompany them to the cemetery. When their family comes to inquire about them I merely inform them that they are no longer with us” (32). The other guests at the terminal are as anonymous in their deaths as they were during their lives. Their bodies were indistinguishable from each other while they were at the Terminal, and this indistinguishability follows them after their deaths, as they die in obscurity. Even their families who ask about them do not receive an adequate explanation of what happened to them; the guests are merely no longer there. The narrator, himself, likely could not tell the family members what specifically happened to each guest, since he never knew them individually. The guests at the Terminal are forced to lead unlivable lives and they die ungrievable deaths. It would seem that that the narrator’s ability to mourn the life of the man who died of tuberculosis is a far preferable way to treat the guests, since it is in line with an “ethical” stance towards an individual life. The narrator, though, makes it clear that this is not the usual way he conducted himself towards the guests, especially afterward. He comments, “When I got close to that young boy, the one who died of tuberculosis, I still had not yet perfected my technique. Although it’s wrong to say so, I regret having become emotionally involved with him” (31). The “technique” that the narrator speaks of here is the way in which he imposes an “appropriate atmosphere,” so every person maintains the same lethargy and inability to ask about their disease; it’s the technique that denies the identity of the guests. The narrator, in fact, regrets the relationship he builds with the man who dies of tuberculosis. The narrator’s response here only makes sense in consideration of the end of the novel, when the narrator apprehends that his own life is ungrievable and is, like his guests, rendered entirely socially unintelligible.
At the conclusion of the novel, the narrator—who knows that he has the same disease as the guests and that his life is coming to an end—begins to speak more about his aloneness and about what will happen to the Terminal once he dies. Throughout the novel, the narrator repeatedly mentions how he is alone in his work at the Terminal; he cares for all the sick bodies, makes all the meals, and does his best to protect the guests from harm. During much of the novel, the narrator seems to want to take care of business at the Terminal on his own, for the sake of efficiency. As the narrator becomes increasingly more sick, however, he speaks more frequently about his fear of what is to come and his despair at being alone. He explains how some of the guests have grieving lovers who try to visit the Terminal; the narrator does not allow any of the guests to have visitors, so these men sometimes stand out in the streets and call their lover’s name. The narrator, who is unsettled by these visitors, explains:

The arrival of these men bothered me, mostly because no one ever came for me. I wondered what purpose all my sacrifice administering the beauty salon served. I’m still alone, as always, without any emotional reward, without anyone to lament my disease...If I had died earlier my sickness might have been sweeter, with friends attentive to my complaints standing by the foot of my bed. Now I have to take care of myself, silently suffer my decay. (52-53)

The narrator, whose friends have all died from the disease, is entirely alone in his suffering, and he seems most upset by the others’ grieving lovers because it makes him recognize that there is no one to grieve his life.

Mourning a life is what establishes connections with others and creates community. We mourn because we recognize that other beings are vulnerable, that their lives are valuable, and that when those beings suffer and perish, those relationships are severed. To grieve another’s life
is to give that life meaning, and in turn, our own life meaning as well. However, as Butler explains, all lives are not grievable because all lives are not livable, and this is a result of social/political/economic institutions and infrastructures that do not support and protect the lives of some beings. Butler’s term for the unequal distribution of precariousness is precarity, and it is those lives who experience precarity most profoundly who are forced to live “unlivable lives.” I argue that the narrator in Beauty Salon is forced to live an “unlivable life” because he is radically exposed to violence and precarity, as he is afforded little to no social support. His life is just as precarious as the lives of his guests, even though he is the one who runs the Terminal and cares for the guests, and would, therefore, seem to have more authority. The narrator, who is made socially unintelligible as he is denied the ability to properly grieve, externalizes his emotional attachment for the guests onto the fish at the Terminal, to which he typically gives far more attention. At this point, it behooves us to return to the narrator’s remarks mentioned earlier: “It was only yesterday, when I was looking at the fish tank with the greenish water, that I realized that no one cares if a fish disappears. I was the only one all this time who was affected by the death inside of the aquariums” (54). While the narrator certainly appears to care about the lives of the fish themselves, this also seems to be his way of expressing his despair about the lives of the guests: no one cares what happens to them, except for him alone. The guests at the Terminal live in their own insulated, glass aquarium—closed off from the outside, but still at the mercy of the world beyond, which has failed to care for them in their final days. The narrator, as he recognizes that he is the only one who cares about death inside the Terminal, is overwhelmed by sadness as he realizes that his own life is ungrievable too.

At the novella’s conclusion, the narrator, who knows his days are numbered, expresses fear and sadness about what will happen after he dies:
No one will ever see my work, the time I invested in it. No one will know how hard I worked to ensure that all my clients left the beauty salon satisfied. No one will know how much tenderness I felt for the young boy forced to traffic drugs, nor the anxiety I felt when I heard other peoples’ lovers arrive. When I fall ill all my efforts will have been in vain… I can’t explain why I am so alone at this stage of my life. It’s quite possible, though, that this is just my way of not having anyone here to cry over me at night. (62)

The narrator, throughout the entirety of the novel, has maintained rigid composure and has shown attention to detail and order as he has created the Terminal in the way that he sees most fit. This passage, though, shows him at his most vulnerable. He acknowledges the care he had for the boy who died of tuberculosis, his devotion to his clients, his sadness at hearing the lovers’ cries, and the knowledge that he will be forgotten and his life will not be grieved by anyone when he dies. The narrator’s regret at having ever established a relationship with the boy who dies becomes more clear here: he sees that this connection loses significance because his own life is not recognized as significant. The narrator not only becomes more vulnerable in the final pages but he also remarks on how his “thoughts flow more freely now” (62). The rigidity that the narrator attempts to maintain throughout the novella breaks down here and his thoughts loosen up. In fact, in the last pages of the novella, the narrator never mentions the fish—his thoughts stay focused on what is to come of his life and the lives of the guests. It is as if in these final pages, the narrator is—for the first time—finally able to acknowledge his care for the guests without needing to express his care and emotional engagement via the fish. In these last pages, the narrator actually imagines the possible outcomes of his death; he narrates his own death and considers the future of the Terminal. In some sense, this is all done in vain, for there is no one there to apprehend the narrator’s life. He is still alone, secluded within the walls of the Terminal.
However, it also seems that the narrator’s narration of his own ending actually affords him some way to resist biopolitical control, as there is no one there to manage his life and determine how he dies. As the narrator actively imagines multiple outcomes for himself and the guests, the narrative leaves a little room for future possibilities—even if these options do not appear hopeful. In “Has the Queer Ever Been Human,” Dana Luciano and Mel Chen write, “A desire to persist in the face of precarity…is the primary catalyst for queer thought in general” (193). Maybe the narrator’s active engagement with the future of the Terminal is precisely what Luciano and Chen describe: it marks his desire to persist amidst radically precarious circumstances.
Works Consulted


