ABSTRACT
Since Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 publication of Lolita, numerous feminist scholars have argued for rereading the novel from the girl’s point of view to understand Lolita not as a sexual agent, but as an incest victim. In this article, I examine how revisionary texts like Roger Fishbite (1999), Lo’s Diary (1999), and Poems for Men Who Dream of Lolita (1992) give voice to the girl in the text, disrupting Nabokov’s “aesthetic bliss” and emphasizing aspects of Lolita’s victimization. Ultimately, I discuss how a contemporary analytical shift from valuing the aesthetics to a consideration of the ethics of the novel has led to restricted critical readings of the narrative, which, nevertheless, remain open through the acknowledgement of the girl’s sexual desire and agency within these female authors’ revisionary texts.

KEYWORDS
agency, ethics, incest, revisionary texts, seduction, sexual consent

Dating back several centuries (recall Samuel Richardson’s Pamela in 1740), the trope of the sexual encounter between the young girl and her benevolent and/or malevolent father figure has epitomized a tangle of consent, agency, and coercion for the girl. As the quintessential twentieth-century text in this genre, Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita (1955) has inspired abundant scholarly analyses, popular cultural critiques, and numerous novels, films, and other creative works. Lolita has also continued to evoke debate on how to read the text—both aesthetically and ethically. Although Lolita has been read as a “love story” (Patnoe 1995: 83), many feminist scholars have urged readers to reconsider the text from the perspective of Lolita, as a child incest victim. In this article, I examine several revisionary texts that present Lolita’s voice as a first person narrator, such as Kim Morrissey’s Poems for Men Who Dream of Lolita (1992); Pia Pera’s Lo’s Diary (published in Italian in 1995 and translated into English in 1999); and Emily Prager’s Roger Fishbite (1999). I argue that these texts emphasize an ethical reading of Lolita by drawing attention to the girl’s victimization while, nonetheless, retaining notable ambiguities that acknowledge the girl’s sexual desire and agency.
Aesthetics or Ethics?

In his 1959 essay, “On a Book Entitled Lolita,” Nabokov argues that the sole purpose of Lolita is “aesthetic bliss,” which he defines as “a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (314–315). Nabokov states, “Lolita has no moral in tow.” The novel, he argues, does not exist for any ethical purpose, but simply an aesthetic one. He describes himself as “neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction,” and states bluntly, “I detest symbols and allegories” (314). Here, Nabokov directly contests the novel’s foreword by John Ray, the imagined psychologist who introduces Lolita as a factual account. Ray insists that the book is first and foremost ethical; he writes, “Still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader” (4–5, emphasis added). Ray also describes the book’s aesthetic “magic,” but unlike Nabokov, Ray argues that it connects directly to the ethical impact of the text: “How magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!” (5). Quite clearly, Ray argues that his publishing the “case study” (4) of Lolita is ethical because, despite Nabokov’s claim, there is in fact a “moral in tow” for readers who appreciate both the ethics and aesthetics of the text.

Feminist criticism of Lolita in the 1980s and 1990s initially argued that Nabokov’s “declared dedication to ‘aesthetic bliss’” proved that “the novel’s design encourages readers to sympathize with the protagonist and artist-figure, Humbert Humbert, to the detriment of the child” (Pifer 2005: 186). Linda Kauffman articulated the feminist academic debate about the novel in her essay, “Framing Lolita: Is There a Woman in the Text?” as she considers Lolita’s erasure of its titular character, in particular how “through a variety of narrative strategies … the inscription of the father’s body in the text obliterates the daughter’s” ([1989]1992: 131). Kauffman suggests that Nabokov’s “aesthetic bliss” is a “trap”—an ethical trap, perhaps—for “sophisticated readers of Lolita,” who tend to sympathize with Humbert while “ignoring the pathos of Lolita’s predicament” (138–139). Kauffman argues that critics and readers “fail to notice that Humbert is not only a notoriously unreliable narrator but that he is an unreliable reader too” (135), especially of Lolita, whom he has not only “solipsized but annihilated” (136). In urging feminist scholars to “read against the text by resisting the father’s seductions,” Kauffman challenges feminist readers to understand “what [Lolita’s] victimization is like” (133). She insists that a feminist reading of Lolita must
acknowledge that the novel is “not about love, but about incest” (131) and that Lolita is not a seductress or even a willing participant in Humbert’s executed fantasy. Similarly, Elizabeth Patnoe, in her essay “Lolita Misrepresented, Lolita Reclaimed: Disclosing the Doubles” locates the “problem” in widespread “misreadings” of the novel that have “embrace[d] what they consider the book’s pleasures” while “almost always skirt[ing] its pains—Lolita’s pains, as well as the readerly traumas associated with this novel” (1995: 116). Patnoe suggests that to read the text pleasurably through Humbert’s myopic vision is to fail to acknowledge how that pleasure comes at the expense of trauma to a girl child and how it derives from a culture that “violates and punishes women, that denies, trivializes, and fragments the female personal—especially trauma—while hegemonically advancing the male personal—especially pleasure” (120). The challenge put forth by scholars like Kauffman and Patnoe is thus to re-read the novel from Lolita’s point of view with the girl’s victimization in mind.

Rewriting Lolita in her own Words

Perhaps recognizing this urgency to unearth a voice for Lolita, several writers in the 1990s reimagined Nabokov’s novel through Lolita’s voice. As Naomi Wolf notes in Promiscuities, “Lolita is created and re-created by men, but she rarely writes her own account of events” (1997: xx). Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of these texts emphasize Lolita’s victimization. In an interview with Camile Paglia, Morrissey stated that her motivation for Poems for Men Who Dream of Lolita (1992) was for “people to never be able to say the word ‘Lolita’ again and use it in the clichéd way that we have” (157, emphasis in original). Similarly, as Timothy McCracken points out, Prager’s “political agenda” for Roger Fishbite (1999) appears “quite clear beginning with her dedication: ‘To all the little girls I’ve met who have started out in desperate circumstances’ and through her numerous references to child abuse and the sexual slavery of children” (2001: 137). Even Pera’s Lo’s Diary (1999), which Julia Vaingurt has argued was “not motivated by feminist critique” (2005: 20), took as her impetus the voiceless, and imprisoned Lolita. Pera explained in an interview with Alexandra Gill, “She was a little girl trapped in a cage. I wanted to see if she could write” (1999: D4).

In each of these texts, Lolita articulates her physical and emotional violation. In Morrissey’s poem, “stepfather,” Humbert’s violence and Lolita’s visceral disgust become apparent:
I am holding my tongue like a fist
pressed hard against teeth
the smell of stale blood in my throat
as you breathe through my mouth (1992: 15)

Lolita’s recurrent horror of this old wound with its “stale blood” also emerges in the next poem, “sometimes I dream he’s my mother.” Here, she says she wakes “dreaming blood” (17), which evokes Humbert’s molestation of her:

I wake to the wet slap of sweat
moving skin against skin (19)

Sex is repeatedly depicted as an injury or a nightmare, and Morrissey’s poems stress Lolita’s youth, with the opening untitled poem reminding us that she is twelve “and almost a quarter” (3) and the title of the poem, “stepfather,” emphasizing the incest and child abuse inherent in their relationship. Through the poems’ chronicling of sex with Humbert, we do not experience any sense of her desire, pleasure, or consent; Morrissey’s rewriting underlines their interaction as being purely a violation. Later, in “stepfather,” Lolita stomachs sex with Humbert by reimagining the flavors of her reality:

think of lollipops
not mouldy socks
close your eyes	
tight, think sour cream
don’t think cheese, don’t
see raw sausage left too long
in the heat
think ice cream (16)

The imagery here reminds us of Lolita’s status as a child and evokes her apparent disgust with the sights and smells of sex with Humbert, rendering it impossible to read this sexual interaction as anything but nonconsensual.

Prager’s Roger Fishbite also accentuates Lolita’s victimization. The narrator, Lucky Linderhof, has murdered her adult lover, Roger Fishbite, and now recounts and interprets her affair with him. The initial sexual encounter between Lucky and Fishbite is described as a clear violation of parental rights. In the hotel bed, Lucky snuggles up to her adoptive father, and then he makes his move: “He felt warm and good and I was very happy. I was just about to say ‘I’m glad to have you for my dad’ when I felt his fingers play across my nipple.” To accentuate the nonconsent of their sexual relationship, Lucky narrates her subsequent detachment from her body and compares herself to “little slaves in Thailand” (1999: 85). In this moment,
Lucky finds Fishbite “blissfully unaware of possible trauma” (86) that he imposes on her in this situation. After this “psychic shift” Lucky becomes “once removed” or disembodied, stating that “as they say in juvenile detention, there are infinite degrees of casualty” (85). Furthermore, when Fishbite wants to “show [her] something else,” Lucky clearly says “No” several times, until Fishbite pleads, “Can I show you later?” to which she responds, “Maybe … Maybe not” (86). At this point, Lucky has already irrevocably changed. When she cries and exclaims, “I want my mommy,” Fishbite tells her that her mother is already dead, propelling her deeper into a “shock” of “sorrow and aloneness” (89). Later, Fishbite remains “blissfully unaware” as he begins to molest her again and asks her if she is okay. She recalls, “I didn’t answer. I wasn’t okay, of course. I would never be okay. It was astounding how self-centered he was” (92). Like Morrissey, Prager leaves no room here for an interpretation in which Lolita is the sexual aggressor, and, rather, represents her clearly as a victim of child abuse.

Pera’s novel, however, depicts Lolita’s sexual agency, illustrating what no feminist scholar today would be likely to argue—the validity of Humbert’s “very strange” assertion that “it was she who seduced me” (Nabokov 1955: 132). Even what has become known as the “lap scene” in the original novel comes about in Pera’s rendition through Lolita’s contrivance. She approaches Humbert with “lips … almost impeccably painted” carrying a “red apple” with the intent of “hypnosis” since “no man can resist a woman who has an apple in her hand” (1999: 101). She gets his attention by sitting on the couch and tossing the apple until he grabs it from her, and they scuffle. As she begins to “feel that trunk of his swelling, bigger and bigger,” she lets him inspect a bruise “so he can touch me right at the edge of my underpants” (102), knowing that he concocts this excuse to arouse himself. Notably here, it is not only Humbert who “tries to act normal so I can’t tell how excited he is,” but also Lolita who must “pretend nothing’s happening,” despite being “all hot inside” and wanting to “hug and kiss him without all these pretenses” (103). Lolita even seems to share in the climactic moment saying,

I fling my head back, and for a second feel his mouth on my throat. I press against him, until he holds me still, interrupts the nursery rhyme, and, all trembling, forgets to keep up his pretense. I feel weird, too, I melt, and something goes by without my really seeing it, a whir of swift wings, it disappears in an instant and we sit there looking at each other, all blushing, not knowing what to do. (103)

Lolita’s erotic experience followed by a post-climactic stillness transforms her from what Humbert in the original Lolita imagined as being a “safely
solipsized” (Nabokov 1955: 60) child into an active orchestrator and participant in the sexual act.

Still, even Pera acknowledges Lolita's victimization. After their first episode of intercourse in Lo's Diary, Humbert becomes “all perked up and wants to do it again and again and again, and in the end it hurts” (1999: 132). And after Lolita learns that “the hen is dead” (135), she regrets her actions, thinking, “If he’d told me right away … I wouldn't have gone in for that wild screwing. I would have taken it more slowly, much more slowly. Today all day it's been hurting, because this morning he made me do it three times in a row” (136). Her status as the “poor little orphan” who is “lonely” and “scared of the dark” pushes her into his arms where he “starts with caresses” and “comes back in and he doesn’t give a god damn that I don't want him to; that he's hurting me” (138). From this point, Humbert is depicted more overtly as a violator, which directly contests her fear that “he'll tell the hen I raped him” (132). Instead, as she describes, “He pins my hands down and he says, See, you're all wet, you want it; and he holds me still and I don't have the strength to kick. I don't care about anything anymore, nothing in the world.” She now feels that she “stink[s] of incest” (138) and is “the sex slave of a French creep” (140). Despite their initial sexual encounter during which she was the actor upon his unresponsive body, the realization of her mother's death (and the accompanying fact that she is now legally, bodily, and psychologically at Humbert’s mercy) depicts her more clearly as a victim.

Undermining Nabokov’s “Aesthetic Bliss”

These writers underscore Lolita’s victimization to combat Nabokov’s aesthetic bliss, seeming to subscribe to the theory that such “bliss” comes at the expense of the girl. At one point in Roger Fishbite, Lucky realizes that “another person's pain was like a picture on the wall to him, an object you could take off and put in the closet if it got in your way.” Here, Lucky questions the ethics of not only Fishbite’s bliss, but also the ethical stance of a reader or watcher who can enjoy another’s “pain … like a picture on the wall” (1999: 92). Morrissey’s poems, too, suggest a protest against aesthetic bliss by aligning the reader with Quilty and Humbert. The title of the book, of course, suggests that these poems are specifically addressed to the “men who dream of Lolita.” Not only are Quilty and Humbert these very men, but this evocation also includes Nabokov and all male readers who derive
aesthetic bliss from the story of Lolita. It is as if Morrissey has taken up the issue that Kauffman objects to in Lolita’s lap scene: “the father’s body is the site and the source of not only aesthetic bliss but literal orgasm; both come at the same time—if, that is, the reader is male” ([1989]1992: 135). Kauffman’s accusation that male readers derive both aesthetic bliss and physical orgasm at the expense of the victimized Lolita echoes with Morrissey’s lines from “Parlour Tricks” when Lolita says,

you long for this dream-child, forgetting
the stale smell of her fear
you want a lover you can love without sex (1992: 39)

The reader longs for this “dream” girl without culpability. To “want a lover you can love without sex” perhaps is to be aroused by Lolita without feeling complicit in the formation of the girl’s pain. But Morrissey’s Lolita suggests that aesthetic bliss comes not only at the expense of the imagined girl, but also of real girls. She accuses Quilty of wresting his “plays” from the “girl who cries” (1992: 39) and being only self-interested, as she says, “for you there is only the sex … only your pleasure” (34). Still, Morrissey’s opening untitled poem suggests the warning that the “private” “Book of Dolores B. Haze” comes “with a curse” (3). She suggests,

put me back in my box
and be happy (3)

Here, Morrissey seems to link the girl’s story to opening Pandora’s Box, an invitation to misery for both the girl writer/Lolita as well as the male reader.

In Roger Fishbite, Prager mimics the direct address of Lolita, also seemingly to disrupt aesthetic bliss. The construct of her novel is that Lucky has become famous, empowering her to bring her salacious story to the mainstream, while advocating on behalf of girls. Lucky says, “Dear Readers and Watchers of tabloid TV and press, I want you to know the truth” (1999: 6). Some might criticize the heavy-handedness of Prager’s irony here, but what she does is constantly remind us, as readers, of the “tabloid” sensationalism of the story and our complicity in its enjoyment. The first time that Lucky allows Fishbite to perform oral sex on her, she interrupts the story by saying, “Dear Readers and Watchers, I must stop here lest I join the illustrious company of titillators and muddy my intent” (93), much like Humbert interrupts Lolita with exclamations, notably shifting to “gentlewomen of the jury” (1955: 135) from “gentlemen” (1955: 125) as he describes the night they became “technically lovers” (132). In Roger Fishbite, Lucky states that
she is “not so interested in the pornography of the affair as in chronicling the sort of man who initiates it” (1999: 93). Of course, we are left to wonder if perhaps not only Humbert but Nabokov, too, is meant to be part of this “illustrious company of titillators” (93). Lucky never mentions Nabokov, but she offers the “example” of Lewis Carroll “who may or may not have interfered with his Alice,” although Lucky believes this to be so “from the sad look on her face in the photogravures” (12). Lucky asks, “You think great literature comes out of nothing? Nothing can come out of nothing.” And then she contemplates, “Is the innocence of one girl child so important next to Alice in Wonderland? Does it matter if it wasn’t quite sooo wonderful for her? A hundred years of beautifully bound editions? Can anyone honestly say that they would save the child and lose the book?” (13). Here, Lucky picks up an unspoken question in Ray’s foreword to Lolita when he suggests that if Humbert had received psychological help “there would have been no disaster; but then, neither would there have been this book” (Nabokov 1955: 5). What would we truly give up in exchange for aesthetic bliss? Is the girl more valuable than art? Or, in other words, is an ethical narrative more important than aesthetic bliss?

What is ultimately at issue is not only the lack of ethics of the writer, but also of the reader. In addition to reading “you” as both Quilty and the reader, Morrissey more directly addresses the complicity of the audience. Her poem “Parlour tricks” begins thus: “You push pins through my flesh at a party” (1992: 33). Here, Lolita accuses “everyone” of enjoying a trick that involves “pressing silver through skin” despite her pain.

everyone knows

with tricks,
the pleasure is all in the audience
all in the stillness and the pain
no one mentions (33)

The audience derives “all” the pleasure here, again at the expense of the girl’s unspoken stillness and pain. So later, when she writes,

this is not erotic
and you are obscene
as you sit, fully clothed
saying no (42)

we might imagine the un-erotic scene of the reader of Lolita who denies complicity with a tale in which a young girl is abused. In this way, Lolita’s accusation,
... a girl is a girl
is a girl (43)

and her wake-up call

I want to slap you  to force you
to listen I want to say: No

My name is Dolores
write that love (43)

is as much for Quilty as it is for any author or reader who “dreams” of Lolita.
The interchangeability of “girl” is a trap for writers and readers who generalize the girl and fail to confront the real child victim.

The Ethics of Girls’ Victimization

Perhaps ironically, contemporary critical re-interpretations of Lolita suggest that the novel’s aesthetic bliss is not at the expense of the imagined or real girl, but in support of her. In short, they advance a so-called moral message of the novel, despite Nabokov’s warning that there is no such moral. Susan Quayle notes, “It is through Humbert’s awareness of the ‘real’ Lolita that Nabokov advances his “moral message on pedophilia” (2009: n.p.), while Nicolas Estournel suggests that the “incuriosity” (2013: 3) of Humbert leads the novel to be “ethical” in the way it “lead[s] the reader to consider morality by questioning the narrators’ points of view” (7). Christine Grogan notes how “Nabokov anticipated that the pendulum tracking the book’s reputation would swing. Confident in the immortality of his masterpiece, he predicted the day when some critic would cry that Lolita shows that he was really a moralist at heart” (2014: 53). Grogan notes that although originally feminists “criticized Nabokov for portraying the sexual exploitation of a pubescent girl as a joke, or, worse, a romance,” more recent critics “have gone so far as to argue in favor of Nabokov’s feminist sympathies and claim Lolita as a proto-feminist narrative” (2015: 53). These scholars find the moments of Lolita’s lack of interest and her “revulsion and reluctance with regard to engaging in sexual activities” (Quayle 2009; n.p.) as proof of even Humbert’s acknowledgement of abuse. Rather than Lolita’s having been successfully “solipsized” (Nabokov 1955: 60) as Humbert suggests and earlier scholars feared, recent scholars contend that her lack of consent comes through her “weeping and her stony silences” which “even Humbert cannot control,” and her narrative or linguistic “disruptions” (Shelton 1999: 289), and Lolita’s
ultimate escape from and rejection of Humbert. Scholars have noted that Lolita’s words in the original novel, such as “the word is incest” (Nabokov 1955: 119) or “the hotel where you raped me” (202), clearly highlight her nonconsent, emphasizing “the fact that Humbert is holding her against her will” (Grogan 2014: 202), so that “Humbert inadvertently makes available to readers a mechanism … through which they can attend to Dolly’s story” (Shelton 1999: 289). In our current moment, to read *Lolita* ethically is to understand it as a tale of victimization—and to argue otherwise would place one in untenable critical terrain.

In consideration of the ironic multiplicity of apparent authorial intent (Humbert’s, Ray’s, Nabokov’s), it seems hard not to find a critical shift from aesthetics to ethics, or from an enjoyment of the novel’s aesthetic bliss to interpretations of the novel as a feminist fable, rather ironic. In Ray’s foreword, he asserts that “in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac,” which “warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils” (1955: 5). Such hazards require protective action; he suggests that “*Lolita* should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world” (6). Ray partially sees the object of disciplinary action as the “wayward child” (5) who must be subjected to greater parental and pedagogical influence, observation, and control.

What might it mean that mainstream critical reception now finds itself more aligned with Ray than not? Ray’s warning sounds strangely similar to the *Report of the Task Force on The Sexualization of Girls*, in which the authors note that it developed in response to “journalists, child advocacy organizations, parents, and psychologists [who] have become alarmed, arguing that the sexualization of girls is a broad and increasing problem and is harmful to girls” (Zurbriggen et al. 2007: 1). In effect, *Lolita* is the quintessential “sexualized girl” as Simone de Beauvoir first articulated in her 1959 *Esquire* essay, coining the term “Lolita Syndrome” and arguing, as McCracken puts it, that “Lolitas” are not “sexual young girls but rather … young girls being sexualized by men” (2001: 130). Lolita’s narrative, in fact, fits at least two of the four sexualization criteria developed by the Task Force: “the imbuing of adult sexuality upon a child” and “being sexually objectified” (Zurbriggen et al. 2007: 2).

Yet, the question that continues to resound with girlhood studies scholars is how to read girls’ sexual desire and agency amidst the realities of sexualization. Scholars often declare the need to hear from girls themselves to unravel these complexities. Deborah Tolman et al. note that “there is a dearth
of qualitative psychological research on how girls navigate sexualization that
can capture the contradictions, nuances, complexities and various venues in
which girls engage with sexualizing processes. The voices of girls themselves
are disturbingly absent in the US psychological literature to date” (2015:
79). However, if we allow girls like Lolita to speak, do we believe them?

What we do choose to believe may have more to do with adults’ per-
ception than that of girls, and it directly connects to how we “read” girls—
aesthetically and ethically. Kathryn Bond Stockton considers the alternating
“dialectic of harm and agency” (2009: 140) for Lolita and inspires us to
understand the matter of Lolita’s consent as a matter of aesthetics. She notes
how Adrian Lyne’s 1997 film adaptation of Lolita was nearly banned “due
to its depictions of a sexual child” (33), while Angelica Houston’s 1996 film
adaptation of Bastard out of Carolina, which includes the young girl Bone
being “raped on-screen at agonizing length” was not (33). Stockton argues
that what makes Bastard more acceptable is, in fact, Bone’s lack of consent.
A raped child confirms “the child’s need for protection and her weakness in
these moments confirms the child’s innocence” whereas a desiring, consent-
ing child suggests an “erotic pleasure” (33) on the girl’s part, which clearly
makes audiences uncomfortable. In other words, the representation of a girl’s
rape can be “art” (and thus ethical aesthetic bliss), while a girl’s sexual desire
and agency must be pornography (often perceived as bliss lacking aesthetics
or ethics). Stockton argues that “Lolita can be sexual on her own terms only
if, definitely, and also finally, we can’t accuse ourselves of perversion” (151).

As readers or viewers, we may be reluctant to imbue Lolita with sexual
agency because we view her agency, and our own pleasure in it, as perverse.
This reluctance may have much to do with what Allison Pease notes as a
shift from early twentieth-century “dominant aesthetic practice … to vali-
date as fine arts only those that invoke disinterested contemplation rather
than a sensuous interest on the part of a reader or viewer” to a new “aesthetic
project: to bring the body and its senses more overtly into relation with the
ethical and social realm” (2000: 165–166). With the “body, and a bodily
response” as a “necessary constituent of the modern reading practice,” the
only way to “avoid a purely pornographic reading” is for “the body … to be
attached to a greater ethical project” (191). In other words, today it might
be seen as ethical to derive intellectual pleasure from Lolita’s literary prowess
and style, but it would likely be seen as unethical to derive sexual pleasure
from the novel’s depiction of a young girl and an older father figure. In our
contemporary American cultural understanding of childhood, pornography,
and sexual abuse, the ethics of consent preclude this as ethical aesthetic bliss.
The Puzzle of Lolita’s Sexual Agency

Today, it might be equally urgent to acknowledge Lolita’s sexual desire as her victimization. M. Gigi Durham acknowledges how “Nabokov’s Lolita is a nuanced character whose sexuality is complex—like many preadolescent girls, she is sexually curious—but she has no control over her relationship with Humbert, which is abusive and manipulative” (2008: 25). Although Durham’s interpretation clearly labels Lolita a victim, she also recognizes the girl’s sexual curiosity. What Lolita and its iterations offer us are representations of the complexity of a girl’s desire and sexual agency amidst her oppression. Here, we might recall Judith Butler’s theories of subjectivity; she argues that “the subject might yet be thought as deriving its agency from precisely the power it opposes, as awkward and embarrassing as such a formulation might be” (1997: 17). It is perhaps for this reason that all the revisionary texts of Lolita attempt to demonstrate the girl’s sexual desire and agency, despite her victimization.

Prager’s novel, in particular, demonstrates the choices Lucky makes as a subjugated girl with a lecherous father figure. Unlike Humbert and Lolita, Fishbite and Lucky never have intercourse. In their first sexual encounter, Lucky pushes his hand away, saying, “Okay, okay … You can give me oral sex” and despite his initial confusion manifesting in “an odd look on his face as if presented with a dilemma he simply could not solve,” he “did as I asked” (1999: 92). When he finishes, he “dully” asks her, “And will you do me?” to which she responds, “No” with “irritation” telling him “Yucchy. Never. No, I will never touch you. Why would I want to?” (93). At another time when Fishbite proposes intercourse, begging, “Please can’t we make love?” she responds:

‘Officer!’ I would shout as loud as I could, and he would cringe. ‘Lose my virginity to you? What are you, nuts? What’s in it for me?’

Then he would list the presents and clothing and trips we would take if only I would give in. (103)

She refuses intercourse despite these bribes, but her allowing him to perform oral sex on her convolutes the lines of consent and nonconsent of their interactions since she says, “So I enjoyed it while I was forced to, and enjoyed forcing Fishbite to, and it amused me that we were both being forced to do it, and it was pretty confusing” (128). Throughout the novel, Lucky envisions herself both as prey and predator—as a rabbit being chased and as a “rabid ferret girl” (174). Even when Lucky alludes to her victimization, she
refuses to accept it simplistically. When Lucky replies to her “Dear Readers and Watchers” who want to know “Do they rape here?” in reference to her residential facility, her response creates a consent puzzle. “And the answer is, they rape—some do—like anywhere. Even at Chutney, some did. Did they rape me? Not without my consent they didn’t” (69). For Lucky then, rape means something other than simply nonconsensual sex, although exactly what it does mean is unclear. Thus, the novel resists a straightforward ethics of consent in which there is a clear perpetrator and victim—at least from the point of view of the girl.

Even Morrissey addresses the confusion often inherent in a girl’s sexual consent. In her poem, “Saturday Matinee, June 3,” Lolita experiences a more palatable feast for the senses with her peer Kenny Knight,

tasting the butter-salt corn
the clean warmth of boy skin
the hot breath (1992: 8)

that belies her reaction to his advances. We read that he

put his hand on my knee
I said no and stared at the screen (8)

Here, Lolita’s no does not mean no. She says,

I said no, meaning do
what you like, Kenny Knight
but don’t ask (8)

This confusion seems to be explicitly tied to a cultural presumption that coercion exists within seduction. While girls are often seen as the gatekeepers of sexual behavior, boys and men are often depicted as the drivers of the seduction, attempting to persuade the girl to engage in some activity (Bay-Cheng: 2015). Although they do not state it explicitly, many of the Lolita iterations seem to ask the question of how we might find the ethical line between persuasion and coercion for the girl.

**Conclusion: The Ambiguity of Lolita’s Ethics**

Consciously or not, these writers have written girls’ sexual subjectivity into the text of *Lolita*. If these novels espouse a moral it might be that to maintain Lolita’s sexual desire is not to deny her victimization, and to acknowl-
edge her victimization is not to deny her sexual subjectivity and agency. Michael Wood ponders “the moral question” (2003: 191) in *Lolita*; he says, “At the risk of sounding like a chastened John Ray, Jr., I would suggest that one of the most important things Nabokov’s novel does is help us understand better just what an offense against a child is and understand this morally, not merely technically. But it does this only by getting everything slightly wrong and leaving the rest to us” (193). Wood draws on the concept of consent to demonstrate his point, suggesting that when Lolita goes to Humbert in despair after she has learned of her mother’s death, “a double confusion reigns in this scene, in Humbert and Lolita, and that it centers on the unnamed notion of consent. This confusion is precisely Nabokov’s point.” He argues, “Neither of them knows anything about consent. Humbert doesn’t know that Lolita can’t have consented, even when she seemed to, even when she came sobbing in the room. She doesn’t know that the very chance of her consent has been destroyed for good” (194). I would agree that “confusion [seems to be] precisely Nabokov’s point” here, although I would not reach the conclusion that “neither of them knows anything about consent.” Rather, I would argue that the novel suggests how consent can be distressingly unclear, remaining in this novel, as in its many iterations, a puzzle, even, as Guy Hocquenghem has called it, a “trap” (1988: 285). We may design laws that protect girls from statutory rape but the lines we draw remain unstable (demonstrated in, among other ways, the constantly shifting age of legal consent). *Lolita*’s moral may be simply to point out how flawed our over-simplified dichotomies of lust and love, seduction and rape, child and adult, child and girl are. *Lolita* does not merely show us “just what an offense against a child is” as Michael Wood says, but shows us that “Humbert is not an ordinary pedophile, and Nabokov’s Lolita is not a Lolita. But are there ordinary pedophiles? Isn’t this a dangerous notion in itself, and doesn’t Humbert, in spite of himself, do us a bit of good by giving the notion such a hard time?” (2003: 189). The *Lolita* narratives force us to rethink the boundaries we draw for the girl for her own good and to wrestle with the complex nature of consent, and the vastness of the gray area between the black-and-white cases. The ethical and aesthetic puzzles of consent, in fact, persist in *Lolita*’s reiterations because they are part of what makes the narrative so endlessly fascinating, disturbing, and perplexing.
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