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Overlapping Agencies: The Collision of Cancer, Consumers, and Corporations in Richard Powers's *Gain*

Jeffrey Gonzalez

Most of the considerable body of writing on Richard Powers's 1998 novel *Gain* has focused on its depiction of Clare International, a massive, Proctor-and-Gamble style corporation that begins as a small, family-owned business. Powers's depiction of Clare within the broader history of American capitalism has led critic Ralph Clare (no relation) to assert that the novel marks a limit to what readers can expect from a literary critique of a corporation (Clare 2014, 16). Clare International dominates the story, even though only one of the novel's two contrapuntal plots focuses directly on the company's birth, rise, and fall; because of this design, most readers rightly read *Gain* as an exploration of corporate logic and power (Clare 2014, 158–179; Maliszewski 2008, 162–186; Williams 1999a).

Powers tracks the ubiquity of this and other corporations in the contemporary U.S. through the novel's other narrative, which focuses on Laura Bodey, a 42-year-old divorced mother of two. Laura lives in suburban Laceywood, Illinois, where Clare's Agricultural Division is headquartered. Powers's narrator introduces Laura by telling us of Clare's omnipresence in her hometown: "The town cannot hold a corn boil without its corporate sponsor. The company cuts every other check, writes the headlines, sings the school-fight song" (Powers 1998, 6). Its products are also all over her home: the narrator mentions medicines, cleaning supplies, "shampoo, antacid, [and] low-fat

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N. Abuja et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature and Science*, Palgrave Handbooks of Literature and Science, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48244-2_28

clmpt' (✓) all produced by Clare. The reader consistently encounters Laura in relation to Clare, even from this initial appearance.

Early in the book, Laura learns that she has ovarian cancer. During her treatment, she encounters accumulating evidence that Clare's products or chemical activity may be responsible for her illness. First, her daughter Ellen shows her a notice in the town newspaper about high levels of toxic discharge in their county (139). Her ex-husband Don sends her the same article (160). A member of the Jehovah's Witnesses named Janine Grandy tells Laura that her husband worked at Clare and died of cancer (190). Laura realizes that a friend she has met during her chemotherapy sessions drove a forklift at the Clare plant (192). She sees a newspaper story about three workers at the Clare Agricultural Products Division in Laceywood getting cancer (216). Don tells her that researchers supporting a class-action lawsuit filed against Clare allege that the company's pesticides trigger cancerous mutation (319-320). These suggestions propose that Clare's role in shaping Laura's life is even greater than the narration initially signals to us. Clare not only influences the social experience of her town and decorates her home but also poisons her insidiously and fatally.

Yet Powers never confirms this causal link, though most critical discussions of the novel assume it is there (Tabbi 2002, 54; Maxwell 2014, 180).¹ The novel's refusal to confirm causality signals that we should be careful about assigning blame. While Clare does engage in some unethical behavior, nothing in the Clare narrative indicates that the corporation is aware that its products or chemical research are carcinogenic: we do not hear of squelched research or silenced whistleblowers. Still, readers find ways to see Clare as responsible. For example, Joseph Dewey asserts that Laura's cancer was "most likely caused by the environmental carelessness of Clare Industries," but no specific activity is singled out in the novel for being particularly careless (2008, 115). Lacking a smoking gun, these readings rely partly on circumstantial evidence and partly on preconceptions about why these two figures, the cancer-victim consumer and the giant corporation, are made pro-mixate by the novel's design.²

The most likely causes for ovarian cancer are genetic predisposition and nulliparity. Powers gives evidence of the first condition: while Laura protests that no one in her family has had ovarian cancer, we learn that her daughter develops it (and has it caught early) in the novel's epilogue, as Kathryn Hume and Susan Miznuchi have noted. As I will discuss in more detail shortly, none of Laura's doctors feel comfortable hypothesizing about the cause of her cancer beyond family history, and one doctor firmly denies that ovarian cancer has environmental causes. Additionally, the sum total of evidence Laura gathers is anecdotal (people who work at Clare, people she sees in town), inconclusive (the emissions in the newspaper), or contested (what she hears from Don).

The suspension of hard evidence linking Laura's cancer to Clare belies a straightforward understanding of the narrative juxtaposition, and in this chapter, I want to show how Laura's storyline contravenes what Jackie Stacey and Judy Segal call the masculinist and individualist conventions of the illness-narrative genre. By focusing attention on Laura's struggle with cancer and the questions of causality that it raises, I hope to indicate the ways that Powers's treatment of her illness calls attention to the social, biomedical, and environmental elements of a cancer struggle, rather than focusing on one person's will, biomedical heroism, or corporate malevolence. This reframing authorizes seeing *Gain* as a model for a more progressive sort of cancer narrative, one that replaces individualist thinking without minimizing individual struggle. Second, and relatedly, I hope to demonstrate that the novel plays with causality and agency in order to challenge normative thinking about corporations, cancer, and the human. As my summary of the reactions above has shown, it is easy to imagine the corporation within the novel as a singular, malevolent distributor of poison, as such an image reflects liberal-left fears about corporate power in the neoliberal contemporary. Yet the depiction of Laura's cancer focuses on maintaining a sense of agency in the face of these biological and economic forces. My reading of Powers's novel allows us to probe the ways that the "rhetorical agency" often ascribed to cancer is parallel to the amoral agency socially conferred upon the corporation (Agnew 2018, 277). This paralleling becomes possible through detailed attention to the cancer component of the narrative, and it yields compelling questions about the agency of the consumer-citizen in light of the awesome and impersonal power of the corporation and the cancer cell.

"NO ONE KNOWS THEIR OWN BODY": ALIENATION AND LAURA'S CANCER

When we first meet her, Laura has problems: she worries about her teenage children, cannot stand her ex-husband, and has an only fleetingly satisfying relationship with a married man. Still, we are told, presumably from her perspective, that "her life has no problem that five more years couldn't solve" (Powers 1998, 8). While getting dressed for the funeral of her daughter's closest friend, Laura recalls the confidence she felt in her own girlhood about scientific progress: she believed "*disease is just a passing holdover from when we lived wrong...My parents and their friends: the last generation that will have to die*" (13; emphasis in original).

Powers traces Laura's gradual alienation from this optimism and the worldview that generates it. Her ovarian cancer is discovered during a surgery aimed at removing what she thought was a harmless cyst. Her doctor's discovery that the cyst is a "serous cystadenocarcinoma" (75) leads to debulking surgery and then chemotherapy. Dealing with these consequences and other fallout from her illness forces her to make difficult physical, financial, emotional, and intellectual adjustments.

Like many individuals in her position, Laura wants to know why she got cancer, and behind this question is an assumption that all cancers have an identifiable cause. Jackie Stacey's seminal *Tetraologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer* argues that the revelation of cancer often summons a chronology with strict "narrative structuring": "linearity, cause and effect and possible closures present themselves almost automatically... the body becomes the site of a narrative teleology that demands a retelling" (1997, 5). The illness disrupts Laura's understanding of her life, including the cruelly optimistic sense that it will be better in five years. The normative purpose of the illness narrative, Stacey argues, is to document these disruptions and fit them into a "narrative structuring" that makes suffering meaningful.

Laura tries to make sense of her illness by blaming herself for her illness. Such doubts are common across many cancer narratives, as Susan Sontag (1979) notably documented in *Illness as Metaphor*. Near the end of the novel, the narrator traces these thoughts: "she has brought this disease on herself, by being unhappy... because she doubted, took her eyes off the road, let negative thoughts poison her" (Powers 1998, 317). She wistfully acknowledges "carcinogenic amenities" like hairspray and hamburgers (283). In this self-blaming, Laura envisions herself as having made errors that she might have avoided with correct living, even though she understands herself as typical in many ways. Stacey writes that such thinking reveals "the successful condensation of so many deep-rooted beliefs about the body in contemporary culture, in particular fears about the limits and acceptability of its desires," ones that manifest in our understanding of cancer (1997, 63).

Yet these thoughts coexist with the suggestions that she encounters about Clare's complicity, which also affirm a reason for her cancer—that it was *caused* by a powerful but neglectful entity. This persistent sense that her cancer has a cause never fully leaves her, even though her doctors consistently say they cannot determine one and Laura's own research yields similar conclusions.

Don recalls Laura maintaining a consistent fatalism during their marriage—he recalls her saying, "you can't change your number coming up" (Powers 1998, 40)—that periodically re-emerges when she feels like her cancer has no explanation. She swings between feeling this abstract fatalism and insisting on some form of causality throughout her narrative. Both of these poles are unsatisfying, of course, and each only deepens Laura's sense of frustration after her diagnosis. Her cancer and the questions it presents her with lead to a disquieting sense of overdetermination: she cannot locate herself in relation to the illness that is radically changing her self-definition and lived experience.

After her surgery and throughout her chemotherapy, Powers regularly comments on Laura's struggle to live in her body and the spaces she normally inhabits. In the aftermath of her debulking, the narrator explains, "They send Laura home. Except it isn't home anymore" (83), due to her post-operative difficulty moving around. After hearing advice to return to "her life," the

narrator explains that her current life "feels like nothing she's ever visited" (119). These claims prestage other ones: "she cannot say whose life she has been spirited into" (134). Each of these examples emphasizes her sense of being estranged, forced to live inside a version of herself she no longer knows intimately. She generalizes the feeling she now has about her lack of self-knowledge multiple times: "Nobody really knows what's blossoming inside him" (85); "No one really knows their real body" (114). Lois Agnew observes that "the personification of cancer as a sinister external enemy sometimes obscure[s] the fact that cancer patients are dealing with a disease that has emerged from their own cells" (2018, 290). The narrator's statements reflect this insight, where Laura's chemotherapy attacks the body to defend the body from the body.

Her inability to feel at home in her house or her body loosens her pre-illness sense of personal ownership, and disrupts what had been a comfortable consumer existence. Another refrain throughout Laura's treatment is how difficult it is for her to eat. Problems with eating are common for chemo patients, and Powers makes these problems an area of focus. Among many other references to this issue, we are told that she "never suspected that a crust of white bread really tastes like chrome" (Powers 1998, 135). During radiation treatments, "food no longer just repulses her. It becomes inconceivable" (241). The novel indicates that Laura has to withdraw (or wants to) from what once had been a form of unproblematic consumption. Cast in those first pages as a quintessential American shopper, she stops being a consumer of the goods she wants to consume.³

Powers stresses this alienation from her pre-cancer self even while he chooses to make her ovarian cancer fairly typical. Laura is diagnosed with epithelial ovarian cancer, the most common type, and her cancer is discovered at the most common point (Stage C, following her doctor's prediction). Her medical trajectory is typical, too: her serous cystadenocarcinoma was diagnosed after her surgeon saw "a small foraging wet spot" (75) on the smaller of two cysts that she removed, which led to the removal of Laura's ovum. That Laura does not realize she had any serious symptoms is also typical. Susan Gubar cites this moment in *Gain* in her memoir about her own ovarian cancer, as it illustrates how "subtle signs of the disease are often not registered or properly interpreted" (2012, 17). The symptoms of ovarian cancer are difficult to distinguish from premenstrual and menopausal pangs or simply the discomforts that become more common in middle age (Gubar 2012, 16–17; Conner and Langford 2003; Montz and Bristow 2005). One reason why ovarian cancer is often fatal is that it continues to spread while these symptoms go unnoticed. Gubar felt that her "body had been betrayed or had betrayed me" (2012, 14), suggesting the relatively common experience Laura has of not realizing she has anything wrong with her, which is of course no less disquieting or alienating for its commonality.

While ovarian cancer is the most oft-diagnosed gynecological cancer, it is a disease without a popular cultural presence. Martha Stoddard Holmes has

written of the “pervasive and public imaginative gap, even a willed opacity, regarding the ovaries and ovarian cancer” (2006, 477). Different than breast or skin cancers, Holmes writes that we cannot envision cancers that impact “bodily interiors” (481)—even a gynecologist cannot reach the ovaries with a hand during an examination; Jane Schultz suggests that ovarian cancer is “written in but not on the body” (2013/14, 75). The sense of alienation from one’s body compounds when one has few images or narratives to help frame expectations.

In choosing ovarian cancer for Laura, Powers invites all these forms of disorientation. Laura knows little about her disease: her only reference point is a neighbor who died of ovarian cancer (Powers 1998, 84). The cancer originates in a part of her body she does not know much about. After Laura wakes up from her surgery, Dr. Jenkins mentions her omentum washings. Laura asks, “I have an omentum?” The doctor replies, “Not anymore” (75).

The distance she feels from her body leads to one form of disorientation. Her aforementioned desire to locate a cause for her cancer generates another. The scientific framing of cancer as simply an unpredictable biological occurrence is tough for her to swallow. After her initial diagnosis, Laura asks her gynecological surgeon, Dr. Jenkins, what causes ovarian cancer, and Jenkins tells her, “Nobody really knows for certain” (76). An unnamed ovarian cancer specialist gives her a long list of possible causes, so long that Laura stops listening (99). After she asks him about environmental causes, her oncologist Dr. Archer hands her a report stating that little evidence exists regarding external triggers for ovarian cancer (191). She keeps asking and keeps not getting answers.

Nonetheless, Laura does not show any rage against her doctors, and while her ex-husband keeps threatening to sue the hospital, Powers does not offer any evidence of malpractice. Gutbar notes that many cancer narratives turn into rants against the medical establishment (2012, 52), but while her doctors are ultimately helpless against Laura’s cancer, *Gain* does not seem to hold them responsible. Nor does *Gain* fall into the other increasingly common narrative of cancer, the type Judy Segal calls “triumphal cancer stories,” of strong-willed people finding important life lessons in their struggle with the disease (2012, 9).

Segal argues that these triumphal cancer stories assert that “cancer has a meaning,” and we might add that the anti-medical establishment narratives do the same thing (2012, 310). One story has a hero; the other has a villain and a victim. Segal asserts that an account without these frames, one simply showing suffering and dying, would constitute an “un-narrative” of cancer, one that builds “up to nothing in particular” and is, as a result, “intolerable” (212, 310). Segal’s statement indicates, perhaps, a key reason why the urge to convert Laura’s cancer into a Clare-induced epidemic is so prevalent: the existence of a villain gives us a narrative with an innocent victim, one whose poisoning produces a warning for those living in corporate-dominated environments. It is the prevalence of these narratives that spurs the automatic

narrative structuring that Stacey mentions and, as Stacey wrote of her own struggle with cancer, she struggled to think outside of (1997, 63).

When Laura considers her own role in causing her cancer seriously, she looks over lists of potentially carcinogenic products and behaviors. At first, no one behavior jumps out to her. While she eventually locates things she has consumed and done that may have been risky, Laura ultimately decides that any relation to carcinogens is essentially unavoidable: “The whole planet, a superfund site. Life causes cancer” (Powers 1998, 284). This last statement reflects her exasperation, but it is consistent with researcher Siddhartha Mukherjee’s characterization of cancer in his masterful *The Emperor of All Maladies*. Early in the book, Mukherjee announces, “Malignant [or cancerous] growth and normal growth are so genetically intertwined that unbraiding the two might be one of the most significant scientific challenges faced by our species. Cancer is built into our genomes” (2011, 6). For Laura, and perhaps many readers, her cancer indicated that something has gone wrong, but she also credits the intolerable possibility that her cancer may not signify anything other than living long enough to get it. In this way, her alienation from the optimism about her life, rooted in the explicability of negative occurrences and an unthinking faith in progress, deepens. Thus we see how important Laura’s cancer *itself* is to the novel’s examination of the forces that determine her life. In making those other forces visible, Powers evades many of the complaints Segal and Stacey have made about the cancer narrative: its emphasis on a simple good (cancer sufferer) and evil (cancer) struggle; its plucky protagonist showing bravery in the face of pain; the medical establishment often presented as a masculinized hero or the unfeeling villain; its desire to generate a straightforward and uplifting moral meaning from a biological occurrence.⁴ Instead, Laura’s narrative spirals inward, through the mysteries of her body’s workings, and outward, juxtaposed with the storyline about the role that corporations play in composing her environment.

“OH, THERE’S A CLUSTER HERE. BELIEVE IT”:
LAURA AND CLARE’S COMPLICITY

Speaking to the novel’s design, Powers told Jeffrey Williams that *Gain* has “two incommensurable frames,” and he aimed “to show how they entangle without contriving a dramatic confrontation” (Williams 1999b). These hints of Clare’s complicity in Laura’s cancer are one way of indicating the depth of the entanglement between this corporation and this citizen. We have seen that Powers introduces Laura by means of her relationship to Clare, and throughout her consideration of their complicity in her illness, she realizes how deeply her life depends on Clare and corporations like it. Bruce Robbins suggests that this awareness indicates Laura’s shift from considering herself an atomized figure to understanding that she is a part of a polity, even within her home, and as I noted above, this movement from a personal struggle to a

broader one is one of the great merits of Powers' use of the cancer-narrative genre (2003, 91).

Late in the book, Powers revisits Laura's feeling of alienation, this time linking it to the omnipresence of corporations in late capitalist America: "She never knew what this place really looked like while she was living in it. Now that she lives elsewhere, she cannot believe what she sees... The world is a registered copyright" (Powers 1998, 304). Throughout *Gann*, the narration pays attention to just how many consumer goods decorate her living space, while Laura initially does not. For example, when Laura sits down in her kitchen to calculate her five-year survival rate, the narrator mentions "the fake Tiffany lamp" she works under, the "Post-It" she uses, the "Pop Tart rind" she has to clean off, invoking three well-known brands (102). Her sickness and Clare's possible complicity in it has changed the perspective she had before her diagnosis revealing that her environment is largely composed of corporations that have been invisible to her but impact her profoundly.

In one key scene, her growing recognition of corporate omnipresence overlaps with an increasing awareness of how much cancer surrounds her. The correlation tempts her to imagine causation, connections the text itself undermines—while nonetheless offering regular reminders of the co-presence. Not long after a disquieting visit to the library, when a librarian tells her people often turn up to research their cancers, Laura attends the town fair with her two children. Echoing the language the narration uses later to describe Laura's shift in perspective vis-à-vis commodities, the section begins: "Now that Laura looks, it seems a kind of epidemic... She cannot turn around without running into someone else. Why did she never see these people before?" (213). Laura identifies cancer victims all around her, but we are told this identification is based "on no evidence whatsoever.... No proof. Laura just knows" (213). Her daughter Ellen confirms Laura's take: Ellen is "already convinced. She doesn't even need to look around" (214).

This moment of misrecognition shows how the evidence she has encountered tempts Laura to see an epidemic where there is scant proof of one.⁵ Her observations here lack the credibility of her realizations about the prevalence of corporate design in her environment—the narration gives us good reasons to believe that Laura is surrounded by corporate commodities, while the lack of "proof" or "evidence" or even real "look[ing] around" punctuate the commentary in the county-fair scene. What is notable, however, is that Laura *can* see an epidemic, if she looks a certain way: this moment seems as revelatory as her other realizations about corporations.

However invested in seeing "a kind of epidemic" she appears to be in this scene, we see her express skepticism shortly thereafter. In a discussion with Don about the class-action lawsuit against Clare, which Laura resists joining, she shows no confidence in the existence of a cluster. Don begins the exchange, with Laura parroting earlier claims by Dr. Archer:

"You're part of a cluster."

"Ovarian cancer doesn't cluster, apparently."

"Oh, there's a cluster here. Believe it. Haven't you seen the statistics the paper's been digging up? We're way above average, for all kinds of cancers."

She wants to say: The whole country is way above average. She says, 'The old Rowen marksmanship.' For years, he compared the way her family argued to a kid who scatters buckshot against the barn wall, then draws a bulls-eye around the densest concentration of hits. (285–286)

Powers gives us two reasons to doubt Don's position in this argument. First, if he is correct that many kinds of cancers in Laceywood are clustering, they are unlikely to have the same cause. What causes cancers of the blood, for instance, may not necessarily lead to gynecological cancers. Second, the marksmanship line references a well-known logical fallacy known as "the sharpshooter effect." Science writer Leonard Mlodinow discusses this fallacy in a discussion about persistent misperceptions about causal relationships. Like Don's allegation about Laura's family, the apocryphal sharpshooter fires, then draws the target. Mlodinow explains this fallacy by illustrating the problems with locating cancer clusters. He explains that attempts to determine environmental causes for cancer follow the sharpshooter doing *ex post facto* targeting: "first some citizens notice cancer; then they define the boundaries of the area at issue" (2009, 184). Because "the development of cancer requires successive mutations," the presence of the disease can only be generated by "very long exposure" to "highly concentrated carcinogens." As a result, drawing a straight line between any one carcinogen-producer and a cluster of cancer is a difficult proposition (Mlodinow 2009, 184). Don's desire to see a cluster, interestingly, reflects Laura's similar sentiment in the county-fair scene.

As we have seen, readers, too, incline toward seeing the epidemic; however, for each of the indications that Clare may have caused her cancer, Powers provides reasons to disbelieve this connection. Powers's reputation is as a writer that does his homework, and his handling of Laura's tumor and its treatment are medically and contextually accurate, even down to the chemo medications Laura takes. He would choose neither cancer nor *this* cancer without realizing the problems with determining causality that come with it, nor would he credit the thin evidence that Don provides as proof. Instead, we can see the ways the two forces dominating Laura's experience—cancer and its treatment, the corporation's omnipresence around her—continue to disorient her, making her see epidemics then denying them, making her feel responsible for her cancer then assuming that it is everywhere.

That Laura eventually joins a class-action lawsuit against Clare suggests that she has accepted the suit's claims. Her struggle with this decision, however, is beset by questions about her relationship to Clare and what assigning it—rather than a specific biological causality—responsibility would mean. She casts the possibility of Clare's poisoning her as *total* dominance, which is why

locating her own agency relative to the corporation is a factor in determining whether she feels Clare is guilty. Her very dependence on corporations complicates her ability to blame Clare for the cancer that's killing her because, as the narrator tells us, "[e]very hour of her life depends on more corporations than she can count" (Powers 1998, 304). In her mind, her behavior is as important as theirs, as we see in her review of agential decisions to purchase Clare products—"She brought them in, by choice, toted them in a shopping bag. And she'd do it all over again, given the choice. Would have to" (304). This example shows Laura clinging to notions of agency and her own guilty complicity as a consumer in postmodern America. In these two moments, she poses the corporation as a shaper, if not the maker, of her environment. Yet while they have "molded" her life, generating the dependence she notes, she insists on having an active role in this arrangement. The coercion of the consent—she would do it again, she would have to do it again—does not erase her decision-making *within* the world she inherits.

Even at the moment before she decides to join the class-action suit, she struggles to avoid thinking about her relation to agency, rather than biology. Pressing Laura to enter the suit, Don lists a number of products that lawyers allege have caused cancer.⁶ What follows occurs immediately after he mentions one she used in her gardening, her most beloved activity:

Her plot of earth. Her flowers.

Sue them, she thinks. Every penny they are worth. Break them up for parts.

And in the next blink: a weird dream of peace. It makes no difference whether this business gave her cancer. They have given her everything else. . . .

She must go before the end of the month. Before whatever new deadline [the class action lawsuit has] set for her signature. She must become as light as she feels. As light as this thought. Cease eating, cease turning nutrients into mass. . . .

'All right,' she tells him. 'Okay. Anything?' (320)

This moment seems less of a confirmation about Clare's complicity than one about the challenge of living in a capitalist society so suffused by corporations. Initially, Laura is furious *if* the pesticide is the carcinogen that made her sick. Yet that anger fades quickly. Instead, she wants to stop thinking of the myriad ways that the corporation has "taken her life and molded it." She has stumbled into a growing awareness of herself as a participant in a larger polity—again, as Robbins has argued, if Laura once thought she was perfectly safe in her home, safe in the conventionality of her behavior, her cancer and the question of Clare's complicity in it erase the boundary between inside and outside. What the possibility of their complicity has done has awakened her to another layer of determination: she is alienated not only from her body

by the illness it has generated but also from the ecosystem she had not realized was shaped by something other than her decisions and natural forces. What we see in the passage, then, is that joining the lawsuit is *also* erasure of her agency—notice the use of the word "must" in the section when she decides to join the suit. Without forceful agency in any reading of her situation, Laura simply follows momentum.

After deciding to join the lawsuit, Laura's vision of Clare and what she wants from it changes. She imagines some acknowledgment of Clare's guilt: "Paul Loftus, the head of the Ag. Division, visits her. He sits on the edge of her bed and offers her an apology. Franklin Kennibar, the CEO, flies out from Boston. No one knew anything. They will clean everything up" (344). These fantasy apologies coincide with a darker sense of Clare's role in her life: "Clare comes to take her out for dinner and dancing. A male, in mid-life, handsome, charming, well built, well meaning. . . . But always, the night of romantic dancing turns by evening's end into desperate caresses, a brutal attack, date rape" (344). Laura's framing shifts from her earlier insistence on mutual responsibility to one of Clare's brutality and inhumanity. This image of Clare manifests Laura's feeling that Clare has robbed her of agency, manipulating her in order to assault her in intimate and vicious ways; it makes her earlier claims that she invited Clare into her life an example of victim-blaming.

The pain at this moment crystallizes *Gain's* frustration with the corporate-dominated US landscape: several other passages in the Clare section use a dystopian tone to discuss the role the corporation will play in the future, as many other critics have noted. Her anger at the corporation emerges because they have played a much larger role in her life than she realized: Feeling similar anger at biology, or fate, is harder to experience or imagine; notice, for instance, that her fantasies involve the corporation being represented by a person—Kennibar, Loftus, the handsome middle-aged male. In envisioning a human face for the corporation, Laura replicates the reductive view of cancer that has emerged in the past century. As Agnew's useful history of cancer metaphors suggests, we want to imagine cancer as separate from us in order for it to be a thing we can wage a war against, for we do not want to imagine the cancer cell's destructive capacities as in some ways natural. Doing so would, as Stacey suggests, remind us that the complicated position of the individual undergoing chemotherapy not a war with an external enemy: it "is the *self* at war with the *self*" (1997, 62; emphasis in original). Agnew and Mukherjee, echoing Sontag's seminal discussions of cancer's representations, each discuss the ways a disease with multiple forms and faces has been condensed into a single, menacing Other, which of course ignores its biological rooting inside the self. It might be that the great insight of *Gain* is to remind us that Laura faces cells and forces that unwittingly endanger her while also composing her and comprising her—it is a text, then, about overdetermination of two sorts, and asks us less to lay blame or call out tragedy but instead to shudder at the difference between our myths of self-shaping and our actual precarious experience.

For this reason, the reader can of course draw from *Gain* the ethical significance of severe public scrutiny of joint-stock, for-profit corporations. If, as recent lawsuits have determined, ovarian cancer can come from consumer products like Johnson & Johnson's talcum powder, the producers of those products must be required to examine the way those products were created and be held responsible for the results. Such actions, as Mollie Painter-Moreland has argued, will never come from the profit-seeking corporation itself, bent as it is on profit and growth; perpetual growth of any sort, as Christopher Kilgore has recently written, "produces malignant carcinogenic growth" (Painter-Morland 2011; Kilgore 2018, 177). I hesitate to follow other writers who have suggested that Clare kills Laura, but that it *might* have hastened her carcinogenesis (or the cancers of any of the characters she encounters) necessitates the sort of attention to the corporation's impact that have been marshaled to produce cancer research. Yet her narrative also shows us precisely why consumer anger at corporate dominance never turns over into outright war: Clare employs people, supports town events and the local university, makes products people choose. While this paper focused heavily on Laura's storyline, the rich body of writing on Clare's representation in the novel indicates how complicated Clare's omnipresence in Laura's life is. Like the cancer, the corporation's presence seems an indifferent, determining force that's also an intimate component of her being.

Powers's rich treatment of Laura's cancer story draws on the resources of the illness narrative but expands its normative purview, eschewing its individualist narrative tendency in favor of one that places an individual who dies of cancer in several broader contexts. Laura begins to understand how strange her biology is and how little she understands of herself, and this alienation gradually expands to her self-conception as a consumer. Cancer cells within her body multiply without her conscious consent; her consent to purchase consumer products may have brought more into her home than she consciously desired to. Neither situation can quite be called antagonistic, simply because neither the cancer cell nor the joint-stock corporation aims at doing anything specific to Laura Bodey. In this way we might see *Gain* as a text about human vulnerability, which is of course what all illness narratives ultimately explore—except the vulnerability expands not just to the biomedical sphere and the home, but to the late capitalist ecosystem within which we are organisms.

NOTES

1. Other readers do not isolate Clare as the cause, but rather corporate capitalism itself or corporations writ large—see Ursula Heise (2002, 762, 765) or Bruce Robbins (2003, 84).
2. Susan Miztruchi (2010), like Kathryn Humme (2013), asserts that the novel intentionally shies away from a causal relationship. Miztruchi does not, however, look closely at why Powers chooses cancer or why readers are drawn to making the causal link: these are two positions that I want to pursue in this chapter.

Hume writes that the novel includes "relatively little technical material on cancer" (Hume 2013, 3) but I argue that what is included merits attention in relation to this causal question.

3. A memorable scene early in the book shows Laura freezing when asked to choose between paper or plastic at the grocery store: she considers the downside to each ("one kills trees...the other releases insidious fumes if burned" [27]), ultimately leaving the decision up to the bagger. In this depiction Laura has no questions about the processed food she buys—something called "Peanut Sheets," "harvest burgers," "Thirst-Aid," "longanberry-kiwi seltzer"—only about what to carry the groceries in (28–29).

4. Ann Jurcic (2012) pushes back forcefully against these characterizations, insisting that they emerge from a hermeneutics of suspicion that overlooks the value of stories about sickness and dying. The impressive *Tulsa Stories in Women's Literature* double-issue on innovative cancer narratives (primarily about autobiographical accounts of breast cancer) eschewed discussion of the mainstream narratives often derided by literary critics, while implicitly suggesting that writing by marginalized cancer survivors offers a valuable critique of those conventional norms. See *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 32/33, eds. Mary K. Deshazer and Anita Helle.

5. Lisa Lynch offers an interesting reading of this scene, arguing that it indicates Laura's fractured late capitalist ideology: Laura sticks with the medical establishment's corporation-absolving understanding of her cancer's causes rather than adopting "grass roots etiology" (2002, 204) that would allow her to join the community of cancer sufferers in Laceywood. Much of Lynch's analysis is convincing, but her observations about this scene do not register these undermining comments by the narrator.

6. The product he mentions begins with "Attra," which Derek Woods connected to "atrazine": he writes "the most likely cause of Bodey's cancer turns out to be atrazine" (2017, 79), which he must have drawn from Don's reference (he doesn't finish the name of the product—all Don says is "Attra," and Laura's reaction takes over the narration). Studies exist that propose a relationship between atrazine and ovarian cancer, and as a long-term amateur gardener, Laura would have had a great deal of exposure to Atrazine. Still, even this piece of potential evidence does not confirm suspicions: to get ovarian cancer at 42 from a product she used weekly in three seasons of the year, perhaps only in adulthood, and from a product not deployed near the part of the body where her cancer emerged, is not a rock solid case.

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