



READING IMPLICATION: FORGIVENESS AND AMERICAN INNOCENCE IN CATHERINE LACEY'S *PEW* (2020)

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ABSTRACT. This article examines how Catherine Lacey's *Pew* (2020) critically portrays discourses of forgiveness in relation to the so-called "Myth of American innocence" and offers a productive site for engaging with Michael Rothberg's concept of implication—how individuals are entangled in violence and harm beyond the perpetrator-victim binary. Drawing on recent work on literary narrative, implicated subjectivity, narratology, and reader-response theory, we argue that *Pew* both represents and performs implicated subjectivity: through its themes and narrative structure, the novel positions readers to confront social and historical violence often obscured by contemporary narratives of forgiveness. Integrating Rothberg's framework with theories of affect and embodiment, we show how Lacey's formal strategies—second-person address, narratorial effacement, and the narrator's ambiguous identity—transform reading into an ethical encounter. The article contributes to debates in literary ethics, narratology, and implication by demonstrating how fiction may both depict and generate implicated subjectivities.

Keywords: implicated reader, implication, narrative theory, American innocence, American racism, US military intervention.

LEER LA IMPLICACIÓN: EL PERDÓN Y LA INOCENCIA ESTADOUNIDENSE EN *PEW* (2020) DE CATHERINE LACEY

RESUMEN. Este artículo examina cómo *Pew* (2020), de Catherine Lacey, retrata de manera crítica los discursos sobre el perdón en relación al llamado “mito de la inocencia estadounidense” y ofrece un espacio productivo para abordar el concepto de la implicación de Michael Rothberg: cómo los individuos se ven envueltos en la violencia y el daño más allá de la dicotomía perpetrador-víctima. Basándonos en trabajos recientes sobre narrativa, subjetividad implicada, narratología y teoría de la respuesta del lector, argumentamos que *Pew* representa y posibilita la subjetividad implicada: a través de su temática y estructura narrativa, la novela sitúa a los lectores frente a la violencia social e histórica que a menudo queda oculta por los relatos del perdón. Al integrar el marco conceptual de Rothberg con las teorías del afecto y *embodiment*, mostramos cómo las estrategias formales de Lacey—el uso de la segunda persona, el borrado narrativo y la identidad ambigua del narrador—transforman la lectura en un encuentro ético. El artículo contribuye a los debates sobre la ética literaria, la narratología, y la implicación al demostrar cómo la ficción puede tanto representar como generar subjetividades implicadas.

Palabras clave: lector implicado, implicación, teoría narrativa, inocencia estadounidense, racismo estadounidense, intervención militar estadounidense.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In her novel *Pew* (2020), American author Catherine Lacey offers a critical portrayal of collective narratives of forgiveness in (white) American communities. Narrated by an unnamed, genderless, and “unracializable” outsider, this stranger turns up in a contemporary southern town days prior to the community’s annual “Forgiveness Festival.” Initially eager to offer help and take the narrator in, the townsfolk quickly grow frustrated and suspicious with the uncertainty surrounding the recent arrival’s origins. Central to the novel’s critical stance is the townspeople’s conception of forgiveness with respect to past and present racial violence, as well as the US’s use of aggressive military force abroad. *Pew* sheds light on how public discourses of forgiveness and innocence operate in relation to instances of direct and structural violence and how they play out in the private sphere, serving to divorce the present from notions of responsibility regarding the past.

While unlikely to be among the most commonly cited impediments to racial justice in the contemporary US, author and scholar Carol Anderson points precisely to “the American penchant for unconditional forgiveness” as a stumbling block to adequately addressing the lasting repercussions of centuries of chattel slavery and structural, systemic racism (2018). Tracing historical gestures of forgiveness and pardon, Anderson sees Americans as having a tendency “to forgive those who waged

the most sustained, brutal assaults in the name of white supremacy, without requiring them to repudiate their beliefs or actions in return. [Americans] have rationalized that forgiveness, that generosity, as 'moving on'" (2018).

This understanding of forgiveness stems from the foundational myth of American innocence, which has worked to ensure that innocence remains both the nation's initial point of departure and its inevitable destination, where instances of injustice may be declared as overcome: from the Lost Cause to the declaration of a post-racial present, the effect has been a redesignation of "racism as an individual aberration rather than something systemic, institutional, and pervasive", which ensures a return to a state of "racial innocence" (Anderson, *White Rage* 99). Along similar lines, Ta-Nehisi Coates exposes how this discourse on individual forgiveness is subsequently extrapolated to the collective: "The point of this language of 'intention' and 'personal responsibility' is broad exoneration. Mistakes were made. Bodies were broken. People were enslaved. We meant well. We tried our best. 'Good intention' is a hall pass through history" (33). This very same logic of perpetual American innocence in regard to the nation's racial past has also served to justify the use of aggressive military force to ensure American hegemony abroad.

While critiques of forgiveness may be uncommon in mainstream arenas, questions of accountability certainly are not. Recent events in the American public sphere have sparked poignant debate and resulted in a renewed scrutiny regarding the country's role and connection to its past. Critical reevaluations, like *The 1619 Project*, for example, have met with severe backlash, provoking reactionary legislation and stoking so-called "anti-woke" sentiment that has served as a rallying cry for right-wing American politics. In a similar vein, in March 2023 prestigious news publications marked the twentieth anniversary of the US-led war in Iraq; notably absent from reports and think-pieces was any mention of the role major publications had played in bolstering support for the war (Solomon 82), let alone recognition of the direct and indirect victims of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. In omitting any criticism or acknowledgement of the civilians killed, the war is framed as a well-intentioned mistake, instead of "a calculated, premeditated crime perpetrated on a massive scale ... premised on transparently nonsensical lies" (Burgis, 2023).

These are but two examples, yet they illustrate what happens when the national myths of American exceptionalism and innocence are either challenged or used retroactively to ensure the US's intentions and actions be seen as forces for good. The two myths operate in conjunction with one another "when the supposedly exceptional nation is forced to explain a past, present, or future action that many people deem morally abhorrent"; they constitute narratives which are "told —to the world and to ourselves— to justify and excuse the actions" so that we "remember slavery and settler colonialism as events of the past, not as structures of domination that haunt our present" and have us "view the Iraq war as a simple 'mistake'" (Sirvent and Haiphong xi). The controversy stems not from questioning the myth, but rather from the serious associations with responsibility or guilt and, particularly, the

feelings that these connote¹. In short, clinging to myths of American exceptionalism and innocence serves to prevent incurrence of any debt—legal, political, sentimental, or moral—whatsoever: the exceptional nation, perpetually innocent—both in the sense of being unaware of and free from blame—is always already absolved.

With the foreclosure of discussions of responsibility, it begs the question: how might a history such as that of the United States be discussed without provoking blowback? How to speak productively about past injustices and those committed abroad in individuals' names in a way that does not reduce the conversation to questions of legal guilt or innocence or take grievances with feelings associated with guiltiness? What role might cultural productions, like Catherine Lacey's *Pew*, play in addressing these concerns?

These are the sort of questions for which Michael Rothberg provides a theoretical framework in *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Perpetrators and Victims* (2019). Drawing on legal and historical scholarship, Rothberg proposes the figure of "the implicated subject", a necessary addition to the conventional triad of perpetrator-victim-bystander, which the author sees as insufficient in addressing cases of violence and injustice whose effects endure. While neither perpetrators, victims, nor bystanders, implicated subjects are nonetheless connected and thus *implicated* in "the manifold indirect structural, and collective forms of agency that enable injury, exploitation, and domination but that frequently remain in the shadows" (1), such as the way an individual consumer may be implicated in the exploitation of workers in systems of global capital or how one may be implicated in past instances of suffering whose effects carry over into the present.

A central objective in theorizing implication is identifying diverse forms of narrative—in the broadest sense of the term—understood "as implicit or explicit theoretical acts that help us advance thinking about political responsibility and solidarity" (23) by way of revealing or highlighting relations of implication. The concept has been applied to diverse fields of study, from social work, history, memory activism, or cultural studies², in order to better elucidate the myriad and complex ways individuals are enmeshed in systems of violence whose repercussions are wide-reaching, both across time and geo-political space. As for scholarly work centered on literary narrative and implication, Jennifer Noji asserts that while many have engaged explicitly with this theoretical framework, studies have seldom focused on real potential readers and the ways in which they may approach the

¹ A brief review of recent "anti-woke" legislation highlights the particular grievance taken with regard to feeling. Florida's so-called Stop WOKE Act, for example, prohibits instruction that encourages students to ascribe to any of eight listed concepts, including the notion that an individual by virtue of their "race, color, sex, or national origin, bears *personal responsibility* for and must *feel guilt*, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress because of actions ... committed in the past by other members of the same" group (Russell-Brown 365, emphasis added).

² See, for example, the volumes 29:3 and 29:4 of *Parallax* dedicated to implication and feeling or the entry for "Implicated Subjects" (pp. 80-85) in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism* (2023).

content and research has tended to limit its scope to "literary content (story) rather than form (discourse)" (24).

Building on this initial framework and on later scholarship that has explored and reflected on implication's applications in contemporary literature, we offer a reading of Catherine Lacey's *Pew* that responds to the question of how literature might address implication in nuanced and productive ways within the context of contemporary American society that holds this notion of innocence as one of its foundational myths. Not only does *Pew* introduce implication as an overarching theme through its critical treatment of narratives of forgiveness, but it also provides the reader with the means to adopt a position of implicated subjectivity through the role of *implicated* reader. Put another way, *Pew* shows what implicatedness looks like through story and its characters as it simultaneously enables readers to imagine what implicatedness *feels* like by way of its narrative structure. In what follows, we will address pertinent theoretical aspects of implication, reflections on the myth of American innocence, and the role of forgiveness in collective discourses in American society. We will then proceed with our reading of how this plays out in *Pew*.

2. THEORIZING IMPLICATION AND READING LITERATURE IN CONJUNCTION WITH AMERICAN INNOCENCE

While Rothberg's theory of implication provides a crucial point of departure for our analysis, the reading developed here emerges at the intersection of narratology, affect theory, and critical race scholarship, treating implication not as a self-sufficient framework but as a concept that gains analytical traction through its dialogue with these traditions. A central remit of theorizing implication is providing conceptual coordinates for identifying and describing narrative framing that would shed light on relations of implication. As an example, Rothberg points to expressions of solidarity in the wake of Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012. In an initial response, gestures of "solidarity-via-identification" through the formula "I am Trayvon" were seen in both street protests and online spaces as an expression of solidarity with Trayvon's family and community. However, this oft-used formula was quickly met with criticism, as white individuals clearly "do not in fact experience the kind of profiling and 'justified' violence to which black people are daily exposed" (4). Thus, the slogan not only exhibits ignorance and disregard for the reality of Black Americans, but also allows white individuals to sidestep and elide white supremacy's role in the innocent slaughter of Black people.

The alternative "I am *not* Trayvon" arose in response to the original slogan. If the first phrase operated by way of identification with the victim, the second does so by means of "non-identification": the recognition on behalf of the speaker that their experience is, in fact, *not* commensurate with Trayvon's and never could be. This reformulation "creates the opportunity to claim a kind of responsibility that does not fit neatly into the victim/perpetrator binary that frames so much mainstream discussion of racist violence" (Rothberg 7). In other words, it is an expression of implicated subjectivity, which allows speakers whose realities differ to expose the

very conditions that made his murder possible and the ways in which they not only do not suffer but, in fact, may benefit from such a system.

Along similar lines, we read *Pew* as exposing the contradictions inherent in the ways forgiveness is employed in contemporary American society. The novel portrays through its characters how the myth of American innocence exploits discourses of forgiveness; at the same time the narrative structure enables readers to approach implicatedness in a nuanced way, whereby the implied reader is prompted to assume the position of *implicated* reader. The narratological concept and figure of the *implied reader*³ refers to a theoretical construct associated with the textual “network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text” and offer “a particular role to play” (Iser 34-35). This role offered to the real reader consists of three basic components: “the different perspectives represented in the text, the vantage point from which he joins them together, and the meeting place where they converge” (36); it is in this meeting place that the meaning of a text arises. While the first of these components is to be found in the text itself, the other two—the vantage point and the meeting place—are not linguistically expressed in the text and, therefore, fall to the reader to be imagined.

Iser’s concept of “vantage point” suggests a consideration of the reader’s physical orientation: the position from which readers perceive perspectives presented in a text. In a similar vein, Stanley Fish places emphasis on the importance of a reader’s physical situation in meaning creation, namely that of the reader’s belonging to an “interpretive community”, which is “made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts” which “exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read” (14). As a member of an interpretive community, any thought the reader “can think and the mental operations he can perform have their source in some or other interpretive community” and “he is as much a product of that community ... as the meaning it enables him to produce” (14).

This brief overview of theoretical concepts provides us with two key notions in considering the reader as implicated subject: firstly, the theoretical construct of the implied reader confers the role to be assumed by the real reader in deriving meaning from the text; secondly, the notion that readers—and writers—are members of an interpretive community on which interpretive strategies depend. Hanna Meretoja similarly underscores the significance of situatedness for readership in regards to implication: “The perspective of the implicated reader requires taking readers to be socially and historically situated, part of histories of violence and injustices, not merely abstract readers with certain cognitive competences” (518). It is in this

³ While Iser’s original concept interests us here, similar terms have been put forth by various narratologists. Wolf Schmid opts for *abstract reader*, which “never coincides with the fictive reader, the narratee” (51, 54). Gérard Genette employs the term “extradiegetic narratee, who merges with the implied reader and with whom each real reader can identify” (260). For more on these concepts, see Schmid, 2010, in particular chapter two, “The entities in a narrative work”, pp 34-88.

situatedness that we view *Pew* as engaging particularly with the contemporary American context wherein discourses of unconditional forgiveness are used to declare past injustices as overcome and to overlook violence against individuals abroad in the name of goodwill and just intentions.

As for the relation between implied and implicated reader, it must be made clear that “while all texts have implied readers, not all texts have implicated readers. The implicated reader comes into existence when a text’s implied reader is implicated in the violent events and structures represented in the given text” (Noji 23). Thus, it could be said that the implied reader may be prompted by the text to adopt the role of implicated reader in deriving meaning from the perspectives contained therein, which, in turn, are based on the interpretive strategies that the implied reader, as a member of an interpretive community in common with the author, identifies as implicating her in the content of the text. Nevertheless, the possible implicated reader is “an ideal reading position”, which is in no way guaranteed, as “real readers inhabit extremely diverse subject positions in relation to histories and structures of violence and such distinct positions will inevitably influence how they respond to a text (if at all)” (23).

A return to Rothberg’s description of implicated subjects may clarify the nature of the implicated reader: implicated subjects “neither possess an identity nor arise from a process of identification ... Rather, to be an implicated subject is to occupy a particular type of subject position in a history of injustice or structure of inequality” (48). In other words, implicated readers do not come about through identifying with characters, narrators, or plot events, but do so rather from a position with respect to the narrative that is situated in a historical and cultural context. We may liken this position to the vantage point proposed by Iser, “from which the reader will be able to view things that would never have come into focus as long as his own habitual dispositions were determining his orientation” (35).⁴

In this sense we read Catherine Lacey’s novel as both a work *about* implication—that is, it addresses themes of implication on the level of the story—as well as a work that *implicates* insofar as it provides a position for the implied reader to adopt the vantage point of implicated reader. Furthermore, we see this transition from *implied* to *implicated* reader not only as a possibility facilitated and encouraged by Lacey’s novel, but as a potentially transformative experience whereby readers encounter *affects*, “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement” (Seigworth and Gregg 1-2). Therein lies the notion central to affect theories: “to ‘affect and be affected’ means that our capacity is changed in some way by the impact of an encounter with something: a body, an object, an idea, or an emotion” (Truran 28).

⁴ While Iser’s concept of the implied reader was foundational to our understanding of the implicated reader, we must credit Jennifer Noji for citing this quote of Iser’s in relation to implication.

These considerations are reminiscent of those put forth by Fish, “for whom reading is not a matter of discovering what the text means, but a process of experiencing what it does to you” (Eagleton 74). Thus, in describing the act of reading together with implication, we may put it that the implied reader is prompted to *embody* the position of implicated reader, from which she assumes an “unconditional and response-able openness to be affected by others—to be shaped by the contact with others” (Athanasίου et al. 6). This cultural practice is capable of transcending physical and temporal barriers when juxtaposing contexts and times that, in any other way, could not coexist. The transformation from implied to implicated reader entails assuming the “openness to be affected” (6), whereby relations of implication are not only made visible but generated in the implicated reader.

3. READING IMPLICATION IN CATHERINE LACEY’S *PEW* (2020)

Catherine Lacey’s *Pew*⁵ may be said to be in dialogue with Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973), a short story about the seemingly utopian city Omelas, whose well-being and prosperity are made possible thanks to the subjugation and torture of an imprisoned child. Upon reaching a certain age, citizens learn of the reason for their affluence and while many find means to come to terms with this reality, others decide to “walk away”, a decision explained in the story’s final lines which serve as the novel’s epigraph: “These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates” (Le Guin 259). Parallels between the two works are easily traced in the *Pew*’s first chapter, wherein the unnamed, genderless first-person narrator tells of their⁶ having “walked away” from a place whose name they do not recall: “I left some place, began walking, slept in all those churches then everything else happened—that’s all I know” (Lacey 3). In addition to these similarities, Lacey’s work offers continuous nods to Le Guin through references to Almose County—an anagram of Omelas—a neighboring locale to the novel’s setting.

In the opening chapter “Sleep”, the narrator recounts their experience of fending for themselves in the search for shelter, the characteristics that make churches an ideal place for much-needed rest, and recent interactions with others. In the following chapter—“Sunday”—the narrator is awoken from their sleeping place on a church pew next to a family during a Sunday morning service. The Bonner family—comprised of Hilda, Steven, and their three sons—offer to take the narrator in, despite not responding to any of the family’s questions as to where they came from, their

⁵ *Pew* won the 2021 New York Public Library’s Young Lions Award and was a finalist for the Dylan Thomas Prize. The Spanish edition, *Altar* (Alfaguara, 2022), was translated by Núria Molines Galarza. Lacey has also authored five novels—*Nobody Is Ever Missing* (FSG Originals, 2014), *The Answers* (Picador, 2016), *Biography of X* (FSG, 2023), and *The Möbius Book* (FSG, 2025)—as well as the short story collection *Certain American States* (St. Martin’s Press, 2019). For more on Lacey’s work, see <https://www.catherinelacey.com/>.

⁶ We will use the singular *they* and its corresponding forms to reference *Pew*’s narrator.

name, age, or gender. Unfazed at first by this unresponsiveness, the family decides to call the narrator "Pew", in reference to where the Bonners found the narrator. Initially eager to extend unconditional hospitality and assistance to Pew, they take their new guest's lack of communication as an indication of some recent trauma or that Pew does not speak English. The other church members are also keen to get involved, and Hilda and Steven count on them to lend a hand: Pew is taken to visit curious neighbors, the local psychologist, the pastor, and youth pastor, yet none is able to elicit any verbal response from Pew, with the exception of some of the town's misfits. Faced with Pew's silence, the townspeople nevertheless continue to speak, treating Pew as a sort of sounding board for their thoughts, opinions, stories, and even secrets.

As the week progresses, the family begins to view Pew's silence as an unwillingness to cooperate, and Hilda and Steven's patience wears thin: the initial sincerity in offering Pew a safe haven soon dissipates and turns to suspicion. The frustration at Pew's uncooperativeness is exacerbated by the collective nerves surrounding the town's upcoming "Forgiveness Festival", which Pew is expected and forced to participate in at the end of the week. The final chapter concludes with Pew's description of the festival: assembled in a hall decked with flowing curtains, the churchgoers don blindfolds and proceed to confess their sins aloud as they meander about the ceremonial space; Pew reports the individuals' confessions, which range from the most venial to the extremely violent, after which Pew takes their leave and walks away from the town.

The process by which we read *Pew* as enabling and prompting readers to adopt the position of implicated reader occurs simultaneously on two levels: firstly, on the level of the story or content, and, secondly, on that of the discourse or form. Both story and narrative mechanics mutually reinforce one another and are both integral to highlighting and enabling implicated subjectivities.

3.1. Implication on the Level of Story

In the chapter "Sunday", the focus of Pew's narration is significantly reduced and limited to observation, description, and reporting what the characters say. It is through these reported anecdotes, free from any ideological tinge or value judgments, that the town's past becomes clear. The result is that these revelations stand out all the more so due to the narrator's lack of inner monologue: it is entirely the characters themselves who reveal their relations of implication, the most salient of which are related to racial violence committed against the town's Black residents, ongoing racist thinking that permitted and sanctioned said episodes of violence, and references to the American government's use of military force abroad.

The first of these is revealed on Monday, when Hilda takes Pew to stay with the elderly Paulina Gladstone. The silent Pew provides Mrs. Gladstone with an outlet for her thoughts about her husband Charlie, who, on his death bed, revealed a series of confessions about his past: as a boy, while playing in a creek, Charlie had been

dared to hold a Black boy underwater, resulting in the child's death. The original revelation was punctuated by Charlie's account of the aftermath of the crime and his coming to terms with it: "Everyone said it was an accident but it wasn't. ... I've thought about it every day of my life ... I begged forgiveness from the Lord ... and it took me many years before I could think for myself, so when they dared me, I just went along with it" (36). Mrs. Gladstone recalls questioning the veracity of the account, chalking it down to some hallucination in the final moments of life; however, the following day Charlie offered another confession:

What I told you last night wasn't all of it. I was part of a group that hung those four men ... We thought one of them had raped someone's sister or someone's girl ... and we weren't sure which one. We hung all four. They were guilty of something even though we didn't know what. We were angry, you have to understand. It wasn't easy, but we did it, about twenty or thirty of us. We had to. Even the sheriff was there. (37)

Unlike with the first confession, Mrs. Gladstone recalls "that second night, he didn't say he repented or that he knew it was wrong" (37).⁷

The significance of these confessions and the extent of the repercussions are revealed later in the week as Hilda takes Pew to a medical examination. Hilda explains that Mrs. Gladstone was her stepmother, and, after arriving at the medical center, it is revealed that Mr. Gladstone, Hilda's father, is actually alive and residing at the adjacent nursing home. While waiting to be examined, Pew is privy to Mr. Gladstone's exchange with a fellow resident, which, after the revelation of his past crimes, proves telling:

We're not perfect, of course. No one is.

Yes.

We know we haven't always been fair to everyone.

Certainly—no.

But we've always been fair to people according to what the definition of fair was at the time. ... We've reckoned with it, he said, and I, for one, I believe we are doing some good. (84)

While the fact that Mr. Gladstone is alive would seem to cast doubt on the confessions, the town's violent racial past is later confirmed towards the end of the novel when Pew is sent to stay with Dr. Corbin, pastor of the local Black congregation. At a picnic organized by Dr. Corbin's church, the churchgoers speak of the Forgiveness Festival and confirm Gladstone's criminal past: "But everybody knows what else he did and nobody says ... [He] paid off the sheriff, that's what.

⁷ Lacey's novel employs italics for speech representation. Mrs. Gladstone's reporting of her husband's confessions appear in plain text. The novel's use of italics is addressed in the following section.

Everyone knows it's true" (182). The disregard for these past crimes is made evident by Hilda: her concerns about Pew's having met her stepmother and father are not the unspoken crimes of racial violence but instead limited to her family's reputation, given Mrs. Gladstone's darker features and unverified origins: "We were the only family like that in town, so we had to work twice as hard to be...right. To sit right with the community" (96).

The townsfolk's own admissions lay bare not only a lack of accountability for the perpetrators of racial violence, but also the fact that the very same racist mentalities and attitudes which provoked and permitted past crimes remain intact, as seen in the eldest Bonner child's comments about Pew while in the restaurant after first meeting at church: "[Pew] oughta be in the back in there, one of them that picks up the dishes ... Everybody's got a place. Dad told me so" (17). An underlying incongruity arises in the way the members of the white community speak about the past: they are simultaneously aware of past injustices, yet willfully refuse to trace any connections with the present. This contradictory nature is characteristic of the realm of implication, a "realm of conscious and unconscious consent, a place where privileges are enjoyed and historical legacies shunted aside" (Rothberg 42). Not only are these incidents stripped of their relevance in the present, divorced of any notion whatsoever that the very same mentalities remain intact, but they are also framed in such a way that any and all wrongdoing is expunged under the guise of a well-intentioned innocence, summed up in Mr. Gladstone's assertion that changing perceptions of fairness distort the present-day gaze into the past. These early interactions reveal how the townspeople's understanding of forgiveness is exploited to justify their past actions, whereby the crime of lynching the four men can be justified by claiming "they were guilty of something" and that those responsible had always been "fair according to what the definition of fair was at the time".

Implication in American military aggression is introduced more subtly through how the townspeople speak about the military: while telling Pew about her family, Hilda excuses her tears, saying "I'm so sorry. I can get so carried away. I can get so emotional. Even a good commercial for something like the army or life insurance—they always get me" (79-80). On one of the many visits Pew is dragged to, the church's youth minister comments on the current state of world affairs: "It's a confusing time, isn't it? ... Countries, governments, are killing people in heaps, tearing cities apart with war, killing women and children" (68). In both instances there is a failure to make any connection between an army for which a televised recruitment commercial could provoke tears of emotion and the very same army responsible for "killing people in heaps". Telling too is how the youth minister is quick to correct himself as way to distance ordinary citizens from the violence: it is not countries "killing people, women and children," but rather "governments", understood to exist and operate independently of the electorate. Again, similar to incidents of past violence, what is suggested is that any notions of implication in wrongdoing can be foreclosed due to the ensured innocence and pure intentions of citizens.

The repercussions of American military violence are also present through the character of Nelson, the adopted son of parishioners Kitty and Butch, whom Pew first learns about from Roger during their first session: "There's a family at the church who adopted a refugee child, an orphan from someplace having a war" (43). Nelson's country of origin is never mentioned, nor are specifics given apart from the suffering he is known to have undergone. Through Pew's reporting, it is clear that he is unhappy and the townsfolk do not hold genuine concern for his well-being, as his adoption serves as a way for others to feel good about whatever harm was done abroad, a hypocrisy not lost on Nelson: "They take me [to church] every week. My whole family was killed in the name of God and now these people want me to sing a hymn like it was all some kind of misunderstanding ... They hear what they want" (52-53). The assertion about the townsfolk's "hearing what they want" points to the collective narrative constructed to "free" themselves from implication, as Nelson's having come from "over there," most likely fleeing violence provoked—directly or indirectly—by American military intervention, provides his adoptive parents and the church community with what they see as moral capital: "And, Kitty, I would just like to say that we're all very moved by you taking that poor [Nelson] into your home. Could there be anything more Christian than that?" (142).

Unlike Nelson, however, Pew's ambiguous identity and origin prove a threat, as evidenced during the church meeting called to decide whether or not to send Pew to spend the remaining days before the festival with Dr. Corbin—"And like everyone in this room, I want justice to prevail, for the good side to win. And in order for that to happen we have got to know who people are. Who they really are" (137). Reminiscent of the Manichaean jingoistic rhetoric used by the Bush administration at the onset of the Iraq War, the comment belies the community's intentions: the assistance offered to Pew and their presence at the Forgiveness Festival would gain in value if they were known to have suffered trauma or to belong to a specific group.

As the festival approaches, the logic underpinning the white congregation's understanding of forgiveness becomes clearer in Hilda and Steven's recounting the tension-fraught origins of the festival:

It's one of the ways we've decided to actively reconcile with our past, unite both sides of our community ... And a few years back all the preachers in town got together for a meeting because it was starting to feel like the whole country was particularly angry, and people are always accusing each other, and whole groups of people start blaming whole other groups of people for their problems—blacks and immigrants, for instance, and women, of course. (159)

Steven explains that, although the reverend Dr. Corbin was part of the original planning committee, the local Black community has always refused to join, a fact that renders false the explanation that the festival "unite[s] both sides of the community." Pew is also told the police will be present—"The guns are symbolic. ... They're symbolic of the power of God, and of the powerful gifts he's given to us"—for protection "[b]ecause pretty much half of the town goes to the festival, so half of

the homes are unattended, so we have our police officers keep the neighborhoods safe" (160). What is described as a ceremony of reconciliation of "both sides" in reality serves to remove any feelings of responsibility from the white community, which fears for the integrity of their homes and property left at the mercy of the other "half of the town".

This central contradiction surrounding the Forgiveness Festival is exemplary of what philosopher Charles W. Mills described as "white ignorance": "a white refusal to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today, and all of its consequent advantages in negotiating opportunity structures" (28). In other words, it is not a matter of an epistemological deficit, but rather a willful affective deficit that actively disclaims oppression and declares past injustice as overcome and irrelevant to individuals in the present. This white ignorance underpinning the town's festival is on full display in admitting the ceremony's one-sidedness:

Yes, Steven said. And it's moving to see the community come together.

Well, almost.

They've always been invited. We invite them every year. And Dr. Corbin, he was part of the group that put it all together anyway, but even he couldn't convince his own church to come. That's what I was told anyway.

Well. I mean. I can understand why. It's just that—

Anyway, that's neither here nor there, Steven said. Point is, Dr. Corbin is going to bring you to the festival on Saturday so you can see for yourself what it is, and what our most important values are. (160)

These comments are reminiscent of what Eva Boodman calls "implicatory denial ... which does not deny the facts, but their psychological, political, and moral implications" (35). The exchange between Pew's hosts suggests an awareness of why part of the community would be unwilling to participate, a fact nevertheless eschewed entirely so as not to undermine their "most important values," namely absolution granted through the festival. In addition, the remarks further illustrate how white ignorance is not mere "innocent obliviousness but ... an urgent, organized, institutionalized need to protect an identity of moral goodness in contradistinction to its opposite badness" (Boodman 7). For proponents of the festival, forgiveness is a choice and a political position, as evidenced in the signs blazoning the town's streets in anticipation of the event: "FORGIVENESS: FOR OR AGAINST?" (154). To inquire into the reasons for the Black community's decision not to participate would jeopardize the ceremony's promised absolution, and therefore past incidents of racial oppression and violence must be ignored and forgotten along with instances of individual sin. This equating and conflation of forgiveness and forgetting is the cornerstone of the festival, also visible in the street signs: "ALL FAILURES ARE FORGIVEN ... ALL FAILURES ARE FORGOTTEN ... MAY WE FORGET ALL WE FORGIVE" (196).

Another of the festival's glaring contradictions is that it is an event shrouded in violence. This is suggested not only by the mention of police presence, but also when it is hinted that the days prior to the festival have become marred in violence over the years. It is explained to Pew that after the festival "everyone's more peaceful. Of course right now it's a little more dangerous for everyone...the week before especially. People get a little anxious I suppose. Start acting out. It's just human nature" (55). The promise of unconditional forgiveness not only allows part of the community to distance themselves from past atrocities, but gives license to commit heinous acts of violence in the present, a logic later clarified to Pew by Kitty's daughter, Annie, who suggests crimes such as rape have become commonplace: "And anyway this week is the worst of it—right before the festival. I already know of about three different girls that—Well, it's the worst for the girls, I think. Everyone's more worried about their houses or cars getting broken into, since everything gets forgiven at the festival and it all goes away" (151).

This notion of violence as inherent in the discourse of forgiveness espoused by the white community is further cemented by Mr. Kerchner, a loner and out-of-towner, when he explains to Pew that "[p]eople need a sense of righteousness to take things from others...to carry out violence. Divinity gives them that. It creates the reins for cruelty" (126). That Pew is forced to attend further underscores the violent nature of the innocence promised by the festival: the white community sees Pew's inscrutable gender and race as a threat, as it impedes their using race or origin to lend credence to their own understanding of reconciliatory forgiveness.

A final element of the festival emphasizes violence's centrality to the congregation's understanding of forgiveness. After the confessional part of the ceremony, a list of names of "the ones who were killed" is read, and Pew relays an exchange between an unnamed adult and inquisitive child:

Why were they killed? ...

Because of what they might have done.

Who killed them?

The people we elected.

Do all elected people have to kill people?

Yes.

Why would anyone want to get elected?

Someone has to be elected ... We have to elect people.

And why are they reading their names?

Because it's a sin we've all done together. Something we had to do even though it was evil. (204-205)

The exchange lays bare, firstly, that the community views violence committed against suspected wrongdoers by elected leaders as necessary, albeit sinful, and

secondly, that the community is implicated in that "sin." The town's festival is, in essence, a portrait of modern-day "violent innocence" in action, "the psychological mechanism necessary to create a white Christian settler nation, where innocence is regenerative and disavowal" of implication, we may add, "represents a habitual mode of thinking" (Bramen 25). With the allusion to elected leaders who have a duty to kill, the parallels between the white community's discourse on forgiveness and the myths of American exceptionalism and innocence are evident:

American exceptionalism has always presumed national innocence despite imposing centuries of war and plunder. ... These wars have all been justified as necessary ventures The erasure of historical memory ... is a key component to the preservation of American innocence and exceptionalism. (Sirvent and Haiphong 9)

For both the white community in *Pew* and the American nation-state, exceptional goodwill ensures that, despite violence, innocence will be preserved for all encompassed within the nation, rendering any preoccupation with responsibility unnecessary and irrelevant, as self-granted forgiveness implied by innocence ensures forgetting: "innocence is what these citizens cling to as their personal and collective 'American' patrimony and dispensation. ... It's what makes them exceptional and sets them apart from the 'un-Americans', who are easily recognizable by the traits that are assigned to them by white people" (Ford 283).

It is through the characters' own discussions and stories that the novel shows what implicatedness *looks* like: in *Pew*'s reporting their week in the town, readers are privy to how discourses of forgiveness are employed to ensure a perpetual state of innocence. Racial violence and racism are talked about in a way that has declared them overcome and violence committed in the nation's name is forgiven, highlighting the pure and just intentions supposedly motivating said acts of violence. By way of Lacey's narrator, readers are shown what it looks like when forgiveness is exploited to ensure an innocence that frees one from any notions of responsibility: in short, a caricature of the myth of innocence in action.

3.2. *Implication on the Level of Discourse*

If the preceding section examined how *Pew* thematizes implication through its plot and characters, the present section turns to how the novel's narrative aspects *enact* implication. Lacey's manipulation of second-person address, the deliberate decrease in *Pew*'s degree of markedness as narrator, and her unconventional representation of speech constitute the formal mechanism through which *Pew* performs implicated subjectivity. These strategies transform reading from passive observation into an affective and ethical encounter, prompting readers to inhabit the unstable space between observing the fictional portrait of implicatedness and assuming a position of implicatedness provided by the text.

The novel's first lines begin with the narrator speaking directly to a *you*, as evidenced in the second-person subject pronouns and personal adjectives:

If *you* ever need to—and I hope *you* never need to, but a person cannot be sure—if *you* ever need to sleep, if *you* are ever so tired that you feel nothing but the animal weight of your bones, and *you're* walking along a dark road with no one, ... and all *you* know is the desire to sleep, and *you* have is no place to sleep, one thing *you* can do is look for a church. (3, emphasis added)

The parenthetical “a person cannot be sure” suggests that the *you* in this long-winded opening sentence is not used as an impersonal or non-deictic *you*, but rather as a direct address to the reader. While the use of a second-person address can constitute a “literary performative” which provokes an “identificatory response” with the *you* (Kacandes 141), this direct address is absent in the rest of the novel, except in Pew's final lines after the festival. This decision to restrict the direct address to the first and final chapters works in tandem with two other formal aspects of the narration that facilitate the reader's implication in the story: an intentional decrease in Pew's degree of markedness as narrator and the use of non-conventional speech representation.

As previously stated, upon arrival Pew's narration is reduced to observation, with scant internal first-person thoughts. The narration is free of ideological or cultural influence or even prior lived experience, to such an extent that Pew does not use—or perhaps lacks—words like *waitress* to describe women working in a restaurant or *maid* to describe the woman employed by Kitty and Butch. Nor does Pew use culturally significant words like *white* or *Black* to describe the characters, but instead uses comparative descriptions: “a man with hair and skin the color of a dead sky” (83). The result of this narrowed scope is not only a narration lacking subjective impressions, but a near-total effacement of personal or linguistic markers of the narrator's presence.

The reduction of markedness of Lacey's narrator is further compounded by the novel's unconventional speech representation. The characters' conversations both with Pew and each other exhibit a remarkable absence of reporting verbs, where speech is represented exactly how Pew receives it, often without ascribing utterances to specific individuals.⁸ Moreover, speech is marked not by quotation marks, but by the use of italics,⁹ a formal erasure that deconstructs and blurs conventional typographical markers that serve to delimit barriers between narrator, character, and reader, destabilizing narrative authority and positioning readers within the same indeterminate space occupied by Pew.

⁸ A clear example is the exchange reported between Mr. Gladstone and a fellow resident quoted in the previous section.

⁹ As in Lacey's other novels and short stories—with the exception of *Biography of X*—the use of italics is the author's preferred method of writing dialogue. However, in our reading *Pew* the use of italics takes on a specific function.

In sum, those elements that would normally indicate *Pew* as a homodiegetic narrator—inner thoughts, clearly defined deixis in reporting, and conventional speech representation—have been purposefully stripped away, resulting in a narratorial voice that, at times, resembles that of a heterodiegetic observer. The effect of this deliberate reduction in markedness is that the narrator's space is seemingly left unoccupied, which produces a shift in deictic referents: in the opening chapter *Pew* employs clearly marked first-person pronouns in their account and the second-person *you* to address the reader, while in subsequent chapters the use of second-person pronouns is exclusively limited to instances where other characters speak to *Pew*. In other words, the difference between the two *yous* is blurred, creating the effect that characters are speaking simultaneously to *Pew* *and* the reader. Put another way, there is an intentional, significant shift in the referent of the *you*: in the first chapter, *you* may be read as referring to potential readers; in the majority of the narrative, *you* refers to *Pew*, but with the subtle effect for readers that *you* also seems to be directed at them.

In her analysis of direct address in literary works and implication, Jennifer Noji develops a taxonomy of second-person forms by which *you* may be described as either *characterized* or *uncharacterized*, *internal* or *external*. The *you* in the first chapter may be described as referring to an uncharacterized external referent, which “hails readers more broadly” and “implicates readers more directly by bypassing a [stand-in] mediating figure” (25). Characters who use *you* to address *Pew* would not be traditionally categorized as narrators; while we do not argue they be described as such, the lack of reporting verbs and the use of italics render their speech almost as if they were intra- and homodiegetic narrators. According to Noji's taxonomy, this *you* aimed at *Pew* would be described as “characterized”, which “more strongly hails a subset of readers who share common traits with the ‘you,’” and internal, which “implicates the readers by way of a stand-in mediating character” (25). However, there is no clear delineation, as the line separating *Pew* and reader in this second-person pronoun is blurred. This appeal to readers both by *Pew* and *through* *Pew* as if the reader were in *Pew*'s position makes the “reader feel personally responsible, personally caught in the discourse and exposed to its political thrust” (Fludernik 452).¹⁰

The reader may also be prompted to adopt this merged point of view through *Pew*'s reflections on the physical body. In relating their search for shelter, *Pew* emphasizes bodiliness by referring to *every body* in lieu of *everybody*: “One thing every body needs is to sleep” (4). This emphasis on the body and its connection to perspective was very much intentional on the author's part: “I did want the reader to be in *Pew*'s point of view as much as possible, even to find themselves able to sense what it would like to be in *Pew*'s body—insomuch as such a body could exist” (Lacey, “Re: Questions on *Pew*”).

¹⁰ We owe this quote from Fludernik to Noji's summary of effects of using second-person addresses and implication. See Noji (24).

Pew also describes feelings of not belonging to the body that they currently inhabit: “This body hangs beneath me, carries me around but it does not seem to belong to me, and even if I could see them, I would not recognize my own eyes” (5). The alienation of mind from body, that human essence is defined by how others perceive one’s body, is another of the novel’s central themes. Pew’s subjectivity is dependent on the other’s gaze and society, leading Pew to ponder if “only other people [can] tell you what your body is, or is there a way that you can know something truer about it from the inside, something cannot be seen or explained?” (8). While this question certainly anticipates the frustration the townspeople later feel when unable to categorize Pew’s body, it may also be read as an appeal to an unbodied and unbounded essence, capable of reaching across barriers normally unbreachable, not unlike the process of reading.

This invitation for the reader to embody Pew’s position is further facilitated by Pew’s ungendered and un-racializable character. While this would initially seem to hinder connections, it is readers’ initial frustrations with Pew’s uncategorizable nature that enable them to assume the novel vantage point, regardless of their gender, race, or personal experience. Midway through the narration any remaining frustration readers may feel towards Pew’s inscrutability dissipates, as Pew’s benefactors begin to lose patience and grow frustrated with the lack of information. Certainly “some readers may find it difficult to buy into the narrator’s ambiguous identity But that difficulty is also a crucial element to what Lacey so magnificently accomplishes in this novel: a work that evokes the same presumptions and privileges as it does in its characters” (Smernoff, 2020). In other words, readers are faced with the reality of their own assumptions or prejudices when these are juxtaposed with those the townspeople hold towards Pew. So, when Pew is unwillingly taken for the medical examination, the reader experiences the insistence on the part of Hilda, the doctor, nurse, and townspeople as violent harassment. With the reader stepping into Pew’s position, the criticisms and ultimatums spat at Pew by the Bonners may all be read as if they were directed at the reader. Through these interlocking narrative strategies, *Pew* transforms formal ambiguity into ethical invitation, thus rendering the condition of implicatedness as an experiential condition whereby readers negotiate the discomfort of occupying a position that is not their own.

Another possible effect of the reader stepping into Pew’s vantage point is that it offers readers the chance to be on the receiving end of rhetoric that is often aimed at specific individuals, particularly those who are non-gender conforming or racialized. While empathy and identification is a defining feature of fiction, Lacey’s novel incites non-identification. The case of Hilda’s frustration at Pew’s not submitting to a body exam or locking Pew in a room will certainly strike a chord in readers. However, this is not unlike Rothberg’s aforementioned analysis of the slogan “I am Trayvon”: the implicated subject arises not “from a process of identification,” but rather from “occupy[ing] a subject position in a history of injustice or structure of inequality” (48). As such, cisgender and non-racialized individuals’ experiences do not easily overlay onto Pew’s, and therefore, in stepping into the

space ceded to them by Pew, such readers may identify not with Pew's standpoint, but rather with the fact that it is incommensurate with their own.

This same incommensurability serves to elucidate discourses on race and gender which serve to oppress and maintain inequality to the extent that readers see that these very same discourses would not be applied to them: in other words, from Pew's point of view, readers are made aware of their own implication in having participated in and even benefitted from these discourses and of the fact that they have never been situated in a position at which such discourses are aimed. For example, it is soon made clear the white community's kindness and assistance is contingent on Pew's revealing their gender or race, showing gratitude, and acquiescing to the townspeople's dictates. The examining physician, for example, sees Pew's unwillingness to undress not as indicative a potential problem—despite introducing himself as an expert in trauma—but as recalcitrance on Pew's part: "We don't need to be this difficult, now do we? I even came in an hour early, just to see you ... We need to understand what sort of person you are—do you understand? Do you understand what I mean by that?" (89). Likewise, Hilda also directs anger at Pew: "You must understand we're not obligated to help you—that we're doing this out of our own kindness. And who do you think paid for that? I paid for that. It's not free. They're not just giving out free doctors' appointments to anyone who needs them you know. We had to pay for it, and it wasn't cheap" (95). Rather than talking to Pew, they talk *at* Pew, which is further compounded by the use of italics which imbue the scolding with a sense of fury. Moreover, given their indiscernible race, Pew is made the target of the townsfolk's "white rage," a concept theorized by Carol Anderson as hostile reaction which is triggered by "black advancement ..., blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations" and, in Pew's case, "blackness that refuses to accept subjugation" (*White Rage*, 3-4).

While the text remains intentionally ambiguous regarding Pew's race, the anger demonstrated by the white townspeople may be correctly described as "white rage": despite not agreeing on Pew's origins, what they do agree on is that Pew is not white and the resistance to be classified is seen as a threat to the racial hierarchical order and thus deserving of fury. In sum, Pew's perseverance in resisting the categorization forced on them lays bare how white supremacy has created, exploited, and weaponized race, wielded as a tool of oppression: "race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming 'the people' has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy" (Coates 7).

The townsfolk's anger echoes the shame expressed by Hilda when recalling the unknown racial or ethnic origins of her stepmother, Pauline, or the question Pew recalls having been asked in the opening chapter: "What are you?" (8). The frustration at not being able to categorize Pew exposes white supremacy's mechanics of dodging moral responsibility and denying implication: if you do not tell us your gender, your race, your trauma, we cannot capitalize on this grace we offer you in order to grant ourselves forgiveness. The novel's refusal to ascribe determinate identity to its narrator resists any attempt at categorical interpretation. This strategic ambiguity on the part of the novel is not a deficiency to be resolved but a formal

ethic inasmuch as it forces readers to confront their own experiences and knowledge of how racial classification has operated and continues to do so within the contemporary US.

Pew's inscrutability goes from provoking anger in the Bonner family to provoking fear, responses that the novel stages as symptomatic of how racial difference is managed within the community: anger at Pew's resistance and, faced with unknowns as to Pew's identity, at the impossibility of capitalizing on their charity; fear because the unracializable body is perceived as threatening, to the extent that the Bonners lock Pew in the bedroom. This decision, however, is temporary, as the Bonner family makes it clear that their kindness is conditional and the decision to finally rescind their welcome is communicated to Pew in a contradictory guise of niceness: "And we do remember how we promised you could stay with us as long as you need, and of course we are serious about that promise, however, it's possible you might not need to say with us anymore" (118). In the previous quotes, the consistent use of the pronoun *you* with a double referent offers readers the perspective of what being on the receiving end of white rage may look like, while simultaneously suggesting that such a reaction would not be aimed at a more easily "racializable" individual.

These feelings of anger and fear also extend to the rest of the white community. The meeting to debate Pew's fate in light of the upcoming festival, held in the home of two wealthy church members, Kitty and Butch, is presided over by Harold, a local lawyer in the town, who insists that they "have the judicial process for a reason" (135), rendering the gathering a sort of summary trial. What is laid bare is that it is precisely Pew's unknown race that the townspeople see as a threat, as evidenced by Harold's comparison of Pew's case to that of a silent young girl who had unexpectedly appeared in a neighboring town:

But everyone in Greenville that saw this girl could agree that she was a girl of about seven years old and she was very obviously American, white, and they easily found documents for her—birth certificate, fingerprints from her Girl Scouts—I think most importantly, her silence, her being mute—it didn't cause anyone any trouble—I think—it was obvious that she wasn't trying to cause trouble. ... But she's doing all right now, recovering. And you know why? Because she's talking. Because she wanted to get better. (136)

Readers witness from Pew's perspective how the townspeople conspire and render judgment on a person who is portrayed as threatening and untrustworthy when held up against the model white girl, not only because of her identifiable race and gender, but the fact that the girl eventually began to speak, which Harold likens to a willingness "to get better". The comparison with the young white girl lays bare how silence itself becomes intolerable when it resists interpretation, diagnosis, or recovery, and thus is interpreted as recalcitrance. For Harold and much of the community, Pew's refusal to speak functions not simply as opacity, but as a rejection of the town's mechanisms of social legibility and control, suggesting that race,

speech, and governability operate hand in hand rather than independently in producing exclusion.

Upon the conclusion of the ceremony's communal confession, the congregation begins to disassemble, and Pew describes how the congregants, many emotional, attempt to collect their composure in the aftermath of the collective catharsis. It is noteworthy how in the wake of such an emotional moment, none of the townspeople approach Pew: having forced Pew's presence at the festival and used their body as a sort of sacrificial scapegoat, the townspeople declare themselves absolved. Read in this light, Pew functions less as an individual subject than as a symbolic vessel through which the community displaces guilt and secures absolution. This lends revelatory nuance to both the community's original intention to include all townspeople, both white and Black, and their adamancy at Pew's attending the ceremony, as the sacrificial figure's presence enables collective purification *without* structural reckoning. As Pew exits the community center and prepares to abandon the town, to "walk away", the novel's parallels to Le Guin's story resurface: in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", the town's good fortune and well-being is predicated on the torture and suffering of one child; in *Pew* it is the narrator and Nelson whose bodies are used to ensure a return to self-granted innocence.

In another similarity to Le Guin's story, Annie, daughter of Kitty and Butch, emerges from the ceremony with Pew and also decides to "walk away". At this moment, the narration returns to the more clearly marked first-person narration: "No one knows where I went, and I don't know where I went and I don't know where Annie went or where you went, but I know that I went and was gone and was gone completely." (206). After having shown what implicatedness looks and feels like in conjunction with innocence, the novel suggests through both Pew and Annie that awareness of implicated subjectivity enables one to search for ways out of implication.

With this return to a direct address, the union between Pew and reader in the overlapping, conflated *you*s is not done away with, as Pew tells the reader "I am moving, perhaps I am moving toward you" (206). Then, in what we read as a final invitation to readers to maintain their affectedness of implicated subjectivity, Pew ends the narration with several phrases in first-person plural, suggesting a continuation of that union: "Will we find each other? The ground is silent. I am uncertain. The sky is quiet. It's never known any of us from the other. We speak with borrowed air" (206).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Underpinning our analysis is the view that, among the myriad ways individuals may be affected by and implicated in long-lasting and wide-ranging injustices, literary narratives constitute a uniquely powerful medium for addressing and illustrating forms of harm that appear distant, abstract, or historically sealed. Fiction

not only renders visible relations of implication that resist legal or moral resolution, but also offers experiential modes for contemplating responsibility beyond direct participation or individual guilt. In this sense, literary form provides a means of engaging injustice as something lived, felt, and negotiated rather than simply acknowledged.

Although Rothberg's concept of implication provides both a point of departure and a central organizing lens, this article has approached *Pew* by bringing together narratology, affect theory, and critical reflections on American innocence to examine how implication is both represented and enacted through literary form set in the contemporary United States. By shifting critical attention from what a work like Lacey's novel represents to what it *does* to readers, this reading contributes to emerging scholarship on the novel by framing it not only as a critical interrogation of innocence but as a literary mechanism that generates implicated subjectivity through the act of reading itself.

In *Pew*, implication is addressed thematically through characters who navigate their entanglement in racial violence and state-sanctioned harm while simultaneously disavowing responsibility through discourses of forgiveness. At the same time, Lacey's formal strategies—second-person address, narratorial effacement, and bodily ambiguity—position readers with these structures, inviting them to inhabit the discomfort of implicatedness rather than observe it from a distance. The novel thus demonstrates how ethical engagement may emerge not from identification or moral judgment alone, but from the experience of being addressed, unsettled, and rendered answerable by the text.

While the reading proposed here is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive, it underscores the potential of fiction to cultivate sustained awareness of implication beyond the page. By foregrounding the affective and formal dimensions of implicated reading, *Pew* offers a model for how literary narratives can foster attentiveness to responsibility in contexts where innocence is habitually claimed and accountability deferred. Such narrative encounters suggest that remaining open to being affected, to the unease of implicated subjectivity, may itself constitute a meaningful ethical practice, one that can extend beyond literature into broader social and political life.

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