RAW FEELINGS: ECOLOGIES OF RACE AND SEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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RAW FEELINGS: ECOLOGIES OF RACE AND SEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Raw Feelings reads contemporary literary texts, from Derek Walcott to Carmen Maria Machado, that are characterized by what I call "raw feeling." I theorize this term as narrative moments that turn to more-than-human raw matter—for instance, the pulpy flesh of fruit, fresh roadkill, or even bad weather—in response to racist and misogynist gaslighting. Drawing on phenomenology, affect theory, and queer studies, I argue that these moments of interspecies comparison enable characters to reclaim the truth content of their perceptions by new means. I contextualize how this contemporary literature, from queer, trans, Latinx, African American, and Caribbean perspectives, reappropriates and redefines raw feeling from its earlier uses in colonial logics of the environment. Additionally, against the term's original psychological meaning as the "inner" and "private" parts of an individual's consciousness, I suggest that these texts instead tap into a more colloquial sense of feeling raw: the everyday ways that bodies soothe themselves when faced with conditions of pain and violation. In this regard, raw feeling points to alternative forms of agency, and even erotic pleasures, that appear in unexpected places.

Chapter One offers an initial definition of raw feeling through reading Carmen Maria Machado's 2017 collection of stories, *Her Body and Other Parties*. The chapter focuses on the feminine, queer, phenomenological dimensions of raw feeling as a form of surprising eroticism. Chapter Two contrasts Jesmyn Ward's 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones* with William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, in order to look at how atmosphere and climate have been conceived as responsible for molding human bodies' racial and sexual "character." Chapter Three compares Négritude's anti-colonial interest in the idea of the "plant-human," with Shani Mootoo's 1996 novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*, where the narrator comes to understand their status as transgender

through botanical comparisons to nonbinary plants. Chapter Four reads Derek Walcott's environmental poetry, which suggests that landscapes are alive, and even have their own language, while at the same time warning readers against the expectation that environmental rawness can automatically provide a more "authentic" identity.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Austin Lillywhite grew up in Folsom, California. He moved to Providence, Rhode Island in 2010 to attend Brown University for his bachelor's degree. At Brown, he pursued majors in Comparative Literature and Anthropology, graduating *magna cum laude* in 2014. After two years working as an after-school teacher at a middle school in Oakland, California, he enrolled as a Ph.D. student in the Department of Literatures in English at Cornell University in 2016. While at Cornell, Austin taught writing courses on American, Global Anglophone, and environmental literatures, where his teaching was recognized by a Martin Sampson Teaching Award. In 2020-2021, he was a resident fellow at the Society for the Humanities, researching the interdisciplinary focal theme of "Fabrication." During his time at Cornell, he also served as a board member of *Diacritics*, a critical theory journal housed in Cornell's Romance Studies department, and as a member of the Graduate Policy and Curriculum Committee for the Literatures in English department.

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INTRODUCTION

"Savage Delight"

Halfway through his *Walden; or Life in the Woods*, Henry David Thoreau presents readers with the following anecdote:

> As I came home through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my pole, it being now quite dark, I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented.[1]

The sentence provides a graphic opener to the chapter "Higher Laws." Readers imagine the stomach-turning image, and gustatory sensation of "devouring raw" the fresh meat of a "wild" animal. Readers question, as well, whether some part of them might identify with this "temptation," this "strange thrill of savage delight." This is perhaps by design on Thoreau's part. The chapter to which this imagined scene of raw carnivory serves as an entrée argues *against* eating meat, not just raw, but in general—and not so much for any "ill effects" to one's body, but rather, because "the imagination will not be reconciled to flesh and fat."[2] The opener, then, functions as something like a first moment in a dialectical process: inviting readers to acknowledge the "savage delight" in rawness lurking in themselves, before urging them to refine that "thrill" in the service of "higher laws."

This memorable moment in *Walden,* a watershed text in American environmentalism, poses a question about the relationship between rawness and the environment. But just how does rawness operate as an environmental logic in this seminal scene? Perhaps most noticeable is that the environmental promise of "rawness" is not a question of food ("not that I was hungry then"),

[1] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 202.
[2] Ibid., 207.

but rather an existential one: to literally become "wild" in the sense of becoming one with the environment, in the way a native animal would. In this regard, rawness names health—in a holistic, "bioregional," rather than merely physiological, sense—as the "substrate" of environmentalism.[3] But more than that, rawness is envisaged as an avenue specifically to *wildness*, rather than *wilderness*. This distinction is significant. For, in this regard, rawness reconfigures the environment not as a question of physical location ("wilderness"), but rather as a psychic condition, and even as a category of identity.[4] Consuming raw flesh, in this scene, provides an avenue to possess "wildness," because of the way that rawness is imagined to undermine the very basis of one's "humanity." As Thoreau writes later in the same chapter, "We are conscious of an animal in us… It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies… It may enjoy a certain health of its own."[5] Thus, rawness, as the key to wildness, names the idea of a primordial, even "animal" self lurking, subterranean, within the "human." But, insofar as rawness names something beyond the human, even something "posthuman"—something creaturely in us, the "swarms of foreigners" making up our bodies[6]—rawness, above all else, reveals how downplaying the human, in favor of recognizing the animal in us, simultaneously functions as a *racialized* environmental identity category.[7] For, the "instinct" to rawness, which Thoreau calls

[3] Jennifer Thomson, *The Wild and the Toxic: American Environmentalism and the Politics of Health* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 1.
[4] The quasi-religious valorization of psychic/spiritual state over physical location runs throughout Thoreau's thought: ''Men rush to California and Australia as if the true gold were to be found in that direction; but that is to go to the very opposite extreme to where it lies. They go prospecting farther and farther away from the true lead, and are most unfortunate when they think themselves most successful. Is not our *native* soil auriferous?'' Henry David Thoreau, "Life Without Principle," in *Essays: A Fully Annotated Edition*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 355.
[5] Thoreau, *Walden*, 210.
[6] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 112.
[7] In this regard, Thoreau arguably serves as an earlier source-point for what Alexander Menrisky calls the "identity politics of ecology" that arose from a cross-pollination of environmentalism by psychoanalytic vocabularies in the 1960s-70s. Menrisky suggests that the result was that mainstream environmentalism of America—mainly white and male—took the most "authentic" self to be the self that is identified with the universal "ecosystem writ large,"

the "animal" in him, is "an instinct… toward a primitive rank and savage one."[8] The notion of "devouring rawness" that Thoreau fantasizes with the woodchuck in *Walden,* he associates earlier with the practices of "the Hottentots" and "our northern Indians" who devour "raw" the marrow of bones in a meal that is better for "manliness" than the "civilized" cuisine of Paris.[9] Thoreau's defamiliarization of himself into an "animal," then, is not so much a fantasy of the "posthuman," as much as it is a fantasy of the *pre*-human, a racial fetish of the "primitive"—a primitive self identified as inhabiting the "civilized" body.

The scene draws on a host of related meanings contained in the word "raw" in order to construct this environmental logic. Beginning with raw in the literal sense of "uncooked" food, and fresh, "unclotted" blood; next, signifying an emotion that is "deeply felt" and "palpable" (Thoreau is "seized" by his "savage" feeling); then, moving onto something which is "in a natural state," not yet "worked" upon by human influence, "undeveloped," "new," in a "pure" and "unmitigated" state; and finally landing on the word's racial, colonial meaning: that which is "uncivilized, coarse; brutal."[10] To be sure, this polyvalent slippage of meanings contained in rawness, which enables, ultimately, this racialized fantasy of how the self belongs to environment via "wildness," is not harmless: rather, rawness as an environmental logic serves, in the end, to naturalize white identity as the ultimate "native" and "primitive" identity of the New World, erasing histories of colonization and slavery along the way.[11]

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denying or subordinating the niceties of socially contingent differences of race, gender, and sexuality, which were seen as secondary, derivative, illusory, artificial, unnatural, even "repressive" of the "true" self, which is ecosystemic rather than social. Alexander Menrisky, *Wild Abandon: American Literature and the Identity Politics of Ecology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 15.

[8] Thoreau, *Walden*, 202.

[9] Thoreau, "Walking," in *Essays*, 260-61.

[10] "Raw, adj. and n.1," *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158694?rskey=YyIH1D&result=2&isAdvanced=false (accessed June 24, 2022).

[11] Commenting on a line from Thoreau's essay "Walking," where Thoreau claims that the farmers literally become more native to America than "Indians" because the former put fields to their proper use, Jedediah Purdy writes: "For both Muir and Thoreau, working, consuming, occupying, and admiring American nature was a way for a certain

This dissertation investigates the enduring logic twinning rawness and environment in American literature. One avenue to approach this problem is a genealogical critique of the ways that current trends premised on the "posthuman" in environmental humanities arguably remain patterned on the fetishization of an ecologically "raw" self, as a coded desire for a "primitive" self—as I have suggested in my earlier work,[12] and as critics such as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson have suggested before me,[13] and as more recently expanded on by critics, like Alexander Menrisky, who historicize the identity politics of radical environmentalism in the U.S. as containing a form of "white masculinity" that disavows racial difference while capitalizing off it.[14]

However, this dissertation's chief goal is to analyze how contemporary literary texts, from queer, trans, Latinx, African American, and Caribbean perspectives, reappropriate and reconfigure this perennial logic of rawness and environment. My dissertation suggests that contemporary authors do so primarily under the rubric of what I will call "raw feeling." Thus, the dissertation's project is partly to show how what I call "raw feeling" functions as a contemporary sensibility in aesthetic production, and partly a project of historical recovery, showing how that contemporary mood writes back to a longer lineage of racialized environmental logics in the Americas.

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kind of white person to become symbolically native to the continent." Jedediah Purdy, "Environmentalism's Racist History," *The New Yorker*, August 13, 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/environmentalisms-racist-history.

[12] Austin Lillywhite, "Is Posthumanism a Primitivism? Networks, Fetishes, and Race," *Diacritics* 46, no. 3 (2018): 100-119.

[13] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement 'Beyond the Human,'" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2 (2015): 215-218.

[14] Menrisky, *Wild Abandon*, 13.

Defining Raw Feeling

To begin with, how do we identify this thing I call "raw feeling," intervening in the environmental logic of rawness, as a trend of contemporary literature? Most basically, what I call raw feeling is a name for moments when narratives turn to more-than-human "raw matter"—from fresh roadkill, to the pulpy flesh of fruit, to the wetness of bad weather—in response to instances of racist, misogynist, and transphobic gaslighting, and other forms of trauma. Put briefly, we can recognize raw feeling when a narration invokes more-than-human matter as a lens for understanding the status of how a character feels, and manages to go on, in the wake of violations that target one's body, and even one's perceptual grasp on reality.

What are the chief effects of such a rhetorical, narrative appeal? As we will see across the chapters that follow, rather than respond to their objectification by an appeal to their species exceptionalism as "humans," these contemporary texts instead linger with objectness—specifically, a kinship with the more-than-human world. What does it mean, for example, to say that one's sexual pleasure is like being a bottle breaking against a wall; or that the mixture of pleasure and pain in erotic encounters both hurts and feels good, a bloody, throbbing sensation that reveals one's underlying "mammal-ness"—as the narrators in Carmen Maria Machado's stories do? Or to say that the feeling one has when one's lover is over them—hot and close—is like the feeling of the pregnant, humid Gulf Coast air in the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina—as Jesmyn Ward's narrator does? Or that the feeling of finally being able to wear the clothes that one desires as a trans person is like letting one's "nature" express itself freely in the way a plant would (Shani Mootoo)? Or that the very metric form of one's poetic, postcolonial self-expression is modeled on the biosemiotic language and rhythm of marching ants (Derek Walcott)?

What links all of these moments, which we will return to at length in the chapters that follow, is that these texts' suggest the solution to a narrator's objectification is not in a refusal of their objectness, but rather a self-identification as thingly, in the way that plants, animals, and even air may be, in ways that open new possibilities of embodied feeling and narrative agency.[15] In this dissertation, I look at each of these moments of "raw feeling," which proliferate across such contemporary texts, and ask how we make sense of them.

In these few examples, we can already glimpse how they rearrange the earlier American logics of rawness and environment, evinced by Thoreau, in significant ways. For, each of these examples confront us with narrators who present themselves, the feelings of their bodies, from the perspective of the more-than-human raw thing being "devoured," from the vantage of the woodchuck, so to speak, rather than from that of the human self. Perhaps even more significantly, their appeal to raw matter functions as an attempt to understand a distinctly "erotic" register of their experience.

The erotic dimension in these examples of raw feeling builds off of Audre Lorde's foundational sense of the term: the erotic as an everyday, epistemic resource, a form of knowledge that taps into unexpressed, unrecognized, and even inchoate feelings. In many ways, what Lorde describes as the erotic being something profoundly mundane, in the best sense of the term, rather than narrowly constrained to sex acts in the bedroom—as a name for any moment where one could say to oneself "It feels right to me," when meeting a previously unfamiliar feeling—comes close to the way raw feeling works in the everyday in these contemporary texts.[16] But, where Lorde sees numbness, exhaustion and powerlessness as forms of alienation in

[15] "It is easy to identify the wrongness of treating someone like a thing for one's own invidious gains, but it is much harder to understand or to judge when one treats oneself like a thing." Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 19.
[16] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*, ed. Roxane Gay

opposition to the erotic, in the texts at stake in this dissertation, the work of raw feeling is precisely to see these feelings (numbness, alienation, powerlessness) not opposed to, but on a spectrum with, and even a precursor to, such erotic forms of knowledge as "this feels right to me." Lorde may be right that feeling raw, numb, like a thing, is alienating; but this alienation of one's "human" autonomy, at stake in raw feeling, is not opposed to the erotic, but is actually constitutive of it for these narrators, who chart their feelings through comparison to the alien, more-than-human things around them.

In this regard, my dissertation joins a number of recent feminist scholars—from Mel Chen, to Anne Cheng, to Amber Musser, to Zakiyyah Iman Jackson—who attempt to theorize the possibilities for sensual, bodily, even erotic knowledge that emerge "under conditions of duress," as Musser puts it,[17] or conditions of "animated objectness" as Cheng has it,[18] or at the mediating grounds between human and inhuman, animate and inanimate as Chen puts it.[19] Each of these scholars, who are all key to my understanding of raw feeling, trace a lineage to Hortense Spillers's work theorizing the possibilities for newly "insurgent" agencies that might emerge in the wake of the violent "ungendering" of feminized, racialized flesh "in the raw."[20]

In defining how contemporary texts use more-than-human rawness, it is worth lingering for a moment over the legacy of Spillers's work in this regard. What does it mean to say, as Spillers does, that flesh "in the raw"—flesh reduced to objecthood by misogyny and racism—becomes "ungendered," yet that this violence actually opens new doors for alternative forms of

(New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 33.
[17] Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 40.
[18] Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, xii.
[19] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 10.
[20] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 220.

gendered subjectivity? Spillers's concept of "*female* bodies in the raw" names the way that objectification violently reduces racialized people to "raw" commodities, while also simultaneously rendering them available for sexual exploitation—a process that Spillers famously names the reduction of racialized flesh to a "pornotrope." Amber Musser suggests, however, that, insofar as this reduction of Black flesh to a "pornotrope" entails that Blackness is always foreclosed access to the "sovereignty" of being a fully "human" subject, Spillers's concept requires at its core a white subject who does the "pornotropic" desiring, objectifying and (dis)possessing of blackened flesh. Musser's intervention is to suggest the need for an "expansion" to the pornotrope, in order to position Blackness not as a "space of negation" by whiteness, but rather in relation to "multiple forms of brownness."[21] Like Fred Moten, who asks what alternative possibilities for sociality might emerge from this space of a subject objectified into "nothingness,"[22] Musser—in what she calls, like Moten, a "yes, and" to Afropessimism—wants to take seriously the alternative "knowledge systems," and forms of "intimacies" that might emerge in the wake of "the impossibility of sovereign subjectivity."[23]

This dissertation on raw feeling in contemporary literature joins these conversations in its investment in defining alternative forms of agency that emerge "below" the level of conscious intention, or "sovereign" subjectivity—what Anne Cheng would call a relocation of agency that takes place in the "very fibers" of one's skin, one's affinity for "objectness," or in one's "nothingness" in Moten's terms—rather than stemming from one's "inner" consciousness, "deep" psyche, or even voluntary choices. In what follows, I contend that raw feeling brings two

[21] Musser, *Sensual Excess,* 8.
[22] "Is it possible to desire the something-other-than-transcendental subjectivity that is called nothing? What if blackness is the name that has been given to the social field and social life of an illicit alternative capacity to desire? Basically, that is precisely what I think blackness is." Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 234.
[23] Musser, *Sensual Excess,* 9.

distinct things to this conversation: the difficult work of providing a phenomenology of this feeling of *objectness* (rather than subjectivity)—for what could we say about a feeling that is a feeling of "nothingness"?—and, second, a critical analysis of the ecological dimensions of this mode of alternative cognition and agency "in the raw."

The Feeling of Not Feeling

First, raw feeling serves to tease out the specific phenomenological contours of felt experience that occur at this level of object-like "nothingness," beyond the pale of "sovereign," fully conscious subjectivity. Rawness, after all, names the feelings of numbness, how one feels when one feels "not one's self," when one's body feels estranged, and even depersonalized.

In this regard, I want to draw out the colloquial sense expressed in the idiomatic usage of "feeling raw," as an emotion or mood—in the Heideggerian sense of mood not as set of glasses that project a colored veneer on the world, but rather as a fundamental atmosphere, welling up, and suffusing everything, in a way that comes from everywhere and nowhere.[24] The paradox of rawness is that when you feel raw, you are both most viscerally confronted with your body's presence (its availability to injury), and at the same time, oddly distanced from the body, as though an unbridgeable ocean gapes between "you" and "it," as a numb thing that belongs to no one. One could describe it as a "phantom" mode of feeling—for who exactly is the subject of a feeling that has no subject?[25]

[24] "A mood assails us. It comes neither from 'outside' nor from 'inside', but arises out of Being-in-the-world, as a way of such Being… Having a mood is not related to the psychical in the first instance, and is not itself an inner condition which then reaches forth in an enigmatical way and puts its mark on Things and persons." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 176.

[25] "Throughout, I rely on the notion of the phantom or ambivalent presence to complicate suppositions about the nature of bodily being, where that phantom is sometimes textual and sometimes material, sometimes designating the ambivalent presence of a particular region or part of the body and sometimes indicating a characteristic of embodied subjectivity in general." Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York:

I argue that this sense of a "phantom" subjectivity, drawn out so clearly in raw feeling, is not an aberration, but actually points to a general quality of what it's like to be a body at all—the idea that, accompanying all of one's perceptual interactions with the world, there is a feeling in which it is not "I" who perceives the world, but rather a general, anonymous "*one*" who perceives "in me."[26] We might describe this as the way our bodies seem to already live their own life, on the side of the world, without one's choice, or any voluntary "say-so" in the matter.

This notion of the depersonalized, anonymous, phantom "one," who accompanies my lived experience, is similar to Cressida Heyes's notion of the "anaesthetics of existence," which builds in turn on the work of Susan Buck-Morss and Lauren Berlant.[27] The feelings of "numbing out," that are a core part of raw feeling, as coping strategies in response to racial, sexual traumas and gaslighting, are close, in this regard, to what Berlant has called agency as a mundane, "maintenance activity" of the body "without grandiosity," a form of "sentience without full intentionality."[28] However, like Lorde's "erotic," Heyes defines the "anaesthetic" in opposition to the "aesthetic," sensation in opposition to non-sensation; for Heyes, sensations are the "interface" between self and world, and "anaesthetics" are the taking away, or suspension of that interface. By contrast, I see rawness not as the "lack" of the sensorial interface with the world; rather I see it in terms of a logic of "supplementarity."[29] The depersonalizing, phantom aspect of

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Columbia University Press, 2010), 2.

[26] "If I wanted to express perceptual experience with precision, I would have to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 223.

[27] Cressida Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

[28] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 100.

[29] "But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills to the brim [*comble*], it is as if one fills [*comble*] a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Supplementing and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which *takes-(the)-place* [*tient-lieu*]. As substitute, it does not simply add itself to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. Somewhere, something cannot fill itself up *by itself*, cannot accomplish itself, if not by allowing itself to be filled [*combler*] through sign and proxy." Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology: Fortieth Anniversary Edition*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns

rawness is something like a precondition that necessarily attends any "normal" feeling at all, and that makes it so that my perceptions of the world are not just "mine," or "owned" by me—an originary dispossession of myself, given over by this phantom, impersonal "one" to the alien, more-than-human environs of the self, and that makes any subsequent sense of self-ownership possible. This poses the question: if our pleasures are ways in which we are made "docile" and "normalized," as Heyes, and others before her like Ladelle McWhorter, contend, might raw feeling alter paths to discovering less docile, less individuated, less subject-centric pleasures?[30] Just what are those shapes of pleasures expressed in the midst of raw feeling—broken bottles, pre-hurricane air, plant tissue, marching ants?

Each of these examples point to something object-ish about desire, rather than thinking of desire as something that possesses. Indeed, raw feeling's figuring of pleasure as object-like, like much of the best forms of eroticism, names the body's tendency to be dispossessed: to become not its own, to become *other*, erasing any sense of the body as "mine," as "owned" by me, as my "property." In other words, in desiring, the "sensation owns me more than I own it," as Gayle Salamon puts it.[31] "I" am plunged into a depersonalizing, and even objectifying sense of "myself" that becomes "no one's" and "nothing," rather than "mine"; even when intense, the pleasure is diffuse, ambiguous, because it's not in any one "part," but spread like an atmosphere through the whole body, and even beyond one's skin.

As I will return to later at more length, this dissertation's goal is to analyze how literary forms offer unique ways for thinking about this phenomenon of depersonalization at stake in raw

Hopkins University Press, 2016), 157.

[30] "Pleasure, and our capacities for pleasure, are cultural and political resources in the struggle against sexual normalization. Pleasure, well used, might counter the power of discourses of desire where they draw most of their potency." Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 184.

[31] Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 52.

feeling. For, these contemporary texts don't just offer depictions of characters who experience raw feeling—feeling "pulpy" like a fruit, or warm-blooded like a "mammal," or like the humidity of air before a storm, or like a flowering cactus as a way to describe one's transess. Rather, through their experiments with narrative form, these contemporary texts blur the lines of the *who* and the *where* of a narrative point of view, thus also yielding, at the level of literary form, the sense of an ambiguous, "phantom" presence at stake in the activities of telling and reading; or, even using narrative forms to inculcate readers' own interpretive activities into their mesh of raw feelings through the metafictional artifices they construct—a process which yields a troubling, messy sense of the very activity of reading as complicit in the violences that, in part, condition raw feeling.

For the moment, though, I want to return to the second feature at stake in raw feeling: the ways in which raw feeling is a distinct modality of ecological cognition, that intervenes in earlier American logics twinning rawness and environment in racially fraught ways. As my dissertation shows, examples of this durable logic of rawness and environment thrive beyond Thoreau; indeed, several chapters examine how this logic of rawness and environment crops up in the early 1900s, alive and well in both American modernism, and Caribbean anticolonialism (Chapters Two and Three). William Faulkner's novels, for example, resuscitate this logic of rawness and environment when they depict bodies as a porous, raw material, whose very racial character is determined by exposure to the climates one dwells in. So too this logic of rawness and environment appears in the decolonial thinking of Carribean surrealists—for radically different political purposes—when they claim that the the "authentic" nature of Caribbean subjects is to be a "plant-human," a claim which both serves as a polemical critique of colonial "assimilationist" aesthetics, while nonetheless drawing on a colonial ethnology that essentializes

the relation between race and environment. As my dissertation will show, contemporary texts directly respond to these twentieth century examples of the logic of rawness, environment, and race that appear in modernism in the Americas.

In taking up this racial-ecological dimension of raw feeling, my dissertation builds on the work of recent ecocritics—such as Monique Allewaert, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Joshua Bennett, Andil Gosine, and Chelsea Frazier—who seek to address the racializing stakes of the appeal of an environmentally-minded "sub"-agency, located, below the "sovereign" self, in objectness and animalness. This scholarship coalesces around the proposition that, as Andil Gosine puts it, Black and postcolonial aesthetic productions refuse the five centuries long "burden of proof" placed on them to show that they are "'not animal' in order to claim our condition as human"; instead, they "boldly affirm" and even "embrace" their status as "animal."[32] These critics, building on Sylvia Wynter and Saidiya Hartman, premise their work on a rejection of the notion that recognizing a blackened subject as "human" will in any way ameliorate the dehumanizing racist violences done against them.[33] Jackson, for example, writes that the logic of "recognition" is like a proverbial Trojan horse. For, recognition as human ends up producing only deeper exposure to dehumanizing racist violence, rather than an escape from it. Not only does Jackson

[32] Andil Gosine, *Nature's Wild: Love, Sex, and Law in the Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 109.
[33] In many ways, this project marries the insights of Sylvia Wynter—whose work criticizes the category of "Man" for the way it is ideologically treated as "isomorphic" with all of empirical humanity, while "overrepresenting" the interests and point of view of a single "ethnoclass" (viz., white, Western, bourgeois)—with those of Saidiya Hartman, who argues that notions of the "liberal" inclusion of blackened individuals into "free" subjectivity only serves to further "discipline" them; or, as Hartman puts it: "Suppose that the recognition of humanity held out the promise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one's suffering but rather of intensifying it? Or what if this acknowledgment was little more than a pretext for punishment, dissimulation of the violence of chattel slavery and the sanction given it by the law and the
state, and an instantiation of racial hierarchy? What if the presumed endowments of man—conscience, sentiment, and reason—rather than assuring liberty or negating slavery acted to yoke slavery and freedom?" Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5. See also Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337.

"not propose the extension of human recognition as a solution to the bestialization of blackness";[34] rather, in fact, in a cruel irony, she argues, recognition actually leaves blackened subjects worse off: "the recognition of humanity… would only plunge one headlong into further terror and domination."[35] So too, in a similar vein, Frazier writes that the radical potential of Black feminist ecology lies in its refusal "of liberal reform or black inclusivity within extant mainstream political discourse."[36] Correspondingly, as Joshua Bennett suggests, rather than a "triumphalist rhetoric that would eschew the nonhuman" in order to claim recognition as "human," the question becomes: what happens when Black authors "engage in a critical embrace of what has been used against them as a tool of derision and denigration… a vision of human personhood rooted not in the logics of private property or dominion but in wildness"?[37]

I will have more to say on this "critical embrace" of a selfhood rooted in "wildness," despite its historical uses as a tool of racial violence (see Chapter Two). For now I want to note the way that, although it may seem that these scholars disavow the cognitive patterns on which "recognitive" labor is based altogether—with all its baggage of Hegel's "master-slave dialectic"—they still avow, ultimately, that recognition in some form or another remains an inescapable part of what's at stake in these alternative models of selfhood rooted in "wildness" rather than "dominion." As Gosine writes, for example, rather than getting rid of recognition altogether, "*recognition* of human animality" is what *results* in the sought-after "refusal" of recognition of humanity.[38] So too, for Bennett, "animal life operates as a site of *recognition* and

[34] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 17-18.
[35] Ibid., 20.
[36] Chelsea M. Frazier, "Troubling Ecology: Wangechi Mutu, Octavia Butler, and Black Feminist Interventions in Environmentalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016): 46.
[37] Joshua Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 3, 4.
[38] Gosine, *Nature's Wild*, 129. Emphasis mine.

reckoning for African American authors."[39]

But how, then, are we to disambiguate the two types of recognition at stake here? If it is, at least in some sense, *not* "recognitive" in a way that hues to species lines, what is the cognitive work being done in this exchange of one type of recognition (human-centric) for another type (multispecies-centric)? How are we to understand what constitutes the distinct dimensions of a recognition reconstrued as inter-species, rather than as intra-human—as happens so clearly in the literary instances of raw feeling at stake here, invoking, as they do, a whole gamut from animals, to insects, to botany, and even meteorology? And what are the risks of an environmental logic of the "sub-self," theorized by ecocritics (the self as "wildness," rather than "private property" or "dominion"), tainted as it is by this distinctly colonialist heritage? These are the questions I turn to next as I look to how raw feeling serves as an avenue to consider anew ecological cognition—to try to find out what, if not "recognitive" in an exclusively intra-human, "liberal," or even "subject-centric" sense, would be the cognitive work at stake in this embrace of the more-than-human.

A Brief Second Definition of Raw Feel(ing)

As a brief interlude en route to examining the ecological and cognitive dimensions of raw feeling, it bears mentioning at this point a second terminological history, drawn from the history of psychology, that accompanies the term raw feeling.

The related term, "raw feel," is a term from early twentieth century psychology, used as a name for the inner, "feely" properties of a conscious experience (often also called the "*qualia*" of conscious experience). The *OED* offers the following definition for "raw feel" in this

[39] Bennett, *Being Property*, 11. Emphasis mine.

psychological sense: "an immediate unconceptualized mental impression evoked by a stimulus."[40] Put in more basic terms, in psychology, a "raw feel" is a name for the (putatively) immediate data of first-person, "inner" experience (sensations, thoughts, feelings, etc.). The term was originally coined in behaviorist psychology in the early 1900s as a suggestive synonym for *qualia*: the notion that conscious sensations have a "unique 'inner stuff'" to them.[41] But, in this original usage, "raw feel" was meant as a pejorative term—a gibe meant to point out what behaviorists viewed as a quasi-mystical belief in an entity lacking any physical basis in reality, and thus ultimately chimerical.

I return to this psychological history of the term "raw feel" at length in Chapter One, where I argue that contemporary narratives revise the term's original pejorative meaning in this psychological sense (as something "inner" and "numinous") in favor of a colloquial sense that points to a basic mood of our flesh: the way bodies soothe themselves, numb out, and even find new pleasures, when faced with experiences of pain and violation.

The brief point here is that we can identify two distinct registers that intertwine in the term raw feeling: the ecological sense we began with (in Thoreau), and the term's additional psychological valence of *qualia*, which entangles the term in turn in philosophy of mind, and questions of the privacy, materiality, and objectivity of the "felt" dimensions of one's experience. In light of this curious, if troubled, psychological sense, I want to tease out now more concretely just in what ways raw feeling relates to notions of cognition as an "ecological" phenomenon; as well as what the risks are for theorizing cognition in ecological terms, given the racial fantasies of rawness we began with.

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[40] "Raw, adj. and n.1" in *OED Online*.
[41] Edward C. Tolman, *Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 215. See also Edward C. Tolman, "Nerve Process and Cognition," *Psychological Review* 25, no. 6 (1918): 423-442.

Ecological Cognition and Primitivism

As I will soon argue, the chief way that contemporary fiction responds to the problems raised by rawness and environment is by reconfiguring raw feeling not as a form of authenticity, but rather of fabrication. My suggestion is that literary form—with its unique capacities for self-reflexively drawing attention to its own fabricatedness in making up narrative perspectives and points of view—provides a unique response to the problems of authenticity raised by the twinning of environment and rawness. However, before unfolding what raw feeling as a literary form of fabrication looks like, I first want to offer a more direct look at the historical discourses that the formal innovations of these texts respond to: namely, discourses that premise the ecological dimensions of self, cognition, and agency in a version of essential, "primitive," "authentic," and "primordial" enmeshment in the world.

To begin with, we can already see the workings of the ecological redefinition of the depersonalized, objectish forms of agency at stake in raw feeling from the phenomenological descriptions of it above as an "unowned" form of (non)feeling. There is something arguably "vegetal" about the type of cognition at stake in this depersonalized notion of the "one" who perceives in "me"—the phantom, anonymous, numbness of sensation that's not really "mine." Michael Marder calls this "thinking without the head," forms of non-conscious intentionality that are the "cornerstone" of the "sagacity" of the vegetal world: the way that vegetal forms of life point toward "the impersonal, nonindividuated *it thinks* underlying and subverting the ever-present synthesis of *I think*," which irreducibly accompanies "all conscious representations."[42] Thus, we can already see how raw feeling is a sort of "zoomorphication" of thought—rendering

[42] Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 12.

thought into something de-humanized, depersonalized, distributed across environmental interactions.

Additionally, I said above that, in contrast to Lorde's erotics, and Heyes's anaesthetics, raw feeling revises the notion of bodily sensations as an "interface" cordoning off mind from world. Challenging the notion of the senses as "interface" between actor and world entails rejecting what Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor call a "mediationalist" paradigm for consciousness, a paradigm that splits off a thinking actor's "inner" representations from the world "out there." The notion of raw feeling, accordingly, as a "preconceptual" level of coping based in our "bodily commerce" with the world in a way that is "prior" to the level of conscious representations also suggests that agency isn't situated "within" an individual agent, but rather takes place "in the interaction itself."[43] This is what psychologist J.J. Gibson would call the "ecological" dimensions of perception: the fact that perception, cognition and agency have not so much to do with making mental images from a static position, but with an organism, situated in a particular environment, getting around and doing things, such that cognition is extended beyond the individual organism, and takes place instead in the *relational* interaction between organism and world; or, as Gibson puts it: "the boundary between the animal and the environment"—and correspondingly, between "subject" and "object"—"is not fixed at the surface of the skin but can shift."[44]

However, the automatically liberatory potentials of this ecological dimension of cognition are far from clear. As critics like Jennifer Thomson, Heather Houser and Alexander Menrisky point out, the "dissolutions of the body-environment boundary," far from an "auspicious" panacea, can equally signify sickness and death when taken to its logical endpoint

[43] Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 72.
[44] James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 2015), 35.

as a rigorously anti-anthropocentric framework.[45] As Thomson in particular points out, radically anti-anthropocentric forms of environmentalism have a long history of problematic misanthropy, evidenced, for example, in the way white, radical, "biocentrists" claimed AIDS as a much-needed, welcome, and even environmentally just response to what they saw as overpopulation ruining the earth; or, evidenced in the way James Lovelock's theory of earth as "Gaia" (recently re-popularized by Bruno Latour[46]), casts the planet as a single, living organism, with humans featuring as a pathogenic, cancerous microorganism parasitically populating it.[47]

But there are deeper grounds to this disturbing, quasi-eugenic logic underlying radically anti-anthropocentric forms of environmentalism. For, part and parcel with this long-standing historical investment in eugenics on the part of environmentalists and vice versa—which constitutes only the most outright form of racial hostility and white supremacy—is the racialized fetishism and fantasy of one's "raw" or "wild" self as "authentically" belonging to the environment that we started with, and that forms the flip side of the same coin.[48]

In many ways, the key contention of ecological cognition—that one's "self" isn't "in one's head," and isn't even really "individual," but is rather porous, seamlessly, "primordially," and irreducibly enmeshed with the environment—concerningly echoes the fantasy of the raw/wild self. After all, Thoreau's initial twinning of rawness and environment, as we already saw, seems to directly anticipate ecological cognition's notion of a level of conscious selfhood that is anti-individual and "pre-conceptual": the logic of a self that takes place below the

[45] Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 15.
[46] Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017). I have written at length elsewhere about the troubling racial politics behind Latour's renovation of the "Gaia" hypothesis. See Lillywhite, "Is Posthumanism a Primitivism?," 109-11.
[47] Thomson, *The Wild and the Toxic*, 3-4, 12.
[48] Purdy, "Environmentalism's Racist History," online. See also Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 180-87.

"human," and that defamiliarizes one's sense of oneself as a "sovereign" and "human" subject—the animal "instinct," and "worms" of the body, that govern Thoreau's self just as much as his "higher," so-called "sovereign" faculties of thought do. And yet, to reiterate, this environmental logic of agency and desire "below" the level of the subject ends up reproducing a logic of exclusionary, privileged white "indigeneity" premised on the racial fantasy of discovering the other-than-human "primitive" at work in the so-called "civilized" human self.

To what degree, then, is the notion of ecological cognition tied up with fantasies of getting back in touch with an anthropological "primitivism" as a promise of environmental authenticity?[49] The embodied understandings of cognition that are the bedrock of ecological cognition, in many ways, stem from a history of phenomenological infusions into cognitive work.[50] One is cued into this reigning interest in primitivism, in this phenomenological tradition, from the frequency of phrases like "our *primitive* contact with the world as embodied agents"; as well as from the claim that this level of "primitive" "wisdom" of the body—the body's ability to "gear" into the world in meaningful ways that predate any "conscious" representation—is where "our kinship with the other animals, not endowed with *logos*" lies.[51]

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[49] William Cronon defines the close link between primitivism and environmentalism in the U.S.: "No less important was the powerful romantic attraction of primitivism, dating back at least to Rousseau—the belief that the best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world was a return to simpler, more primitive living. In the United States, this was embodied most strikingly in the national myth of the frontier… As Turner described the process, easterners and European immigrants, in moving to the wild unsettled lands of the frontier, shed the trappings of civilization, rediscovered their primitive racial energies, reinvented direct democratic institutions, and thereby reinfused themselves with a vigor, an independence, and a creativity that were the source of American democracy and national character." William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*, ed. Ken Hiltner (New York: Routledge, 2015), 107. On the topic of "modernist primitivism"—the vogueish obsession with "primitive" African art that was a defining feature of the European avant-garde of the early 1900s—see Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch, eds., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[50] On seminal texts in "extended" and "enactive" cognition that take inspiration from Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, see Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991); Andy Clark, *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); and Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

[51] Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 64, 88. Emphasis mine.

This fascination with the "primitive" part of "us," rooted in our bodies' pre-representational capabilities, is pervasive in the phenomenological tradition. And the involvement of this "primitivism" is not a mere rhetorical coincidence. For, it substantively involves a fascination with so-called "actual" "primitive" cultures as well, which are seen as providing a "developmental" insight into this other, "primitive," non-representational bodily enmeshment in the environment.

Take for example Maurice Merleau-Ponty's interest in "primitive" cultures in *Phenomenology of Perception*.[52] There are a number of occasions throughout where Merleau-Ponty conspicuously draws an analogy between his relationship to his own body, and a "primitive" person's relationship to their landscape. These analogies, comparing embodiment and "primitive" personhood, are frequently flagged by the comparative phrase "just as." For instance, Merleau-Ponty writes that he has "an absolute knowledge" of where his pipe is located, and from that, a relative knowledge of where his hand and his body are, "*just as* the primitive person in the desert is always immediately oriented" in relation to his landscape, without having to first measure distances in terms of geometric units.[53] Elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty writes that "a primitive person" knows where his "encampment" is located not in relation even to physical landmarks, but rather through an existentially felt sense of space as an emotionally-charged situation: the space of "a certain peace or a certain joy, *just as, for me,* knowing where my hand is involves joining myself to this agile power that is dormant for the moment, but that I can take up and discover as my own."[54] Merleau-Ponty's rhetorical "just as, for me" phrase draws up a

[52] Heidegger also discusses primitivism in *Being and Time*; see Heidegger *Being and Time*, 76, 81-2. I focus on Merleau-Ponty's racial views here because Heidegger's problems with race are already well-known vis-à-vis his involvement with Nazism. See Víctor Farías, *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).
[53] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 102.
[54] Ibid., 298.

scalar analogy: *just as* a primitive person is to their landscape, *so is* Merleau-Ponty to his body. In a way, the effect of these analogies is claiming the primitive person is "in me," in my body; I live in my body, in the analogy, just as a primitive person lives in their landscape. Here, in the way a phantom "primitive" self lives a life of its own in Merleau-Ponty's body, we can hear direct echoes of Thoreau's claims of the "animal," "worms" in his body that live a life of their own.

These appeals to primitivity are far from a mere rhetorical decoration that lies external to the core logic of phenomenology. Rather, a fetishistic desire for a "primitive" selfhood is a fundamental part of the central concepts that make up the tradition. Merleau-Ponty appeals to primitivism here in order to bolster his argument that space is not just an "empty" or "blank" set of points laid out next to each other, but rather that it derives its original "sense" or its "orientedness," in the first place, from being environmentally situated, having a set of existential tasks. The turn in Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger away from Edmund Husserl's notion of the subject as "transcendental," and toward a notion of the subject as immanently, existentially entangled in the facticity of their more-than-human world—indeed, one might say, a precursor to the earthy, "posthuman" self, which figures the "human as humus,"[55] or the human "*as* earth" rather than merely "*on* the earth"[56]—raises its own set of problems.

Indeed, primitivism arguably is a core component of the theorization of "being-in-the-world" that makes up the central post-transcendental turn in the phenomenological tradition. The primitivism at stake in being-in-the-world stems from a conflation between "primitive" in an etymological sense of the term as meaning "first," "original" or "primordial," and in an

[55] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 32.
[56] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 111.

anthropological sense meaning "primitive" cultures. This conflation of etymological primitivism and cultural primitivism is displayed in the introduction to *Phenomenology of Perception,* for example, when Merleau-Ponty calls perception a "primitive function." Merleau-Ponty claims that children tend more to perceive the world in terms of whole situations (in terms of "*gestalts*"), whereas adults tend more to focalize discrete, atomized, local stimuli. Merleau-Ponty then compares this developmental claim of infantile perception to the way that "primitive people" perceive the world, arguing that "we" can only understand "primitive thought" if we relate it back to " the fund of perceptual experience" that it "attempt[s] to express."[57] It turns out that this "fund" of perceptual experience is nothing less than being-in-the-world itself: or as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "the pre-objective domain in ourselves."[58] We can thus see the collapse between the etymological sense of "primitive" and the anthropological sense of "primitive" take place here in the very definition of being-in-the-world.

My point is that being-in-the-world is a concept fundamentally contaminated by the same racially charged fantasies that we saw motivating the environmental logic of rawness we began with, with its earlier appeal to "the Hottentots" and "our northern Indians." Phenomenology's general investment in a world "below" or "before" the sophistications of "intellectual reflection" is part of the broader fantasy of lived experience as something primitive—and primitive in the truest sense, etymologically, in that it comes "first," it is "pre-objective." But this first level is irresistibly conditioned by a conflation with a racialized fantasy of "primitive people," who are likened in developmental terms to the way children express their worlds in more "naive," and "immersive" terms. Although Merleau-Ponty elsewhere seeks to criticize earlier anthropologists

[57] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 12.
[58] "Perception, insofar as it does not first of all posit an object of knowledge and insofar as it is an intention of our total being, are modalities of a pre-objective perspective that we call 'being in the world.'" Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 81.

of primitivism, like Auguste Comte, for trying to explain "primitive" cultures as a so-called "first stage" in the civilizational march toward scientific enlightenment, Merleau-Ponty nevertheless preserves the canonical, racist linkage of primitive people and children. His tweak is simply to say instead that the primitive/infantile is "just as" much in "our" (read: civilized, white) bodies in general. Thus, "being-in-the-world," or the notion of a "pre-objective," ecologically holistic level of perception, is part of a larger corpus of thought that fetishizes the possibilities of "rediscovering" the primitive other at the heart of the civilized West—an idea which lurks uncomfortably in the notion of being-in-the-world, as a fantasy of being indigenous, being "authentically" at home in the world, effectively claiming, in a way that whites can be "natives" too. Being-in-the-world, then, like Thoreau's woodchuck, serves as an alibi for a settler colonist fantasy of whiteness as the ultimate form of indigeneity.[59]

We can see this same pattern play out in more recent examples that bring together literature and ecological cognition. For example, it is no coincidence that one of Jonathan Kramnick's chief examples for a literary text that emblematizes such ecological cognition is *Robinson Crusoe*—a text that also emblematizes settler colonial logics of possession. Kramnick's interpretation of *Crusoe* as displaying an example of being-in-the-world—Crusoe arranges "his" island as "handsome" in the dual sense of both Heideggerian "ready-to-hand-ness" of the items in the settlement that he builds, as well as aesthetically pleasing—also fundamentally relies on processes of settler colonial land ownership and, eventually, ownership of non-white humans as servants. In Kramnick's treatment of *Crusoe*'s "handsome aesthetics," we can see how J.J. Gibson's argument for perceptual consciousness as an "animal" fact[60]

[59] See Taylor Eggan, *Unsettling Nature: Ecology, Phenomenology, and the Settler Colonial Imagination* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022); and Herman Rapaport, "Fantasies of Settlement: Heidegger, Tocqueville, Fichte, Faulkner," *Modern Fiction Studies* 63, no. 1 (2017): 9-28.
[60] "The seeing of oneself is not a complex intellectual experience but a simple primitive one. The orthodox dogma

translates into Crusoe being at home in his world, directly in it, rather than a trespasser—a model of environmental "dwelling" and authentic existential belonging that extends all the down way to the roots of cognition and perception, making Crusoe a "native" in his very being-in-the-world, rather than a Cartesian *Cogito,* trapped in his head, at a skeptical remove who interacts with the world around him only "from a distance."[61] Thus, claiming Crusoe's "handsome" aesthetic as an "ecological" one is a key part of paving the way for his claim to a settler colonial "right" to dominion over both land and non-white humans, as the "true" (white) "native" on the island.

This version of "ecological cognition" plays out a familiar fantasy that white humanity has gotten "too heady," and needs to get back in touch with the "rank" world of things (to return to Thoreau's phrase). In this durable Western fantasy, Blackness is seen as naturally, magically providing a kind of redemptive "salt of the earth" way of living, that promises to "reconcile" humanity with nature and all of existence.[62] As Frantz Fanon tersely describes this fantasy: "When the Whites feel they have become too mechanized, they turn to the Coloreds and request a little human sustenance."[63] Indeed, in light of Fanon's pronouncement of whites feeling "too mechanized," it is not coincidental that what "4E cognition"—the notion that cognition is "embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended"—seeks to oppose is a "computational" model of consciousness, that is too "abstract," too "automatic," too caught up in heady "representations."[64] Insofar as ecological cognition entails a nostalgia for a primitive self, for making the (white) self

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that no animal but the human animal has *self-consciousness* is surely false." Elsewhere: "Presumably our primitive ancestors had also been making and observing traces long before the first artist discovered that by means of lines one could *delineate* something." Gibson, *The Ecological Approach*, 194, 263.

[61] Jonathan Kramnick, *Paper Minds: Literature and the Ecology of Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 75.

[62] Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 7.

[63] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 108.

[64] Albert Newen, Leon de Bruin, and Shaun Gallagher, "4E Cognition: Historical Roots, Key Concepts, and Central Issues," in *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*, eds. Albert Newen, Leon de Bruin, and Shaun Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

belong at home in the environment, the question is just *who* this home is for—and the answer is a white self that dispossesses any other's right to belong in an environment.[65]

Thus, we need a version of ecological cognition that is ecological while critical of racialized fetishes/fantasies of "dwelling."[66] How do we avoid the "mediationalist" framework (pitting mind on one side, and world on the other), without falling into the opposite problem: the body as brute material thing, rife with racialized fantasies, fetishes and essentialisms, the dream of the primordial critterly self, savage animal, etc.?

Narrative Form and Fabrication

Across the chapters that follow, the narratives by Machado, Ward, Mootoo, and Walcott each criticize the dangers of a romantic environmental logic of the self authentically enmeshed with the world. In different ways, as we will see, they refigure raw feeling not as a fantasy of something "authentic," but rather show the "fabricated" aspects of rawness. In this sense, I argue, the uniquely literary dimensions of form in these texts, in their emphasis on raw feeling as something both fabricated and fabricating in turn, provide a response to the problematic conflations of environment and identity in cognitive and phenomenological discourses. In Machado and Walcott, for example, short stories and epic poetry thematize, through

[65] Calvin Warren argues that Dasein, in Heidegger's sense, must first negate "nothing," or Black being, in order to become available. Or, in the terms above, if Dasein is to be "primitive," it must first negate Black being. The result for Warren is that Black being lacks any home in the (antiblack) world of Dasein, physically or existentially: "If, as we learn in *Being and Time*, Dasein uses tools to experience its thrownness in the world (establishing its facticity) and to develop its unique project oriented toward the future (projectionality), the Negro—as commodity, object, slave, putative backdrop, prisoner, refugee, and corpse—is the *quintessential* tool Dasein uses. The *use* of the Negro metaphysically and ontologically, as a tool, is what *black* thinking is tasked with pursuing." Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 8.

[66] Deconstructively minded critics make some ground here. See Ted Toadvine, "The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences," in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, eds. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 139-154; and Michael Marder, "Ecology as Event," in *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, eds. Matthias Fritsch, Philippe Lynes, and David Wood (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 141-164.

metafictional artifices, the dangers of reading too much into the raw feelings they present, as offering any "authentic" glimpse into the interiority of their narrators. In Ward and Mootoo, narrators blur the lines between first and third-person points-of-view, frustrating any search for the "origin" sources of a narrator's perspective. So, although each of these texts appeals to raw plant, animal, and meteorological matter to make sense of their portrayals of gendered and racialized violations**,** the texts refigure "rawness," away from authenticity and toward fabrication.

This push-back against a too-neat conflation of self and environment on the part of raw feeling as a term, can be quite explicit. For example, in Chapters Two and Three, I look at the ways in which authors like Ward and Mootoo use raw feeling in ways that directly contrast with earlier twentieth century logics of rawness and environment that fall in line with the "primitivizing" tendencies we've looked at. These chapters, that make up the middle of the dissertation, look in depth, for example, at two historical environmental views of race held in modernist movements of the 1930-40s, that hold race to be essentially determined by environmental factors—both the white supremacist views of climate and race evinced in William Faulkner's novels (Chapter Two), as well as, on the opposite end of the spectrum, the notion of a "vegetal" self that couches an essentialist rhetoric of race in the decolonial polemics of Négritude (Chapter Three).

In this regard, my dissertation builds off recent work by scholars such as Greta LaFleur and Sonya Posmentier who analyze the historical dangers of seeing the human as seamlessly entwined with the environment. LaFleur's work, for example, provides a critical historical analysis of environmental theories of race and sexuality in the long eighteenth century that already saw the self as porous—as a product, literally, of its environs. As she puts it, this way of

thinking is "an environmental logic in which the climatic, humoral, physical, and social milieu of the body was understood to be a determining force, at least as much as individual inclination."[67] LaFleur's work is critical insofar as it shows, in another light from what we've already seen, that getting "below" the subject may not be the panacea it seems. For, in a sense, settler colonists in early America already believed in a quasi-posthuman model of self rooted "before" or "below" the "subject," and did so precisely by appealing to an environmental logic. And yet, even in this period where race and sexuality were understood not as a "product and property of individuals," or "an autonomous, closed system," but rather as "disaggregated" from the body, and located instead in a "collection of environmental factors," the environmental logics of self nevertheless served to entrench essentialist views of identity—"to characterize and etiologize human difference, especially racial difference."[68]

In a similar vein, Sonya Posmentier analyzes the way that even postcolonial Caribbean literature of the late twentieth century maintains an eco-nationalist vein that problematically echoes the "the colonial equation between climate and culture."[69] Posmentier calls these appeals to climate, weather, and nature—understood as key ingredients to achieving an "authentically" Caribbean aesthetic style—a form of "ecomimesis" or "ethno-environmental mimeticism," since it seeks to homologize environmental nature with national and regional postcolonial identities.[70] This "mimetic fallacy" or "colonial logic of mimesis" threatens to undermine postcolonial literature if we take it too literally, for the way it potentially naturalizes, romanticizes, and even essentializes the relation between race and region—"echo[ing] a colonial tradition which fails to

[67] Greta LaFleur, *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 6.
[68] Ibid., 21, 31, 35, 60.
[69] Sonya Posmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2017), 13.
[70] Ibid., 8, 9.

separate the bodies and minds of the enslaved people from their climates."[71] The middle chapters of my dissertation return to moments in trans-Atlantic modernism that participate in these environmental, climatological theories of race, in order to more fully flesh out the dangers of intertwining rawness, self, and environment, and, in turn, clarify how contemporary texts differ from them. How do these contemporary texts, then, define raw feeling—which after all, rests in a comparison of self with the more-than-human world—while at the same time highlighting and critically intervening in these earlier American logics of rawness understood primarily as a version of eco-mimesis, conflating self and environment?

In response to this question, I analyze how narrative form, as an explicit activity of experiment and fabrication, can offer a unique solution to the problematic twinning of ecological cognition with rawness in the sense of a fantasy of primitive authenticity, or homey enmeshment with one's environs. For, one of the things that marks each of these contemporary texts' specifically narrative investment in raw feeling is an efflorescence not of "natural" or "realistic" narrative forms, but rather of ostentatiously fabricative genres of fiction: allegory, metafiction, fables, myths, magical realism, framed narratives, intertextuality, *cento*, and so on—in short, that "delight in design" that is the hallmark of "fabulative" forms of fiction that tend "away from the representation of reality" in naturalist, realist, or "mimetic" genres of fiction, in favor of "ethically controlled fantasy."[72]

As we will see in the chapters that follow, these texts deliberately flaunt the very "seaminess" of the "fabrics" of their narrations. One of Machado's narrators shows, for example, the host of popular fables and children's tales surrounding taboos of women's sexuality that she weaves and "stitches" into her narration of her own experiences of misogyny with her spouse

[71] Ibid., 11-2.
[72] Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 10-2, 19, 29.

(Chapter One). Ward's teenage narrator, far from producing a seamless "stream-of-consciousness" account of the twelve days leading up to Hurricane Katrina, scrambles any sense of a smooth surface to her narration through using frames that jolt the reader between multiple "present" tense moments; through memories of her dead mother that haunt the text as a phantom presence; and most obviously, through conspicuous appeals to Greek mythology as a lens for understanding her own sexuality as a Black, single, teenage mother on the Mississippi Gulf Coast (Chapter Two). Mootoo's narrator claims to provide the story of an elderly woman that they serve at a nursing home, but increasingly laces their own life into the story, all the while asking the reader to "forgive the lapses" in their narrative "mission," even as these "lapses" take over the real interest of the story, and blur the lines between the narrator's story, and the history of the woman they're telling about, as they turn their narration into an explicit activity of fabrication ("fashioning a single garment out of myriad parts").[73] And Walcott's narrator famously flaunts self-aggrandizing parallels between his tale of the mundane activities of the local working-class villagers of his native Caribbean island, and the epic ancient Greek poetry of Homer—parallels that are often so over-the-top that critics sometimes find them to be distractions. It is perhaps no surprise that Walcott's most famous metaphor for his poetic process hinges on an act of literal repair and repetitions of fabrication: gluing back together the fragments of a shattered vase from "disparate, ill-fitting," broken pieces, such that "its white scars" show, and its "original" integrity can no longer be "taken for granted."[74]

These texts' practices of flaunting their fabricatedness, then, not only puts them in relation to other textual worlds which they literally recycle or "stitch" into the fabric of their own

[73] Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 3, 105.
[74] Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 69.

narrative. More importantly, it also raises the problem of what interpretive mode is appropriate to reading these fabricated narratives, seams and all: do we, as readers, read them allegorically, pulling at the seams to separate top and bottom, inside and out, truth and artifice—or do we read them at a surface level, taking them at face-value, leaving the seams intact?

This question raises worries over the ethics of narrating and interpreting the experiences of raw feeling, given this tension between literalism and fabrication. The point of this fabricating, metafictional, intertextual, and allegorical play in these texts is to demonstrate how messy separating surface from depth can be in the act of reading. On the one hand, these texts offer up the injunction to take their narrative accounts of their raw feeling at face-value, to cleave to the surface-level of the appearances they present as such: don't read into their raw feelings too much, take them at their word, as literal, as just what they appear to be on the surface. Yet on the other hand, these texts' playing with fabrication often incites, at the same time, just the opposite mode of reading. For, they seemingly invite the reader to treat them as though their narratives have what scholars of allegory call a textual "integument" or "covering"—the "fabulous narration" that "wraps" the text, but, that also "veils" the "true," "hidden" meaning, and which must be penetrated or stripped off by a reader.[75] But, at the same time that these texts solicit readers to pull the "veil" off their fabrications, making good on this apparent textual solicitation for a penetrating interpretation puts the reader into a problematic position, uncomfortably shared by those in the narrative who violate the narrators' realities. The fabrication in these texts suggest the impossibility of disentangling literal textual surface and hermeneutical depth from one another.

In this regard, in the fabricated dimensions of rawness in these texts, I would suggest that

[75] Rita Copeland and Stephen Melville, "Allegory and Allegoresis, Rhetoric and Hermeneutics," *Exemplaria* 3, no. 1 (1991): 170.

Sylvia Wynter's work provides a clue forward in how to relate ecological cognition back to fabricated narrative forms, through her engagement with cognitive studies, race, and narratively constructed "genres of human being." Wynter suggests, across her work, that racism is a result of a purely "biocentric" model of human—a notion that humans are *first* biological beings, who *second* go onto produce cultural, narrative utterances. Wynter, by contrast, suggests that "as humans, we cannot preexist our genres of Being Human," genres which are culturally, narratively produced, and which do *not* come after purely biophysical notions of humanity, but rather themselves shape and condition the latter, in a process she dubs "sociogeny," following Frantz Fanon.[76]

I mention Wynter's work not only because she is a central figure of Black ecofeminist theory, but because of her deep investment in revising the race-blind aspects of both phenomenology and cognitive studies. As Wynter puts it: "If the mind is what the brain *does*, *what* the brain *does*, is itself culturally determined through the mediation of the socialized *sense of self*, as well as of the 'social' situation in which this *self* is placed."[77] As Wynter shows, in her intervention into cognitive studies and phenomenology, the taken-for-granted idea that consciousness is "self-evident" to those who have it, that there is a *de facto* norm of consciousness, is precisely what is called into question in the case of racialized consciousness.[78] The problem is that this state of affairs—claiming any pre- or supra-cultural understanding of the self-evident, *de facto* "norms" of consciousness—is also ideologically useful: it supports white

[76] Demetrius L. Eudell, "'Come on Kid, Let's Go Get the *Thing*': The Sociogenic Principle and the *Being* of Being Black/Human," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 237.
[77] Sylvia Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of 'Identity' and What it's Like to Be 'Black,'" in *National Identity and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, eds. Mercedes Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (New York: Routledge, 2001), 37.
[78] "Yet it is precisely this self-evident consciousness that Fanon has found himself not only compelled to call in question, but also to indict, as itself being the cause of the black's autophobic as well as the white's anti-black 'aberration of affect.'" Ibid., 56.

supremacy, in the way that it serves the notion of "normal" or "self-evident" human conscious experience in terms that fit with the position of the "ethno-class" "Man" (i.e., a faux-universal stand-in for white, male, middle-class, Western, etc.). In short: in a purely biocentric approach to cognition, in the current state of affairs, anti-Blackness becomes normalized as "lawlike" even down to the level of *qualia*, the putative self-evidence of any "universal" experience of what consciousness feels like.[79]

Wynter's conclusion is that the study of words, and narrative in particular, is key to linking the study of an anti-biocentric, properly sociogenic approach to neurobiology, a model which would be capable of grasping the "biocultural" or "bios/logos" hybridity of cognition.[80] Such a method—which Wynter calls an "objective phenomenology"—would not mean the setting aside of either subjective appearances, or narrative modes of understanding the "human," for these are in fact the only objective data for understanding the culture-specific governing codes of "human subjectivity" (i.e. sociogeny). Without doing so, we won't be able to get beyond our present culture's biocentric mode—based on a notion of human identity as the "normal" of ethno-class "Man"—which gives rise to anti-Blackness as an adaptive mode and even law of *qualia*.[81]

My commitment, then, to phenomenology is a wary one, in light of being-in-the-world's ties to primitivism, while nonetheless cleaving to the importance of a vocabulary for attending to

[79] "Yet as an order of consciousness that is, at the same time, indispensable to the dynamic instituting and stable reproduction of our present ethno-class conception/criterion of the human… if the black/white psycho-existential complex, as well as the respective 'aberrations of affect'—i.e. that of anti-black racism, as well as that of black autophobia, are not only of 'normal' adaptive advantage to our present mode of being human, to its governing sociogenic principle, how do we extricate ourselves?" Ibid., 57.
[80] Sylvia Wynter, "Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture: The Cinematic Text after Man," in *Symbolic Narratives/African Cinema: Audiences, Theory and Moving Images*, ed. June Givanni (London: BFI, 2000), 59.
[81] Anti-Blackness is an "adaptive psychoexistential complex of qualitative mental states… to which our present culture's biologically absolute notion of human identity, as expressed in the 'normal' Self of 'Man', lawlikely gives rise." Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle," 60-1.

the affective way things feel, in lived experience, as Sylvia Wynter insists on as a central resource for sociogeny's narratively constructed dimension. My commitment to a phenomenology is Wynterian; and I look to raw feeling as teasing out the details of the uniquely narrative dimensions of the (re)cognitive work between human/more-than-human, which is the corollary of rejecting "Man" in the sense of an "ethno-class" norm. Raw feeling, in light of Wynter's work, also teases out further what an "objective phenomenology" might look like. For, objective phenomenology, here, as we've seen, takes on further meanings beyond just *qualia* or first-person views, in the literary revaluations of feeling objectish (and feeling "objectish" beyond the purely negative forms of objectification Wynter analyzes). Too, Wynterian phenomenology offers a compelling "third way" between the putative impasse between phenomenology and historicist genealogy,[82] a "post-transcendental phenomenology," or "critical phenomenology," *avant la lettre*.[83]

In this regard, seeking to understand the unique phenomenological dimensions of raw feeling in a different ecological light than the earlier logics twinning rawness and environment, we might think of the unique formal contortions and fabrications of these narrative forms as a genre of what anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls "cannibal metaphysics." Raw feeling argues that bodies are made through erotics, and that thinking about the body this way means thinking about it intersubjectively—or inter-objectively, rather—a constitution of desire

[82] "If phenomenology takes subjective experience as its object and description as its method, the later Foucault takes phenomenology (and other human sciences) as his object and history as his method. In this sense, the rejection of phenomenology could not be more complete." Todd May, "Foucault's Relation to Phenomenology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 306. See also Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence*, 14-19, 27-51.

[83] For definitions of "critical phenomenology," see Gayle Salamon, "What's Critical about Critical Phenomenology?," *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 1, no. 1 (2018): 8-17; Alia Al-Saji, "Glued to the Image: A Critical Phenomenology of Racialization through Works of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77, no. 4 (2019): 475-488; and Lisa Guenther, "Critical Phenomenology," in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, eds. Gail Weiss, Ann Murphy and Gayle Salamon (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 11-16.

in the presence of and in recognition of other embodied beings: not just other mammals, but plants, and even the weather. Like the way that raw feeling, in the contemporary sense, twists away from Thoreau's perspective of the human devouring the woodchuck, and instead moves "inside" the perspective, so to speak, of the woodchuck who is devoured, so too does cannibal metaphysics provide a vocabulary for this type of perspectival fluidity. As Tao DuFour puts it, this theory of cannibal metaphysics points to the way that "the animate body is the condition of possibility for the incorporation of a perspective," and perspective not in the sense of "a view on the world—a 'worldview,'" but rather in the way "the body itself expresses the incorporated world."[84] This notion of perspectives enabled by bodies, rather than minds, offers an idea of nature that is multiple rather than unitary—a "multinaturalism."[85] Perspective is not the property of a subject who would pre-exist the occupation of the somatic perspective, but rather is an "empty position." It is thus a subjectivity that is "anti-subject"; its intentionality is not a product of its own agency, but its corporeal, multinatural perspectivism.[86] Furthermore, as in the way that raw feeling works, animals, vegetables, and air participate in this "anti-subject" subjectivity of perspectivism, yielding nature as "ontologically" subjective and cultural.[87] As we will see in the chapters that follow, the attempt to grasp both the depersonalization at stake in rawness, and the "multinaturalist" perspectivism of cannibal metaphysics, is evidenced in the extreme formal distortions of fabrication that take place across these texts, both blurring certainty about the point

[84] Tao DuFour, "Toward a Somatology of Landscape: Anthropological Multinaturalism and the 'Natural' World," in *Routledge Research Companion to Landscape Architecture*, eds. Ellen Braae and Henriette Steiner (New York: Routledge, 2019), 158.
[85] "'Nature', therefore, is not an objective category over against subjective 'culture', but is the concrete, phenomenological experience of the structure: world." Ibid., 159.
[86] Ibid., 161.
[87] "If the concept of the body from the point of view of a somatic phenomenology projected to its logical and phenomenological limits reveals that animal and vegetal worlds participate in a 'formal', transcendental subjectivity, and in their concreteness are determined by spatial and temporal specificities that would be indicative of a historicity, then nature is—ontologically—subjective." Ibid., 165.

of view of where and who the telling of a narrative is coming from, while also flaunting, metafictionally, the seams that make up a narrative point of view, and sometimes catching the reader out by demonstrating their complicity in the points of view enacted in the text.

Chapter Summary

Chapter One, "What Is a Raw Feel?," offers an initial definition of raw feeling, and its historical backdrop in psychology and philosophy of mind. The chapter primarily engages the phenomenological and erotic components underpinning raw feeling, in order to set the stage for the environmental discussions of raw feeling that follow in the rest of the dissertation. In the chapter, I draw on queer and trans phenomenology in order to offer a primer into how one's "raw feel" of their own body may be "fabricated" and yet "true." The chapter analyzes how phenomenological "fabrications of the body" occur, at a formal level, through Machado's recycling and repurposing of the misogyny in children's horror stories and gothic fairy tales. Machado recontextualizes such tropes through a genre akin to the late antiquity practice of *cento*, a method of composition where lines from older, canonical texts are "stitched" together in order to form a new text with a different meaning. Ultimately, I argue that despite the narrator's explicit request to take her magical realist presentation of her body at a literal level, her engagement with fables means that she is not entirely eschewing allegorical reading, and that indeed, her fabulist narrative mode evidences the impossibility of getting rid of any hint of allegory altogether. Instead, I suggest that her "skin deep" narration, as a result, calls for a mode of reading that goes between surface reading and allegory. In this regard, the cooperation between the raw and the fabricated signals a way of maintaining a constructivist ontology, while

also suggesting that they get at something "real" about this constructivist reality.[88]

Chapter Two, "Raw Weather," provides the first full account of the direct environmental consequences of raw feeling that predominate the rest of the dissertation. The chapter contrasts Ward's Hurricane Katrina novel *Salvage the Bones* with Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, reading both texts specifically for the way that they focalize atmosphere, climate, and the quality of air itself as a way to understand the rawness of bodies—their porous susceptibility to the environment, as Posmentier and LaFleur would have it. In the first half, I consider the problems with over-idealizing the "aesthetics of atmosphere," a recent trend in literary criticism, by showing how atmosphere works as the chief way in which white supremacy is spread as an ideology across Faulkner's novel—a "smog" of whiteness, as it were.[89] After, I look at the ways in which Ward's narrator Esch reconfigures atmospheric rhetorics to grapple with both the anti-Black colorism and misogyny she experiences in her romantic relationships, as well as with the climate catastrophe of Katrina. I suggest that atmospheric rhetorics of rawness crucially offer a way for Esch to figure her own practices of erotic pleasures in the interstices of a sexuality which, following Roderick Ferguson, may be inside the "norms" of sexuality while still located askew of it: heterosexual yet not heteronormative.[90]

Chapter Three, "Trans Plants," picks up on this thread of how rawness, in a botanical register, provides a vocabulary for self-understandings of genderqueerness in the postcolony. I

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[88] "For me the word 'construction,' even when defined in nonvoluntaristic terms, does not quite explain the ways in which sexual orientation can be felt as inherent and bodily or even as essential. It does not explain how orientations can feel 'as if ' they come from inside and move us out toward objects and others… So we need to produce explanations of how orientations can operate simultaneously as effects and be lived or experienced as if they are originary or a matter of how one's body inhabits the world." Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 79-80.

[89] Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 86.

[90] Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 87.

look to Shani Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*, which I call a "trans botanical" narrative, since the narrator's journey into transness is chiefly expressed through analogies to the titular cereus plant. I situate this novel's turn to trans subjectivity as vegetal within a longer Caribbean tradition of decolonial rhetoric centered on the figure of the "plant-human," beginning with the Négritude movement in the 1930s. I locate how this decolonial rhetoric of the Caribbean human as a vegetal being is complicated, at times, by its colonial and ethnological sources. At the same time, Mootoo's novel in turn, evinces some of these same pitfalls: while a botanical register is liberating for her narrator's experience of their transness on the one hand, on the other hand the same botanical register shades into a fetishization of trans subjectivity as hyper-sexualized.

Chapter Four, "The Language of Landscape," picks up the thread of how more-than-human life figures in an "authentic" Caribbean aesthetics, this time turning to Derek Walcott's poetry. The chapter looks at how Walcott's poetry revalues pathetic fallacy away from its colonial implications in its original coinage as a form of mental fallacy. Instead, it argues that Walcott's poetry provides a model for thinking of its own language of pathetic fallacy as something that is environmentally extended, rather than something "in the head" of an individual. At the same time, in the second half, I look at the way Walcott's poetry figures the wounds of slavery as "raw," by depicting human flesh through hybrid plant-animal metaphors. I argue that Walcott's *Omeros*—through its metafictional apparatus—reveals the way in which this notion of Caribbean aesthetics as harmoniously entangled with the more-than-human world is part and parcel of the neocolonial expectations for what should constitute a legitimate form of Caribbean poetry and subjectivity—an expectation which not only is echoed in the previous chapter's look at the anti-assimilationist aesthetic polemics of the "plant-human," but, it turns out, is also an interpretive expectation which readers themselves may be complicit in.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS A RAW FEEL?
EVERYDAY BEING AND READING WITH THE BODY

Naive Problems

Midway through her story, the narrator of Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch" tells the reader about a gruesome childhood experience: she once saw toes next to potatoes in the produce aisle. Her mother corrects her—"potatoes!"—chalking up her daughter's perception to a semantic error. But the narrator insists it was no mix-up. The toes were really there, "pale, bloody stumps, mixed in among those russet tubers," cold-as-ice, "yield[ing] beneath my touch the way a blister did."[1] At home, her father cross-examines her disturbing flight of fancy—Where did the toes come from? What motive would the grocer have for putting them there? Why did only *you* see them? The narrator feels her certainty wilting "beneath the sunbeam of my father's logic," despite having seen and touched the toes herself (*HB* 8). As an adult, she offers a belated response to his skepticism: there are "true things in this world" that are observed by only a single pair of eyes. But, as a child, she "consented to his account," and laughed as he sent her on her way (*HB* 9).

This experience is a raw one in several ways. It literally involves raw, human flesh, adjacent to the flesh of vegetables. But the experience is also raw in the sense that, according to her parents, it's a naive one: she hasn't processed the immediate, "raw" sense of her perception enough yet to realize that it couldn't actually be true. And finally, the experience is raw insofar as the memory still stings later in life, potentially standing as an omen for the way women are

[11] Carmen Maria Machado, *Her Body and Other Parties* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017), 8. Hereafter cited in text as *HB*.

manipulated from a young age to "consent" to male versions about the "truth" of what they experienced. The moral the narrator offers, by contrast, invites readers to take the raw part of her experience seriously: the toes were really there. Yet, there's a problem with taking this raw, surface-level reading literally, too. The narrator begins the vignette by claiming that she has "always been a teller of stories," implying that, even at the time, she was conscious that her perception was partly an imaginary fiction (*HB* 8). The scene, then, poses two problems: How can the narrator claim the raw feel of her perception to be objectively true (claim the toes were really there), while also claiming that she made them up—that they were "always" part of a "story"? And how is the narrator's literalism about her sensations connected to the way her memory still feels raw, in terms of a lingering hurt over a violation that is gendered?

Following the scene's invitation to take the narrator at her word, this chapter explores literature's knack for describing the raw feel of situated experience, not as a naive refusal of a more real reality, nor as something falsely subjective, but rather as a mode of world-directed objectivity.[2] I argue that the raw feel functions as a phenomenology of feminine queer body experience, where knowledge of the world is directly in the body, rather than consciousness, and the body produces unique types of spatiality in the ways that it is lived.[3] Although the term "raw feel," in its original context, was meant negatively—a gibe from early twentieth century psychology at the belief in "*qualia*," the notion that conscious sensations have a "unique 'inner stuff'" to them—Machado's work taps instead into a more colloquial, and affirmative sense of the term that reorients around everyday bodiliness.[4] In addition to making a claim for the truth

[2] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 582-3. See also Sharon Marcus, Heather Love and Stephen Best, "Building a Better Description," *Representations* 135, no. 1 (2016): 12-4.
[3] Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 31.
[4] Edward C. Tolman, *Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1932), 215. Tolman first defined the term "raw feel" in a 1918 paper, where he coined it as synonymous with "the *quale* of a

contained in the surface-level appearance of our sensations, the raw feel, in this sense, names a basic mood of our flesh: the activities by which our bodies soothe themselves, and even find new pleasures, when faced with experiences of pain and violation, particularly in ways that touch on one's gender and sex. In short, while the psychological coinage of raw feel denotes the (potentially chimerical) property of experiences that stamps them with a sort of ineffable "what it feels like" quality, accessible only to that individual, this chapter examines how the raw feel more simply means the ways in which one's body copes with lingering gendered violations, and how this revises the psychological definition of the term (*qualia*).[5]

The aptness of the term raw feel is that it signifies the point at which these two registers of meaning intertwine—gendered violations, and the privacy versus objectivity of one's perceptions. Machado's work directs our attention to these points of intertwining: her stories show the way that the mundane precursors to abuse and gaslighting, as well as the extreme instances of it, are effectually about exploiting another's body's gender and sexuality *in order* to deform that other's faith in their perceptual grasp on the world generally (their faith that their everyday perception—their raw feel in the sense of their "naive contact" with the world—has any bona fide commerce with the world).[6] Most basically, the raw feel names this tangling of coping with the violability of one's gender and sexuality, and its rippling effects onto how one perceptually grasps the world at large.

We see an example of this at stake in the way that the narrator's father makes the narrator

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quality." See "Nerve process and cognition," *Psychological Review* 25, no. 6 (1918): 436. By 1932, Tolman came to view both *qualia* and raw feel as lacking any physical basis in the brain, and thus as entirely chimeric, imaginary entities.

[5] C.I. Lewis is credited with first coining the term *qualia* in 1929. In 1932, Tolman directly links his critique of the "raw feel" to Lewis's "doctrine" of *qualia*: "this doctrine as to the ultimate privacy of the 'raw feel,' and hence the fact that the 'raw feel' may be ignored in science, is very close to the doctrine of C.I. Lewis." Tolman, *Purposive Behavior*, 252.

[6] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), lxx.

second-guess her perceptions. But, although the narrator poses to readers an injunction to take her raw feel seriously, this does *not* mean taking the narrator's experience as "raw" in the way that the psychological sense means "private" or "inner."[7] To take her raw feel seriously as "private" or "inner" in this way entails that her experience was still just *for her*, and thus perfectly considerable as "objectively" wrong.[8] But this is the same cop-out, and no different from her father's attitude, which basically says, "I'm sure you *thought* you saw that, but you couldn't *really* have, and I'll prove it."

The narrator's experience of rawness points in a starkly different direction than the notion of private or inner qualities. The rawness in the scene seems rather more to allegorize an alternative relationship between objectivity, embodiment and perception that she outlines as a counter-response to this (male) suspicion of her. For, part of the parental rejection of her experience—one where bits of human bodies are basically indistinguishable from plant organ commodities to be eaten—is due to the way it unveils an uncomfortable, underlying shared "meatness" and "rawness" of our flesh in the world that we would prefer not to acknowledge.[9] (And is of a piece with misogynistic logic, when it projects this rawness onto feminized

[7] I redefine the raw feel in phenomenological terms in this chapter in order to shift it away from its original association with *qualia* from Tolman and Lewis. As we saw, for its originators, Tolman and Lewis, *qualia* is a term that is about discovering the psychological genesis of appearances. But phenomenology begins by simply *describing* appearances on their own terms, not attempting to discover what their underlying "causes" are. The metaphysical concerns about *where* consciousness arises distort the accuracy of our ability to describe appearances as they appear to us, on their own terms. For example, in our "naive," everyday experience, our "raw feel" of the world precisely does *not* appear as something "private" or "inner" (as Tolman would have it), but rather as getting in touch with what's really out there in the world.

[8] Against "private" *qualia*, Merleau-Ponty claims that perception is far from being "the experience of a certain state or of a certain indescribable *quale*." The notion of a specific *qualia* or sense-datum is "produced" as a result of a "second-order," paranoid, "critical" attitude I employ when I am either worried about being tricked by my perception, or want to make a scientific study of it. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 217, 236.

[9] Anne Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford, 2019), 115. Compare Cheng's sentiment about a shared rawness between humans and things to Merleau-Ponty's notion that I only experience the world because "things and my body are made of the same stuff." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, eds. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 355.

bodies).[10] But, the narrator claims a virtue out of this notion of raw flesh. The allegorical level of championing the reality of toes-amid-potatoes in this way suggests the possibility of feeling raw (even to the point of numbness, as we will see in the next section) as an alternative type of agency—an agency that, in the midst of feeling objectified like so much meat, is located in one's shared "affinity" for thingliness, the surface of the body's very "fibers," as opposed to one's "inner" consciousness, or the "deep" parts of one's psyche, or even one's intentions or choices.[11]

The entire trajectory of the raw feel's revaluation in this scene, then, is this: in raw feel(ing), you get hurt; you get objectified; most egregiously, this happens in a way that attempts to exploit your body's gender in order to make you paranoid about your own raw feel (faith in your basic perceptual contact with the world around you). Within that space of objectification (feeling your body's thingly status as raw "stuff"), you find new forms of agency, bodily configurations, and perceptual gestalts.

Yet, what privileges Machado's stories in particular to explore the concept of the raw feel? More than the circumstantial reasons that associate Machado with #MeToo, and more than her frank explorations of the bodily tolls of misogyny, it is the formal elements that makes her stories especially revealing.[12] Machado's use of fables and allegorical meanings mirrors the very

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[10] See for example Simone de Beauvoir's description of "man's revolt" against wombs on the grounds of raw, vulnerable fleshiness: "Wherever life is in the process of being made—germination and fermentation—it provokes disgust because it is being made only when it is being unmade; the viscous glandular embryo opens the cycle that ends in the rotting of death… man is horrified at having been engendered; he would like to rescind his animal attachments." Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 165.

[11] Anne Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 121. Compare Cheng's notion of the skin's non-intentional surface agency to Merleau-Ponty's claims that motor agency occurs before the level of a personal "choice." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 80, 140, et passim.

[12] Released two days before *The New York Times* broke the Harvey Weinstein scandal, the stories in *Her Body and Other Parties*—gothic romance and horror, dark comedy, queer erotica, Latinx magical realism—have seemed prescient in capturing the muted mundane horrors of inhabiting a woman's body. For more on biographical circumstances associating Machado with #MeToo, see discussions of her Twitter thread calling out the misogynist behaviors of Junot Díaz. See Carmen Maria Machado, "Misogyny Is Boring As Hell," interviewed by Lila Shapiro, *Vulture*, June 14, 2018, https://www.vulture.com/2018/06/misogyny-is-boring-carmen-maria-machado.html.

tension that is already embedded in the term raw feel at the level of literary form: a tension between a hidden or non-apparent sense, and surface-level, naive one.[13] But by doing this, Machado also raises problems about the ethical consequences of what it means to read and narrate such experiences—even for well-intentioned readers who seek to believe the narrator, or be allies to her cause.[14] After all, if we allegorize the narrator's experience of the toes-amid-potatoes in the way that it seems to suggest (as a cautionary fable for "Believe women," for example), are we still taking her at her word about the toes-potatoes *really* being there, or are we making its raw, literal surface into a symbolic emblem? The formal gambit of the narrators in these stories is to respond to the raw feeling of gendered violations with "fabulation": a form of fictionalizing that invents (rather than mimetically represents) realities, in order to sustain our "imaginative well-being."[15] In this sense, although Machado depicts intense bodily sensations that cause a raw feel—in the sense of sexual traumas—she emphasizes, through form, not the hurt itself (and questions about the suspicion/belief thereof), but rather the narrative process of rescripting that rawness into new pleasures.

In what follows, I explore what the raw feel means first by offering a basic account of

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[13] In this regard, the term raw feel bears relevance for current debates in literary theory surrounding "reparative" modes of reading. For example, Bruce Robbins's impassioned reaction against postcritique, for example, stems from the fear that it will devolve literary study into merely "flaunting our feelings." Bruce Robbins, "Not So Well Attached," *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017): 374. As Jonathan Flatley shows, this suspicion that feelings are connected to naivete, and that this is bad (insofar as naivete raises the specters of subjectivism and relativism), is deep-rooted in literary theory. Jonathan Flatley, "Reading for Mood," *Representations* 140, no. 1 (2017): 139.

[14] By playing metafictional games with the generic tropes of sexual trauma testimonial, authors like Machado "raise questions about the ethics and consequences of narrating such experiences—not just for the author, or for the victim, but for anyone implicated in story." Maggie Doherty, "Metafiction and #MeToo: A New Way to Tell Charged Stories," *The Yale Review* 108, no. 1 (2020): 185.

[15] Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 29. Scholes—who brought the English word "fabulate" back into currency from William Caxton's use of the word in a 1484 translated compendium of fables—describes "fabulation" as a genre which delights in intricate design and form for the sake of pleasing the imagination (in contrast to mimetic/realist fiction). Scholes would also later use fabulation as a term allied to "metafiction." By using the term fabulation in this chapter, I also want to indicate Saidiya Hartman's more recent notion of "critical fabulation" in her essay "Venus in Two Acts," which Machado begins *In the Dream House* by discussing. Machado uses Hartman's notion of critical fabulation in order to explain the formal stakes of what she's doing in narrating the experience of domestic abuse within queer relationships. Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2019), 4.

how experiences of rawness operate throughout Machado's story collection as a whole, and how they uniquely relate to sex, numbness, and finding agency, even when we feel depleted or violated. I then read "The Husband Stitch," the story in which the toes-potatoes scene arises. Here, I explore the interpretive difficulties that arise when readers try to respect the raw feel of the narrator: the difficulty (and perhaps impossibility) of literally believing someone at their word. So too, in the way that the narrator makes a "lesson" out of herself by knowingly setting her story up as a fable of misogyny, she raises the question of what it means to treat oneself like an object lesson, and what this objecthood has to do with blurring binaries of victimization versus agency, and suspicion versus belief.[16] I conclude by turning to what is especially queer and phenomenological about the raw feel, through a reading of "Real Women Have Bodies." Reading this story, I ask: what happens if we think of the style of bodies not as something that comes after the fact of an originally "real" or "bare" body, but rather as a "precondition" for them?[17] As a corollary, what would it mean to consider sex on the surface, as a general style of being, rather than being about finding out what's "really" underneath one's clothes? As a whole, what emerges from this engagement with Machado is a politically-aware phenomenology that bids us reconsider the notion of knowledge as bodiless, transparent reasoning, why this matters for feminine queer forms of knowledge production, and how attending to the everyday need not be opposed to political critique but can contribute meaningfully to it.

[16] "It is easy to identify the wrongness of treating someone like a thing for one's own invidious gains, but it is much harder to understand or to judge when one treats oneself like a thing. In making room for stranger forms of less-than-human agency… I hope to clear some new ground beyond the political cul-de-sacs of feminist and race studies: the impasse between victimization and agency, antiessentialism and authenticity, and so on." Cheng, *Ornamentalism,* 19.

[17] Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 98. In making this statement, Cheng builds off Galen Johnson's phenomenological claim that "embodiment is a style of the world." Galen Johnson, quoted in Cheng, *Ornamentalism,* 14. See also Cheng, *Second Skin*, 44.

"Fuck Me Numb"

In its colloquial sense, the raw feel is a way of expressing how certain emotional hurts feel when they linger. If one googles "what is a raw feel," for example, one of the first results is a 2010 online forum where contributors define it as feelings that are "painful and intense," "raw," like a "bad cut," that is "fresh, just experienced, extremely painful; there has been no time for any healing to begin."[18] One of the immediate paradoxes of rawness is that it can feel numbing, by virtue of this overabundance of intense sensation: the body dulls feeling as a way to take care of itself. This numbing quality marks the ambivalent nature of the raw feel in Machado's work. Akin to the chorus of Frank Ocean's hit pop song "Novacane" that sings, "fuck me good, fuck me long, fuck me numb," Machado is interested in the raw feel not so much as pain, but more as a liminal zone between pleasure and pain, between feeling and non-feeling, as a form of excessive sensation that can reconfigure agency and pleasure, when feeling depleted, worn out, traumatized, or otherwise "not one's self."[19]

Machado's stories abound in multiple forms of the literal and figurative rawness of experience (in terms of moods, foods, corpses, blood, and other bodily fluids and secretions). For example, raw animal meat proliferates both as kin and as killable objects. Images of roadkill motifically frame stories about coping in the wake of being physically violated. In one, the narrator encounters "the occasional slurry of red and flesh where a stag had met its end" before she herself runs over a rabbit en route, split in two, "its visible organs glistened like caramels, and it smelled like copper" (*HB* 209). In another, "a huddled mass on the side of the road—a deer, blasted apart by the tires of an SUV" (*HB* 232). A narrator about to undergo a bariatric

[18] mihnduc, "raw feelings," Word Reference Language Forums, October 4, 2010. https://forum.wordreference.com/threads/raw-feelings.1936151/.
[19] Frank Ocean, "Novacane," Def Jam Recordings, 2011.

surgery orders "a cavalcade of oysters" as her last supper, consuming "a stubborn hinge of flesh… alive… nothing but muscle (*HB* 155-6).

These images of raw meat mirror the ways feminine and queer bodies are wounded and bleed in the stories. At an uncomfortable house party, sucking at a cut finger, the blood tastes like "hummus and copper" (*HB* 228). The stories also build on an interest in women's bodies as objects available to be anaesthetized and surgically cut open. In "The Husband Stitch," a woman has her baby surgically delivered against her will: "They do have to make a cut, but not across my stomach as I had feared. The doctor draws his scalpel down instead, and I feel little, just tugging, though perhaps it is what they have given me" (*HB* 16). In "Eight Bites," the narrator opens inexplicably *in media res* with the doctor's hands "in my torso… she is loosening flesh from its casing, slipping around where she's been welcomed" (*HB* 149). These images describe rawness as the body's objectifiability; one that is known through how it is touchable, even cuttable, for other things.[20]

But this rawness is not only an indicator of the body's status as wounded, dying, or otherwise open to its own non-being through invasive activity. The rawness of secretion and pumping blood is also a crucial indicator of life as well—and sexual pleasure in particular. In this regard, rawness marks the ambiguous line between what feels good and what hurts (hence its connection to numbness). In "The Husband Stitch," when the narrator has sex for the first time, her partner "finishes with my blood slicking down him… I can feel my heart beating between my legs. It hurts but I imagine it could feel good" (*HB* 5). More often, this motif of pumping blood, linking heart and genitals, involves two women's bodies touching: "we kissed deeply for a long time, my heart hammering in my cunt" (*HB* 41). "She touches my arm, and a shock of pleasure

[20] See Anne Cheng's discussion of the "sushi principle" in her chapter on "Edible Pets." Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 115, et passim.

bolts from my cunt to my breastbone" (*HB* 131). After kissing a girl for the first time, a narrator describes it as "pleasure, which had pumped blood through me and warmed my body like the mammal I was" (*HB* 212). These instances of pleasure marked as the pumping of blood are ultimately in conversation with the text's other instances of animal flesh, suggesting a messy imbrication of pleasure and pain. Here, rawness indexes the way women's sexual being is felt as a certain imminent danger attendant upon abandoning the bodily inhibitions which are culturally defined as a core part of "femininity."[21] There is a certain ungendering and unfeminizing of herself marked by the raw here—in the refusal to accede to inhibiting herself by instead feeling this blood that she is told she is both reducible to, and never should feel lest she be reduced to it.[22]

This mix of pleasure and pain often results in going numb. For example, characters often alter their senses, by enveloping or submerging their bodies in things like blankets or water, as a way of coping in the wake of traumas. After a husband digs into his wife's buried sexual trauma against her wishes, he finds her "cocooned under the blankets of their bed. Even her face is swaddled" (*HB* 99). Returning home from a hospital, the first thing a narrator does is draw a bath; the scalding water "hurts, and it is good," as her skin numbs from the heat and she becomes "buoyant and bodiless" (*HB* 221). In "Mothers," numbness initially heightens sexual longing when a narrator breathes weed smoke into her lungs by kissing her girlfriend; but later, when the relationship becomes physically abusive, the narrator retreats to the shower for numbing relief, declaring, "I'm a Cancer. A water baby, always," as her girlfriend "rains" punches into the wall

[21] Young, *On Female*, 44.
[22] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 207, 214, 222, 224. See also Amber Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 5-9.

outside (*HB* 61). In another story, this same ambiguity is at play. Women are "fading" out of existence and being sewn into dresses. They "drift and mill" like "afterthoughts," and their skin has no feeling when the needles pierce it. The narrator learns about the faded women in dresses the morning after having sex with her crush. This numbness bookends intense sexual pleasure, and the two, arousal and numbness, percolate into each other as she leaves the motel room: "My hands go numb with cold. My cunt throbs, my head aches" (*HB* 135). Bringing together all the senses of numbness—as both cocooning the senses when the body doesn't want to feel anymore, and as opening them up when the body yearns to feel even more—the two women later have sex in the shower, before the narrator walks out to discover her girlfriend is fading too. Her girlfriend feels less, but is also "ravenous" for her; they "have never fucked with such urgency" (*HB* 140, 143).

The numbing of sensation, then, serves not so much as an end in itself, but rather functions to tap into alternate structures of feeling: as a site either of care after pain, to prepare the body for alternative yearnings, or as those yearnings themselves in the present, as the body learns different ways to be sensorily open. As Cressida Heyes suggests, sometimes "the only possibility of resistance (or even the only viable response) might be to detach from experience, to evade pain and fatigue, to slow down."[23] In this regard, an additional level of what Machado, and others like Ocean, are getting at in the raw feel is a certain desire to court experiences that allow one to feel as if they have shed being an autonomous individual as the basic defining unit of who you are. The raw feel's paradox is that it both can seem to intensify the boundaries of your skin, while it also dissolves and blurs them at the same time. In this regard, if one's will-power is a chief target of exploitation, the raw feel is giving that up.

[23] Cressida J. Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge* (Durham, 2020), 7. See also Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

The raw feel, following its complete spectrum of resonances as both warm-blooded hunger and objectification as so much meat, above all insists on this: rather than imagining femininities, especially queer ones, as the transcendence of space or the body, or meekly accepting this pain (making martyrology of woundedness), this feminine queerness is what Amber Musser refers to as brown jouissance, "a reveling in fleshiness, its sensuous materiality that brings together pleasure and pain."[24] It anchors new hungers, gestures, desires, and ways of being sensually "geared into the world," and fabulates the space where she is inhibited and objectified into other possibilities that don't exist within the present spatial order.[25]

What is at stake, then, in rawness, is agency in unexpected places, agency in pain or experiences that seem to oppress, through altering the boundaries of what one is able to experience. Machado's concern is to acknowledge the way these characters' seemingly innermost, "raw" feelings are often provoked and even "constructed" by systems of pain, exploitation and oppression. Yet despite this, she doesn't diminish the importance of the felt sense of things, the inherent "truth" borne in one's perception, especially when it comes to matters of sex.[26] A character experiencing a raw feel is not a mere victim of ideology, abuse or heteropatriarchy for Machado; rather, their raw feel takes pride of place as constituting its own truth. Machado's use of the raw feel, then, is not naive in the sense that it is unaware of the ways power constructs a subject's experience—to the contrary it is acutely aware of them. But her raw feel is naive in a certain sense in that it addresses this through a texture of experience that is "true" despite being shot through with and constructed by power, and her refusal to call it a "trap" despite all that.[27] Machado leverages this fact to explore how, in moments of our felt

[24] Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 3.
[25] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 262.
[26] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 79.
[27] Caroline Walker Bynum suggests constructivist accounts "seem to have left viewers not free and creative but

rawness, we can still be free in some sense, even when the "truth" of power crushes us, even when we are violated or numb.

If the raw feel for Machado is a way of retaining agency under negative sexual conditions—reclaiming pleasure, and not being pathologized as a "victim" or treated as an object "lesson" of patriarchy—how does that change our ways of reading her narrators' subjectivities? What does rawness, as a structure of feeling, have to do with how we read the "raw," surface-level "truths" her narrators present us with in their account of their perceptions? How do we interpret her characters in their fantastical, yet mundane, sensual experiences? To answer this, I turn to the opening story of her collection, "The Husband Stitch," in order to test out the possibilities and ramifications of taking the narrator at her word in her raw feelings; doing so, I suggest, the story involves a way of reading that takes us beyond the opposition of surface meanings and the allegorical "lessons" or "morals" behind them.

Skin Deep

"The Husband Stitch" is a story that is particularly obsessed with red, with stories as bodily agents, with bisexuality, with the politics of happiness in sexual intercourse, and women's bodily organs as objects of sex, surgery, and cooking. Beyond the rawness of the toes-among-potatoes scene, the narrator depicts experiences of unprotected sex, sex that causes bleeding, and an unconsensual, anaesthitized surgical episiotomy in childbirth. The narrator also shares numerous fables about women, nested, like russian dolls, within her telling of her own coming-of-age story: women are frozen to death, poisoned, and stalked by serial killers; a feral woman,

rather caught in—because constructed by—their vantage points… Present discussion reveals surprisingly often its own version of body-as-trap." Bynum, "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 1 (1995): 6.

raised by wolves, suckles wolf-pups from her own torn-up breasts; a woman carves out her own liver to feed her abusive husband. These raw experiences, both literal and fabular, all cut deeply. But arguably the deepest trauma doesn't cut at all. Rather, it concerns the narrator's clothing: a mysterious green ribbon tied around her neck that her husband tries to touch without her consent.

Given the ribbon's deep significance while also being a literal superficiality (a clothing item placed on top of her), we might think of the narrator's relation to her ribbon as skin deep.[28] The husband's violation of the narrator's consent surrounding this ribbon—while obviously not skin deep in the sense of being trivial—is skin deep insofar as it concerns the mere surface of narrator's skin: who has agency over it; what goes on it; who gets to take what off of her body and how; what gets to count as part of her body to begin with.

In countering her husband's possessive obsession with the ribbon, an obsession which assumes the ribbon "hides" a "secret" meaning, the narrator explicitly requests that he instead take the ribbon not as a "secret," but just "as a part of me," no different than "an ear or finger" (*HB* 18, 20). This response, on the part of the narrator, is skin deep in two ways. On the one hand, the term skin deep names an aspect of the raw feel, which troubles the boundary between the "style" of a body's "ornaments," and the supposedly "real" body they cover (evidenced in the narrator's claim that the ribbon is as much bodily as an actual limb).[29] But more importantly, the skin deep names a mode of interpretive response when it comes to reading the bodies of others. More specifically, it suggests an ethical request to *cease* interpreting in order to accept what's given in another's account of their body (evidenced in the way the narrator asks her husband to

[28] The *OED* defines the "skin-deep" as that which does not "penetrate" deeper than the skin; that which is "shallow, superficial." The earliest recorded use (1613) of "skinne-deepe" in the *OED* gives the familiar criticism of an outward beauty dissembling an inner ugliness. "Skin-deep, adj. and adv." *OED Online*, January 2022, https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/view/Entry/180927?redirectedFrom=skin-deep#eid
[29] Cheng, *Second Skin*, 121, 44.

stop secret-mongering, and accept that the ribbon *just is*).

This activity of reading skin's meanings is central to the story. The narrator's husband, for example, in fetishizing the ribbon, has an "investment" in her skin that renders it "textual" as much as physical.[30] One might liken the husband's stance toward the ribbon to a Freudian one, which would see the narrator's request for a skin deep reading of her ribbon as a failure to decipher the secret, true, unconscious source of the superficial, manifest behavior.[31] But, the narrator—declaring her ornamental ribbon is as bodily as a limb, and that there is no secret lurking behind its surface-level appearance—refuses this type of reading approach that seeks to uncover the psychic truth buried beneath the duplicitous signs of the flesh.[32]

A skin deep reading, then, is the reading that the narrator asks for, and that she doesn't get from her husband, who treats it like a secret fetish. It seems that the task set to readers, then, is to interpret the ribbon, in contrast to the husband, as merely skin deep, in the sense that it "just" is a part of her. But, ultimately, readers, too, develop an irresistible investment in her skin. After all, the metafictional play in this story about making up fables has to do not only with the literal content of her skin, and what she puts on it; it also has to do with our own (in)ability to take her literally at her word concerning that ribbon and its meaning, or lack thereof, rather than

[30] Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 147, 153. Roach elsewhere fittingly calls such investments "deep skin": "the attribution of enormously important (and not infrequently tragic) consequences" to the skin of others. Roach, *It*, 165.

[31] Following Roach's lead, we might put it this way: though the green ribbon certainly "partakes of the character of a fetish," in place of "depth psychology," we ought to consider what we may learn from "a case study of surfaces," the "feel" of things. This invitation echoes the phenomenological idea of respecting the "raw feel" of a thing as it appears, without "getting to the bottom" of its psychological causes. It also harmonizes with the narrator's explicit request: the ribbon harbors no deep or hidden secret, it's just another part of her skin. Roach, *It*, 43.

[32] This question of the reading method best suited to the narrator's metafictional form—and its stakes for current debates surrounding surface versus allegorical reading—relates back to the phenomenological questions this chapter began with. For the connection between skin-deep reading and phenomenology, see for example Heidegger's assertion that, contra the Kantian doctrine of hidden "noumena": "Least of all can the being of entities ever be anything such that 'behind it' stands something else 'which does not appear'. 'Behind' the phenomena of phenomenology there is essentially nothing else." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 60.

as an allegory of consent. It thus remains an open question whether readers will be able to give her the reading she asks for. For, rather than cleaving to the binary opposition of surface *or* depth, as we will see, the narrator's text ultimately suggests a "depth *of* surface"—suggesting the impossibility of carrying out a "pure" literal reading of another's raw feel, without a relational reflexivity between readers' bodies and hers, which is both the condition of her body's objectification (as exemplified by her husband), as well as the means of reading *with* it.[33]

The narrator opens the story at a party where she meets a boy: "In the beginning, I know I want him before he does" (*HB* 3). She describes his muscles, his clothing, and says seeing his body, "I run slick… he is craggy… and I want" (*HB* 3). This opening sequence presents the "I" not in terms of an "I think," but in terms of her body's sexual being in the world. The significance of the sexual being of the "I run slick" is soon echoed and complicated. When they have sex for the first time, the narrator describes how "he is hard and hot and dry and smells like bread, and when he breaks me I scream and cling to him… His body locks onto mine and he is pushing, pushing, and before the end he pulls himself out with my blood slicking down him" (*HB* 5). The image is notable not just for its use of polysyndeton to describe a strange synesthetic crossing of senses in intercourse (hard, hot, dry, bready); nor for its metonymic euphemism that refers to genitals not as a specific nameable part, but as a person's entire self (her slicking is simply down "him"). More noticeable is the mirrored echo of the phrase "slicking." In the first instance the narrator describes her want in terms of its slicking as her own secretion. In the second, it is more complicated, this time not only a different type of fluid, the redness of blood, that is produced through a certain discomfort that is welcomed, but now also mixing with her

[33] As another way into how to interpret the green ribbon's alluring shine non-fetishistically, we might think of Roach's analysis of the accrual of a "patina" to surfaces, a desirable, visual sheen. Yet against reading patina as a fetish, Roach argues in his reading that patina is "the depth of surfaces." Roach, *It*, 171, emphasis mine.

partner's own "finishing" as well. As the scene ends, this sense of the reading of the rawness—exposure, pain, joy, pleasure—is solidified by the fact that he accidentally and unknowingly smears some of this "slicking" blood-semen mixture across his face.

The sexual politics of their marriage seem mutual in most ways, and arguably the narrator is the leader in the sex life they develop together. She says, "It is not normal that a girl teaches her boy, but I am only showing him what I want" (*HB* 9). And even when she accommodates herself to his pleasure, there is a sense that it further solidifies her own sexual dominance. Yet from the opening scene, her future husband is fixated on violating her fundamental ground-rule of the relationship: not to touch the green ribbon tied around her neck.

The story seemingly invites a Freudian reading of the green ribbon as a fetish. It is glossy and has a shine, the first characteristic of a typical fetish-object that Freud lists.[34] And it is clearly invested with sexual desire by the husband. From their first meeting, his attraction to her is bound up with the green ribbon and her prohibition of it. After discovering the narrator is pregnant, "he touches the bow delicately, as if he is massaging my sex" (*HB* 12). At other times, he tries to guilt her into telling him about the ribbon ("a wife should have no secrets" he says), and when all else fails, he covertly loops his fingers in the bow while she is giving him a blowjob, or probes it with his tongue while she is sleeping (*HB* 20). In the final scene, his penis becomes erect with anticipation when the narrator finally asks him if he wants to untie it (*HB* 30).

Ultimately, the story ends with the husband getting his way. He removes the ribbon and her head falls off. On a Freudian fetish-reading, the green ribbon is really a substitute for a penis—an object that allows the male fetishist to make penis-lacking women acceptable sexual

[34] Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth press, 1961), 21: 152.

partners for him, rather than sites of fear over the genital difference.[35] So when the narrator's husband ultimately removes and destroys the fetish and the narrator's head falls off (after all, Freud observes, fetishists are not only reverential toward their substitute-penis fetishes, but sometimes hostile, pretending to play the role of the castrator), we would read the story's conclusion as the violent death of his ability to be sexually fulfilled by his wife.[36] But this reading not only objectifies the narrator, refusing to privilege as meaningful her own experiences, which make up the content of the story itself. It also directly refuses to take the narrator at her word. When the husband, playing the role of a fetishist reader, asks his wife what the secret truth hiding beneath the ribbon is, she responds that "the ribbon is not a secret; it's just mine," and when he persists in accusing her of hiding things, she responds "I'm not hiding it. It just isn't yours" (*HB* 21).

But even if we instead center the narrator's own account of her sexuality, rather than her husband's, it is not certain that we will avoid running into other problems. For example, one may be inclined to read the green ribbon as an allegory for the eponymous stitch. In this reading the secret of the ribbon turns out to be the "husband stitch," the title of a medical procedure where, following an episiotomy during childbirth, a woman is subsequently given an extra stitch so that her vagina is tighter and more pleasurable for her husband, though painful for her. Though the narrator is still under the influence of anaesthetics when this happens to her, she recounts remembering the doctor and her husband joking about paying more in order to "get that extra stitch" to make her "—like a vir—," and when she awakens the doctor reports, "nice and tight, everyone's happy" (*HB* 17).

Is the green ribbon about that procedure literally happening? Is it about the fine line

[35] Ibid., 152-3, 154.
[36] Ibid., 157.

between attitude and action—between joking about women's genitals as objects that exist for male pleasure, and a culture where it becomes acceptable for that thought to be acted on? Or is the dark moral of "The Husband Stitch" that she shouldn't have wanted a husband in the first place? That her desires were dangerous—an itch that will result in a stitch?

Even though a reading such as this does not necessarily read the ribbon fetishistically, a reading centering her husband's interest in her sexuality, it nevertheless still fixates on finding the hidden truth beneath the ribbon's surface: Was there really a stitch there or not? If not, what does the stitch stand for, what is it an allegory of? Though the object sought is different (husband's substitute-penis, versus hurt inflicted on the narrator), this query uncomfortably places the reader in the same position the narrator finds so hurtful in her husband: looking to remove the ribbon to find out what lies beneath. This shared position between reader and husband vis-a-vis the green ribbon is called to our attention when she reminds us in the closing lines, as her head falls off: "you may be wondering if that place my ribbon protected was wet with blood and openings, or smooth and neutered like the nexus between the legs of a doll. I'm afraid I can't tell you, because I don't know" (*HB* 31). As the story closes, it becomes apparent that looking for the "true" nature of the stitch, figurative, literal or otherwise, makes the reader part of the attitude that the text itself is revealing as non-consensual, exemplified by her husband, in its critical stance toward her body, its refusal to take her account at the skin deep level that she asks it to be taken at.

Reading her ribbon at skin depth means instead to engage directly in the real, enfleshed, perceptual world of her account, in all its rawness that brings together pleasure and pain, in a way that nevertheless does not construe her as only mistaken or erased in the way she gives into

desires.[37] It means her language is a form of sensual, enfleshed epistemology that, following Tavia Nyong'o, we might say fabulates new worlds and possibilities. This act of fabulation is neither lying nor confusion (misremembering or mis-perceiving), nor allegorizing. Rather, it is a purposeful exposure and refusal of a world that is, from her point of view, false to her (does not leave room for her being, actively tells her that the more she inhibits herself the more feminine she becomes). Thus, it is a tethering of a world that cannot be to the world that is, and holds them both together in what constitutes a site of "incompossibility" that critically moves beyond what is deemed possible and real in the present aesthetic and epistemological order.[38]

But how, to return to the problems initiated by the potatoes scene, does this fabulist "tethering" of the real and the possible happen within the fabric of her narration? I have been broadly suggesting that it happens at a skin deep level, taking the narrator at her word, as opposed to allegorizing it. In this regard, the story would seem to be making a point about reading, and our rhetorical lives more generally: the interpretive activity of drawing allegorical meanings (what you really mean by *x* is *y*) is frequently non-consensual, especially in the context of relationships. Definitions of allegory seem to confirm this opposition to the skin deep: allegorical writing is writing with a "double meaning," a "surface" level and another implied, invisible or hidden level that the surface level supposedly points to.[39] And yet, one can't help but notice that even by saying that the point of the story is the danger of allegory, one has still fallen

[37] Like Roach's patina as a "depth of surfaces," Gaston Bachelard's notion of "topophilia" demonstrates further phenomenological dimensions of surface reading. Bachelard argues that "the 'objective' critical attitude stifles" our ability to understand poetic images' effects on readers. Bachelard chastises "the literary critic and professor of rhetoric, who know-all and judge-all, readily go in for a simplex of superiority," and thus arrest phenomenological engagement with the text in order to master it. Bachelard calls instead for critics to be "topophilic" in orientation, to focus on "the space we love," "the simple images of *felicitous* space," and to consider "images that *attract*." Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin, 2014), 10, 19-20.
[38] Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 6.
[39] Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegor*y, eds. Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

back into allegorizing the moment one draws this larger meaning.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the narrator herself deliberately composes allegorically with her fables. The story of the green ribbon is actually a remake of a popular children's horror story, "The Green Ribbon," popularized in Alvin Schwartz's 1984 collection of scary stories. And the narrator continuously interpolates her retellings of misogynistically violent fables and fairytales into her own personal narrative. The tropes from fables she uses are posed as dark "lessons" in the form of warnings about various stages of her own social life as a woman. At the outset, the narrator tells us the "morals" of these stories for women: don't scoff, don't be proud, don't be right, don't be poor, don't be a bride (*HB* 9-11).

Yet rather than attempt to escape the doomed misogynist logic of such fables, the narrator instead willingly courts them as a way to tap into forbidden pleasures. In the first of the fables she shares, after meeting her boyfriend, she tells of a girl who requested something so "vile" from her lover that she was hauled off to a sanatorium. Rather than express consternation, the narrator's response is to "desperately wish" she knew what "deviant," "magical thing" you could want so badly that "they take you away from the known world for wanting it" (*HB* 4). As she puts her attitude more directly, later, upon having sex with her boyfriend in public after introducing him to her parents: "I have heard all of the stories about girls like me, and I am unafraid to make more of them" (*HB* 7).

This double fictionalization—the story of a fictional narrator willingly making herself into one of the many fables she tells us about—becomes actualized by the story's ending. The first time the narrator has sex with her boyfriend in a car by the lakeside (the "slicking" scene), she imagines a hook-handed murderer out in the dark (an interpolation of another ghost story popularlized by Schwartz). At the story's end, the final time they have sex before the husband

undoes her green ribbon, the narrator returns to this story, but this time she herself has become the subject in the fable that she tells: “There’s a classic, a real classic, that I haven’t told you yet… I know the story. I was there” (*HB* 28). By doing this, she accomplishes her promise to not be afraid to “make more” of these fables herself. And the way she frames it suggests the “literal,” in-the-flesh version she gave at the outset wasn’t the “real” version, rather the new fabulated version is.

As the story goes on, the narrator increasingly withdraws from participating in the economy of allegorical reading altogether. In one fable that is about gaslighting at its most literal level, she simply remarks: “I don’t need to tell you the moral of this story. I think you already know what it is” (*HB* 19). By the end of her narration, when giving herself as the “classic” version of the hook-handed man story, she cuts off the story before its end, remarking, “I’m sorry. I’ve forgotten the rest of the story” (*HB* 29). Two pages later, she repeats this refrain, this time regarding her ultimate fate after the ribbon is untied and her head falls off (*HB* 31). This withdrawal evidences the way that a purely surface reading of her narration is impossible. If we truly want to completely avoid allegorizing her skin deep level of experience, the only strictly ethical thing to do would be to stop reading her story altogether. Again mirroring her husband in his disbelief, the literal level of the story is too astounding for readers not to allegorize it in order to make sense of it. Yet the more interpretive energy we readers exert on it, the more the story makes a “lesson” out of us for not being able to help ourselves from allegorizing her experience—even if that allegorical moral takes itself to be in allyship.

This pivots our thinking about how allegorical reading functions in the story. The husband is confronted with a shocking surface that he doesn’t understand (a fantastical-but-real green ribbon that seems to have no rationale), and in order to gain control of it (and her), he adds

fetishizing meanings that aren't there. The husband takes himself to be digging below the surface to get to the secret, "real" meaning it hides. But, as allegorist, in fact he's the one that initially makes her presented surface into a "veil" that ostensibly covers up, by positing another meaning for her literal explanation. In this sense, his allegory first creates the problem it subsequently pretends to rescue her surface from.[40] By providing the cipher that "saves" her account from the "veiled" condition that his allegorical reading itself supplied, allegorical reading posits itself as "anterior" to her given account, and offers itself as the more "real" one. In this way, it manifests the readerly desire "to control, rather than be subject to, affectivity."[41]

Rather than explaining the causal origins of the green ribbon, or seeking to control it through explanations that allegorize it, the narrator's point in asking us to stick with the skin deep level of fables—stick with, rather than explain away, their fabulous surfaces—is to trigger precisely that: an affective response on the part of the reader. This point is driven home by the narrator's frequent breaking of the fourth wall. The story's first words are stage directions from the narrator for the reader to perform her story aloud to an audience ("If you are reading this story out loud, please use the following voices") (*HB* 3). Like the fables, these instances of breaking the fourth wall are interspersed throughout her narration and are themselves deliberately fabulous and unrealistic. When the doctor forces the narrator to deliver her baby via an episiotomy, the narrator informs the reader to "give a paring knife to the listeners and ask them to cut the tender flap of skin between your index finger and thumb" (*HB* 16). Like the fables, the fourth wall scenes seek to get the reader and listeners to learn some "lesson" by empathetically being affected by, and implicated in, the violences done to the narrator. But they

[40] Rita Copeland and Stephen Melville, "Allegory and Allegoresis, Rhetoric and Hermeneutics," *Exemplaria* 3: 1 (1991): 172.
[41] Ibid., 175.

function as skin deep: they break allegory by shaking the reader out of the complacency of being an aloof critic, by demonstrating how language is always materially affecting other bodies; at the same time, their dark humor hinges on their very preposterousness and impracticability, and thus reinscribes a sort of allegorical distance.[42]

In this sense, even though "The Husband Stitch" employs allegorical fable, we can see how it nevertheless parts ways with contemporary theories of allegorical reading: with allegory as a purely intralinguistic self-referentiality strictly divorced from all sensuousness;[43] or, allegory as hermeneutical mastery over a given text, by positing the interpreter as the real author, who wrests the buried truth from a text's "unconscious."[44] At the same time, regarding a pure surface reading, it is nonetheless evidently disingenuous to say that the narrator of "The Husband Stitch" is refusing any hint of allegory altogether. Rather than eschew allegory, her embrace of fables serves as a way to go between surface and allegorical reading. Her skin deep style is something like a texture where the two layers, "allegorical" and "literal," exist as a weave or fabric, rather than surface with a hidden depth. She repurposes fables in a manner that is closer to the ancient practice of *cento*, a method of composition where lines from older texts are "stitched" together in order to form a new text with a different meaning, a practice which etymologically refers to a surface that has been pricked by a needle—as in storytellers "who stitch together (*sarciunt*)

[42] This point is close to what Amanda Jo Goldstein claims when she suggests that reading and perception both rely on coming into contact with the material traces of "figures" (a term deliberately ambiguously located between the corporeal and the linguistic for her). Figures are constantly shedding "material films" and "skins" that "transpire" into both perceptual and semiotic experience. See *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 104, 113-4.

[43] "Allegory names the rhetorical process by which the literary text moves from a phenomenal, world-oriented to a grammatical, language-oriented direction." Paul de Man, "Introduction" to *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* by Hans Robert Jauss, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xxiii.

[44] As Fredric Jameson puts it: "It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative [of class struggle], in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity." The text itself "seeks in vain wholly to control or master" these unconscious "traces," and thus requires the critic to explicate their true allegorical meaning. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 10, 49.

works of their own" from the work of others "in a patchwork fashion (*more centonario*), uniting various scraps from here and there into one body."[45] The narrator's fabulative method "restitches" the misogyny of fables that oppress her, inhibit her pleasures, for the purposes of her own new fabric. Though she takes her "cloth" from these misogynistic fables, the narrator "sews" her own alternate "stitching" for herself, beside that of the "husband stitch" given to her by the men in her life. This status of reusing fables that oppress her does not make her narrative into a symbol of "internalized" inferiority or misogyny that must be unmasked through a hermeneutic of suspicion. Rather, it is a way of "stitching" alternate meanings, experiences and expressions that aren't "real," into the surface or seams of the actual; and it does so by repurposing the "same universe of symbols" as that "actual" realm which oppresses her.[46] All allegorical depth is compressed into the literal, surface level of the story's fabric—a fact suggested in the image of stitchwork. There is no "behind," no second level more real than the fabulous one she presents, no relation of contained/container, veil/veiled, but a single weave of fabulous fabric. And, to come full circle to the problem of "objectivity" in these raw feelings initiated by the potatoes scene, rather than understanding her fabulative memories of her perceptions as "right" or "wrong," or as tied to a mimetic project of "accurately" and "authentically" simulating an actual past, we ought to understand her account as something that, like her *cento*-esque form of narration itself, remembers by recomposing: a form of "re-membering" that is permeable with "using our imagination," "scarcely different from outright lying," because it is more concerned with "inventing" new forms of thinking and acting for a

[45] This is the first attested use of the word *cento* as a form of storytelling, from Tertullian referring to authors who "stitched" new works out of lines taken from Homer. Quoted in Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed, *Proba the Prophet: The Christian Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2015), 2. See also Anke Rondholz, *The Versatile Needle: Hosidius Geta's Cento 'Medea' and Its Tradition* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2012).
[46] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 295.

future that more truly fits her.[47]

In this regard, "The Husband Stitch" functions as a primer for how to engage with the fabulous elements present in her other stories, in a way that acknowledges their status as fabricated, as patchwork, without trying to get "beneath" their skin-deep resonances for some more "real" meaning behind the characters' frequently painful, raw experiences. I turn next to a story, "Real Women Have Bodies," that is more directly about the "real" fabrications of the raw feel. While I use the skin deep method taught by "The Husband Stitch" in order to read the fabulist element in "Real Women" (women are mysteriously "fading" out of existence), I also suggest these stories contrast in important ways. If "The Husband Stitch" largely depicts the raw feel as a response to negative sexual contexts (heteropatriarchal nonconsent and gaslighting), "Real Women" by contrast uses the raw feel more clearly for an affirmative sexual project of queer erotics: to recognize our hitherto "unrecognized feelings," not just in the bedroom but in the everyday; which is to recognize the "phantom," the not-yet-embodied parts of our body, the lability of desires throughout our bodies, as a way of reconfiguring, transforming and transposing what we feel and how.[48]

Real Fabrications

"Real Women Have Bodies" is a story about the tension between the fabricated and the "real" in several senses. The narrator works at a dress store in a mall named "Glam." It's the kind of store whose fabrics cater to a teenage audience: "bright teal slips and dusky pink thunderpuff"; skirts "ruffled, with layers of taffeta"; one dress is "the color of Dorothy's shoes

[47] See Mary Carruthers's discussion of "remembering the future" in *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 66-72. Also see Carruthers's discussion of *cento* as a way of "re-membering" in *Craft*, 57-9.
[48] Audre Lorde, *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 29, 37.

and has a plunging back"; one has "strategically shredded, milk-colored silk"; another "is just thousands of jet-black beads" (*HB* 126). Around the height of the recession, women started "fading," as the narrator describes it. Only women are disappearing. So life goes on. The narrator has a crush on the woman, Petra, who delivers dresses to Glam (a short-haired "dyke" in combat boots and a baseball cap, delivering them for her mother, a seamstress). After the narrator and Petra hook up, Petra reveals to the narrator that the faded women are being sewn into the fabrics of the dresses. It seems that the faded want to be sewn into the dresses, but it's not entirely clear since they don't talk. The narrator and Petra start a romantic relationship. But then Petra starts fading too. After Petra disappears completely, the narrator breaks into Glam and tears the dresses apart in order to free the faded women: "I can see them, the women, loosened from their moorings, blinking up at me… I tear at the hems and seams. The dresses are coming apart, looking more alive than I have ever seen them" (*HB* 147). But the women don't leave. "They remain" (*HB* 148).

Given the seeming willingness with which the faded become one with the fabric of these dresses, the story seems to be about the internalization of misogynist body standards. Girls who come in to buy these dresses are duped into conforming to a male gaze that erases them, that "fabricates" their lived spatialities as inhibiting.[49] The dark moral, seemingly, is that women become one with the literal fabrics that oppress them, with "no resistance," like "an ice cube melting in the summer air… skin and fabric binding together as tightly as two sides of an incision" (*HB* 134-5).

This reading of internalized misogyny is one reviewers have tended to take for granted as the primary meaning of the fable. In one review, the story is described as "a riff on fashion and

[49] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 177-8.

the constraints of body image."[50] In another, this story "links female body image to a vanishing epidemic paying sharp attention to the nature of outward appearances and living under the male gaze."[51] But, from what we've learned from "The Husband Stitch," this way of reading the fable-like elements in Machado—unmasking their fabulous surface to reveal a general moral about misogyny—potentially erases the story's literal-level of magical realism, and reduces women's being to their status as oppressed by men.

This is not to say that the story is unconcerned with the misogyny of body images. The fading phenomenon is introduced by the anecdote of a landlord who, in a viral video, evinces derision for one of his tenants for the various signs of her having a real body: making "wisecracks" about "her artwork, her dirty dishes, the vibrator on her nightstand," as he strolls through her apartment, not having noticed she's there, but faded, standing in a corner "crying… miserable, terrified" (*HB* 128). In a second scene, the narrator's male co-workers at the mall give voice to the story's misogynist title, trading quips about what a "real woman" should ideally look like in order to be sexually desirable: "Hips… That's what you want. Hips and enough flesh for you to grab onto," one comments, while another adds that sex without something to "hold onto" is "like trying to drink water without a cup" (*HB* 128).

However, if this misogyny is the reader's primary focus, the queer care between the narrator and Petra, which occupies the bulk of the story's actual content and interest, becomes peripheral. For, "Real Women" reveals, more primarily, a positive possibility for bodily pleasures as a counter-fabrication, enacted through the experience of queer eroticism between the

[50] Justine Jordan, "*Her Body & Other Parties* by Carmen Maria Machado review – powerful debut collection," *The Guardian*, January 18, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/18/her-body-other-parties-carmen-maria-machado-review.
[51] Lydia Beardmore, "Why you should read: *Her Body and Other Parties*, Carmen Maria Machado," *The Bosphorus Review of Books*, March 2020, https://bosphorusreview.com/why-you-should-read-her-body-and-other-parties.

narrator and Petra; and it does so in a way that shows the lability of sexuality (its fluidity and constructedness), while simultaneously revealing eroticism as a feeling of a natural "rightness," in the sense that it affords a feeling of being at home in one's skin, while also pressing oneself beyond one's own "actual" skin.[52]

A sense of feeling right in one's skin unfolds from the get-go in Petra and the narrator's flirtations. It's after the narrator notes that her coworker once called Petra a "dyke" that the narrator reveals the crush that she has on her: "she makes me nervous, in an excess-salivation kind of way" (*HB* 127). When Petra asks the narrator out—which is only their second time speaking—the narrator feels "the heat of a blush creeping up my neck" (*HB* 131). They sit in an empty food court after the mall is closed. The narrator suggests doing date-like things: "We could get a coffee or something, or—." But Petra interrupts the narrator before she can finish, by way of touch, to communicate that she wants to get a room with the narrator: "She touches my arm, and a shock of pleasure bolts from my cunt to my breastbone" (*HB* 131).

After arriving at a motel (owned by Petra's seamstress mother), there's a full line break. The next sentence picks up: "Petra fucks me in room 246" (*HB* 132). It is important that the scene begins here, that it uses the word "fuck"; not just because "fuck" avoids being prudish, but more so because of the way that the narrator uses it syntactically to position herself as the direct object of the fucking. The grammar of sex the narrator cultivates here acts as an antidote to the grammatical objectification of the real, but ignored, faded women, and the imaginary, idealized, "real" women from the opening scenes with the landlord and coworkers. At the end of the scene, we get a sequence that inverts two earlier scenes already described: the moment when Petra interrupted the narrator at the foodcourt, and the moments where men, the landlord in the viral

[52] "Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, 'It feels right to me,' acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge." Lorde, *Selected Works*, 33.

video and the narrator's coworkers, assume permission to comment on women's bodies without asking:

> "May I—" she starts, and I nod before she finishes. She puts her hand over my mouth and bites my neck and slips three fingers into me. I laugh-gasp against her palm.
>
> I come fast and hard, like a bottle breaking against a brick wall. Like I've been waiting for permission. (*HB* 133)

What is remarkable about the scene is not just its description of the feeling of fulfilling sex as lack of containment, as "breaking" the boundaries of one's skin. It's that, even though Petra is the one who asks for permission, it's the *narrator* who is the one more primarily given permission. In this back-and-forth of consent put in play by Petra, asking the narrator's consent allows the narrator to give herself permission to be herself, in her own skin, even while also going beyond her skin. Consent in this scene erotically reimagines objecthood, as the narrator becomes herself by allowing herself to become the "object" of pleasure (recalling the narrator positing herself both as a direct object within the literal grammar of sex, as well as imagining herself, in her pleasure, breaking like a bottle shattered against a wall).[53]

Crucial to all of this, though, is that these scenes show that erotic consent is not just about sex. If we fail to notice this, and focus just on acts of climaxing, we miss what is most touching in the interactions between Petra and the narrator, and risk perpetuating an ableist or hypersexualized narrative of queerness. As touching as the sex scene is between Petra and the narrator, even more affective (for me at least) is the narrator's felt response in the scene where Petra simply touches her arm. I think this is because it gets at something that queer and trans phenomenologists like Sara Ahmed and Gayle Salamon refer to sometimes as the queer "lability" of pleasure and desire. Rather than positing either "sex" or "orientation" as located in

[53] As Cheng puts it: "that pause or delay before a person becomes a person and a thing a thing… the immanent possibilities of personhood and its frightening-yet-seductive affinity for objectness." Cheng, *Second Skin,* 121.

some elusive, heroized climactic act or body part, these theorists draw our attention to the way in which there is an everydayness to sexuality through the way bodies simply inhabit space.[54] Rather than being tied to any particular part, the whole body, in moments of desire, becomes a horizon of mixed-up, open possibilities for erotogenic feeling (this erogenous "lability" is precisely what is so surprising, yet meaningful in the scene where Petra simply touches the narrator's arm). Salamon describes this potential for "lability," or what she elsewhere calls "transposability," as a fusion of becoming between body and desire that occurs when the body fades from view and the desired object takes over.[55] This ability to mix up and reconfigure the feeling parts of the body with one another also points to the way that one's felt-sense of their own body, while "in" the body, exceeds any exact physical locatability. Feeling is not constrained to "actual" matter, but re-fabricates the possibilities for inhabiting bodies and spaces. Feeling builds the body, becomes the body, *em*bodies, rather than being caused "by" the body. And it does so, not idealistically, but as a phantom openness of the location of perception and desire, that allows the body to lodge itself in the other bodies it leans toward in sensation (a sensing that is neither "in" me, nor "in" the world, as the shattered bottle image would have it).

This point about the potential lability and transposition throughout our felt bodies—what Audre Lorde describes as the erotic being like a "kernel" that, when released, "flows through" and suffuses the other regions of our life—also explains why so much of what is erotically affective about the story is not strictly sexual, but pleasures of a more everyday sort.[56] In these mundane moments, the story shows the reciprocity between sexuality and simply existing, simply being in space. In the shower, the narrator describes the way "the water heats my skin,

[54] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 68.
[55] Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 52.
[56] Lorde, *Selected Works*, 34.

and I moan from the sensation" (*HB* 139). On the first night when the narrator learns Petra is fading, "We line up our bodies and press them together, every inch" (*HB* 140). Petra suddenly goes out for a run because, "I just needed to get out into the morning… I wanted to feel my body running" (*HB* 141). The narrator, holding her finger up to the sun, studies "my fingertips against the light, pink-amber halos around the shadow of my bones" (*HB* 144). In her last days, Petra takes to "treating every meal as her last," methodically chewing and savoring chicken, setting "each wedge of orange in her mouth reverently, as if it is the Eucharist… she rubs the peels against her skin" (*HB* 143-144). The story pays close attention to these moments; and it is hard to say where the "sexual" ends, and the "non-sexual" begins, or vice versa. It is this simple "osmosis between sexuality and existence" that is most affecting in these scenes, the way they show the line between sexual and nonsexual is not indexable to any particular anatomical part, or even set of behavioral norms.[57]

It's tempting to read the faded women as allegorizing, not male oppression, but rather this tension between the material and the phantom elements of "skin-sense," brought forth by the raw feel: something that is fabricated, yet real, rooted in the body, yet that goes beyond the body's material topography as the the only locus for determining what counts as "real."[58] Rather than interpreting the faded as only vessels of oppression, we would then see them in conversation with the queer bodily care between Petra and the narrator; after all, it is not coincidental that the initial hook-up scene that sparks their relationship is immediately bookended with the narrator's first encounter with the faded women being sewn into dresses. In this regard, the faded would be like the "phantom limbs" enabling and haunting the sexual-existential pleasures between the narrator and Petra.

[57] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 172.
[58] Cheng, *Second Skin*, 116.

The dresses also play the role of women not trusting their "naive" perceptions because they are accustomed to being gaslit by others. Like the narrator in "The Husband Stitch," the narrator of "Real Women" is afraid she won't be believed if she describes her fantastical experiences—evident for example in the fact that she can't bring herself to tell her mom about the faded women being sewn into dresses, or that she is living with a fading woman herself, because she wants her mom to think she is "believable," "solid and safe" (*HB* 142). But in "Real Women," it is the narrator herself who struggles with this same attempt to interrogate the "truth" behind the desires of the faded. When Petra shows her the process of the faded being sewn into dresses, the next time she goes to work at Glam, she throws up seeing faded body parts mixed in among the fabrics. The narrator's revulsion stems not from the (para)physical, ghostly, aspect of bodily decomposition, but from the ethical problem that she can't tell whether the faded women are consenting to be in these dresses or not—"cannot tell if they are holding on for dear life or if they are trapped. The rustling and trembling of the fabric could be weeping or laughter" (*HB* 137).

Is this then an allegory about the "bad faith" of these faded, consenting to have their bodily autonomy violated, caught in the "trap" of a masculine-serving body-image ideology that abuses them, unable or unwilling to rescue themselves—as the narrator herself seems to be potentially interpreting the faded here? The story seems to trouble this being the case in any neat way; for there is no way to cleanly adjudicate in the final scene between the narrator's sense that these women are doing something that's bad for them that they must be freed from, and their desire to continue to stay, even after she has torn up the dresses. Her hopes to critically enlighten them, to motivate them to become "free," seem to fail. And it's possible that she is trying to "free" the faded out of motivations that have more to do with her own needs than theirs. What

then is political about the numbing faded and the raw feel of the narrator in these final moments of the story?

For me, especially salient is how the narrator puts her moment of critical rage at the end, tearing away a bodice-panel to reveal a faded woman staring at her: "She could be Petra or Natalie, or my mother, or even me" (*HB* 147). The raw feeling here marks a certain critical, yet also naive yearning, manifested in the counterfactual "could be" the narrator expresses. The hinge of the raw feel here is that the painful or numbing or depleting moments are explored not as deadends, but as calling for another world. The narrator of "Real Women" is railing against the world that oppresses her, that doesn't make space for her, through her use of the counterfactual "could be." Like the *cento*-esque form of "The Husband Stitch," these counterfactuals, like the fables themselves, are "fallacious" to a degree in the way they flirt with the "untrue" or the "unactual" in preference for entertaining what *could* be true. But such fallacies aren't so much the opposite or the "negation" of truth, as much as they point out the conditions by which truth "appears" in the world, in order to change them.[59] In the same way that the faded women's bodies become one with the dresses, skin and fabric stitched like two sides of an incision, this counterfactual ending reveals how the other side of the erotic in this story, the felt sense of being right and good in one's body, most deeply at home in the world, is also stitched like an incision to the feeling *how could the world be this way*, an awakened critical desire for more or for different possibilities, beyond the actual, for the shapes and feelings one's own body can take, and for others.

[59] D. Vance Smith, "Fallacy: Close Reading and the Beginning of Philosophy," *Representations* 140, no. 1 (2017): 35. See also Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*, 5.

Conclusion

The raw feel functions in several registers: it is a structure of feeling—the ways that bodies respond to conditions of pain or violation, in manners that both detach from sensation, and reattach to it in new ways. This is not necessarily sexual, but, reading Machado's concern with the possibilities for sexual agency and pleasure, when faced with the bodily tolls of gaslighting, nonconsent, and abuse, it is clear that the raw feel, as a mood and way of coping, is deeply tied to our sexual being in the world, often in a queer way. A raw feel also registers a way of perceiving the world; this part of raw feeling is closely linked with phenomenology, for it emphasizes attending to the situated descriptions of lived experience as constituting their own truth. This feeds into the way that a raw feel shows how our bodies are labile: they become embodied and spatial through situational relations with other bodies. The raw feel, in this regard, is a way of maintaining a constructivist ontology while also suggesting that it gets at something "real" about this constructivist reality.[60] Finally, the raw feel entails a fabulative mode of reading. In reading Machado's fables, if we are to attend to the raw feel of her narrators, we are led to a form of reading that is skin deep, going between the opposition of surface and allegorical meaning. Although these fabulations may look like lying in their disregard for faithfully representing what is "actual," such fabulations are still "real" in that they are a purposeful exposure and refusal of a world that oppresses, inhibits and alienates one's being, in favor of "restitching" new hungers, gestures, desires, and ways of sensually being in the world.

The raw feel, in each of these regards, is by no means limited to Machado. While the raw feel is exemplified particularly well in all its dimensions in Machado's work, the raw feel, in at

[60] See recent work in critical phenomenology: Lisa Guenther, "Critical Phenomenology," in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, eds. Gail Weiss, Ann Murphy and Gayle Salamon (Evanston, 2020), 11-16; and Gayle Salamon, "What's Critical about Critical Phenomenology?," *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 1, no. 1 (2018): 8-17.

least the first sense of a mood and structure of feeling, predominates in much contemporary literature, although it is increasingly present in its other senses as a genre of fabulation.

But if it characterizes a certain contemporary mood and genre, how does the raw feel fit into current debates surrounding how to read literature? My relation to both Felski's postcritical notions and those of surface readers in my exploration of a phenomenological reading with the body is one of *yes, and*. Although there is no hidden depth behind the phenomena of a text's language, there is still a perceptual depth, even if only skin deep, that is crucial to the fact of any world appearing and mattering to us. Moreover, the spatiality I explore alongside Machado is not just a geometrical space where all points are homogeneous and interchangeable, as surface readers would have it. Rather, I have argued that lived space is defined less by geometrical distance without depth than it is by tasks, styles of motility and sexual being. Similarly, the raw feel as I see it is similar to Felski's argument about the power of mood, but is also something slightly different. Felski presents mood—whether suspicious or postcritical—as which psychological glasses you filter the world through. As I have meant it, a raw feel attempts to name something more basic than this; rather than presenting phenomena to a hidden consciousness, it entails knowledge being structured in the spatiality produced by sensually lived flesh that always has a certain sense, direction and orientation.

Much of my definition of the raw feel has been in league with surface reading—particularly in regards to the way I argue that the raw feel makes a claim on objectivity for the surface level of perception, even when it is "illusory" or "constructed." At the same time, I am wary of claiming that the Husband in "The Husband Stitch," for example, is an avatar of a symptomatic, paranoid or suspicious reader, or that Machado's fabulations are straightforward emblems of surface reading. I have flagged this in the way that allegory, the polemical opposite

of surface reading, is essential to the type of intervention her fabulations make. The fact that there is an allegorical depth that is present within the surface is central to the dialectical tension of the skin deep mode of Machado's work. Part of what I'm saying in drawing together surface and allegory is that, like David Kurnick, I am skeptical of the inflated "characterology" that surface readers' polemics traffic in—a polemic which can seem to effectively position texts as feminized damsels caught in the midst of a gendered melodrama between two vying types of critic.[61] Also against such oversimplifications, while Machado's texts suggest that attending to surfaces is an important defense against gaslighting, it's important to note that such attending is not the panacea surface readers take it to be: enjoining someone to attend to surfaces is, after all, just as much the canonical bread and butter of gaslighters. If, as Kurnick suggests, surface reading (and postcritique more broadly), in its ardency for attending to the surface, has given up queer theory's pleasure of "calling bullshit"—and literary criticism's "truth ambitions" more broadly—I would suggest in turn that there is still an important elision here between calling bullshit and telling the truth. The two are certainly connected; to call something bullshit implies that there is a truth not being given. But one of the things I have been trying to portray through defining the raw feel is that Machado's narrators do the latter: they tell their truths. Machado's interest in the raw feel stems from her concern for articulating the affective, perceptual and narrative structures that allow narrators, who are in various ways made to feel their reality is bullshit, to respond by crafting new forms of telling. The raw feel, in this regard, is about what you do afterwards—how you find the resources to speak and feel after you've identified the bullshit that hurts you. And part of the importance of the raw feel specifically is that it isn't a grandiose or heroic act, but, first, part of the everyday grain of perceptions and feelings that

[61] David Kurnick, "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas," *English Literary History* 87, no. 2 (2020): 358-60.

come with just getting by.

This type of sensual, corporeal reading at skin depth is far from quietistic; stories are not only networks for wondrous attachment, but "can sense happiness and snuff it out like a candle" (*HB* 11). This literary, politically-aware phenomenology does not mean flattening out the misogynist, heteronormative violence at the core of these stories. Nor does it mean being a vessel to that white, male violence, or transcending it by escaping the body altogether. Rather, while taking the violence of the present order seriously, it also means exceeding it, anchoring new, intimate forms of sensual spatiality through the multiple forms of feminine queer everydayness. The phenomenology of the everyday need not be synonymous with white, male and bourgeois forms of being; and its postcritical recuperation of the way knowledge and meaning are produced within the enfleshed, perceived world need not be apolitical; rather, a skin deep phenomenology that attends to the flesh's knowledge is an augur of where else our politics might lead.

CHAPTER TWO

RAW WEATHER IN WARD AND FAULKNER

Rawness names a body's susceptibility to its environment. This moldability manifests from obvious marks (being literally cut by the solid things of the world), to more subtle ones (being enveloped by the ambience of weather). The fact that early uses of "raw" refer to a quality of the air itself points to this bodily susceptibility: the fear of being exposed to the elements, reduced to an animal nakedness. As early as 1933, in a letter published in *Nature*, atmospheric scientist G.M.B. Dobson called for an answer to the "physicophysiological question" of "raw weather" as a meteorological phenomenon—why damp air can have especially adverse effects for human bodies.[1] In a different, contemporary vein: "weathering" also names the bodily tolls, registered at a cellular level, of living in a climate of pervasive systemic racism.[2] Nor is such "weathering" merely metaphorical, when the quality of air itself becomes a literal medium of racism.[3]

I raise the idea of "raw weather," as a term that points to the multitudinous abilities of climate to impact the body, both meteorologically and culturally, in order to tease out the relationship between rawness and the environment first raised in the dissertation's introduction. In the previous chapter, I argued that raw feeling was a way of coping with gendered, sexual

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[1] G.M.B. Dobson, "'Raw' Weather," *Nature* 131, No. 3297 (January 7, 1933): 28.

[2] A.T. Geronimus, "The Weathering Hypothesis and the Health of African-American Women and Infants: Evidence and Speculations," *Ethnicity & Disease* 2, no. 3 (1992): 207-21. See also Christina Sharpe's discussion of weather and antiblackness: "In what I am calling the weather, antiblackness is pervasive as climate… The weather trans*forms Black being. But the shipped, the held, and those in the wake also produce out of the weather their own ecologies. When the only certainty is the weather that produces a pervasive climate of antiblackness, what must we know in order to move through these environments in which the push is always toward Black death?" Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 106. See also, Mike Hulme, *Weathered: Cultures of Climate* (London: Sage Publications, 2017).

[3] United Church of Christ Commision for Racial Justice, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites*, 1987.

violations, a way of validating one's perceptions in response to those violations, and that, moreover, this took the form of a sort of pre-intentional bodily agency, rather than something "in one's head"—the "inner" or "private" bits of mental imagery that a "raw feel" had previously been defined as. This chapter pursues the subsequent questions: If raw feeling names alternative agency, below intentionality, what are the ecological dimensions of that bodily agency? And what are the risks of conceiving of bodies' agencies as ecologically produced, molded by environmental forces, rather than determined by the subjective will-power of a tightly-bounded, impermeable individual? Put simply: Where does raw feeling meet the environment? And what are the risks of raw feeling as an environmental logic?

In order to answer these questions, this chapter contrasts two novels—William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*—which both deal with "raw weather": damp air that gets under one's skin, so to speak, that one can feel "in their bones," as one of the characters in the latter puts it in regard to hurricane season. The first half of the chapter examines how Faulkner's novel provides a later, modernist context for the dangers of environmental logic of rawness and primitivism, initiated by Thoreau. In reading the novel, I show how the novel's atmospheric rhetoric both shows how racist ideologies spread like a sort of airborne "vibe" or virus—a type of invisible, contagious "smog in the air"[4]—as well as to show how the types of racism that the novel's narrators evince rely on an appeal to a body's exposure to air—to different types of climates, "torrid," "temperate," and so on—as determining its racial character, even when it's not visible in the skin.

[4] "Cultural racism—the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color—is like smog in the air.… None of us would introduce ourselves as "smog breathers" (and most of us don't want to be described as prejudiced), but if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air?" Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 86.

In the second half of the chapter, I examine how Jesmyn Ward's novel of Hurricane Katrina intervenes in this durable environmental logic of climate, race, rawness, and primitivity. Oddly enough, Ward's novel, I suggest, in its denomination of its central characters as "savage," appears at first to be quite close to reproducing the very same logic we see in Faulkner where one's race is said to be essentially determined by one's environs. Yet, in place of Faulkner's "smog" of white supremacy which essentializes race on the basis of climate, Ward's novel shows how "savage" is a cultural process: a form of "salvaging" what one needs in order to survive in the midst of environmental catastrophe. Indeed, rather than Faulkner's "smog" of white supremacy, Ward offers us a vision of "weathering" that elucidates rather than obscures the histories of how racism and environmental disaster intersect in a given landscape. But importantly, more than "weathering" simply in the sense of a privative logic of what of Black characters must endure to survive, or the incapacitates that leave them in a state of heightened precarity, Ward's narrator reclaims the weather—not as anti-Black, in Christina Sharpe's influential sense of "the weather"—but rather as a manner of belonging, and what Kevin Quashie would call Black aliveness. And the novel's narrator does so, I suggest, through reconfiguring atmospheric rhetorics at an erotic register, expressing sexual desire, and meeting up with her own raw, interspecies approach to her gender and sexuality.

It may seem counterintuitive to offer this dissertation's first full example of how these forms of rawness relate to the environment by looking to weather. After all, rawness seems profoundly material, bodily, while weather seems the opposite: airy, insubstantial. Yet one key way to think about raw feeling is as a mood—and mood in turn is tightly tied to atmospheric rhetoric.[5] And, weather, ultimately, constitutes a "material reality that wraps our bodies," and

[5] "Mood is a concept that gives us a way to describe the feeling world of these readers, if we understand mood to name a collective affective atmosphere, one structured and shaped by social forces and institutions and particular to

though its touches "are the lightest, the least pressing," it is irreducibly "concrete."[6] In fact, as scholars such as Greta LaFleur and Sonya Posmentier have recently shown, the weather is arguably a matter of rawness *par excellence*. From antiquity through modernity, the weather has been historically conceived as the chief force that gets under the skin, and shapes the raw matter of bodies; indeed, no less a philosopher than Immanuel Kant explained the origins of race primarily through appeal to the climate as the ultimate causal source of racial differences. As he puts it in a summative racial taxonomy drawing together geography and climate: "noble blond (northern Europe) from humid cold," "Copper red (America) from dry cold," "Black (Senegambia) from humid heat" and "Olive-yellow (Asian-Indians) from dry heat."[7]

While we will return to the significance of such climate-determinist racism as it appears in Faulkner's modernism, for now I want to note how this chapter's engagement with raw weather also responds to two trends in environmental humanities. The chapter builds off of recent work theorizing the aesthetic dimensions of atmospheres.[8] Such scholarship blurs the line between atmosphere conceived of as the literal, physical gasses that compose what we breathe, and atmosphere conceived of as a mood, aura, or vibe.[9] Much of this criticism argues in favor of the positive outcomes of attending to the social and aesthetic power of atmosphere—what Dora Zhang, for example, calls reading "vibes" of a room as a form of social knowledge.[10] But what,

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a given historical moment." Jonathan Flatley, "Reading for Mood," *Representations* 140, no. 1 (2017): 144.

[6] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Reading for the *Stimmung*? About the Ontology of Literature Today," *Boundary 2* 35, no. 3 (2008): 215.

[7] Immanuel Kant, "Of the Different Human Races," trans. Jon Mark Mikkelsen, in *The Idea of Race*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Tommy L. Lott (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 20.

[8] Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," *Thesis Eleven* 36, no. 1 (1993):113-126. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012). Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, trans. Sarah de Sanctis (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2014). Dora Zhang, "Notes on Atmosphere," *Qui Parle* 27, no. 1 (2018): 121-155.

[9] Thomas H. Ford, "Literal and Literary Atmospheres," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate*, eds. Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 40-54.

[10] Dora Zhang, *Strange Likeness: Description and the Modernist Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 70.

to put it bluntly, do we do when the "vibes" are "off"—when they're white supremacist vibes, as in the case of Faulkner, and when the social "knowledge" produced is a form of ideological misinformation and willful "unknowing"—a "smog"? In part, in looking at the somewhat chilling effects that atmospheres can have, my chapter serves to demonstrate that the aesthetic dimensions of atmosphere, far from being a panacea, are up for grabs politically, so to speak, and a key way in which rhetoric functions ideologically.[11]

Second, in many ways, the notion of the rawness of bodies—that property of human matter shared by all organic matter, and even the inorganic composition of the weather—has become a galvanizing trope among posthumanist scholars. Scholars like Donna Haraway and Jane Bennett frequently point out, for example, that "we are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman";[12] or, that we are "selves who live *as* earth," rather than "selves who live on the earth";[13] or, that the "insides" of our bodies are also actually "outsides" (a definitional image of rawness to be sure): the body as an "outside-that-is-inside-too";[14] matter so mixed up and confounded that we can no longer "distinguish between the outside and the inside of an agent."[15] These are all instances of praising a raw self in the sense of what the human body shares materially with its environment. But does this picture of the human body as a "earthy" or as a "wormy pile," or of the "outside" becoming the "inside" of a body, romanticize the violence of rawness in the wake of a climate catastrophe like a hurricane?[16] In a text like *Salvage the*

[11] "Insofar as *Stimmung* is a historical form that orients us in a specific world, is felt on an intimate and individual level even as it is not ''psychological,'' and is a key player in the psychic life of power, it is analogous to Louis Althusser's conception of ideology." Flatley, "Reading for Mood," 147.
[12] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 55.
[13] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 111.
[14] Ibid., 112.
[15] Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 103.
[16] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 32.

Bones, acutely aware of the effects of environmental racism, the prospect of one's body being dissolved into the environment takes on a decidedly different value when the raw corpses in the hurricane-flooded neighborhood pollute drinking water and smell "like garbage set to rot, seething with maggots in the hot sun."[17] Is courting an ecological dissolution into the environment—the interface of rawness—a privilege?[18]

In sum, while this chapter analyzes weather to look at how raw feeling has been conceived in relation to environment, at the same time, the chapter considers at length some of the troubling implications of thinking the two together. Furthermore, the chapter also complicates the picture of phenomenological components of raw feeling that we saw in the previous chapter with Machado; for as we will see, Faulkner's narrators rely on a phenomenology of telling and listening as a key part of how their activity of sharing racist ideologies becomes an atmosphere. Ultimately, Faulkner appeals to environment in order to deterministically fix race, make it static, eternally defined, unchanging, in order to conform to the twin taboos policing racial ambiguities—"miscegenation" and "passing"—that so disturb *Absalom, Absalom!*'s various white narrators. Ward's novel, on the other hand, shows rawness in precisely the form that most horrifies and disgusts Faulkner's characters: life that is constantly in process of being made and unmade, "germination and fermentation," both the "viscous glandular embryo" of pregnancy and birth, and "the rotting of death" of corpses.[19] So too, where Faulkner's Mississippi whites are horrified by any association with the Gulf, and the tropical Caribbean climate at large, looming like a shadow at the peripheries of the novel's backstory—

[17] Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 218. Hereafter cited in-text as (*SB*).
[18] "This fantasy of self-erasure in nature paradoxically positions the vanished (often white and male) self as the privileged subject of both environmentalism and a seemingly anti-identitarian stance." Alexander Menrisky, *Wild Abandon: American Literature and the Identity Politics of Ecology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 9.
[19] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 165.

the economic source of capital, and enslaved, bestialized Black characters, which allows Sutpen to install his plantation, as well as the source of the secret "drop" of "Black blood" that spells the doom of the plantation—Ward's Black narrator turns, increasingly, to an association with the Caribbean horizon of the Mississippi Gulf, embracing the tropical weather event, Hurricane Katrina, formed in the Antilles, as the key to her own self-understanding of her gender, sexuality, and incipient motherhood. In short where Faulkner's narrators want to contain and stamp out this ripe and raw form of creolized, "Caribbean materialism"—persons as raw in the sense of constant relational processes, "diversifying," "disorganizing," and "parahuman"—Ward's narrator Esch, in narrating her pregnant body and her sexual hungers, wants to unleash it.[20]

Consciousness as "Commonwealth" Atmosphere in *Absalom, Absalom!*

There are no storms or environmental catastrophes in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*—the moiling, "primal," "protean," "animistic" more-than-human world of a text like *As I Lay Dying*, which renders the setting "an agent in its own right and on the same footing as the characters."[21] Nonetheless, the setting is alive in *Absalom, Absalom!*. And it forces its will on its characters in more subtle, yet nonetheless more disturbing ways.

Of all Faulkner's texts, *Absalom, Absalom!* is obsessed with the quality of the very air its characters breathe.[22] To a degree, this peculiar obsession with air as a medium "thick" with communications builds off gothic conventions—turning to an atmospheric "miasma" in order to

[20] Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3, 22.
[21] André Bleikasten, *Faulkner's* As I Lay Dying, trans. Roger Little (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 100.
[22] In his reading of *Light in August*, Rex Ferguson writes: "Much of William Faulkner's prose contains a quite particular *stimmung*. Subtly different to 'mood', *stimmung* will, in this instance, be taken in its most physical sense, as the light touch upon the skin of weather conditions and atmospheric states… The argument is not that Faulkner *represents* heat – rather what is being promoted is the notion that his writing *presences* heat." Rex Ferguson, "Gumbrecht, Faulkner and the Presence of Heat," *Textual Practice*, 31, no. 7 (2017): 1367-8.

heighten mystery.[23] For example, midway through the novel, when the fact that "there's something" still living in the long-abandoned Sutpen plantation is revealed, while Quentin and Rosa drive out to the plantation in order to discover what this "something" is, a dustcloud "materialised about" them, "enclosing them… as if to say… *I would advise you not to go, to turn back now and let what is, be*."[24]

More than "a bottle of Gothic sauce" used to "spice up" the novel,[25] the air in the novel transforms the very setting, the very environment of the narration into a more-than-human racialized and racializing force. The air becomes a medium, a conduit, for communicating a series of family stories about Sutpen—stories that derive their dramatic, mysterious source of suspense from deeply racist theories about "miscegenation." The air is the medium for the act of narration, as well as the medium that sustains the life of the narration's protagonists. And the air becomes, according to the text's key narrators, the very shaping force in determining a character's racial essence—even, remarkably, molding a person's "blood" itself, even when one's "race" isn't visibly signified in one's skin, in the case of racial "passing" that so disturbs these white narrators. This racial essence, molded by the air itself, becomes the ultimate source of narrative suspense. For the novel's cast of white narrators, racism is literally spread through being breathed in—spread from narrator to narrator as they breathe in white supremacist ideas like they're the very atmosphere of the town they live in—and for its Black characters, race itself is, in the minds of these narrators, literally produced by the type of air, the climate zones, one's

[23] As Dora Zhang points out, to see this gothic tradition of atmosphere, "we need only think of Ann Radcliffe's gothic mists, or more immediately, the thick, miasmatic fog of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* or the meteorological specifications of Joseph Conrad." Dora Zhang, *Strange Likeness*, 66.
[24] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 140, 143. Hereafter, cited in-text as (*AA*).
[25] Cleanth Brooks, "History and the Sense of the Tragic (*Absalom, Absalom!*)," in *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), 295.

body is exposed to.[26]

To begin with, the stories one listens to, and the air one breathes, are inextricably entangled from the get-go in *Absalom, Absalom!*. In the opening pages, a twenty year-old Quentin Compson has been summoned to hear his sixty-five year-old neighbor, Rosa Coldfield, tell him the story of Thomas Sutpen. One might assume that, like the reader, Quentin is hearing the story of Sutpen for the first time. But, after Rosa has been narrating Sutpen's life to Quentin for several hours, the reader finds out that "Quentin already knew. It was a part of his twenty years' heritage of *breathing the same air and hearing his father talk* about the man; a part of the town's—Jefferson's—eighty years' heritage of *the same air which the man himself had breathed* between this September afternoon in 1909 and that Sunday morning in June in 1833 when he first rode into town" (*AA* 7, emphasis mine). Moreover, readers are told that the story of Sutpen is not even particularly unique, for Quentin has grown up hearing many similar such stories:

> Quentin had grown up with that; the mere names were interchangeable and almost myriad. His childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterward, from the fever which had cured the disease. (*AA*, 7)

While it might appear at first that *Absalom, Absalom!* is a story about Sutpen and the Civil War, this passage points to the way that the novel is actually concerned with the way the tellers themselves have invented histories surrounding the war in its wake (a "Lost Cause" mythos).[27]

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[26] This argument is somewhat analogous to the one Susan Scott Parrish makes in regard to *The Sound and the Fury*'s staging an environmentally sensitive form of psychoanalysis: "This eco-historicist reading does not jettison Freud. Instead, I want to argue that we have not heretofore gotten Faulkner's response to Freud quite right. I see Faulkner as signifying upon Freudian theory in order to force Freud out of doors… Faulkner is slyly demonstrating his own sense of the physical situation of the psyche, and of academic psychology's error in too strictly immuring identity inside the self and the family." Susan Scott Parrish, "Faulkner and the Outer Weather of 1927," *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 36.

[27] On histories of the Lost Cause, see Adam H. Domby, *The False Cause: Fraud, Fabrication, and White Supremacy in Confederate Memory* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020); Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of*

The novel is, above all, a meta-narrative: a novel about the way the Sutpen story is passed around between families, generations, and neighbors—from Rosa Coldfield, to Quentin's father and grandfather, to Quentin himself, and ultimately, in the present, to Quentin's roommate, Shreve. The novel isn't really about the Sutpen story itself per se, but about the impact that telling this story has on its narrators: exposing the cognitive attitudes of the white imagination, as revealed through such instances of (re-)telling.[28] As this opening passage claims, in participating in the telling of such stories (as Quentin will ultimately do), one's imagination is a "commonwealth," suggesting that one's consciousness becomes a residence for others—becomes a "racial imaginary."[29] In this regard, the novel, above all, chief merit is the way it addresses what Toni Morrison calls the need for "a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters."[30]

What is particularly remarkable about this opening passage, though, is the way in which it rhetorically represents the true content of the novel—its meta-narrative focus on the racial imaginary of its white tellers—through the intertwining of "breathing the same air," "telling," and "listening." Quentin's "heritage" is figured as a specifically narrative heritage that is also a respiratory heritage—a set of well-known stories, town gossip, so to speak, inherited through "breathing the same air" as the man the stories are about (Sutpen), as well as the "same air" used

Confederate Culture (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003).

[28] As Linda Martín Alcoff puts it: Faulkner "wrote a set of severe novels exposing the perverted logic of white supremacy and the high price extracted from everyone who succumbed to its claims, including whites. However, Faulkner not only critically exposed the illogic of white racism, he also exemplified it." Linda Martín Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 91.

[29] Because "imagination" often connotes an inner, subjective, creative and personal vision, I use "imaginary" to emphasize a socially inherited and shared set of images, narratives and stereotypes that influence how one perceives and behaves in the world. See Cornelius Castoriadis, "Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary," in *Rethinking Imagination: Culture and Creativity*, eds. Gillian Robinson and John F. Rundell (New York: Routledge, 1994), 136-54; Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

[30] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 12.

in “hearing his father talk about the man.” The opening passage then, conflates the respiratory act of telling with the respiration of its dead protagonists, as both denizens of the same environs, across a span of time that becomes collapsed through the medium of the air itself; the passage suggests that air ontologically collapses any distance between the narrators doing the telling, and the characters they tell about, the latter possessing the former, and rendering the former into “ghosts.”

This concern with “breathing the same air” as Sutpen makes a continuous and conspicuous motif repeated frequently throughout the novel. At the start of the second chapter, following Quentin’s summoning to Rosa’s house to hear the story in the first chapter (a story he already knew well, a story that was his very “heritage” thanks to “breathing the same air and hearing his father talk”), readers witness a renewed occasion of Quentin “hearing his father talk” about Sutpen. First, subjected to Rosa’s telling of the Sutpen story, Quentin is now subjected to yet another rendition of the telling of Sutpen’s story, this time Mr. Compson’s, as the two, father and son, sit on the porch. The start of this new narrative scene starts with a noticeable repetition of the same phrase from the prior chapter: “It was a day of listening—the listening, the hearing in 1909 even yet mostly that which [Quentin] already knew *since he had been born in and still breathed the same air* in which the church bells had rung on that Sunday morning in 1833” (*AA* 23, emphasis mine). In a repetition of the exact same phrase used before in regard to Quentin hearing Rosa’s telling from the first chapter—Quentin “already knew” the Sutpen story because he “breathed the same air” as Sutpen had—the novel ascribes an epistemic agency to the air itself: the air itself becomes the reason why Quentin already “knew” the story of Sutpen’s life. It is as if, even without the repeated tellings, Quentin would still somehow “know” just by virtue of having “breathed the same air.” Indeed, the air collapses the present moment of the telling

(1909), with the very moment it is telling about (Sutpen's original arrival into Jefferson in 1833), melding the two moments into each other.

Nor is Quentin the only character whom this fact of "breathing the same air" as Sutpen affects. The problem of being influenced, as it were, through airborne contact with the "same air" that enters Sutpen's lungs, seems to extend like a blanket over the whole town. In Chapter Three—as Mr. Compson continues his narration to Quentin on their porch in the evening—the narration describes Rosa as so able to be bothered by Sutpen's presence that "she did not even have to go out there and breathe the same air which he breathed" (*AA* 50); here, the phrase "breathing the same air" as Sutpen is exaggerated to the point that Rosa did *not* even need to breathe "the same air" as Sutpen to nonetheless be affected by his presence. In Chapter Six, the phrase appears, in relation to Charles Etienne, Sutpen's grandson. Quentin's grandfather describes Charles Etienne—who is white-passing according to the narrators—as acting with a "furious protest" against the "one-drop rule" that governs his fate, a "furious and indomitable" behavior "which [Sutpen] himself might have shown, as if the child and then the youth [Charles Etienne] had acquired it from the walls in which [Sutpen] had lived, *the air which he had once walked in and breathed*" (*AA* 164, emphasis mine). This occurrence of this air-breathing motif—as if mere respiration made one susceptible, vulnerable, infected by Sutpen's life—is doubly significant insofar as this time the narrators are concerned with someone breathing the air who is, according to them "white-passing"—the phenomenon that is the chief obsession of these narrators, their obsession with finding the invisible "drop" of Black "blood" that "sneaks" into the Sutpen family tree, and supposedly brings about its downfall. At the moment where the novel arrives at what, for its white narrators, constitutes their chief subject of interest—so-called "invisible" Blackness, someone who was only "a white-colored man," but for whom whiteness

was what "he could never have been" (*AA* 167, 174)—the novel also reaches its most complicated narrative framing: Quentin is re-narrating to Shreve a story that Quentin's father, Mr. Compson, once narrated to Quentin, about a story Quentin's grandfather, General Compson, had narrated to Mr. Compson.

In light of all this, the fact that the narrators depict Sutpen himself as having been "created out of thin air" takes on new significance (*AA* 24). But it is not just the fact of "breathing the same air" as Sutpen as a rhetorical statement that is at issue in the novel. For the air also constitutes the chief distinguishing medium of the different narrative settings in the novel. The first sentence of the novel is emblematic of this, beginning with a rich description of the air quality in Rosa's "office." From mid-afternoon until sunset, Quentin spends "the long still hot weary dead September afternoon" in Rosa's office, listening to her talk. The office is "a dim hot airless room" because Rosa keeps "the blinds all closed and fastened," since "when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat." As the sun sets, it "shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house," producing a peculiar lighting effect through the closed blinds: the room "became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes," which Quentin imagined to be "flecks of dead old dried paint" that were "blown inward" from the "scaling blinds" themselves (*AA*, 3). The atmosphere of the room is not just the medium for Quentin's "listening," but the air itself becomes the conduit of Sutpen's reincarnation: for "hearing-sense" to become "confound[ed]," and transform into an actual material presence of Sutpen, as though "the long-dead object" of Rosa's talk "would appear" out of the "dust" of the room itself (*AA* 3-4). Similarly, in Chapter Two, when the setting switches to the Compson porch, in the evening, with Mr. Compson now doing the talking, the scene is set by the air: "It was a summer of wistaria. The twilight was full of it and of the smell of his [Quentin's] father's cigar as they sat

on the front gallery after supper" (*AA* 23). When, four chapters later, the setting of the narration has switched again, from September in Mississippi, in 1909, to Quentin's dorm room at Harvard, in January 1910, with Quentin now doing the talking, readers are cued in, yet again, to the switch through an opening description of the air quality: "There was snow on Shreve's overcoat sleeve, his ungloved blond square hand red and raw with cold, vanishing" (*AA* 141). Two chapters later, when, on the following night, Quentin's roommate Shreve is the one doing the talking, an opening description of air recurs: "There would be no deep breathing tonight. The window would remain closed above the frozen and empty quad… soon the chimes would ring for midnight, the notes melodious and tranquil, faint and clear as glass in the fierce (it had quit snowing) still air" (*AA* 235). When, in the last chapter, the narrative perspective returns finally to Quentin readers are treated to a final airy refrain: "At first, in bed in the dark, it seemed colder than ever, as if there had been some puny quality of faint heat in the single light bulb before Shreve turned it off and that now the iron and impregnable dark had become one with the iron and icelike bedclothing" (*AA* 288).

At various points in the novel, then, the quality of air, provided through descriptions in the various settings of narration—temporally, spatially, and perspectivally—between Mississippi, September 1909 and Massachusetts, January 1910, marks the key switches between narrators that take place through the novel: from Rosa (Ch. 1), to Mr. Compson (Ch. 2), to Quentin (Ch. 6), to Shreve (Ch. 8), and back to Quentin (Ch. 9). Because the novel's true interest concerns precisely its meta-narrative content—who is doing the talking, who is listening, where and when the talking is taking place—the function of air in the novel is not only to suggest a conflation between the teller of a story and the subject of their story (Sutpen), but also the novel's way of cueing readers into these key meta-narrative switches.

At the same time, while these chapter openers rhythmically describe air in order to mark narrative switches in time, place and person, the air also simultaneously functions to *destabilize and blur* those very narrative distinctions, melding the different places and persons of telling into a single, shared environ. For example, while Quentin, at the start of Chapter 4, is still sitting on the porch in September, at night, in 1909, listening to his father talk about Sutpen, Quentin finds himself imaginatively transported back into Rosa's office from earlier in the day: "He could almost see [Rosa], waiting in one of the dark airless rooms… She would have no light burning because… probably some mental descendant or kinsman of him or her who had told her once that light and moving air carried heat had also told her that the cost of electricity was not in the actual time the light burned but in the retroactive overcoming of primary inertia when the switch was snapped" (*AA* 70). Though we are in fact still on the porch with Mr. Compson talking to Quentin, as we have been for several chapters now, the space of Mr. Compson talking on the porch becomes invaded and taken over, as it were, once again by the ambience of Rosa's room from earlier in the afternoon, as Rosa's room merges with the "actual" place and person of talking on the Compson porch.

Nor is this the only time Rosa's room interrupts the realm of the "actual" place of narration, and takes over it. For in the second half of the novel, which concerns Quentin and Shreve talking to each other in the cold January nights of 1910 at Harvard, the ambience of Rosa's room, from that September afternoon, which opened the first chapter of the novel, continues to bubble up, as it were, and seep into the actual narrative present. In the first chapter in Rosa's office, the hot air of the shuttered room is "like in a tomb," as if the room had "prisoned in it… all the suspiration of slow heat-laden time" that had occurred within its walls over the past four decades (*AA* 6). This "tomb-like" quality of air—hot, stagnant, shuttered—that

opens the novel's first setting in Rosa's office reappears multiple times in Quentin's dorm-room in Harvard some five months later: "their [Quentin and Shreve's] quiet regular breathing vaporising faintly and steadily in the now tomblike air" (*AA* 240); and again, later: "their breaths in the tomblike air vaporised gently and quietly" (*AA* 260). As Rex Ferguson rightly argues, there is something "elementally physical" about the way that weather "makes present" the past narration: "the vantage point of an explicitly cold New England room" physically conditions the way that Quentin and Shreve "narrate, project and fantasise" the "many explicitly summer days that punctuate the Sutpen history."[31]

This is made even clearer in Mr. Compson's letter to Quentin, which bridges the novel's two meta-narrative halves, Mississippi, September 1909, and Harvard, January 1910. Notably, the first time Mr. Compson's letter to Quentin appears, in Chapter Two, it appears in anticipatory foreshadowing, as a future event that will have taken place: "the odor, the scent, which five months later Mr Compson's letter would carry up from Mississippi and over the long iron New England snow and into Quentin's sitting-room at Harvard" (*AA* 23). In Chapter Six, when the letter arrives at Quentin's dorm in January 1910, Quentin describes his father's very handwriting as having "sloped… out of that dead dusty summer… that dead summer twilight—the wistaria, the cigar-smell, the fireflies—attenuated up from Mississippi and into this strange room, across this strange iron New England snow" (*AA* 141). This idea of the ontological "attenuation" of two different atmospheres, two different environs, through the medium of the air carried in the letter—the idea that the letter literally "makes thin" the distances of time and space—recurs repeatedly in the chapters that follow. In Chapter Seven, the letter, still on the "lamplit table," is described as a "pandora's box" that "filled" up Quentin's dorm, "this snug monastic coign, this

[31] Ferguson, "Gumbrecht, Faulkner and the Presence of Heat," 1375.

dreamy and heatless alcove" (*AA* 208). Even as the narration calls attention to the actual setting of the narration as "heatless," that heatless room is at the same time taken over, "filled" with the stifling, stagnant heat of Jefferson in September. Again, in the final pages of the novel, we get a repetition of the phrase, and only now does Quentin finish reading the letter: "Now he (Quentin) could read it, could finish it—the sloped whimsical ironic hand out of Mississippi *attenuated*, into the iron snow" (*AA* 301, emphasis mine). It is no coincidence then—as we will see in even sharper clarity soon—that the final lines of that letter, revealed in the novel's finale, fixate on the quality of the weather at Rosa's burial in Jefferson: "*The weather was beautiful though cold… in one of the deeper clods I saw a redworm doubtless alive when the clod was thrown up though by afternoon it was frozen again*" (*AA* 302). In short, the air is not only a medium for commingling the narrators with their subject ("breathing the same air" as Sutpen), but also with each other, as narrators. Nor does the novel limit this idea of the melding of narrative moments—of the who, when, and where of the act of telling—to just this rhetorical turn to the air. Rather, the descriptions of air set the stage for the novel's formal experiments in performing this blurring in action.

To take just one frequent example to this effect of blurring the lines between different perspectives of telling through form in a way that parallels the rhetorical depiction of it through the air, consider the stylized use of parentheses in the novel. The frequent parenthetical style of "he (*x*)"—as in, for example, "Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry, the two of them both believing that Henry was thinking *He* (meaning his father) *has destroyed us all*, not for one moment thinking *He* (meaning Bon) *must have known or at least suspected this all the time*" (*AA* 267)—often evokes the feeling that the subjects of the predicate actions being described are

strangely generalized and depersonalized.[32] The novel's use of parentheses further destabilize the who, where and when of telling in the novel by producing what we might think of as a "stacking" of perspectives. Take for example Chapter Six, mentioned above as one of the most complex in terms of the "telephone" game, so to speak, of multiple narrative framings. Its "present" moment, Harvard in 1910, is already overdetermined with voices giving different recapitulations of Sutpen's story. In addition to a letter from Quentin's dad pushing the narrative forward, we have Shreve's imagined recapitulation of Sutpen's life, Quentin's own, and a fictionalized, hybrid Shreve-Mr. Compson version of the telling, which is fabricated in Quentin's own imagination. Then, in the midst of Quentin's imagined, hybrid Shreve-Mr. Compson narrator (whose narration is stylized in italics), a 23-page long parenthetical interrupts Quentin's imagining mid-paragraph. It begins here:

> …*at last and spent the money for a tombstone.*—("How was it?" Shreve said. "You told me; how was it?… (*AA* 152)

It lasts until the end of the chapter, and ends:

> "Wait then," Shreve said. "For God's sake wait.") (*AA* 175)

This parenthesis layers on top of the 1910 "present" of Shreve and Quentin talking in their dorm in Harvard an additional extended memory of Quentin and his dad talking at the Sutpen gravesite back in Mississippi when Quentin was younger. But this new parenthetical layer is not a mere recall *from* the present but rather takes over (or even "dubs over") the rest of the chapter's "present" entirely, featuring the voice of Quentin's grandfather as he tries to imagine the inner life of Charles Etienne (a speculation which in turn was told by Mr. Compson to Quentin, now

[32] The stylistic effect figures a given "character not as a unique instance of signatures, but as a narrative punctuality, among others, in a field of signification." Hortense J. Spillers, "Faulkner Adds Up: Reading *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 349.

told by Quentin to Shreve).[33] But notice the stylistic game that these parentheses play. For it is not simply Quentin's *memory* of that conversation that is enclosed in the parentheses, as one might expect. Rather, the very "present" moment of conversation between Quentin and Shreve in Harvard in 1910 is enclosed within the parenthetical as well. Rather than simply a direct immersion in Quentin's memory, there remains a persistent, mediating narratedness, even to the presentation of the memory itself, such that memory never becomes immediate—because for this novel there is no such thing as an "immediate" memory that is not already mediated by prior levels of narration inherited from elsewhere; instead, consciousness is always already a "commonwealth" inheritance. This fact makes it difficult and perhaps deliberately impossible to ascertain for sure *who* is narrating *when*. By the time the reader reaches Chapter Eight, these preceding narrative blurrings of perspective have prepared them for the claims that Quentin and Shreve's minds are now one "hive" as it were—"it might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one" (*AA* 245). And when we finally get to the key scene of the secret "truth" about Bon that the whole novel has been building to (his one drop of Black blood, as hypothesized by these white narrators), it's simply a passage set off in italics with no indication as to who speaks it, or whether it's even spoken out loud. In fact it is said that by this point the hitherto entirely oral narrative "had no listener" and "no talker either" (*AA* 280).

It should be unsurprising, then, to discover, late in the novel, that air—this vehicle that rhetorically emblematizes the novel's formal, experimental goals of destabilizing the who, when, and where of narration—turns out to serve as the rationale for the story being told in the first

[33] As Jean-Paul Sartre notes, "cover[ing] over and hid[ing]" the present is a tactic Faulkner used extensively in *The Sound and the Fury*: "[Faulkner] is sometimes apt to disguise the present, and the present moves along in the shadow, like an underground river, and reappears only when it itself is past… once it has become a story." Jean-Paul Sartre, "On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner," in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 87.

place. The whole novel, the Sutpen family tale, serves as Quentin's response to Shreve's desire to know what it's like to be from the South: "I just want to understand it if I can… What is it? something you live and breathe in like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? a kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving?" (*AA* 289).

This is to say, the air in *Absalom, Absalom!* is the chief rhetorical vehicle for conveying a phenomenological fact—registered in the novel's formal experimentations—about the act of narration itself: the possession of one's supposedly "first-person" perspective by the voices and perspectives of other "third-person" perspectives (put in action at a formal level through the novel's use of free indirect discourse, parentheses, italics, etc.). Put differently, the explicit descriptive use of air to collapse narrators' points-of-view into each other—like a shared "birthright"—thematizes not only the way that the narrators' minds are not just their *own* (but rather, a "commonwealth," a shared *collectivity*); but the air also serves to thematize, the role of memory—specifically, memory in the form of generational re-tellings—in shaping perceptual attitudes in the present. Portraying narration as an embodied act, conditioned by a setting's physical atmosphere, the weather literally "triggers the narrating muscles."[34] The rhetoric of air in the novel calls attention to the way that any "present" perception of the world, at a phenomenological level, is always immersed in and enabled by a "field," an "atmosphere," or a "milieu"—a field that is already thick with "inherited," "birthright" or "commonwealth" significations that are "in the air" so to speak. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes this phenomenological intertwining between memory, perception, and atmospheric ambience:

> [Memory] provides the perceived with a present atmosphere and signification. A field

[34] Marie H. Liénard, "Faulkner's Poetics of Heat: Summer's Curse," *The Faulkner Journal*, 14, no. 1 (1998): 58.

> always available to consciousness that, for this very reason, surrounds and envelops all of its perceptions; it is an atmosphere, an horizon, or even the "settings" that assign consciousness a temporal situation—such is the presence of the past that makes distinct acts of perception and remembering possible.[35]

This quote about the phenomenological role of memory in inescapably rendering perception in the present into an irreducible "field," an "atmosphere, an horizon," sheds light on the stakes of the novel's obsession with air quality and formal experimentation in blurring narratorial points-of-view, such that we are never sure where the lines between "first-person" and "third-person" lie. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's quote about memory as atmosphere (and vice versa) in a sense, put differently, is just what Shreve is actually requesting from Quentin when he asks Quentin to tell him what the South "is like." What Shreve really wants to know, when he asks, "is it something in the air?," is not about the air per se, but rather what it is about the role of memory—built through generational re-tellings—that gives the perceptual worldview of white Southerners their lived atmosphere in a phenomenological sense. In a sense, he's asking: explain to me how the atmosphere shapes your phenomenological manner for perceiving the world in the way you do, the role of memory in the present, that sustains this continued "atmosphere," and vice versa. More specifically: What is the atmosphere that stokes the continued racial resentments, insecurities, and the distinct, burgeoning white supremacist investment in a Lost Cause mythos of the Civil War?

The idea of perception as an "atmosphere" explains too the sense of involuntariness to one's perceptual imaginary—being instead a "birthright" or a "commonwealth"—that permeates the novel. Rather than being a "personal" or "individual choice," perception "takes place within an atmosphere of generality."[36] Rather than our experience of things being "objective," in the

[35] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 23.
[36] Ibid., 223.

sense of a world with sensible properties on one side and a pure consciousness on the other, experience "introduc[es] us into a milieu" and "attest[s] to the union of the subject and the world… In fact all things are concretions of a milieu, and every explicit perception of a thing is sustained by a previous communication with a certain atmosphere."[37]

We can see clearly how the novel's point—with all its atmospheric rhetoric of "breathing the same air," being a "commonwealth" rather than an "individual"—is that, so too, in the act of telling, as well as listening, it is not just "me" who tells, but rather a general, impersonal, collective, commonwealth "one" who tells "in me"—the cultural, atmospheric "sediments" that are like "third parties" taking up residence inside one's "I." Thus we can see, near the novel's end, when in the act of Quentin and Shreve talking about Henry and Charles Bon, the narration says "there was now not two of them but four, the two who breathed not individuals now," that this description is not just using their shared "breathing" as a gothic flourish (*AA* 236). Rather, the novel explores through the air, and its attendant formal experiments, the phenomenological dimensions of the act of narration, such that the act of telling and listening, which seem to be patently "personal" acts of "choice," in fact entail an "atmosphere" that gets under the skin so to speak, in a way that, like the air itself, renders one into a medium, a conduit.

Climates of White Supremacy

But why go to such trouble, formally and rhetorically, to blur the lines of narrative points-of-view, of the who, when and where, in telling, as a phenomenological atmosphere? Ultimately the novel does this in order to show how dangerous this phenomenological fact of the "atmosphere" can be, ideologically, when it comes to racism and white supremacy, as a

[37] Ibid., 334.

contagious form of social "knowledge" that spreads like a virus, passed around like an airborne virus, "sedimented" in one's body without one's say-so.[38] Here we arrive at our real point of atmosphere in *Absalom, Absalom!*: the novel uses the idea of telling as "atmospheric" or a "commonwealth" to lay bare the cognitive fabric of white supremacy as a "smog," an airborne pathology or pollution. The novel shows, in action, the way white supremacy infects those who come in contact with stories about it ("breathing the same air"), and propagates itself through intergenerational (re)tellings—a dispersed "atmosphere of generality," a "commonwealth," even below the level of one's voluntary or conscious or personal world.[39]

In this regard, the novel shows how whiteness acts as a veil that makes it impossible for all of these white narrators to see straight. As the opening passage from chapter one, the same passage that first introduced the phrase "breathing the same air," and the idea of Quentin as a "commonwealth" rather than an "individual," puts it: the "back-looking" tellers refuse to see either the "disease" or the "fever" of whiteness, as both a privileging and debilitating cognitive framework. Rather than confronting their whiteness for what it is in this regard (a "disease"), the tellers of the story, including Quentin, will eventually converge on the hypothesized one drop of "Black blood" that putatively taints Sutpen's son, Charles Bon, as the "real" reason that explains the narrative "mystery." This reveals, in addition to the pathological nature of whiteness, what we might call the book's examination of the *whiteness of whiteness,* shown in action, in these tellings—the white imagination's inability or refusal to see itself as white, its refusal to

[38] Helen Ngo offers a discussion of how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concept of bodily "sedimentation" is useful for understanding the bodily nature of the habits of racism. As Ngo notes, there are caveats to using the term "sedimentation" that need to be corrected in order to not connote that sedimentation is only "passive and inert" and thus potentially "further obscure questions of responsibility." Helen Ngo, *The Habits of Racism: A Phenomenology of Racism and Racialized Embodiment* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 38.

[39] In his reading of Faulkner, Édouard Glissant contends that studying the effects of racism on societies founded on an unstinting belief in white supremacy is only interesting insofar as it shows what reversals of sensibility must occur before new experiences of relationality can happen. Édouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, trans. Barbara B. Lewis and Thomas C. Spear (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 95.

acknowledge or even consciously *know* what white privilege in a racial caste system means, thus ideologically hiding from itself its own inevitable complicity in harming others, and pretending that it's "innocent" (as Sutpen, for example, so thoroughly claims himself to be in his own accounting of his life to Quentin's grandfather).[40]

This refusal to see straight, to see one's own whiteness for what it really is, constitutes an "epistemology of ignorance": a "pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made."[41] This is not merely an accident, but is in fact deliberately cultivated.[42] This willful ignorance is dramatized spectacularly by the account of Sutpen's first conscious "discovery" that "race" exists, a discovery which prompts him to formulate his life's "design." In an attempt to overcome the humiliation of his abject poverty as a child, Sutpen recognizes that in a system built on inequality, it serves no use to retaliate against a single individual who holds themselves above you, and decides instead to join the ranks of the racial economic caste system of whiteness: "you have got to have what they have… land and n****rs and a fine house" (*AA* 192). But this white ignorance of what whiteness really is plays out ironically insofar as Sutpen, in a symbolic sense, murders himself; or his whiteness at least does. For Wash Jones, as the Compsons' collective

[40] While Cleanth Brooks's canonical essay on *Absalom, Absalom!* is valuable for pointing out that Sutpen is an imagined construct in a sort of quasi-detective fiction, Brooks himself nevertheless falls prey to the very "Lost Cause" mentality that the novel pathologizes when he maintains that the novel is not really about race, and has nothing to do with slavery, and that Sutpen is an "innocent" tragic hero. Brooks, "History and the Sense of the Tragic," 296-7, 307-08, 311, 318.
[41] Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18.
[42] Charles Mills's account of whiteness's cultivated unknowing is precisely the inverse of the type of "unknowing" that Philip Weinstein claims for Faulkner (and other archetypical modernists) in his triumphal account of *Absalom, Absalom!* as depicting "decentered" characters "careening outside the furnished paths of space and time" in order to "shatter" ideology. Philip Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 235. For Mills, by contrast, white unknowing is precisely a chief reinforcement of ideology, not an escape from it.

narration imagines it, is the literary double of Sutpen. Wash—whom Shreve calls white trash, and whom Sutpen, in a mirror image of himself as a boy in his primal scene of childhood humiliation, won't allow to approach the front of his house—is a double of what Sutpen would have become if Sutpen had not tried to form his "design" of getting rich and becoming a master himself. The irony is that Sutpen's own "boy-symbol," in the form of Wash Jones, comes back ultimately to kill Sutpen, accomplishing the retaliatory murder that Sutpen himself once fantasized.[43]

Thus, the core of the book, for all its sprawling complexity, is not about the actual truth-status of the ultimate "secret": Bon's hypothesized, invisible "drop" of Black "blood." It is about watching a series of white people who are transfixed—both fascinated and horrified—by Black people, and repeatedly invent and peddle an oppressive "cognitive image of 'Negro'" as the "prism" for all Blackness, rather than look the effects of their own whiteness in the face.[44] And while Rosa as a narrator is the most scandalously horrified by the visible forms of Blackness (in Clytie, for example), it is the book's increasing obsession, in the minds of Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve, with invisible forms of white-passing Blackness that is most telling in this regard.

Here is where air comes in once again, in a crucial way, and in its most disturbing sense in the novel: as we will see, this obsession with the perceived possibility of Blackness as "invisible" leads the novel's white narrators to increasingly appeal to air quality as yielding a climatological basis for racial essence contained in one's "blood," even when it doesn't show up

[43] As Thadious Davis puts it, *Absalom, Absalom!* marks a shift from the traditional position of the white mind—"Look at what the black man has done to me"—to the recognition, "See what I have done to myself." Thadious Davis, "The Signifying Abstraction: Reading 'the Negro' in *Absalom, Absalom!*," in *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: A Casebook*, ed. Fred Hobson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 105.
[44] Ibid., 99.

visibly on the skin.

Let's look at how these racist ideas about Blackness—which are themselves climatologically based—"circulate" in the novel, as it were, like the quality of the Mississippi air that circulates across time and space with Mr. Compson's letter, into the distant future space and geography of Quentin's dorm.

Take for example, the fact that even though the cynical Mr. Compson condescendingly distances himself from the Southern "Lost Cause" values emulated by Rosa and the town at large—he calls the War "a stupid and bloody aberration" (*AA* 96), and claims that the Southern virtue of "chastity" only existed intact because white "gentlemen" could rape enslaved Black women (*AA* 87)—Mr. Compson, despite himself, is equally infected by the racist fantasy of a "primitive," racial difference, guaranteed by an evolutionary history rooted in climate zones. We see this in his references to "that heritage peculiarly Anglo-Saxon" (*AA* 86), and his converse reference to "the tragic burlesque of the sons of Ham"[45] in reference to Charles Etienne (*AA* 160), and his descriptions of Charles Etienne's "coal-black" wife as "ape-like" (*AA* 166) and "resembling something in a zoo" (*AA* 169). In Chapter Four, we witness Mr. Compson invent an entire extended fantasy that he uses in order to explain why Henry would murder Charles Bon, since he does not know yet about the "drop" of Black "blood," that Quentin will later reveal to him. In this fantasy, Mr. Compson hypothesizes that the motive was Henry not being able to bear that Bon, who was going to marry his sister Judith, had an "octoroon" ("one-eighth" Black) mistress acquired through the so-called "*plaçage*" system in New Orleans (an extralegal concubinage system, of disputed historical veracity, for white men to purchase mistresses of

[45] The phrase "sons of Ham" is a reference to the so-called Hamitic hypothesis: the belief that the Biblical story of Ham (a son of Noah), whose descendants were said to be Black Africans, provided divine justification for slavery, in the form of a racial curse from God. See David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

mixed-race descent). As Mr. Compson waxes increasingly poetic, he fetishizes the mixed-race *plaçage* system as "the supreme apotheosis of chattelry, of human flesh bred of the two races" (*AA* 89). Mr. Compson fancifully imagines Bon saying to Henry that the reason octoroon mistresses are an "apotheosis" is because they wed together the different racial essences of white and Black blood—and specifically, they wed the very environmental worlds of two of these two "races":

> the white blood to give the shape and pigment of what the white man calls female beauty, to a female principle which existed, queenly and complete, in the hot equatorial groin of the world long before that white one of ours came down from trees and lost its hair and bleached out. (*AA* 92-3)

Here, we see Mr. Compson's obsession with an evolution-based notion of scientific racial essentialism, as well as a climatological theory of race, evident in his sexualizing reference to Africa as a "hot equatorial groin," and whites as "bleaching out" after leaving to cooler climes.[46] For Mr. Compson, the idea of racial climatic/genetic evolution in the "blood" also serves as a sexual fetish: he imagines the African "female principle" as a sort of animal sex drive, an instinctive desire to be penetrated (he imagines the Black woman "supine" on "her throne"). Thus, in this flight of fancy where Mr. Compson ventriloquizes what he thinks Bon must have said to Henry, Mr. Compson really explores his *own* fantasy of sex with the racist image he creates of over-sexualized Black women, opposed to the "white sister," whom he figures as a moralistic prude for prioritizing marriage over intercourse, thus making sex an economic and civil matter—an over-civilized moral prudery that comes, too, Mr. Compson implies, as a result of the move to cooler climates, which supposedly chill the "hot," primitive instincts.[47]

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[46] Michael Wainwright argues that Darwinisim and eugenics were "in the air" over the course of Faulkner's career; particularly when it comes to Faulkner's 1930s novels obsessed with the myth of blood, "the paradigm of Darwinian evolution" thus serves as a key "hermeneutic." Micahel Wainwright, *Darwin and Faulkner's Novels: Evolution and Southern Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 33.

[47] On humoral theories, see Greta LaFleur, *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns

This racist attitude about "primitive" blackness, based on a fantasy of race as genetically and climatologically based, circulates like the air itself from teller to teller as the novel progresses, infecting each narrator in turn—folding into itself air in the first sense of a rhetorical marker for the phenomenological fact of telling as an atmosphere or "commonwealth" owned communally by all.[48] For example, the reader finds out that Mr. Compson has inherited this attitude about the genetic and climatological nature of "blood" from his father, General Compson. Upon learning about the young Sutpen's stint in Haiti trying to get rich through working as an overseer on a French sugar plantation, Quentin's grandfather remarks that the Caribbean is "the halfway point between what we call the jungle and what we call civilization, halfway between the dark inscrutable continent from which the black blood" came and "the cold known land to which it was doomed, the civilised land and people" (*AA* 202).[49] This is one of the more jarring statements in the novel of white characters indulging in a theory of race as determined by climate "zones"—torrid, temperate, tropic, etc.—and directly recalls Mr. Compson's obsession with racial essence and climate, the "equatorial groin" of the world. Moreover, despite his various criticisms of Rosa, Mr. Compson, despite himself, fundamentally shares with her this investment in the primitivist idea of "black blood" as genetic. Rosa too, after all, primitivistically describes Clytie as possessing an "*acceptance of the inexplicable unseen inherited from an older and a purer race than mine*" (*AA* 110). The very thing these white tellers accuse Blackness of (being unevolved, timeless, primordial) is ironically at the same time the

Hopkins University Press, 2018); Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

[48] As Margo Crawford puts it, *Absalom, Absalom!* "enters, partially but tellingly, into the larger modernist discourse of racialized primitivism" which serves as a "veritable playground for the imagination." Margo Natalie Crawford, *Dilution Anxiety and the Black Phallus* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008) 60.

[49] Glissant points out how the Caribbean is precisely what Yoknapatawpha County needs to suppress—the fear that miscegenation, creolization, métissage are running rampant, contaminating every corner of the Plantation system. Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 87-8.

thing they long for, and that they imagine white blood as now lacking ("purity" of genes, an original animal instinct free from the repressive taboos of civilization)—hence whiteness's need to parasitically supplement itself through "Black blood," a need which they also resent Blackness for. In this regard, ultimately, unsurprisingly, the story culminates with the tellers convincing themselves they've found what they suspected all along in Bon. In light of this, Mr. Compson's final words in the novel, in the form of the letter that has so thoroughly disturbed Quentin—and disturbs the very narrative fabric, as Quentin cannot finish the letter until three more chapters have gone by—take on a more ominous sense than their seemingly innocuous content of just chatting about the weather: for the statement is not about weather per se, but about how it literally attacks the human body in the form of its analogization to a worm frozen by it (*AA* 302). Climate itself turns out to be Mr. Compson's pet theory (inherited in turn from his father, we later learn) for explaining how race can be shaped into a body's "blood" if not its "skin."

As we see, like Sutpen, Rosa and Mr. Compson know deep down the primitivist, climatological fantasy of race is make-believe. And yet, the structure of it will not leave their minds. And by the end we see it spread to both Quentin and Shreve who become increasingly likened in their imaginings to Mr. Compson. The primitive, climate-determinist fantasy of "blood" is just as appealing to the Canadian Shreve, if not more so, who remarks to Quentin, "Jesus, the South is fine, isn't it. It's better than the theatre, isn't it. It's better than Ben Hur, isn't it" (*AA* 176), and interrupts Quentin to take over the increasingly fantasized reconstruction of events, telling him "Let me play a while now" (*AA* 224). And it is Shreve—taking up Mr. Compson's primitivist, climatological fantasy of race—who ultimately articulates the most theatrical version of racial essence and climate, claiming the "Jim Bonds" of the world (Sutpen's great-grandson, and the sole survivor of the "miscegenated" family line) will "conquer the

world," even though they will "bleach out" as they "spread toward the poles" (note that "bleach out" is the exact same turn-of-phrase Mr. Compson used before), such that eventually even "I [Shreve] who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings" (*AA* 302).

Given Shreve's general attempts to tease Quentin about the South, one might just interpret this as yet another attempt of his to needle Quentin about southern values, like the taboo of miscegeny. At the same time, it's harder to discount Shreve's adoption of the exact racial-climatological phrase that Mr. Compson used earlier ("bleach out"), in light of the fact that, when Shreve first enters the story, Quentin continuously thinks to himself that Shreve, as a narrator, "sounds just like Father" (*AA* 147, 148, 168, 171). Indeed Shreve's claim here, and Mr. Compson's before it, echo long-standing fantasies drawn from natural sciences seeking to explain racial origins. Shreve's hypothesis about Jim Bond and his future descendants—an hypothesis which provides the final line summing up the entirety of the whole Sutpen family lineage at the novel's close—is almost a direct reinstantiation of what, in 1749, in his *Histoire Naturelle,* the Comte de Buffon argued as possible in regard to climate's relation to race: "If a colony of Negroes were transplanted into a northern province, their descendants of the 8th, 10th, or 12th generation, would be much fairer, and perhaps as white as the natives of that climate."[50] So too, three decades later, no less a figure than Immanuel Kant would argue for climate as the ultimate origin of "races of men": "at long last, then, the condition of the earth (dampness or dryness)… eventually produces one hereditary distinction or stock among animals of a single line of descent and race."[51]

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[50] Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Natural History, General and Particular,* Vol. 3, trans. William Smellie (London: A. Strathan and T. Cadell, 1791), 201.

[51] Kant, "Of the Different Human Races," 10. Kant also claims that "hot and humid climate" "accounts for the origin of the Negro," as it naturally produces "the growth of the spongy parts of the body… thick, turned up nose and thick, fatty lips," "oily skin," a "blackness that shines through the epidermis," and a character that is "lazy, indolent, and dawdling." Ibid., 17.

Thus, we have a set of white narrators who are obsessed with the difference of airs between hot Mississippi late summer and cold Massachusetts deep winter—between temperate and torrid zones within the U.S. itself—and the impact of these airs for the unfolding of the telling itself, as well as something itself that is actively theorized as a source of racial origin by those same tellers. Part of why Shreve's final statement about "bleaching out" functions as a goad to Quentin is that climate theories of racial origin stoke anxieties over the instability and potential loss of racial identity—the corollary potential, for example, for whiteness to degrade or "degenerate" through over-long exposure to "torrid" climates (Mr. Compson's "equatorial groin"), and conversely, for Blacks to "bleach out" in "temperate" ones.[52]

Part of what is at stake, in this descriptive obsession over the difference of air quality between North and South, is the way in which the conversation between Quentin and Shreve also functions as a demand for Southern whites of the "torrid" zone of Mississippi to justify themselves to Northern whites from the temperate zone—justify their grounds for inclusion in the category of "normal" whiteness. Indeed, Shreve and Quentin's relationship, their narratorial communion over the Sutpen story, is explicitly marked in terms of an environmental logic of whiteness, and the question of how different "degrees" of whiteness can span geographical, climate zones, yet still be a single unified essence: born the same year, "the one in Alberta, the other in Mississippi; born half a continent apart yet joined, connected after a fashion in a sort of geographical transubstantiation by that Continental Trough, that River which runs not only through the physical land of which it is the geologic umbilical… but is very Environment itself which laughs at degrees of latitude and temperature" (*AA* 208). Indeed, although the narration

[52] James Johnson, *The Influence of Tropical Climates on European Constitutions* (New York: Evert Duyckinck, George Long, Collins and Co., 1826). See also Greta LaFleur's discussion of Thomas Jefferson's anxieties in defending the Southern U.S. against climate theorists claiming it as a "torrid" zone. LaFleur, *Natural History*, 56-9.

appeals to the Mississippi River as the grand unifier of "degrees" of whiteness in the Americas regardless of "latitude and temperature" separating them, we nevertheless see, evident in the narration's plea for this shared whiteness, a deeper, concealed anxiety over shades of whiteness. The aforementioned passage of Shreve asking Quentin to explain the South's "air" to him—is it something "in the air?"—is part of this racial appeal for Southern, torrid, tropical whiteness to justify itself as still white enough to temperate whites of the North. The fact that Shreve begins this passage by, upon seeing the cold Quentin, exclaiming "Jesus, if I was going to have to spend nine months in this climate I would sure hate to have come from the South"—a statement prompting Shreve in turn wonder, "Maybe I wouldn't come from the South anyway, even if I could stay there," which in turn leads him to ask Quentin to explain the South to him—gives, upon closer examination following Shreve's later statement about "bleaching out" at the end of the chapter, a more literal, climate-determinist level to Shreve's question about "what's in the air down there," that takes over or folds into the prior, formal, phenomenological level explored above.

Thus, in the end, the novel shows how, along the way to Shreve's denouement via climate determinist claim of race, Quentin, Quentin's father, Quentin's grandfather, and Rosa Caulfield, all express some version of this shocking, antiquated early modern doctrine of race as well. Of course these narrators need not "actually" believe in the material reality of a taboo like miscegeny or passing in order to benefit from its effects of segregation, oppression, and exploitation.[53] After all, Quentin and Shreve in their reconstruction ultimately cease to care about

[53] As George Yancy puts it: "On this score, whiteness functions as what I call the transcendental norm, or that according to which black bodies or bodies of color are deemed 'deviant,' 'different,' 'ersatz,' 'raced,' and 'marked' against the normative, unmarked background of whiteness." George Yancy, "Confiscated Bodies," in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, eds. Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy and Gayle Salamon (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020) 69.

anything else about Henry and Bon besides their "blood," with everything else about them becoming an abstract irrelevance: it didn't matter to them "what faces and what names they [Bon and Henry] called themselves and were called by so long as the blood coursed—the blood, the immortal brief recent intransient blood" (237). This bias makes the factual point of whether the "black blood" actually existed in Bon's body both dubious and beside the point.[54] The point is the effect it has, as an abstract symbol, in the minds of these white narrators. The point is to lay bare the way these white minds believe they have a right to ventriloquize, predict and imagine Blackness, thus participating, narratively, in a tradition of minstrelsy, the donning of Black skin and the presumption of control over a transparent Black interiority. For in reality, this narrative performance reveals nothing about Bon, or Charles Etienne themselves. Rather, like blackface,[55] it is an imagined construct that "is actually little more than a perverse expression of whiteness… A form of 'white knowing' (in reality, of white unknowing), of white projection, and of stipulating through performance of what it means to be black by way of lies about what it means to be white."[56]

In this regard, the gambit of the novel, the whole cooked-up "mystery" that hinges on Bon's drop of "black blood," is that even *after* the key piece of missing information is revealed about Bon's heritage, the story is still anticlimactic.[57] What the novel actually shows is not any

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[54] Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 71.

[55] This is also what Kristin Fujie analyzes as race's "medial" character in Faulkner: the way that white characters use (their stereotypical projections about) Black characters as a way "attune" themselves to their world: "the black body's function as a medium through which white characters first suspend and then access their own feelings." Kristin Fujie, "'Through a Piece of Colored Glass': Faulkner, Race, and Mediation," *Modern Fiction Studies* 65, no. 3, (2019): 433. See also John Duvall's claim about "whiteface minstrelsy" in Faulkner—the claim that the performance of Blackness by white characters serves as a way for Faulkner to write characters who "perform cultural blackness" in ways that enable the author to critically meditate on his own distance from white Southern norms. John Duvall, *Race and White Identity in Southern Fiction: From Faulkner to Morrison* (London: Palgrave, 2008), x.

[56] George Yancy, "Why White People Need Blackface," *The New York Times*, 4 March 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/04/opinion/blackface-racism.html. Accessed 12 November 2020.

[57] As Spillers points out, far from a climax in the form of a final tragic revelation, the point of Faulkner's narratology in *Absalom, Absalom!* is to rupture "the intuitive 'logic' of reading as forward and progressive

resolution to a mystery about the putative *climatic-genetic* inheritance of a drop of blood, but rather the *cultural* inheritance of racism as a social, intergenerational cognitive obsession—a far different "something in the air" than the climate-based theories of race its primary characters profess. Moreover the "aura" of heat that is conjured by "the activity or writing, or telling the South" in the novel is far from a panacea that some critics might contend, but rather is ultimately the enabling medium of the novel's white supremacy.[58] In doing so, the novel reveals the ways the white mind is held in the the thrall of a racial imaginary: a sedimented cultural inheritance that is geared toward deliberate misinformation about the white self and its place in the world (an "epistemology of ignorance"), and is parasitic in nature. It feeds off its own projections of Blackness as a deflection against actually coming to understand the real meaning and effect of its own whiteness.

"Savageness," Sexuality, and the Air of Colorism in *Salvage the Bones*

Like in *Absalom, Absalom!,* in *Salvage the Bones*, raw air is used to stack different narrative perspectives across time and space, drawing together into the "present" a host of generational (re)tellings. Air is the condition for narration and memory. It is also the condition for a distinctly racialized history, and for sexual desire. Hurricanes themselves are perceived as racialized, "tropical" phenomena, raising the specter of the racist imaginary of the racial essence of climate zones that Faulkner's white narrators evince.[59] The narrator, Esch, uses the hurricane

momentum in time which takes us steadily along a trajectory initiated in ignorance and brought to closure on knowledge and certainty." Spillers, "Faulkner Adds Up," 338. Glissant similarly argues that Faulkner rejects tragic unity. Glissant is right that the comparison of Faulkner's work to detective fiction is only a *seeming* similarity, for at the end of the day, Faulkner deliberately deflates the long-deferred moment of disclosure. Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 9, 98.

[58] Ferguson, "Gumbrecht, Faulkner and the Presence of Heat," 1375.

[59] On a cultural history of hurricanes in the Caribbean, see Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

as an occasion to remember and relate to her dead mother; as well as to her own impending status as a mother, as a sixteen year old teenager. The lens for this set of relations—backward and forward looking—concerning motherhood hinges on rawness. The narrator relates to the hurricane as a raw thing, like herself, and like the other more-than-human companions in her neighborhood, from animals killed for food to her older brother's pit-bull, both a new mother and a prized fighting dog. And Esch draws on an atmospheric vocabulary in order to express her erotic desires for the man who impregnated her, while coping with misogyny and anti-Black colorism.

Ward situates her fiction directly in contrast to the brand of pessimistic fatalism about racism that dominates Faulkner's work.[60] Ward has said that "failures of some of his [Faulkner's] black characters—the lack of imaginative vision regarding them, the way they don't display the full range of human emotion" was a "goad" for her to write *Salvage the Bones* in the first place.[61] Indeed, like Glissant, Ward too senses Faulkner's suppression of *créolité* in *Absalom, Absalom!* in particular: "But when I read *Absalom, Absalom!* and saw these Creole characters on the page, I thought, oh, these aren't – I have problems with the ways these characters are coming alive on the page. They aren't coming alive like the [white] characters; these characters feel flat to me."[62] It is not coincidental that readers find, on the first day of *Salvage the Bones*, that the narrator got an "A" on her exam on *As I Lay Dying* for answering correctly the question: "*why does the young boy think his mother is a fish?*" (*SB* 7).[63]

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[60] Alcoff, *Future of Whiteness*, 92.
[61] Jesmyn Ward, "Jesmyn Ward on *Salvage the Bones*," interviewed by Elizabeth Hoover, *The Paris Review*, August 30, 2011, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2011/08/30/jesmyn-ward-on-salvage-the-bones/.
[62] Jesmyn Ward, "I Wanted to Write About the People of the South," interview by Emma Brockes, *The Guardian*, December 1, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/01/jesmyn-ward-national-book-award.
[63] For essays comparing Ward's novels with *As I Lay Dying*, see: Sinéad Moynihan, "From Disposability to Recycling: William Faulkner and the New Politics of Rewriting in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*," *Studies in the Novel* 47, no. 4 (2015): 550-567; Greg Chase, "Of Trips Taken and Time Served: How Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* Grapples with Faulkner's Ghosts," *African American Review* 53, no. 3 (2020): 201-216.

If Faulkner's atmospheric rhetoric is cynically stuck in the deadend rut of racist habits—if it seeks, as Glissant contends, to contain and suppress *créolité,* that which is changed by the process of cultural exchange[64]—how does Ward reconfigure atmospheric rhetoric in service of a Caribbean materialism of rampant, relational rawness? If for Faulkner, atmosphere is a "smoggy" medium of obscuring white supremacy, how does Ward, by contrast, use atmosphere as a way to shed light on anti-Black misogyny and histories of environmental racism?

On August 29, 2005, on the eve of Hurricane Katrina, Esch Batiste, the sixteen year-old narrator of Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, waits in her family's boarded up house on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and confronts the way the storm has put her in the same boat as animals: foxes, rabbits, squirrels, "they prepare like us," packing materials into their shelters. In the lull before Katrina hits, she reminisces about the last time she lived through a hurricane—Hurricane Elaine. During Elaine, Esch's mother told Esch about the storm she had lived through in 1969 when she was little, "the legend: Camille." What her mother remembered most vividly about Camille was "the smell afterward," from the "newly dead": "like garbage set to rot… in the hot sun" (*SB* 218). The polluted water meant that, even after walking miles to an artesian well, she still got sick. Her mother "had dreamed that she could never get away from the water because she couldn't stop shitting it or pissing it or throwing it up" (*SB* 218).

The memory charts the rawness of hurricanes as both the wet and windy air of the storm itself, as well as the smell of "new" corpses. The hurricane is also an occasion for Esch to reflect on rawness as an interspecies substratum linking her body's matter to those of the animals around her in the face of the storm. While the water in Katrina builds—soon to be lashing their home in rains and floods—Esch reflects on the historical occasions when this type of deluge has

[64] Another way of putting this, in Glissant's terms: Faulkner rejects *créolité,* rejects what is *changed* by the process of cultural exchange. Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, 83-5.

happened before. And the image of her mother sickened by waters polluted by raw matter in the wake of past hurricane floods—the water outside—finds a microcosmic mirror inside Esch's own body, as she reflects on the shared fluidity between the waters of her own pregnant body and the gathering waters of the storm. Present too, for Esch, is the pain of memories of her mother, who died in childbirth, as Esch herself is on the verge of becoming a teenage mother.

But what is most significant about the scene is its narrative structure of nested memories of generational telling concerning the raw weather: the way in which Esch stacks three hurricanes, spanning generations, into the present moment. Doing so, the narrative gives the present climate event its own "matrilineage," as it were: Camille, Elaine, Katrina. Moreover, the shared memories, between Esch and her mother, yields a sense of familial belonging to an environment in the face of climate catastrophe. To understand Katrina, Esch brings a memory of her own experience living through a hurricane, which includes within it the memory her mother shared with her, into the present instance—an instance which includes the future for Esch as well, as she concludes in the wake of the storm: "Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother, with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes" (*SB* 255).

In asking how the quality of air functions in *Salvage the Bones*, one immediately notices its most dramatic moment in the text: when Katrina actually hits, on the eleventh day of the novel. Esch's narration of the air in this climactic event is full of noticeable personifications of Hurricane Katrina. The storm flooding the family's yard is "like a creeping animal, a wide-nosed snake" (*SB* 226); and Esch repeatedly attributes language to the storm: in the early morning, the wind says "*Hello*" in "sighs" (*SB* 219); later, at the most violent part of the storm, when the Batistes break through their house's attic roof to escape drowning in it, "the storm screams, *I have been waiting for you*" (*SB* 230); and when Esch's father, Claude, pushes Esch into the

flooding waters as they are escaping the house, upon the shock of learning she's pregnant, Esch hears the hurricane saying "*ssssssshhhhhhhh*" as its "hand" pushes her under the waters (*SB* 235).

Esch's decision to narrate Katrina through this personifying mode is perhaps influenced by her memories of her mother, whom Esch claims not only "talked back" to storms, but whose generational retellings of memorable hurricane seasons gives Esch a sense of the storm as a "mother" in the scene described above (*SB* 219). But Esch's narration of the storm in this anthropomorphizing mode also noticeably shifts the storm away from what some might expect—a sort of senseless evil—to something like relational familiarity. One might say that this personification primarily evinces the desire to give meaning to what is otherwise an event of meaningless violence. But, throughout the novel, there is arguably more significance to Esch's relationship to air than this. In this regard, we might learn something about the decision to personify the violent air in this scene by attending to what air is doing more ambiently throughout the novel's days leading up to the storm, and how else it signifies in Esch's narration beyond this personification of Katrina as a "mother."

To begin with, like the white narrators of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Esch's narration frequently plays with rhetoric that conflates the relationship between race and region (what Sonya Posmentier calls an "ethno-environmental mimeticism," that frequently lurks in decolonial aesthetics).[65] In fact, this relation between race and region seems, at a literal level, to be integral to the novel's very title, which plays on a homophony between the words "salvage" and "savage." As Esch's older brother, Skeetah, puts it at one point, regarding the connection between the Batiste family's plot of land, called the Pit, and their personal identity: "We savages

[65] Sonya Posmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2017), 8.

up here on the Pit. Even the gnats. Mosquitoes so big they look like bats," a statement that consciously claims the environmental place-name of the neighborhood they live in for themselves, as well as suggesting an interspecies, ecological molding of bodily matter by the very ambience of the Pit, all the way from insects to humans ("Bois Sauvage" is French for "wild," or "savage woods"). We might also note that, recalling *Absalom*'s investment in what it means to "breath the same air," that Skeetah's pronouncement similarly points to a quality of the very air at the Pit—air that is thick with especially large and aggressive insects—as the source of familial identity. In interviews, Ward has highlighted the importance of this term, "savage," in its relation to the novel's title: "The word *salvage* is phonetically close to *savage*. At home, among the young, there is honor in that term… You survive. You are a savage." The mirroring, the claim of an analogy, between place-name and and familial identity ("we savage"—a "we" which notably includes both Batistes and the more-than-human ecological world of insects around them), and Ward's suggestion of the "savageness" of surviving the raw winds of Katrina recalls, in a new variation, the image we started the dissertation with: Thoreau's "strange thrill of savage delight," which "strongly tempted" him to "devour raw" a woodchuck crossing his path in order to incorporate the "wildness" the animal represented—its natural indigeneity.[66]

Nor is Skeetah's imagination the only one that hinges on this "mimeticism" between racial identity and environment. Esch shares with Skeetah an imaginary that mimetically conflates environmental place with personal identity. Indeed, in Esch's imagining, we see the same Thoreauian pattern of imagining that when one consumes a "wild" animal, one might incorporate the "wildness" the animal represents, the fantasy of belonging to an environment as "deeply" or "primitively" as a "wild" animal does. Esch describes how, when her mom caught a

[66] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 202.

small shark while fishing in the bay, she cooked it in butter and buttermilk, in order to "take the wild out of" the raw meat (*SB* 85). Elsewhere in the novel, even cooking a "wild" animal doesn't completely remove the "wildness" from it. When Esch's brother Skeetah kills and cooks a squirrel for them, on an evening when the two siblings are camping out, Esch imagines that the blood of the butchered animal itself incorporates, microcosmically, a part of the squirrel's environment: "the blood smells like wet hot earth after summer rain" (*SB* 47). Already here Esch's sensory perception twins "blood" with "climate" in a way that recalls, in a different way, the concern of Faulkner's narrators' racially obsessed imaginaries. When Esch bites into the sandwich she has made out of the cooked squirrel meat, "half wild animal," she imagines herself literally turning squirrelly, completing, in a sense, the Thoreauian fantasy of eating a woodchuck raw in order to take on its properties: "I bite and I am eating acorns and leaping with fear to the small dark holes in the heart of old oak trees" (*SB* 49). Here, Esch's imagination strikingly echoes the precise environmental fantasy that Thoreau indulges in with his woodchuck (also a rodent, like Esch's squirrel): an ability to ontologically incorporate the "wildness" of an animal caught and killed outdoors (which here also means literally melding into place-name as well, "Bois Sauvage"), consuming its body such that one ingests its essence, and, in this case, becomes a squirrel, inhabits the environment of a squirrel, becomes one with a squirrel's ecosystem, and even knows, affectively, perceptually and emotionally, what it is like to be a squirrel—both the "fear" as well as seeing the world as squirrel would (small holes in oak trees as "home"), and tasting the same food ("I am eating acorns"). [67]

Nor is Esch's flight of fancy concerning incorporating wildness into her own body

[67] "This is not to say that Ward is merely running the racist 'animalization' of African Americans backwards, but is commenting on the far more complex entangling of multispecies life." Christopher Lloyd, "Creaturely, Throwaway Life after Katrina: *Salvage the Bones* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," *South: A Scholarly Journal* 48, no. 2 (2016): 253..

limited to this scene alone. And in fact, Esch seems to extend her brother Skeetah's perception of the "we" in the "savage" beyond just the Pit to include the rest of what she refers to in the novel as the "black heart" of Bois Sauvage. In one of the few scenes where Esch walks through the center of Bois Sauvage, she gives the reader a brief glimpse into what the rest of the town beyond the rural Pit looks like: she talks about how the houses of her brothers' friends are "hidden behind trees," describing Big Henry's "narrow shotgun house"; Marquise's "small pink house" with only three windows, and blending in with overgrown azaleas; a blue-gray house "with bougainvillea grown to riot"; Mudda Ma'am's "faded" house "choked with wistaria," and a county park which "strives" but "fails" to "impose some order, some civility to Bois" (*SB* 116-17).

In this description of the town itself, Esch's specific choice of the word "civility" in the last example implies her awareness of its opposite, savageness/wildness, suggesting in effect that the town literally lives up to its name of "Bois Sauvage." In talking about the fact that the forest constantly "encroaches" on what is meant to be a park with artificially manicured boundaries—trees sprout up in ditches, in play structures, in the baseball field, and beside picnic tables—Esch describes the perennial failure of maintenance workers to mow back the pine seedlings. Esch ends her description: "The wild things of Bois Sauvage ignore [the maintenance workers]; we are left to seed another year" (*SB* 117). Significantly, Esch's narration here directly calls back to the statement that Skeetah makes, "we savages," in the previous chapter. Like Skeetah, Esch's use of "we" here functions semantically to include herself, and her neighbors, among "the wild things of Bois Sauvage," suggesting that, despite her humanness, she herself is nonetheless part of the "wild" environment that earned the place its name. Esch's "we" here extends, by implication, not just to the Batistes at the Pit, but to the whole part of the neighborhood she describes in the

previous part of the paragraph—Big Henry, Marquise, Mudda Ma'am, all with their faded, overgrown, "incongruous" houses are enlisted now, too, within the "wild things of Bois Sauvage." To be sure, this semantic punning between "wild things" and "Bois Sauvage" has a racial composition to Esch: it is only the part of the town that Esch elsewhere calls the "black heart" of Bois Sauvage, as opposed to its "pale arteries," that demonstrates this essence of the place-name Bois Sauvage, that can really be said to most deeply belong to the real "character" of the place as an environment and climate.

Many have remarked on Ward's savage / salvage pun positively; Joshua Bennett argues persuasively that the novel's investment in "savagery" / "wildness" (the twin signifiers of *sauvage*) is key to its two, interrelated goals: to depict human "intimacy" and "entanglement" with the more-than-human world (most notably, with China, Skeetah's pitbull) in order to "abolish" species hierarchy on the one hand; and, on the other hand, to "return to the wild as a means through which to abolish the stranglehold of a white-supremacist imaginary."[68] In short, the novel's "critical embrace of savagery, is one of the novel's greatest gifts."[69] Other critics write that "Entering a salvage requires deploying a revised Black feminist mythology that celebrates not only change over time but also the wildness, the savageness inherent in post-Katrina Black lives";[70] "The Batistes survive the storm by opening up to being in such a wild, savage way."[71]

It is significant, in the light of the way in which raw weather served precisely as the chief medium of white supremacy's viral spread, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, that here, critics discern in

[68] Joshua Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 155, 157.
[69] Ibid., 159.
[70] Alvin Henry, "Jesmyn Ward's Post-Katrina Black Feminism: Memory and Myth through Salvaging," *English Language Notes* 57, no. 2 (2019): 82.
[71] Erica R. Edwards, "Sex After the Black Normal," *Differences* 26, no. 1 (2015): 161.

raw weather the chief form of *abolishing* white supremacy. How is this reversal supposed to take place—the switch from environmental atmospheres as conduit for white supremacy's spread in *Absalom, Absalom!*, to a chief tool in white supremacy's abolition in *Salvage the Bones*? This question requires deeper attention to the logic of atmosphere guiding Esch's racial imaginary in the novel beyond just her personification of the air in the event of Hurricane Katrina. Doing so, we ought to be careful not to mistake Esch's imaginary, in the way it hinges on "wildness" and a conflation between identity and environmental place-name, with an endorsement on the part of Ward.

Indeed, like in *Absalom, Absalom!*, an uncomfortable environmental logic of skin color comes to play a large part in Esch's narration, in the metaphors and similes Ward depicts her mind coming to rely on to make sense of her world. This is, at first blush, a habit Esch inherits from her mom (also echoing the inheritance of racial views from one's parents depicted in action in *Absalom, Absalom!*). On the novel's first day, Esch says early on that she got her looks from her mom. When Esch was eight, her father told her mom that Esch is "*a little scrappy scrawny thing—built just like you*" (*SB* 6). Esch, however, seems to have mixed feelings about what others perceive as her tomboyishness: her hair is "my one good thing… [I] knew the rest of me wasn't so remarkable: wide nose, dark skin, Mama's slim, short frame with all the curves folded in so that I looked square" (*SB* 7). Ten days later, after Esch recounts this memory, as Esch and her brothers Randall and Junior scout for eggs on their property two days before Katrina hits, Esch recalls how her mother taught her to find eggs, telling Esch about the colors to look for: "*They're usually brown and have some feathers stuck to them… The eggs look that way because of the mama. Whatever the color the mama is that's what color the egg is… Like me and you*, she said. *Like me and you. See?*" (*SB* 199). In this memory, Esch's mother teaches Esch about

her inheritance of her skin color by analogy to the more-than-human world, tying up Esch's sense of her Blackness with the environment from a young age. In a sense too then, perhaps adjacent to the dynamics of *Absalom, Absalom!*, we see the role of generational memory in shaping how a narrator understands race through appeal to the more-than-human environment.

But most significant turns out to be the environmental logic—and especially, increasingly, the atmospheric rhetoric—that Esch appeals to in narrating her sexual relationship with Manny. Manny is three years older than Esch, and though she has become pregnant, Manny wants to keep their relationship a secret because he is living with another woman, his girlfriend Shaliyah, who is light-skinned like him, and unlike Esch. The relationship is marked, in the days leading up to Katrina, by several instances of overt verbal misogyny. When Esch attempts forms of touch that are romantic rather than sexual, he calls her "crazy" and tells her she "know[s] it ain't like that" (*SB* 56); he humiliates Esch in front of others, telling her that her body "ain't that bad" (*SB* 55); in a particularly painful scene, Manny insults the Batistes fighting pitbull, China, claiming that she's weaker after giving birth to a litter; Manny says weakness is the "price of being female," and glances at Esch when he says it, prompting Esch to both wonder "Does Manny think that of me, that I am weak? That there is a price to this body that swallows him… ?," and to further wonder if "he ever told [Shaliyah] that about weakness. If he ever called her female, bit it off at the end like underripe sugarcane" (*SB* 96). Esch, too, feels dehumanized by the fact that Manny refuses to look at her face when they have sex. In another painful scene, when Esch and Manny have sex in a bathroom stall, she forces Manny to look at her ("He will look at me"), and when Manny notices Esch's "honeydew curve… the budding baby" and then looks at her "eye to eye," their reactions couldn't be more opposed: as Esch says Manny seeing her and "knowing" is "all I have ever wanted," Manny instead flings her off of him roughly,

banging her into the door and yells “Fuck!,” leaving Esch alone in the bathroom. In their final exchange in the novel, when Esch confronts Manny for his rejection, telling him that the baby is “his,” Manny tells Esch that she can’t “come to me saying something’s mines when you fuck everybody who come to the Pit,” and insists even her own brothers know she’s “a slut” (*SB* 204).

While these are certainly some of the most shocking scenes in the novel, arguably more important than Manny’s misogyny in the novel is what Esch’s relationship to Manny means on her own terms, rather than his. In this regard, what we notice is the distinctly atmospheric vocabulary that Esch appeals to in describing her attraction to Manny.

Esch is aware, for example, of how Manny’s misogyny also intersects with a larger anti-Black colorism she has long lived with, even before Manny’s preference, at least publicly, for Shaliyah versus his relegation of Esch to a secret contingency (*SB* 56); Esch describes feeling this at a young age, from childhood jealousy of a schoolmate named Citronella, who always had “at least two boyfriends,” and whom Esch describes as “golden as those candles, so perfect that I wanted to hate her”—what she perceives as a sharp contrast between Citronella’s amorous desirability and her own, recalling what she calls her “not remarkable” self (*SB* 50). In this scene of childhood memory, Esch’s mention of Citronella’s skin as “golden as those candles” is not just significant because it is prompted, in part, by Skeetah’s remark to Esch that he doesn’t think her and Manny “look right together,” further underscoring the understanding, on her brother’s part, of the colorism Esch faces with Manny (*SB* 47). After all, it is no coincidence that it is Manny, complaining to Skeetah about how large and aggressive the mosquitoes are at the Pit, that prompts Skeetah’s claim that “we savages up here at the Pit”—thus explicitly drawing a division line between Manny and the Batistes, excluding the former from the latter’s at-homeness in the place-name of Bois Sauvage. But what is further significant is the fact that Esch

turns to a rhetoric of atmosphere (candle-light, here) in order to chart this relationship to skin color. For it is this very rhetoric of atmosphere and environment that continues to predominate her descriptions of Manny in the present.

Although when she first introduces Manny to readers she compares his skin to "the color of fresh-cut wood at the heart of a pine tree," this botanical metaphor gives way throughout the rest of the novel to atmospheric depictions of Manny. We can see the way in which atmosphere provides Esch with a vocabulary for coming to terms with the emotions surrounding her sexual desire for Manny, inflected with the tensions of colorism that haunt that desire, evinced across each of the twelve days that Esch narrates. On the first day of the novel, Esch describes the climate in Bois Sauvage, the raw, humid, stagnant air, pregnant, in a sense, with a budding hurricane:

> We hadn't had a good rain in weeks. The shower we needed was out in the Gulf, held like a tired, hungry child by the storm forming there. When there's a good rain in the summer, the pit fills to the brim and we swim in it. The water, which was normally pink, had turned a thick, brownish red. The color of a scab. I turned around and saw gold. Manny. (*SB* 15)

The description is significant not just because the next words in the narration are the first ones we see Manny speak to Esch in the novel. As the scene unfolds, it shows to readers for the first time, Esch and Manny having sex together; thus, significantly, the scene sets the tone for how Esch views her sexuality, her desire for Manny, through the rest of the novel, in relation to the environment itself, and especially the air. In a sense, Esch conflates her sexuality and her desire for Manny with the literal climate: with the pre-hurricane pregnant air. Insofar as the climate description foreshadows Hurricane Katrina, forming out in the Gulf, which will land ten days later, there's a way in which Esch's sexuality literally becomes part and parcel with Hurricane Katrina itself.

Esch recurs repeatedly to this rhetoric that conflates her sexual desire for Manny with that of the climate of hurricane season. On the sixth day, Esch says: "The sun is shimmering through the oak leaves and catching [Manny's] skin, so his whole body shines" (*SB* 121). Again, on the tenth day (the day before Katrina lands), Esch describes Manny as "the lightest thing in the clearing. I want to have him blazing over me again, just once" (*SB* 200). Elsewhere, on the third day—the day that Esch recounts the memory of Citronella after her brother tells her that she and Manny don't "look right" together—Esch says that Manny's body, like Citronella's, "catches all the light from the fire, eats it up, and blazes" (*SB* 50). On the same evening Esch describes the atmosphere "before a hurricane": animals and birds fly north in the humid, stagnant, rainless build-up: "the air has been clear these past couple of days. Bright, every day almost unbearably bright and hot and close, the way that I feel when Manny is sweating over me: golden, burning" (*SB* 45). Each of these descriptions figure Esch's erotic desire for Manny distinctly in terms of the atmospheric sense of the very place of Bois Sauvage, specifically what the place of Bois Sauvage feels like during hurricane season; and, insofar as she figures her erotic desire in this way, in terms of the very feeling of the place, she folds her sense of erotics into the novel's larger configuration of the relationship between place-name and identity in Bois Sauvage.

Esch's own self-consciousness of the colorism at stake in her relationship with Manny—first drawn attention to in her memory of Citronella following Skeetah's claim about Esch and Manny's visible "wrongness" together—comes to the fore in her subsequent descriptions of Manny's atmospheric skin. On the fifth day, during the scene when Manny claims that women are inherently "weak" as the "price of being female"—a comment which, for Esch, painfully calls attention to the way Manny treats her in comparison to his girlfriend Shaliyah—Esch describes how, when Manny stands in a shadow that it "seems wrong that he is as dark as me

now, that he would be washed dark by the sun behind him" (*SB* 100). Esch's use of atmospheric, climate rhetoric to chart not just her desire for Manny, but also her awareness of their difference, comes even more to the fore after they break up. On the novel's tenth day, Esch upon seeing Manny, "bright" in the clearing, "wonder[s] what will come from him and me: something gold and broad like him, black and small like me, or something more than either of us" (*SB* 180). Esch's question here about the color of her baby—to what degree it will look like her or Manny—returns readers, in the present, to the memory of her mother telling her that chicken eggs are the same color as the hens that laid them. In a sense, Esch follows her mother here in wondering if her own baby will be like a chicken egg in this regard, evincing an understanding of color as something filtered through a capacious environmental logic that encompasses the more-than-human world as much as humans. Esch returns to this same question the next day, on the morning before Hurricane Katrina arrives: "Would [the baby] look at me with Manny's face, with his golden skin, with my hair? Would it reach out with its fingers, pink, and grasp?" (*SB* 219). Esch further narrates her thoughts about her pregnancy in the early dawn hours before Katrina lands: "I lie awake and cannot see anything but that baby, the baby I have formed whole in my head, a black Athena, who reaches for me. Who gives me that name as if it is mine: *Mama*" (*SB* 219). Fom the novel's first day, Esch consistently uses an environmental imaginary that compares the feeling of each of these things—erotic desire, coping with emotional abuse, colorism, and finally her pregnancy—to the feeling of the pre-hurricane atmosphere of the Gulf itself; thus it is no coincidence that this repeated question about the baby and her status as a mother arrives on the morning of Hurricane Katrina, in the same scene that we opened this section with: with Esch remembering how her mother told her about Hurricane Camille, during Hurricane Elaine, establishing a sense of co-matrilineal, generational memory paralleled between

the intertwining histories of Batiste women and hurricanes.

Climate Histories and Racial Capital

One might ask: how is Esch's vocabulary of air different from the race essentialist climate determinism of *Absalom, Absalom!*? One important way of responding to this is to contrast the ways in which Ward's narrator clarifies the histories of environmental racism at stake her descriptions of the novel's setting, whereas Faulkner's narrators tend to obscure it. I want to think about the role of setting in the novel, the ambience and everydayness of the novel's landscape, and the way it depicts a historical intertwining of weather and race. The novel, most basically, is the story of the general activity of preparing for the hurricane—salvaging old jugs to store water, salvaging wood to board up the house, gathering eggs from chickens, stocking up on gas and canned goods. Like in Faulkner's novel, air quality means a history that is thick with race; except for this time, rather than a clouding smog of white supremacist ideology, we see the clarifying possibilities of a history made "thick" by the atmosphere.

Esch's narration not only highlights the way in which every generation in Bois Sauvage endures the torments of raw weather in the form of hurricanes (the novel's first day describes the chores Esch's father assigns to them to prepare for hurricane season, something they must do every summer). It also highlights the way in which the experience of climate disaster maps onto the racial inequalities that shape, differentially, both how one experiences climate disaster, as well as the landscape itself. As Annie Bares puts it, *Salvage the Bones* elucidates the "mutually constituting realities of environmental and reproductive injustice"[72]

From the novel's first pages, Esch's perception of the setting is sensitive to the way in

[72] Annie Bares, "'Each Unbearable Day': Narrative Ruthlessness and Environmental and Reproductive Injustice in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*," *MELUS* 44, no. 3 (2019): 21.

which this landscape, molded by human histories of race, in turn is shaped by the intersecting, repetitive rhythms of hurricane season: "It's summer, and when it's summer, there's always a hurricane coming or leaving here. Each pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach, where they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses before running over the bayou" (*SB* 4).

Esch's description of the setting here calls attention to the way that atmosphere and climate disaster intersect with racial histories shaping the land. Esch's narration "points to how hurricanes are racialized… the legacy of slavery is the always already condition of the Mississippi delta's landscape."[73] Zooming out to give the lay of the land of Bois Sauvage also depicts the racial histories that still constitute the place. Significant, too, is that this history of slavery enables a present-day gentrification in its wake: what before was a slave quarter has now turned into a "guesthouse" for vacationers, for wealthy seasonal tourists. Esch's historical description of housing implies not only "human" (i.e., racial capitalist) hubris in building an artificial environment below flood zones (the beach is "manmade"), but also implies that historically in both cases—in the conversion from "slave galley" to "guesthouse"—Black people in Bois Sauvage are dispossessed from the landscape, converting the historical capital of slavery into the present-day capital of tourist attractions.

Several days later, Esch further details the intertwining of climate and segregation as intersecting forces shaping Bois Sauvage, when she describes how the school near the beach, St. Catherine's, now the wealthy white school, in fact, was the school that her parents went to: "the elementary school used to actually be the black school for the district… Daddy went to this school when it was all black, and Mama, too." But this changed when "the schools were

[73] Henry Ivry, "'Improbable Metaphor': Jesmyn Ward's Asymmetrical Anthropocene," *European Review* 29, no. 3 (2021): 384.

desegregated in 1969, after the last big hurricane, when people were too tired finding their relatives' uprooted bodies… to still fight the law outlawing segregation" (*SB* 140). Significant here is not only that Esch's narration shows the failures of desegregation three and a half decades later in the novel's present, in 2005, as a historically Black area becomes white, and Esch is precluded from attending the same school her parents went to. What is further significant is the way that, like Esch's earlier description of "slave galleys turned guesthouses," Esch's perception of the landscape hinges on an attention to a history of climate and race as intersecting forces. Climate disaster appears not in a vacuum, but rather paves the way for further socioeconomic violence, an opportunity for gentrification that recomposes the setting of Bois Sauvage itself.

This history—a history that moves from slavery, to segregation, to gentrification—is legible to Esch throughout the present-day landscape of Bois Sauvage. Esch describes crossing the line of segregation, for example, when she and her brother Skeetah, as children, accidentally stumbled across a white neighbor's house over a mile away from theirs. Esch describes seeing "a pasture full of grazing cows. A wooden and barbed-wire fence rims the pasture," accompanied by a barn and a house. "White people live there." The details of Esch's perception draw subtle attention to the disparities between her family's house on the Pit—which possesses no fence, no pasture, and only small livestock. Furthermore, Esch registers what it is like for her to experience the sensation of the ways that economic capital leads to a different relationship to landscape, as her eyes move from ground to sky: she notes how "the pines had been cut brutally away so that stumps dotted the field beyond the fence… the land looked wrong. There was too much blue" (*SB* 64). Esch's bewilderment here at the empty sky registers at a felt level ("too much blue") the way that capital has remade the land (also recalling the "manmade" beach Esch describes). This in turn leads to a disorienting experience; where Esch is used to a skyscape full of trees, here the

sky is blank, which is "wrong." Esch's sense of having stumbled into a place she doesn't belong, first registered at the felt level of landscape orientation, notably converts in turn into her distinct feeling of racial and economic unbelonging as well: of trespassing an invisible color line in the landscape. As she retreats from the property, she "looked back scared, thinking the white people who lived there in that house on the edge of the black heart of Bois Sauvage had come after us" (*SB* 65). Notably, this manicured, well-kempt house contrasts starkly with the overgrown houses that Esch elsewhere describes as the "wild things of Bois Sauvage" that are "left to seed."

The contrast between the white neighbors' house and the Batistes' house—a contrast Esch captures perceptually in the very experience of atmosphere that accompanies it—also translates into a contrast in the way Hurricane Katrina impacts these neighbors and the Batistes differently. Where the white family can buy what they need to prepare for the storm, the Batiste family has to salvage what they need. In many ways, the novel is a litany of the different ways the Batiste family members end up putting their bodies on the line in order to prepare for Katrina. On the first day of the novel, Esch slits her hand open on broken glass, while cleaning out old jugs to fill with clean water, a cut "the size of a quarter" and leaving a "ribbon of red" in the mud (*SB* 11). After breaking into the white people's house in order to steal a cow dewormer he can't afford for China, who is sick, Skeetah cuts his ribs on a glass window while escaping: the four wounds are deep and "angry," "gouged into his stomach and side" (*SB* 84). Skeetah salvages an old Ace bandage that belonged to their oldest brother, Randall, "so old it's faded white"; two days later, Esch imagines that the gashes "turn red with infection under Randall's old wrap. We catch boils on the Pit as easily as we used to catch stray dogs" (*SB* 111). When, on the day before Katrina arrives, Esch and Randall return to the white neighbors' house in order to steal non-perishable food items to stock up on (the grocery store has sold out), they not only see

traces of Skeetah's dried blood around the window—Esch wonders if the old white man "smiled when he saw it" (*SB* 207)—but Randall in turn injures his body trying to break in through the plywood of the boarded-up house, first breaking the skin on his knuckles open ("the blood pools in the valleys between his knuckles, rolls to waterfall between his fingers"), then injuring his bad knee when he kicks the board ("'The wrong knee,' he says, and blows on his kneecap like he's scraped it bloody") (*SB* 208, 209). In the most dramatic instance, Esch's father, Claude, loses three of his fingers in a tractor accident that occurs while trying to knock down their chicken coop in order to salvage wood to board up their house ("his T-shirt turns red… what was Daddy's middle, ring, and pinkie finger on his left hand are sheared off clean as fallen tree trunks. The meat of his fingers is red and wet") (*SB* 129-30). This gains further significance when Esch later contrasts the salvaged boards of their house—which are "soft and rotten… knuckle-freezing winters dried it up and hollowed the woody pulp out" (*SB* 108)—with those of the white people's house; the boards of the white neighbors' house "are more even, more secure. They are not a patch-up of boards of different sizes like our house… only plywood closed smooth and tight as eyelids" (*SB* 208).

The implication in these contrasts are significant in multiple ways: where the Batistes must salvage for what they need, the white family can buy it new; in turn, this leads to a different level of exposure to the storm's violence: after surviving the storm, Esch notes how Skeetah's "skin was running red. Then I looked at my arms, Randall, Junior, Daddy; we were all bleeding, all gashed" (*SB* 239). Further significant, the fact that the white family has evacuated means effectively that their private property, the material assets, capital, livestock, are afforded a "more secure" protection than the Batistes themselves. In short, the novel makes the case that the toll of bodily rawness leading up to the hurricane—Esch's cut hand, Skeetah's cut ribs, Randall's

damaged knee, Claude's severed hand—are all considerable as part of what it means to experience the climate, under racial capitalism. This fact, echoes and brings us back full circle to the image we started with, of Esch's mothers memory of raw bodies in the face of raw weather following Hurricane Camille, a tale retold not father to son (as in *Absalom, Absalom!*), but mother to daughter.

Erotics "in the Raw"

In light of the novel's depiction of the violences of a landscape shaped by the dual forces of climate crisis and racial capitalism—what Françoise Vergès calls the "racialized capitalocene"[74]—which the novel charts in the stream of instances of the Batistes' bodies opened into raw wounds, one might ask: is anti-Blackness, then, "the weather" for Esch, in the way Christina Sharpe describes—in both the form of weathering the misogyny Esch experiences, as well as the racialized excess of violence in Katrina?

I want to conclude by suggesting that Esch reclaims the weather, through rawness as an erotic vocabulary, such that weathering is not just about precarity in the face of a multiply anti-Black climate (running the gamut from exposure to weather, to gentrified geography, to misogyny). In large part, the idea that the novel is, above all else, a depiction of environmental racism, as a form of precarity, proneness-to-death, and incapacitation, has dictated the critical reception surrounding it, including how it is understood to be a key form of "environmental literature." Taken to the extreme in this regard, critics argue the novel depicts how certain environments are "little more than warehouses for extracting resources, and certain populations, such as the Batiste family, vulnerable to the heightened risks posed by climate change," such that

[74] Françoise Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene," in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, eds. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (New York: Verso Books, 2017), 72-82.

"*Salvage the Bones* can be read as an example of literature of the *sacrifice zone*";[75] elsewhere, "Esch and her family, have already been marked for the reduced life chances, poverty, and heightened exposure to risk";[76] still elsewhere, the novel is about portraying the Batistes' failure to evacuate not as a "bad choice," but rather as "an effect of poverty, lack of transportation, and no access to alternative accommodations elsewhere"[77]; the novel depicts "structures of environmental racism that unevenly enhance the precarity of certain communities by diminishing the ecological infrastructures of their lands."[78] Such critical interpretations of environmental racism make good on explaining how the novel plays out what Ward herself has said was a key motivation in writing the novel: responding to victim-blaming discourses, in the wake of Katrina, that criticized those who either stayed or returned.[79]

Yet, the novel's deepest attempt to defuse such discourses lies not in pointing out a *lack*, a deprivation, or incapacitation, but rather in portraying the affective ties of generational memories and erotic pleasures that anchor the Batiste family in Bois Sauvage in the first place. In this sense, Esch reclaims and revalues the hurricane in a way that's not an emblem of Black death, but rather tied to memory, motherhood, and erotic pleasure. Moreover, in this regard, Esch's vocabulary of rawness to chart her affective ties to the place of Bois Sauvage, refigures the meaning of the earlier discourse of the "savageness" of the Pit (Skeetah), or the "wild things" of Bois Sauvage (Esch) in the novel. Might we read Esch's erotic pleasures of rawness—as it is folded into the novel's larger discourse of the "black heart" of Bois Sauvage, as an environmental logic—as a response to the construction of Black sexuality "as wild, unstable, and

[75] Bares, "'Each Unbearable Day,'" 23, 24.
[76] Ibid., 25.
[77] Moynihan, "From Disposability to Recycling," 555.
[78] Kelly McKisson, "The Subsident Gulf: Refiguring Climate Change in Jesmyn Ward's Bois Sauvage," *American Literature* 93, vol. 3 (2021): 479.
[79] Ward, "Jesmyn Ward on Salvage the Bones," online.

undomesticated," and hence always already "outside the bounds" of both state "citizenship machinery" and simultaneously never able to "claim heteronormativity"?[80]

To begin with, Esch's attention to rawness nearly overwhelms: the weather of a hurricane, "committed to blood," which leaves torn-apart trees and buildings "raw and ragged" (*SB* 255, 252); Esch's inability to keep food down due to morning sickness; an infection that kills several of China's puppies; China's many bodily fluids while birthing her litter ("the yellow string of mucus pooling to a puddle on the floor under China's rear," and the "dark purple" afterbirth, "wet" and "glistening," that China hastily eats) (*SB* 3, 17). Echoing the way that Esch imagines China as "blooming" when she gives birth, Esch remembers witnessing her mother die during childbirth in similarly botanical metaphors: her little brother Junior was "purple and blue as a hydrangea: Mama's last flower" (*SB* 2, 4). Esch watches her brother butcher and clean an animal carcass: the animal's stomach is "raw, full with shit" (*SB* 47). During the dog fight between China and China's mate, Kilo, Kilo sees China's exposed "breasts," "white and full and heavy and warm" with milk, and bites one: the "breast is bloody, torn. The nipple, missing…. streaming fluid, leaving a trail in the brush" (*SB* 174-5). During a tractor accident, Esch's father's severs three fingers: "the meat of his fingers is red and wet" (*SB* 130). Esch relates one version of the myth of Medea involving fratricide: she "chops" her brother into "bits: liver, gizzard, breast and thigh, and throws each part overboard" (*SB* 154); China kills one of her own puppies: the now "pulpy puppy" in her mouth, "China is bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea. If she could speak I would ask her: *Is this what motherhood is?*" (*SB* 130).

However, rawness serves, more than pictorially, as a source of memory for Esch. For example, the rawness of her father's missing fingers—rather than staying as an emblem to the

[80] Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 87.

precarity of "weathering" violence in an anti-Black world—turns into a phenomenological model of memory for Esch. The day after surviving Katrina, she says: "I wonder if that is phantom pain, and if Daddy will feel his missing fingers the way we feel Mama, present in the absence… If [the baby] is a girl, I will name her after my mother: Rose. Rose Temple Batiste" (*SB* 247). The scene is significant both for the fact that it is the only time in the novel that Esch shares with readers her mother's name; but also for the way that it revalorizes the rawness of her father's finger's not as a lack, but as something generative, as a "presence in the absence"—in the same way that her narrative practice of salvaging memories of her mother serve as a way for Esch to generate a sense of belonging in the midst of raw weather, as we saw at the start of the discussion of the novel.[81]

A further way to understand Esch's particular raw feel, as a phenomenology, inflected by her particular experiences of anti-Black misogyny, is through Amber Musser's suggestion that the flesh itself is "epistemological"—that is, flesh knows about the world without the mediation of "intentional" or "conscious" representations. Musser focuses on the "proprioceptions" of flesh—the way flesh itself experiences the feeling of being oriented in space—as well as its what she calls its experiences of surface frictions. For Musser, while one's flesh perilously exposes one to racist, misogynist violence, it also points to the possibilities for new "hungers" operative "'beyond' the individual and the sovereign subject"[82] (recalling, too, Moten's interest in desiring something called "nothing" that takes place in the "burial ground" of the subject).[83]

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[81] See Alvin Henry's claim: "In *Salvage the Bones* Ward's new post-Katrina memory responds to the material, racial, and gender conditions of the twenty-first-century South—inaugurating a theory of Black feminist memory I term "salvaging." Unlike the predominantly traumatic and reconstructive dimensions of Morrison's rememory, Ward salvages (verb) memories and rememories by repurposing and reassembling them into an amalgamation of salvages (noun)." Henry, "Jesmyn Ward's Post-Katrina Black Feminism," 74.
[82] Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 45, 68.
[83] Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 194,

According to Musser, this expands the concept of the "pornotrope"—Hortense Spillers's term for how the racialized drive to reduce a person "to sheer physical powerlessness" is always a profoundly sexual desire, a "source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality."[84] In the case of "female bodies in the raw,"[85] as Spillers puts it, not only are the ties of kinship stripped away; but even more basically they become open to an entire spectrum of styles of violence that, in their sexualized nature, "unmake" gender.[86] Musser suggests that allowing for new hungers and desires even from within "conditions of duress"—an "expanded" notion of the pornotrope as she puts it—is crucial if we are to move away from merely "theorizing blackness as a space of negation" and instead position "it in relation to multiple forms of brownness."[87]

How does Esch's erotic vocabulary of rawness intervene in Spillers's analysis of the dynamics of "ungendering" at stake in "female bodies in the raw"?[88] To begin with, Esch narratively frames her understanding of her sexuality in terms of a botanical rawness. Terms of "pulpiness" in particular name her sexuality and gender in the ways it is framed in terms of exploitation and non-consent. But, crucially, raw pulp also names her own sexual desires and hungers. When, three years earlier, she witnessed Manny having sex with another girl, "he opened his mouth so wide for her, licked her like he was tasting her, like she was cane sugar sweet. He was eating her… I loved Manny ever since I saw him kissing that girl" (*SB* 56). Here pulp also comes to name a sexual desire to be hungered and eaten as a pulp.

Esch similarly charts her pregnant body through appeals to the same vocabulary of pulpiness. She calls her breasts "turgid," and her womb is like a plant on multiple occasions.

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[84] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.
[85] Ibid., 220.
[86] Ibid., 207.
[87] Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 8.
[88] "That 'Esch' is a truncated version of the word *flesh* returns us once again to Spillers." Edwards, "Sex After the Black Normal," 158.

"My belly is solid as a squash" (*SB* 57); "There is a layer of meat around the belly button" that is not like "watermelon" nor like "cantaloupe," but rather "is a honeydew curve… It pushes back, water flush and warm" (*SB* 87-88). She emphasizes this idea of pulp—raw flesh that is filled with fluid, indicating its thirst for life, the animacy of a body, its ripeness—as its own type of agency ("it pushes back" after all, and later, she "knead[s] the melon to pulp, but it just keeps springing back: ripe. Intent on bearing seed") (*SB* 102-103). The feelings of her swelling-leaking body inside her are their own instrument: "Inside my chest, a machete swings, back and forth, up and down, breaking the living, clearing a pulpy path behind it where green things lie, leaking" (*SB* 145). Esch refers to her own erotic desire as pulpy in this mode of violence. Out on a trip with her brother, looking at a squirrel he has shot, "blood squirts out of it with a pulse. The heart." When Skeetah, tells Esch "Y'all don't look right together," she gives a quasi-masochistic response: "*But we are*, I want to say. He makes my heart beat like that, I want to say, and point at the squirrel dying in red spurts" (*SB* 47). What do we make of this moment where the very desirability in one's sexual pleasures is signified by a dying animal corpse as what that pleasure feels like? How can the same evidence—a corpse spurting out blood—be both the sign for wrongness (Skeetah's version) and rightness (Esch's) of feminine sexuality?

Flouting the feminine-as-fragile stereotype underlies Esch's desire to have a body that "swallows" both pains and pleasures—both in its ability to take in pain equally well as a boy, as she puts it, as well pleasures and pleasure-taking (even while pleasuring others) (*SB* 96). Even in the midst of pain, her body is neither passive nor deprived of its own styles of sensuality. And, as she suggests, even her ability to take in pain as well as any "male" body is something that she wants us (or at least other sexual interests like Manny) to understand, and in this she refuses the gendering of her body as a fragile encumbrance, something delicate to the touch.

One might argue—despite Esch's explicit desires not to be gendered in stereotypical ways—that the novel is about heteronormativity in the way that it focalizes on Esch's intense attraction to Manny; or even that it falls into a certain reproductive normativity with Esch's ultimate decision to keep the pregnancy, and Skeetah's comments to her that "everything deserve to live" (*SB* 213).

However, might we see in Esch's erotic pleasures, expressed through the appeal to a more-than-human rawness, a locating of Black sexual subjectivities and affective lives "*inside* and *athwart* that which might be understood as 'normative,'" frustrating "easy distinctions between normativity and nonnormativity"?[89] Or as Joshua Bennett puts it: "the sort of antinormative, distinctly wild kinship relations that have emerged in the wake of the loss of the potential for a nuclear family"?[90]

Perhaps paradoxically, the chief way that Esch's narration of her erotic experiences as both "inside and athwart" normativity concerns how she understands her own feelings about her consent in past sexual encounters as a young teenager. These instances surrounding her messy feelings about her own consent are instances of raw feeling *par excellence*, in the sense studied in the last chapter. Esch's raw feel concerns the terrain of consent, her negotiation of how she can derive both pleasure and agency from sexual relationships that also in some sense objectifies her. In this sense, her recognition of her body's likeness to plants and animals in its sexual and reproductive behaviors is not in itself a panacea, but rather gestures toward the "complicated truthfulness" of pleasure in the midst of gendered violence.[91] Moreover, this question of Esch's sexual consent is narratively twinned to the fate of surviving the hurricane, which poses a

[89] Ibid., 151, 143.
[90] Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself*, 152.
[91] Andil Gosine, *Nature's Wild: Love, Sex, and Law in the Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 125

shadow-question: how to derive belonging to a place that, exacerbated by racial capitalism, objectifies you, reduces you to salvaging.

Indeed, this intertwining of Esch's negotiation of consent as a young adult with the negotiation of the violences of the Gulf Coast is foreshadowed early on. In the scene where she explains her first, nonconsensual sexual experience at age twelve with another one of her brothers' friends (Marquise), she prefaces it by saying that only two things have "ever been easy for me to do": swimming through water, and "sex when I started having it" (*SB* 22). After describing the scene where she first learned what having sex could be like, she shares how learning to swim, too, was learned by men doing something to her body without her consent: when she was little, her father would pick her up and "fling" her into the water. Like with sex, she'd "taken to it fast… I'd pulled the water with my hands, kicked it with my feet, let it push me forward. That was sex" (*SB* 23-4).[92] This memory is repeated in the present action in one of the novel's two primary climaxes: as the Batiste family clings onto a tree amidst their flooded property, Esch's brother Skeetah reveals to their father that Esch is pregnant; when he sees the "telltale push" of her stomach, and sees her body now as "fruit," he "pushes" her from the tree, and "flailing backward" along with China's puppies that she's holding, Esch lands in the water on her back and tries to "kick" and "palm water," but the storm swallows her under, until Skeetah saves her, letting go of China in the process (*SB* 234). The scene also functions in terms of lingering traumas over reproductive injustice: the reason her father pushes Esch in may be because he's traumatized about Rose's death in childbirth, and attempts to refuse the possibility of the same fate returning now to his daughter.

To conclude this chapter, I want to return to the scene, from the novel's first day, where

[92] "Sex is Esch's reflex (her name, 'Esch,' could also easily be reconfigured to sound like 'sex'), an intuitive and spontaneous reaction to external stressors." Edwards, "Sex After the Black Normal," 159.

Esch initially associated Manny's "gold" appearance with the current Gulf climate, hot, stagnant, pregnant with a hurricane held like a "hungry child." Following this description, Esch depicts her and Manny having sex. In the overgrown acreage behind her house, he "peel[s]" down her underwear "like orange rind" (*SB* 16). Esch explains that what Manny wanted from her is what she calls her "other me" that was now exposed: "The pulpy ripe heart." Through Esch's earlier teenage years, Skeetah and Randall's other friends have also been discovering sexual attraction to Esch: they "saw through" her "boyish frame," her "dark" skin, and her "plain" face to this same "sticky heart" part of her she has just described in the present scene with Manny. And though in past years she "let" these boys "have" this "girly heart," she did so because "they wanted it, not because I wanted to give it" (*SB* 16). As she puts it later, recounting her first sexual encounter when she was twelve: when her brothers' friend Marquise touched her, the feeling switched between "good" and no longer good, and it was "easier" to let him "inside" than to "ask him to stop," and hear him say, "*Why not?*" (*SB* 23). But with Manny, in the present scene, she explains, things are "different": rather than being unconsensual as these early experiments were, she has been having sex with Manny on and off for a year ("again and again"), and this time, she tells readers, it's consensual: even though he, like the others, still only wants "the girly heart," she "gave him both" of her hearts (*SB* 16).

Esch expresses human sexuality through comparison to raw, plant organs: the skinned, exposed meat of a ripe fruit (which is itself the ripened ovary of a mature flower). Through the simile, "like orange rind," Esch effectively figures her whole, denuded body (stripped of its "rind"-clothes) as an ovary. But this part (fruit) to whole (organism) relation structured by the simile is rhetorically inverted when the narrator shifts from simile, to metonymy: where at first the fruit represented her whole naked body, she next describes the way that what is underneath

this “rind,” at least in the mind of the boys that she has sex with, is not actually her whole body, but genitalia: which she implies is the “sticky,” “girly” and “pulpy ripe heart” that boys want despite their lack of attraction to the rest of her body. As she puts it, even with Manny, he never kisses her with his mouth, only with his hips during sex.

Even though Esch uses the well-worn romantic rhetoric of the “heart,” she inverts it to describe not romance, but the narrow, misogynistic focus of men on one part of her body, rather than her whole self. In that sense, she subverts the sense of “heart” away from meaning the “deep” part of oneself, to mean instead the surface of her skin.

Even more striking, is that, due to the way that the young men around her want just her “pulpy ripe heart” while ignoring what they see as the “boyish” elements of her, we might say that the botanical element in this scene reveals a wrinkle in her cisgender identification, even in the midst of Esch’s “straight” sexual encounters. For, she calls her botanically-figured “heart”-part of her the “other me,” implying that it is separate from her real, whole and consenting self (the “boyish” one that her partners attempt to ignore). There is thus a rhetorical depersonalization between her and her “actual” anatomy, that is perhaps partly to blame on the impact of the narrow, genital-essentializing focus of her previous sexual encounters. If there is something queer about the botanical language in this scene, it lies in the non-normative experience of gender that Esch has; an experience which, at the rhetorical level, expresses a gender dysphoric moment located at the putative (anatomically reproductive) “girly heart” of her cisness—and indeed which is key to the oscillation between her multiple (consenting, versus unconsenting) selves in erotic encounters.

In reading this painful, yet sensual, and erotic scene, where sexual agency undergoes such contortions, and where Esch’s own relationship to her cis-ness becomes troubled, we see how the

stakes of the raw vocabulary in the novel—replete with its phenomenology of memory-work of Rose as a "phantom pain," as well as the novel's large environmental logic of "savageness" and "wild things"—is thoroughly to reinstantiate erotic pleasures; and moreover, that it shows the way their heterogeneity: for example, that it can produce what we might even think of as "blips" or "ripples" of trans-ness circling through cis-ness, that takes place in sexual subjects who, though not "outside" the normative, per se, still position themselves askew of it. In part, Ward's novel, in this regard, serves as an important counter to what Jennifer Nash calls a "sexual conservatism, wearing the guise of racial progressivism" in certain trends in Black feminist though, arising as a result of a tendency to foreground "sexual exploitation, oppression, and injury," as the primary source of Black women's identities, "at the expense of… black women's sexual heterogeneity, multiplicity, and diversity," and avoiding "questions about black women's sexual desires, black queer subjectivities, and the various forms of black women's pleasures," in favor of a version of feminism as respectability,[93] or "defensiveness."[94]

Too, I close with Esch's description of her "pulpy ripe heart"—which injects a wobble into cis-ness, insofar as it reveals Esch recognizing that the body she feels herself to have "is not necessarily the same body that is delimited by its exterior contours," even for her as a "normative" subject—as a way to transition to the next chapter.[95] For, the next chapter picks up n0t only the thread of Caribbean materialism that has been at stake in this chapter; it examines in depth the affordances, and limitations, of a botanical rhetoric for narrating experiences of transness, in the Caribbean postcolony.

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[93] Jennifer C. Nash, "Strange Bedfellows: Black Feminism and Antipornography Feminism," *Social Text* 26, no. 4 (2008): 52-3.
[94] Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 3.
[95] Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

CHAPTER THREE

TRANS PLANTS: BOTANY, COLONIALITY, AND NARRATIVE FORM IN THE CARIBBEAN

"Transplantation"

Midway through their story, Nurse Tyler, the narrator of Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, wears a dress for the first time.[1] The opportunity—a surreptitious private audience set up in the room of an elderly patient cared for by Tyler—is tied up with the planting of the novel's titular cereus plant, a tropical American cactus, in the nursing home garden.

The scene depicts what we might think of as a "trans botanical" narrative in several regards. Most literally, the cereus plant itself is sexually nonbinary.[2] Its flowers are botanically "perfect," possessing both pollen-producing parts (so-called "male"), and ovule-producing ones ("female")—what, in the eighteenth century, Linnaeus called a "hermaphrodite."[3] The characters in the novel seem to sense this, describing the cereus flower's "heavy perfume" as having "two edges—one a vanilla-like sweetness, the other a curdling" (*CB* 152). One might also think of the scene as trans botanical insofar as Tyler's relationship with the plant offers an interspecies analogue for them to naturalize, and thereby feel "ordinary" in the "girlish" identity they've had since childhood (*CB* 78, 71). At a further level, the plant's propagation is part of a queer circuit

[1] I use they/them pronouns for Tyler. There is a critical precedent for this with Nicole Seymour's reading of the novel, where she uses "ze/hir" pronouns for Tyler; see Nicole Seymour, "Post-Transsexual Pastoral: Environmental Ethics in the Contemporary Transgender Novel," in *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 35-70. This decision meshes well with the way Tyler describes themself as "neither properly man nor woman but some in-between, unnamed thing." Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 71. Hereafter cited in-text as (*CB*).
[2] K. Greene, "Non-Binary Botany," presentation at the Organic Seed Growers Conference, virtual, February 5, 2022.
[3] Linnaeus calls the anthers the "male genitals," and the stigmas the "female genitals"; a flower "that contains both [anthers and stigmas] is called hermaphrodite." In addition to these three classes, Linnaeus also asserts there are "androgynous" and "polygamous" classes of flowering plants. Carl Linnaeus, *Philosophia Botanica*, trans. Stephen Freer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 103-6.

of relationality in multiple senses—not only in its reproduction by cutting, but as a gift given by and among queer individuals in ways that bring them into unexpected kinships. Finally, the cereus cutting is also "trans" at a different register, insofar as it is a signifier of colonial histories of violence; for the cereus is first recognizable to Tyler through its place in the "Exotic Items Collection" of the National Botanical Gardens in the colonial capital; and the original source of the cutting that Tyler plants in the scene is taken from the garden of a white missionary family.

The scene offers an expansive definition of trans botany that includes the sexuality of the flower itself; the uses that plants can serve in building trans identity and community; and the plant's own trans-Atlantic circulations as a "specimen" within the colonial archives of "exotic" organisms (a reminder of the historical role of colonial exploration in creating the demand for botany as a science in the first place).[4]

This multivalent definition of trans botanical narrative poses two sets of clashing questions: What is the vegetal form of agency at stake in this scene, as something cooperatively emergent between a plant and a human, rather than just "inside" one body? And what might be emblematic about such vegetality of agency as it were—distributive, cooperative, reliant on others—for forming queer genders? On the other hand: what are the limits of this analogization? Is suggesting there is something inherently queer in plant life an essentialism?[5] Does the "eco-mimetic" analogy between plant biology and trans subjectivity risk echoing a colonial logic that

[4] For accounts of the role of the so-called "Linnaeus Apostles," students who scoured the globe on colonial expeditions to collect biological specimens, see Mary Gribbin and John Gribbin, *Flower Hunters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[5] In this regard, see Jordy Rosenberg's critique of queer ecology: "[Timothy] Morton's fantasies about 'queer ecology'—of its putative queerness or its inherently resistant nature." He goes on to say: " rather than understanding sexuality within the porous realm of the social, much recent ontological work has reterritorialized desire within the molecular as if the molecular itself constitutes a kind of productive, autonomous realm… of queerness itself." Jordy Rosenberg, "The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present," *Theory & Event* 17, no. 2 (2014). www.muse.jhu.edu/article/546470.

conflates an individual's racial, sexual character with their environment?[6] If so, does the rhetoric of botany reveal a "coloniality of gender" contaminating even trans vocabularies of self-understanding?[7]

This chapter poses these questions in order to return to a thread across the past two chapters: the suggestion that there is something in raw feeling—something in the comparison of oneself to the more-than-human—that offers unique possibilities for articulating forms of gender queerness. What insights can we gain, in this regard, when we turn to a novel, like *Cereus Blooms at Night*, that draws on comparisons to more-than-human plant matter explicitly as the primary way to narrate how an individual comes to terms with their transness? What are the stakes of analogizing the trans and the plant, in light of the long-standing logic of environment and rawness raised at the outset of this dissertation?

In one sense, we could begin by noting that for Mootoo's novel, as we will see, what plants offer, with their "nonindividuated" modes of living in the world, is a rich example for the way that being nonbinary isn't a stable category, a fact which Tyler feels when they express the uncomfortable "limbo" and "suspension" they feel in the midst of their transition—a freefall into an ambiguity that is registered in the very signifier they/them.[8] The promise that plants offer, as would be co-voyagers in this "freefall" into a unindividuation—becoming plural in one's very gender—is that even if it's a messy process, as a result of living in a society that insists on neat one-to-one definitions of self-perception and outward presentation that don't always align with what one feels oneself to be, the process isn't an "unnatural" one, but rather "just is" (echoing

[6] Sonya Posmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2017).
[7] Maria Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development*, ed. Wendy Harcourt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 13-33.
[8] Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 12.

the phrasing Machado's narrator uses about her green ribbon).[9]

On the other hand, it is significant that this chapter on transness, at the same time, moves us onto the terrain of Caribbean postcolonial subjectivity. Why is it that plants, in particular, as we will see in what follows, have so often appealed to Caribbean writers, not just as an emblematic expression of trans identity, but of the specificities of (post)colonial identity more generally?

To answer this question, my chapter begins, first, by critically contextualizing *Cereus Blooms at Night* in terms of a longer, shared tradition of Caribbean literature comparing the postcolonial human and the plant. As we will see, the idea of a hybrid "plant-human" has long been a part of a decolonial, anti-assimilatory rhetoric in the Caribbean. The chapter theorizes the notion of "trans plant"—in its doubly gendered and colonial dimensions—by posing a comparative intersection between Mootoo's novel, and the chief source for this "plant-human": Suzanne Césaire's nonfiction essays published in the surrealist journal *Tropiques*. Thus, a reading of trans-ness in the sense of "transplantation," as Césaire puts it, is the essential ground that opens up the reading of transgender in Mootoo's novel—with both homing in on the figure of the hybrid "plant-human." Our problem will be to see how they fundamentally intersect—how the notion of the "plant-human" as specific to colonial identity helps to understand a novel that's working through the messiness of a postcolonial sexual identity.

Focusing on the "trans plant"—the intersection of these two texts—is thus to think of trans as geographic and trans as a gender identity. To pose this intersection is also to ask what is at stake in the very term "plant-human"—is it the plant? The human? Or is the hyphen itself that is at stake? One way to answer this is to say that a chief reason that Césaire's notion of the

[9] I thank Lisa Camp for talking me through this dimension of Tyler's narration. Lisa Camp, email message to author, June 9, 2022.

"plant-human" appeals is because of this hyphenism; it is a rich example of the model of "Caribbean materialism" that, as Monique Allewaert puts it, involves construing the very ontology of the self, in material terms, as a messy, multiple, constantly shifting, disaggregating and relational set of bodily, ecological processes—as more "para-human" than "human."[10]

At the same time, as we will see in our reading of Césaire's formulation of the "plant-human," there is something disconcerting if we take her claim of "plant-humanity" too literally at an ontological level. For, as I will show, Césaire derives the ontological claim for plant-humanity from a colonial, ethnological source material that taxonomizes strains of African lineages in troubling race essentialist ways based on the environment (recalling, yet again, the many historical woes of twinning of rawness and environment). In light of this worry, I suggest that what is most productive about Césaire's "plant-human" is her attention to how plant-humanity, in all its hyphenation, arises from a social, historical condition: "the horrific conditions of *transplantation* onto a foreign soil," as she puts it.[11] What Césaire's intervention is, with this term of "transplantation" that punningly draws out "plant-humanity"—indeed, a punning signified even in the hyphen's very bridging between two "kingdoms" of biotic taxonomy—is a process that is socially constituted and constructed, while also, in the productive mediation provided by vegetality, reconnecting back to the very ontology of the earth; the result, I suggest, is an ontology which becomes reconstituted by the social relation: a form of "sociogeny" *avant la lettre*;[12] or as Césaire puts it, ontology reformed by the "most unremitting

[10] Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
[11] Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941-1945)*, ed. Daniel Maximin, trans. Keith L. Walker (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 29. Emphasis mine.
[12] Sylvia Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of 'Identity' and What it's Like to Be 'Black,' in *National Identity and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, eds. Mercedes Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (New York: Routledge, 2001), 30-66.

mixtures" unleashed by these histories of "transplantation."[13]

My reading of Césaire's plant-human generates my reading of "trans plants" in Mootoo's novel. Like the plant-human, the novel's appeal to plant life to cast trans life as "ordinary" is also a double-edged sword; for the appeal to botany in order to express transness also results in a problematic, fetishistic hyper-sexualization of trans individuals (a risk that shouldn't be surprising: after all, botany is a *sexual* science of plant life).[14] Thus, echoing the colonial ambivalences at stake in Césaire's plant-human, Mootoo's novel poses the question: what are the limits of a botanical metaphor? Is the novel making a rhetorical argument, or an ontological argument? In part, Mootoo's novel also simultaneously thematizes the risk of transness being narrativized as an inherently anticolonial political identity, a suggestion which may be essentialist in its own way.[15]

How do we situate, then, this intersection of these two "planty" texts within current trends in environmental humanities? For one, in queer ecology, there's a broad fascination with finding nonbinarity in plant life.[16] But this move is often not cognizant of the colonial

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[13] Another way of posing this: how does transness enrich new dimensions of Glissant's notion of relationality emerging in the wake of the hold of the slave ship? Glissant puts this tension between ontology and relation this way: "It would not be possible to base ontological thinking on the existence of entities such as these, whose very nature is to vary tremendously within Relation. This variation is, on the contrary, evidence that ontological thought no longer 'functions,' no longer provides a founding certainty that is stock-still, once and for all, in a restrictive territory." Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 142.

[14] For studies on the contemporary social anxieties surrounding Linnaeus's popularization of botany as a sexual science in the 18th century, see Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Staffan Müller-Wille, "Linnaeus and the Love Lives of Plants," in *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day*, eds. Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming, and Lauren Kassell (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2018), 305-18.

[15] See for example Greta LaFleur's historical account of how botanical rhetoric served as an *apologia* equally for *both* nonnormative gender/orientation *and* at the same time for settler colonial violence against Native peoples; Greta LaFleur, "Botanical Sexuality and Colonial Landscape," in *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 137-63.

[16] "Plants' refusal to conform to the biopolitical (categorical, metaphysical, ontological) imperatives through which life is generally understood, valued, and organized has the potential to call into profound question the ways in which living is practiced in the services of both anthropocentricism and neoliberalism, and perhaps even the ways in which gendered, racialized, and other operations of biopower also specify and regulate human lives." Catriona Sandilands, "Fear of a Queer Plant?," *GLQ* 23, no. 3 (2017): 426.

dimensions to this, insofar as it ignores the fact that there is a robust tradition already in anticolonial thought linking animist/vitalist materialism to a quasi-posthuman identity (dissolved into the being of plants, animals, minerals, the more-than-human environs). This fact leaves open the question of whether appeals to a posthuman self (loss of self into the environment as the way to be the most authentic self) can ever be disentangled from racial politics.[17]

A second reason concerns the centrality of reading to trans life.[18] The oscillation between the novel's rhetoric of botanical co-identification and its mediation by its narrative structure might be emblematic of the larger tension in how something (gender, sex) can be simultaneously a performace, and construction, and at the same time, lived in one's experience as ontologically real.[19] Because transness can produce a complicated relationship to personal history, the fetishization of a "pretrans" past (a core issue at stake in Mooto's novel) can be suspicious in a way that is transphobic—for example, supposing that a person who chooses not to disclose their history is a "stealth" trans, a term that implies a deceit, a bringing to light of a past, putatively hidden, that somehow would reveal "more" about the "truth" of them, rather than just being the person they present and know themselves to be. This sort of forensic lens manifests as transphobic (or, conversely, as trans-fetishistic), and can result in a desire for a more phenomenologically literal surface reading of one's gender unencumbered by such added layers of "reading into gender."

This tension is played out in the novel's very form. In a sense then, the novel's tension

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[17] Alexander Menrisky, *Wild Abandon: American Literature and the Identity Politics of Ecology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Austin Lillywhite, "Is Posthumanism a Primitivism? Networks, Fetishes, and Race," *Diacritics* 46, no. 3 (2018): 100-119.
[18] Alexander Eastwood, "How, Then, Might the Transsexual Read?: Notes toward a Trans Literary History," *TSQ* 1, no. 4 (2014): 590-604.
[19] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 79-80; Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

between its narrative form and its botanical rhetoric thematizes the tension, at stake too for Césaire, between social construction and ontology, and transposes it onto the terrain of methodological questions of reading. In one sense we might think of a mutual enlightenment at stake here with the problems of reading, raised uniquely by transness, and Glissant's notion of a "right to opacity."[20] For, as we will see, Mootoo's novel not only uniquely attends to the transness as a representational issue in environmental humanities. But rather, not only limiting my interest here to representations of transness and botany, I focus on the way in which the narrative form of this text complicates the very way we read the transitional hyphenation at stake not only in plant-human, but the post-human more broadly.

What Is a "Plant-Human"?

Shani Mootoo isn't the first Caribbean writer interested in the political and ontological affordances of a hybridized vegetal-human agency. Rather, the trans botany of *Cereus Blooms at Night* enters a robust tradition of vegetal agency understood, foremost, as a form of decolonial rhetoric. Before Mootoo depicts plants as a way to understand transness, (or, the "vegetal turn" in theory more broadly),[21] Négritude, as a movement, was already invested in the figure of a hybridized "plant-human," "plant-like" modes of thinking and feeling, as a form of decolonial, anti-assimilatory resistance. But untangling just what Négritude's "plant-human" is, where it comes from and what baggage it brings into the picture, turns out to be a complicated affair.

In April 1942, in an article published in the fifth issue of the Caribbean surrealist,

[20] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 189-94.
[21] Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Columbia, 2016); Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, trans. Dylan J. Montanari (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019); Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira (eds.), *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

anticolonial journal *Tropiques,*[22] Suzanne Césaire asks: "What is a Martinican, fundamentally? … How does he live?"[23] In answer she proclaims: a Martinican is "a plant-human. Like a plant, he abandons himself to the rhythm of universal life… he grows, he lives in a plant-like manner"; he is not "lazy," but rather, like the plant he "vegetates."[24] Above all, a plant-human "surrender[s]," and "desire[s]" to "abandon oneself" to the animistic pulse "universally" present in all life.[25] In claiming this self-abandonment, melding ecologically into one's surroundings, the ultimate goal is immediacy: establishing a co-identity with the environment, through self-dissolution. The result of the ecologically dissolved self is a more authentic self.[26] Thus, there is an ontological dimension to what Césaire is claiming: the "plant-human" names a real dimension of being shared by humans with plants (self-abandonment, merging with the vital "rhythm" of life).

Yet, while this plant-human claim is perhaps appealing at an ontological level (evidenced by its currency in posthumanist discourse), Césaire's claim for the plant-human is also inextricably linked to an ethnological claim. Indeed, what makes Césaire's idea specifically *plant*-human, and not just *post*-human, is the ethnological taxonomy she relies on. One can see this move from the ontological to the ethnological (and back), when she concludes the passage on the plant-human by writing: "It [being a plant-human] is a vital feeling of a life-death community. In short it is the *Ethiopian sentiment of life*. Consequently the Martinican is typically

[22] For accounts on the history of *Tropiques,* see Michael Richardson (ed.), *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (New York: Verso Books, 1996); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Franklin Rosemont and Robin D.G. Kelley (eds.), *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).
[23] Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, 29.
[24] Ibid., 30.
[25] Ibid., 31.
[26] "Ergo, the ecosystem is all of us. An appeal to ecological authenticity is in this respect always an appeal to universal authenticity, in that it flattens distinctions among individuals and communities into a single, unified identity position: the ecosystem. Sociocultural forms repress this state of nature." Menrisky, *Wild Abandon,* 10.

Ethiopian. In the depths of his consciousness he is the plant-human, and while identifying oneself with the plant, the desire is to abandon oneself to the rhythm of life."[27] At this point in the essay, where Césaire claims that being plant-human is ethnically determined—is "typically Ethiopian"—she footnotes another of her essays, a favorable review of the theories of German ethnologist Leo Frobenius, which she published in the inaugural issue of *Tropiques*, a year earlier.

Before unpacking what is going on with the intertextuality of this prior, footnoted essay, and what it explains about the bizarre linkage of plant-humanity with what, by all accounts, appears to be a risky racial essentialism, it bears mentioning what context Césaire takes her "plant-human" to be a response to.

The 1942 essay in which the plant-human arises, "The Malaise of a Civilization," poses the question: why haven't Martinicans produced "authentic works of art"? Why are there as yet "no viable survivals "of "unique styles" on the island?[28] Her answer is that Martinicans have tried to imitate Western styles foreign to their own "true nature." As Césaire puts it, a "collective error" took root, whereby Martinicans came to believe that "since the superiority of the colonizers comes to them from a certain life-style, we shall gain strength only by dominating in our turn the technique of this 'style.'"[29] It is at this point—where Césaire invites her readers to consider the "far-reaching implications of this gigantic misunderstanding"—that Césaire launches her exposition of the figure of the "plant-human" in response. Thus, the plant-human—and its attendant ties to an ethnological "Ethiopian sentiment of life"—stands as the true "nature" that Martinicans have become alienated from in trying to, instead, "mimic" the aesthetic styles of

[27] Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, 31. Original italics.
[28] Ibid., 28-9.
[29] Ibid., 29.

colonizers (which, by contrast, are said to be "Hamitic"). By contrast, she concludes, the possibilities unlocked by returning to an aesthetic style "under the sign of plant life"—which is to say a home-grown, independent, anti-assimilatory aesthetic sensibility—are "exhilarating to imagine."[30]

Césaire's "Malaise" essay, along with several other key Négritude texts (including her husband's *Notebook of a Return to a Native Land*, published three years earlier), inaugurates a tradition of environmental aesthetics in the Caribbean—a way of invoking the more-than-human world, and flora and climate in particular, as a way to explain the proper shape of "authentically" Caribbean aesthetic styles, independent of colonial ones. Suzanne Césaire's essay, in particular, explicitly marks a surrealist-Négritude sensibility of saying that (perhaps like a plant), art needs to not just reflect, but grow out of the soil of the land.

As Sonya Posmentier points out, this environmentalist impulse remains a paradigm for the postcolonial theorists of the 1970s and 1980s.[31] One can recognize, for example, the pattern Césaire instantiates in "Malaise," when, four decades later, fellow Martinican Édouard Glissant suggests that the "pattern of the seasons has perhaps shaped" the narrative style of Western literature, and that consequently, for "our writers," to try to imitate such narrative structuring is "to perpetrate at the technical level an unconscious and unjustified submissiveness to literary traditions alien to our own."[32] Glissant's concern that Caribbean aesthetics goes wrong when it imitates colonial style, and that such imitation takes place at the level of the unconscious, mirrors Césaire's earlier concerns; so too does Glissant's suggestion that the answer to this lies in a root

[30] Ibid., 32-3.
[31] "In their essays from the 1970s and 1980s, Sylvia Wynter (from Jamaica), Kamau Brathwaite (from Barbados), and Édouard Glissant (from Martinique) turned to their local geographies and to shared regional experiences of weather, climate, and agriculture to define Caribbean writing for a new generation and for emerging nations." Posmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe*, 6.
[32] Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 106.

ecological concern: just as for Césaire, the answer is to get back in touch with an essential Martinican "plant-humanity," so too for Glissant, the answer is to get back in touch with an essential character of Martinican climate.[33]

While Glissant counterbalances this environmental-determinist impulse by emphasizing the historical conditions that shape Antillean aesthetics, and clarifying that "the *poetics* of landscape… is not to be directly confused with the *physical* nature of the country"—it is unclear if shifting the landscape's causal power from the physical realm to a quasi-metaphysical realm ameliorates the underlying tilt toward essentialism.[34] Césaire, for her part too, downplays the physical determinism of the environment, and plays up its metaphysical significance. As Césaire puts her metaphysical, anti-empirical approach to understanding the relation between environment and aesthetic style, in the earlier essay which she footnotes, "Leo Frobenius and the Problem of Civilizations": the study of civilizations "does not accumulate facts or dates… What it seeks is to study 'the organic being' of civilization. Civilization itself conceived of as 'a metaphysical entity.'"[35]

Here, Césaire quotes from German ethnologist Leo Frobenius's theory of "*paideuma*": the theory that, as Césaire understands it, civilizations are the product of a "secret," unique "life force" (a "paideuma"), and this "life force" makes humans its "instrument" in creating a civilization, rather than the other way around.[36] Césaire elaborates the metaphysical significance that Frobenius makes from the empirical observation of the difference between "Hamitic"

[33] As Glissant puts it later: "For us, the inescapable shaping force in our production of literature is what I would call the language of landscape." Where "the European literary imagination is moulded spatially around the spring and the meadow," in pan-American letters, "the prevailing force is not that of the spring and the meadow, but rather that of the wind that blows and casts shadows like a great tree… the language of my landscape is primarily that of the forest, which unceasingly bursts with life. I do not practice the economy of the meadow, I do not share the serenity of the spring." Ibid., 145-6.
[34] Ibid., 150. See also Sonya Posmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe*, 8.
[35] Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, 4.
[36] Ibid., 3.

cultures which rely on animal husbandry, and "Ethiopian" cultures which rely on agriculture.[37] Césaire's expostulation of Frobenius continues: due to a fundamental "bipolarity" in this "vital force," it "manifests itself literally in two opposite forms: (1) Ethiopian civilization and (2) Hamitic civilization. Ethiopian civilization is tied to the plant, to the vegetative cycle." The Ethiopian's plant-like way of thinking means that "he lives and lets live, in a life identical to that of the plant, confident in the continuity of life: germinate, grow, flower, bear fruit, and the cycle starts all over again." The "Hamitic" life-force, by contrast, "is tied to the animal, to the conquest of the right to live through violent struggle and conquest."[38]

In the later "Malaise" essay we began with, one can see how Césaire puts this hypothesized metaphysical antagonism between Ethiopian and Hamitic "*paideuma*," drawn from her exposition of Frobenius, to political and aesthetic uses. In the "Malaise" essay, she suggests that the plant/animal life-force binary is the source of a "drama" of alienation in the "collective" psychic selves of Martinicans, whose "unconscious continues to be inhabited by the Ethiopian desire for [plant-like] abandon," but who, in a self-contradiction, aspire to assimilate to colonial bourgeois lifestyles (i.e., move toward a "Hamitic desire for competitiveness. The race for economic fortune, diplomas, unscrupulous social climbing").[39]

Thus, not only does her reading of Frobenius's metaphysical antagonism provide an answer for an aesthetic "sterility," it also serves as a polemical critique of the Martinican petite-bourgeoisie. Using this notion of a "hidden" psycho-social-metaphysical drama of "hidden" "life forces," Césaire offers a symptomatic reading of the middle class in Martinique, attacking the would-be assimilator for "not know[ing] he mimics," for being "*unaware* of his true nature," just

[37] "*a) Die äthiopische Kultur* ist bedingt durch die Pflanze"; "*b) Die hamitische Kultur ist bedingt durch das Tier*." Leo Frobenius, *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas* (Zürich: Phaidon-Verlag, 1933), 234, 238.
[38] Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, 5.
[39] Ibid., 32.

as "*the hysteric* is unaware that he is only *imitating* an illness."[40]

Is Césaire's remarkable invocation of the "plant-human," as a figure who "abandons" themselves to their environment—a "let it go" attitude, as she puts it, that is actually a form of resistance to capitalist-colonialist pressures to compete, to assimilate—in fact a form of racial essentialism, in light of the colonial ethnography that underpins it?[41]

Césaire's own careful articulation of her anti-essentialist ends in the "Malaise" essay suggest a more complicated story. Despite Frobenius holding colonial views of race as essentially determined by the environment, Césaire for her part is explicit that in answer to the question she poses—why haven't Martinicans produced "authentic" art?—that "only imbeciles" would blame it on some inherent racial characteristic: a "so-called predisposition to laziness." Nor, she goes on, is the lack climatological: "this lack in Black character is not to be explained by the harshness of the tropical climate to which we have adapted, and still less by I don't know what inferiority." Instead, Césaire suggests that it is explained historically, by "the horrific conditions of transplantation onto a foreign soil," which "we have too soon forgotten."[42] In concluding the essay, Césaire notes that getting back in touch with this "Ethiopian" plant-humanity is "not at all about a backwards return, a resurrection of an African past… On the contrary, it is about the mobilization of every living strength brought together upon this earth

[40] Ibid., 32.
[41] Frobenius's celebration of the "depth" of civilization in sub-Saharan "Ethiopian" cultures was, in part, a rebuttal to the "Hamitic hypothesis," a popular colonial ideology that "the civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites," who were claimed to be a branch of Caucasians ("pastoral 'Europeans'"), and thus "better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural Negroes." Charles Gabriel Seligman, *The Races of Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 141. The term "Hamites" is itself a holdover from an earlier theological justification of inherent racial superiority/inferiority based on a biblical passage involving Noah and his son Ham. On the other hand, while Frobenius's valorization of the "plant-like" Ethiopians is a reversal of the terms of the hierarchy, in doing so it nevertheless accepts the underlying racial logic of the equation. See also Michael Spöttel, "German Ethnology and Antisemitism: The Hamitic Hypothesis," *Dialectical Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (1998): 131-50.
[42] Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, 29. Emphasis mine.

where race is the result of the most unremitting *mixture*."[43]

Despite the troubling colonial source that it is drawn from, it is arguably not easy to dismiss Césaire's plant-human as a form of racial essentialism. At worst, her aims are already staunchly anti-essentialist, but then subsequently go on to give a seemingly essentialist answer to Martinican character in the form of the plant-human. Put this way, one could argue Césaire is using the proverbial master's tools to dismantle the master's house: attacking a racist essentialist judgment on inherent Martinican character, and seemingly substituting it for another one (the "vegetal," inherited from an "Ethiopian" lineage).[44] One could even argue that her invocation of the plant-human rooted in transplantation is in fact prescient of Glissant's later anti-essentialist turn to *créolité*/*métissage*, and the hold of the slave ship as the event that opens the historical conditions for such forms of open-ended relationality.[45]

What is appealing about the plant-human, an aesthetic style "under the sign of the plant," for Césaire, then, if not its racial essentialist content, its colonial baggage? Why use it in the first place? Extending Souleymane Diagne's recuperative reading of Léopold Senghor, I would argue that for Césaire the appeal of the plant-human lies similarly in its potential as a hermeneutic, a way to read and interpret art. Senghor gives context to this idea thirty-one years after Césaire's essay, in a preface he offered for an anthology of Frobenius's work on the centenary of the latter's birth.[46] According to Senghor's account, Frobenius, for his Négritude readers, "reveal[ed]

[43] Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, 33. Emphasis mine.
[44] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*, ed. Roxane Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020),39-44.
[45] "Relation neither relays nor links afferents that can be assimilated or allied only in their principle, for the simple reason that it always differentiates among them concretely and diverts them from the totalitarian—because its work always changes all the elements composing it and, consequently, the resulting relationship which changes them all over again." Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 172.
[46] Senghor's 1973 preface to an anthology on Leo Frobenius describes the "thunderclap" that reading Frobenius was for "the handful of black students who launched the movement of the Négritude in the 1930s in the Quartier Latin in Paris, with Aimé Césaire from the Antilles and Lyon Damas from Guyana." Senghor claims that this group "knew by heart" passages from Frobenius's *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas* in particular, which they discovered "at the very

Africa to the world and the Africans to themselves," insofar as Frobenius offered a metaphysical method that pierced beneath the surface of "facts" about a culture in order to grasp its "morphological" essence—an African "soul," as it were.[47] But what compels Senghor is the potential that this method could be applied not so much to ethnology, but rather as a type of "depth" hermeneutic for interpreting art. For Senghor, Frobenius (along with Bergson) identifies a useful contrast between intellect and emotion, facts and essences, sense and sign—the latter item in each of these pairs underlying the former (and, also being "plant-like," in the association Suzanne Césaire provides).[48] Art, for Senghor, stems from being moved ("that is to say from emotion"), and "man, when moved, begins to 'act,' to relive the Other—plant, animal, star, etc.—first to dance it, then to sculpt it, paint it, sing it." What Senghor calls here the "'possession' of the ego by the Other" directly recalls the "abandonment" of self to its environment that Césaire attributes to the plant-human. Instead of racial essence though, it is an avenue to understanding what Senghor calls the "sub-real," the essence, or "rhythm" as he will

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moment… we were entering upon active militant life, with the concept and the idea of *Négritude* under our belts. It was Frobenius who helped us to give the word [Négritude] its most solid, and at the same time its most human significance." Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Foreword," in *Leo Frobenius on African History, Art, and Culture: An Anthology*, ed. Eike Haberland (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2007), vii, viii.

[47] Marc-A. Christophe argues that Senghor's reading of Frobenius makes him a thoroughgoing race-essentialist: "Frobenius's interpretation of African culture, together with the general perception of Africa in certain 19th and 20th century scientific treatises, was to orient Négritude—at least Senghorian Négritude—towards a rather controversial definition of Blackness as an essentially intuitive concept far removed from European thought processes and characterized by the opposition between reason and emotion, between logic and imagination." Marc-A. Christophe, "Leopold Sedar Senghor as Racial Theorist: A Comparison of His Thoughts with Those of Frobenius and Gobineau," *Obsidian II* 2, no. 3 (1987): 47. Michael J.C. Echeruo by contrast "re-reads" Senghor's writing on Frobenius in order to put a critical distance between them, suggesting that Senghor's apparently "generous" interpretations of Frobenius are belied by "a common African discursive practice of 'accommodation,' a mode for negating that kind of obsessive concern for difference which is so central to European though." Michael J.C. Echeruo, "Négritude and History: Senghor's Argument with Frobenius," *Research in African Literatures* 24, no. 4 (1993): 2.

[48] For the linkage between plant-like thought and emotion, see this passage in Frobenius: "Der Wandel von der Ergriffenheit zum Begreifen ist und bleibt (wenigstens uns) das A und das O jeder Kulturbildung. Er zieht sich als Allbestimmendes durch die Geschichte der einzelnen Menschen und Völker wie durch die Kultur- und Kunstgeschichte, und das Kultursein entspricht hierin durchaus der Gestaltwelt, die dem menschlichen Auge am deutlichsten ist, derjenigen der Pflanzen. Und wenn uns in ihm die pflanzenhafte Stetigkeit zu fehlen scheint, so bedeutet dies nur einen Gradunterschied und entspringt der in uns liegenden Schwierigkeit, eine Einstellung, vor allem in richtiger Distanz, zu gewinnen." Frobenius, *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas*, 242.

put it, that underlies the surface of facts (one may recall as well the frequency with which Césaire invokes "deep," "hidden," "secret," "invisible," "unseen" in regard to the "life force" that "plant-human" "surrenders" to).[49] As Diagne argues, this "formalist" hermeneutic approach in Négritude's cross-pollination with surrealist vitalism is not interested in an essentialist ethnology, but rather as a way to give a "plastic understanding" to the "rhythm" at stake in aesthetic forms.[50] It is through an "eidetic reduction"—bracketing the "natural" assumption that the real world is only its visible surfaces spread "out there"—that one can appreciate the formal conventions of abstract, non-mimetic style at stake in so-called "negro" art. Rather than being "the natural emanation of something like a 'race,'" then, the claim for "rhythm"—and I would add, Césaire's claim for the "plant-human"—is in fact "the choice of, the preference for, and perhaps the religious and aesthetic obsession with, a particular *form*."[51]

Cuttings as Narrative Form in *Cereus Blooms at Night*

These valences of plant-humanity are at stake when we read, in a text like *Cereus Blooms at Night*, that, like the plant, a trans person "blooms" (*CB* 105). While the narrator, Tyler, rhetorically represents trans botany in a biologically naturalizing sense, at the level of its narrative form, the novel simultaneously undermines and challenges the naturalness of this mimesis between trans and plant. The botanical frame the novel deploys in order to narrate

[49] One may even go so far as to link this formalist hermeneutic approach with a different German philosophy contemporary to Frobenius's own : Husserl's suggestion that phenomenology's objects are "pure essences," the underlying structures of thought that allow the mere "factual" objects taken for granted as constituting "reality" to occur in the first place. See for example Husserl's distinction of phenomenology, which studies "essences," from psychology which studies "facts." Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2014), 2-8. See also Husserl's claim that to take essences seriously as real "objects" (as phenomenology does, according to Husserl), is to be a "Platonic realist," despite the "particular offense" that this position arouses. Ibid., 40-1.
[50] Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Négritude*, trans. Chike Jeffers (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011), 65, 88.
[51] Ibid., 93.

transness leads it to oscillate between naturalizing and fetishizing transness.

Because my argument will concern the narrative form of the novel—and because it is important to try to keep in mind who is speaking, and where the information that Tyler presents about their narrative subject is sourced from—it is worth beginning by outlining the complicated narratorial structure that the novel unfolds.

The novel begins with the narrator, Nurse Tyler, taking care of a patient recently admitted to the "Paradise Alms House" on the fictional island Lantanacamara. The patient, Mala Ramchandin, is a pariah at the nursing home because she is accused of having murdered her father, and because of her strange behavior: she doesn't speak, but imitates birds and insects. Tyler becomes obsessed with uncovering the truth of her past, and presents the novel's manuscript as an attempt not only to recreate Mala's life-story, but to use it to locate Mala's estranged sister, Asha.

The novel tells two parallel plots: one, going forward with the flow of time in the present, of Tyler meeting and falling in love with one of Mala's visitors, Otoh Mohanty, who is also trans, and of Tyler eventually publicly transitioning in turn, in the novel's final pages. Second, is a retrospective plot which, like a form of detective fiction, uncovers the history of Mala's sexual abuse by her father, Chandin, in order to reconstruct how she ended up at the nursing home in the first place.

The novel, in the intertwining of these two plots, is also a meta-narrative: not so much about Mala's story per se, but more so about the *telling* of the *telling* of Mala's story, and the impacts that narrating this story has on its narrator(s)—foremost among them, Tyler and Otoh.

The novel is structured in five parts, and though it is superficially in first-person from Tyler's perspective, each part offers different framed narratives sourced from various

conversations Tyler has, as Tyler pieces together the story of Mala, "*fashioning a single garment out of myriad parts*" (*CB* 105). In Part I, Tyler focuses on how they came to develop a close companionship with Mala through their shared status as misfits at the nursing home—the one, for being trans (although misread by their peers—and many critics—as an effeminate gay man), the other, for going "mad" as a result of incestual rape. This first half of the novel depicts what Tyler already knew about the more distant aspects of Mala's family history, thanks to town gossip Tyler heard from their grandmother as a child: that Mala's father, Chandin, had an unhappy childhood, saved from the field labor of his indentured parents when adopted at a young age by local missionaries; that Chandin fell in love with his white, adoptive sister, Lavinia Thoroughly, but was forbidden to marry her; that Chandin instead married Lavinia's best friend, Sarah, out of spite; that, in the wake of a loveless marriage, which produced Mala and her sister Asha, Sarah initiated an affair with Lavinia, and subsequently left Chandin for her; and that, in response, Chandin began raping the adolescent Mala.

In the second half of the novel, after Otoh, and Otoh's father, Ambrose, begin visiting Mala at the nursing home, Tyler relates how these new figures from Mala's past helped them fill in the "gaps" still existing in Mala's more recent history (*CB* 102). In Part II, Tyler relates their conversations with Otoh at the nursing home garden, where Otoh describes how he had become fascinated with Mala, upon discovering that she was his father's lover as a youth; and how he accidentally led the police to discover the decaying body of Chandin, hidden in a cellar in Mala's house, which led to her arrest and placement in the nursing home. In Parts III-IV, Tyler relates a conversation that took place between Otoh and his father Ambrose (which Otoh, in turn, relates to Tyler, and Tyler to the reader, in a game of narrative "telephone"), that took place the night after Otoh accidentally led the police to Mala, in which Ambrose explains to his son Otoh how

Chandin was killed: decades earlier, on a fateful day, Ambrose accidentally discovers the truth of what Chandin was doing, runs away from Mala, and Mala murders Chandin. Finally, Part V sees Tyler briefly return to their own meta-narrative, epistolary goal in the text, now that the story is complete: to use the novel's manuscript to locate Asha—a goal which ultimately ends in failure at the novel's close, insofar as Asha remains unreachable.

Through all this—through both the reconstruction of Mala's past, as well as Tyler's self-described "*bloom[ing]*," their transition and their romance with Otoh in the present—runs the presence of the titular cereus plant, a vegetal presence that takes on a narrative agency in bringing these two narrative levels to intersect with each other (*CB* 105). The plant is first given by Lavinia to Mala as a child, during Lavinia's affair with Sarah, which Mala keeps secret from Chandin; and Mala's last-minute decision to go back for the gifted cereus is what prevents her from joining Sarah and Lavinia as they flee Chandin (and Lantanacamara altogether). Closer to the present, Otoh's obsession with going to Mala's yard to take a clipping of the cereus plant—whose aphrodisiacal blooms beguile him, and the town at large—ultimately leads the police to discover Chandin's body.

Indeed, Chandin's corpse arguably serves as a site of fertility for the cereus plant growing out of Mala's house: she routinely collects the corpses of various critters in a bucket, and deposits them in the cellar with Chandin's body, where they are "fodder for a vibrating carpet of moths, centipedes, millipedes, cockroaches… death feeding life"—producing a rich scent of "decay" emblematic "of life refusing to end… [Mala] revelled in it as much as she did the fragrance of cereus blossoms"—the same aphrodisiacal blossoms which Otoh later sees pollinated by this cellar-based moth community (*CB* 130, 128). In turn, after Mala's arrest, Otoh's subsequent decision to bring a cutting of the plant to Mala at the nursing home garden,

which Otoh does on the second day of Mala's residency (a fact which readers don't discover until Part IV), explains where the cutting came from that Tyler plants in Part I, immediately before Tyler's dress scene. Arguably, then, thanks to the cereus plant, the novel's narrative structure is circular, such that it begins where it ends: the first page of the novel sees Tyler, in the present, mentioning that the cereus they planted in the nursing home garden "at least year ago"—a planting event recounted later, in the dress scene—"will bloom soon" (*CB* 5). The novel's final page depicts Tyler and Otoh solidifying their romance in the nursing home garden, with Tyler asking Otoh, "The cereus will bloom in just another few nights. Can you wait?," before reiterating again—this time directly addressing "you," Asha, the unresponsive addressee of the epistolary manuscript—"the cereus will surely bloom within days" (*CB*, 248, 249).

Botany and Trans Ordinariness

In many ways, the first half of the novel is about how Tyler casts their desire for trans "ordinariness" through a botanical rhetoric. The first half of the novel (Part I)—at least its meta-narrative component—tells the culmination of Tyler's desire to be "ordinary." As Tyler puts it early on: rather than be treated as a "curiosity," they wanted to be "treated like a regular fellow… how desperately I want to be—and be treated as—nothing more than ordinary" (*CB* 22).

Before Tyler wears a dress, readers are already introduced to their femininity, as well the sharp transphobic responses it receives from coworkers. Tyler portrays their transness, at first, affectively and erotically rather than in terms of dress (one reason critics go wrong when they

suggest Tyler's "nature" is merely "transvestism"[52] or a "penchant for cross-dressing").[53] Tyler describes feeling a twinge of pleasure at being "diminished" in the presence of particularly masculine men (*CB* 9). They aesthetically appreciate ideal male bodies—but they do so from a gendered distance, instead, identifying themself with the other women coworkers looking on (*CB* 9). Tyler describes feeling "proud" when the other women in the nursing home do *not* assume them to be "strong and fearless and without need of protection"—a "pride" in vulnerability that comes, seemingly, from their co-workers shedding the associations they would have if they perceived Tyler as a man, rather than another woman (*CB* 10).

At the same time, Tyler is repeatedly exposed to transphobic perceptions that throw their body into a sharp, alienating unordinariness, collapsing their ability to perceive themselves in the way they desire. Tyler's male co-worker, Toby, calls them a "pansy," and refuses to work with them. The other women nurses tease Tyler for their eye for clothing styles when Tyler wears a neckerchief: "nice colour! I will have to consult you sometime!" (*CB* 14-5). Tyler notes, behind the flattery, the edge of mockery, and describes being painfully sensitized, "as a matter of survival," to the scales of transphobia, from "the tight smile to the seemingly accidental shove" (*CB* 15). When Tyler is seen wearing a nightgown that is more decorous than the other women's nightgowns even, they are aware that they will be the subject of "comment" after (*CB* 18). Tyler's exposure to transphobia forms the basis of their quick attraction to Mala, who is also ostracized and vilified by other nurses at the home for the gossip surrounding her and her strange behavior: "I did fancy that she and I shared a common reception from the rest of the world" (*CB*

[52] Isabel Hoving, "Moving the Caribbean Landscape: *Cereus Blooms at Night* as a Re-imagination of the Caribbean Environment," in *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*, eds. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson and George B. Handley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 154-168.
[53] Diane Cole, review of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, by Shani Mootoo, *New York Times*, November 29, 1998. Online. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/29/bib/981129.rv124339.html.

20).

Tyler notably frames trans ordinariness through a botanical framework, both rhetorically and narratively. This is clear, first, in how Tyler perceives Mala. Tyler introduces Mala to readers as smelling like compost; claims, at first, that she only makes bird and insect noises; Mala also seems remarkably passive; she doesn't voluntarily eat food but must be fed, is a vegetarian; she is an ardent multispecies equalist, doesn't like to see even plant beings harmed.

But the botanical register of trans "ordinariness" is particularly clear in the scene where Mala encourages Tyler to wear a dress. The sequence begins when Hector, the gardener, tries to bring Mala "a stem of yellow gerbera," out of sympathy. Tyler explains to Hector that seeing it would upset Mala, since Tyler imagines that Mala believes plants possess feelings: "I think that she does not like things in nature to be hurt. To her, the flower and the plant would be both suffering… It would be as if its arm had been cut off or something" (*CB* 69). Instead, Hector suggests that Mala could have her own patch in the garden to tend to. After Tyler and Hector plant Mala's cereus clipping in the new garden patch, Tyler returns with Mala to her room, where Mala produces a nurse's dress and pair of black nylon stockings, which Tyler guesses Mala stole from a clothesline while they were gardening with Hector.

The vegetality of the scene, then, operates already at the surface-level of plot: planting the cereus plant is the occasion that provides the opportunity for Mala to steal a dress for Tyler. At a second level of narrative structure, the fact that the cereus clipping is later revealed to have been brought by Otoh—the novel's second trans character and Tyler's eventual love interest—adds another, promissory, trans botanical element to the scene. At an even further level, the cereus clipping Otoh brings is cut from Mala's yard where it has, in a sense, been fertilized and pollinated through the decomposing corpse of Chandin. In this regard, one might look back on

this scene and argue not only that Tyler's dress-wearing is afforded by a botanical activity of gardening, but also that Tyler's opportunity to feel "ordinary" as a trans person in a dress has been manured, like the cereus, from the corpse of colonialism and, even more specifically, by the body of Chandin, who most closely emblematizes the generational traumas that emerge in the wake of succumbing to assimilationist politics. And here we might notice how the vegetal in this scene, if it does indeed represent transness as a way of surviving beyond, and literally out-growing the effects of colonial assimilation on postcolonial sexualities (symbolized in Chandin's corpse), matches up with Césaire's polemical goals for the "plant-human" as an anti-assimilatory figure.

Perhaps most significant though is the way in which Tyler makes their claim to trans ordinariness through a rhetorical appeal to vegetality, casting themselves, by analogy, with the vegetal world, making their transness natural by making themself into a plant-human figure. Directly before planting the cereus and wearing the dress, Tyler's experiences of unordinariness in the wake of a transphobic world reaches its sharpest point—they feel "stung" when someone "recoil[s]" from them with "discomfort and polite disdain" (*CB* 70). Tyler reflects that they would not be so "devastat[ed]" if "I did not so loathe my unusual femininity," a self-loathing apparent when they refer to themselves as "neither properly man nor woman but some in-between, unnamed thing" (*CB* 71). The scene with the cereus and the dress is a direct response to this. In the scene, Tyler concludes, after removing the dress, (because they couldn't leave the room dressed as such, at "the most basic level of survival"), with a powerful reversal of the feeling of self-loathing that preceded it: "It had been a day and an evening to treasure. I had never felt so extremely ordinary, and I quite loved it" (*CB* 78).

It is worth mentioning, again, that this ordinariness does not surround "cross-dressing,"

as some critics read it, which would imply, by its "cross"-ness, that Tyler is, "really" still, "at bottom," a man in this scene. There are multiple pointers to this fact, first the way that Tyler fantasizes a gender-affirming body when they touch the dress: "My body felt as if it were metamorphosing. It was as though I had suddenly become plump and less rigid," and they mention feeling "an odd shame" when they go to put on the dress and are confronted with the visible reminder "that my mammary glands were flat" (*CB* 76). More telling than this though, is that at first, Tyler describes feeling "horribly silly" when they step out from behind the curtain, "like a man who had put on women's clothing for sheer sport and had forgotten to remove the outfit after the allotted period of fun… Not a man and not ever able to be a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state" (*CB* 77). The sentence is revealing for two reasons. First, that it is the potential that Tyler will be (mis)read as "only" cross-dressing—a term which would imply Tyler was still a man, just temporarily in a woman's clothes for an "allotted period"—that makes Tyler feel profoundly uncomfortable, even estranged from themselves. Second, the sentence also suggests, in the way that Tyler describes "in-betweenness" as an uncomfortable, dysphoric feeling suggests either that they may not in fact be nonbinary, but rather a woman; or, that they are frustrated with the fact that they haven't yet been able to accept nonbinariness as "ordinary."

But most significant is the way that Mala treats Tyler as a "natural" being in the scene. Tyler's first thought when Mala presents the dress is that "she knows what I am… She knows my nature" (*CB* 76). Tyler later makes great significance of the fact that Mala doesn't react when Tyler steps out in the dress. At first this makes them feel uncomfortable (it's at this point they worry that they might just be seen as a cross-dresser who has already outworn their moment of show). But Tyler's "revelation" is that "the reason Miss Ramchandin paid me no attention was that, to her mind, the outfit was not something to either congratulate or scorn—it simply was.

She was not one to manacle *nature*, and I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom" (*CB* 77, emphasis mine).

The significance of this "paying no attention" is that Mala doesn't fetishize Tyler's transness as "different"—a form of fetishizing something "special" in a way that ultimately would have the same effect of rendering someone hypervisible in the same way transphobic interactions do. But more significant is that Tyler here suggests that what is so naturalizing about Mala's perception is that Mala literally perceives Tyler in the same way she would a plant. For Tyler's rhetoric here about Mala's perception of Tyler's "nature," her sense that "it simply was," and that it should not be "manacled," but left "free," directly echoes the rhetoric Tyler used in the prior scene with Hector, where Tyler described how (according to Tyler's guesses, at least) Mala views all plant-life: "she does not like *things in nature* to be hurt" or to be "separated" from their rightful parts (*CB* 69). Thus in a sense, Mala's unresponsiveness in perceiving Tyler—which others see as her affirmation of the affordances of a "vegetative" mental state—is actually a source of naturalization, normalization and empowerment for Tyler.[54] Through the rhetoric of botany, then, Tyler normalizes their body through Mala's vegetal perception of them in all the above senses.

In sum, the rhetorical level of trans botany as "natural" like a plant importantly paves the way for a more significant phenomenological level. For part of the register of "nature" in the scene isn't just at the botanical/"biological," but also concerns the phenomenological notion of a "natural attitude," the normalized attitude that Tyler wants to be taken with. To say, phenomenologically, that Tyler wants to be taken in a "natural attitude" is to say that they want to be taken for granted in the world, even to be able to be simply perceived as a part of the

[54] Sarah L. Lincoln, "Uncanny Communion: Trauma, Touch, and Vegetal Being in *Cereus Blooms at Night*," *The Global South* 14, no. 2 (2020): 110-130.

normal background of the day-to-day, rather than the proverbial "sore thumb," not sticking out as unbelonging to the mundane—regardless of whether that perceiving of sticking-out comes from a "well-intentioned" fetishism of transness or a malicious phobia (indeed one might go so far to say the "well-intentioned" fetishism, at root, covers up the same basic phobia/discomfort that one may want to hide).[55] As if to prove that Tyler's sense of Mala's "vegetality" is mirrored, in turn, in Mala herself, in the very ontology of her own body as a "plant-human" hybrid, Tyler concludes the scene: "My hand on her scalp released the sweet scent of yellow potatoes… Her breath had the delicate perfume of young carrots" (*CB* 78). As Tyler puts it at the conclusion of Part I, "*thanks*" to Mala, and all the vegetality that attends her (at least in Tyler's eyes), "*my own life has finally… begun to bloom*," casting themself by analogy as a plant species tended by Mala (*CB* 105).

Botany and Trans Fetishism

The popular reception of the novel as a "plea for tolerance," for two "outcasts" who are "truer" to themselves than transphobic "conformists," like Chandin and most the rest of the village, who end up alienated from themselves (read: assimilationists, in Césaire's sense),[56] is a reception premised around this desire for trans ordinariness in the face of transphobia. The way this is achieved, at least in Tyler's narration in the first half, is to suggest that there is something vegetal to transness. Not just the fact of being "natural," but, in the way Tyler perceives Mala, suggests they may find something inspiring for trans ordinariness in vegetality's passive agency, reliant on others, distributed.

[55] "Natural attitude" is usually taken as a negative thing to be critiqued, in Husserlian phenomenology. But here, interestingly, one can see Tyler's narration, through its botanical frame, as making an argument in favor of the affordances, and even importance, of the natural attitude for trans individuals.
[56] Diane Cole, review of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, online.

But is this rhetoric of botany—which seems to work so effectively to naturalize trans ordinariness in the novel's first half—also a double-edged sword in the novel, equally capable of functioning toward a fetishization of transness, as an "exotic specimen," so to speak, the very thing it is meant to resist? Does it also generate an attitude toward trans individuals as a social curio, as something with a unique, *because* "natural," status?

We see this uncomfortable possibility emerge in the second half of the book, with the entrance of the novel's second trans character, Otoh, where the narration substitutes a second vocabulary built around the idea of the "secret" lurking underneath transness. This vocabulary threatens to undo the very ordinariness established in the first half, and replace it instead with a troubling attempt to either fetishize trans bodies, or get underneath their "surface" appearances to a truer backstory.

To begin with, with the character of Otoh, the novel immediately raises the ethical quandary of what it means to deadname a character, even if it is an imagined character in a work of fiction. The narration does not simply point out the fact that Otoh used to be called by their birth-name, Ambrosia, at some point in their life, but actually replaces Otoh's name: "By the time Ambrosia was five… their daughter was transforming herself into their [Otoh's parents] son" (*CB* 109). "Ambrosia" transformed "into an angular, hard-bodied creature," "Ambrosia's obviously vivid imagination…" and so on (*CB* 109). The problem is compounded by a fascination with the way the dynamics of transition are linguistically represented in pronoun switches: "his (*her*, then)" (*CB* 109), Otoh's mother Elsie "went along with his (her) strong belief that he (she) was really and truly meant to be a boy. Else fully expected that he (she) would outgrow the foolishness" (*CB* 110).

A reading of this introduction of Otoh's gender history in the novel might point out that

since, due to the narrative framing, this information is coming to Tyler through conversations they had directly with Otoh, one might infer that Otoh has given permission to this representation of his past in these terms. But it nevertheless still problematically feeds the idea that a trans person has a more "original" backstory that "needs" to be mentioned, underlying and supposedly achieved after the fact of the "present" one. Indeed, one might even see this language as reveling in a fetish of transness as a delightful anomaly for cis-readers to marvel at the linguistic complications of.

Other critics have pointed out that there is much to appreciate in Otoh's depiction. Nicole Seymour, for example, argues that the above passages concerning Otoh depict an "organic self-transformation" in Otoh.[57] This "organicity" is empowering, not just because it is "self" directed, "internally" chosen, Seymour suggests, but rather also because it functions as a polemical response to the "medico-technological complex" that often seeks to both "ensure that genital reconstruction is understood as utterly integral to their transitioning," and to "commodify" a trans person's body.[58] Thus, the fact that Mootoo depicts Otoh and Tyler's bodies as bodies that haven't undergone surgery is not only empowering insofar it depicts "transgenderism as a process that anyone might undertake at any time," as "internally driven," rather than "externally granted"; it is empowering because it combats the transphobic logic that there can only be one body type per gender identity: a logic that states that "retaining" one's body "would somehow be more unnatural than changing both one's body and one's identity." Thus for Seymour, the novel is emblematic of a broader cultural shift away from the narrower logic of transsexualism to the more inclusive logic of transgender, putting the novel in a "post-transexual" era.

Without undercutting the immense power and persuasiveness of Seymour's reading, I

[57] Seymour, *Strange Natures*, 46.
[58] Ibid., 45, 36.

don't want to ignore what is potentially disturbing in Otoh's conversational portion of Tyler's narration, or the ways that its depiction potentially problematizes the usefulness of a botanical lens for affirming trans ordinariness. In this regard, we might immediately note that the level to which Otoh's transness is self-guided and internally achieved, rather than externally granted, is already put into question within this very opening depiction of his history. For, we are told by Tyler, that Otoh changing his name to Otoh was precisely externally granted, and may not be a name that Otoh identifies with at all, despite the fact that readers are never given another name to which he might answer: it was "through no choice of his own" that he began "to be called Otoh-boto, shortened in time to Otoh, a nickname to which he still answered" (*CB* 110).

More troubling though, is the way in which Otoh's obsession with the cereus plant, and with Mala in turn, offers a sort of de-transgendering prehistory that provides a mirror image to the uses that Tyler puts botanical rhetoric to in the first part. When Otoh puts on a dress and walks over to Mala's yard to see her, it's because "he wanted to share his *secret* with Mala Ramchandin, even at the risk of being caught walking the streets like a woman" (*CB* 121, emphasis mine). As Tyler relates the way Otoh puts it in the present: "I felt as though she and I had things in common. She had secrets and I had secrets. Somehow I wanted to go there and take all my clothes off and say, 'Look! See? See all this? *I am different!*" (*CB* 124). Otoh's emphasis that "I am different" is not only a remarkable opposite, to mirror and invert Tyler's experience of "ordinariness" in Mala looking at him. More troublingly is the way in which the narrative here directs the reader's eye, in turn, to uncover the "hidden truth" of Otoh's body—again raising persistent ethical questions about narrating trans bodies even in a work of fiction. For here, the instruction to Mala to "look" and "see all this" functions as an instruction, by proxy, to the reader to focalize on Otoh's genitalia in a way that implies aberrance, and undercuts any notion of the

naturalness of a multitude of gender expressions where the material contours of the body are purely incidental rather than essential. Here, the putative stubbornness of the body as determining index is forced back into the reader's view. In place of Tyler's earlier, marvelous imagining of their fantasized, felt, phenomenal body as their real/essential body, we get the literalization of the body in Otoh's part—gender indexed to what parts are "really" underneath the pants as hiding the authentic "secret" truth of who one is.

To be sure, Otoh's register of his transness as a "secret" and "different" is also a mirror image of Tyler's insofar as it is equally entwined with the same botanical register inspired by the cereus plant in Mala's yard. In a sequence that sees the sixty-two "huge, white cereus buds" blossoming during the night of a full moon in Mala's yard before her arrest, the plant "perfumed the entire neighborhood," and along with the full moon, acts as an aphrodisiac (*CB* 135). The buds "intensified their scent, steadily pumping it into the air, an urgent call to insects and bats to find and pollinate the flowers" (*CB* 138). Again, recalling that readers later learn the decomposing source that fertilizes and pollinates the cereus buds, there's a sense in which one might argue that the aphrodisiac scent that town is washed in stems from the death wrought by colonial assimilationism in the corpse of Chandin, whose personal history is wrecked by his desire to marry a white missionary.

But wrapped up too, in this valence of coloniality's violences pollinating the scent that the cereus pumps into the air, is the way in which Otoh's own body is likened to the cereus—just like Tyler's was before in the dress scene. On the same night that the cereus blooms, and in the same narrative passage, Otoh is with a young woman, Mavis, who, in courting Otoh, "pressed her cheek against his chest and smelled his gentle body odour, highly unusual and so very welcoming from a man" (*CB* 137). The passage not only likens Otoh's own body to the

"pumping" perfume from the cereus buds, but the way that Otoh's scent is described—"unusual" for a man—recalls the description of the cereus's scent as "two-edged." The likening of Otoh's body—specifically its perceived erotic dimensions—to the cereus plant provides a botanical lens that makes his body into a fetishized object, the trans body as an object of desire, for both men and women in this passage. Before mentioning his pleasurable scent, Tyler notes that Otoh "had long been the object of desire of almost every Lantanacamaran woman, regardless of her age," and finds it also "noteworthy" that even "a number of men were shocked and annoyed by their own naggingly lascivious thoughts of him" (*CB* 135). Indeed, the next morning after the olfactory orgy of cereus blossoms, when Otoh is walking back to Mala's, determined to get a clipping of the plant, we see just such a scene take place when a male stranger persistently, flirtatiously tries to get Otoh to enter his car (*CB* 148-9).

This second prominent, mirror sequence of trans botanical narration, surrounding the cereus, then, provides a repetition of the sense of Otoh's "secret," as he reflects, upon successfully preventing Mavis from removing his belt and looking beneath his pants: "as long as his tightly belted trousers were never removed he had nothing to worry about"—once again, calling out to the reader's eye the putative "truth" of Otoh's body, unveiling it in the act of calling attention to its need to stay covered, with a narrative gaze that undoes the "ordinariness" of the novel's first part (*CB* 141). On top of that, claiming that both men and women so fervently desire Otoh's body as an erotic object, not only fetishizes his transness as a hyper-sexualized curiosity for others to explore, but also suggests that this fetishism stems from an underlying ability in cis individuals to unconsciously "sniff" out the "truth" of Otoh's "secret."[59]

Thus, while I'm in agreement with the large body of criticism extolling the virtues of this

[59] Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 45.

novel's pairing of ecology and transness, I think there is a tendency in critics to romanticize Mala, Tyler and Otoh's becoming-ecological; their literal ontological blurring into the landscape—or "becoming-cereus" as Catriona Sandilands puts it—in the case of Mala, both as a posttraumatic method of coping, but more importantly in critics' eyes, her status as inherently resistant to colonial logics of personhood as the individual, autonomous, human subject.[60] In this regard Mala would be another avatar of the "plant-human" expressed by the surrealist sensibilities of earlier Négritude authors interested in the ecological dissolution of the self, as a decolonial, anti-assimilatory, uniquely Caribbean aesthetic style.

But to take these descriptors of Mala, Tyler, and Otoh's plant-humanity at face-value is to ignore the narratological framing that mediates it—two trans characters who see their reconstruction of Mala as a lens to understand themselves. Thus the earthiness, the becoming-cereus, may not so much be an ontological statement we can take at face value, as much as a rhetorical and narratological medium for these characters to approach their transness.

In light of Tyler's desire to transition, Otoh's lingering thoughts about detransitioning his body in front of Mala, their shared obsession with Mala, one must wonder if Mala is a narrative vehicle, a projection mechanism, for these narrators. Indeed, one may even wonder why Otoh in particular wants to equate his "secret" with what he assumes to be Mala's secret. And just what is Mala's "secret"? At a narrative level, one might be led to believe it concerns her status as a survivor of abuse, since the passages that Otoh narrates concerning his obsession with "revealing" himself to Mala are immediately followed by Otoh relating what his father told him about Mala's rape, a lamentably, spectacularly visualized, salacious depiction—which in its

[60] Catriona Sandilands, "Violent Affinities: Sex, Gender, and Species in *Cereus Blooms at Night*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, ed. Louise Westling, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 90-103.

drawing of the reader's eye to this trauma calls to mind the drawing of the reader's mind to Otoh's body. Indeed, at least one character, Otoh's mother Elsie, seems to concretize the potential parallel between Otoh's transness and Mala's fate, claiming near the novel's end to Otoh: doesn't Otoh realize that "almost everybody in this place wish they could be somebody or something else? That is the story of life here in Lantanacamara… Why you think The Bird [Mala] end up in that situation? Look at her own father. And the mother…" (*CB* 238). Elsie claims to Otoh that "you are not the first or the only of your kind in this place," and that "every village in this place have a handful of people like you" (*CB* 237-8). What might at face value appear as an attempt to console Otoh with the idea of normalcy through a larger trans community comes as cold comfort in light of the fact that Elsie really wants to know: are things serious with his girlfriend Mavis? If so, does she "know about you?," by which Elsie means, once again directing the narrative gaze to a scrutiny of Otoh's body: does Mavis know what she's going to find under Otoh's pants? And moreover, does Otoh know for a fact that Mavis is a "woman"? Elsie's mentality, considering the possibility of transness, turns into a blanket attitude of gender suspicion and anxiety: "is not easy to tell who is who. How many people here know about you, eh? I does watch out over the banister and wonder if *who* I see is really *what* I see" (*CB* 238).

We are a far cry at the point from the "ordinariness" Tyler sought to instill in the first part of the novel in this fissure of "who" from "what." Instead now, the narrative gaze of the novel repeats the same cis-gaze, whether fetishistic rather than phobic, on the trans body, and repeatedly makes trans bodies into something like the property and business of cis individuals' knowledge, in order to "fix" genders in a stable, less fluid place. The concluding scene with Elsie, moreover, suggests not only transness as an effect of coloniality (everybody wants to be someone else on this island), but also a trace of narrow reproductive normativity as the "proper"

logic guiding intercourse, in place of any more expansive sense of the possibilities of erotics.

Transness as Etiological Fable

The idea, then, that there is a vegetal passivity/organicity to both Mala's coping with her trauma, and Tyler and Otoh's transness is belied by the intense narrative mediatedness at stake in the novel's presentation. Tyler, for example, in the key botanical passage where they wear a dress, makes a point to claim that this "episode"—which is the climax of the first half of the novel—doesn't matter, was of no narrative importance, except for that it proved that Mala wasn't "vegetative," that she overheard one of Tyler's conversations, concerning their gender, and responded by stealing a dress for them.

Further, it is belied by Tyler's intense desire to control the narrative of Mala's life; we already saw how active Tyler is in casting themself as stitching together from "myriad parts" the story of Mala's life. Also recall, it is Mala's perceived passiveness by Tyler that allows them to feel "natural" in their body. This is a vested interest which Tyler themselves warns readers of from the very outset: Tyler is "filled with a sense of success" in serving as Mala's nurse, ushering her back into the social fabric; they "imagined further successes, immeasurable feats that I might accomplish with my great understanding and magnanimity" (*CB* 17). There are shades of a predatory nurse-patient/therapist-victim relationship that creep into Tyler's attempt to analyze Mala's psychic landscape. Tyler attempts to "decipher the words in her eyes" (*CB* 21). Elsewhere, Tyler repeatedly "detects" underlying meanings behind symptomatic behaviors in Mala: "I detected what I think are symptoms of trauma" (*CB* 13); "I detected a slight change in her face" (*CB* 16); "I detected a glint of stubborn independence" (*CB* 20); "I detected a brightening of her eyes" (*CB* 24). This may appear like Tyler harmlessly doing their job as a

nurse, but Tyler's intense desire to narrate her life takes on more starkly self-interested tones when they declare, "I felt like an explorer charting her life in murky, unmapped waters" (*CB* 72). Indeed, by the time that Tyler declares that, from Mala's various animal sounds and incoherent mumblings, it became clear to Tyler that "there was little doubt that I was being given a dictation, albeit without punctuation marks or subject breaks," this statement of Tyler's begs disbelief given their over-readiness to serve as would-be therapist and psychoanalyst to Mala, lending more than a grain of unreliability to the whole narrative "mission," compounding the already tangled sources of conversations that Tyler later stitches together (*CB* 100).

This fact is further indicated by Tyler's interest in the Ramchandin family history to begin with, a story which their grandmother shares with them as a child when Tyler asks her: could a mother be a father? Could your sister be a brother?. By answering Tyler's questions about these nonbinary kinship possibilities via a family history that includes incestual rape, Tyler's grandmother, though well-meaning, fails to fathom, and thus forecloses, the equal and better possibility of transness as a valid response to Tyler's question, instead labeling all such instances as always "not good." As Tyler puts it, it was "a long time before I could differentiate between [Mala's father's] perversion, and what people called mine (*CB* 48).

On the one hand, Tyler's narrative, both their blooming, as well as their narrative reconstruction of Mala's life, is the process of completing this disambiguation, the need for which was stamped on them in this primal childhood scene concerning Mala's history, between trans identities and sexual abuse. The need to reconstruct Mala's life in order to finish this disambiguation leaves Tyler—and the reader through them—in the position of a detective, or even "symptomatic reader," in relation to Mala.

On the other hand, the novel flouts the presumption of the detective genre. As Tyler

reconstructs events, Mala's narrative begins increasingly to blur with the events of Tyler's own narrative present—despite their explicit protestations to the reader that their goal is to tell Mala's story and not their own, and beseeching readers to "forgive these lapses" in narratorial focus (*CB* 3).

However, rather than being a narrative lack, Tyler's so-called narrative "lapses" and Mala's family history are part and parcel of the same fabric, converging both in plot, through the figure of Otoh. In this way, as a lack that is really generative, Tyler's narrative lapses are analogous to the clippings of cereus themselves which grow new roots from the very surface that has been cut.

Might we argue that the novel's rhetoric of botany—which directs the reader's gaze to trans bodies in fetishizing ways just as much as they do in naturalizing ways—is in part undone by the complicatedness of its narrative form in this regard? The novel's proximity to detective fiction is, upon closer inspection, nearer in spirit to an etiological fable: or a *pourquoi* tale—a fictional narrative that explains why something is the way it is—in this case, how Tyler came to "bloom."[61] Yet, given that asking for a so-called "true" backstory often transphobically fetishizes the false notion of an imaginary "original" state in the past, the novel, in its narrative form at least, if not always its rhetoric, conceives of etiology not as the detection of the "real" or "original" underlying causes for a present condition, but instead as invention, as fable, as it increasingly blurs the lines between Tyler and Mala.[62] Through the logic of the productive, narrative lapse, or cutting, Tyler performs an etiological fable of transition as the erasure of etiology in the sense of getting at the "real" root of things.

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[61] Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 25-7.
[62] Valerie Rohy, *Lost Causes: Narrative, Etiology, and Queer Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

In this case, what the novel's closing would show, in Tyler's transition and relationship with Otoh, is that a straightjacketed desire to hold "true" to these etiologies—with their attendant obsessions, what was your "original" name, what was your "original" body shape—is in a sense the "perversion" at stake in the novel, in the multiple generations short-circuited by people's sexual and gendered inabilities to transition into what they want, leaving Tyler and Otoh as the ones to finally get it right.

CHAPTER FOUR

"THE LANGUAGE OF LANDSCAPE":

PATHETIC FALLACY AND NEOCOLONIALISM IN WALCOTT

The inescapable *shaping force* in our production of literature is what I would call the language of landscape.

— Édouard Glissant[1]

A Feel For Things

What does it mean to "have a feel" for things? To say that I have a feel for things—and related terms such as having a knack for things, or knowing my way around something—is to say that I have a certain facility for and familiarity with something; it often refers to a craft that takes nuanced physical skills gained over time.

This may at first blush suggest a mundane scenario in which power is invested in the human doer against a passive object. But if we pause before presupposing that the "feel" belongs to a human subject and focus on the term's core—"a feel for things"—an ambiguity creeps into the words. Rather than gathering all agency on the side of a mental being, the phrase also connotes an attunement or fellow-feeling with the thing. Accordingly, then, the *for* in the expression "feel for things" is both a kind of imperative to empathize with the things one is dealing with ("feel for them"), as well as an indication that the feeling is *for* things in the sense that it belongs to them (even more explicit in variants like "the feel *of* things").[2] In a sense,

[1] Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 145.

[2] "Sympathy names a material agency, a power of bodies human and nonhuman, a mode of impersonal connection, attachment, and care that proceeds from below subjectivity into subjectivity." Jane Bennett, "Of Material Sympathies, Paracelsus, and Whitman," in *Material Ecocriticism*, eds. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 250.

having a feel for things means not so much taking oneself to be the originator, but rather the recipient of a feeling that is generated by the things beyond one's own skin.[3]

Though such phrases seem natural enough on the surface, these connotations—suggesting as they do the notion that the world has its own feelings and even "communication" independent of us—once articulated as explicit propositions seem far-fetched.[4] What do we make of such attributions of feelings to things? Do we take it as something real, or as merely a "pathetic fallacy," an erroneous psychological projection that attributes feelings to animals and inanimate things?[5]

This chapter argues against the idea that such pathetic fallacies are only fallacious, only the effect of a human emotion serving, as John Ruskin put it in his original definition of the term, to "produce in us a falseness in all our impressions."[6] Instead, I suggest we take seriously the implications of pathetic fallacy: namely, that more-than-human beings are fellow feelers with their own forms of language, memory and subjectivity. The notion that the being of plants and other more-than-humans, even landscapes and places, can be subjective, full of their own feelings and communications, seems necessarily fallacious only in a grammar that supposes from the start that more-than-humans are invariably "its" devoid of personhood. Pathetic fallacy, though, is a "language of animacy," treating rocks, mountains, weather systems and landscapes

[3] "You could imagine things, second, as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects-their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems." Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 5.

[4] "Is there anything in architecture that can be seen as its communicative power; if so, can it be treated, literally or metaphorically, as a form of language or text? The distance that separates the domains of the spoken or written language and of architecture represents a continuity of meaning that is largely hidden from view." Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 68.

[5] "pathetic, adj. and adv." *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/view/Entry/138777?redirectedFrom=pathetic+fallacy (accessed June 29, 2022)

[6] John Ruskin, "Of the Pathetic Fallacy," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 71.

as feeling persons, as "whos."[7] This is not to "plead for an excessive anthropomorphism," nor to narcissistically model the foreign subjectivities of plants or other more-than-humans on our own.[8] Rather, it is more to strategically imagine in language the ways that humans and nonhumans can exist as "kin."[9] If anything, this means defamiliarizing our own intelligence, perception and language—perhaps as no longer our "own," but as sustained by the prior atmospheres (or "feels") that things themselves produce and communicate through.

Postcolonial thinkers have long understood the stakes of a worldview rooted in objectifying anything that isn't the (white) Human: how natural extraction and racial dehumanization function "as interlocking forces."[10] As Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris puts it, the claim that there is a "silent music" of "living landscapes"—a "language akin to music threaded into space and time which is prior to human discourse"[11]—is key to "repudiating a dumbness or passivity" with which Western epistemic traditions "subconsciously or consciously robe the living world."[12] Harris's phrasing suggests, at a phenomenological level, that the notion of more-than-human landscapes as language-lacking comes *after* (is a "robe" on top of) a more prior level of more-than-human space as in fact language-bearing (possessing a "silent music"). Given this, what are the affordances and limitations of pathetic fallacy in serving to institute

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[7] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015), 183.
[8] "It follows that the eventful encounter with plants whereby we find ourselves in the greatest proximity to them without negating their otherness cannot come to pass unless we entertain the hypothesis that vegetal life is coextensive with a distinct subjectivity with which we might engage, and which engages with us more frequently than we imagine." Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 8.
[9] See Robin Wall Kimmerer's discussion of her experimentation with using "kin" as a pronoun for more-than-human beings. Robin Wall Kimmerer, "The Intelligence of Plants," interviewed by Krista Tippett, February 25, 2016, in *On Being*, https://onbeing.org/programs/robin-wall-kimmerer-the-intelligence-of-plants-2022/.
[10] Jana Evans Braziel, "'Caribbean Genesis': Language, Gardens, Worlds (Jamaica Kincaid, Derek Walcott, Édouard Glissant)," in *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*, eds. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 111.
[11] Wilson Harris, "The Music of Living Landscapes," in *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, ed. Andrew Bundy (New York: Routledge, 1999), 40.
[12] Ibid., 44

different narrative "genres of the human" that are neither premised on a purely physicalist, biocentric definition of matter, nor on white, European Man as the *de facto* "ethnoclass" defining true human being?[13]

To answer this question, this chapter reads both the short and epic poetry of Derek Walcott. Derek Walcott's poetry looks at humans and landscapes that bear the marks of a violating and uprooting relationship to whiteness's settler colonist attitudes toward the more-than-human world. At the same time, Walcott insists that ways of carrying on life in the wake of colonial violence are not to be "filtered" through the "elegiac" light of nostalgia for a lost, original cultural state of belonging (home country and language), but rather are to be seen as "celebrations of real presence" in their own right.[14] I argue that this idea of a "real presence" manifests in the way Walcott's poems figure nature as feeling and speaking, and the way they frequently suggest that the very language of poetry itself is a direct part of (indeed literally made from the very material of) the more-than-human environment. In this way, Walcott shows the central point of this chapter: how language itself can be seen as something that does not belong to the human mind (contained in the brain as a conscious representation) but is rather a part of a phenomenological atmosphere that is already communicative (something that can't be owned or contained). Rather than reading this as a souvenir of "authentic" traditions (something that Walcott takes great pains to distance himself from), I suggest we take Walcott's suggestion of a language of more-than-human nature literally—of the atmospheres we live in as themselves

[13] Sylvia Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be 'Black,'" in *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, eds. Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio GómezMoriana, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 30-66; Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, vol. 3 (2003): 257–337.

[14] Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 68.

nonhumanly communicative. In this regard, Walcott's speaking, feeling nature is not fallacy but rather reimagines alternative ways to the racialized, language- and species-extinguishing violence of settler colonial whiteness. At the same time, I go onto show that Walcott's epic poetry theorizes the limitations of this naturalizing view of language even at the same time that his poetry seeks to self-consciously derive its *raison d'être* from it; in my reading, Walcott's *Omeros* pushes back on the sometimes too-easy, romanticizing notions of language as harmoniously attuned to nature—a form of environmental cognition[15]—thematizing, through metafictional forms, the ways in which fantasized readerly expectations for "harmony with nature," (of the variety this dissertation began with in the introduction), are often part and parcel of the racist and neocolonial consumptive gaze he writes against.

How do these issues fit into broader scholarly trends in posthumanism? Recently, in a turn away from poststructural understandings of poetic language, new materialist ecocritics have sought to explore the notion of a real "language of landscape" (in Glissant's phrase) by revalorizing anthropomorphism and pathetic fallacy as strategically helpful fabrications in unlearning anthropocentric prejudices.[16] Jane Bennett claims for example that "a touch of anthropomorphism" can actually help undo dualist ontologies by "lighting up parallels between material forms in 'nature' and those in 'culture.'"[17] For others, pathetic fallacy, far from being false, "registers" the "interdependence" of the "animate and the inanimate,"[18] "renders porous

[15] Omri Moses, "Poetry and the Environmentally Extended Mind," *New Literary History* 49, no. 3 (2018): 309-335.
[16] In this regard they clash with earlier theorizations of anthropomorphism from Paul de Man, who critiques the way anthropomorphism seems to resuscitate language, make it alive, and prefers the way tropes (like metonymy) have negative power, make things seem dead: "Anthropomorphism seems to be the illusionary resuscitation of the natural breath of language, frozen into stone by the semantic power of the trope. It is a figural affirmation that claims to overcome the deadly negative power invested in the figure." Paul De Man, "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 247.
[17] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 99.
[18] Maureen N. McLane, "Compositionism: Plants, Poetics, Possibilities; or, Two Cheers for Fallacies, Especially Pathetic Ones!," *Representations* 140, no. 1 (2017): 104.

the divide between persons and things,"[19] and reconceives the notion of a special human claim to language by arguing instead for language's "participation in the whole of nature."[20]

This type of "material ecocriticism," taking seriously "the insights of the new materialist wave of thought,"[21] produces valuable anti-anthropocentric work. While this work crucially challenges dualistic nature/culture hierarchies, in many ways, language remains an under-theorized problem for new materialist ecocriticism. This may partly be due to materialists' polemical goal of rejecting the linguistic turn for its putative lack of attention to matter. But the result is that, as Toril Moi puts it, new materialism, in presuming that it needs move *beyond* language in order to get to matter, still begins by taking for granted the overall picture that language is somehow an obstacle at odds with matter, a problem of immaterial innerness unable to have any real connection with the outer external world.[22] This presumption that materiality is opposed to or "beyond" language crops up even among postcolonial ecocritics who disavow dualisms on the one hand, yet claim at the same time that "the substantial world of nature is placed *a priori* to language."[23]

Rather than objectifying the world, the forms of knowledge-making contained in the poetic form of pathetic fallacy suggest that "to know is to 'personify,' to take the point of view of what should be known."[24] If we take this poetic style of knowing *qua* personifying seriously it offers an alternative to the paradigm of language as representation (bare material signs linked to immaterial meaning). Rather than exceptionalizing language as the unique, inner endowment of a

[19] Branka Arsić, "Materialist Vitalism or Pathetic Fallacy: The Case of the House of Usher," *Representations* 140, no. 1 (2017): 125, 136.
[20] Marjorie Levinson, "Of Being Numerous," *Studies in Romanticism* 49, no. 4 (2010): 656.
[21] Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, "Introduction: Stories Come to Matter," in *Material Ecocriticism,* 2.
[22] Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 13.
[23] George Handley, "Derek Walcott's Poetics of the Environment in *The Bounty*," *Callaloo* 28, no. 1 (2005): 209.
[24] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-structural Anthropology*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2014), 60.

single species, we are confronted with "a universe inhabited by diverse types of actants or subjective agents," all "equipped with the same general ensemble of perceptive, appetitive, and cognitive dispositions."[25]

Walcott's Symbiosis of Language and Landscape

Recently, scholars have increasingly focused on the role of plants and landscapes in Walcott's poetry, in order to argue that Walcott's work serves to "highlight the efficacy of non-human actants," and the environment itself "as more than just setting, but as agent."[26] Walcott's poetry is about "creating a sense of rhizomic at-homeness amidst hybridity";[27] the primary upshot of Walcott's "ecopoetics" is to show "the cosmopolitan nature of the Caribbean and its human and environmental diasporas";[28] Walcott theorizes "new eco-relations" between humans and nonhumans that are "symbiotic or rhizomic" rather than "consumptive."[29]

But how does this pose a shift in attitudes toward language away from a representational economy of meaning that remains anthropocentric, continuing to posit the more-than-human landscape as that which is "beyond" language? And what, conversely, are the political ramifications of viewing the "language of landscape" as actual rather than fallacious?

For Walcott, this language of landscape goes hand in hand with recalibrating language, in its poetic form, to be not so much a matter of mediated *re*-presentation, a pairing of sign and signifier, but rather a form of "real presence," where word and matter co-form each other by a

[25] Ibid., 56
[26] D.E. St. John, "Writing Agential Landscapes: Making History Through Materiality in the Poetry of Derek Walcott and Audre Lorde," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 21, no. 7 (2019): 1021, 1022.
[27] Haleh Zargarzadeh, "Rhiz(h)oming Achille: Walcott, Glissant, and the politics of relation and creolization," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53, no. 6 (2017): 716.
[28] Elaine Savory, "Toward a Caribbean Ecopoetics: Derek Walcott's Language of Plants," in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, eds. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 89.
[29] Braziel, "'Caribbean Genesis,'" 111.

process of mutual growing into and together with each other—what we might call a symbiosis of language and landscape.[30] Language in its poetic form, according to Walcott, does not sprout from the head, but rather wells up from the dynamic process of following the sensible grain of the world, getting in touch with the feel of things, in the sense of a more-than-human space that is already communicative, rather than "beyond" language.

For Walcott, language belongs more to one's environs than that it belongs to consciousness; poetic language for Walcott happens when things call forth to us, pose a question to our bodies that we respond to, not through hard-wired concepts we already have in our minds, but more through allowing ourselves to be taken away from ourselves and into things, "a certain manner that the outside has of invading us."[31] For Walcott, phenomenologically speaking, rather than first "grasping" things through language, it is only when things grasp us with their own communicative atmosphere that language wells up.

This symbiosis of word and world central to Walcott's nonrepresentational conception of language is particularly evident in his last collection of poems, *White Egrets* (2010). Here we see, as Elaine Savory puts it in regard to Walcott's previous poetry, his "almost obsessive representation of interplay between poetry and plants," and the attendant suggestion that Walcott's poetics "comprehend plants through poetry and poetry through plants."[32]

In the title poem, "White Egrets," for example, Walcott begins with the image of a lawn with "stalking egrets" who "wriggle their beaks and swallow."[33] In "accepting" the "quiet ravages" of growing old, the speaker suggests that she or he ought to "learn how the bright lawn

[30] See Tim Ingold, *Correspondences* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).
[31] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 331.
[32] Savory, "Toward a Caribbean Ecopoetics," 81.
[33] Derek Walcott, *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 558. Hereafter cited in-text as (*PDW*).

puts up no defenses / against the egret's stabbing questions and the night's answer" (*PDW* 558). A reader may at first be tempted to see Walcott's attribution of a linguistic function ("questioning") to an animal behavior (a "stabbing" beak) as merely metaphorical in the comparison it enacts. Yet, further in the poem, the speaker blurs the distance of any metaphorical comparison: "the page of the lawn and this open page are the same / an egret astonishes the page" (560). Here, by the making page and lawn converge into one another, the speaker enacts a semantic convergence between the empirical egret "out there" and the literal word *egret* on the page; if page and lawn are one and "the same," then to say "an egret astonishes the page" means simultaneously both the literal sentence you are reading (semantically, the word *egret* has just shown up) as well as the physical flesh-and-blood animal on the grassy lawn/page. The notion of an irretrievable split between signified (empirical egret on the lawn) and signifier (the word *egret* on the page) is thrown into question as a suitable model for how this poem understands its own composition.

The speaker re-emphasizes this overlap between the egret's behavior and poetic language, lest readers ignore its pretensions to something beyond a merely figurative comparison: "We share one instinct, that ravenous feeding / my pen's beak, plucking up wriggling insects / like nouns and gulping them, the nib reading / … / selection is what the egrets teach / on the wide-open lawn, heads nodding as they read / in purposeful silence, a language beyond speech" (*PDW* 561). Here again the speaker emphasizes that readers are to take the egret's status as language-bearing as real language—indeed, a language that even subtends the poetic language of the speaker. Moreover, readers also see the mirror image of this too: that language is an animal behavior ("ravenous feeding") as much as it is semiotic.

Reading these lines, one might be tempted to latch onto the use of a simile ("like") to say

that ultimately the suggestion of a nonrepresentational schema between word and world is comfortably resolved. But the comparison carried out by the simile is backwards on closer inspection—the "like" points to the wrong thing. After all, the "pen's beak" is not said to be plucking up *words* "like" an egret plucks up insects, but rather the reverse: the *literal* thing the pen does is "pluck up insects"; the *metaphorical* thing it does is pluck up nouns. And recalling the overlaying of page and lawn from before, it is no intention of a human mind that is the source for this behavior of plucking up insects/nouns; rather it is the egrets' behavior that *teaches* the speaker how to accomplish this linguistic behavior that shares the form of "feeding" and "selection." How do egrets convey this poetic lesson? It is not through non-linguistic observation. Rather, the egrets, in the final account, though they are "silent," possess a "language beyond speech." This echoes the points made by Wilson Harris and Robin Wall Kimmerer: that there is a type of silent, more-than-human language that suffuses the fabric of space itself, and that participates in and enables ("teaches") human language capacities.

The Coloniality of Pathetic Fallacy

The poem's understanding of its own use of pathetic fallacy (as not fallacious, ultimately) here contrasts markedly with Ruskin's original coining of the term in 1856. After all, pathetic fallacies are originally dubbed fallacious not only because they are deemed delusory, but because they threaten a certain species-hierarchy and exceptionalism where humans are located at the top of an imagined "chain of being," and are accordingly attributed a "grander condition" and a "higher capacity and stand in the ranks of being."[34] Ruskin's account of the fallaciousness of the notion of any actual symbiosis between language and landscape ultimately relies on using a

[34] Ruskin, "Of the Pathetic Fallacy," 73.

model of language as mental representation (the opposite of Walcott's non-representational, participatory, symbiotic account) that is designed to support an ideological view of human exceptionalism, mastery and sovereignty over the natural world—an exculpatory view of human domination over nature that ultimately dovetails with masculinist, patriarchal, settler-coloniality. Insofar as pathetic fallacies are insisted to be fallacious, at an ontological level, in order to guarantee this place of humans at the top of a "chain of being," we could say that the canonical definition of pathetic fallacy serves what Sylvia Wynter and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson have critiqued as the racializing "humanist" project of the Chain of Being as part and parcel of anti-Black, white supremacist logics.[35]

According to Ruskin's original formulation, the error of pathetic fallacy happens when humans enter a "state of mind" overcome by "violent feelings," whereby "reason is unhinged" by "passions."[36] Since this ostensibly happens when clear thinking is muddled by emotion—and since it is conversely "a grander condition" for the human "intellect" to be "strong enough to assert its rule against" these overly-emotional states—the conclusion is that "the main point… respecting the pathetic fallacy" is that it "is always the sign of a morbid state of mind, and comparatively of a weak one"—and thus belongs to "an inferior school" of the creative uses of language.[37] It is the "temperament" of "a mind and body in some sort too weak to deal fully with what is before them."

The first thing one notices about the logic of this account of pathetic fallacy is that it is a projectional one: it hinges on the notion that the event of pathetic fallacy arises from a moment

[35] "For, it was to be the figure of the Negro (i.e., the category comprised by all peoples of Black African hereditary descent) that it was to place at the nadir of its Chain of Being; that is, on a rung of the ladder lower than that of all humans." Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 301. See also Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 48-50.
[36] Ruskin, "Of the Pathetic Fallacy," 71.
[37] Ibid., 73

of intense emotion—taken to be experienced only "inside" the head of a human agent—that is then subsequently projected out onto other things in one's surroundings, and thus tricks people into thinking that one's surroundings reflect or partake in that emotion too.

This type of projectional account offers up a psychological fable about how such pathetically fallacious images arise.[38] Ruskin's criterion for calling these instances fallacious lies not in the images themselves but in the ontogeny he posits for them, replete with a scaffolding of the human mind in an allegorical struggle waged between two combatants, bodily passion and spiritual intellect. Ironically, though, Ruskin's rhetoric of discrete mental faculties, in the way that it sets up a mini-drama to explain how cognition works, notably displays the very forms of personification he derides. He explains the phenomena of pathetically fallacious language by transforming it into the offspring of a set of homunculi in the head that take care of various distinct tasks, and in which the one (emotion) should recognize its rightful subservience to the other (reason)—but which is sometimes able to stage a successful (albeit scandalous) *coup*, thereby producing a case of, or at least the right conditions for, pathetic fallacy.

This last point is especially salient because it points us to deep ideological concerns at stake in pathetic fallacy, and the broader humanist ideologies that underpin its status as a so-called "fallacy." For, the nature of the duping going on in pathetic fallacy, Ruskin says, is threatening because it creates a self-sabotage of humanity's exceptionalism: language itself, that which should demonstrate humans' unique-on-earth "species smarts," instead acts to undo the very "rational" autonomy it is supposed to guarantee for "*Homo loquens*," leaving humans

[38] In this regard, Ruskin's psychological account of pathetic fallacy is weak in the same way that Jonathan Culler notes of accounts of apostrophe: "This is a matter on which rhetoricians seem to agree, and in so agreeing they invoke a rudimentary psychology to naturalize the figure… Apostrophe, by this tale, is a figure spontaneously adopted by passion, and it signifies, metonymically, the passion that caused it. … one might conclude that apostrophes indicate intense involvement in the situation described." Jonathan Culler, "Apostrophe," *Diacritics* 7, no. 4 (1977): 60-1.

"weak," "morbid," taken by "passion" like base animals.[39] In this drama of warring faculties, pathetic fallacy is cast as both psychological regicide and suicide: it usurps the thing it is supposed to be vassal to (reason). As Ruskin puts it: "the language of the highest inspiration becomes broken, obscure, and wild in metaphor, resembling that of the weaker man, overborne by weaker things."[40] Recalling this dissertation's opening with Thoreau's dialectic of "higher laws" mastering "savage delights" in rawness, in the picture Ruskin paints, language is cast as an issue of mastery: learning how to dominate and control humans' "lower," embodied passions with our "higher," spiritual ones (the ones that putatively make us stand out from other animals).

Ruskin's account thus further serves as an encomium to proper "humanity" as a distinctly white, masculine one. The implied fear is to become unmanly, unmastered, womanly even, in the way one gives oneself to be taken by emotion. Faced with this potential problem, what we need, says Ruskin, is not by contrast "the men who feel nothing" and therefore see only mechanically, nor the "the men who feel strongly" but "think weakly," and thus see only fallaciously, but rather, a dialectical process of mastery: "the men who feel strongly, think strongly, and see truly."[41] This last category of the praise-worthy (male) poet only comes about after an internal battle—between "passion" and "intellect," where ultimately the intellect "is strong enough to assert its rule"—with hyperbolic, even erotic, heroic results: "the whole man stands in an iron glow, white hot, perhaps, but still strong, and in no wise evaporating; even if he melts, losing

[39] Vicki Kirby puts the problem of language-exceptionalism this way: "Whatever language is—organizing tool or instrument, articulating tech-nology, organism—it commands dominant status in the definition and explanation of humanity's species privilege. Made synonymous with sociality, abstraction, and therefore intellection, human language becomes an exemplar of species smarts, a standard against which our difference from the great apes, for example, is secured. Their comparatively puny vocabulary in "natural languages" becomes proof of an intellectual proximity and yet failure, a failure that *Homo loquens* demands." Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 40-1.
[40] Ruskin, "Of the Pathetic Fallacy," 74
[41] Ibid., 74.

none of his weight."[42] For Ruskin the ability to feel emotion yet remain mentally "strong"—remaining "whole," and not losing any of one's self-composure even ("in no wise evaporating")—is a profoundly masculine one steeped in a mythos of heroism.[43]

The basic theory of language that this projectional account feeds off of is a representationalist one. We can define what it means to view language as representation by looking at how this model presumes a certain picture of language as framed within a broader set of pre-existing human behaviors—indeed as Ruskin does, with his pitting of separate faculties, passion and reason, against one another. Though language is given special functions, those functions are made fully explicable only through a framework that precedes the languaging itself and is independent of it (i.e., cognitive faculties of "emotion" and "reason" whose interrelationship provides the ontogeny for linguistic events like pathetic fallacy).

Entailed by such a move are two crucial presuppositions: first, that language is just a way of encoding priorly given information from the mind that is not itself essentially something linguistic in nature. And second, that there is consequently an essence or prior content of what it is to be human that is more original than language and fundamentally independent of it. In sum, in our heads there are pictures of reality, and we have knowledge when these representation-bearing pieces match up accurately with the world. And in turn, words function by being attached to these pieces of representation. On this account, as a type of label-system for sorting out our mental representations, words facilitate the combination of these representations into

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[42] Ibid., 73

[43] Branka Arsić claims that "the ontology formulated by the first three paragraphs" of Ruskin's "Of the Pathetic Fallacy"—which, according to Arsić, is a nondualistic animism that insists "on the annulment of the taxonomy that separates extants into subjects and objects"—effectively "undoes the very fallacy Ruskin then goes on to formulate." Arsić "Materialist Vitalism," 123. While this is a fascinating argument, it potentially overstates the nature of Ruskin's investment in this animistic ontology, ignoring Ruskin's clear statements that treating objects as sentient is false, and both an intellectual and artistic flaw. Here is Ruskin's anti-animism, *pace* Arsić: "he has a morbid, that is to say, a so far false, idea about the leaf: he fancies a life in it, and will, which there are not." Ruskin, "Of the Pathetic Fallacy," 72.

more complex forms of thinking and knowing.[44] Such accounts ideologically justify the self-interests of humans (if we're exceptional, we can go on exploiting nonhumans); and this exceptionalism is "just the way things are," eternally justifying the colonial, capitalist exploitation of the more-than-human.[45]

Walcott's Pathetic Fallacies

In light of this, let us return to Walcott's different conception of pathetic fallacy, this time in a non-fictional setting. In a 1965 lecture on Robinson Crusoe at the University of the West Indies, Walcott draws a connection between landscape, names, pathetic fallacy and poetry. In the lecture, Walcott argues that "any sound, any act of naming something… is anthropomorphic, that is, like the pathetic fallacy."[46] Notably, the wide net that Walcott casts—"any sound"—qualifies far more as language than one may expect (and indeed, not just any language, but a form of cognition shared with humans, since any sound can even qualify as "anthropomorphism"). Walcott explains that his point is "to make a heretical reconciliation between the outer world, and the world of the hermit, between, if you wish, the poet and the objects surrounding him."[47]

Two things are especially salient here. Walcott explicitly argues for a rejection of a split between an inner, languaging mind (cast as the image of a "hermit"), and an outer, language-barren world; and he does this by a strategic appeal to pathetic fallacy (which he links to all acts of "naming" in general). Like the word "egret" in the poem "White Egrets," Walcott suggests an

[44] Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 3-34.
[45] Even models that are diametrically opposed to this representational one, such as Taylors's, still wind up in a problematic human exceptionalism: "Linguistic beings are capable of new feelings which affectively reflect their richer sense of their world"; "animals mate and have offspring, but only language beings define kinship." Ibid., 28.
[46] Derek Walcott, "The Figure of Crusoe," in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott,* ed. Robert D. Hamner (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), 36.
[47] Ibid., 35

isomorphism between outer objects and the nouns we use for them—both thing and name converge, and do so through a shared "form of feeling," as Walcott puts it later in the 1965 lecture. That gap, that notion of a word as representing, mentally, a separate thing out there, is precisely what Walcott refuses in his definition of poetic naming *qua* pathetic fallacy. Rather, words don't separately "stand in" for, but actually participate in the things they name (this recalls again Walcott's emphasis in the Nobel lecture on "real presence").

Walcott frequently uses a motif of the human mind as an environmental phenomenon to express this point that an "inner" world—of language, thought, feeling, emotion, experience, etc.—does not separate the human mind from the rest of nature, but rather is kin with it. Instead of showing an inner mind projecting out onto the world, Walcott tends rather to favor the opposite trajectory: the outer world as introjecting into the human mind. For example, in a poem about the experience of one's friends dying, that opens with the image of "breakers coming around Pigeon Island," Walcott writes: "their voices heard / in the page of a cloud, like the soft surf in my head" (*PDW* 564). Elsewhere in *White Egrets*, in a poem where Walcott wonders whether his "gift has withered," Walcott similarly opens with the image of the ocean as the thoughts unfurling in his head: "the sea's recitation reentering my head / with questions it erases, canceling the demonic voice / by which I have recently been possessed" (*PDW* 595). In *Midsummer*, in a poem about the inherent political nature of all language ("no language is neutral," he says), Walcott's first line begins: "I heard them marching the leaf-wet roads of my head, / the sucked vowels of a syntax trampled to mud" (*PDW* 361). Here, he figures not only his physical skull as an exterior environment, a "division of dictions" (a figurative road "marched" on by "words"), but also as a literal road marched by soldiers. Furthermore, the contents of his head, supposedly the proprietary source of poetic language itself, become participatory with that

same physical, external environment—the imagery of "sucked vowels" and "syntax trampled to mud," evoking the notion that the language that one might think of as housed in an inner head and representing the outer world, here become partnered with, physically spread into, the way the "wet leaves" are strewn on a muddy "road."

In these images we see Walcott's move of framing kinship with nature cognitively—the more-than-human world as constituting the material flesh of the speaker's brain, thoughts, language—as Walcott's way of mapping "the intra-action between non-human powers circulating within the body and ecosystem."[48] Walcott further emphasizes this point by framing the print of words on a page as one with the perceived world immediately around the speaker. In the opening lines of his last published poem, Walcott writes: "This page is a cloud between whose fraying edges / a headland with mountains appears brokenly / then is hidden again…" (*PDW* 606). Elsewhere, in "Gros-Ilet," Walcott suggests that the provenance of language is not so much a human head, but rather an entire ecosystem—or suggests rather, that ecosystemic environments develop their own more-than-human language: "From this village, soaked like a gray rag in salt water, / a language came, garnished with conch shells, / with a suspicion of berries in its armpits" (*PDW* 378). In a poem from *The Bounty*, Walcott expresses even more clearly that language participates in the natural world, rather than indirectly representing it through the mediation of a mental representation, arising from a human mind separate from nature: "I am considering a syntax the color of slate, / with glints of quartz for occasional perceptions and / winking mica for wit… (*PDW* 446). Here, even in this meta-poetic rumination on the proper language for poetry, the language is not composed of representations but rather is composed by its participatory kinship with more-than-human language of solid, heterogeneous,

[48] St. John, "Writing Agential Landscapes," 1019.

inorganic, mineral-beings (slate has a "syntax," mica has a "wit").

For Walcott, this framing of language is also reversible: it entails not just an environmentalization of language, but a "linguistification," as it were, of the environment. Walcott demonstrates this for example in *The Prodigal* when he figures that reciprocity between language and environment in both directions: "Every noun is a stump with its roots showing / … / then the rain begins to come in paragraphs / and hazes this page, hazes the gray of islets" (*PDW* 540). In the first instance here, language ("every noun") is itself nature ("a stump"); in the second instance, nature ("the rain") occurs as a form of language (comes "in paragraphs"); and the realm of its occurrence blurs the line between material page, the printed word, that bears Walcott's semantic content, and the landscape itself that it refers to.

Living Landscapes and Raw Wounds in *Omeros*

So far I have been arguing that Walcott tries to show us that language is not just in the head of the speaker—that it is in the landscape. But, although I've been arguing that Walcott depicts a language-rich world, blurring the line of the agency of his language (is the language in the speaker, or in the environment?), does this argument racialize Walcott's speakers as a bit of traditional "local" culture for the white world to consume?[49] In concluding this chapter, I want to analyze how Walcott troubles the very expectation, on the part of his readers, for a harmony between language and nature in his poetry—an expectation which, as we have seen above, he consistently appeals to as the *raison d'être* of his own poetry—as in turn limited by its complicity

[49] As Fanon puts it: "When the Whites feel they have become too mechanized, they turn to the Coloreds and request a little human sustenance." Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 108. Natalie Melas reminds us in her reading of *Omeros* how going on tourist vacations to the Global South continue this legacy of whites consuming "sustenance" from "earthy" postcolonial nature destinations. As Melas puts it: tourism functions by marketing local color ("enhancing local specificity") in order to "sell enjoyment." Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 163.

in neocolonial stereotypes about postcolonial subjectivities.

To begin with, the opening poem in *Omeros* is full of pathetic fallacies. It opens with Philoctete telling the story of how he and his friends would go into the woods and cut down trees to make them into fishing canoes. Within the space of three pages, the reader is confronted with wind that is capable of bringing news to trees about their fate (they will soon be cut down by fishermen to be made into canoes); trees that feel and express fear at such a fate with their shaking leaves; cedars that can see the intentions (the "axes") in the eyes of their hunters;[50] ferns that, also shaken by the wind-bearing news, understand and speak out, "Yes, the trees have to die"; the fishermen confer a personhood onto these trees, in empathetic remorse, accusing themselves of turning into "murderers" for cutting them down; a human's moan of pain mimics "the rising moan // of a conch" as he lifts the pantleg over his wound that "has puckered like the corolla / of a sea urchin"—an image which metaphorically blends the raw matter of plant-life (a "corolla" is a botanical term for the petals of a flower, forming a whorl around the reproductive organs of a plant) into the predatory mouth of heterotrophic animal-life ("sea urchin"), and uses it to refer allegorically to the lingering wounds of slavery (*O* 4); a "garrulous waterfall" and "talkative brook" are capable of empathizing with this speaker's pain, carrying "his secret" with them; eels are language-bearers who can "sign their names" in sand; rivers have memories; trees are not merely symbols of godhood, but are themselves actually "the old golds… / The first god was a gommier [gum tree]" (*O* 5); a chainsaw for cutting down trees is a "shark," whose "sidewise jaw" cuts wood-chips that are "mackerel," leaving a "wound" in these tree-gods, and splashing their bark with blood.

This preoccupation with the feelings and language of the natural landscape is not just

[50] Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 3. Hereafter cited in-text as (*O*).

surface level, but runs through the entire epic narrative plot. Philoctete's wounded leg (a symbol for the lingering wound of colonialism), which is also compared to a sliced yam, needs to be healed through a "brew" made from the "root" of a special plant, native to West Africa and carried across the Atlantic Ocean from the "Bight of Benin" in the belly of sea-swift, before the swift "eject[s] the seed" upon reaching St. Lucia (*O* 239). Achille's journey back to his ancestral village in Africa to retrieve his lost name is only possible because of the tree he cuts down to make into a canoe, which he names *In God We Troust*, and which is repeatedly called the "hollow body" of a dead god (*O* 8, 134). Like Achille, the trees themselves are said to have lost their original language (*O* 6). These wounds of histories of colonialism that need to be healed end up in the heart of the whole island itself, via the plant the sea-swift carried, whose growth festers "its gangrene, its rage" down into the "brain" of the whole island itself (*O* 244). Both the healing work of Ma Kilman and the poetic craft of the text's author are repeatedly referred to as hinging on their ability to understand the language of ants. The language of ants serves to establish the poet-narrator's charge to write *Omeros* in the first place (for the metric "feet" of his poetic words to give voice to the "feet" of the local St. Lucian worker-women, whose own timed, rhythmic footwork in turn stems from an "ancestral" source, and which in turn, in their load-carrying footwork is like that of a line of ants) (*O* 73-5). In Book Six, Ma Kilman wanders into the hills to find this "unknown weed" needed to brew a medicine for Philoctete's wounded leg, and it is a line of ants, "with scribbling fingers and forehead / touching forehead," that leads Ma Kilman to the plant, and in a sense, transforms her into a hybrid ant-human as "she prayed / in the language of ants," as she digs out the flower from the earth (*O* 243-4). The very "O" of Omeros is tied to all this concern with the recovery of a lost language of landscape—"O" is the agonized scream of the traumas of colonialism (*O* 246), the lack of closure around a lost name in

the wake of the trans-Atlantic diaspora (*O* 248), ripped away in the Middle Passage.

At the center of all this, Philoctete's wound is a raw feeling *par excellence*: it is figured as a raw matter understood in terms of comparison with the more-than-human world. It swells and itches "like the tendrils of the anemone, / and the puffed blister" of a jellyfish sac; it trickles "sap" like the yams Philoctete slashes in anger in his garden (*O* 19, 21). And it requires a raw solution—both literally in that it requires an herbal cure; but it goes back to the "root" in more sense than one: a rediscovery of ties to West Africa, re-connection with both original landscapes and language.

Metafictional Fabrications and the Neocolonial Gaze

But, what, at the formal level, does the recycling of Homeric epic have to do with telling the story of Philoctete's path to healing this "raw feeling," this still-raw ancestral wound of the Middle Passage, figured in terms of a more-than-human materiality? And how does it impact the way we, as readers, understand Walcott's presentation of a materialist/animistic view of the agency, personhood and language of the more-than-human world, as critics have been so focused on doing recently? How does the rhetoric of pathetic fallacy—after all, a rhetoric designed for pity-making in the audience, through appeal, in this case, to the human *as* the more-than-human, a form of raw feeling—matter for Philoctete and the ultimately touristic gaze on his wound that opens the book's first pages?[51]

These formal questions about the recycling of the Western canon, in the guise of Homer, is a form of what Walcott claims is the inescapable fact that "the Negro" poet—*pace* certain

[51] As Lauren Berlant observes: "There is nothing clear about compassion, except that it implies a social relation between spectators and sufferers, with the emphasis on the spectator's experience of feeling compassion and its subsequent relation to material practice." Lauren Berlant, "Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding)," in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

strands of Négritude which "artificially" "attempt to force a fusion" with Africa—must re-use and repurpose not only the language of the colonizer ("the white man's words"), but also, "of course, his literature."[52] This fact returns us to Chapter One's discussion of Machado's narrators' *cento*-like re-stitching of the fabric of misogyny, which is fitting for Walcott's image of his poetry as a "broken vase" that has been put back together, leaving visible the traces of its shattering in the new reassembled whole.[53]

At first, it might seem the metafictional play with Homer is a distraction from the real matter at hand, which readers might suppose to be "authentically" or "home-grown" Caribbean literature (a fact which recalls, too, the way Walcott may diverge from the anti-assimilationist polemics of Cesaire's "plant-human" from the previous chapter). But the metafictional, Homeric frame is indelibly key from the start.[54] At the level of narrative form, the *in media res* call-out to Homer indelibly frames the book from the the first page with Philoctete: the book starts at its end, or at least near the end, after Philoctete's wound has already been healed, and the rest of the book jumps back in time from that opening frame, in order to explain how that wound was healed. But the fact that Walcott is producing a text through *cento*-izing, or restitching pieces from Homeric canon into a new "fabric," also serves to shine a light on the potential policing, in readers' minds, over what gets to count as an "authentically" St. Lucian text or not. For, if a reader wonders, "Why is Walcott using Homer to show the Caribbean?"; or, if a critic thinks it best to ignore the excessive Homeric parallels because they reveal "an insecure longing" for the

[52] Derek Walcott, "Necessity of Negritude," in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, ed. Robert D. Hamner (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), 20.
[53] Derek Walcott, "The Antilles," 69.
[54] Philoctete's narrative arc in *Omeros* is a repurposing of the character Philoctetes from *The Iliad* and Sophocles's *Philoctetes*. For the multitude of other literary allusions around the figure of the vegetation god that Walcott rolls into his allegorical recasting of Philoctetes, see Jahan Ramazani, "The Wound of Postcolonial History: Derek Walcott's Omeros," in *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 49-71.

authority of the canon,[55] or a vulnerability to the "influence" of white, Euro-American precursors,[56] then they have fallen into the quandary of racially fetishizing expectations about what counts as the "real" or "pure," "Caribbean" content of the poem.

Consider the opening poem, where Philoctete tells a group of tourists about the local fishing traditions of cutting down trees for canoes—which he casts for them, as we have seen, in terms filled with a panoply of deliberately animistic beliefs and pathetic fallacies—and then shows them his grisly scar, now healed, left by an anchor, as a token of his salt-of-the-earth way of making a living. To be sure, this is a monetary exchange—as a paid tourist-guide, Philoctete displays the scar to get "some extra silver" from them (*O* 4). In this regard, Philoctete showing his "punctured shin to paying tourists," figures "by extension, the poem's large-scale exhibition of Afro-Caribbean pain to the touristic reader."[57] So too, Philoctete's decision to liberally season his tale to the tourists with pathetic fallacies, it turns out, is not unmotivated, but rather is playing the part of the exotic tour guide displaying a bit of "local color," sold for money. Philoctete emphasizes St. Lucians' connectedness to nature, claiming the villagers believed the trees to be conscious; he goes so far as to quote for the tourists the way the villagers can hear the plants speak. As a result, the villagers saw themselves as "murderers" for cutting down the trees; the narrator had "dew" filling his eyes before he took the first blow with his axe.

But the scene of pathetic fallacy, arguably, is a curated image. Not only does it depict selling the tourists a tale that they want to hear—"authentic," "traditional" St. Lucian lifeways—but crucially, the speaker of the poem is selling it to us as readers, who blend uncomfortably into

[55] "The obsessive proliferations of Homeric comparisons might be seen as… motivated by an insecure longing to claim the founding authority of the European canon." Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 266.
[56] Helen Vendler, "Poet of Two Worlds," in *Derek Walcott: Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 25-34.
[57] Jahan Ramazani, "The Wound of Postcolonial History," 53.

the same position as the tourists, taking for granted the harmonious, posthuman view of at-homeness in animistic worldviews, represented in the poetry. From what we as readers are told in the very first stanza, we have been warned that as tourist-readers, reading the rest of the book is an ethically compromised decision (recalling the same dynamic familiar from the first page of Machado's "The Husband Stitch" in Chapter One). From the first stanza, we are told that Philoctete smiles as the tourists take pictures of him (they "try taking / his soul with their cameras") (*O* 3). In the same way that these tourists try to record and consume the "soul" of "authentic" Caribbeanness in the Black body of Philoctete, the speaker of the poem comes full circle at the book's end to remind the reader that they have done the same thing in reading the book: *Omeros*'s commemoration of the village is a "souvenir" for readers, like a "hotel brochure / with photogenic poverty," who are, like the privileged tourists depicted in the first stanza, vacationing among "ethnic" cultures—"people lovers"—with a "snapshot of Philoctete showing you his skin" (which "you," as a reader, now have too, in the form of a poem) (*O* 310-1).

In response to the touristic/readerly desire for the "real" St. Lucia, the speaker gives only fabrications. The speaker-poet responds by selling readers a "snapshot" tale of St. Lucia; but at the same time, rather than acquiesce to "the ultimate fantasy of touristic voyeurism: to see *them* exactly as they would be in the tourist's absence,"[58] the speaker restitches the "local" into a fabricated pastiche of "Homeric shadows" so as to clog up readers' access to any claim of an authentic St. Lucia (*O* 271).

In this case, this metafictional play with Homer, far from a detachable allegorical apparatus or egoistic display of artifice, or "anxiety" over "influence" of the (white, Western) canon, displays the ways in which calling for a language of landscape, or an animistic,

[58] Melas, *All the Difference,* 167. As Melas argues, rather than being superficial, the Homeric parallels are in fact "a textual effect deployed in resistance to tourism's representational economy." Ibid., 146.

personifying view of more-than-human raw matter—the sort of symbiosis that we saw Walcott actively courting in his shorter poetry in the previous section—is also wrapped up in a neocolonial and primitivizing gaze that fetishizes racialized bodies. In this way, Walcott poses the question of the racist expectations surrounding nature poetry—and the way in which any straightforward appeal his poetry as materialist, depicting the agency and personhood of the more-than-human through the pathetic fallacy, is not racially innocent, but can serve to reinscribe neocolonial expectations. To escape the gaze of the tourist-reader, desiring to see Black bodies of the Global South harmoniously in touch with the earth, Walcott uses fabrication (through metafictional forms that "re-stitch" Homer). Rather than turn to nature as a purifying retreat from the fabrications of the social, Walcott shows how turning to "nature" only ever plunges you further into the social fabrications of race and gender.

The speaker-poet even goes so far as to comment on how the metafictional apparatus both thematizes the idealization as well as the obscuring of authentic St. Lucianness. In many ways, the speaker-poet's depiction of Plunkett, the British expatriate, is a mirror to the tourist-reader. Plunkett regrets that he can't get past race and class to true camaraderie with native St. Lucians, which potentially mirrors the position of the reader-tourist visiting the inhabitants of the island between the pages of the book (*O* 55). Plunkett's "masochistic" white guilt over the history of empire, his good intentions to "help" the people of St. Lucia, while nonetheless exploiting them as patron (viz., Helen's position as a potentially sexually exploitable servant in his household) too mirrors readers' own interest in what they get out of this book (*O* 90).

For, the reader is imbricated, too, in the book's allegorization of Helen as a stand-in for the island of St. Lucia as whole—in reference to the St. Lucia's nickname, "Helen of the West," given the 200-year history of the French and British clashes for over control of it. At least three

of the major male characters in the book—the speaker-poet, Major Plunkett, and Achille—reveal the potentially sexually predatory dimensions of allegorizing the island as a woman in this way. When Plunkett, seated with his wife, voyeuristically watches Helen walk down the beach, "he felt a duty towards / her hopelessness" that was "so like her island's"; out of "pity," he decides she needed "a history" (*O* 30). Plunkett's project to write the history of St. Lucia, from its own perspective—inspired by this "pitiful" sight of Helen on the beach—not only sexually objectifies the island itself (in his mind, "her breasts were its Pitons") (*O* 31, 103); but it also reveals sexually predatory undertones of the allegorical connections between St. Lucia and Helen, when ultimately, Plunkett gets so wrapped up in his project that it leads to him to imagine Helen's serpentine bracelet tempting him to rape her ("Her housebound slavery could be your salvation") (*O* 96).

This allegorical linking of Helen-St. Lucia, rife with a voyeuristic romanticization of Black women's bodies, lies at the heart of the poet's own origin story—and thus, potentially, the origin of the book that the reader is holding. At the end of Book One, the speaker-poet tells how, as a boy, with his father, he voyeuristically watched, and romanticized, the working-class women carrying coal as looking like "ants." Like Plunkett, his father "spoke for those Helens from an earlier time" (*O* 73), and then tells the future poet-narrator that his charge as a poet is to "kneel" to his poetic "load," crafting poetic meter in the way they move their feet "in time," in "ancestral rhyme": "your own work owes them // because the couplet of those multiplying feet / made your first rhymes" (*O* 75).

In the parallelism of the poet-narrator's primal charge to become a poet of St. Lucia, with Plunkett's decision to create the history of St. Lucia (both emerge out of patronizingly feeling "pity" for working class Black women), the speaker's metafictional narration of how he decided

to become a poet, more than offering a legitimating origin story, raises the damning ethical consequences of both narrating and reading St. Lucia as potentially ineluctably paternalist and condescending.

In this regard, the speaker-poet draws multiple self-indicting comparisons between his own book and that of Plunkett's history project. He remarks on his own idealization of St. Lucian "tradition" for the sake of the aesthetic ends of poetry, sensing the obsolescence of his own poetic "craft" in tandem with the loss of "traditional" rural lifestyles, involving carpentry and fishing, in the wake of the tourist industry (both require the same patient "care," and "natural devotion," and for both their "time was gone") (*O* 227). But in preferring the look of pre-globalized village life to late capitalist commercial tourism (preferring "a shed of palm-thatch with tilted sticks / to that blue bus-stop"), the speaker-poet realizes that he wants to aestheticize poverty (wants to keep "the poor" "in the same light so that I could transfix / them in amber"); in this nostalgia, he was "attached" to these scenes "as blindly as Plunkett with his remorseful research"—and too, as blindly as the reader's desire for the "authentic" St. Lucia as well (*O* 227-8). As a source of poetic inspiration, admiring local St. Lucians working from his hotel balcony, he hypocritically "made their poverty my paradise," as by extension, we as readers have irresistibly been doing (*O* 228). Near the end of the book, the speaker-poet reveals that he, too, was watching Plunkett spy on Helen that day on the beach, and that, all along, over the course of the book, he and Plunkett were both seeking grounds to explain the beauty of Helen walking on the beach ("the Major's zeal" to sexually, allegorically idealize Helen, person and island, "was an ideal / no different from mine") (*O* 270). This potentially predatory "pitying" of Helen is not limited to the text's two authorial figures, Plunkett and the speaker-poet, but extends to the men, Hector and Achille, who fight over the flesh-and-blood Helen in the present, and allegorize her

with the island in sexually misogynistic ways as well. Achille thinks that Helen "was selling herself like the island," and like the speaker-poet, conflates Helen's "whoring" (the fact that he jealously suspects she'll leaves him for Hector), with the way the island has lost touch with its "original" values, exchanging "a simple life that would soon disappear" for neocolonial tourist industries (*O* 111). When he sees Helen later, "Achille was angrily filled / with a pity beyond his own pain" (*O* 115).

By way of conclusion, I want to return to the question of pity for Helen/St. Lucia, and the image of Philoctete selling tourists a glimpse into his raw feeling, his "puckered corolla" of a scar. It might seem that in the character of Philoctete, Walcott has reversed his earlier Dante-esque sentencing to "a circle of hell" poets who make too much out of claiming that the wounds of slavery are still raw: poets "who chafe and nurture the scars of rusted chains," and, in constantly re-opening the wound again to keep it raw, are "saints of self-torture" who make "stars" out of "pimples of pus," and becomes like "dogs" who are paid "to lick the sores of their people."[59] However, given what we have seen about Walcott's awareness, through the metafictional elements of the poem, about the rhetorics of pity-making and their affinity for voyeuristic, neocolonial gazes, Philoctete may serve just as much as a further evidence of Walcott's earlier claim as a reversal of it. Walcott uses the rhetoric of pity-making—apostrophe and prosopopoeia, as well as pathetic fallacy—not only as a poetic conceit, nor merely as a symbiosis of language and landscape, but rather to inculcate the reader in the violence that such gestures towards sympathetic identification, even erasure, of the self with or into its others involves (both human and more-than-human). More than reversal of this early concern, *Omeros* is a continuation of Walcott's long-standing concern with the idea of "selling" the pain of Black

[59] Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems: 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 269.

life as its authentic essence or "property" for audiences; and in this, arguably, Walcott's *Omeros* presages the way in which a scholar like Fred Moten worries, in the present moment, that Afropessimist paradigms of Black suffering and death are in fact "enthralled by the notion that blackness is a property that belongs to blacks" in ways that essentialize it and render it further available for consumption.[60]

This is perhaps made clearest in the poem's most explicitly metafictional moments, where the speaker-poet first introduces himself into the book in the first-person, and first invokes the title-word, "Omeros," of the book the reader is holding in their hand. The poem begins by introducing the character of Seven Seas, then allegorizing him, through the word "Omeros," as at least three things: the ocean, the physical book *Omeros* the reader is holding, and the historical figure Homer. Recalling how Philoctete emits "the rising moan // of a conch" when he rolls up his trouser-leg to show tourists his wound, the word "Omeros," in its first invocation in the book, is immediately rolled into affiliation with Philoctete's puckered corolla of wound: "O open this day with the conch's moan, Omeros, / as you did in my boyhood, when I was a noun / gently exhaled from the palate of the sunrise" (*O* 12). Notably, this stanza serves, at first glance, to confer an aura of legitimacy on the poet-speaker of this book; but it also returns us to Walcott's familiar language of landscape from the previous section: the speaker-poet gains linguistic legitimacy by attributing language to the landscape around him (his whole being becomes a "noun" that isn't in his own head, but rather that is born in the mouth, or "the palate" of a sunrise itself—also a pun on the *palette* of a sunrise).

Yet this conceit of legitimacy is effaced in the offing. The speaker explains how he learned the word "Omeros" from a Greek lover, and how afterward he came to think of it as a

[60] Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 205.

fitting word for the essence of the Caribbean. The narrator and his lover are in her room, looking at a bust of Homer that she has, which provides the purely incidental occasion for invoking the epic name of Homer. The speaker-poet then says, in an arresting line of apostrophe—which also puns on "bust" as both the marble-sculpted likeness of a head, and the fleshliness of a woman's breasts—that looking at the "cold bust, not hers, but yours," with "stone almonds for eyes, its broken nose," the speaker-poet sees the bust "turning away"; he then imagines the following hypothetical scenario, concerning the bust, to explain why it would turn away:

> But if it could read between the lines of her floor
> like a white-hot deck uncaulked by Antillean heat,
> to the shadows in its hold, its nostrils might flare
>
> at the stench from manacled ankles, the coffled feet
> scraping like leaves, and perhaps the inculpable marble
> would have turned its white seeds away, to widen
>
> the bow of its mouth at the horror under her table,
> from the lyre of her armchair draped with its white chiton,
> to do what the past always does: suffer, and stare. (*O* 15)

This is the putative primal image of Philoctete's puckered corolla-wound (as symbol for chained feet of enslaved Africans in the Middle Passage), given in the flesh (although also not, since it's an imagined vision, impossibly attributed to marble stone, that it is only a hypothetical: "*if* it [the Homer bust] could read between the lines"). But who is this startling apostrophic "you," addressed to, before the narration switches back to a third-person "it," a "you" and an "it" which can't *actually* but only *hypothetically* read between the lines here—the bust of Homer? The reader? Seven Seas? Omeros? Or even meta-reflexively, the book *Omeros* itself? We also notice, the lines aren't what are caught—aren't the thing itself to be got at—as earlier in the poem they were (the speaker-poet, upon first invocation of "Omeros" writes: "Only in you, across centuries / of the sea's parchment atlas, can I catch the noise / of the surf lines") (*O* 13). But rather, now

that the poet-speaker has imaginatively traveled back "centuries" to the Middle Passage, the lines are themselves an obstacle, like bars that must be looked through or past, standing in the way of what is actually to be seen: the enslaved human bodies of the Middle Passage. The poetic lines themselves are the obstacle that get in the way and must be looked *past* in order to see this target; and, moreover, rather than being treated as insubstantial, are treated as substantial (as floor-boards), whereas what's lurking beneath, the target vision, the human bodies, are treated as insubstantial: "shadows in its hold." Here, the "hold" is the poetic lines themselves, that conjure the imagined vision of enslaved humans in the reader's head, metaphorized as lines of her floor. At the same time that the poet-speaker's imagined vision evinces pity in the reader, they also put the reader in the position of the bust itself, which literally turns a "blind eye" to the horror, or to the poetic lines the reader peruses, which in fact become the "hold" that enslaves them.

The passage thus illustrates the rhetorical mechanics for making pity—through apostrophe ("you" Homer, but also "you" reader, and "you" the book *Omeros*), prosopopoeia (invoking the faces of the dead), and building on the pathetic fallacy (surrounding Philoctete's raw feeling, his corolla/urchin wound, and its ancestral story in these feet "scraping like leaves")—which, after eliciting pity from "you," shows "you" the ethically compromised position that leads to. This fact seems confirmed when the image of Homer's bust, and the story of how the speaker-poet first learned the word "Omeros," is returned to at the end when, after a hallucination-like vision where the bust of Homer rises from the sea and visits the speaker-poet on his hotel balcony, and leads him, Dante-like, through the underworld of people who have sinned against St. Lucia (Hector is there for being Christian); at the vision's conclusion, the bust of Homer, ironically accuses the speaker-poet of looking with eyes as blindly as the bust that had turned away from reading "between the lines" when he first learned the word "Omeros" in the

book's beginning: "You tried to render their lives as you could," but "ask yourself this question, // whether a love of poverty helped you / to use other eyes, like those of that sightless stone?" (*O* 294).

But the reader need look no further than the metaphor of Philoctete's puckered corolla, in the first pages of the epic, in order to already see this self-effacement of the book's own legitimacy of narration already at work, compacted into a single, viciously circular image. For, after all, the irony of the "puckered urchin corolla," as a metaphor, already aptly suggests this logic of self-consumption from the beginning, in the way that it signals something which is supposed to guarantee the life of the plant (the corolla surrounds the reproductive organs), that has instead transformed into the heterotrophic orifice that kills and eats a plant's tissues.

Part of my point in all of this is that, contra critics such as Ian Baucom, *Omeros* does not offer a history of the Middle Passage by representing its unchanged, "accumulating," lingering omnipresence in the "now."[61] More appropriate to Walcott's *Omeros*, against this "melancholic historic" mood of identification with the past, is what Stephen Best calls the failure to make the past present, arguing instead for forms of Black belonging that have more to do with letting go, abandonment, and other forms of non-solidarity with the past.[62] But the fabricative elements of *Omeros* also index a radical revision to our understanding of what a language of landscape—a project so many ecocritics are invested in currently—could or should look like. For, it shows that one can't just reclaim pathetic fallacy, and the myriad other ecocritical ways of reclaiming a "sympathy" for or "kinship" with the more-than-human-world, without also passing through the

[61] Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 324-5.
[62] "A sense of racial belonging rooted in the historical dispossession of slavery seems unstable ground on which to base a politics. My goal is merely to clear some space for a black politics that is not animated by a sense of collective condition or solidarity." Stephen Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 64.

neocolonial dynamics that are inevitably at play in such appeals. So too, does *Omeros* teach readers the dangers of going to look for the wrong rawness—the essence of raw feeling supposedly encapsulated in Philoctete's "puckered corolla"—which will only vanish before them, in consuming itself, leaving them with an opaque, empty O, a fabrication all the way down.

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