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Weird Modernisms

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WEIRD MODERNISMS

by

Alison Sperling

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

WEIRD MODERNISMS

by

Alison Sperling

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017
Under the Supervision of Distinguished Professor Jane Gallop

This dissertation theorizes “the Weird” as a pervasive theme across literary Modernism. Drawing from early versions of weirdness in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* (1923-1954) and from the magazine’s most famous writer, H.P. Lovecraft, I demonstrate that the weird must not be limited to tentacular horrors present in supernatural fiction of the period. Instead, I argue weirdness is a category bound to non-normative experiences of material embodiment. Drawing from feminist materialisms, queer theory, disability studies, and nonhuman theories, this project develops a concept of the Weird that is more expansive and ultimately more ethically engaged with otherness and bodily difference. I read the work of Carson McCullers, Djuna Barnes, and Zora Neale Hurston as revisionary versions of the Weird that argues for its liberatory power as well as restores the threat inherent in that power. By showing that the Weird is present throughout modernist fiction, I argue for a new way of conceptualizing modernist obsessions with non-normative embodiment.

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For my Dad

For my Mom

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INTRODUCTION

Weird Modernisms

“We arrive at the unthinkable formulation:

H.P. Lovecraft is the background noise to Modernism.”

-Aaron Jaffe

I first presented a part of this project at *The Weird Conference* in 2013, held at the Birkbeck Centre for Contemporary Literature at the University London. It was a conference that marked the presence of “The Weird” as a significant emerging area of focus in the humanities, particularly within literary studies. But the event was also robust in its interdisciplinarity; it hosted crowded keynote talks by H.P. Lovecraft expert S.T. Joshi and cinema scholar Roger Luckhurst, and it featured a few dozen panels with presentations by philosophers, mathematicians, and researchers in the biological and geological sciences. I was thrilled to be there, amongst diverse thinkers interested in something we were collectively calling “The Weird” while seeming to share some understanding of its parameters.

But I also felt an immediate and nagging sense that I didn’t quite belong. I had traveled there to deliver a talk about queerness in Carson McCullers’ work as an example of what I had begun to call “weird modernism.” I quickly noted that not only was I one of the few women represented on the conference program, I was also one of the only presenters discussing writing

by women. I remember reading my paper to a full house, maybe fifty people, including two women (I counted), to a largely fidgety audience. I received just two (but enthusiastic) questions, each from one of the other two women in the room.

The experience turned out to be a significant one for the project. I began to understand the stakes of redefining the Weird within this very particular critical and intellectual moment, within which there was not much space for thinking weirdness across literary genres or alongside queer theory. The concept felt almost precious - “the Weird,” as if I were intruding, damaging a delicate object, or performing in the capacity of what Sara Ahmed might call a “feminist killjoy.” The experience was indicative of the ways in which scholarship on the Weird not only excludes writers outside of the horror and supernatural genres it typifies, but it seemed to want to keep it that way. Although “the Weird” as a category has continued to expand and develop since then, it has yet to make significant strides away from the overtly tentacular horror that has seemed to hold it captive. This dissertation is an intervention into modernist studies by arguing that the Weird is much more dynamic and far more pervasive than either modernists or scholars of the Weird have detected.

Before that conference, I hadn’t yet realized that this would be a project about weird modernisms, but I knew it was about *queer* modernisms. I had studied modernist fiction for all of graduate school and I was repeatedly drawn to texts attuned to gender and sexual difference(s), as well as the ways in which the body registers those differences. Interested in more than the psychic or cognitive index of difference, but in material, embodied experiences, I scanned novels for strange and unique descriptions of the corporeal. I noticed in modernism a sense in which bodies marginalized by difference were themselves depicted as unfixed and unstable. There seemed a preoccupation in modernism with transformative moments of embodied life.

Queer theory first helped me to see how these transformative moments were often linked to gender and sexuality. The deconstruction of stable gender and sexual identities, and the fluidity with which these categories are experienced in queer life made weird readings of the novels possible. By the early stages of this study, there was already a lot of work being done at the crossroads of modernism and queer theory,¹ and I was especially excited by the concept of “queer temporality,” which had been the subject of an outpouring of scholarship between 2005-2010.² By the time I encountered it, queer temporality seemed to have already had its moment, had already been brought to bear on modernist texts in numerous and productive ways. Also at this time, UWM’s Center for 21st Century Studies held a conference that enlivened for me the productiveness of queer theory. It was called “The Nonhuman Turn,” and I was sparked in breakout sessions by the relationships in play between queer and nonhuman objects, affects, and temporalities. Though queerness had much to do with the modernist texts I had already begun to collect, in this moment it retreated just enough to allow for me to recognize this other major element that connected the texts I was drawn to, the nonhuman. These authors were writing about porous and willful bodies, and the ways in which nonhuman systems and things reveal this openness. The confluence of queer and nonhuman theories facilitated the emergence of instances of weird embodiment, corporeal experiences that threaten to undo conceptions of the body as

¹ For a small sampling of some of this work, see Colleen R. Lamos, *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust* (1999), Anne Hermann, *Queering the Moderns* (2000), Jaime Hovey, *A Thousand Words: Portraiture, Style, and Queer Modernism* (2006), Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (2007), Benjamin Kahan, “Queer Modernism,” in *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (2013), Brenda S. Helt and Madelyn Detloff, ed., *Queer Bloomsbury* (2016).

² For examples of foundational works on queer time, see J. Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2005), Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward* (2007), A special issue of *GLQ* titled “Queer Temporalities,” ed. Elizabeth Freeman, Jose Esteban Munoz’s *Cruising Utopia* (2009), and Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds* (2010). Of these authors, Love and Freeman have been especially interested in queer modernism.

singular, contained, or enclosed. Weird embodiment's intimate relations with the nonhuman world maintain forms of queerness that persist throughout this project.

The authors I've chosen for the chapters share among them an attunement to the materiality of non-normative embodied experience, as opposed to the privileging of the psychic or psychological effects of difference. Each author presents a form of weird embodiment that draws attention to shifting understandings of the body in the first half of the twentieth century, and how this shift is thinkable in relation to questions of sexuality, gender, class, race, or ability. To begin, I turn to the most recognizable and demonstrably weird fiction of modernism, that of H.P. Lovecraft's contributions to the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* (1923-1952). The modernist period is perhaps the most useful of places to theorize weirdness because of Lovecraft's place in it. His work seems to obsess over transforming bodies; it is fixated on the horrors of bodily difference. Lovecraft also is the first writer to go to great lengths to publish studies of "the weird" as an aesthetic and style, as well as to propose a genealogy of weird writers. Though weird forms surely existed in literature prior to the period, Modernism is almost certainly the moment of its culmination.

A surprising number of modernist writers share Lovecraft's preoccupation with weird bodies-in-flux. Of particular interest to me are novels by writers who seemed to be thinking about the category of the human within the context of other categories of non-normativity. If Lovecraft's work demonstrates the ways in which the so-called human is never really or completely human, the novels that I read alongside Lovecraft are also invested in this dilemma, though from radically different perspectives. I include the writing of Carson McCullers, Djuna Barnes, and Zora Neale Hurston in this study in order to widen the scope of the weird, as well as to amend the category of weirdness to include its more diverse and non-oppressive deployments

in the period. Carson McCullers' novels are rich for their complicated overlapping of queerness, adolescence, race, and disability. Her work indexes the ways in which multiple embodied categories are lived and felt simultaneously as barely human—indeed as freakish—and connect her work to temporalities of the weird. Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* is a novel about queer and lesbian longings that seem to exceed the confines of the human body. Barnes's work "weirds" the body even more deliberately than McCullers', depicting embodiment as intimately entwined with nonhuman life and nonhuman temporalities. I selected Zora Neale Hurston's fiction and ethnography for my final chapter because it demonstrates most clearly the tension inherent in weird embodiment between empowerment and dangerous undoing. I deliberately included women writers from various positions of sexuality, race, and ability, in order to show how "the Weird" is more capacious and ethically utilized with their revisions.

Outside of the novels I had begun to collect, the weird made itself known to me in another form. Theoretical thinkers of largely nonhuman philosophies like speculative realism and object-oriented ontology were drawing on Lovecraftian fiction as a forbearer of contemporary thought,³ and 21st century writers in the science fiction and fantasy modes were producing work in a genre they called "The New Weird." In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Lovecraft seemed to be enjoying a height of fame and recognition never realized during his lifetime (1890-1937). If the weird was merely the stuff of pulp magazines in the early twentieth century, recent literature and scholarship in the philosophical mode has elevated it to a new level of prominence

³ See, as examples of this trend Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy, Vol. 1*, Zero Books, 2011; Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, Zero Books 2012; Dylan Trigg, *The Thing*, Zero Books, 2015; Tim Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, Columbia University Press, 2016; Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, Repeater Publishing, 2017.

in the 21st. The idea of weird modernisms accrued a new kind of significance in a contemporary context, in part because they have seemed to persist.

This long-winded set of encounters with the weird, some chance, led me to title this dissertation *Weird Modernisms*. I demonstrate that “the weird” is a pervasive category in modernism, one that charts forms of embodied difference across writing of the period. Though some of the novels I examine have been read from intersectionally queer, feminist, and critical race perspectives, I offer new interpretation of these works by reading them alongside Lovecraft and the weird. Each chapter presents existing literary criticism in modes that commend these authors’ works as modernist celebrations of queerness, womanhood, or blackness. While I have found this scholarship energetic and essential to modernist studies, I argue that recognizing weirdness in these texts restores the sense of danger, risk, and fear that can accompany the embodied experiences of difference. Identifying that these texts are participating in the weird is a reminder that moments of empowerment and possibility can also carry with them a great threat. The authors of this study face and navigate these threats differently, and to varying degrees of success.

~

The Weird is first named outright as a literary technique by H.P. Lovecraft in his 1927 essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature.” He introduces the essay: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. These facts few psychologists will dispute, and their admitted truth must establish for all time the

genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form” (Lovecraft, “Supernatural,” accessed online). For Lovecraft, the weird tale engages the human fear of the unknown, the “oldest and strongest” fear, therefore establishing the weird as a worthy literary form. Crucially for Lovecraft, the weird tale must maintain the “unknown,” must never fully disclose the horrors that haunt humans’ imaginations. He writes, in what has become a famous description of the weird tale:

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (Lovecraft, “Supernatural,” accessed online)

The weird is not merely the horror of the act (“secret murder”) or the discovery of the remains (“bloody bones”). The truly weird tale draws instead from the fear of inexplicable horrors that the mind conjures up in place of the thing that remains unrevealed. Rather than describe the horror directly, a weird writer of talent invokes an “atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces.” Weirdness is, in part, affective and atmospheric, impossible to fully see, grasp, or run from. It refutes the absolute and strictly unchangeable laws of Nature, thereby creating a terrifying universe of which humans no longer know the rules of the game, and are no longer the primary players.

The original definition of the “weird” (n.), though perhaps surprising, is central to its modernist literary appearances. Deriving from the Old English *wyrd*, the word is chiefly defined as “the principle, power, or agency by which events are predetermined; fate, destiny,” and as “magical power, enchantment” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Weirdness is, in part, a complex temporal category oriented towards the future, but in a way that suggests its fixity. In its more contemporary, colloquial usage as an adjective, weirdness maintains much of its Old English sense: it “partake[es] of or [is] suggestive of the supernatural; of a mysterious or unearthly character; unaccountably strange; uncanny” (*OED*). The Weird can be purely “magical” or it can be merely “*suggestive of the supernatural,*” other-worldly or just of “an unearthly *character.*” The more modern definition alludes to what becomes a central tenet of weird writing in the 20th and 21st centuries. The weird is not only strange but it is “unaccountably” so, one cannot make sense of it through experience, history, or language. It is mysterious and elusive; it is not entirely of this world. The Weird appears in this project in both its literal and more subtly suggestive intimations.

In part because of its enchanting, even magical elements, the weird is often labeled as sensationalist or mere pulp, a so-called low-brow, underbelly quality which Kate Marshall has referred to as modernism’s “pulpy underside” (Marshall 634). Marshall’s 2016 essay, “The Old Weird,” argues for a longer literary-historical genealogy of the weird, which she locates in 19th century American naturalism⁴. Marshall’s disruption of genre and period in her approach to the weird has enabled me to similarly think of weirdness as having broader theoretical import across modernism.⁵ But instead of what Marshall calls the pulpy underside of modernism, the weird

⁴ Marshall looks to Frank Norris and Stephen Crane in her essay.

⁵ Kate Marshall’s article, “The Old Weird,” has only just been published in a special issue of *Modernism/modernity* as I finish this dissertation, but I am indebted to having attended her

might be productively understood as a more widespread phenomenon—not the outside, the margins, or the underside of modernism, but quietly coursing through its veins.

These modernist traces of the weird infiltrate the period to comingle with the seemingly conventional. Weirdness thus expands from Lovecraft's conception of the term, exceeds its definition typified by the tentacular, and acquires new meanings in new and more ordinary contexts. Though the weird, across its modernist articulations, retains much of its Lovecraftian sense, when taken up by the writers in this project it also assumes new forms and thereby requires a revised and expanded definition.

The weird describes embodied experiences that reveal the body's willful unruliness. Part of what is both liberating and terrifying to the characters in the novels presented here is the uncontrollable nature of their bodies and the body's processes: adolescence, desire, spiritual transformation. Weirdness points to moments of the body-in-flux, those transformed or on the verge of unstoppable transformation, physically or psychically. Weirdness is therefore also a temporal category. Fatalism is a central element to early literary examples of the weird—when something is weird, it is also related to the determinism of the future. In the pulpy weird of the period, this signals humans' insignificance on a grand scale, a cosmic pessimism and a realization that humans are not at the center of the universe and have little control over its future. As a broader category, the weird assumes new and more constructive ways of engaging fatalism, though it still signals an intense dread and anxiety over what may come.

When the dreaded thing arrives, it never fully presents itself, and it is never entirely describable. The weird is an attempt to come to terms with the inexplicable, especially through

seminar, "The Old Weird," at the Newbury Library in Chicago in 2013 when I first heard a (then unpublished) version of this article, at a crucial moment when I, too, was in the early stages of my work on the weird.

language. This is crucial for Lovecraft's definition of the weird, and it is his key component of the weird tale. In Lovecraft this means a partial foreclosing of the reality of the horror (*e.g.* we only see an "outline" of Cthulhu but never all of its parts). In other writers of the period, weirdness accompanies the inexplicability of events or feelings through similar narrative gaps and confusions. This element of weirdness appears therefore as a stylistic narrative technique, which achieves an affective or atmospheric quality of obstruction or impasse. To this point, Ann and Jeff Vandermeer have written that the Weird is "as much a sensation as it is a mode of writing, [that] the most keenly attuned amongst us will say 'I know it when I see it,' by which they mean 'I know it when I feel it'" (Introduction to *The Weird Compendium*, 2012).

Lastly, the weird is not (entirely) human. Instances of the weird pose challenges to strict boundaries of human and nonhuman bodies and objects, life and non-life. The weird insists on being understood as a category not reserved for the human but rather as one that deconstructs standardized, heterogeneous, often western notions of the self and of subject-hood. Crucially, the way in which the weird undoes the self presents a thorny double-bind. It can offer empowering possibilities, but never without serious threat or danger. As the concept of weird embodiment expands an understanding of the body to include affects and atmospheres, particles and unearthly presences, the self threatens to be undone. This simultaneous experience is what is most complicated and perhaps most important about the weird in this project.

Eileen Joy has recently suggested that the weird might also be understood as a way of reading literary texts across periods and genres. She describes a literary critical practice that she calls "weird reading." Her essay of the same title draws from speculative realism and object-oriented philosophy to locate in literature things that "don't quite line up with each other" (34), texts that "don't easily correspond or answer to traditionally humanist questions and concerns"

(“Weird Reading”, 29). Weird reading entails being open to “incoherence,” and non-routinized un-disciplinarity that privileges unknowing over mastery of knowledge” (30). She goes on to write, “I want to see what happens when I work to recognize better how *inhuman and weird* texts are” (29, italics mine). It isn’t too difficult to locate the inhuman and the weird in Lovecraft, or to surrender to the unknown, as his work has one do. But perhaps Joy’s suggestion that one reads for the weird *everywhere* is a methodology well suited to this project. The chapters presented here locate weirdness in such places within modernism where it hasn’t yet been recognized, due in part to the fact that weirdness is never exactly, nor entirely human.

The first chapter, “H.P. Lovecraft’s Weird Body,” lays out the most recognizable form of the weird, which can be found in Lovecraft’s contributions to the modernist pulp magazine *Weird Tales* (1923-1954). Drawing from Lovecraft’s stories as well as his essays about the nature of weirdness, I locate some of the foundational qualities of Lovecraft’s weird, namely what Eugene Thacker has called his “cosmic pessimism,” as well as its inexplicability, temporal dimensions, and the capacity for the transformative. This chapter begins the project because it shows how the weird is typified in the modernist period. Here, I also identify the ways in which a narrow understanding of weirdness has inspired contemporary theoretical trends circulating around Lovecraft’s renewed popularity in the twenty-first century.

As a premier example of the kind of stories found in *Weird Tales*, Lovecraft's work deems human life insignificant, giving way to kind of cosmicism that has, in the twenty-first century, been taken up in the fields of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, and has been reimagined in the “new weird fiction” of the end of the 20th century and into this century's

first decade.⁶ According to S.T. Joshi, Lovecraft's cosmicism is the central tenet of his weird aesthetic, decentering humanity from the universe and emphasizing the mere momentary incident of our existence on earth. Indeed, what has drawn many literary critics back to Lovecraft is what Graham Harham has called the "gaps in reality" that exist within his texts, shifting point of view itself from merely a human capacity and flattening the universe into complex relationships between objects. What some disapproving critics have referred to as a certain kind of coyness, Lovecraft's refusal to fully reveal his monsters is not merely, for his narrators, the failure of language, but is rather the failure of human cognition to be able to perceive the universe.

The philosophical schools that have adopted Lovecraft as a literary figurehead and which have dominated Lovecraft studies, neglect what is most compellingly weird in his work—the body. By bringing Lovecraft into conversation with feminist science studies and materialisms, I contend that we are better equipped to explore his persistent representation of the body as both a porous and willful object.

The other chapters work to develop the concept of weird embodiment by examining the work of women authors who have not previously been considered as weird writers. Chapter two, "Freak Temporality: Queer Adolescence in the Novels of Carson McCullers" locates the freaky temporal elements of the weird in adolescent female experience across three of McCullers' major novels: *The Member of the Wedding*, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*. Adolescence seemed a particularly apt place to begin to make the argument that weirdness persists across Modernist bodies. Though the experience of this tumultuous period varies widely, the girls in McCullers' work confront its weirdness, the impossibility of understanding what is (and what isn't) happening to their bodies, the strangeness of encountering desires they feel

⁶ In addition to the speculative philosophers that have taken up Lovecraft's work with fervor, the Library of America also republished Lovecraft's work in a collected volume in 2005.

somehow that they shouldn't have. These novels share with Lovecraft's stories the narrative gaps and cessations, the obsession with bodies-in-flux, and a perceived threat of non-normative embodiment. In a way that recalls Lovecraft's nine-foot tall alien-boy in *The Dunwich Horror*, McCullers's fiction repeatedly portrays young, queer-ish girls who fear that their non-normative desires and gawky bodies will somehow coalesce in a form like the nine-foot tall woman in the town's annual freak show. The horrors of Lovecraft are present in the girls' fears of becoming too tall, which they associate with becoming freakishly undesirable in the future. The weird becomes suddenly understandable in the context of the most ordinary (though often extraordinary to those in its throes) of human experiences, adolescence. The temporalities of adolescence in McCullers are experienced materially, on and through the body, as both uncontrollable and freakish.

In McCullers, the girls mathematically calculate their growth rate to find that they will become over nine-feet tall in just a few years. This sense of unrelenting and endless growing that so frightens the girls in McCullers is manifested in the third chapter, "Djuna Barnes and the Vegetative Body" as truly infinite nonhuman growth. I examine the relationship between queerness and growth that is alluded to in McCullers but that takes center stage in Barnes' 1936 novel *Nightwood*. Long heralded as a canonical lesbian novel and a quintessential example of high modernist writing, *Nightwood* offers another unexplored form of weird embodiment attuned to non-normative registers of time and nonhuman life. In McCullers, freak-show performers point to the boundaries of the human form and the limits of human life; but Barnes interrogates these boundaries explicitly. Although recent Barnes scholarship has been particularly attuned to her post-humanist sensibilities, much of this work has been focused on the hybridization of human and nonhuman animal. As an addition to this scholarship, I locate Barnes' fascination

with plant and fungal life in *Nightwood* as well as across her short stories, poetry, and woodcuts, and I examine the queer body's imbrication in vegetal and mycological systems. I ultimately argue for a temporal, spatial, and vegetal proliferation that characterizes Barnes' conception of queer, never entirely human, life.

If these chapters suggest somewhat mutedly the horrors and anxieties most present to Lovecraft's vision of the weird, the fourth and final chapter, "Zora Neale Hurston's Voodoo Corporeality" returns us to the weird's most viscerally chilling form. Here, the weird is recognizable by looking at Hurston's fiction alongside her ethnographic and autobiographical writings, where she documents her experiences studying and practicing voodoo in New Orleans and Haiti. Her nonfiction portrays the practice of voodoo possession as a terrifying and dangerous ceremony wherein Hurston herself becomes deeply and almost fatally involved. Hurston's work has predominantly been read in recent decades as feminist, a celebration of independent black womanhood in the rural American South. I complicate these readings by turning to Matthew Taylor's recent work on post-human cosmologies in order to show the double valences of the weird, a potential liberatory power that simultaneously threatens modern western notions of selfhood and subjectivity. Hurston's version of the weird returns us to these haunting qualities of weirdness, not presented as merely literary metaphor, but as a very real threat to her body and sense of self. If this dissertation begins with Lovecraft's weird, one rooted in a fear and hatred of otherness, it ends with a weird in Hurston that refashions and reclaims otherness in a radical—though treacherous—embrace.

In a final gesture to the reach and influence of weird modernisms, I turn in the Afterword to the literary movement of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, "The New Weird." Here, I conclude by pointing to the ways in which the literary weird enjoys its recent reemergence led by

writers like China Mieville and Jeff Vandermeer. I consider the influence of the modernist iteration of weirdness into the 21st century moment, and briefly point to the ways in which the weird becomes a central outlet for ecological fiction and climate fiction. The weird continues to be a way in which writers attempt to make sense of rapidly changing, often unimaginable forms of embodiment in the Anthropocene.

Regarding the arc of the project—beginning with an examination of weirdness in Lovecraft invariably marks the weird as a category inextricable from its ties to racial, misogynistic, and xenophobic fears ever-present and well-documented in Lovecraft’s tales and personal letters. Literary criticism of Lovecraft’s work in the philosophical vein has predominantly ignored the context of Lovecraft’s racism by privileging form over content, or by reducing (through broadening) his prejudices as a generalized fear of all otherness. The move in chapter one to identify the dangers of such readings is supported by an assemblage of queer and feminist thinkers whose work helps to reveal how these readings are insufficient, and supplies us alternatively with new methods by which we can encounter the weird. The theoretical frames of this project are varied and overlapping, though they are not those often read in relation to the weird, and certainly not in relation to Lovecraft. The diverse, tangled theoretical methodologies presented here not only enrich an ethical engagement with the complexities of Lovecraft’s weird, they have also informed my selection of writers to include under a broader banner of the Weird. If, as Aaron Jaffe has claimed, we have “arrive[d] at the unthinkable formulation” that “H.P. Lovecraft is the background noise to Modernism,” (Jaffe, 505), it is unthinkable primarily because Lovecraft’s problematic politics are surely not shared amongst these others writers of period. If Lovecraft’s work is the “background noise” of the period and of the weird, the other authors presented here might be heard a bit louder, as a revisionary roar.

A word about method. I came to this project through my theoretical investments and their overlapping inquiries, to which these particular novels seemed to me to be responding. Queer Theory, Freak and Disability Studies, Plant and Animal Studies, and Feminist Sciences Studies form the diverse and robust constellation of thought that inform this project. Though this set of fields which help me to develop a conception of the weird are varied, they share among them an egalitarian attunement to the nonhuman world and the contested limits of human life and experience. Each also crucially considers some of the foundational questions central to this project regarding so-called difference itself: how it is constructed, perceived, perpetuated, exploited, or performed. What challenged me and also thrilled me most as I assembled the frame of each chapter and of this project as a whole were the ways in which the chapters relied not on a single body of theoretical thought, but in the overlaps between fields. It was at the productive intersection of queer and disability studies, for example, or in the tiny space where critical plant studies and theories of queer temporality meet, where something new about a literary text could make itself visible. Sometimes, the objects and ideas that became visible in the novels within these new spaces were really surprising.

Tim Morton has noted that the word “weird” can also be traced to the old Norse root “urth,” which means “to twist or turn.” As Morton writes, the weird is “a twist of fate” (Morton, “Weird Embodiment,” accessed online). In what was a series of unexpected twists, I continued to discover in these novels a certain figure, a tall woman. This woman, nine or ten-feet tall as she repeatedly appeared to my wonder and delight, insists herself as central to this particular collection of weird modernisms. What was it about this figure, one I grew accustomed to searching for—and finding—in Lovecraft⁷, McCullers, Barnes, Hurston, that she always seemed

⁷ The figure doesn’t appear as a woman but as a boy in Lovecraft’s “The Dunwich Horror.”

to accompany my sense of the weird? Lovecraft once praised Poe's tale "MS. Found in a Bottle" (1833). He writes: "Who can forget the terrible swollen ship poised on the billow-chasm's edge...[the girl's] dark intimations of her unhallowed age and monstrous growth" (online). The fascination with unwieldy growth endures from Poe to Lovecraft to a host of modernist writers who have repeatedly imagined weirdness as not only a temporal category but a spatial one. The weird is experienced not only in time, but in space in the world. And it is not something that can be contained. It is imagined repeatedly as out of control (fatalistic), unstoppable. It serves not merely as a metaphorical concept, but as one repeatedly imagined as having material consequences that are perceived on multiple registers simultaneously.

Queer and feminist materialisms enabled me to recognize in the literature of this project something more than metaphor, to read novels differently than I had previously. Writers like Mel Chen, Stacy Alaimo, Donna Haraway, Heather Davis, and Eileen Joy aren't always writing about literature, but their work suggests the possibility of a more immersive experience of reading, a more ethical engagement with literary narrative. When I read Frankie's fear of growth in relation to her queer desires in McCullers, for example, I'm pushed to think of the material forces of queerness, its visibilities and invisibilities, its manifestations as it intersects with other modes of simultaneous embodied being attuned to race, class, ability, etc. Queer and feminist theory have been the lynchpin of this project, long before I knew that what I had identified across these works I would call "weird," I was drawn to them because they were also queer. I admit even to enjoying the shared sonic resonances of the "weird" and the "queer;" though it is surely happenstance⁸. When a text is "queered," the weird is already a part of the way the word sounds,

⁸ Thank you to Jane Gallop who pointed this similarity out to me very early in this project, and to Richard Grusin who helped me to see that the weird's strange absence in canonical Modernism was not evidence of its insignificance but rather of its curiosity and value.

and is paralleled in the shape of the mouth when both words are spoken. There was an affinity between them, I felt, in both their histories⁹, and in the ways that they share the quality of reclaiming the pejorative as a source of pride.¹⁰

Eileen Joy isn't talking about Lovecraft, nor is she talking about modernism when she says that "[m]aking things (such as a novel, or a poem) that are weird even more weird is...an ethical act, one invested in maximizing the sensual and other richness of the world's expressivity" ("Weird Reading," accessed online). She's talking about the ways in which the act of "weirding" texts is itself an ethical act, a critical work that can enrich the expressive dialectic between texts that goes otherwise unnoticed. Vitality, queer residues remain in the "sensual" dynamic of the weird, in forms of queer kinship with the nonhuman world. Central to the theoretical methods undertaken in what follows, weirdness enables and sustains queer encounters, disrupts intersecting systems of subjugation based on gender, race, or ability. In their explorations of bodies and lives I call weird, the authors presented here challenge normative understandings of embodiment. Weird embodiment, particularly in the chapters following Lovecraft, demonstrates the unwieldiness of the body and its wills. Fueled by queer desires, fungal entanglements, and spiritual exchanges, weirdness creeps into modernism to disrupt the confines of genre and unsettle the boundaries of the body.

⁹ Heather K. Love points out a similar relationship between the "bad" and "queer" in her contribution to the edited collection *Bad Modernisms*. Drawing from Foucault and Butler, Love writes that "turning a negative category into a positive one cannot be done cleanly" (24). Particularly in the case of the category of "queer," she reminds us "the modernist affirmation of this term is haunted by its history as an instrument of shame" (24). See Love's essay "Forced Exile: Walter Pater's Queer Modernism" in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, Duke University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ We might identify a similar kind of reclaiming in both the history of the term "queer" and its reclaiming in the 1990's as well as in slogans like "Let your freak flag fly," or, "Keep Berkeley weird."

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CHAPTER ONE

H.P. Lovecraft's Weird Body

“The horror of the cosmos is essentially a horror of the body”

Dylan Trigg, *The Thing*, 2014

Introduction

The writings of H.P. Lovecraft are experiencing a renaissance in the twenty-first century. Elevated from “pulp author to canonical classic” by the *Library of America* publication of his oeuvre in 2005, Lovecraft has since been revived in literary criticism and, perhaps even more productively, in philosophy (Harman, “On the Horror,” 4). In the last decade or so, Lovecraft’s tales, letters, and essays have reemerged with intensity, markedly in the influential philosopher Graham Harman’s book, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Zero Books, 2012). Lovecraft’s work has repeatedly appeared in philosophical essays and books that follow in Harman’s speculative realist tradition, where the tales often serve as the literary example *par excellence*.

Residing under the banner of this speculative realism are two distinct but related philosophical methods, object-oriented ontology (OOO) and new materialism, which have jointly

undertaken a thorough re-examination of the place of the human in relation to the nonhuman world. Through varying approaches, these philosophers seek to overturn the longstanding assumption that human life and perception serve as an ontological foundation for any ethical study of the world. The effect that these philosophical inquiries have had on literary and cultural studies cannot be overstated. In the twenty-first century, the influence of speculative realism is evidenced in the outpouring of literary criticism and cultural theory that directly contends with the tenets of this philosophy. Both OOO and the myriad of new materialist approaches to the study of literature are burgeoning methods that have, after a decade or more on the literary scene, continued to introduce a host of new literary objects worthy of study, as well as breathe new life into older literature otherwise exhausted or abandoned.

The reemergence of Lovecraft's work within this context is therefore no coincidence. The adoption of Lovecraft by the speculative realists marks his collection of tales as the quintessential example of literature that refuses the centrality of human life within a rapidly expanding cosmos. His fiction serves as a link between the Modernist period and the contemporary one through this de-emphasis of the human and the inherent inability to ever fully comprehend the mysteries of the universe.

His life, from 1890 – 1937 primarily in Providence, Rhode Island, neatly spans what is most commonly identified as the period of literary Modernism. His work, though published almost exclusively in small, pulp magazines like *Weird Tales* (1923-1954), reflects many of the concerns of more widely-read and recognized Modernist writers of the period. These concerns include a fascination with and skepticism toward scientific dogma and technological advances, a cynicism towards religion, a return to realism, and a challenge to human's capacity for knowledge. Lovecraft's work asks readers to contemplate how one comes to know what one

knows, whether knowledge of the world is ever really possible at all, and to imagine instead forms of nonhuman knowledge. The philosophers central to this essay have taken up this question with enthusiasm, going so far as to herald Lovecraft as “philosophy[’s] new literary hero” (Harman, “On the Horror,” 6).

Lovecraft’s place in literary modernism has been historically debated throughout the twentieth century, evidenced by key essays in defense of his work by the preeminent Lovecraft scholar and biographer S.T. Joshi. In a period obsessed with the designation of and distinction between high and low aesthetics, Lovecraft’s work was immediately relegated to mere pulp, a categorization that would persist into the twenty-first century. Indeed, his fiction contains quite a bit of the fantastic, the supernatural, and the weird, descriptions that seem hardly on par with the work of recognized literary greats of the first part of the twentieth century: T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, Djuna Barnes, or Gertrude Stein. Lovecraft’s supernatural stories draw from his study of astrophysics, Newtonian physics, and complex geometry to ponder the existence of alien beings on far away planets or in the fourth dimension. While his tales are rooted almost entirely in fictional towns of Massachusetts, his narrators experience supremely unbelievable events like encounters with invisible beasts, extraterrestrial consciousness swaps, and chance encounters with haunted cities of alien races from millions of years past. His work has been criticized for more than just its content – critics have long consigned Lovecraft’s literary style to the hackneyed and sloppy, too verbose or too prescriptive, despite an immense oeuvre that surges with elegant and masterfully controlled tales.

At his worst, Lovecraft can certainly be a tedious writer, even formulaic. But when writing at his best – and critics will disagree a bit as to when this is – he expertly creates an atmosphere of fear and confusion. He denies his readers any full disclosure of the creatures that

populate his tales, and hints instead at “the general outline of the thing” (Lovecraft, *Cthulhu* 5, 141, 201), or its “weird silhouette” (Lovecraft, *The Thing*, 242). As I will demonstrate in the section that follows, speculative realist philosophers have found this quality of Lovecraft’s writing, the refusal to name the horror that so terrifies the narrators of his tales, to be his principal achievement as a writer. Graham Harman, a philosopher at the helm of speculative realism, has written of Lovecraft, “No other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess” (*Weird Realism*, 3). Harman finds Lovecraft compelling because of this “gap” that his writing reproduces, the refusal of representing to his readers the horrors of the cosmos. For Harman, Lovecraft’s work emphasizes the unbridgeable space between experiences in the world and one’s ability to ever fully describe them.

Because the philosophical field of speculative realism has been at the forefront of Lovecraft studies in the last decade, this essay will begin with a discussion of the important contributions that thinkers in this vein have made to the study of Lovecraft. Speculative realism is largely responsible for Lovecraft’s revival, and it has reinvigorated Lovecraft studies. Their collective emphasis on Lovecraft’s flattened ontology has fixed his work at the center of anthropocene studies, eco-criticism, and object-oriented ontology, and together they form a new set of foundational texts for any serious scholar of Lovecraft and his philosophy. Yet no current works provide a thorough study of the way in which Lovecraft’s weird tales have been taken up across these philosophical and theoretical works. Lovecraft’s “weird” has played a significant role in the development of speculative realism, and I therefore will continue this essay by laying out how “the weird” in Lovecraft has been employed in these accounts. I do this first to demonstrate the import of his writing within contemporary philosophy, and second, in order to

situate my own subsequent departure from these readings and from their conception of the weird, which have now come to saturate the study and understanding of Lovecraft.

My readings of Lovecraft's tales are influenced by feminist theory, specifically feminist new materialism, a field heavily influenced by the study of the sciences, which, as Rebekah Sheldon has recently argued, lies in thorny relation to other speculative realist philosophies and especially to object-oriented ontology.¹¹ Whereas OOO readings of Lovecraft seek to undermine the human and thus are not interested specifically in corporeality in his work, I am instead drawn to the work that makes up the concurrent "material turn"¹² in feminism – one that aims to restore the complex makeup of the body as nonhuman, as an "agentic force," and imagines how human corporeality can "account for how the discursive and the material interact in the constitution of bodies" (Alaimo and Hekman, 7). This essay is informed by feminist and queer theorists who have argued that embodiment must take into account the biological, environmental, atmospheric, chemical, geologic, and various other agential forces and their interactions with the body in order to understand the body's porous and willful nature.

In a series of related keynote talks she delivered in 2014,¹³ Donna Haraway argues against human exceptionalism and individualism, citing that the so-called human has always

¹¹ Sheldon's essay, "Form/Matter/Chora: Object-Oriented Ontology and Feminist New Materialism" from the edited collection *The Nonhuman Turn* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), offers a comprehensive recent history of concepts in feminist new materialism that cut across two fields that are often cited as entirely at odds with one another. Influential to this essay and to my own thinking about the relationship between these two fields is Sheldon's demonstration here of the "unwitting embrace of patrilineation" (116) by OOO, and perhaps by speculative realism more broadly.

¹² Named as such by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman in the introduction to their edited collection *Material Feminisms*, Indiana University Press, 2008.

¹³ For two primary examples where she discusses the Cthulhucene, see "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Cthulhucene: Staying with the Trouble," delivered at AURA: AARHUS University Research on the Anthropocene, University of California, Santa Cruz, 5/9/14, <https://vimeo.com/97663518>, and "SF: String Figures, Multispecies Muddles, Staying with the

been comprised of the nonhuman as well. Referencing Scott Gilbert's work,¹⁴ Haraway claims: "We are all lichens now. We have never been individuals. From the anatomical, physiological, evolutionary, developmental, philosophic, economic. I don't care what perspective. We are all lichens now" (AURA talk, delivered 5/9/14, approx. 22 min 45 sec). Through the use of examples of all kinds of creatures both real and imaginary, Haraway builds an argument against the now dominant term "anthropocene" and calls instead for the naming of the current epoch as the "Cthulhucene." Haraway claims some distaste for Lovecraft, claiming not to be borrowing from his most famous monster from "Call of Cthulhu"¹⁵ when she says that we are not in the "anthropocene" but rather

the Cthulhucene, the phonic ones, the not yet finished, ongoing, abyssal, and dreadful ones that are generative and destructive, and make Gaia look like a junior kindergarten daughter... The Cthulhucene might be a way to collect up the questions for naming the epoch, for naming what is happening in the airs,

Trouble," delivered at University of Alberta 3/24/14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1uTVnhIHS8>.

¹⁴ See "A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals," in *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, Vol. 87 No. 4 (December 2012) pp. 325-341, co-authored with Jan Sapp and Alfred I. Tauber.

¹⁵ Since the writing of this chapter, Haraway has published her book that came out of the talks I reference above. In the book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, published with Duke University Press (2016), Haraway denies any influence of Lovecraft's Cthulhu and instead links her notion of the "Chthulhucene" with a species of spider. Haraway's refusal of Lovecraft's influence, primarily, it seems, because because of his widely-acknowledged racism and misogyny, but appears to me to be a bit of an odd sidestepping of Lovecraft's work and his clear influence on many theorists working at similar intersections. Regardless, I find many Haraways' description of the Chthulhucene very provocative and useful for my theorization of "the weird," and in further work that exceeds the scope of this essay, hope to interrogate Lovecraft's racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic attitudes as deeply problematic but central tenets of his weird philosophy.

waters, and places, in the rocks and oceans, and atmospheres...[It is a way] to imagine a world more liveable. (AURA talk, at approx. 1 min)

Haraway's adoption of Cthulhu to name a kind of possible "reworlding" wherein we might "have a chance of ongoing" (Haraway, AURA talk, approx. 25 min), is a rare optimistic twist on the squid-like beast, whose literary life has come to be otherwise synonymous with human insignificance on an apocalyptic scale. But her naming of the Cthulucene also signals the way in which Lovecraft's literary efforts might be read from a feminist materialist perspective, one which takes stock of the material, often nonhuman forms and forces that are intricately connected to "human life" and more specifically to human embodiment.

I therefore continue this essay with speculative realist accounts of Lovecraft because of a curious neglect of corporeality. For while it is true that Lovecraft's work exposes the insignificance of the human race in deep time, the characters in his tales cannot escape their bounded-ness to the body in their respective presents. They experience the body as strange and alien, freakish and out-of-control, or even as imprisonment. In addition, those speculative realists, like Harman, who are more interested in Lovecraft's formal techniques at the cost of content, neglect the political stakes that are inextricable from the body.

Lovecraft's racist and xenophobic attitudes are widely acknowledged and well-documented in his writing and letters.¹⁶ His misogyny and racism do not just haunt his tales; they

¹⁶ For a discussion of racism in Lovecraft's work see Michel Houellebecq's *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (1991), Bennett Lovett-Graff's "Shadow's Over Lovecraft: Reactionary Fantasy and Immigrant Eugenics" *Extrapolation* (Kent State University Press) 38.3 (1997): 175-192, or China Mieville's introduction to the Modern Library Classics edition of *At the Mountains of Madness* (2005). Critics have also begun to complicate our sense of Lovecraft's racist and eugenic beliefs by demonstrating a shift away from these attitudes in his later writings. See, as one example of this, Timothy H. Evans' "A Last Defense against the Dark: Folklore,

are central to his mythos. Critical scholarship on the author has only recently started to grapple with the tension between the philosophical implications of his work and its inherent xenophobia. Lovecraft may enjoy a current vogue among predominantly masculinist philosophical methodologies, but he remains unpopular for those unwilling or unable to delve beyond his racist and misogynistic attitudes. Select essays in the recent edited collection, *The Age of Lovecraft*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Carl H. Sederholm attempt to support the editors claim in the introduction to the volume that Lovecraft's racism cannot be separated from his fiction, that it must be taken a central tenet of his writing and his philosophy¹⁷. Although here I will examine stories that are not exclusively about race, I argue that turning attention towards feminist materialist modes of embodiment in Lovecraft's stories is at least one of the ways we might critically revise Lovecraft's weird, one rooted in fundamentally oppressive and racist attitudes. The repeated encounters that Lovecraft's characters have *with their own bodies* as strange stages corporeality as entangled with Lovecraft's horror in profound and largely unexplored ways.

This essay will contend with what has become the trend in the study of Lovecraft, that erasure of subjectivity for the sake of de-anthropocentrism. As the fields of speculative realist philosophy and cultural theory have slowly turned away from the privileging of the human, the sacrifice in Lovecraft studies has been the neglected consideration of embodiment as a primary theme across his work. In what follows, I will interrogate Lovecraft's characterization of bodily experience: the ways in which the body resists our control, estranges us, and incites horror in us.

Horror, and the Uses of Tradition in the Works of H.P. Lovecraft," *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Jan. - Apr., 2005), pp. 99-135.

¹⁷ See, for example, Jed Mayer's "Race, Species, and Others: H. P. Lovecraft and the Animal," and Patricia MacCormack's "Lovecraft's Cosmic Ethics," in *The Age of Lovecraft*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Ultimately I hope to restore a theory of embodiment central to Lovecraft's work, to horror writing of the period, and perhaps to the philosophy of speculative realism more broadly.

Lovecraft's Place in Speculative Realism

Speculative realism was introduced in 2007 to describe the work of four philosophers: Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant (Shaviro, *Universe*, 5). In his recent book, *The Universe of Things*, Steven Shaviro describes the philosophy:

Speculative realists question the anthropocentrism that has so long been a key assumption of modern Western rationality. Such a questioning is urgently needed at a time when we face the prospect of ecological catastrophe and when we are forced to recognize that the fate of humanity is deeply intertwined with the fates of all sorts of other entities...we cannot isolate our own interests, and our own economies, from processes taking place on a cosmic scale in a universe whose boundaries we are unable to grasp. (1)

This description is Lovecraftian in its sense of scope and scale. Shaviro cites the current ecological moment as urgently requiring a new kind of philosophical thought, wherein imagining a human-centered universe is no longer useful or ethical. Speculative realism aims to think of humans' fates as entangled with those of all sorts of other nonhuman things: air, water, carbon dioxide, whales, and dirt, rather than superior to or independent of them. He also invokes a

“cosmic scale,” emphasizing the vastness of the universe of which humans are a part. As our understanding of the nature of the cosmos matures, the less we actually understand about its limits, and the more trivial humanity seems to be.

Speculative realists are united primarily against elements of Kantian philosophy that have, they claim, dominated Western philosophy since the eighteenth century. Most controversial among these elements is the notion that Meillassoux has called Kant’s “correlationism”: the claim that objects and phenomena are dependent on human thought to exist. For Kant, we can’t *know* anything about things-in-themselves beyond our apprehension or perception of them; they may *exist* independently of us, but we have no access to them¹⁸. But speculative realism has staunchly opposed this philosophy. Is philosophy limited to the human mind and what it thinks and perceives? Speculative realists collectively argue not. Timothy Morton has described the central problem of correlationism in the form of a riddle: “is the light on in the fridge when you close the door?” (Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 9).

As both a father of speculative realism and the philosopher most enamored with Lovecraft, Graham Harman’s work is exemplary of the way in which Lovecraft has been incorporated into philosophy more broadly. As one of the only literary examples Harman repeatedly returns to across his work, Lovecraft’s tales are employed as examples of an author already object-oriented in the early half of the twentieth century. Through Lovecraft, Harman’s work attempts to overthrow the long-standing philosophical maxim of correlationism. In what has become a touchstone text for Lovecraft scholars, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, Harman performs quick close readings of dozens of short passages from Lovecraft’s most well-known tales. He examines Lovecraft’s literary style of evasion, claiming that the author “unlocks

¹⁸ Thanks to Matthew Taylor (UNC) for his clarification on this point in an earlier draft of this essay.

a world dominated by [the] gap...between the world and our descriptions of it” (27). This kind of writing, which operates against the logic of representational realism, is instead what Harman terms “weird realism.” The book is a rapid succession of unfastened philosophical scraps that are eventually united as examples of a weird philosophy. Instead of relying on traditional definitions of the weird, which underscore futurity and fate, Harman finds that Lovecraft’s most valuable contribution, what makes him “one of the greatest [writers] of the twentieth century” (3), is his ability to merely allude to the horrors of the universe while “cancel[ing] the literal terms of the description” (17). Through this narrative technique, (Harman focuses almost exclusively on Lovecraft’s style in this book), Lovecraft’s work exposes the impossibility of ever fully knowing the object-oriented world, of which humans are just one part.

Harman’s most powerful reading in this vein is of Lovecraft’s most famous tale, “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926). Perhaps against the spirit of Harman, who claims in the introduction to this section that “ ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ is best savored not by summarizing its plot, but by examining...the work directly” (54), I will describe the story, albeit briefly: Cthulhu is a giant winged octopoid creature, silent in sleep for eons deep under the ocean, below the earth’s crust. As figurines of this ancient being begin to appear across the globe, many who attempt to follow the path to the secrets of the beast die horrible deaths. Eventually, through recovered manuscripts, a description of the thing is finally revealed — except not exactly.

Harman’s fascination with the “reveal” in “Cthulhu” is for him a moment that similarly occurs throughout Lovecraft’s work. Lovecraft writes of Cthulhu: “If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing...but it was the general outline of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful” (*Cthulhu* 160). In a brief section of *Weird*

Realism, “The General Outline of the Whole,” Harman revels in Lovecraft’s refusal to reduce the horror to a grouping of specific qualities: “cheerful bundles of octopus, dragon, and human” (58), he writes. Instead, what is frightening, is the irreducibility of the object to its qualities, the “general outline of the whole” allows for no direct contact with the horror, but only a vagueness that allows an indirect experience of Cthulhu (238). Lovecraft offers a few concrete descriptions that we can “sink our teeth into” (Harman 238): octopus, dragon, human – but then retreats to the failures of language to describe his experience or make it known to his readers. Harman’s appreciation of Lovecraft identifies his work as the foundational literature of Harman’s weird philosophy, which, above all, is weird because of its “obstruct[ion] [of] the power of literal language” (Harman, *Weird Realism* 234).

Other speculative realists have similarly defined “the weird” in Lovecraft, although with slight distinctions. Eugene Thacker, author of *After Life* (2010) and the recent three book series, *Horror of Philosophy Vol.1-3* (2011, 2015, 2015), also calls on Lovecraft to define what he calls an “entelechy of the weird,” which undoubtedly echoes Harman. In *After Life*, he writes that Lovecraft’s creatures “can barely be named, let alone adequately described *or thought*.” He goes on to say that indescribability is the “crux of supernatural horror, the reason why life is ‘weird.’ The threat is not the monster, or that which threatens existing categories of knowledge. Rather, it is the ‘nameless thing,’ or that which presents itself as a horizon for thought” (23). Thacker names Lovecraft’s weird as that which resists representation, rather than the weird as the monster itself. Though he does not cite Harman directly, Thacker seems to be furthering Harman’s sense of the weird by showing how Lovecraft’s work is terrifying because it presents us with the “horizon for thought,” or the “possibility of a logic of life...absolutely inaccessible to the

human” (23). Notably for Thacker, the “weird” in Lovecraft is about weird *life*, a “life according to the logic of an inaccessible real” (23).

In his subsequent series, *Horror of Philosophy* (2011, 2015, 2015), Thacker calls on Lovecraft at greater length, citing his work as the primary example of the way in which horror forces us to consider the world after humans are gone, what he calls a “world-without-us.” Harman’s celebration of Lovecraft’s anti-representationalist rhetoric is extended in Thacker’s work, where he proposes that “horror be understood not as dealing with human fear in a human world (the world-for-us), but...about the limits of the human as it confronts a world that is not just a World, and not just the Earth, but also a Planet (the world-without-us). This also means that horror is not simply about fear, but instead about the enigmatic thought of the unknown” (*In the Dust of this Planet*, 8). In Thacker’s expansion of the cosmos – from human-centered “World,” to “Earth,” to “Planet,” the challenge of horror is not to theorize human existence in the World, but to imagine the “Planet” as “that which remains ‘after’ the human” (7). For Thacker, the horror in Lovecraft is that confrontation with an unknown future landscape, the world post-humanity. In the introduction to the book series, Thacker acknowledges the inherent contradiction in reading Lovecraft in this way: “we cannot help but to think of the world as a human world, by virtue of the fact that it is we human beings that think it” (Thacker, 2). Yet despite this acknowledgement, Thacker does not discuss the ways in which Lovecraft’s characters might find the human world as another kind of predicament, the reality within which humans find themselves as bound to the fleshiness of material, embodied life.

If Harman and Thacker are struck by Lovecraft’s refusal of linguistic representation, their focus remains primarily on the way in which Lovecraft denies his readers access to the horror of the monsters in the tales. Dylan Trigg’s 2014 *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror* is the first

of the speculative realist philosophers whose work comprehensively considers that the horror might arguably be that thing which is both most known to us and most foreign: our own human bodies. Trigg's book picks up from where thinkers like Harman and Thacker leave off, attempting to reconcile the philosophical trend of post-humanism with a phenomenology that is "attuned to both human and nonhuman entities" (5). Trigg critiques speculative realist projects that replace subjects with objects, claiming that this philosophy has "long since folded back upon itself, becoming a distinctly human – alas, all too human – vision fixed at all times on the perennial question: *How will the Earth remember us?*" (4, emphasis in original) Trigg's work holds that a study of human experience, and specifically of the materiality of the body as alien, is a necessary departure from other speculative realist work, which has thus far worked to entirely negate the subject.

Trigg's work is important in the field and to a more comprehensive understanding of "the weird." Borrowing again from Harman, Trigg distinguishes his employment of "weird realism" as "that which outlives its own corporeal extinction [and] is transformed into an entity that is both itself and concurrently other-than-itself, both human and unhuman at once" (53). Through a reading of Lovecraft's *The Shadow Out of Time*, a tale I will turn to in the next section, Trigg argues that Lovecraft's weird names a kind of bodily experience, a human subjectivity made up of the "weird facets of bodily existence." These weird facets together name what he calls an "alien subjectivity," one that is explored in Lovecraft's tale and is underscored in Trigg's horror of the body. His engagement with Lovecraft and his investment in the horror of the body enable an intersection with other theories of embodiment, particularly feminist and queer materialisms that have been largely silent on the subject of Lovecraft's fiction.

Lovecraft's "Weird"

Lovecraft himself wrote a number of essays in which he describes what he imagined as the truly "weird tale." While the philosophers discussed thus far share a sense of how Lovecraft theorized "the weird," a closer look at Lovecraft's own writing on the subject reveal some additional complexity to the term. Contemporary philosophers have agreed that Lovecraft's weird is most certainly about the horror of indescribability. In his lengthy 1927 essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature," Lovecraft writes that the "true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to a rule." Instead, he writes:

The one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers, a subtle sense of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim. (*Collected Essays*, 84)

Here, in this beautifully dark and poetic description, Lovecraft illustrates the weird through a series of images and sounds which are meant to evoke "a profound sense of dread," a fear of "unknown spheres and powers." He calls on images impossible to conjure up entirely – a set of disembodied black wings, and the scratching of "shapes and entities" not on the outside of a parlor door but on the "utmost rim" of the known universe. The passage illustrates quite vividly Lovecraft's sense of the weird not as a set of concrete objects or actors, but rather as atmospheric. He writes in the later essay, *Notes on Writing Weird Fiction*, that "[a]tmosphere,

not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction. Indeed, all that a wonder story can ever be is *a vivid picture of a certain type of human mood*" (*Collected Essays*, italics in original, 177).

Speculative realism primarily theorizes this sense of indescribable dread as the defining characteristic of the weird. But an extended look at Lovecraft's own description of the weird demonstrates the concept to be complicated by the additional question of temporality. What Lovecraft names as "dread," or, "extreme fear; apprehension or anxiety as to future events" (*OED*), marks his vision of the weird as oriented towards the future and signaled by a mood of fear and anxiety. Although he often writes narratives with complex temporalities framed by reflection, recollection, and temporal disorientation, Lovecraft describes weirdness here not in terms of remembrance or regret over past events, but as apprehension over future ones. In a passage worth quoting at length, he writes:

I choose weird stories because they suit my inclination best, to achieve...the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time...These stories frequently emphasize the element of hours because fear is our deepest and strongest emotion, and the one which best lends itself to the creation of nature-defying illusions...The reason why *time* plays a great part in so many of my tales is that [it] looms up in my mind as the most profoundly dramatic and grimly terrible thing in the universe. Conflict with time seems to me the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression. (*Collected Essays*, 176)

Here, Lovecraft expresses the desire to halt time, to suspend it even for a moment in his fiction. Weird fiction is the kind of writing that can possibly attain this suspension through a capitalizing

of fear and anxiety. As Joshi has stressed of this passage, “Lovecraft is not renouncing his materialism by seeking an imaginative escape from it; indeed, it is precisely because he believes that [these laws] are uniform...that he seeks an imaginative escape from them” (Lovecraft, *Cthulhu*, xv). The link between the subject of “hours” with fear doesn’t exactly make clear their connection, but it is as if only out of the experience of fear can the author create the illusion of defying the unrelenting the laws of time. This passage makes clear Lovecraft’s anxieties over time as the most “terrible thing in the universe,” the subject which informs his writing and which he feels is most fruitful when conflicted with.

Where some philosophers have usefully expanded on Lovecraft’s description of weird writing as atmospheric, indescribably horrific rather than concretized in an object or thing, Lovecraft’s fixation on time is as equally important to any discussion of the weird in literature or in philosophy. In response to the staunch and unwavering constraints and regularity of time, Lovecraft creates weird tales that act as explicit confrontations with these limitations. As I will show in the section that follows, these conflicts with time frequently occur at the site of the body.

Lovecraft’s Weird Body

Despite the way in which Lovecraft scholarship has tended to disregard embodied experience in favor of the cosmological, it is not especially difficult to locate passages across Lovecraft’s fiction that underscore the centrality of the body to his vision of horror. As we have seen in the philosophical readings of his tales and essays, Lovecraft’s horror lies, in part, in the inexplicable and indescribable, and emerges not necessarily from “secret murder or bloody

bones,” but from the literary style of purposeful imprecision, a refusal or inability to name that which is un-nameable. But Lovecraft is not merely a horror writer – he is a “weird” writer, and as is evidenced by Lovecraft’s own definition of the weird, his tales also lay out a uniquely embodied and horrific temporality. The tales I will examine in this section are therefore chosen for their joint thematic concerns with the body and with time. Together, the readings of this fiction demonstrate how the weird in Lovecraft is hinged to the body and to the experience of embodiment as a temporal phenomenon.

Lovecraft’s 1929 “The Dunwich Horror” has been called the most “pulpish” of his tales, which, not surprisingly, Joshi writes, was “snapped up by *Weird Tales* as soon as he submitted it” (Lovecraft, *The Thing*, introduction by Joshi, xiv). The tale follows the life of Wilbur Whateley, a child born in fictional Dunwich, Massachusetts to the sound of a “hideous screaming which echoed above even the hill noises and the dogs’ barking” (Lovecraft, *The Thing*, 210). His birth is witnessed by none except for his “deformed, unattractive albino” mother Lavinia, whose conditions of pregnancy in the first place remain shrouded in mystery: who is the father of this boy? The strange events that follow his birth are noted over time by the townspeople who occasionally ramble up the hill to the Whateley’s property. As the child ages and matures at alarming rates (he reaches adulthood in form and mind in less than ten years’ time), the townspeople note that the Whateley’s livestock has become increasingly depleted and sickly. In the meantime, Wilbur and his grandfather are seen reconstructing their townhouse repeatedly and without explanation. After his grandfather’s death, the now *ten-year-old and nine-foot tall* Wilbur ventures to the (mythical) Miskatonic University Library in search of the (also mythical) *Necronomicon*, which holds the truth to unknown alien pasts. Professor Henry Armitage denies Wilbur’s request to take the text from its place in the library, and when Wilbur returns on a later

night to steal it, guard dogs attack and kill him, tearing off his clothes and revealing a mass of alien appendages.

Back in the town of Dunwich, havoc has broken out in the elusive form of an invisible creature that has been loosed on the town, destroying homes and killing a number of the townspeople. Suspecting a dark relation to Wilbur's inhuman condition, Professor Armitage ventures himself to Dunwich, only to discover that the invisible creature is the twin brother of Wilbur, nurtured and kept secret in the Whateley home for a decade with the intent of eventually overtaking the human race. After following the invisible beast through its path of destruction and detected only by the sway of grass or the bent of timber, Armitage finally locates the creature. He heroically sprays a potion in the direction of the invisible thing, thus revealing it. He is seen from a distance reciting a series of spells that eventually and successfully destroy the beast, and with it, the malevolent intentions of Yog-Sothoth.

Joshi writes that despite this tale's popularity with readers, it is "one of Lovecraft's great failures in its clumsy moral didacticism and ludicrous use of white magic versus black magic"; it is "pulpish tripe" (Joshi, *World in Transition*, 176). Joshi's critique of "The Dunwich Horror" is not ungrounded. The tale concludes by pitting good versus evil in an uninteresting way, and it is one of Lovecraft's only wherein humankind successfully wards off the malignant alien assailants. Whereas for some authors this kind of victory might be met with praise and pleasure, serious Lovecraft readers do not look to his work for these sorts of triumphant endings, and rather see this tale as a failure to live up to Lovecraft's own philosophy. I want to suggest that the tale might be redeemed by focusing not on the ending, but on the rapid maturation of Wilbur Whateley. It is Wilbur's dramatic growth, recorded at nearly twice that typical for a child his

age, that is shocking and terrifying, especially if read as parallel to the mounting evil in the Whateley home.

Lovecraft writes, “When Wilbur was a year and seven months old—in September of 1914 - his size and accomplishments were almost alarming. He had grown as large as a child of four, and was a fluent and incredibly intelligent talker” (*The Thing*, 213). At the age of four, “Wilbur was growing up uncannily, so that he looked like a boy of ten” (214). At four and a half, he “looked like a lad of fifteen. His lips and cheeks were fuzzy with a coarse, dark down, and his voice had begun to break” (215), and just a few years later, he was “tremendously mature of aspect, and his height, having reached the normal adult limit, seemed inclined to wax beyond that figure” (217). At age 15, Wilbur has reached a height of eight feet tall, and when he meets his death in the Miskatonic University Library shortly thereafter, he has reached the height of nine feet (223). The speed of Wilbur’s growth is disturbing to the narrator, and he marks each incremental foot of Wilbur’s growth throughout the tale as a way to parallel the mounting horror unfolding in Dunwich. In this way, the mounting sense of fear is embodied in the body of Wilbur. Time and the corporeal are bound up in ways that reveal the body to be the site of manipulation on the part of evil beings. As the evil grows, so does Wilbur, his body the manifestation of other-worldly forces outside of his own control.

Literary critics have named the beastly twin brother as the flimsy basis of the terror in “The Dunwich Horror,” the strange invisible beast whose nonhuman maturation parallels Wilbur’s swift human development into abnormally tall adulthood. But I would argue instead that the real horror is the slow buildup of the bizarre circumstance, the material manifestation of the horror from beyond via the earthly body of Wilbur Whateley. The horror is Wilbur’s humanoid figure, a creature that eventually reaches nine feet tall, a “thing” which to behold

“crowded out all other images,” and which “no human pen could describe.” As with many of Lovecraft’s tales, in the moment of the horror’s reveal, language and writing fail the narrator, and description becomes impossible. The narrator elaborates: “it could not be vividly visualized by anyone whose ideas of aspect and contour are too closely bound-up with common life forms of this planet and the three known dimensions. It was partly human, beyond a doubt...But the torso and lower parts of the body were teratologically fabulous...” (Lovecraft, *The Thing* 223). Wilbur is a unique character in Lovecraft’s body of work, operating as a covert agent of Yog-Sothoth, a mythic god-like entity first introduced in his novella *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, written in 1927. As Graham Harham writes, “Fresh ground is broken in the tales with the character of young Wilbur Whateley. In the story of Cthulhu, all the ostensible humans are actually human and we never have reason for physiological suspicion...With Wilbur Whateley, by contrast, we have the soon-to-be classic Lovecraftian theme of a being who pretends to be human while concealing a much darker identity” (Harman, *Weird Realism*, 102).

In “The Dunwich Horror,” the humanoid body is the central vehicle through which an alien race carries out its malevolent plot to destroy the future of humanity. The freakish temporality of Wilbur’s individual life is thus in sharp contrast with the immortalized and infinite temporality of Yog-Sothoth. These distinct and conflicting temporalities, Wilbur’s individual human(ish) time and the deep time of Yog-Sothoth, are set in dramatic opposition in the tale. Lovecraft would continue to revisit this conflict between scales of temporality in many of his tales to follow, namely “The Whisperer in Darkness,” “The Shadow Out of Time,” and “From Beyond.” In these tales and in countless others, the human body is manipulated and altered by nonhuman actors from outside of time as we know it, and human corporeality is revealed to be a horrific, uncontrollable, or unwieldy experience.

“The Shadow Out of Time” (1936), tells the story of Nathaniel Peaslee, who is lecturing at the University when his mind is suddenly overtaken by a Yithian being (an ancient race referred to as “The Great Race”) and is transported to the Yithian planet. His consciousness has been kidnapped by the Great Race in an effort to escape their slowly dissolving planet. They have undertaken the project of invading human specimens, overtaking their bodies through the inhabitation of human minds. After five years of alienation from his own body, Peaslee’s mind is suddenly returned to himself, exactly at the moment from which it was extracted, mid-sentence during his lecture at the university. The five year span is just the blink of an eye for Peaslee, who suddenly awakens mid-sentence in the same lecture from which he was stolen. The five years on the planet of the Great Race have equated to the blink of an eye on Earth. As he re-acclimates to terrestrial life, he has difficulty taking stock of his human form:

There was...a feeling of profound and inexplicable horror concerning *myself*. I developed a queer fear of seeing my own form, as if my eyes would find it something utterly alien and inconceivably abhorrent. When I did glance down and behold the familiar human shape in quiet grey or blue clothing I always felt a curious relief, though in order to gain this relief I had to conquer an infinite dream. I shunned mirrors as much as possible, and was always shaved at the barber’s. (Lovecraft, *Necronomicon*, emphasis in original, 723)

Lovecraft’s italicized emphasis on “myself” makes clear the strangeness of the experience of Peaslee’s own body. At this moment, the tale minimizes the horror of the Great Race and instead calls attention to the horror of one’s own form. Peaslee’s fear that he might find his body utterly

alien is calmed only by an occasional glance, which he avoids as much as possible. For awhile, he doesn't understand his own fear of his body, until the memories of the past five years with the Great Race begin to flood back to him. With his developing knowledge of his time on the Yithian planet comes the awareness that his body has belonged to others. As Peaslee's memories slowly come to the fore, so too does an emergent awareness that his body does not belong to him, but to other forces who invade his consciousness and take over his capacities at their whim. The erasure of his memory, of his past and therefore of his sense of himself in the present, also erases his familiarity with his human form. He becomes temporarily estranged from his body as the result of his travel through time and cosmic space.

Trigg's reading of "The Shadow Out of Time" emphasizes the way in which "ownership" over the body has been central to the conceptualization of the rational subject in Western philosophical thought. Utilizing Lovecraft's tale as a counterexample, Trigg argues that the just cited Lovecraft passage presents a challenge to these reigning notions of the self as that which can ever be "mastered" by its host:

The discovery of the body in its alien materiality hinges upon a self-conscious awareness of the body as no longer mine, and thus marks a point of divergence from personal identity...this break of the body from an experience of selfhood is not absolute, but depends on a recognition of the body as simultaneously self and other...What this means is that the alien within the body is not a departure from the lived body, but a continuation of it...The creature we are faced with in Lovecraft...is thus a synthesis of the human and the nonhuman, the personal and the impersonal, the possessor and the possessed. (78)

Trigg emphasizes in Lovecraft the way in which the alien possessor, a figure which repeatedly surfaces across Lovecraft's tales, is not "a departure from the body" but a "continuation of it." The human is revealed to be what Trigg calls here a "synthesis of the human and the nonhuman"; the body (and mind) an open system rather than a cordoned off, contained one. As Trigg argues, it is Peaslee's revelation of the porousness of the body to outside forces and beings that terrifies him. The human itself is alienated, made strange.

There is another nuance to the Lovecraft passage. Peaslee reflects: "I developed a queer fear of seeing my own form, as if my eyes would find it something utterly alien and inconceivably abhorrent." Here, Peaslee is afraid not simply of an "alien materiality"; it is not only, as Trigg reads it, the horror of lost ownership over the body. It is also that he will no longer be able to recognize the human. It is the possibility of a loss of recognition of himself, "*as if my eyes would find it alien,*" that most frightens him. It is the alienation of the human form, the evolution of the human into something no longer recognizable as such, that drives the terror of this tale, and which makes this passage alluring to read alongside contemporary theories of embodiment. Trigg asks, "If I am unable to possess my body, then who - or perhaps more pertinently what - am I?" (65)

A welcome voice in the choir of speculative realism, Trigg's inquiry here reverberates with corporeal feminisms, which pose similar questions about the body's place in nature and culture. Trigg's work might then serve as one of many possible bridges between object-oriented ontology and feminist new materialisms. Where strict OOO philosophers like Harman theorize that all objects maintain strict boundaries and withdraw from one another without relationality, Trigg's theoretical leanings feel closer to something like Stacy Alaimo's notion of "trans-

corporeality,”¹⁹ Donna Haraway’s “entanglements,”²⁰ Karen Barad’s “intra-actions,”²¹ or Myra Hird’s “microontologies.”²² In these theories of relationality between human and nonhuman realms, the human and nonhuman relate and coexist in various ways; there is no inside or outside of the human form, only a complex intermingling of life and nonlife.

Feminist theorists of the natural and biological sciences, and I’ve mentioned just a few, each approach the question of corporeality from distinct backgrounds and with unique projects at stake. This very brief account of a few of the major theories in feminist and queer materialism is meant not to group them together to collapse their many differences in approaches, content, and style. Instead, I cite these theories to demonstrate the kind of work that feminism, at the junction of the humanities and the sciences, has been doing previous to and alongside those working in the speculative realist tradition for some time now. Trigg’s insightful recognition regarding *The Shadow Out of Time* of the human posited as “simultaneously self and other, “a synthesis of the human and the nonhuman,” locates in Lovecraft what feminist new materialists have been, albeit in broad terms here, theorizing about the body.

An early weird tale, “From Beyond” (1920, published 1934), elucidates a new materialism at work in Lovecraft, wherein the true unknown multiplicity of the universe is revealed. The narrator describes a visit to his friend Crawford Tillinghast’s home where

¹⁹ “Trans-corporeality” is a way to think about the material self not as a “bracketed biological body” (*Bodily Natures*, 3) separate from the environment. Instead, the material body “in all its...fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment’...always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (*Material Feminisms*, 238).

²⁰ See *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

²¹ For Barad, objects emerge through intra-actions with other objects and phenomena, and do not exist preceding their relationality. See *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007.

²² Hird’s concept of “microontologies” follows from Haraway’s concept of companion species that she outlines in *When Species Meet*, but considers human/nonhuman relations via companion beings that are not species at all and that are mostly invisible to the human eye – bacteria.

Tillinghast has just constructed a new kind of machine that makes ultra violet rays (among other things) visible, and invites the narrator over to show it to him. Tillinghast claims, “I have always believed that such strange, inaccessible worlds exist at our very elbows, *and now I believe I have found a way to break down the barriers*” (Lovecraft, *Necronomicon*, 747). They turn it on, and the narrator’s view of the world suddenly and dramatically changes forever:

I saw the attic laboratory, the electrical machine, and the unsightly form of Tillinghast opposite me; but of all the space unoccupied by familiar objects, not one particle was vacant. Indescribable shapes both alive and otherwise were mixed in disgusting disarray, and close to every known thing were whole worlds of alien, unknown entities. It likewise seemed that all the known things entered into the composition of other unknown things and vice versa. (Lovecraft, *Necronomicon*, 750)

Here, the scientific machine elucidates an otherwise invisible universe all around them. It makes visible the previously imperceptible; it illuminates what was once thought of as “vacant” space as being filled with “unfamiliar” and “indescribable shapes.” The beings are both alive and something other than alive, and are all “mixed” in a way that appalls the speaker. The mixture, described as “disarray,” is disgusting to the narrator because its things lack borders and specificity. The invisible universe shares very few of the qualities with our perceivable one, where objects, beings, and bodies (seem) clearly self-contained and distinct from one another. The narrator writes, “I felt the huge animate things brushing past me and occasionally *walking or drifting through my supposedly solid body*” (emphasis in original). The body here is revealed to be what Alaimo calls “porous,” susceptible to the comings and goings of unperceivable

nonhuman entities. No longer able to imagine the body as a closed system impenetrable to outside things and forces, the narrator in “From Beyond” must come to the terrifying realization that the body is always exposed to an environment not visible, and is thus far more vulnerable than he previously understood.

Thacker calls this kind of discovery, one prominent in the horror genre, a “terrifying reverie,” citing Pascal’s well-known formulation: “Nature is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere” (cited in Thacker, 166). Evoking Shaviro’s “universe whose boundaries we are unable to grasp,” nature is depicted in the Lovecraft passage as a multitude of worlds around us without any knowable boundaries. As Thacker says of the horror in “From Beyond,” it is the “[d]issolving of the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural” (*Dust*, 74), the “[revelation] of the already-existing non-separation between natural and supernatural (77). Thacker reads the device as a kind of mediation between the seen and unseen universe, an instrument that reveals an entanglement that has always existed. Thacker seems right to point out the dissolution of the boundaries between the so-called “natural” and the “super-natural.”

Thacker and Trigg have much in common with material feminists who draw from the natural, geological, biological, and other environmental sciences in their collective refusal of nonhuman matter as inert or passive. As Ann Fausto-Sterling writes, “In thinking about both gender and race, feminists must accept the body as simultaneously composed of genes, hormones, cells, and organs— all of which influence health and behavior” (1495).” The body’s makeup of nonhuman parts biological and otherwise (“I felt the huge animate things brushing past me and occasionally *walking or drifting through my supposedly solid body*”) is a central acknowledgement of feminist science studies and feminist new materialist projects.

The acknowledgment of a human/nonhuman body is met throughout Lovecraft's tales with mixed feelings: horror, bewilderment, and even allure. In *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (1936), a novella with dramatic bodily transformations, the narrator Robert Olmstead sets out to explore the town of Innsmouth, where he learns that the townspeople are hybrid offspring of humans and Deep Ones, fish-frog like creatures that look like humans until mid-life until they slowly transform into the amphibious beings. After escaping the town, Robert soon discovers to his horror that he too is likely a descendent of Deep Ones and begins dreaming of his transformation. Yet in a surprising turn at the close of the tale, he writes, "I feel queerly drawn toward the unknown sea-deeps instead of fearing them" (Lovecraft, *Call of Cthulhu*, 335). Whereas "From Beyond" is fascinating for the way in which it anticipates contemporary philosophical thought about the complex and human/nonhuman makeup of the body, "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" details the evolutionary comingling of humans and nonhumans and emphasizes the genealogical links between humans and nonhumans. Robert's queer acceptance of his fate as a fish-frog is surprising in light of the horror and disbelief with which he first receives the news of the townspeople of Innsmouth. And despite the fact that his being "queerly drawn" to the creatures does not, in the early twentieth century context, have the theoretical meaning or weight it carries now, his sudden acceptance of his transformation might also be understood as "queer" in the contemporary theoretical sense²³. His embrace of a

²³ There is a lot of important theoretical work at the junction of queer theory and the sciences which is attuned to the makeup of the body as primarily nonhuman material and organisms. This work is outside of the scope of this essay, but offers much to the way in which we might think about weird embodiment at the cellular and bacterial level. See, as exemplary work on the topic, Myra Hird's "Indifferent Globality," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2010, 27 (2-3), 54-72, "Meeting with the Microcosmos," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2010, 28, 36-39, and "Symbiosis, Microbes, Coevolution and Sociology," *Ecological Economics*, 2010, 69(4): 737-742, as well as her co-edited collection with Noreen Giffney, *Queering the Non/Human*, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008.

human/nonhuman lineage and evolutionary past is a surprising acknowledgement of the way in which human and nonhuman species comingle and co-exist, and emphasizes a queerer fluidity in the place of a human/nonhuman divide. *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* is an embrace, perhaps, of queer kinship with other species, perhaps even a queer, non-progressive evolutionary view that does not privilege the human as the evolutionary *telos*²⁴.

Conclusion

While some of speculative realist philosophy has begun to consider the place of the body in Lovecraft, a more comprehensive sense of corporeality is necessary in order to gain a fuller understanding of “the weird” across his work. In this vein, this essay has hopefully offered a reading of Lovecraft through feminism and new materialisms, which helps to restore to Lovecraft’s fiction the centrality of embodiment and the many horrors it presents in his work. The convergence I offer between Object-Oriented Ontologies and Feminist (and Queer) New Materialisms does not negate the philosophical developments of speculative realist work on Lovecraft, but does challenge that body of work to more fully consider the centrality of embodied, material existence to Lovecraft’s fiction, and perhaps, to the still youthful speculative realist philosophical tradition.

While object-oriented ontology has seemingly staked its claim on Lovecraft as the

²⁴ See Stephen Jay Gould’s essay “The Evolution of Life on Earth,” *Scientific American*, 2004. Gould disputes long-standing claims that evolutionary processes are unidirectional or naturally progressive. Though Gould does not discuss his revised theory of evolution as “queer,” I see his project as queering evolution by challenging teleological narratives of evolution and progress, a project that productively aligns with theorists of queer temporality. See, for example, the work of Elizabeth Freeman, Heather Love, Jack Halberstam, Jose Esteban Muñoz, and Lee Edelman.

literary figurehead of the philosophical movement, the robust forms of materiality that have emerged from feminist perspectives offer a useful and much needed intervention into the study of Lovecraft. Feminism's recent attunement to the "materiality of the body itself as an active, recalcitrant force" (Alaimo, *MF* 4), helps to understand Lovecraft and "the weird" in new ways. The horror of Lovecraft's corpus is not merely the indescribable strangeness of the world or the cosmos *writ large*, it is more specifically the unfamiliarity with and estrangement from the human body. It is a horror of recognition of the body as an agential force: porous and vulnerable, unpredictable, out of control, even fatalistic. Lovecraft's weird corporeality is one grounded in the materiality of the body in relation to other things and other bodies, and one that claims a theory of weirdness that is always and explicitly an embodied phenomenon. As Haraway has written "theory is not about matters distant from the lived body; quite the opposite. Theory is *anything* but disembodied" (*Monsters*, 295). The horror implicit in the weird is therefore the body's complete enmeshment with the environment; the site of the breakdown between what was once thought of as the "Natural" and what can no longer be staved off as the "Supernatural."

Weird corporeality is perhaps most easily recognizable in Lovecraft, but it is by no means limited to his work. The weird, developed in Lovecraft's essays and embodied in his fiction, is pervasive into the Modernist period, as anxieties mount over developing scientific and cultural understandings of the body. Though most identifiably "weird" in Lovecraft's work, the body is no less alien and certainly no less frightening as it appears in more canonical fiction from across the period.

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CHAPTER TWO

Freak Temporality: Female Adolescence in the Novels of Carson McCullers

“If I had a time machine, I’d travel back to the freak show. Sneak in after hours, after all the folks who worked long days selling themselves as armless wonders and wild savages had stepped off their platforms, out of their geek pits, from behind their curtains. I’d walk among them...I’d breathe their fierceness into me.”

-Eli Clare, “Gawking, Gaping, Staring”

Introduction

In a 1959 essay, “Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing,” Carson McCullers famously wrote: “Spiritual isolation is the basis of most of my themes...Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about – *people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love – their spiritual isolation*” (*The Mortgaged Heart*, italics mine, 174). One of the most cited passages in McCullers criticism, this quote is used in order to repeatedly prop up the interpretation of bodily difference in McCullers’s novels as purely representational – as a metaphor for a kind of “spiritual incapacity.” While her novels do exhibit loneliness and isolation as primary themes throughout, the non-normative bodies that populate McCullers’s fiction – the queers, the freaks, the “deaf-mutes,” the “dwarf” and the “giant,” the drunk, the sick, the half-blind, and, I will add, the awkward adolescent – are not mere “symbol(s)” of

interiority; they offer up material and alternative futures for bodies otherwise marginalized, or even branded incapacitated.

Carson McCullers, a southern, queer, chronically ill, and eventually disabled, late Modernist female writer, wrote five novels: *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951), and *Clock Without Hands* (1961). In three of these, freak show performers either appear or are referenced in relation to characters who display physical and cognitive differences from the so-called norm. Each novel is distinct in how it negotiates difference in relation to freakishness; it is this that calls for a better understanding of her repeated employment of the freak show trope in her work. In her two major novels, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*, as well as briefly in her lesser-discussed novel, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, freakishness is specifically associated with the adolescent fear of out-of-control growth that threatens to expose the girls' underlying queerness and to render them undesirable in the future. McCullers's formulation of girlish adolescence, where growth and maturation (physical and psychic) do not culminate in what is thought to be normative womanhood, but, rather, in their identification with freakishness, form the conditions for which I am calling "Freak temporality." Freak temporality operates against hetero-normative time, stalls futurity, and, for the girls in McCullers's work, is not easy to navigate.

The Member of the Wedding is the novel at the heart of this chapter; it offers the most sustained case of freak temporality in McCullers's work. But freakishness makes some other surprisingly similar kinds of appearances in another two of her novels. Following a reading of *The Member of the Wedding*, I will offer a brief examination of these scenes from other novels to bolster my claim that freak temporality exists as a persistent temporal frame throughout

McCullers's work. Looking at these moments together suggests a connection between the sense of time shared by these girls and their obsession—indeed, fear—of growing tall, and growing up.

McCullers's novels feature characters with a wide range of differences, and not all are as visible as those of the described freaks at the carnival. In McCullers's first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, the town's café patrons are labeled as "freaks" by the owner Biff Brannon: "I like freaks," he says one evening to his wife. "The enjoyment of a spectacle is something you have never known" (14). Biff is referring to the host of regulars that frequent the café in his small Georgia town: the deaf-mute John Singer, the androgynous adolescent Mick Kelly, and the wandering drunk Jake Blount who was "not a freak, although when you first saw him he gave you that impression. It was like something was deformed about him — but when you looked at him closely each part of him was normal and as it ought to be. Therefore if this difference was not in the body it was probably in the mind" (*THIALH* 18). Despite Biff's emphasis on "the spectacle" of the freaks that frequent his establishment, these people are not Freaks, not spectacles or performers like those making a living in the travelling House of Freaks. By describing Blount by what he is not -- he is "not a freak" -- freakishness is purposely evoked and complicates the relationship between freakishness and other kinds of less visible bodily difference. Indeed, Jake Blount operates machinery at some kind of show at "the fringes of the city limit" (*HIALH* 130), conjuring up the kinds of fairs and carnivals that might showcase freaks -- his job at the edge of town parallels his place at the margins of society. Despite his hospitality towards these social outsiders, Biff collapses all bodily difference into the category of the freakish, problematically fetishizing difference as a spectacle for his own entertainment.

In *The Member of the Wedding*, the presence of an actual freak show at the annual fair distinguishes those freaks from the rest of the figures in the novel whose non-normativity conjure up freakishness. Among the many similarities between these two novels, both include an adolescent girl protagonist who fears her future as her body grows and changes, worrying that she will grow as tall as the one of the freaks at the annual fair at the margins of town. In both novels, the girls grapple with their queer sexual and intimate longings. Queer adolescence is the central experience of these novels, and the girls have difficulties with their developing bodies and the kind of limited intimate and economic futures that seem already inscribed onto them. In these texts, adolescence is problematized by queer longings that (somewhat accidentally) confront and challenge normative notions of futurity. The story of the young tomboy Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding* is one of that summer when “she was grown so tall she was almost as big as a freak, and her shoulders were narrow, her legs too long” (462). The novel immediately claims freakishness as Frankie’s worst fear, as she identifies with the freaks because of her rapidly developing body and her emerging queerness, both of which mark her as decidedly different.

These novels together complicate an understanding of freakishness in McCullers’s work, calling for a reassessment of the ways freakishness has thus far been theorized. Freakishness serves not merely as a symbolic trope, but as an explicit link to the very real fears that accompany the adolescent and temporal experiences of the young girls of her novels. The figure of the freak is the central example of how McCullers’s characters perceive their futures, fearing that their sense of their own difference will manifest itself in uncontrollable growth. Time itself is therefore experienced with anxiety and dread, with the ultimate fear of never achieving “normal” adulthood, and instead becoming a freak.

Freak Studies and McCullers

The field of Freak Studies emerged in conversation with the many ways in which the once widely popular freak show reflected and responded to the reconfiguring of the body during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in America. Swift industrialization in the United States during this period changed the way that the body was understood in relation to developing technologies of production and labor. The standardization of modern life and mechanized labor “reinforce[ed]...[the] unmarked, normative...body as the dominant subject of democracy” (GT, *Freakery* 12). New kinds of industrial accidents as well as injuries from developing military technologies in the Civil War and even more so in World War I, maimed bodies in unprecedented numbers, while scientific discourse and medical practices including eugenic movements glorified sameness and bodily uniformity. Freak studies takes up the psychic, discursive, and material ways in which the freak emerges in culture.

Although Leslie Fiedler’s important book *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* was published as early as 1978, it wasn’t until freak studies was picked up as a sub-field to the burgeoning field of disability studies in the late eighties that it became more established. In 1988, disability theorist Robert Bogdan published *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, and was followed by Rosemary Garland-Thompson’s pair of key freak studies texts of 1996 – *Extraordinary Bodies* and the essay collection *Freakery*. For Garland-Thompson, the figure of the freak is a “touchstone of anxious identification or an assurance of [one’s] regularized normalcy (*Freakery* 11). The freak here has two possible and opposing

functions for the spectator: one of identification with the freak, or one of disassociation from the freak. Audiences of P.T. Barnum's 19th Century freak shows, for example, "challenged audiences not only to classify and explain what [the freaks] say, but to relate the performances to themselves, to American and individual collective identity" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 59). While on the one hand, Garland-Thompson seems to find value in the ways that the exhibits "charged their audiences to determine the precise parameters of human wholeness and the limits of free agency," she adds that freak shows "were to the masses what sciences were to the emerging elite: an opportunity to formulate the self in terms of what it was not" (*EB* 59). Freak Studies has seen its most productive output since Bogdan and Garland-Thompson's foundational texts established connections between disability studies and freak studies.

In 2005, *Disability Studies Quarterly* published a special double-issue on Freak Studies, in which Michael Chemer's introductory "Freak Studies Manifesto" claims outright that Freak Studies is a "fascinating sub-discipline" of Disability Studies. He defines "Freakery" as "the intentional performance of constructed abnormality as entertainment" (1), arguing for the potential of conceiving of freaks not merely as voiceless and victimized, but rather as active agents or even as artists "whose work shapes and is shaped by the same complex and dynamic social forces governing any aesthetic production" (5). Chemers argues that to consider freaks as cultural actors renders freak narratives potentially liberatory in nature, and that this consideration can be usefully applied to disability narratives as well. As is evident even by this brief gloss of freak studies texts, the field has grown alongside and entangled with disability studies for over three decades.

Part of the reason why Disability Studies has adopted the figure of the Freak is because of the way that disability studies has long argued for disability as a socially constructed category —

things like built environments and architectures, standardized ways of communication and learning, and the glorification of something called “normalcy” are just some of the ways that culture constructs disability as a way to describe those with bodily, cognitive, or behavioral anomalies. For this reason, Garland-Thompson has distinguished the Freak not as a “Freak of Nature,” but as a “Freak of Culture” (*Freakery* 9). Much of freak studies productively moves away from more straightforward narratives of stigmatization and exploitation, and suggests instead the possible liberatory power of the Freak, “the *intentional* performance” (Chemers, *DSQ* 1), the “successful attempts by disabled people (and other stigmatized individuals) *to gain control* of the process of stigmatization” (Chemers, *Staging Stigma* 19, italics mine). Recently, Freak and Disability Studies have turned to theories of performativity and the theatrical to think about the freak as “an active agent” and not merely as a voiceless victim. The emphasis in Freak Studies on the freak’s harnessing of difference by way of performance, is in part what Disability Studies scholars have found so compelling in the history of the American Freak Show.

Despite the way that Freak and Disability Studies are intricately connected, most scholarship on McCullers that is focused on her freakish figures largely neglects the material significance of freakishness in her work. Early critics tended to talk about bodily and cognitive difference in her novels as abstracted and symbolic. In 1960, Ihab Hassan first named the primary theme in McCullers’s work as the “transcendental idea of spiritual loneliness” made evident by bodily difference (GW, 312), what Louise Gossett called in 1965 “[t]he falling apart of community” (GW, 159), or what Gayatri Spivak described in 1979 as the difficulties that arise when “people cannot discover a common bond” (GW, 129). In her 1990 book *Understanding Carson McCullers*, definitive McCullers biographer and scholar, Virginia Spencer Carr, continued with this trend in her description of the role of the freak in McCullers’s fiction:

“[t]hroughout the author’s canon, freakishness is a symbol of a character’s sense of alienation, of his being trapped within a single identity without the possibility of a meaningful connection with anyone else” (38).²⁵ This long span of McCullers’ criticism relegates bodily difference to the realm of the symbolic, and collapses the wide range of difference in McCullers as symbolizing the same kind of isolated and lonely experience.

Many of McCullers’s characters across her novels do, in fact, share a sense of loneliness and isolation, in part due to their respective developing sense of queerness. The emergence of the field of queer theory in the 1990s has therefore enabled more nuanced readings of McCullers’s work. Queer theory developed in part as a response to gay and lesbian studies, which did not sufficiently account for the wider range of sexual identities and desires that queer theory became invested in. Indeed, McCullers’s characters that I will discuss in this chapter are complex examples of queer subjects, longing not just for same-sex others but for alternative kinds of intimate futures that exceed gay or lesbian identification. The concurrent flourishing of queer theory and freak studies in the 1990’s allowed for new considerations of the kinds of embodiment McCullers depicts throughout her novels.

As a prime example of this kind of scholarship, Rachel Adams’s 1999 essay “‘A Mixture of Delicious and Freak’: The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers,” is the first intervention of queer theory into McCullers’ criticism about freakishness, and represents a turning point in the subject. Adams critiques the abstracted way in which earlier criticism refers to the freaks and queers in McCullers’s work, and argues instead for the way these figures’ “discomfort is concretized in uneasy relationships to material things” (553). Her explicit recognition of the

²⁵ For an exhaustive record of critics who have read McCullers’s characters as universalized symbols of human alienation, see Rachel Adams’s footnote five on page 577 of “The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers” (1999).

connection between freakishness and queerness across McCullers's novels is the first time that queer theory is effectively put to work on McCullers. Adams's reading of *The Member of the Wedding*, is, for one, a crucial revision enabled by queer theory that amends earlier lesbian feminist readings of the novel. Where the young protagonist Frankie was previously interpreted as a confused tomboy or as a lesbian, Adams and queer critics after her convincingly refute these readings as too limited to describe Frankie's multiplicity of desires. She writes that McCullers's freaks are "figures of possibility whose queer transgressions of sexed, gendered, and racial boundaries enable a productive reconsideration of normative social relations (553)." While this claim to empower the freakish is suggestive, heralding the freak's power to transgress oppressive boundaries, she also writes that the freakish body serves to "provide *the visible evidence* of queer desires that cannot be domesticated" (553, italics mine). Here, freakishness is treated as the outward and "visible evidence" of inner turmoil, moving the focus away from the material bodies of the freaks and towards what they represent. While Adams is right that queerness and freakishness are in a complex relationship to one another in *Member*, freaks serve as more than merely the "visible evidence" of queerness. Adams' reading of this relationship might then be usefully extended by more closely considering the specificity of the kinds of freakish bodies that appear across McCullers's novels.

Following Adams, McCullers scholarship in the twenty-first century has been almost exclusively interested in the figure of the Freak. Sarah Gleeson-White's 2003 book *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers* refutes long-standing scholarship that simply allegorizes bodies of difference by critiquing the history of McCullers's freaks being read as "mere symbols of existential angst" (3). Gleeson-White argues instead that the strong presence of freaks and so-called outcasts in McCullers's fiction does not exclusively

function “as a bleak and violent response to the modern world” (1). She suggests that the many freaks that populate the pages of McCullers’s novels should be viewed as particularly transgressive figures that, borrowing from Bakhtin, risk the grotesque “as [an] ‘unfinished metamorphosis’” (*Rabelais* 24). Gleeson-White convincingly argues that McCullers’s freaks “in metamorphosis” present alternative gender and sexual identities. She claims that McCullers’s “strange bodies” are actually emblematic of the body and specifically of gender as perpetually “unfinished” challenges to normalcy (6), a “powerful, unsettling threat to stable identity” (34). Gleeson-White claims that McCullers’s characters are often in a state of bodily flux, and that these ongoing transformations are suggestive of fluid and changeable gender identifications.

While works by Adams and Gleeson-White focus their attention on the relationship between freakishness and queerness, Nancy Bombaci’s 2009 book *Freaks in Late Modernist American Culture* is more interested in the way in which freakishness counters high modernist aesthetics and serves as an important trope that can be identified across cultural texts from the period. She calls the freak show in McCullers a “heterotopia” in which “diverse and conflicting forms and values” come into play in a process of “reordering conventional hierarchies” (6). Where Garland-Thompson claimed that the spectator either uneasily identifies, or, conversely, is assured a certain distance from the freak by reclaiming normalcy in relation to dramatic difference, Bombaci goes so far as to suggest that the spectacle of the freak evokes identification with and even acceptance of otherness.

Somewhat optimistically, Bombaci describes the “fetishization” of the freak as based on “a desire to know and experience the subjectivity of marginalized others,” symbolic in modernism of the “acceptance of *disteleology, anarchy, and degeneration*” as opposed to the high modernist “nostalgia for order, progress, and grand narratives” (1, emphasis mine).

Bombaci suggests a way in which McCullers's narratives refuse order and progress to reveal instead in "disteleology" -- the negation of design, purpose, or final cause (*OED*). In McCullers, this disteleology is specifically made evident in the erosion of traditionally imagined futures and objectives. Therefore, while Bombaci's book makes no mention of queer theory, it serves as an important link to queer readings of McCullers that preceded it. Her emphasis on the relationship between freakishness, disteleology, and degeneration evoke a somewhat contemporary debate in the field of queer theory that wrestles with how queerness challenges hetero-normative imaginings of the Future, a debate centered around the notion of what has come to be called "queer time."

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a torrent of queer scholarship concentrated on the question of time. In 2007, *GLQ* published a special issue titled *Queer Temporality* as a response to this outpouring of scholarship on the subject, which collectively posited that time itself might be experienced differently through an inhabitation of queer life. In the introduction to the issue, guest editor Elizabeth Freeman writes that the queering of time is an effort to recognize the ways in which "temporality is a mode of implantation through which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts" (Freeman, *GLQ* 160). By 2007, Freeman already has a rich body of work to draw from wherein queer theorists expose the many and diverse institutional forces that are at work on the body by way of time -- "schedules, calendars, time zones, even wristwatches...as forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege" (160)²⁶. The temporal politics of sexuality became especially relevant to the field of queer theory, evidenced by the way in which marginalized sexual identities have

²⁶ In her later book of 2010 titled *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Freeman will call this "chrononormativity," a concept drawn from Dana Luciano's "chronobioplotics," wherein people are "bound to one another...through particular orchestrations of time" (3).

been viewed as “backwards” or even as having no history²⁷. Judith Halberstam has defined “queer time” in part as “a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (*In a Queer Time and Place*, 4). Theories of queer time have sought to define and enable alternatives to these temporal frames by privileging instead those cultural artifacts, films, texts, and histories that have otherwise been cast as undesirable, unfortunate, or impossible. Among the fundamental objectives of this strand of queer theory is to trouble the supposed inherent value of the family, reproduction, and futurity itself – values that McCullers’s work confronts through the trope of freakishness.

The concurrent flourishing of queer theory, disability, and freak studies continues to allow for new considerations of the kinds of embodiment McCullers depicts in her novels. One of the most important intersections of these fields is what Robert McRuer has termed “crip theory.” Here, at the junction of queer and disability studies, McRuer contests the compulsion towards able-bodied and heterosexual identity, which is always “bound to fail.” Crip theory offers a way to “continuously invoke...the inadequate resolutions that compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness offer us” (31). In McCuller’s work, it is the girls’ adolescent, queer sense of time that is complicated and further transformed when it is also crippled by taking into account their embodied experiences of disability or freakishness.

²⁷ See Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Jose Munoz’s *Cruising Utopia* (2009), Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward* (2009), Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds* (2010).

Freak Temporality

In what has been considered McCullers's best novel, *The Member of the Wedding* follows one dreadful summer in the life of Frankie Addams, a twelve year-old tomboyish girl entrenched in the tumult of adolescence in her poor, southern Georgia town. The novel is, in part, McCullers's meditation on adolescence by way of her portrayal of a young girl who cannot quell the emotional and physical pain that results from her inability to conform to social norms. The backdrop of the novel is the impending wedding of Frankie's brother, Jarvis, to his bride-to-be, Janice, which only finally, and, for Frankie, traumatically, occurs over a brief span of five pages at the book's conclusion. The wedding itself is a kind of peripheral focus of the novel; although readers never experience the event firsthand, it looms in Frankie's thoughts right from the start – she expects to be married as the third member of her brother's marriage. Ultimately, she is forced to the realization that her imagined future as a member of the wedding is unattainable. With the maternal guidance of the half-blind, black housekeeper, Berenice, and her only friend, her sickly cousin John Henry, Frankie's adolescent experience does not resemble that of any of the other girls', all of whom have rejected Frankie from their social circles.

As Rachel Adams has noted of the novel, the word "queer" appears an "improbable" number of times. Often in place of the inexplicable, some "queer thing she could not name" (*MOW* 520), queerness stands in for those things that, in the confusion of youth, Frankie does not yet fully understand. But as Adams and other critics have argued, McCullers makes use of the multiple valences of the word "queer," redeploing its already pejorative use against homosexuals in the mid-twentieth century, while also recognizing the ways in which it could be read as an innocuous description of oddness or inexplicability. Critics have generally disagreed

about whether the novel is an embrace of Southern femininity (Westling), a lesbian coming-of-age tale (Spivak, Kenshaft, Free), or a queer-affirmative novel in its “wide array of erotic groupings” for which “lesbian” is insufficient (Adams 562). But, as Elizabeth Freeman has powerfully suggested, the queerest thing about *The Member of the Wedding* is not Frankie’s subtle desire for Berenice, or for her cousin John Henry, or for the soldier who tries to entice her to his room – it is Frankie’s radically queer desire to become a member of her brother’s wedding. This projected future that she imagines for herself is regularly disrupted throughout the novel by her fear that she is, or will grow up to be, freakish. In Frankie’s mind, freaks have no future, especially not futures in which intimacy or marriage have any place.

The event that bookends *The Member of the Wedding* is the annual autumn visit of the Chattahoochee Exposition, a fair with “the Ferris Wheel, the Flying Jinney, The Palace of Mirrors – and there, too, was the House of Freaks” (476). The novel opens with Frankie’s recollection of last October’s visit to the Freak Pavilion, the figures that “all the year she had remembered...until this day” (477). This is the day she has learned of her brother’s wedding, and her memory of the Freaks is at the forefront of her mind, revealing an immediate link for Frankie between her experience at the freak show and that of imagining her brother’s wedding. Her description of the entertainment acts breaks the format of the text itself, is indented, and is presented as a list:

The Giant

The Fat Lady

The Midget

The Wild Nigger

The Pin Head

The Alligator Boy

The Half-Man Half-Woman (476).

This textual interruption is Frankie's attempt to organize her experience of the Freaks. The list is the only such break in the novel, and emphasizes the way in which she understands the freaks as a list of acts or performances, linking them to one another in order to maintain their difference from herself, for "she belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world" (*MOW* 461). Frankie lumps the freaks together in order to distinguish them from what she hopes to be her own relative ordinariness.

Of all the freaks at the fair, it is the Half-Man Half-Woman who is described in the most detail and who prompts Frankie's universalized fear of all Freaks. The figure is "Divided completely in half," dressed in leopard skin with a dark beard on one side, and in a bra and make-up on the other. Half primitive, animalistic man and half cultivated, civilized woman, the Half-Man Half-Woman embodies the dueling characteristics that make up masculinity and femininity in Frankie herself. She oscillates throughout the novel from being rough, tough, and dirty, to sweet, mannered, and even doll-like. But none of these postures seem truly to suit her. Frankie says of this figure, "Both eyes were strange," signaling that neither the male nor the female gaze feels familiar or comfortable to her. Her adolescence is marked by this kind of discomfort with her own expression of gender amidst pressures to conform to the standards of femininity.

It is not just the eyes of the half-man half-woman, but all of the freaks' eyes that captivate Frankie at the fair: "She was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at

her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you. She was afraid of their long Freak eyes” (476). Frankie fears identification with the Freaks, afraid that through their gaze, she will recognize the “secret way” they try to “connect their eyes with hers.” It is her fear of being identified as one of them in this exchange of gazes that troubles her “all the year [long].” Her naming of their “long eyes” describes stretched or elongated eyes, and also evokes an expression of sadness or unhappiness that Frankie perceives in her fear of identification with them. These eyes are reminiscent of the “strange eyes” of the Half-Man Half-Woman, whose gaze makes Frankie uncomfortable because it elicits in her an unwelcome recognition of her own queerness. “Strange,” “long” eyes therefore characterize the freakish as threatening and induce in Frankie the fear of being known by them, of receiving their horrible and defiant claim: “we know you.” To be known by the Freak is to belong among them, and for Frankie, this fate is the worst imaginable.

The description of the eyes as “long” has a provocative resonance in relation to Frankie’s attempted rejection of queerness. For Frankie, freakishness is the real and embodied manifestation of queerness, and she wants nothing to do with them. The association between being “long” and being queer is something Elizabeth Freeman has also identified in her essay on “Queer Belonging.” She writes that “Longing to belong, *being long*: these things encompass...the desire to...have something queer exceed its own time, even to imagine that excess as queer in ways that getting married or having children might not be (299). Queer belonging, for Freeman, exceeds one’s mortal and finite commitment to the future, *i.e.* marriage and children. This kind of belonging is precisely what Frankie distastefully associates with belonging with the freaks (“I doubt if they ever get married, those freaks”). In the description of Frankie, she “belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world;” and was “an

unjoined person who hung around in doorways” (461)²⁸. Her yearning to become the third “member” of her brother’s marriage is her mistaken imagining of this arrangement as a normal alternative to a freakish future. In her supposed rejection of queerness and freakishness, of the gaze from the “long” freak eyes, Frankie embraces the impossibility of belonging in a marriage in which she has no place. Freeman also writes that being-long is “to endure in corporeal form over time,” and long to be bigger...spatially, but also temporally, to ‘hold out’ a hand across time.” This kind of belonging, signaled by Frankie’s fear of the freak’s long eyes, is what Frankie fears most: of exceeding oneself, and especially of being “bigger” in space.

Frankie spends a great deal of time looking into mirrors, worrying that her rapidly growing body will propel her into a life of freakdom:

It was the summer of fear...and there was one fear that could be figured in arithmetic with paper and a pencil at the table. This August she was twelve and five-sixths years old. She was five feet and three quarter inches tall, and she wore a number seven shoe. In the past year she had grown four inches, or at least that was what she judged...According to mathematics and unless she could somehow stop herself, she would grow to be over nine feet tall. And what would be a lady who is over nine feet tall? She would be a Freak.

(*MOW* 478)

She is genuinely afraid of the unfamiliar transformations her body has begun to make. While she repeatedly says of her “queer feelings” that she doesn’t know “what caused this fear, but she was

²⁸ Jack Halberstam has said of McCullers’s description here that it is Frankie’s “lack of connection,” her “awkward failure to fit, that makes up Frankie’s identity” (*Female Masculinity* 190).

afraid,” her fear here of growing too tall is “the one fear that could be figured in arithmetic.” Her attempts to mathematically figure her growth rate make evident her belief that her future is somehow calculable and predetermined. While her queer desires seem inexplicable to her, sometimes creating actual cessations and gaps in her narrative, this is one fear she can measure. Her rapidly developing body is the material site of her fear of the future.

In her anxiety after the October visit to the freak show, Frankie remarks, “I doubt if they ever get married or go to a wedding... Those Freaks,” and dares to ask Berenice, “Do I give you the creeps? Am I going to grow up to be a Freak?” (466) Wanting to go anywhere but up, Frankie seems to feel that she has something already in common with the Freaks that gives Berenice “the creeps.” If she grows too tall, she too will be a Freak, and according to Frankie, Freaks aren’t a part of weddings. By setting up freakishness in opposition to marriage, McCullers shows that Frankie’s fixation on the wedding is simultaneously her attempted rejection of freakishness and difference. And yet, Frankie’s dreams of a wedding still do not align with tradition or normalcy, for despite her fear that she might become freakish (or queer) when she grows up, she unknowingly sets her sights on the queerest of impossible prospects -- becoming the third member of her brother and Janice’s marriage.

In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, adolescent girl and protagonist Mick Kelly also fears that her rapid height gain will result in freakishness. The novel follows tomboyish Mick in her poor rural town as she cares for her younger brothers, goes through puberty, befriends the stranger and “deaf-mute” John Singer, and eventually is forced to abandon her dreams of becoming a musician in order to take a job at the local department store to help with the family’s dire financial situation. Like Frankie, Mick fears she is different, and worries that her rapidly developing body is evidence of her inner desires, which she fears are anomalous and perverse.

In one scene at the local town café, owner Biff Brannon asks her:

‘How old are you now, Mick - thirteen?’

‘Going on fourteen.’

She knew what he was thinking. It used to worry her all the time. Five feet six inches tall and a hundred and three pounds, and she was only thirteen...

‘I grew three and a fourth inches just in the last year,’ she said.

‘Once I saw a lady at the fair who was eight and a half feet tall. But you probably won’t grow that big.’ (*HIALH* 95)

This passage, though but a moment’s exchange between Mick and Biff, bears a striking resemblance to the more prominent freak show trope that appears repeatedly in *The Member of the Wedding*, which McCullers would publish six years later. Here, Mick keeps diligent tabs on her growth, down to the quarter of an inch, and it “worry[s] her all the time.” Like Frankie’s calculated but faulty logic that projected her eventual height at over nine feet tall, Mick too has carefully monitored her height and weight, worried that her growth spurt of “three and a fourth inches *just in the last year*” will be maintained in the years to come. Biff’s reference to the lady at the fair who was eight and a half feet tall does nothing to quell Mick’s anxiety; indeed he only partially attempts to ease her fears: “But you *probably* won’t grow that big,” he says.

In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, it’s not the girl who references the freakish -- it’s Biff -- whose obsession with the “spectacle” of whom he calls “freaks” seems to lure a steady flow of outsider-regulars into his café. While Biff’s citing of the “lady at the fair” intentionally provokes Mick’s fears of her growing body, he is also oddly fixated on the subject in another moment of

the novel: “Mick had grown so much in the past year that soon she would be taller than he was. She was dressed in the red sweater and blue pleated skirt she had worn every day since school started...She was at the age when she looked as much like an overgrown boy as a girl” (113). Here, Biff echoes Mick’s anxiety over her growth spurt last year, noting that soon she would be “taller than he was.” In his obsessive surveillance of Mick (the sweater and skirt that “she had worn every day”), he perceives her as both girlish and boyish, a mixture of qualities that Biff seems to associate with adolescence. Like Frankie, tomboyish Mick is not described as becoming more woman-like as she matures. Instead, the way that Biff describes her vaguely recalls another ambivalently-gendered figure, the half-man half-woman that so frightened Frankie in *Member*.

While in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, it is Biff who links Mick’s growth with freakishness and her gender ambiguity, both *Heart* and *The Member of the Wedding* explicitly work to expose the adolescent fear of growing as tall as the “lady at the fair.” In *Heart*, it is specifically Biff’s acknowledgment of Mick’s growth that spurs his subsequent associations between her, freakishness, and gender ambiguity. In *Member*, it is Frankie’s experience at the House of Freaks – the Giant, the Half-Man Half-Woman – that incites her fear of growing tall, and growing up.

The trope of the tall woman is repeated yet once more in McCullers’s fiction, appearing in the short novel *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951). This novel tells the story of another café owner in a small southern town, Miss Amelia Evans, who is confronted one day by a man who claims he is her distant Cousin Lyman, a “hunchback” who, in sharp contrast to Miss Amelia, is “scarcely over four feet tall” (417). Miss Amelia is described by way of the townspeople’s perception of her; they “remembered that Miss Amelia had been born dark and somewhat queer of face, raised motherless by her father who was a solitary man, that early in youth she had

grown to be six feet two inches tall which in itself is not natural for a woman, and that her ways and habits of life were too peculiar ever to reason about" (McCullers, *Ballad of the Sad Café* 407). Miss Amelia is said to have grown to be six feet two inches "early in youth," fulfilling the greatest fears of the girl protagonists of the earlier novels. Her growth is described as "not natural for a woman," indicating that growth itself is imbued with gendered judgments about what womanhood is naturally supposed to look like. Miss Amelia is repeatedly described as awkward and gawky, descriptions that recall the somewhat unwieldy body of adolescence: "Sometimes [Lyman] followed in Miss Amelia's footsteps -- but these days it was only in order to imitate her awkward long-legged walk; he crossed his eyes and aped her gestures in a way that made her appear to be a freak" (*TBOTSC* 449). In these two passages, Miss Amelia is described both as unnaturally tall and as freakish. McCullers again explicitly connects freakishness to growth and to womanhood, linking the girls' fears of growing into a freak with Miss Amelia's full realization of this fear.

These excerpts from McCullers's novels help to illustrate what I am calling "freak temporality"—a temporal structure attentive to the embodied experience of adolescence, wherein development and maturation do not pave the way to normal adulthood but to identification with the Freak. In McCullers's work, this temporality is linked explicitly to the girls' subtle sense of their own developing queerness. Freak temporality operates against heteronormative time, threatening to undo the dominant cultural imaginings of futurity. It reveals in McCullers's work a robust example of what Alison Kafer has called "crip time" (25), a temporality that "requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies" (Kafer, 27). Freakishness operates in a material register by altering the girls' perceptions

of the passing of time in adolescence. It emphasizes the ways in which their bodies and psyches experience time with dread and anxiety. It exposes one way in which an adolescent temporality might be experienced and felt in ways that disability studies helps us to understand. It asks that we consider the ways in which developmental narratives towards able-bodied and heterosexual adulthood are often painfully impressed upon, and oppressive to , young people. Freak temporality disables time, crippling it, occasioning perhaps a more inclusive temporal structure for the ways in which differently-abled bodies experience and live time in the world.

Freak temporality is most clearly illustrated in McCullers by the trope of the tall woman, that possibility of uncontrollable growth that she represents, and the damage that becoming freakishly tall threatens can inflict on the young girls' fantasies of having a normal future. While freak temporality might seem promising in its subversion of teleological, straight-time towards "normal" adulthood, it is a haunting menace for the girls in McCullers's work, who are unable to imagine their lives outside of the cultural expectations imposed on them in the American South in the early part of the twentieth century.

In an influential 2009 article, "Syntax: Replotting the Developmental Narrative in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*," Nicole Seymour argues against existing and dominant interpretations of McCullers's novel which maintain that it is a progression narrative towards adulthood. She claims instead that Frankie never shakes her fears of her future body, nor does she achieve womanhood, or even successfully transition into adolescence. Instead, she writes, the novel "queers developmentalism" through narrative design and techniques. For example, Frankie suffers from severe difficulty with narrating past events, producing narrative gaps that disrupt narrative cohesion and the reader's ability to follow Frankie's line of thought. Seymour's analysis of Frankie's narrative effectively shows the ways in which McCullers's work

functions to disrupt time by straying from linear descriptions of maturation from adolescence to womanhood.

For Frankie, narrative difficulties nearly always accompany her efforts to describe her experience of the engaged couple. After every mention or thought of the upcoming wedding, she has difficulty describing her feelings. For example, she says, "It is so very queer. The way it all just happened. I have never been so puzzled" (462). Later, upon seeing the couple: "She stood in the doorway, coming from the hall, and the first sight of her brother and the bride had shocked her heart. Together they made in her this feeling she could not name" (483). Upon meeting the glance of an "old colored man" driving a wagon, she has the fleeting wish to tell him about her feelings towards the upcoming wedding but thinks to herself that "It was a feeling impossible to explain in words" (507). In each of these examples, Frankie tries to describe the feeling that the couple gives her, but she is unable to. Her radically queer desire to become a member of her brother's wedding cannot be expressed in any way that is familiar or available to her, and she is left with no way to articulate her desires, nor to fully understand them herself. These difficulties are not only ones of self-expression, they also create temporal lags in the narrative.

These kinds of narrative disruptions depict Frankie as an example of what Seymour calls a "non-futurist adolescent," whose difficulties narrating her emotions, longings, and past are an example of the text itself resisting so-called "natural" bodily processes, including adolescent development. She writes:

In short, while it is impossible to stop a pubescent female body from undergoing certain somatic processes...*Member* shows us that it *is* possible to refuse to employ those transformations as the building blocks of a coherent narrative, one leading to the end of

heterosexual, reproductive white womanhood. And in refusing us these cues to forward movement, McCullers present[s] a female whose body does not have to “mean” womanhood, and an adolescent whose body does not have to “mean” anything, even in the face of developmentalist standards. (301)

Seymour argues that the novel radically rejects female development as a coherent narrative of forward progress. Frankie’s inability to articulate her queer feelings creates gaps in the narrative that reflect the significant temporal lag of her experience of adolescence. Working against the ways in which the adolescent female body is often interpreted as containing the “building blocks” of a coherent narrative, McCullers’s girls are confused and frightened by the ways that their bodies and longings do not fit into this trajectory. They are obsessed with what they perceive as “unstoppable” bodily processes like growing too tall, fearful that their freakish bodies will expose them as different.

Seymour makes no mention of queer temporality in her essay, but it has, for some time, celebrated this kind of childhood non-futurism, delayed growth, and developmental “disteleology”²⁹. In *The Queer Child, or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009), Kathryn Bond Stockton specifically takes up growth in relation to the figure of the gay child. She writes of “children’s delay”: “their supposed gradual growth, their suggested slow unfolding, which, unhelpfully, has been relentlessly figured as vertical movement upward (hence: “growing up”) towards full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childlessness” (3). She offers a different kind of directionality that appears as a favorable, or at least a more appropriate

²⁹ I’m thinking specifically here of Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2003) and Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), and in disability studies, of Alison Kafer’s *Feminist Queer Crip* (2013).

alternative, what she calls “notions of the horizontal - what spreads sideways - or sideways and backwards - more than a simple thrust toward height and forward time” (3). Stockton’s queering of time shifts the vertical trajectory of time on its side, arguing that in childhood, time does not function as a kind of forward and upward progress, but that instead it is more unruly, unfolding, and horizontally dispersive. Stockton’s theory of “growing sideways” informs freak temporality; both models reject verticality and argue for a distinct kind of temporal experience for gay (or queer) children. But freak temporality in McCullers is also slightly different, best evidenced by her recurrent use of the word “slant” in *The Member of the Wedding*. While uses of the word “slant” do not appear directly in passages about freakishness, it emphasizes the experience of freak temporality as disorienting and even melancholic, distinguishing freak temporality from previous theories of queer time.

In *Member*, “slant,” describes crucial moments where Frankie notes the passing of time and her skewed perception of space in *The Member of the Wedding*. In one key instance of Frankie’s slanted vision, “she was too big to sleep with her father anymore. She had to sleep in her upstairs room alone. She began to have a grudge against her father and they looked at each other in a slant-eyed way. She did not like to stay at home” (481). If Frankie’s fear of growing tall (into a freak) threatens her hopes for a future of marriage and intimacy, it also effectively ends her final childhood form of intimacy with her father. Suddenly, that dreadful summer, she grows too “big” in the literal sense but also matures psychologically; sleeping with her father is no longer possible or appropriate. Her being cast out of her father’s bed creates a new schism between them. The strangeness of adolescence is therefore emphasized in this scene – growing (up) means that you are further from childhood as you grow towards adulthood — and yet, instead of becoming closer to her father, it creates even more distance between them. Frankie’s

expression exudes skepticism of her relationship with her father and a new hostility towards him. As a result of her aversion to the effects of her growing up, she squints, changing and revising the way she sees the world.

Other instances where the word “slant” is used in the text, describe the way the sun casts light across the ground as a marker of time. For Frankie, this always indicates the time of day, and the welcomed nearness of night: “The cards on the table were greasy and the late sun *slanted* across the yard” (473), “She opened her eyes, and it was night. The lavender sky had at last grown dark and there was *slanted starlight and twisted shade*. Her heart had divided like two wings and she had never seen a night so beautiful” (501), and “The long gold sun *slanted* down on them” (539). Each of these examples describe the late afternoon sun or the early evening light of the stars, and are Frankie’s marker of the passing of time on a grand, universal, planetary scale. Whereas previous examples of Frankie’s rejection of linearity, verticality, and straightness circulate around her own body and individual desires, these descriptions are more ambitious in their suggestion of the parallels between the individual rejection of developmental, teleological Time and a similar rejection manifested in the greater universe. Frankie’s elongated, slightly sideways view of the world, her slow and staggered way of narrating her experience, her contestation and fear of growth itself are also demonstrated in the way she experiences the environment around her.

In two final and striking examples, the “slant” is most explicitly connected to time. In the first instance, “The clock in the tower of the First Baptist Church changed twelve, the mill whistle wailed. There was a drowsing quietness about the street, and even the very cars, parked slantwise with their noses towards the center aisle of grass, were like exhausted cars that have all gone to sleep” (518). In this somewhat odd description of the street at noon, the atmosphere

during the changing of the clock is one of “drowsing quietness,” where even the slantwise-parked cars appear exhausted. Time’s passing seems to have lulled the town to sleep. In the second example, “She realized the reason for her uneasiness and knew that the ticking of the clock had stopped...There slanted across her mind twisted remembrances” (584). Here, time seems to stop, and immediately “slant[ing] across her mind” are feelings of uneasiness. In the first example of the chiming clock, time serves to drowse or mollify, whereas when Frankie can no longer hear the ticking of the clock, she becomes troubled by “twisted remembrances.” These examples reveal Frankie’s complicated relationship to time itself. When the ticking of the clock can no longer be heard, Frankie does not celebrate or rejoice in her freedom from time – she is uneasy, and recalls uncomfortable memories.

If the passing of time signals for Frankie her rapid growth and evolution into a freak, time experienced at a slant might be one method of perception that she adopts in order to stall or shift not just her own upwards growth but also the verticality of the world at large. Her slanted experience of time also indicates the way she perceives her own queerness as divergent. Interestingly, Sara Ahmed has also described the spatial and temporal “failed” orientation of queerness as slanted: “The queer couple in straight space hence look as if they are ‘slanting’ or are oblique. The queer bodies...are out of line” (Ahmed 91-2). Ahmed’s emphasis on embodied orientation resonates with Frankie’s own obsession with how her body figures in space, *e.g.* when she can no longer fit in her father’s bed, or fears she will be too tall to get married. Frankie’s slanted vision towards her father is a response to her fear of freakish growth and the kinds of straight futures inscribed onto her body as it develops. But her slanted perspective is also echoed on a grander scale -- in the sunset’s shadows cast, or in her “twisted remembrances” which “slant across her mind” when she hears the clock’s ticking stop. In contrast to Bond

Stockton's horizontal description of childhood time, "slanted" time is merely off kilter or skewed, and represents a troubled experience of time for Frankie. Slanted time in *The Member of the Wedding* is another example of, or perhaps a result of freak temporality, that transpires across McCullers's work. Freak temporality is more than just a slanted experience of the world, it is an embodied experience of time that is shaped by the fear of identification with the freak, and the fear of becoming one. The figure of the freak, repeated again and again in McCullers's work, is always entangled with the character's experience of time and endangers normative expectations of the future.

Conclusion

Across McCullers's body of work, the recurrent figure of the freak bears explicit relation to female adolescent temporality. Where past readings of McCullers's work have repeatedly read the freak as a symbol of interiority, I have argued instead that the freakish body is more than representative – it is, for the girls especially, the real material result of difference. For the twelve and thirteen year-old girls, normal futures of marriage and child-bearing is much more appealing than embracing their developing sense of queerness, or even freakishness, despite the fact that the marriage Frankie desires is already radically impossible. While McCullers's characters experience freak temporality with a kind of dread, they also remind us of adolescent difficulties with embracing alternative kinds bodies and futures. Freak temporality shapes the experience of McCullers's central characters, instilling in them trepidation and anxiety about their future prospects of community, belonging, and intimacy. Their repeated fear of growing into a freak is

the defining example of freak temporality in McCullers's work, and my examination of its surprising recurrence is a new, and I think crucial addition to McCullers's scholarship.

But this chapter has also attempted to rethink queer temporality as it is experienced in and through non-normative bodies. While freak temporality clearly draws its theoretical foundation from theories of queer time, it also works to recognize and restore the feelings of disorientation, discomfort, and uneasiness to the adolescent experience of queerness, particularly in stifling environments like those represented in McCullers's work. Enabled by queer theories of time as non-linear, multi-directional, even working backwards in queer life, freak temporality draws out the fears and anxieties that often accompany these radical re-imaginings, by girls, of the future. Extending theories of queer time by way of freak and disability studies also maintains the embodied experience of difference as a key distinction of freak temporality. Recent disability studies scholarship has started to ask how disabled or crip time might better account for not only queers, but also for disabled lives and bodies. As Kafer writes, “[r]ather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (27). Freak temporality reclaims the many non-normative bodies of McCullers' work as not merely representative or metaphorical. Instead, the female adolescent body maintains its pervasive potential to dismantle standardized temporal structures, to refuse not necessarily the future itself, but any compulsory normative course headed in its direction.

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CHAPTER THREE

Of 'Earth-Flesh;' Djuna Barnes and the Vegetative Body

“I was doing well enough until you came along and kicked my stone over, and out I came, all moss and eyes.”

– Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

Introduction

Djuna Barnes' 1936 novel *Nightwood* is a quintessentially Modernist text and a canonical lesbian novel³⁰. It is because of its notoriety as both that the novel has garnered fairly consistent attention from literary critics since its publication, particularly from within feminist and queer scholarship. In recent years, the novel has received a new critical attention for the many nonhuman subjects that populate its pages, as animal studies scholars in particular have productively and abundantly theorized the place of the animal within *Nightwood* and across Barnes' other work.

³⁰ For discussions of Barnes' personal relationships, see Andrew Field, *Djuna: The Formidable Miss Barnes* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1985), Phillip Herring, *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Viking, 1995), and Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, vol. 1, *The Women of 1928* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). For a discussion of how Barnes' relationship to lesbianism has been read in conflicting ways in criticism, see for example Carolyn Allen, "Writing toward *Nightwood*: Djuna Barnes' Seduction Stories" in Brow, *Silence and Power*.

In fact, Barnes' entire oeuvre teems with animal life. She consistently explores the relationship between the human and the animal, and challenges any strict boundaries that attempt to maintain distinction between the two. In *Nightwood*, nearly every character is described with animal-like features, and key scenes take place at the circus or in the company of dogs. Barnes' short stories feature titles such as "The Rabbit," "No-Man's-Mare," and "A Night Among the Horses," to name only a few examples, and her poetry, as well the woodcuts that accompany the poems, abound with animal imagery. Critics have been right to claim that favorable feelings towards animal life are a crucial, if not central, theme of her work. To bolster this claim, scholarship often points to a revealing 1935 letter to her agent Emily Holmes, in which Barnes writes that before settling on *Nightwood* for a title, she had considered instead *Night Beast*, as she "regretted the now debased meaning put on that nice word beast" (quoted in Kime Scott, 41). The field of animal studies has therefore been one of the most generative frameworks in recent literary criticism of Barnes' work, and has done much to place Barnes in a tradition of writers engaged with the nonhuman world-building. Criticism in this vein has demonstrated the myriad ways in which Barnes' work decenters the human as the privileged site of meaning, knowledge, and experience.

And yet, while animal studies scholarship has contributed enormously to the study of Barnes, the many insights it has offered have neglected the ways in which the human, throughout Barnes' work, is also linked to other kinds of nonhuman life – namely the vegetative and the mycological.³¹ Though Barnes' work has been an important set of texts for animal studies

³¹ Though of different kingdoms, those of Plant and Fungi, the various organisms in this chapter often evoke similar themes. Though Barnes' use of both plant and fungal imagery in her work sometimes seem to operate as binaries of life and death, both signal abundance and growth, albeit in different forms. It's hard to know whether Barnes knew of the distinction between the plant and the fungus (it remains a surprisingly little known fact even today that fungi are not in

scholars, the inattention to other forms of life reveals the way in which nonhuman readings of Barnes are thus far incomplete. Just as frequently, and often within the very same passages as the descriptions of the bestial, are plush and opulent accounts of plant and fungal life. *Nightwood*'s Robin Vote exhales the "odor of fungi," and Doctor Matthew O'Conner is described as "all moss and eyes." Barnes' bodies are fungal and vegetative,³² further complicating the concept of weird embodiment that I have been theorizing throughout this project.

The study of plant and fungal life throughout Barnes' work does more than complicate existing animal-driven nonhuman scholarship on the author. It also continues to develop the relationship between the weird and the nonhuman. Plants and fungi in *Nightwood*, as well as in Barnes' short stories, poetry, and the woodcuts that accompanied the poems, exhibit Barnes' unique ecological imagination. Though not typically characterized as a writer with ecological concerns, her work demonstrates a profound attunement to human entanglements with plant-life. Vegetal and fungal bodies operate outside the finite temporality of human life. Their proliferation and boundlessness offer new modes of thinking about the weirdness of embodied life. Barnes' vegetative body reveals that one need not look up to the cosmos to imagine the weird, but down to the earth.

the plant kingdom), and there are examples where the distinction between them did not seem important to Barnes. I will preserve the distinction throughout this chapter between plant and fungal life, as they sometimes signal different forms of embodiment, the complexities of which are worth maintaining through this distinction.

³² Fungi are closer in relation to organisms in the Animal Kingdom. Fungal bodies, like those of animals, digest food by absorbing broken down, dissolved molecules, typically by the secretion of digestive enzymes.

Of Earth Flesh

Nightwood tells the story of the star-crossed, lesbian lovers, Robin Vote and Nora Flood, whose paths cross and then dramatically diverge in the second half of the book. Each of the four chapters introduces a main character living in the city of Paris: the Baron Felix Volkbein, the pseudo-psychiatrist Doctor Matthew O'Connor, the mysterious Robin Vote, and her lover Nora Flood. These misfits make up the odd and unhappy cast of expatriates of *Nightwood*, a novel centered around Robin's seductive yet destructive relationships. Her marriage to Felix results in her bearing him a son; though Robin leaves both with no explanation early in the novel. Most notable in the novel is Robin's ruining of Nora, who, in a lengthy and difficult section of the book, seeks the help of Doctor O'Connor after Robin disappears and leaves her for another woman. The novel traces the paths of emotional rehabilitation of those that Robin leaves in ruins, but leaves Robin's own intentions and feelings relatively shrouded in mystery. The book concludes with one of the most famous scenes of literature where Nora finds Robin deep in the woods, down on all fours with a dog, performing what has been read by various critics as a spiritual ritual, a bestial past, or an act of sex.

We meet Robin in a lengthy and much-quoted passage which spans about four pages and which presents a beautiful, though complex description of her. These pages are central to many readings of *Nightwood*, and I will therefore spend considerable time with them. The reader is introduced to Robin Vote in a hospital scene, where she is

The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh...Like a painting by the douanier Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room (in the apprehension of which the walls have made their escape), thrown in

among the carnivores flowers as their ration; the set, the property of an unseen dompteur, half lord, half promoter, over which one expects to hear the strains of an orchestra of wood-winds render a serenade which will popularize the wilderness. (38)

Teresa de Lauretis has written of this passage that, “the text introduces Robin in the figural setting of an inhuman nature...trapped in representation...These metaphors and similes, allud[e] to an instinctive animality in Robin” (125). de Lauretis ultimately argues that Nora is more than representational of the animal but that the novel registers “a nonverbal or presemiotic communication” between Robin and animals, something “beyond representation,” the pure psychic forces of death and sexuality as drives. Robin’s sexuality is thus an “undomesticated...uncivilized force (126),” which is emblemized in Robin’s relation to animals throughout the novel. Critic Robin Blyn reads the carnivorous flowers in this passage as also indicative of Robin’s animality. She writes that “Like the ‘carnivorous flowers’ that surround her, Robin is predatory, her beastliness as attractive as it is dangerous” (152). Animal studies scholar Carrie Rohman describes Robin here as a “prehuman organic body...who confounds the usual separation between human and animal” (66). Rohman writes of this passage that “Rather than abjecting animality, she seems to include it as a necessary part of her humanity” (66). These critics unanimously note that this passage indicates something like what Rohman calls Robin’s “seeping” and “overlapping” subjectivity with the nonhuman animal.

A few pages later, the novel continues in its description of Felix and Robin’s first encounter:

Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human. Such a person’s every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience; a mirage of an eternal

wedding cast on the racial memory... a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth; as the unicorn is neither man nor beast deprived but human hunger pressing its breast to its prey.

Such a woman in the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache - we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers. (41)

These passages together make up the novel's introduction to protagonist Robin Vote, and have served as the foundational material for nonhuman scholarship of *Nightwood*.

They have been read as an index of Robin's bestial past, and as an indication of her entanglements with the nonhuman. Bonnie Kime-Scott writes that "[Barnes] constructs a blurred middle ground between the bestial and the human, disrupting these categories, and the very practice of categorization" (42). According to Kime-Scott, Robin is hyper-aestheticized by the narrator in order to parallel nature, a category historically tied to the feminine. But she also sees the passage as blurring the space that separates "the bestial and the human," broadly claiming that by doing so, Barnes disrupts neat categories of the human/nonhuman distinction.

Animal studies scholar Carrie Rohman interprets Robin's lengthy description to mean Robin's "figure[ing] as a prehuman organic body... supremely primordial and elementary... whose subjectivity, rather than being impermeable and distinct, is characterized by seeping and overlapping," and adds that the end of the passage "confounds the usual separation between human and animal." Rohman's descriptors "primordial," "seeping," and "overlapping," seem to suggest a fluid-body, something neither human or animal. She goes on to write of

Robin's "earth-flesh" and "smell of captured dampness," that the "emphasis on smell places her in the realm of animality" (66).

Elizabeth Freeman has also written of Robin Vote in this passage. For Freeman, the description of Robin fits into the following quick summary of the novel in which the phytological stage is a primordial, primitive stage on the way towards becoming-animal. She writes:

Nora's lover, Robin, is the novel's avatar for an animality that begins with the phytological, moves through the zoological, and culminates in the antisocial. Robin first appears in a faint in her apartment, figured as a plant...her flesh has the 'texture of plant life,' and there is 'an effulgence as of phosphorous glowing' around her head (Barnes 2006, 38). The narrator eventually analogizes Robin to a 'beast turning human' (41), yet this process is incomplete, as 'she yet carried the quality of the 'way back' as animals do (44).' (Freeman 745)

In a recognition of a wider array of life-forms, Freeman calls the phytological (plant life) qualities "prehistoric," an early stage of Robin's journey towards animality. Here, the vegetal is an early stop along a teleological evolutionary chain towards the animal. Freeman draws out the rich descriptions of non-animal life, interpreting the vegetative body as that which has not yet become animal, it is incomplete and underdeveloped.

Of this often cited passage from *Nightwood*, Barnes scholarship remains fixated on the animal. Robin does indeed evoke beastliness; Barnes' description of her undeniably links her to the realm of the animal throughout these connected and important passages. And yet, I want to

argue that despite these valuable readings, critics have largely ignored the other forms of life that populate the description of Robin – the fungal, the palms and the plants, these forms of life that are often neglected in nonhuman literary criticism in service of the animal. In what follows, I will fill in the passage with some of these other forms of life; I will argue that this crucial passage is not merely about the animal in the jungle – it’s about the jungle itself.

In taking a closer look at the passage, Robin is

On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants...exotic palms and cut flowers... heavy and disheveled...The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh...which smells of captured dampness and yet it so dry, overcast with the odour of oil of amber... (38)

Her surroundings, “a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms, and cut flowers,” are “a confusion” not only because of the quantity of plants, but also because of the various kinds: potted, exotic, and cut. The plants in various states cause confusion – the scene is partly domesticated by potted plants and cut flowers, but maintains the wildness of exotic palms. Susana Martins has read the plant markers in this scene as evidence it is “constructed by human hands,” that Robin is not “so much...the primitive, but...the culturally defined.” Martins reads this passage as a signal of the “artificial binary of culture/nature” (116). Indeed, much of the plant life in the room exists in direct relation to humans, who have presumably potted or cut it for display.

Amidst this confusion lays Robin, whose bodily exhalations are a perfume exuding the quality of “earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry.” Distinct

from the plant or animal life that populate the room, Robin is fungal, decomposing. Set amongst the live foliage in the room, Robin not only evokes death and decay but embodies it. Her exhalations come not from her mouth but from her entire “broad, porous frame,” from which “sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface.” A deathly air about her, Robin is enmeshed in the nonhuman life around her, part-human, part-fungal and part-plant, a festering kind of life. The passage suggests that Barnes has collapsed the plant and fungal into one category; the “earth-flesh, fungi” is also described just lines later as having the “texture of plant-life.” Flesh, “the soft substance consisting of muscle and fat that is found between the skin and bones of an animal or a human” (*OED*), is retextured here, imbuing the vegetative and the fungal body with the fleshliness of animal life.

Robin’s fungal “flesh” is not just evocative of the animal body, it can also evoke the carnal. Flesh here describes the soft tissue of meat, ready to be consumed figuratively, sexually, or literally in death. Robin’s indeterminate assemblage of both animal and fungal body produces her as what de Lauretis was referring to as “pure psychic state of the drives,” she is an emblem of a decadence. This state of circuitous decay is oddly described as sensuous. She appears disheveled, her damp fungi-flesh smells not of rot but of perfume, and the way her body exhales, all seem to mark this as an eroticized scene, a sexual encounter. I read Robin’s decomposition at the beginning of this passage as a key instance in *Nightwood* of her weird embodiment, here signaled by the weird temporality of decadence.

There has been a consensus in Barnes scholarship that her decadent aesthetic especially in relation to alternative, or queer, sexualities in the novel. David Weir writes of *Nightwood* that “the varieties of sexuality that can be called ‘decadent’ because they are at some remove from heterosexual ‘norms’” (186). Indeed, among the thematic elements of decadence, Len Gutkin

lists “elaborate artificiality, non-normative sexuality, extremes of self-psychological investigation, and...deliberate grotesquerie” (338). In her essay “*Nightwood*’s Freak Dandies,” Robin Blyn argues that Robin as a “freak dandy” that unfixes subjectivity through her place in what she calls the “decadent freak show” that is *Nightwood*. Her freakishness is marked in part by her as a “missing link,” her racial and sexual ambiguity, her queerness (Blyn 519). Blyn writes, “in addition to the science of degeneration that attends her earliest display,” (Robin as earth-flesh, fungi), “*Nightwood* ultimately refuses to explain Robin or her desires...[she is] a freak dandy, a decadent subject/object of unrequited desire” (Blyn 519). Here, Blyn links the fungal body with queer desire. As Robin moves from Felix to Nora to Jenny, emotionally devastating each, as their affections for her are never reciprocated for long. Jenny “did not understand anything Robin felt or did, which was more unendurable than her absence” (*Nightwood* 177). She is illegible to the other characters; she is intimately unavailable, unable or unwilling to participate with her lovers in any recognizable emotional register.

The aesthetics of decadence are in Robin’s beautifully detailed decay, alluring and sexually charged. Rather than glorifying the pregnant or reproductive body which Robin’s body does eventually become, Barnes aestheticizes and celebrates a queer degeneration instead. She exists in a state between life and death, teeming with the life of a fungus that simultaneously threatens her own undoing. In his bio-philosophical treatise *Slime Dynamics*, Ben Woodard considers how fungal bodies reveal “life [not] as always enduring but as always dying, as always being ready to be consumed” (Woodard 34). Indeed, he writes that “[t]he intertwining of life and death has long been a mark of fungoid existence... Fungal bodies are thus hardly bodies at all as they stretch the conceptual limits of their own bodies as well as destroy and decay the purported solidity for other bodies” (29). Robin as “fungi” (*Nightwood* 28) might therefore be read as an

emblem of fungoid existence, the “intertwining of life and death,” the site of intermingling between human and nonhuman forms of life, between competing drives towards death or towards sex.

Robin is not only indicative of life and death simultaneously, she also exemplifies interspecies relations that are defined by the co-constitution of bodies otherwise unrelated. As Anna Tsing notes in her recent book *Mushrooms at the End of the World*, “fungi and plant roots are intimately entangled in mycorrhizal relations...Neither the fungus nor the plant could flourish without the activity of the other” (138). According to Tsing, the world-building of fungi has received so little attention because of the way in which evolutionary scientists have, until recently, privileged the narrative of life on earth as a matter of species-by-species reproduction. In this flawed view, mutualistic relationships between species were anomalies, rather than interactions absolutely crucial for species’ evolution and development. Robin’s body as a site of intimate interspecies relations challenges existing progress narratives that fail to account for the degenerative fungal companions necessary for continued life. This moment of weird embodiment is queer in its refusal of reproduction, and its seductive celebration of decay through decompositional interspecies relations.

Robin’s place in a wider environmental setting is emphasized in the evocation of the painter Henri Rousseau (1844-1910), post-impressionist French painter of the primitive style (Fig. 1 and 2), which critics read as placing her in the realm of the beastly: “Like a painting by the douanier Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room (in the apprehension of which the walls have made their escape).” It is worth taking a moment to see what might have been so appealing to Barnes in Rousseau’s work, which repeatedly stages eroticized female bodies in relation to the jungle.

Rousseau's paintings stage the female figure as secondary to the jungle. Both paintings depict the women as out of place in the wild environment. In "Le Reve" ("The Dream," Fig. 1), the nude woman reclines seductively on a cabriole sofa, which has been oddly placed in the middle of the forest. In "Femme se Promenant dans une Foret Exotique" ("Woman Walking in an Exotic Forest," Fig. 2), the leaves and grass in the painting obstruct parts of the impeccably dressed woman's face and feet, consuming her in the foliage. Plant life in Rousseau's work is often the controlling force and power.



(Fig. 1) Henri Rousseau, "Le Reve" (The Dream), 1910

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



(Fig. 2) Henri Rousseau, “Femme se Promenant dans une Foret Exotique”

(Woman Walking in an Exotic Forest), 1905

The Barnes Collection, Philadelphia

In one sense, the incongruities between the women and their surroundings de-familiarize the relationship between the women and the environment, and emphasize the distinction between culture and the wild. In both paintings, Rousseau depicts the human as not fully integrated into the vegetative world by including markers of civilization like furniture and high fashion. Yet at the same time, other formal qualities of these works draw our attention to the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life. For example, in both paintings, Rousseau has painted the beige of the woman's body to match young blades of grass (both beige in Fig. 1) or the colors of the woman's dress to hanging peaches and tall blue flowers (Fig. 2). Rousseau's work emphasizes the tension between human and nonhuman life -- rather than simply depicting two worlds at odds with one another, his work attends to the complexities present in the intermingling of living things.

Barnes' description of Robin as reminiscent of a painting by Rousseau sets her up in a conflicted relationship to the nonhuman world, particularly to the world of plants. Indeed, Robin is just "thrown in" among "carnivorous flowers as their ration," implying not a systematic and harmonious relationship between herself and the nonhuman life that surrounds her, but a haphazard and ominous one. Robin is bait, thrown in by an unseen "dompteur" (tamer), given over to carnivorous plants that threaten to devour her. Blyn's reading, that the inclusion of carnivorous plants in the passage work to define Robin as predatory and beastly (152), collapses the plants' presence in order to signify the animal. But her recognition of the unique characteristics of carnivorous plants as another organism (like Robin herself) that defies its own categorization (is it a plant or is it animal?) is crucial to Robin's description. The vegetal body in *Nightwood* is a queer body; Robin's corporeality as an inter-species assemblage reflects her fluid and enigmatic sexuality.

Carnivorous plants do indeed transgress the boundaries between the categories of plant and animal and further serve to trouble the characterization of Robin in the novel³³. Carnivorous plants primarily obtain nutrients through the trapping of insects and unicellular protozoans, and break down their prey with digestive enzymes they share with animals and with fungi as well. The difficulty categorizing carnivorous plants was well documented in histories of botany of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which reflect widespread and popular fascination with the organisms. Most notable in this literature from the period is the way in which these plants also threatened standing theories of evolution and of genealogical order, as well as their threat to long-standing knowledge about what exactly constitutes organisms in the Plant Kingdom. Carnivorous plants pose a challenge to strict species-boundaries, and pose a similar threat to that of Robin, who has seemingly been “thrown in as their rations.” Robin threatens (and ruins) because of her inexplicability, because of the inability of others to understand her queer, nonhuman desires (which flirt with bestiality at the end of the novel). Her nonhuman makeup reinforces the sense that she operates according to a nonhuman logic, one within which there is no attention paid to definitive boundaries or categories.

³³ Darwin’s widely read study of insectivorous plants was published in 1875, and scholarship on the history of botany has shown that this study was met by an American audience already somewhat enthralled with botany. Studies of carnivorous plants, especially Darwin’s work, had far-reaching effects. For a discussion of the way in which carnivorous plants closed the evolutionary gap between plants and animals, see Tina Gianquitto’s “Criminal Botany: Progress, Degeneration, and Darwin’s Insectivorous Plants,” in *America’s Darwin: Darwinian Theory and U.S. Literary Culture*, pp. 235-264, University of Georgia Press, 2014. For a discussion of the ways in which carnivorous plants blur the boundaries between plant and animal life, see Jonathon Smith’s “Une Fleur du Mal? Swinburne’s ‘The Sundew’ and Darwin’s Insectivorous Plants,” in *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 41, No. 1, Spring 2003.

I have argued that the *Nightwood* passage that initially introduces readers to the central character Robin is rich with multiple forms of life – potted plants, fungal bodies, earth-flesh, carnivorous flowers – which, when read as part of the Robin’s nonhuman corporeal assemblage, challenges animal-centric readings of Robin which dominate Barnes scholarship. Vegetal life is in fact central to theorizing Robin’s place in the novel, and also offers a way of conceptualizing queer sexuality as threatening, boundless, and unclassifiable. Mycological life adds themes of decadence and decay to the aesthetic of the novel and complicates the temporality of the body. As I will show in what follows, these non-animal forms of life abound throughout Barnes’ work, revealing a rich philosophy of ecological entanglements between species and between bodies.

Plants Across Barnes’ Work

In the last section, I examined a single lengthy passage from *Nightwood* in order to demonstrate that a few pages of descriptive material has much to say about vegetal and fungal corporeality. But there are many moments in Barnes’ other works that also reveal a profound interest in plants and fungi. Her poetry is dark and pungent with decay, and many woodcuts and drawings from throughout her life repeatedly draw our attention to vegetation and its relation to human life.

Barnes’ collection of poetry, *The Book of Repulsive Women* was published in 1915 and is most famed for its relatively uncensored descriptions of sexual acts between women. The collection is, in part, about lesbian sexuality, but this must be understood in relation to the grotesque, “repulsive” bodies that populate the poems. Throughout the poems, the body is

repeatedly figured in a state of decay. Consider the short poem “The Flowering Corpse” as an example:

So still she lies in this closed place apart,
Her feet grown fragile for the ghostly tryst;
Her pulse no longer striking in her wrist,
Nor does its echo wander through her heart.

Over the body and the quiet head
Like stately ferns above an austere tomb,
Soft hairs blow; and beneath her armpits bloom
The drowsy passion flowers of the dead. (47)

The first stanza establishes the dead female body, the “pulse no longer striking in her wrist / Nor does its echo wander through her heart.” A scene of death and decay is then described, the body and head are covered in “soft hairs” that stand like “stately ferns,” and “beneath her armpits bloom / The drowsy passion flowers of the dead.” The soft hairs are not just the hairs that cover the body, they are also the growing fungal layer, standing stately over the grim scene. Indeed, the bloom of fungal decay has already begun under her armpits. In this poem, fungal life rules over the dead corporeal landscape; it is glorified in the stately stature of the soft hairs, and aestheticized in the fungal bloom.

The poem’s “drowsy passion flowers” recall Robin in the passage from *Nightwood*, who “seem[ed] as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire...as if sleep were a decay.” Where

Robin's sleepiness may be only a metaphor for her spiritual or emotional deterioration, the figure of this poem is truly dead, the sleep permanent. In both examples, the decaying body is overtaken by mycological life, emphasizing the cyclical nature of life and death, and the ways in which they are also and always co-constituted.

Five illustrations accompany the poems in the collection, at least three of which depict humans in relation to plant life.³⁴ I have included two of these below. In the first example (fig. 3), a nude figure rests on one knee with her other leg extended behind her, cut off by the darkness of the background and covering her foot. She has tall rabbit ears and a long, raised tail. In the upper right of the frame is a semi-circular object, perhaps a bit of the moon, and the bottom quarter of the frame is delineated by what appear to be bricks or wooden planks, below which her arm extends with two flowers' stems tightly grasped in her hand.

³⁴ It is difficult to tell whether or not Barnes drew each illustration for a specific poem, or if she intended the illustrations to be published in proximity to particular poems. I therefore examine the illustrations as additions to the volume as a whole as opposed to attached to any particular poem. Also, the print quality of the illustrations is somewhat low, and it is difficult to make out some of the objects in the included illustrations. I've chosen to discuss two of the five, although it is possible, given a better resolution, that at least one of the other illustrations also includes plant life.



Figure 3, Title unknown, 1915

Bonnie Kime Scott is one of just a few critics who have written about Barnes' illustrations. For Scott, this image in particular is where "the animal and the human merge most memorably" (Kime Scott 43). Scott writes that it anticipates Robin Vote's character in *Nightwood*, who Barnes describes as a "beast turning human" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 37). Indeed, this illustration clearly merges animal traits with the human, and contributes to the overall bestial nature of poems contained within *The Book of Repulsive Women*. But the woman's clutching of the flowers which reach below the horizontal plane also is an effort to figuratively root herself in the earth. Her arm, which disrupts the plane separating her, human above, from the vegetative life beneath her, transgresses the division between the two realms. The tautness of the flowers' lower stems confirms the intensity with which she holds on to her connection to the earth; these appear to be still rooted, as if the figure holds onto them for stability or support. There is a dark amorphous figure at the bottom of the frame, perhaps a rocky landscape that is mirrored in the dark craggy shapes above ground.

In the other example I've included (Fig. 4), a similar kind of division and transgression is depicted:



Fig. 4, Title Unknown, 1915

This image contains a robed woman looking up to the stars. A celestial face emerges from some kind of opening in the sky, returning the gaze of the woman below. In her hand hangs some kind of vessel with a narrow top, possibly for transporting water. As in the previous example, the arm of the woman is noticeably elongated, and holds onto something in the bottom half of the frame. The illustration is divided in half, into what appears to be an above and below ground, though the woman's arm hangs low and breaks the divide. Black, extensive root-like tendrils extend from the underside of the dark hill in the bottom left. Against the white, vacant background, the roots are prominently displayed.

There are many similarities between these two images. Both draw attention to the separation between the human and vegetative world by their sharp horizontal division across frame of the piece. But the long arm reaches down into the bottom half of each illustration, transgressing this division, and implying a link between the vegetative underworld and the human world above. In figure three, the woman grasps onto the stems of the flowers, rooting herself in the earth through the plant-body. In figure four, the extension of the woman's arm mimics the sinuous and twisting roots just next to it, suggesting a likeness between the two.

Just as the poems in *The Book of Repulsive Women* conjure up grotesque, corpse-like bodies, "often rotting, decaying, or ill-fitting" (Loncraine, xii), these illustrations also contribute to that project. They depict the body as reaching down to the earth from which it came, a reach that extends backwards into time, one that grounds the human in a nonhuman foundation. Barnes visualizes the human figure as part of a grander cycle, linked to vegetative life. Roots and rootedness are important throughout these images, the plant-body and human-body both imagined as having networks of interconnectedness with other forms of life, including each

other. The women in both illustrations are joined with flowers, roots, and the dirt; they are “live bodies as decaying flesh” (Loncraine xii).

In the infamous final scene of *Nightwood*, Robin is also reaching towards the earth: “Robin walked the open country in the same manner, pulling at the flowers, speaking in a low voice to the animals” (Barnes, *Nightwood* 177). Robin’s “pulling of the flowers” recalls the illustrations. She does so while “looking about to be sure that she was unobserved...like a housewife come to set straight disorder in an unknown house” (177). Robin interacts with her environment as if trying to establish order. She searches for a way to organize her surroundings in the forest, this “unknown house.” She searches for a way to sort or understand the forest around her. Barnes writes that “in [Robin’s] gestures there was a desperate anonymity.” Her intrusion into the woods is forgotten as birds and insects begin to fly over her, “obliterating her as a drop of water is made anonymous by the pond into which it has fallen” (178). The obliteration of Robin’s identity comes here, in the final chapter, when she attempts to immerse herself in the nonhuman world around her. Her body, characterized as vegetative and fungal, becomes anonymous in the forest, indistinguishable as a single drop of water in a pond. In *Nightwood*, Robin’s desire to organize the nonhuman natural world in the final scene reveals her desires to integrate herself fully into it, radically dissolving the boundary between human and nonhuman life. This boundary is one that Barnes repeatedly breaches throughout her work, challenging the terms of human corporeality by insisting on its weird relations to nonhuman plant-bodies.

Weird Proliferation

Nonhuman plant and fungal embodiment in *Nightwood* operates according to temporalities outside of the scope of the human. In the novel, the trope of strange temporality and the fear of infinite growth, surprisingly and powerfully returns. In a strange passage from *Nightwood*, Robin finds out she is pregnant with her son, and she goes from church to church with the intent to take the Catholic vow:

Then as if some scrutible wish for salvation...they regarded her, to see her going softly forward and down, a tall girl with the body of a boy...she knelt alone, lost and conspicuous, her broad shoulders above her neighbors, her feet large and as earthly as the feet of a monk...they blessed her in their hearts and gave her a sprig of rose from the bush...Kneeling in the chapel...Robin, trying to bring her mind to this abrupt necessity, found herself worrying about her height. Was she still growing?
...She wandered to thoughts of women, women that she had come to connect with other women. (50)

Robin kneels, trying to “bring her mind to this abrupt necessity” of her pregnancy, her child, but instead finds herself worrying about her height. “Was she still growing?” she worries. It is the same worry that Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams have in McCullers’s novels, where queerish girls fear that their bodies will grow uncontrollably to the heights of the Giant at the outskirts of town. And yet, while that fear seemed to make sense for the adolescent girls, it is especially strange here. The fact that this worry persists into Robin’s adult life furthers a reading of this

trope as not merely confined to adolescent experience. In this example, fear of growth persists well into adult life, long after one would well and truly know that one does not continue to grow forever. Robin's embodied experience does not match up with reason; the body is out of control and willful.

Yet there are still ways in which this instance links Robin to adolescence. For instance, as is common with young adolescents, her body complicates the perception of her gender: "a tall girl with the body of a boy." Her body boyish, her face "childish" (51), Robin's pregnant body is a continuation of her gawky adolescent one. She is awkward and boyish, perceived by the nuns as a "tall girl with the body of a boy," "broad shoulders above her neighbors," "feet large and...earthly." Her body parts are exaggerated and oversized – tall body, broad shoulders, feet large. The commingling of boy and girl attributes contributes to her refusal to be categorized.

In the passage above, she is also in between the states of childhood and adulthood. Again, later in the novel, Nora will mourn the loss of Robin, infantilizing her: "I saw her always like a tall child who had grown up the length of an infant's gown, walking and needing help and safety; because she was in her own nightmare" (154). This strange description of Robin as a "tall child who had grown up" tells us that Nora also sees Robin as overgrown, too tall to be a child yet child-like "needing help and safety." Nora is protective of Robin, motherly even, she too recognizes that Robin is not in accord with her own body. To Nora, Robin is an overgrown child.

Queer theorists of *Nightwood* have indeed recognized in the novel the relationship between the child figure and queerness. Most notable is Kathryn Bond Stockton's reading, which interprets the strange final scene in which Robin goes down on all fours like a dog, as one in which "[w]e seem to be watching her tunnel back in time [to her childhood] to where she is suspended in sideways growth" (93). For Stockton, the lesbian in this novel and in this historical

moment exists out of normative time. Stockton writes, “time is out of joint for the woman who loves other women and so cannot ‘grow up’ in this relation” (93). In her interpretation of Robin-as-lesbian, she cannot “grow up” as such but lives instead “suspended in sideways growth.” Stockton’s is an odd and captivating description -- to be both suspended or halted, and also simultaneously growing, not up but sideways.

Sideways growth offers a way to think about childhood and queerness together with vegetal and fungal growth. Rebekah Sheldon has called Stockton’s queer child the “queerly-human child,” which resonates with Robin’s characterization as “a tall child who had grown up.” Sheldon writes that the queer child,

far from generating a smoothly teleological progression into normative heterosexuality, instead enables the proliferation of lateral possibilities...I am arguing that these queer potentialities inhere biologically as well: we are not the smoothly self-similar species we wish to imagine. (accessed online)

I am struck by Sheldon’s sense of queer potentiality as lateral proliferation. Proliferation is growth that multiplies and flourishes outward, it implies an excess and refuses unidirectional growth usually associated with human life. Sheldon argues that queerness inheres biologically; it can be felt and experienced in the body. Emphasizing her opposition to the “smoothly self-similar species we wish to imagine,” Sheldon instead argues for overlapping and interconnected kinds of existence between different kinds of biological life.

Lateral proliferation is especially useful in relation to Robin’s vegetality. For while some plant life surges upward, other fungal bodies, what Woodard calls the “creep,” “spread[s]...and

spread[s] again” (31) in a kind of infinite sideways growth. Queer bodies grow infinitely, excessively, but outside of normative time, in intervals of duration that are not translatable to humans’ familiar intervals of temporality and duration (Marder 100). It’s as soon as Robin wonders about her growth, that her mind wanders to “thoughts of women, women that she had come to connect with other women.” Her fear of growth, linked, as Stockton argues, to the queer adolescent body, reappears now in adulthood. Though not dwelt upon in the scene, Robin is handed a sprig of rose from a nearby bush, a subtle reminder of her vegetally queer body, threatening and thorned.

Dana Sietler has also written of the final scene in *Nightwood*, arguing that Barnes plays with the way in which queerness was perceived as dangerous and unnatural. Sietler writes that

Sexual perversity as a form of atavism is dramatized literally as a character’s return to the form of an animal in such a way as to perform the perceived unnaturalness of sexual alterity and to act as a persistent and threatening reminder of how far society could fall *if perverse sexual activity were allowed to continue unhindered*. (99 italics mine)

Her reading interprets lesbian desire as Robin’s return to her atavistic animal form, suggesting that Barnes is depicting the way in which lesbian or queer desire is perceived as a threat to society’s future. But the idea that perverse sexuality might “continue unhindered” is also a temporality described by and attributed to plant life in Michael Marder’s work and displayed in the novel. If queerness were to proliferate unchecked, society would devolve into a primitive

form, or would cease to exist altogether.³⁵ Continuous and unhindered sexual perversity operates within the structure of infinite temporality; it is the predatory, the invasive, the wild and overgrown queer. Plants and fungi are alternative spatial and temporal structures against which Barnes situates queerness as excess and proliferation.

In his 2013 book *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Michael Marder theorizes a plant-centered ethics. Underscoring the way in which plants have been marginalized in twenty-first century theoretical writing on the nonhuman, he argues for a new “and more daring” consideration of the diverse forms of plant-life which have thus far been “deemed too insignificant and mundane to even deserve the appellation ‘others’ (2). Widening the scope of nonhuman life beyond the animal, Marder’s philosophy of the vegetal recognizes the way in which the decentering of the human has functioned primarily in favor of animal life, and not the more “mundane” lives of plants. Plants, he argues, are “capable, in their own fashion, of accessing, influencing, and being influenced by a world that does not overlap the human...but that corresponds to the vegetal modes of being and dwelling on and in the earth” (8).

One of the important influences of Marder’s work on this chapter is his concept of vegetal temporality, which he calls “infinite temporality.” Unlike humans, whose lives exist on a limited and known time scale, infinite plant temporality “has no beginning and no end” it displays “an exuberance of growth and an equally spectacular decay” (38). Infinite growth is not only spectacular, however, it can be frightening and dangerous. Marder writes that “such monstrous growth and immoderate proliferation [] whose possibilities...are never realized, have always been unspeakably terrifying” (107). Infinite vegetal and fungal growth also appears in

³⁵ I’m thinking here of Michael Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), where in the introduction Warner describes a queer politics in the face of culture’s worst fear, a proliferation of queerness that ultimately halts reproduction and thus ends the human race, the fear of a queer planet.

Woodard's work. Fungi "appear[] to be an *infinite expansion* of the already extended, an endless development of the odd spatiality of the fungoid, of the sick perpetuation of foul matter being simultaneously the cause as well as the result" (32, italics mine). Marder and Woodard identify in vegetal and fungal life the infinite expanse that can be monstrous, terrifying, and sickening. Woodard even finds the temporality of plants' creep "uncomfortable." He asks, "what is the limit of the creeping mechanism, of the stretch of the creep?" (Woodard 32).

Not only is Robin's body vegetal and fungal, She also worries about the possibility of endless growth – "Am I still growing?" The novel emphasizes the tension between human and nonhuman temporalities. Her worry that she is not yet finished growing links her sense of corporeality with the vegetation that comprises it; her hybridity is unmanageable and unpredictable. The infinite temporality of her vegetal body emphasizes her queer proliferation – characterized in the novel as dangerous, destructive, and terrifying to those who become involved with her.

In one of Barnes' short stories, "Indian Summer," the tall woman is linked once again to plants and decay. She is described in this way:

At fifty-three she blazed into a riotous Indian Summer of loveliness. She was tall and magnificent. She carried with her a flavor of some exotic flower; she exhaled something that savored of those excellences of odor and tone akin to pain and pleasure; she lent a plastic embodiment to all hitherto unembodied things. She was like some rare wood, carved into a melting form — she breathed abruptly as one who has been dead for half a century. (Barnes, *Short Stories* 211)

Though height is not a fear here -- in fact it is “magnificent” -- it is one of her defining characteristics. Her body is tall and sensuous, it has “flavor” and her exhalations, much like Robin Vote’s in *Nightwood*, savory odors but also those of death and decay. In a striking moment of this passage, Barnes describes her as lending a “plastic embodiment to all hitherto unembodied things,” as if she molded the unembodied into shape. Her corporeality is imagined much like the other characterizations of female bodies in previous examples. She is exhaling the odors of flowers and rare wood, she evokes death; her body forms and is formed by her surroundings. This flexible and porous body is one that is found imagined repeatedly in Barnes’ writing and visual art.

There is one more central example of infinite plant temporality at work in Barnes, in an undated and obscure self-portrait she drew [Fig. 5]. Here, a collection of somewhat amorphous tendrils wrap possessively around Barnes’ face. They look upon first glance to be either hair or, perhaps, an adornment to her hat, and they seem almost in movement as they threaten to consume the author’s face. The shapes are darkly shaded in stark contrast to the empty white space of Barnes’ cheek and hat:



Fig. 5: Wallace and Elliott, *Women Artists*, p. 40. The drawing has the caption: 'Djuna Barnes, author of *A Book* – a self caricature'. Undated. Series VIII, Box 8, Folder 1, Item 4.25.

I might have overlooked this drawing, had I not encountered Daniela Caselli's arresting description of it: "[it] presents us the author casting a sideways glance to the viewer, her face half masked by a hat whose feathers entwine the right side of her face, *like menacingly growing algae*" (8, italics mine). Upon closer look, the tendrils do bear striking resemblance to seaweed [Fig. 6 and Fig.7], a kind of brown algae, which (perhaps coincidentally) is the most rapidly proliferating species in the Plant Kingdom, growing up *to two feet per day* in ideal conditions. Note the similarity of the drawing to the long tendrils in Fig. 6, and especially the resemblance of the very bottom strands of hair in the drawing to the silhouetted shape of seaweed leaves in Fig. 8.



Fig. 6 (left) and Fig. 7 (right) of Brown Algae, open access online

Caselli's interpretation of algae in this drawing as "menacingly growing," recalls Marder's "monstrous growth" or Woodard's "uncomfortable creep" of plants and fungi. It's unclear if Caselli means that the algae is menacing or if the growth itself is the threat. Barnes' drawing of herself as overcome by the plant reinforces what I have found throughout her work, her deep interest with the entanglements of vegetal and human life. What Caselli deems "menacing growth" in this self-portrait can be understood as yet another example of limitless plant proliferation and the kind of alternate temporality that it offers the queer body. This drawing, as in other examples of Barnes' work, exhibits the queer body as bound up with vegetal temporality, and queerness is depicted as a limitless and threatening excess and proliferation.

Conclusion

Barnes' self-portrait tells us a lot about her fascination with nonhuman life, just as it is a revealing look into how Barnes imagined herself. Plants and fungi throughout the pieces I have examined in this chapter serve to make up the body just as they simultaneously consume it. This is the "menacingly growing" plant that Caselli describes, bodies of limitless proliferation but at the same time, bodies that threaten to consume and decompose at once.

Previous chapters of this project have argued for various versions of weird embodiment throughout the modernist period, showcasing bodies that in various ways operate outside of the limits of what constitutes the body. The vegetal body in Barnes further develops the way in which the weirdness of the body was understood in the literary period. It underscores its hybridity of the human and nonhuman, and it insists on the entanglements between species that

are not only necessary to survive but are invaluable alternatives to linear, hetero-normative, and finite temporalities. In this chapter it is Barnes' obsession with plants and fungi that lead her to reimagine the human as enmeshed with these other forms of life, perhaps, at times, even overcome by it.

Bonnie Kime Scott has written that "By becoming beast familiar, by sensing the bestial as craft, ritual, and code, as Barnes represents it in each of her works, we may learn to read woman in a new set of personal, historical, and ecological relations, and eventually to use those relations well" (50). Indeed, animal-centric criticism of Barnes' work has demonstrated Barnes' profound attunement to ecological relations. But we must also become familiar with that other, soft-spoken life-form proliferating throughout her work. The infinite temporality of plant and mycological life, its seemingly limitless flourishing, is also a solemn reminder of humans' finite span in the scope of other life forms and durations.

If plants are "extensive, distributive, and entangling," if they have "decentralized bodies" (Myers 81), then the vegetal and fungal presence throughout Barnes' work might be understood to operate this way, as an assemblage of nonhuman life that extends between her works, entangling them with one another in ways that I hope this chapter has shown. Queerness, across Barnes' art and writing, might function in this way, too, as distributive and rampant, entangling humans and nonhumans in weird assemblages of life and desire. The abundant vegetal life across Barnes' work enables a kind of queer desire that refuses to be finite or singular. Understanding queer embodiment as nonhuman but not merely animalistic, as vegetal and fungal, is to recognize the ways in which queer bodies can productively and threateningly disrupt normative structures of time and space.

This dissertation began with an investigation of the most recognizable weird – Lovecraft’s supernatural, cosmic, and alien bodies. Though I began there, I have argued in the chapters that followed that weirdness in Modernism resides in much more common places – at the carnival at the outskirts of a small Georgia town, or along a dusty road in Alabama. In a way, this chapter has also tried to make that claim, that one doesn’t have to look up to imagine the weird in another universe, but rather that weirdness has always and already been here. Djuna Barnes’ work presents, perhaps, the most commonplace and also the most fantastic version of weird corporeality. It is found in the most earthly of places – the so-called “natural” world, the plants and fungal life that make up the environment around us. Barnes breaches the long-held distinction between the natural world and the weird, showing that human life is not a finite, closed system, but that it survives only in relation to its nonhuman, vegetative and fungal counterparts.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Zora Neale Hurston's Voodoo Corporeality

“I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped up against a wall...Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. A first-water diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knife-blade... On the ground before you is the jumble it held—so much like the jumble in other bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter.”

-Zora Neale Hurston, “How it Feels to be Colored Me”

Introduction

If Lovecraft's work first sets the scene for the modernist weird as terrifying and unknowable, Zora Neale Hurston's is a return, even a partial embrace of the dangerous qualities of the weird. Though her work has been celebrated for decades as empowering for black female subjectivity, there exists simultaneously an underlying but persistent threat of the annihilation of the self. The inclusion of Hurston in a developing collection of weird Modernist writers dramatizes this contentious opposition that has been developing in this project, one between the liberatory power and the simultaneous threat of the weird.

Hurston's writing, spanning across genres and disciplines, ranges from short fiction to anthropology, though she is perhaps best known for her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This novel in particular has received much critical attention for its celebration of independent black womanhood, and its disruption of gender roles and racial prejudices in the

American South. It has more recently enjoyed, alongside Hurston's ethnographic writings, new relevance as work that threatens traditional boundaries of the body and self. Taken together, Hurston's fiction and nonfiction reveal the tension in play throughout her work between the search for selfhood and empowerment and the looming threat of losing oneself along the way.

Hurston (1891-1960) was born in Notasuga, Alabama, and wrote four novels: *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948); two works of non-fiction, *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938); multiple collections of poetry, plays, essays, and over fifty short stories. Much of her fiction reflects her anthropological fieldwork in the South and in Haiti where she studied, among other things, voodoo practice and spirituality. From around 1928 and into the early 1930s, Hurston turned her attention from the anthropological work of gathering folk tales in Eatonville, Florida, to the study of voodoo in New Orleans and the West Indies. Biographers of Hurston and literary critics alike frequently discuss her personal involvement in Voodoo during this decade or so of her life. Indeed, Hurston participated in traditional initiations with roughly half a dozen voodoo doctors, both in New Orleans as well as in Haiti, and her accounts of her experiences are especially well documented in *Mules and Men*. In the last few years, scholarship on Hurston has begun to return its attention to the relationship between her fiction and her anthropological work, particularly on the many influences of her study of voodoo on her novels and short stories.

In this chapter, I take up a central tenet of voodoo practice that appears throughout Hurston's fiction and nonfiction alike—voodoo possession. As a crucial thematic operative in Hurston's work, possession is a function of what Matthew Taylor has called Hurston's "voodoo cosmology," which takes seriously the possibility that our bodies are never fully our own. Taylor writes that Hurston posits a universe "in which any thing, any place, might be the dwelling of a

god...voodoo offers an almost infinite plurality of metaphysical registers and agencies. Being-or, rather, becoming - is here defined by abundance, not scarcity. Consequently, any encounter could be a sacred one” (156). Taylor’s reading of *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* is central to this chapter, as his is the first piece that firmly situates Hurston in an American modernist tradition of authors exploring nonhuman subjectivity, a way of understanding embodied life that is both human and nonhuman at once. If it is true of voodoo possession that any place might be the “dwelling of a god,” voodoo practices demonstrate in Hurston a dramatic example of weird corporeality—a “voodoo corporeality”—a vulnerable permeability, an ability to be transformed, remade, even overtaken.

Hurston’s fiction shows that possession is critical to understand the dangers of a porous and vulnerable form of embodiment. Scenes of possession in her fiction suggest that the body’s permeability poses distinct risks not only to the body possessed, but also to any others in the vicinity. I supplement my reading of her fiction with her ethnographic writings to argue that Hurston posits voodoo rituals of possession as a formidable practice of other-worldly, nonhuman embodiment that is as empowering as it is dangerous. To do this, I consider feminist readings of Hurston alongside the work of Matthew Taylor, restoring to the celebratory a sense of danger that insists throughout Hurston’s writing. As a way of building on Taylor’s work, I consider the brief but significant examples of voodoo possession in Hurston’s fiction, namely in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and her short story “Sweat” (1926). But the weird is not recognizable in Hurston’s fiction alone; it is illuminated by a turn to her ethnographic work. I turn finally to her anthropological and autobiographical writing to support a reading of possession as central to her conception of embodiment, suggesting that Hurston’s work is not only post-humanist, but that it participates in the literary and philosophical traditions of the weird.

Voodoo has indeed been recognized across Hurston scholarship for some time, and especially scholarship in a feminist mode, as a set of rituals and values central to her world-view, practices which emphasize the vital bond between the embodied self and the environmental powers and structures to which one is always linked. Feminist critiques of Hurston have widely cited voodoo as central to black female empowerment in her work. In her early essay on Hurston, Wendy Dutton writes that she “established a tradition of black women writers at the same time that she illuminated the tradition of black women in conjure...eulogiz[ing] priestesses like Marie Leveau as if they were role models” (148). Rachel Stein, in her study of the relationship between women and animals in Hurston’s writing, argues that the “African-derived spirituality affords black women an alternative paradigm through which to recast oppressive social-natural relations,” and that “[t]hrough rituals that locate the sacred within nature and within female sexuality, Voodoo challenges the degradation of black women as ‘donkeys,’” (29). Cheryl Wall has written that just as much as the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, so does *Mules and Men* “deserve[] to be a ‘mother text’ in the tradition of black women’s writing” (Wall, “Mules”, 662). Wall claims that the text “locates the sources of female empowerment firmly within the pre-Christian, Afro-centric belief system of hoodoo” (672). In their collective interpretation of voodoo religious practices, these critics have tended to read voodoo as rooted in a kind of egalitarianism largely absent from other dominant religions of the period and region, and specific to those with African heritage living in the Americas.

Hurston’s use of Voodoo to frame her cosmology imagines the body as empowered, but also as susceptible to the forces of the gods and the Voodoo doctors who worship them. She suggests that contained, stable, individualized concepts of selfhood and subjectivity are not sufficient. Voodoo’s attention to and reliance on the body’s health or its sickness designates the

body as voodoo's central vehicle through which to enact the will. It is therefore no surprise that feminist critics in particular have taken special interest in Hurston's voodoo. Voodoo's attentiveness to the imbrication of the body in complex and racialized systems of labor, health, or economics might in fact call for the recognition of what Tara Green elsewhere has called a "voodoo feminism:" a "unique form of resistance practiced by women of African descent" (283) where women "make conscious decisions to resist oppression (301). And yet contra Green's formulation, not all acts of voodoo practice require standardized notions of consciousness. In one of the most performed rituals in voodoo ceremonies, possession, the singularity of human consciousness is challenged and the body is revealed to be the site of complex negotiations between selfhood and otherness.

There is one other instance of strange bodily transformation that places Hurston firmly in the conversation of weird writers collected here. Towards the end of *Their Eyes*, after Janie Starks has finished telling her lengthy story of her life to her friend Phoebie, the recurrent figure of the tall woman that has appeared throughout the other chapters makes yet another surprising appearance:

'Now dats how everything waz, Phoebie, jus' lak Ah told yuh.'

'Lawd!' Phoebie breathed out heavily. 'Ah done growed ten feet higher jus' listenin' tuh yuh, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo', Ah means tub make Sam take me fishing' wid him after this. Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah hearin'' (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 192).

As a figure that has repeatedly appeared and challenged corporeal boundaries throughout each of the previous chapters, the tall woman appears once again in *Their Eyes*, this time as a figure of empowered femininity. Phoeby's sense that she has grown in space with her new knowledge from Janie, grown tall with will and a new power to improve her life manifests itself with her standing up (very) tall.

Phoeby's exasperated claim that she's "done growed ten feet higher jus' listenin' to yuh" is of course just a figure of speech, but it points to a theme that's run through every chapter of this project. Phoeby says she's grown because she "ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'," and that as a way of response to her self-dissatisfaction, she plans to make her partner Sam take her out fishing with him the next chance she gets. Phoeby's metaphorical growth is thereby a reflection of her empowerment from Janie's story. She's inspired to better herself, to demand more from Sam and more respect for herself. This reading of Janie and Phoebe's empowerment fits nicely into feminist readings of Hurston's work as another example wherein black womanhood and independence are celebrated.

Growth here is not monstrous as it was in Lovecraft, not a literal fear as in McCullers, but it does continue to demonstrate that the body houses and responds to gender, sexual, racial, and other forms of cultural oppression in a weird and unwieldy way. Phoeby is a good example of the ways in which weird bodies are gain power and authority, and yet her metaphorical growth harkens back to the menacing growth that figures into McCullers's formation of queer adolescence or Barnes' of lesbian womanhood. Hurston's repeated return to the transformative possibilities of the body, some empowering and others dangerous, reveals the doubled and contradictory nature of the weird.

Biting the Dust

Possession is not a frequent theme across Hurston's fiction, but when it occurs, it signals a critical and unnerving turning point in the text. In each example, possession follows the unfortunate occasion of a poisonous bite from an animal, and the body of the infected host responds in a way that suggests their body is no longer their own. Though possession scenes are brief in Hurston's fiction, they are powerful moments that must be read not merely as metaphor, but as deadly examples of weird embodiment.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a novel which works to foreground the fragility of embodied selfhood and entirely-human subjectivity within the context of indifferent socio-economic conditions, racial oppression, and hazardous environmental forces arising both as the result of poverty and oppression, but also of their own volition. The novel's tale is told primarily by Janie Starks, a black woman from Eatonville, Florida, who marries three times in search of love and a better life. Janie herself is described as connected to the nonhuman world in the first pages of the novel, stretched out under the pear tree in her backyard, "'From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously... It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness'" (11). The novel's opening sets up Janie's body as susceptible to intermingling between herself and the tree, not only in her consciousness but "in her flesh." Hurston's impression of the body's ability to absorb and entangle itself with the nonhuman world, with nature, is thus made early in the book. Thomas Cassidy has written that Hurston hereby "posit[s]

a network model of the natural world that includes humans, placing people and their environments in a reciprocal relationship” (260). This reciprocity is a thing of beauty and sensuousness for Janie, but is the source of terror when it occurs in her lover Tea Cake.

Tea Cake is the man Janie marries third, and he is everything that her previous partners were not. He encourages her to let her long hair down, to laugh and enjoy life, and he puts her happiness above all else. When he suggests the move to “the muck” to help with harvesting fields and try to save a little money, Janie goes happily. Though at first the muck is a place of joy and play, song and dance at night with the other workers, and happily in love, it eventually begins to sour. The Turners, a couple who runs the estate, take a liking to Janie, admiring her “light skin” for a black woman. Tea Cake overhears Mrs. Turner talking about him, and in a demonstration of power aimed more at the Turners than at Janie herself, he beats her: “Being able to whip her reassured him possession. No brutal beating at all, He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss” (147). The turn in the novel is marked by Tea Cake’s abuse, in a quick scene that readers only hear about as Tea Cake relates the story to his friend Sop-de-Bottom:

‘Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man,’ Sop-de-Bottom told him. ‘Uh person can see every place you hit her...’

‘Ah didn’t whup Janie ‘cause she done nothin’. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss. Ah set in de kitchen one day and heard dat woman tell mah wife Ah’m too black fuh her. She don’t see how Janie can stand me.’ (148)

In just two pages, Tea Cake goes from being a loveable carefree man to an abusive husband, and just pages after that, Janie sees the first signs of an impending environmental disaster.

Headed home one afternoon, Janie sees a “band of Seminoles” passing by. An hour later, another group passes, and before sunset, a third. She asks them where they are all going and one of the men answers, “ ‘Going to high ground. Saw grass-bloom. Hurricane coming’ “ (154). Although many of the workers and other locals take heed and begin the move to higher ground, Tea Cake remains unworried, and he and Janie make the decision to stay in the muck and wait out the storm. But the wind and rain strike up in a fury, putting out their light and threatening to demolish the crude walls of their quarters. The waters of nearby Lake Okechobee begin to rise quickly and flood the area. Tea Cake tells Janie to gather a few things, and they ready to go out into the darkness at the height of the storm. Tea Cake goes outside and “he saw that the wind and water had given life to lots of things that folks think of as dead and given death to so much that had been living things. Water everywhere” (160). His observation foreshadows what is about to happen to him, and underscores the way that the storm in the novel disrupts the conception of life or liveness as a category reserved for biological life.

The most famous scene in the novel occurs in the midst of this storm, when the hurricane has forced them out into it, swimming and wading their way without direction in an attempt to find a place to rest. They find a cow with a massive dog on its back, floating through the water. Janie swims to grab hold of the cows’ tail, but the dog “stood up and growled like a lion, stiff-standing hackles, stiff muscles, teeth uncovered as he lashed up his fury for the charge” (Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 166) towards her. In an effort to save Janie from the dog’s fury, Tea Cake seized the dog by the neck, but, exhausted from hours of struggling against the current, Tea Cake is bitten by the dog on the cheek-bone. Four weeks after the storm has passed, Tea Cake comes home from the fields complaining of a headache and never recovers from the infection from the rabid bite.

Christopher Rieger has also noted the way in which this scene of *Their Eyes* is “reminiscent of Vodou possession rituals.” He argues that it “confound[s] the fundamental dualism of self and other” in the novel (108). Tea Cake’s slow demise is filled with the language of possession. In the middle of the night he claims there was “an enemy that was at his throat” (174), and when Janie tried to give him a glass of water he says it “nelly choke me tuh death” (175). “You come makin’ out ah wuz dreamin’,” Tea Cake accuses Janie. “Maybe it wuz uh witch ridin’ yuh, honey” (175). In his final scene, Tea Cake “gave her a look full of blank ferocity and gurgled in his throat. She saw him sitting up in bed and moving about so that he could watch her every move. And she was beginning to feel fear of this strange thing in Tea Cake’s body” (182). He goes out to the outside and she looks outside to see him walking up: “She saw him coming...with a queer loping gait swinging his head from side to side and his jaws clenched in a funny way. This was too awful!” (183)

Janie realizes in this moment that Tea Cake has been overcome, undone, by his illness. He is no longer the Tea Cake she knew and loved, but someone, or something else. He looks at her with a “blank ferocity,” and she fears a “strange thing in [his] body.” It is his walk which is most disturbing, a gait that is not recognizable as his, “queer” and “loping,” and his head swinging side to side. The passage suggests that the rabies virus has transformed Tea Cake, not only his consciousness (the blank look) but also the way he moves his body. The transformation is recognizable in the body’s movements, in the way his movements do not register for Janie as his own but as possessed. The threat of Tea Cake to Janie is a threat of violence on multiple registers: of the rabies virus, the hurricane, and of domestic abuse pushed to the degree that it might kill her. The strange and inhabited body presents real danger once it is transformed, and Janie makes the swift decision to kill Tea Cake before he can kill her.

It wasn't necessarily her exposure to voodoo that opened Hurston's eyes to a nonhuman formulation of embodiment, but rather that voodoo supported ideas already at work in Hurston's writing. "Sweat" (1926) was written before Hurston's research in the South and in the Caribbean, but its similar themes to those in *Their Eyes* suggest that Hurston was already thinking about the body in terms of its vulnerability and plurality. "Sweat" is a short piece of fiction that tells the story of Dehlia, a black woman in the South who works hard as a laundry-woman for white families in the neighboring town. Unlike Janie, Dehlia is decidedly *not* in love with her husband Sykes, who beats her, spends her money, and consistently and vocally disrespects her labor. One day, Sykes brings home a rattlesnake and puts it in a box on the front porch. Knowing that Dehlia is terrified of snakes, Sykes gets immense pleasure watching her suffer, and refuses to feed the snake or to set it free.

In one sense, the story gives Sykes what he had coming, when the snake escapes from its confinements and bites him when he returns to a dark home one night. One critic has read the story as a grim tale of domestic violence that does not empower women of the period, but rather suggests that they are powerless in the face of domestic violence.³⁶ Certainly the story offers a critique of the treatment of black female laborers in the South in the period, who were exploited not only by low-wages and poor working conditions of white employers, but also by unequal and abusive relationships between men and women. In titling the story "Sweat," Hurston draws attention to the way in which the body registers social and economic inequities. Sweat, or perspiration can be understood as a bodily response, a self-regulation. It suggests that a willfulness of the body and points to the way labor and inequity is registered on Dehlia's body.

³⁶ See Catherine Carter, "The God in the Snake, The Devil in the Phallus: Biblical Revision and Radical Conservatism in Hurston's "Sweat." *Mississippi Quarterly*, 67.4 (2014): 605-620.

Just as in *Their Eyes*, it is exclusively in the brief final scene of “Sweat” in which the image of possession is conjured. Dehlia is outside when she hears Sykes’ encounter with the snake. Hurston writes: “Outside Dehlia heard a cry that might have come from a maddened chimpanzee, a stricken gorilla. All the terror, all the horror, all the rage that man possibly could express, without a recognizable human sound” (Hurston, “Sweat” 39). In a cry that foreshadows the mad dog in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Sykes exclaims that the bite “might have come from a maddened chimpanzee,” suggesting a similar experience to that of Tea Cake’s. The idea that madness underlies the bites in both instances demonstrates the men’s inability to comprehend what is happening to them. The connection to madness in both *Their Eyes* and “Sweat” suggests again that weird corporeality is often difficult to understand and even more difficult to explain. In “Sweat,” the juxtaposition of the sheer abundance of “all the rage...man possibly could express” with the inability to express it like a man—“without a recognizable human sound”—sets up a conflict between human experience and the inability to express it as such. The inability to register the sounds as human suggests not only possession but possession by something other than human, and it suggests that the nonhuman can be recognized not just by the body’s visible differences (a queer, loping gait) but also by sound.

In both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and “Sweat,” the male partners of the woman narrators are bitten by animals, which either carry disease or a poisonous venom which then infect their bodies. Though the terms of each attack are markedly different, both cases illustrate possession not as supernatural but as causally related to the poison that enters the bloodstream. Though much work has been done to locate the influences of Voodoo in *Their Eyes*, this criticism largely tends to read the novel’s plot and symbolism as indebted to the gods and

traditions of Voodoo.³⁷ As I will show in the section that follows, while Voodoo very likely did influence Hurston's writing of the novel in many ways, including the imagery and plot, it is her engagement with voodoo possession that makes appearances in her fiction not merely as metaphor or symbol, but as a form of voodoo corporeality.

Bodies Possessed

The influence of voodoo on Hurston's life and writing is largely absent from her fiction. A turn to her nonfiction reveals that she had extensive experience with voodoo possession as both a practitioner and as a witness. The dangers she ultimately comes to associate with voodoo possession mark the ceremony as a conflicted site of spirituality and subjectivity. If Hurston's fiction does not appear particularly weird at first readings, it is because her ethnographies and autobiography are required to see the weird in the ordinary.

Though many elements of voodoo were important to Hurston, none garners more awe, terror, and fascination than the rituals of possession. In the sacred Voodoo ceremony during which possession typically takes place, the spirits of Voodoo gods (the loa) enter and "ride" the body of the person they've inhabited. It is considered a great honor to take on the spirit of one of the gods, and ceremony participants take the opportunity to bestow praises and make requests for

³⁷ See, for a good example of this critical trend, the collection *Zora Neale Hurston, Haiti, and Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. La Vinia Delois Jennings, Northwestern University Press, 2013. Specifically, see Rachel Stein's "Remembering the Sacred Tree: Black Women, Nature, and Voodoo in Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (pp. 4-29) for a reading of the pear tree as a central symbol in Voodoo, or Janie as voodoo goddess Erzulie in Derek Collins' contribution "The Myth and Ritual of Ezili Freda in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," (pp. 30-49). See also Daphne Lamothe, "Vodou Imagery, African-American Tradition and Cultural Transformation in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *African American and African Diaspora Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Winter 1999.

any earthly and spiritual needs. Voodoo possession in Hurston's writing formulates a distinct Voodoo subjectivity in her work, a transformative and pluralistic mode of embodiment. These moments of possession and trance states throughout Hurston's work are met with mixed emotions. Most frequently, Hurston describes feelings of vulnerability and fear, marking possession as a complex ontological challenge for black female subjectivity. Rather than simply glorify voodoo subjectivity as solely reaffirming or empowering, Hurston's work reveals that moments of possession can be dangerous and terrifying.

Whereas writers in the feminist mode have lauded Hurston's work on Voodoo as a literary liberation for black womanhood, there has been a somewhat quieter tradition in Hurston scholarship that has turned its attention towards the perils of voodoo. Hurston's experiences with Voodoo possession were indeed complex, as is evident from her personal letters, ethnographic work, and autobiography. She repeatedly finds herself in situations out of her control, and when in the presence of the possessed, is often unable to convey in her writing the nature of her terror.

As Matthew Taylor has also noted (150), Hurston certainly could not claim that no one warned her of the dangers of Voodoo. Multiple instances in her work reveal that she is consistently told not to meddle with voodoo lest she risk her own life. In the beginning of the section "Hoodoo" from *Mules and Men*, Hurston asks one of her neighbors where she can find a good hoodoo doctor. Mrs. Viney White asks:

'But looka here, Zora, whut you want wid a two-headed doctor? Is somebody done throwed a old shoe at *you*?'

'Not exactly neither one, Mrs. Viney. Just want to learn how to do things myself.'

'Oh, honey, Ah wouldn't mess with it if Ah wuz you. Dat's a thing dat's got to be

handled just so, do it'll kill you.' (180)

Because of the threat that voodoo poses, Mrs. Viney doesn't understand why Zora would want to learn voodoo except for the function of revenge: "Is somebody done throwed a old shoe at *you*?" she asks. In another moment of caution preceding Hurston's initiation with Voodoo doctor Kitty Brown, Kitty warns her that the process "might be the death of you" (*Mules and Men*, 222). In yet a third example, this time in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Doctor Legros introduces Hurston to a real zombie, and expresses his desire to learn the secret of zombification, about which Hurston writes: "These secret societies are secret. They will die before they will tell. They cited instances. I said I was willing to try. Dr. Legros said that perhaps I would find myself involved in something so terrible, *something from which I could not extricate myself alive*, and that I would curse the day that I had entered upon my search" (*Tell My Horse*, 196, italics mine).

Each of these three instances, narrated as Hurston's personal experiences in New Orleans and Port-au Prince, demonstrate her keen awareness of the possible dangers of engaging in the initiation rituals of voodoo. Warned by friends and multiple conjure doctors, Hurston was well aware of the possible threat that the practicing of voodoo posed to her very life. Perhaps she felt that their counsel was exaggerated, for despite the dangers of which she'd been warned, she proceeded to undergo around six initiation ceremonies with a number of different voodoo doctors.

One of the most terrifying initiations that Hurston describes offers a specific example of the kind of dangers Voodoo involved. As a pupil of Father Joe Watson and his wife Mary, Hurston must undergo a series of rituals, including the final one—the Black Cat Bone. For this ritual, Hurston must catch a black cat and throw him alive into a pot of boiling water. When the

cat screams in agony, Hurston is instructed to curse him, until the flesh and fur are boiled off of the bones and they can be removed from the pot. She writes,

The bones of the cat must be passed through my mouth until one tasted bitter.

Suddenly, the Rooster and Mary rushed in close to the pot and he cried, ‘Look out!

This is liable to kill you. Hold your nerve!’ They both looked fearfully around the circle.

They communicated some unearthly terror to me. Maybe I went off in a trance. Great beast-like creatures thundered up to the circle from all side. Indescribable noises, sights, feelings. Death was at hand! Seemed unavoidable! I don’t know. Many times I have thought and felt, but I always have to say the same thing. I don’t know. I don’t know.

(Mules and Men, 208)

Not only does this example reveal yet another warning that her life is in danger (should she lose her nerve), it illustrates Hurston’s own experience of a loss of self in the initiation. “This is liable to kill you,” Father Joe Watson yells, looking fearful. After communicating an “unearthly terror” to her, Zora appears to lose consciousness: “Maybe I went off in a trance.” When Hurston enters a trance state she describes as “indescribable,” the supernatural experience is marked as a moment of the weird, one impossible to describe, something inexplicable. “I don’t know,” she says again and again, suggesting that Voodoo’s takeover of her body also disrupts her ability to understand or relate her experience. Hurston’s trance is one way in which she experiences a form of self-possession as a momentary break or gap, a lapse in consciousness.

In his groundbreaking essay, “Hurston’s Voodoo Ethnography,” Matthew Taylor writes of this scene that “A Hurston still exists, of course ...but it is a Hurston riddled with as much

uncertainty as the representation itself...The breakdown[s] in rational reporting...are dramatizations of a person confronting a universe both larger and closer than she imagined...Hurston in this moment loses herself to voodoo” (155). Taylor’s convincing reading of the moments wherein Hurston “loses herself to voodoo” charts the dangers that accompany its practice, and argues against recent critical interpretations of Hurston’s voodoo as a practice that affirms selfhood. Taylor goes so far as to argue that despite the fact that the Black Cat Bone is an aberration of the text (“rarely is it brought to such a crisis,” he writes), “The drama of *Mules and Men*...is that [the narrative itself] actually threatens to be overwhelmed by the subject” (Taylor, 163). Indeed, Hurston herself would write in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, that of all her initiations, the Black Cat Bone was “[t]he most terrifying...going to a lonely glade in the swamp to get the black cat bone...Strange and terrible monsters seemed to thunder up to that ring while this was going on. It took months for me to doubt it afterwards” (700). Reiterating the supernatural, horrific presence of “beast-like creatures” and “strange and terrible monsters,” Hurston spends months wondering if it ever actually happened. Her narrative in both instances feels less like the ethnographic work of a graduate student of anthropology, and more like one of H.P. Lovecraft’s *Weird Tales*. In both instances, the overwhelming of the human in the face of nonhuman forces “larger and closer” (Taylor) than one imagined, threatens to overwhelm, to undo the subject, as well as the text itself.

Critics have pointed to the way Hurston’s work reclaims an African cultural identity. Possession might be understood to operate in part as a mode of black women’s “self-redefinition, a reformation of identity and self-image, and a means of voicing social protest and criticism. It is also a means of retaining and reformulating an African derived cultural identity in the midst of colonial cultural assumptions” (Stein 39). Ana Monteiro-Ferreira writes of the concept of “Afro-

centricity,” particularly in twentieth century literature. Though she doesn’t mention Hurston in her work, Monteiro-Ferreira does discuss the role of the literary Harlem Renaissance in which Hurston played a tangential and controversial role. Citing the 1920’s and 1930’s in Harlem as an “eruption” in the quest for black identity, an “essence of blackness” (81), she argues that Afrocentricity is actually not “a resurrection of the autonomous African American individual,” emphasizing instead that “the concept of individuality attached to ‘the autonomous African American individual’ is completely out of the scope of the African cosmogony” (Monteiro-Ferreira, “Afrocentricity”, 330).

In a less terrifying but no less intense initiation ceremony also detailed in *Mules and Men*, Hurston is studying with Doctor Turner, who, after a prolonged period of refusing Hurston initiation rites, finally accepts that she is in earnest and agrees to perform the ceremony. Hurston writes that Turner

crowned me with a consecrated snake skin...I ate my final meal before six o’clock of the evening before and went to bed for the last time with my right stocking on and my left leg bare...Turner prepared the couch with the snake-skin cover...upon which I was to lie for three days....at three o’clock in the afternoon, naked as I came into the world, I was stretched, face downwards, my navel to the snake skin cover, and began my three day search for the spirit that might accept or reject me according to his will. Three days my body lie silent and fasting while my spirit went wherever spirits must go that seek answers never given to men as men. (191)

Common elements of voodoo rituals, nudity and deprivation presumably present a pure body, cleansed to receive or release the spirits within (Fig. 8). Here again, Hurston is silent on the “answers” she receives from her spirit’s journey to “wherever spirits must go,” this time perhaps to uphold the code of secrecy that is imperative to voodoo practitioners. If the secrets must “never be given to men as men,” readers must assume that voodoo experience is not something that can be written or spoken between humans, but rather that its knowledge is only acquirable through initiation, through the vulnerability of the secure, contained self. It is only by putting the body and self up for occupation that one can begin to unlock the secrets of the voodoo universe.



Figure 8: Hurston’s illustration of her initiation ritual from *Mules and Men* (190)

In 1937, Hurston's voodoo practice in Haiti reaches a critical stage. In a letter dated July 6th addressed to her Guggenheim sponsor at the time, Henry Allen Moe, Hurston writes: "It seems that some of my destinations and some of my accessions have been whispered into ears that heard. In consequence, just as mysteriously as the information travelled, I HAVE HAD A VIOLENT GASTRIC DISTURBANCE... For a whole day and night, I'd thought I'd never make it" (Quoted in Kaplan, 391, capitals in original). Fearing that her work as a Voodoo doctor (again, she is vague on the details) has been discovered by one or more of her intended subjects, Hurston fears that her life was in grave danger, likely due to a reciprocal curse. Hurston's descriptions of her experiences in hoodoo initiations as well as her letter to Moe make the case that voodoo was far more than an ideological influence on her writing and thought. According to Hurston, the voodoo subject is one in constant danger of losing oneself not only in consciousness or spirit, but in death.

Hurston biographer Deborah G. Plant writes that after her recovery from her illness, she continued her work on the manuscript of *Tell My Horse*. According to Plant, Hurston "completed her work and set sail for the States on September 22, 1938. Confident that 'the book is in the bag'" (Plant 78). But another prominent Hurston biographer has interpreted this significant moment quite differently. Robert Hemenway writes, "Zora Hurston was convinced that her illness and her voodoo studies were related...She backed off from continuing the intense research and began to make plans to finish *Tell My Horse* on American soil...She had gone deeply enough into the Caribbean night" (238). These radically conflicting narratives offered by Hurston's foremost biographers may seem to be insignificant, a small difference in the interpretations of a minor event in Hurston's life. But their differences point to a central question

in Hurston's life and writing—what are the dangers with which she associates the quest to uncover the secrets of a West-African cultural heritage? Plant and Hemenway disagree as to whether Hurston was ultimately able to sustain the bodily trauma that accompanied her voodoo practice, whether or not she eventually goes “deeply enough into the Caribbean night.”

In contrast to the trance-like states Hurston herself experiences in *Mules and Men*, the possession scenes in *Tell My Horse* depict others who are more literally possessed by the spirits of the gods. As Hurston's most straightforward anthropological work, one of the aims of *Tell My Horse* was to work against the exoticization of voodoo's representation in mainstream American culture. Though Hurston's literary style is less present in *Tell My Horse*, her description of the possessions she witnesses still convey the influence of her affective and emotional response to what she sees and hears.

Hurston describes a night when “something very interesting and very terrifying came to pass. A houngan (priest) had died and Dieu Donnez was to officiate at the Wete'loa non tete yum mort (Taking the spirit from the head of the dead)” (144). A pair of white pigeons were caught and cooked without seasoning as an offering to the dead, and the body was placed on two chairs under a saddle blanket. Course corn meal was roasted and put on a white plate, and slivers of pinewood were lit as candles. Dieu Donnez approached the fire with the plate and chanted until suddenly “[t]he body of the dead man sat up with its staring eyes, bowed its head and fell back again and then a stone fell at the feet of Dieu Donnez, and it was so unexpected that I could not discover how it was done...its presence meant that the loa or mystere which had lived in the dead man and controlled him was separated from him” (143). The man was then buried and the ceremony continued. Hurston writes:

It was then that the thing of terror happened. There were some odd noises from a human throat somewhere in the crowd behind me...A man was possessed...and began crashing things and people as he cavorted toward the center of things. There was a whisper that an evil spirit had materialized, and from appearances, this might have well been true, for the face of the man had lost itself in a horrible mask. It was unbelievable in its frightfulness....A feeling had entered the place. It was a feeling of unspeakable evil. A menace that could not be recognized by ordinary human fears, and the remarkable thing was that everybody seemed to feel it simultaneously and recoiled from the bearer of it like a wheat field before a wind. (*Tell My Horse*, 144)

Here, voodoo possession takes the form of evil, transforming the man, his face “lost...in a horrible mask,” into something no longer merely human. Hurston realizes that the man is possessed by the sound of it: “There were some odd noises from a human throat somewhere in the crowd behind me.” Here, possession is first identified not by visual clues but by aural ones. Though the throat is human, by the sound of it, the noises coming out are not. The fear that materializes is experienced collectively, but Hurston implies that the voodoo practitioners in the room are also not quite human: It was an “unspeakable evil. A menace that could not be recognized by ordinary human fears.”

Hurston’s emphasis on the throat in moments of possession recalls Tea Cake’s possession scene in *Their Eyes*—when he feels someone is “at his throat,” and when he finally is overcome, it is marked by a “gurgle[] in his throat.” When Janie suggests that maybe a witch was riding Tea Cake, she is also recalling the Voodoo possession rituals wherein the spirits or loa enter the body by mounting it to ride the subject as a horse. *Their Eyes*, published the year before *Tell My*

Horse, appears to make gestures to possession rituals, and in doing so suggests that Tea Cake's illness is to be understood in the context of voodoo spiritual practice. Just as the dead man in *Tell My Horse* "sat up with its staring eyes," the possessed Tea Cake sits up in bed, watching Janie's every move. It is in this moment that Janie herself recognizes that her Tea Cake is already gone, that someone, *something* else has taken over his body. The scene reinforces readings of Hurston's ethnographic work as challenging the subject's individualism and troubling the boundaries between self and other. *Tell My Horse* helps to produce a reading of *Their Eyes* that insists that Tea Cake's demise be understood as a kind of possession, a final moment wherein his body is not entirely under his control.

In her essay, "The Zombie In/As Text: Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse*," Amy Fass Emery writes that

Possession challenges beliefs in fixed identity and crosses dichotomies between flesh and spirit, self and other, in that during possession the spirits become incarnate in the bodies of the believers, temporarily replacing the individual subjectivity with the character of the *loa* and inducing striking behavioral changes. Spirit and body interpenetrate, and identity is transformed by the presence of the gods. (38)

Fass Emery finds in voodoo possession a challenge to fixed, stable notions of identity, and argues here that individuals who inhabit the spirit of the *loa* go through radical transformation. The breaking down of the boundaries between self and other occur in the passage from Hurston above not merely in the body of the man possessed, but in the affective collectivity of the ceremony participants who bear witness to the event. "Everybody seemed to feel it

simultaneously and recoiled from the bearer of it like a wheat field before a wind,” she writes.

“The fear was so humid you could smell it and feel it on your tongue” (*Tell My Horse*, 144).

Individual subjectivity is challenged in the ceremonial rituals of voodoo possession, not only in the one possessed, but in the crowd who respond together, connected, in a way that is more than singular, and more than ordinarily human.

In chapter 13 of *Tell My Horse*, “Zombies,” Hurston tells a series of stories about famous Zombie cases in Haiti, including the story of Felicia Felix-Mentor, whose photograph Hurston includes in the text itself (Fig. 2). Felix-Mentor was a woman who fell suddenly ill in 1907, died, and was buried by her family in Port-au-Prince near Gonaives. Twenty-nine years later, the Garde d’Haiti recovers a naked woman wandering along a road near a farm where she lived as a child. Her husband reluctantly identifies her as his formerly dead wife. On November 8th, 1936, Dr. Rulx Leon informs Hurston that a Zombie had been found and was now being held at the hospital at Gonaives, and Hurston pays her a visit.



Figure 9: Photograph taken and captioned by Hurston:

“Felicia Felix-Mentor, the Zombie” (*Tell My Horse*, 180)

Hurston describes the woman as cowering along the fence, protective of herself and apparently fearful of the visitors. Hurston first takes photographs of her “cringing against the wall with the cloth hiding her face and head,” until “[f]inally the doctor forcibly uncovered her and held her so that I could take her face” (195). She describes what she saw: “the sight was dreadful. That blank face with the dead eyes. The eyelids were white all around the eyes as if they had been burned with acid...There was nothing that you could say to her or get from her except by looking at her, and the sight of this wreckage was too much to endure for long...We went to a more cheerful part of the hospital and sat down to talk” (195-6). Fass Emery has recognized the violence of this interaction as indicative of a Boas-inspired anthropological

practice which objectifies and does violence to its subject, what she calls the “zombification of vulnerable human beings as embodied in the silenced,” “something parasitic and aggressive that sucks the life/soul out of its subjects” (331). Fass Emery makes the case that this confrontation between Hurston and the black woman zombie “her uncanny double,” presents an allegory about the nature of anthropology. She writes that it is about “the shared vulnerability of the self and the other...the parasitic speaking of the anthropologist through the abject other that produces the zombie-text” (331). As Fass Emery goes on to point out, the inclusion of a photograph of the woman in *Tell My Horse* presents a textual example of zombification, a “static textual death in life” (331).

The story and photograph of Felicia Felix-Mentor does more than allegorize the complex relationship between anthropologist and subject/object of study. Fass Emery suggests that it is Hurston’s “fear of losing control of herself in her writing” (331) that is projected onto the Zombie woman, but as this section has attempted to show, the fear of losing oneself it is not merely a metaphor in Hurston’s writing. As Taylor writes, “Hurston’s hoodoo cosmology means the ineluctable overcoming—the other-coming—of person and text. Voodoo is thus not (only) a ‘metaphor’ or a ‘figurative concept’” (142). Her body of work, when read together, demands a reading methodology that is attentive to the real and present dangers of voodoo in Hurston’s life. Although the possession scenes in her work do not serve a single and cohesive function, they do collectively demonstrate her investment in an Afro-Caribbean subjectivity that poses a set of other-worldly and dangerous challenges to white, Westernized concepts of selfhood and embodiment.

Conclusion

The concept of a “voodoo corporeality” emerges from Hurston’s paradoxical investment in embodied being and her fascination with its instability. Whereas previous authors considered in this study merely imagine a body other than their own, one that has grown freakishly tall in McCullers, for instance, or as embedded in a slow fungal creep in Barnes, Hurston’s weird embodiment is not only imagined but also experienced first-hand through the practice of voodoo. Like other versions of “the weird” at work in previous chapters, voodoo corporeality in Hurston exposes the body’s permeability and openness to the world. Bodies possessed in Hurston’s work are not merely symbolic of otherness within the self, they are simultaneously otherness and the self, a body that disputes singularity and individuality. Including Hurston’s work within “Weird Modernism” is an important addition in that it refutes “the weird” as reserved for writers like Lovecraft, who relied on the weird to stave off deep fears and hatred of otherness. Hurston’s writing continues the work of complicating and challenging Lovecraft’s weird by insisting that otherness is always and already a part of us.

The descriptions of possessed bodies in Hurston’s fiction are enriched when supplemented with passages about voodoo possession from her nonfiction. Her involvement with voodoo reveals her deep knowledge of the subject, and her experience with the potential perils of in getting too involved in its practice. The body enmeshed with the voodoo ritual of possession must give in to distinct threats to personhood and individualism. Possession is a way of conceptualizing the relationship between the self and others, between the self and the world, as a breakdown of boundaries. This breakdown is not romanticized in Hurston’s work, but is terrifying. Voodoo corporeality is important to a developing conception of the weird. It is a

reminder that the dissolution of contained embodiment and of the subject itself may bring a form of liberation, but that this liberation may come at a high cost.

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AFTERWORD

Weird, Resurrected

“Rather than creating escapism, mapping elements of the Anthropocene via weird fiction may create a greater and more visceral understanding (render *more* visible)—precisely because so many of the effects of this era *are felt in and under the skin...*”

-Jeff VanderMeer, “*Hauntings of the Anthropocene*”

The 2000 publication of China Mieville’s *Perdido Street Station* arguably served as a “lightning rod” for what would become the contested category of New Weird fiction.³⁸ Mieville’s epic and expansive landscapes, bodily hybrids, visionary and surreal imagery, and clear literary influences of past weird fiction established his work as a birthplace for a new genre that was not exactly science fiction, horror, nor fantasy (VanderMeer, “Introduction” xi). In the first decade of the 21st century, writers of related styles and aesthetics clamored to either be included among or remain distinct from the New Weird, in part because of its ties to the modernist magazine *Weird Tales* and its most famous figure, H.P. Lovecraft. Regardless, the movement didn’t need much more than China Mieville’s wide acclaim and appeal paired with his early efforts to fashion the term around his inclinations, for the movement to gain traction. It was largely because of Mieville’s engagement with the term that the New Weird had been granted a certain amount of authority on the literary scene by 2005.

³⁸ Jeff VanderMeer includes other writers of this moment utilizing similar stimuli: his own *City of Saints and Madmen*, K.J. Bishop’s *The Etched City*, and Paul Di Filippo’s *A Year in the Linear City*.

Writers in the New Weird mode have, to varying degrees, acknowledged the influence of the older Weird, which most attribute to Lovecraft and the like. But the New Weird also distinguishes itself from the Old in ways that reflect vastly different economic, social, and ecological climates. In the introduction to the 2008 edited collection of fiction assembled under the banner of *The New Weird*, Jeff VanderMeer writes one of the first working definitions of the genre. It is an “urban” fiction that “combines elements of science fiction and fantasy” that draws on “complex, real-world models.” The New Weird is often intense in its grotesqueries, and uses elements of “surreal or transgressive horror,” to initiate a “surrender to the weird” (*The New Weird*, xvi). If Lovecraft’s tales take place in rural towns outside of city limits, or in Antarctic caves far from civilization, the New Weird plants itself squarely within the city. If the nature of the horror was coyly obscured by Lovecraft’s refusal to fully disclose the monster, the New Weird does not shy away from a more visceral take on Lovecraft’s visionary horror.

Despite VanderMeer’s claim that New Weird was built on a united rejection of the Old, essential remnants of the Old remain. Most importantly for this conclusion, the New Weird fictions maintain an obsession with the body. What VanderMeer identifies as the New Weird’s “particular emphasis on...transformation, decay, or mutilation of the human body” (“Introduction xvii) has been an essential quality of the weird modernisms this project has laid out, providing a striking parallel between the Old and New Weird worth exploring. The transformations are not the same, nor are they transformations responding to the same set of conditions, but they remain essential in weird fiction spanning a one hundred year gap. What does weirdness allow for that enables writers across generations to think through the body? Why does the weird reemerge when it does, and how might we imagine the reach of modernism, through the weird, into the contemporary moment?

Mieville has written that weird fiction is a response to the conditions of capitalist modernity entering the 20th century (Mieville, *Weird Fiction* 513). In this way, weirdness may be a mode that registers the shift from the industrial revolution and spanning to late capitalism. Part of this shift in capitalist production can perhaps be identified in the modifications made to the Old Weird in New Weird fiction: the move from the rural to the urban, the pastoral to the mechanized, an airy, interstellar cosmicism to the steam-punk aesthetic characteristic of early Mieville novels. The conditions of capitalist modernity also ushered in radically different ecological crises and concerns which, though not emphasized in Mieville, has become a major element of weird fiction following his work.

In a recent essay, “Hauntings of the Anthropocene,” VanderMeer writes that global warming makes such a mockery of what our five senses can perceive that the “fixed laws of Nature” seem more and more, through, for example, extreme weather events, to have become un-fixed, the compass spinning wildly. The laws of science, which often seem resolute, begin to seem less so, even if this is just our faulty perception. (“Haunting,” online)

Vandermeer is describing the conditions of the Anthropocene, a geological epoch commonly referred to across disciplines that defines an era of ecological crisis on the planet, a crisis caused by human activity. His description of the unpredictable, inexplicable experiences of the Anthropocene are experiences that inform his vision of weird writing in the 21st century. The weird world of today recalls a weird which Lovecraft also described almost a century earlier: “a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space (“Supernatural Horror in Literature”). In the 21st century weird, the chaos and demons of space are ecological

horrors manifest in forms of global warming and climate crisis, making a “mockery of what our five sense can perceive.” Since being crowned the “King of Weird Fiction” by *The New Yorker* in 2015,³⁹ VanderMeer’s popularity and celebrity as a new weird writer might mark the still developing genre as ecologically minded fiction.⁴⁰

VanderMeer’s work, especially his recent *The Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014) is one example of New Weird fiction that offers a way of reading and representing the experience of the Anthropocene. Here, weirdness is the temporality of a slowly worsening global ecology—what Rob Nixon has called elsewhere “slow violence”⁴¹—*haunting* rather than directly or immediately frightening. As a prime example of contemporary weird fiction, VanderMeer’s disquieting trilogy registers environmental change and degradation as an experience focused on “transformation, decay, or mutilation of the human body” (VanderMeer, *The New Weird*, xvii) which take place in a locale called “Area X,” once inhabited but now deserted due to a mysterious ecological disaster.

The New Weird does not simply reject the weird forms of embodiment that can be traced throughout modernism. Where weirdness in modernism operates as a form of questioning the

³⁹ Rothman, Joshua. “The Weird Thoreau.” *The New Yorker* (14 January 2015): <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/weird-thoreau-jeff-vandermeer-southern-reach>.

⁴⁰ Here, I am only briefly describing *The Southern Reach Trilogy*, but readers new to VanderMeer’s work might also look to his broader range of fiction to see how his work has engaged similar ecological concerns throughout, namely his Ambergris series made up of *City of Saints and Madmen* (2002), *Shriek: An Afterword* (2006), and *Finch* (2009). His work as an anthologizer of new weird fiction with his wife Ann VanderMeer also contributes to his expertise on “the weird,” see their collection *The New Weird*, Tachyon Publications, 2008.

⁴¹ See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. There, Nixon defines “slow violence” as one that occurs “gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). Nixon names many environmental examples of slow violence and calls for new ways to account for the delayed temporalities and pervasive effects of slow violence.

nature of the body and its imbrication in other nonhuman systems, life, and nonlife, the New Weird takes the body's openness as its starting point. At least one major strain of New Weird fiction, this form of Anthropocene or eco-fiction responds to ecological crisis and transformation by radically reframing normative accounts of the body, "because so many of the effects of this era are felt in and under the skin" (VanderMeer, "Haunting"). Vandermeer's trilogy imagines this reformation as a kind of environmental sickness which forms the conditions not of an anomalous condition but as the norm. In this way, New Weird fiction like Vandermeer's also exposes what we might call a weird ecology, or what a recent issue of *Paradoxa* has called "Global Weirding"⁴². Like modernist iterations of weird embodiment, a weird ecology is made visible through the body as an active and ongoing set of relations.

The collection *The New Weird* begins with an introduction with a provocative title: "The New Weird: *It's Alive?*" Instead of boldly proclaiming the arrival of this new genre of writing, the editors pose it as a question: "*It's Alive?*" Yes—and no, they explain. If there was a height of new weird fiction, it had probably already passed by the time of the book's publication in 2008. And yet, the New Weird might still be productively understood as a "movement...still mutating *forward*." "New Weird is dead," they declare, "Long live the Next Weird" (xviii).

Though this declaration--"New Weird is dead"—may serve as the editors' somewhat playful response to the introduction's title question, I'm inclined to think more about the question's other elicitations which have been underlying this dissertation. The question "It's Alive?" is also a fundamental question asked repeatedly throughout this project of different bodies and in different forms. It is a question that gets to the heart of the weird, to the uncertainties and anxieties it produces about the nature of embodiment. Weirdness troubles the

⁴² See "Global Weirding," *Paradoxa*, Vol. 28, December 2016.

boundaries of the human body by revealing the ways in which human and nonhuman, life and nonlife, are not distinct categories but are instead co-constituted. In a kind of reversal of Frankenstein's exclamation at the site of his monster's birth ("It's Alive!"), the question marks instead a moment of hesitation, of doubt: is it? The Weird, in both its modernist and contemporary articulations, continues to return us to embodied moments marked by curiosities, uncertainties, and fears. The Weird's resurrection in New Weird forms, drawn from modernism, might serve as evidence that these moments continue to haunt human experience, though the nature of this rapidly changing experience in the 21st century continues, perhaps, to call for a Newer, a Next Weird.

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