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TENTACULAR MODERNISMS

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Leah Faye Norris

Committee in Charge:

Professor Maurizia Boscagli, Chair

Professor Melody Jue

Professor Enda Duffy

June 2023

The dissertation of Leah Faye Norris is approved

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June 2023

DEDICATION

For Maka and Olivia
who taught me about potential and not knowing

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In Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, the explorer mutates in relation to a sequence of alien encounters. She writes that these experiences have shaped her into a great ceremonial building, "many angled, lovingly decorated, full of spaces for intense and special uses." The shape of my scholarship (and indeed, my mind) is likewise indebted to a sequence of encounters with others' ways of thinking. Melody Jue challenged me to conceive research that expresses and develops my intrinsic interests and introduced me to the areas of academia in which I feel most at home. Enda Duffy's ebullient energy and intellectual curiosity have galvanized and supported me through the last 8 years. Particular thanks go to Maurizia Boscagli, whose wit, strength, and incisive critiques have sharpened my craft and pushed me to always be purposeful in my words and actions. There are spaces in the person I have become that are dedicated to the influence of each of my mentors, and I am profoundly grateful to have matured in the company of such dedicated and fascinating humans. In an earlier era of my life, when I still might have gone in any of a number of questionable directions, Thomas Bartscherer fueled and focused my cerebral fervor. My parents Kevin and Julie Norris provided the building supplies for all of my big plans and constantly encourage me as I undergo construction. My brother Russell Norris inspires me to care and to envision. My husband Jimmie Sottile is my joy and my comfort, which have been indispensable as I lose myself in my projects over and over. Julia Stern, Roland Schwartz, and Lindsey Frazier are the interlocutors of my spirit, without whom I would not know what I mean by the things I say. Finally, my nonhuman companion Gonzo has taught me about humanness and relationality, work and play, patience and living in the moment.

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ABSTRACT

Tentacular Modernisms

by Leah Faye Norris

Tentacular Modernisms examines modernist literature and science fiction by women in the 20th century. Each of the texts in this interdisciplinary archive renegotiates the cultural divide between human subject and nonhuman object, critiquing human exceptionalism in terms of its patriarchal, capitalist, and colonialist ways of knowing and interacting with the nonhuman world. Invoking Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), I develop "tentacular thinking" into a literary praxis that identifies the often-overlooked critical insights of artistic precursors to contemporary feminist materialism. Whether these prescient authors contributed to Futurism, Surrealism, or early science fiction, they all portray nonhuman figures—tentacles, animated objects, utopian agents, and aliens—that model a transformative and reciprocal version of relationality. Their texts estrange the normative objectification of bodies that deviate from humanist expectations, challenging the cultural discourse that shapes race and gender. Science fiction writers C. L. Moore, Lilith Lorraine, Naomi Mitchison, and Pauline Hopkins and modernist writers Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy, Jean Rhys, and Leonora Carrington depict otherworldly close encounters that eschew the exploitative power dynamics associated with nonhuman contact.

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Introduction

Djuna Barnes, a central figure in the expatriate modernist art scene on the Left Bank of Paris, tells her love story with an allegory that is both viscerally and philosophically disturbing. Nora's beloved Robin has left her for another woman:

> "In the end you'll all be locked together, like the poor beasts that get their antlers mixed and are found dead that way, their heads fattened with a knowledge of each other they never wanted, having had to contemplate each other, head-on and eye to eye, until death; well, that will be you and Jenny and Robin" (*Nightwood* 107).

The three women have affected each other so profoundly as to compromise their separate identities, and Barnes depicts their entanglement via antlered beasts. This passage is from her *roman à clef, Nightwood* (1936) so the story is her own, and yet she chooses to render this most intimate anecdote in a grotesque, nonhuman fashion. Why convey her human experiences through the images of animals? How do the locked antlers render her understanding of being *in relationship*? In what ways is the monstruous knowledge of embodied realities disruptive?

The women I call "tentacular modernists" use nonhuman figures to challenge inherited narratives about humanity. Their artistic production estranges the normative objectification of nonhuman bodies. The human has historically been defined by its contrast to dehumanized others who are interpreted in racialized and gendered terms; when tentacular modernists eschew cultural imagination of the human figure, they resist the violent exclusivity of that category. Instead of categories, they inscribe an unconventional sense of relationality.

Barnes began her career as a journalist in Greenwich Village, where she personally underwent forced feeding in order to write about the treatment of suffragettes. In this article, "How It Feels To Be Forcibly Fed" (1914), she relates feeling "gripped in the tentacles of some monster devil fish," an image that compromises the boundaries dividing science (the administering doctor) from myth (monster devil), machine (the invasive tubing) from animal (fish), and the individual body from the social environment. Barnes' nonhuman figures encode political and aesthetic subversions, intervening in the discourse that shapes and polices the cultural image of the human, and the primary nonhuman figure I focus on here is the tentacle.

Tentacles

Tentacles are a modernist motif. In James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920) and Ezra Pound's World War II radio speeches (1941), tentacles signify the power of empire, stretching itself across the globe. Marianne Moore describes Mount Rainier as "An Octopus" (1924) and Virginia Woolf describes the "contamination of family life" grasping the young with "long white tentacles" (*The Years*). However, to properly explore the cultural meaning of tentacles in the early 20th century, we need to work across discourses; the tentacular is also prominently featured in science fiction, which was just emerging as a genre at this exact time. The very first issue of *Weird Tales*, from March of 1923, features a tentacle menacingly wrapped around a fearful white woman [FIG. 1]. H. P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928) and "The Dunwich Horror" (1929) constitute some of the best-known science fiction of the period and center on a horrific tentacled menace. Why do we see this profusion of tentacles in multiple types of aesthetic production from this moment in history? In the words

of Aaron Jaffe, whose 2016 introduction to *Modernism/Modernity* asserts the "serious tentacle bona fides" of the era, "A quick survey of modernism's embrace of tentacle-becoming reveals a variety of connotations: clingy, elongated, flexible feelers that don't so much touch or handle as present grasping as a hazard."

Both in modernism and science fiction (SF), tentacles point to the connections between bodies – they are limbs that reach out into the environment. We see them in 20th century literature because the experience of interconnectedness was actively changing at this time; technological advances in transportation and communication were connecting people in new ways and urbanization was pushing them into more condensed spaces. The connectivity tentacles represent is, importantly, contact between material bodies. Whereas, in Cary Wolfe's formulation, "'the human' is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether," the tentacular speaks to the physical realities that such idealism overwrites, the chaotic interactivity of matter (Wolfe xv). Being physically in a space means being surrounded by other physical bodies, external influences that penetrate our pores, that we breathe and eat. "New Weird" author China Miéville's essay on "M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire" reads tentacularity along the same lines, as "an excess of specificity, an accursed share of impossible somatic precision" (Miéville 105). Tentacles, then, connote embodied relationality that extends in many directions.

For both Miéville and Jaffe, the tentacle is expressive of the modernist period itself, an era animated by the "Weird-as-novum, unprecedented, Event" (Miéville 110). This shared sense of rupture from the past is commonplace in modernist aesthetic production and is usually interpreted as an existential threat for which "traditional bogeys were quite

inadequate" (Miéville 111). In contrast to this emphasis on the menace of difference and novelty, Donna Haraway formulates "tentacular thinking" as a productive alternative to human exceptionalism. Indeed, the tentacle's deviance from human norms is the key to its potential, which, for Haraway, is urgently needed. Humanism is a code and a mode, a set of principles and a way of interpreting the world. Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) argues that humanism's units of measurement— "bounded individuals plus contexts"— inhibit our ability to read important aspects of our embodied experiences, which testify that "critters do not precede their relatings" (*Staying* 30; 60). Bonds with other critters and the environment condition identity. Tentacular thinking is a "material semiotics," a method of interpretation capable of recognizing distributed, embodied relationships and tracing the connections from one body to the next to more appropriately acknowledge the critters that exist in "thick copresence" (*Staying* 4).

Following Haraway, I read the work of women for whom the tentacular signifies the breakdown of patriarchal power dynamics and human exceptionalism. Humanist myths of identity have always depended on contrast with the "others" who are excluded. For this reason, alien invasions that break down identity are actually a liberation for the authors I study, an opportunity to make space for bodies that are either culturally illegible or demonized outright. Their narratives explore the close connection between the objectification of the "nonhuman" and the subjectification of an idealized version of humanity. Mina Loy's posthumously published novel *Insel* (1991) unravels a painter's fantasies of perfect artistic freedom by investing the canvas with agency and inverting the muse-artist relationship (plus, contact with this artist leaves a residue described as "tentacular pulp") (*Insel* 81). C.L. Moore's "Shambleau" (1933), published in *Weird Tales*, inverts the damsel-hero relationship

with a Medusa from Venus (who has tentacles for hair). Both modernist and science fiction counter-myths refuse the culturally imposed rift between agentive and objectified bodies.

Humanism of the Enlightenment was fundamentally defined by this rift; because man is presented as an agentive body acting upon passive objects, he sees himself as rational, pure, and in control of his environment, ideals that continue to hold sway today. Djuna Barnes goes so far in the other direction that some of her work could qualify as science fiction. "Twilight of the Illicit," a poem from her *Book of Repulsive Women* (1915), is devoted to the "massive mother of illicit spawn," with "long black udders" and "great ghastly loops of gold snared in [her] ears" (*Repulsive* 19-20). Barnes' drawings for the book depict women with bizarre, animalistic features in alien settings, surrounded by extraterrestrial objects (stars and moon), plants (vines and carrot), and a mysterious face [FIG. 2 & 3]. The outline of both bodies is shaped by negative space, the active influence of heterogeneous environments. These images are echoed in the science fiction poems of James Tiptree Jr (Alice Sheldon), who also utilizes the features of animals, aliens, and objects to dabble in "repulsive" femininity. Her posthumous collection *Neat Sheets* (1996) describes "a face of stone" and a "brain like a phoenix in bondage," invents a subaltern community of "irregular hidden Shes" and envisions "minds perched on their bodies like riders" (Tiptree 14; 17; 22; 4). Barnes and Tiptree illustrate women who do not conform to human standards of "Woman," and they bear a provocative resemblance to each other.

These examples highlight themes endemic to modernism and to science fiction. At this moment in the early twentieth century, both discourses were exploring nonhuman terrain. Virginia Woolf urged the readers of her 1929 book *A Room of One's Own* to "escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each

other but in relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the trees" (*A Room* 114), and Lilith Lorraine, who sold her first novella to Hugo Gernsback's science fiction series in that very same year, argued that the "poetic temperament" instigates mutation in "the human species, the next step in evolution" ("The Story of Different" 320). These discourses interrogate the human in nonhuman terms, and they developed almost simultaneously.

The heyday of experimental modernist journals such as *Others* (1915-1919), *BLAST* (1914-1915) and *The Little Review* (1914-1922) came to a close in the early 1920's as modernism became a more established discourse, at which point the era of the science fiction magazines was just beginning. When *Weird Tales* and *Amazing Stories* published their first issues in 1923 and 1926 respectively, they coexisted with the peak of modernist cultural influence. I read the work of these SF trailblazers in the light of the modernist literary milieu into which they entered. Modernist and SF writers alike use nonhuman figures to create an embodied, relational rendering of identity that does not fit into human models. However, the SF contingent were published in a medium named for its cheapness ("pulp" magazines) and are still sequestered in genre studies while the "high modernists" attracted celebrity and scandal. Institutional and social borders have obstructed conversation between these artists. To expand the boundaries of modernist studies, I read "high art" in the context of popular culture.

Strange Aliens

Modernism's formal innovation and SF's original content are evidence of a shared preoccupation with estrangement. Both discourses hinge on their ability to warp the reader's sense of normalcy. Humanism objectifies the "massive mother of illicit spawn" to neutralize

the danger she represents; the humanist worldview abides by categories she violates just by existing. Tentacular modernism, on the other hand, animates the objectified. It does so by narratively estranging humanism.

"Cognitive estrangement" is considered a defining quality of SF. Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) argues that the unfamiliar technologies, species, or spaces in SF narratives allow readers to see the familiar from a new perspective, therefore performing political work. The modernist aesthetic is also characterized by estrangement. Referencing *Nightwood*, the critic Brian Glavey describes Barnes' "talent for estrangement" as "a kind of passive resistance. Barnes banks not on the epistemological gaze that promises to master and classify but on the power of an aesthetic vision that dazzles and stuns, driving a wedge between seeing and knowing" (Glavey 756). Barnes' dense, intricate prose resists attempts to know her work decisively, and she points to the limitations of human knowledge as it tries to fathom a complexly interrelated environment. Modernist and SF authors both distort expectations and definitions through aesthetic gestures that demonstrate the strangeness of reality.

Estrangement connotes distancing, achieving the critical awareness of an "outside" perspective, but I also interpret it as the process of moving towards the alien ("alienation" signifies the distancing effect whereas "estrangement" also signifies a kind of *alienization*). *Posthuman Bodies* (1995) begins by describing how the process of fitting selfhood neatly into "human" confines comes at the cost of "rendering unintelligible much of what matters to us" (Halberstam and Livingston vii). Accordingly, estranging humanity also means regaining access to demonized or buried aspects of self. Tentacular modernists' aesthetic distancing is especially interested in enabling new connectivity with the nonhuman. For instance, the

protagonist of Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962) trains for space-travel with a thorough program of alienation that allows her to see that human norms are fungible; as a result, she learns to think in alien languages and accepts alien grafts onto her body. She explores the feminist potential of becoming-alien, much as *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* (2018) advocates in the following century, "seiz[ing] alienation as an impetus to generate new worlds" (Cuboniks 15).

Though it alienates other norms, mainstream science fiction typically confirms the stability of the human figure by contrasting it with the alien. The pulp magazines of the 1930s were full of gruesome alien antagonists. These monsters are designed to be repulsive, and they are destined to be squashed. Today, lovable aliens are a widespread phenomenon in popular culture, a tendency that Neil Badmington coins *Alien Chic* (2004), but he hastens to caution that "Playing with aliens does not necessarily involve toying with the security of the subject" (Badmington 109). Objectification of the alien as either enemy or fetishized "other" allows the mythologization of humanist subjectivity to continue uninterrupted. However, I see tentacular modernism as indicative of a trend apart from either alien bashing or alien chic—or more precisely, a trend devoted to critiquing conventional relations with the nonhuman. In this way, tentacular modernisms represent a kind of "metafiction," much as Marleen Barr writes of post-1950's feminist SF, a genre that creates "fiction about patriarchal fiction, to unmask the fictionality of patriarchy" (Barr 8). Jane Donawerth's study of the women of science fiction notes that "in the decade in which men writing science fiction invented BEMs (Bug-Eyed Monsters), women writers showed great empathy for their imagined aliens," and the women I discuss here exhibit a particularly subversive sense of kinship with the nonhuman (Donawerth 138).

SF authors Lilith Lorraine, C.L. Moore, Pauline Hopkins and Naomi Mitchison portray alien “others” who destabilize and transform the human subject. Getting to know monsters forces recognition of the monstrous within the self. The decline of Victorian morality and rising colonial anxieties gripped the transatlantic cultures of the early 20th century, informing the way literature of all genres interpreted the alien. Much of canonical modernism exhibits a sense of nostalgia for an imagined pre-modern stability; T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922) depicts the “fragments I have shored against my ruins” and the “fear” that he sees “in a handful of dust,” a longing for and idealization of the disintegrating social structures of the past that supposedly kept alien influences in check. Djuna Barnes, along with Mina Loy, Leonora Carrington and Jean Rhys, takes a different attitude: “Destiny and history are untidy; we fear memory of that disorder. Robin did not” (*Nightwood* 126). Each of the texts I study embraces the disordering of humanity, which makes sense given that each of their authors, in different ways and to different degrees, was considered not-quite-human herself. *Tentacular Modernisms* spans from Pauline Hopkins’ early Afrofuturist utopia *Of One Blood* (1902-3) to Jean Rhys’ post-colonial classic *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). The authors resist the widespread cultural logic that dehumanizes “othered” bodies from unique but complementary points of view.

Nonhuman Objectification

Whether written as a part of experimental avant-garde movements from Futurism to Surrealism or in mass-circulation science fiction magazines, each of the included texts renegotiates the cultural divide between human subject and nonhuman object by depicting

close encounters with aliens, animals, and the physical environment. These entanglements defy the exploitative power dynamics of humanism.

Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974), written in Mexico thirty years before its publication, follows 92-year-old Marian Leatherby, whose family thinks of her as a valueless object, "a drooling sack of decomposing flesh" (Carrington 15). They institutionalize her, presuming that she will hardly notice the difference, but her experience is quite the opposite: "houses are really bodies. […] This is true of the back yard and the small room I occupied at that time, my body, the cats, the red hen all my body all part of my own sluggish bloodstream" (Carrington 17-8). Her refusal of objectification addresses its fundamental logic rather than a particular objectified demographic; even objects such as houses are not absolutely passive in the way we often imagine.

Carrington provides a powerful example of how modernism, like science fiction, intuits materialist insights. SF thinks about how tools, events, or augmented bodies condition subjectivity and the development of history, and modernism traces fluctuating, overlapping embodiments, animating objects such as houses just like characters. Contemporary theory validates this emphasis on the animacy of the physical world; Karen Barad critiques "the positioning of materiality as either a given or a mere effect of human agency" in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), affirming that "nature is neither a passive surface awaiting the mark of culture nor the end product of cultural performances" (Barad 183). Everything from scientific thought to quotidian common sense depends upon the containment of bodies within the categories of subject and object, concealing a more dynamic reality. *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) by Bruno Latour argues that this paradigm enforces the "clandestineness of the quasi-objects" with the consequence that "neither the human nor the nonhuman can be

understood” (Latour 134; 136). So, when Djuna Barnes’ poetry and drawings in *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915) blend everyday objects and women’s bodies in gestures of rebellion, a central principle organizing the historical consciousness of modernity falters.

Tentacularity shares critical investments with materialist feminism, postcolonial and posthuman theories; namely, a focus on the power dynamics associated with objectification. The structures of oppression at issue in these fields overlap significantly, and just as postcolonial theory (broadly speaking) seeks to understand and undermine colonizing influences, posthuman theory should seek to understand and undermine humanist influence. However, Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) argues that posthuman offshoots such as transhumanism extend humanist frameworks under the guise of transforming them. It is because of such controversies that Donna Haraway disavows the term posthuman though her work has contributed immeasurably to the field. The crucial distinction is whether posthumanism refers to a stage of evolution subsequent to the human species or a material reality that has been underlying the human all along. The former is problematic in a study such as this one because the figures I analyze, characters that deviate from politically arbitrated expectations of the subject, are not afforded human status in the first place.

Tentacular Modernisms could easily qualify as a pre-history of posthumanism, but I use the language of the nonhuman in an attempt to prioritize those who cannot access posthumanity by way of the human. Bruce Clarke, a theorist of literature and science, calls “nonhumanism” an “alter-ego” of posthumanism: “to recover our nonmodernity is to reconstitute an effective awareness of our own hybridity, of the actual composition of the human, be it ever so modern or postmodern, out of inexorably impure mixtures of human and

nonhuman" (Clarke 151; 143). The literature I research highlights a hybridity that precedes and underlies all of the illusions of humanist culture. These authors wrote well before the officially recognized declaration of posthuman culture in Ihab Hassan's 1977 article "Prometheus as Performer" or the wave of theories such as Clarke's that followed, but they exhibit a prescient sensitivity to the unsettling agency of the nonhuman.

Illusory or not, the idea of "humanity" wields material power; those designated nonhuman are thereby exposed to potential violence. Mel Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012) explores how the social calculation of "what or who counts as human, and what or who does not" translates to binary interpretations of agency, projecting a passive object-hood onto nonhuman bodies (Chen 30). Assertions of humanness depend on contrast and domination, just as "the subjects of the colonies posed an apt exercise for the emphatic reiteration of the relative humanity of European colonizers as compared to the animality or 'objectness' of the colonized" (Chen 49). Sylvia Wynter, whose critique of "humanness" is explicated in *On Being Human as Praxis* (2015), argues for "the conceptual 'erasing' of the figure of Man" because his humanization inherently implies dehumanization elsewhere (Wynter qtd. in Walcott 199). Since the cultural image of the human is tainted by a history in which it is deployed as a mechanism of social control, artistic production turns to nonhuman animacy to achieve critical distance from exploitative renderings of identity and forge alternatives.

Rewriting Humanity

Ursula Le Guin's article "Fantasy, Like Poetry, Speaks the Language of the Night" (1976) warns that "Those who refuse to listen to dragons are probably doomed to spend their

lives acting out the nightmares of politicians." For her, dragons are conversation partners; their nonhuman influence represents a crucial opportunity to escape the enclosure of humanity. When the hero slays the dragon, or is eaten in the attempt, his knowledge goes unchallenged, but Le Guin's version demands a thorough reevaluation of humanist ways of thinking. Replaying the story from a different vantage point opens a new set of possibilities.

Post-colonial literature has a long history of "capturing and remoulding the [oppressor's] language to new usages" as detailed in *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (Ashcroft et. al. 37). The figure of man becomes a naturalized standard through discourse, so when post-colonial literature "take[s] hold of the marginality imposed on it" and works towards models for the subject that are not contingent on exclusion, it inscribes "an entirely different and intrusive (invasive) orientation to knowledge and interpretation" (Ashcroft et. al. 77; 81). Donna Haraway's influential "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) also proposes capturing and remolding the languages of oppression. She considers how "stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities," can subvert the humanist myths by which "we have all been colonized" ("Cyborg" 175). Haraway reads as "the technology of cyborgs" SF that "embodies textually the intersection of feminist theory and colonial discourse […] a conjunction with a long history that many 'First World' feminists have tried to repress" ("Cyborg" 176; 179). For Haraway, the fiction of authors such as Octavia Butler and Joanna Russ, significant contributors to the boom of feminist SF in the 1960's and 1970's, instigates regeneration, new growth akin to the "monstrous" new limbs grown by injured salamanders ("Cyborgs" 181).

Tentacular modernists are the forerunners of these authors, "writing back" to discourses of objectification. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Rhys rewrites the early feminist classic *Jane Eyre* (1847) by imagining it as the story of the Creole madwoman locked in the attic. C.L. Moore's "Shambleau" upends the story of the heroic space explorer and his exoticized alien sex object. Though clearly engaged in gendered power dynamics, these texts were not in sync with the prominent feminisms of their own time. Mary Russo writes that feminist theory of the early twentieth century labored to establish itself as a domain for legitimate, "normal women" with "mainstream" aims, an intentional "cultural and political disarticulation of feminism from the strange, the risky, the minoritarian, the excessive, the outlawed, and the alien" (Russo 12; vii). Russo theorizes *The Female Grotesque* (1994) in response to this early feminist enforcement of normativity; the grotesque is at once an aesthetic and a subversive relation to power. By highlighting and even celebrating figures whose contrast from expectation creates friction, literature carves out narrative space for redacted bodies.

During an era in which mainstream feminism was demanding that women be recognized as human, tentacular modernists reject recognition by relaying their visions of selfhood in nonhuman terms. They lived in a moment between Mary Wollstonecraft's indictment that patriarchy "consider[s] females rather as women than human creatures" (Wollstonecraft 7) and Simone de Beauvoir's biting observation that "every time [a woman] behaves like a human being, she is declared to be identifying with the male" (de Beauvoir 482). Yet the authors I analyze are remarkably dismissive of human blueprints in their design of powerful feminine figures, including an alien anthropologist, a mad immigrant, a queer enigma, and an actress transplanted into a metal body. If, as de Beauvoir says, "One is not

born, but rather becomes, woman" (de Beauvoir 330), then these characters confront what happens when one continues "becoming" past the edge of "woman." This archive presents feminine beings dissociated from normative female bodies, women who are not Women. Their adaptations of identity are radically inclusive of not only women, but all deviants shut out by humanist tradition to whom feminism's responsibilities must extend – in the words of *Posthuman Bodies*' Paula Rabinowitz – "I am not arguing for making women human. Who needs it?" (Rabinowitz 97).

Tentacular thinking does the opposite of making women human; it employs nonhuman animacy as a challenge to myths of human identity. Humanism's dependence on objectification makes the animacy of the nonhuman world appear startling and grotesque; each of the nonhuman figures I analyze presents as a horror story from certain perspectives. After all, entire worldviews might be called into question when the line dividing animate and inanimate is compromised, alienating human norms and promoting nonhuman kinships.

Utopia and Unknowing

My work bridges gaps between 20th century literature and contemporary theory, modernism and science fiction, to offer a provocative history of the way we imagine the path forward. The embodied relationality of *Tentacular Modernisms* rewrites humanist myths—imagining such a revolutionary change of perspective smacks of utopia, a glimmer of something meaningfully different in a world where difference is incessantly coopted. Utopian solutions usually end up as dystopias, but Pauline Hopkins' Afrofuturism employs utopian thinking not to fix problems but to recontextualize cultural attitudes towards the future. As Martin Luther King Jr. writes in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963), "human progress

never rolls in on wheels of inevitability" (King 81). A glimpse of utopia, where history has ended, makes the contingency of ongoing histories palpable. Hopkins challenges colonial myths of "progress" to make new futures possible rather than actually depicting the future.

This version of futurity requires an acceptance of not knowing that resists the Enlightenment compulsion to know everything. The way Jean Rhys' protagonist is *known* by the colonizing authorities in her social environment is a cage; it is in her moments of forgetting, reveries alongside nonhuman kin, that she is able to become "something else" (Rhys 16). Like Hopkins', Rhys's novel works against established knowledge to preserve space for potential, and Naomi Mitchison's protagonist makes a craft of unknowing. She becomes so absorbed in alien cultures that she forgets her own name, adapting dramatically to each in a sequence of unprecedented encounters. The power dynamics of humanist knowledge are such that we can only know the alien on exploitative terms, so engaging alien futures depends on unlearning expectations.

What to Expect

Tentacular Modernisms rewrites humanist models of relationship. The problem with these models is that they rely on objectification, which is deeply engrained in cultural modes of interpretation and perhaps even language itself. To resist objectification, the following authors alienate human norms and imagine becoming-alien.

In chapter one, tentacular modernists across genres rewrite humanist myths. I trace the connections between a quasi-Futurist poet's long-forgotten, only novel and two stories by one of the first women to publish in the pulp magazines. Mina Loy and C.L. Moore both use the *tentacle* as a figure of connectivity. They write modernist counter-myths that refuse the

culturally imposed rift between agentive and objectified bodies, featuring inter-dependence between parties that compromises Western individualism.

The nonhuman figure of chapter two is the *animate object*, which I explore through art and literature about the influence of material objects and the subjectivity of women treated like objects. This chapter focuses on modernist figures that trouble the line between animate and inanimate. Djuna Barnes and Leonora Carrington's protagonists and their artistry itself, the logic of their worldmaking, refuse objectification.

The third chapter considers *utopian agents* who disrupt social order. Their alien perspectives estrange cultural images of futurity. Established expectations of "progress" perpetuate the power dynamics of the past, so Lilith Lorraine and Pauline Hopkins's SF narrates moments of profound interruption to make new futures possible. Lorraine writes about visitors from radically unfamiliar planets who intervene in everyday life. Hopkins' novel intervenes in world history with the discovery of a futuristic Ethiopian city, a revelation that changes social conditions in the present. Utopian agents, with their emphasis on the process of transformation rather than a particular endpoint, account for the animacy of material reality in a way that a fully fleshed-out utopian program cannot.

Finally, chapter four looks at the figure of the *alien*. SF author Naomi Mitchison writes about the experience of encountering aliens, and post-colonial author Jean Rhys writes about the experience of being encountered as an alien. They develop an epistemics of contact that depends on cultivating the ability to not know, which constitutes a dramatic disruption of humanist knowledge production.

Tentacular Modernisms' most structural act of tentacular thinking is to make kin of science fiction and modernist literature. Amidst their rapport, I track depictions of nonhuman

connections. This transatlantic constellation of subversive women rewrite relationality, upending the power dynamics implicated in language, knowledge, our understandings of ourselves and our visions of the future.

Chapter 1

Tentacles in the 20th Century: Mina Loy & C.L. Moore

““Don’t shove me into your damn pigeonhole, where I don’t fit, because I’m all over. My tentacles are coming out of the pigeonhole in all directions.”

- Ursula K Le Guin, “The Art of Fiction”

The tentacle is an organ of connectivity that moves in unexpected ways, squirming and wriggling in a society built for vertebrates. Mina Loy’s poem “Human Cylinders” (1917) describes “automatons” that send forth two nonhuman appendages: “One little whining beast / Whose longing / Is to slink back to antediluvian burrow / And one elastic tentacle of intuition / To quiver among the stars” (*Lost* 41). Tethered to the past and to strange and uncharted possibility, the human cylinders explore how they are situated and connected to each other as they lean “brow to brow” (*Lost* 40). By its contrast to “antediluvian,” the tentacle appears to reach out towards the future, and this future is found in the company of extraterrestrial bodies, quivering alongside them.

Tentacles also connect unlike beings in C.L. Moore’s “Shambleau” (1933). The Shambleau is a species from Venus, introduced as the original source of the Medusa myth. Her tentacular hair latches onto her human companion and their bodies merge. Loy and Moore would likely not have seen each other as colleagues; their politics, genres and cultural positions divided them. However, both employ a materialist poetics that emerges out of necessity from humanism’s failure to adequately address the profound interactivity of embodiment. These women interpret the physical world as an active contributor to even humanity’s most ethereal designs, and they figure the inherent connectivity of material embeddedness through the tentacle.

Cultural production of the twentieth century employs the tentacle to tell dramatically different stories. Theosophist Jacques Demarquette considered the Futurist movement to be a cure for "the evils of the artificial civilization of the 'villes tentaculaires' (tentacular cities)" (Sica 67).[1] The "tentacular city" of Rosa Rosà's[2] work, on the other hand, is saturated by the "multiple and dynamic forces of modern places" that fuel her version of social renewal (Sica 196).[3] Tentacular imagery has been utilized to embody opposite perspectives on the modernist experience, the horrifying or empowering interconnectivity that became increasingly omnipresent as the century progressed and continues to escalate today.

A rash of political cartoons depicting social institutions as tentacled monsters appeared at the turn of the century. "The Curse of California," published in an 1882 issue of *The Wasp*, illustrates the railroad monopoly choking the life out of farmers, miners, fruit growers and more [FIG. 4], and "An English Country Seat", published in a 1901 issue of *Puck*, illustrates corruption in New York politics [FIG. 5]. "The Devilfish in Egyptian Waters," published in an 1888 issue of *Punch*, critiques British Imperialism [FIG. 6]. In these images, which are just a few of many oppressive octopuses to be found in transatlantic media of this time period, being connected means being the agent or object of absolute control.

The disturbing aspect of tentacles, the reason the referents in these political cartoons are supposed to be alarming, is the flexibility and breadth of their reach. These images center

[1] The phrase "tentacular cities" refers to Émile Verhaeren's volume of Symbolist poetry by that name: *Les villes tentaculaires (The Tentacular Cities),* published in 1895. "Verhaeren's vision casts modernity as irresistible tentacles that wrap, grip, and feed, draining the country to the industrial city's insatiable swell" (Silverman).
[2] Edyth von Haynau was an Austrian author and artist who, like Mina Loy, was introduced to Futurism by Marinetti, at which time she changed her name to Rosa Rosà and began publishing in *L'Futurista.* She was one of only a few artists engaging Futurist and feminist ideas together (Re and Siracusa).
[3] "The tentacles of an octopus – an image that will return in Rosà's works to represent the multiple and changeable forces giving life to modern cities and reviving their depersonalized inhabitants" (Sica 187).

the recognizable faces[4] of politicians or political symbols whose influence seems unnaturally extended, human power dynamics that stretch beyond human boundaries. "Devilfish" even places greedy human hands at the end of each tentacle, grabbing at ever-more territory. These images signify the vastness of social forces that threaten to infiltrate everything, framing connectivity as fundamentally invasive.

Tentacular Modernisms follows a separate trend, a constellation of women whose aesthetic production is devoted to critiquing this exploitative version of connection. They too use tentacles to figure connectivity, but in their work, tentacles are conduits between bodies, redistributing agency and undermining boundaries. Influence flows in all directions, unconstrained by bones or patriarchal narratives. Interestingly, this model is actually closer to how real, biological tentacles work. Sy Montgomery's 2015 book "The Soul of an Octopus" describes a nonhuman version of distributed cognition: "Each arm seemed like a separate creature, with a mind of its own. In fact, this is almost literally true. Three fifths of octopuses' neurons are not in the brain but in the arms. If an arm is severed from an octopus's body, the arm will often carry on as if nothing has happened for several hours." Cephalopod cognition is distributed amongst its limbs. Tentacles are not the passive tools of a unilaterally controlling mind, but rather sensory synthesizers; their intelligence is far more alien than the all-too-human expressions of power represented in that series of political cartoons.

Tentacular modernists create narrative space for material realities that distort human ways of relating. Instead of a recognizable face with impossible power, they represent an

[4] The faces in "Curse" are Mark Hopkins and Leland Stanford, Southern Pacific Railway magnates; the face in "English" is Richard "Boss" Croker, a leader of Tammany Hall; the face in "Devilfish" is John Bull, a cartoon personification of the United Kingdom.

alien version of connectivity. C.L. Moore and Mina Loy rewrite the myths that shape cultural expectations of what a relationship is and how it works. Moore's stories for early SF pulp magazines upend the relationship between hero and damsel, between a scientist and the object of his study. Loy's modernist novel upends the relationship between artist and muse. Their renderings of connection break down the power dynamics of each dyad.

Moore and Loy contribute to different discourses, but modernism and science fiction are both deeply invested in subverting the same conventions. In fact, the established boundaries between these fields rely on many of the classist, patriarchal conventions that the fields themselves challenge. Genres such as SF, intended for mass distribution, have long been read as separate, inferior, and feminine in comparison to the work of people dubbed high modernists, such as Mina Loy; Ursula Le Guin even considers anti-SF bias a species of misogyny (Le Guin 4). Maria DiBattista claims that high and low modernists were not necessarily writing for different audiences, though they would have been read with different expectations (DiBattista 5). Despite the way high modernism set itself against mass culture, Alex Goody points out that "the mass-market is inextricable from the avant-garde," citing "the reliance of the avant-garde on a knowingness about mass-cultural forms and trends which, in turn, inform their own positions and activities" (Goody 92). Through their emphasis on contrasting mass cultural forms, the elite literary crowd is bound to *Amazing Stories* (the first magazine to exclusively publish SF), cheesy rocket ships and all.

The same cultural milieu produced the artists of modernism and SF, which is evident in the synchronicities that emerge throughout *Tentacular Modernisms* – shared investments (feminism, power, relationality), modes (materialist poetics), and motifs (tentacles!). I read them in tandem to experiment with alternatives to the aesthetic categorizations that have

informed modernist scholarship. Neatly dividing 20th century artforms obscures connections between them; I focus on a connection between their ideas about connectivity. This project is an encounter between modernist literature and SF, both of which are themselves characterized by encounters with difference.

Modernism, Science Fiction, and Humanism

An apartment building on the rue St. –Romain in interwar Paris was home to both Djuna Barnes and the modernist poet and painter Mina Loy, who had moved there in desperation for the psychological refuge of a likeminded artist. There, Loy and her youngest daughter helped hand-color 50 copies of Barnes' *Ladies Almanack* (1928), relinking their aesthetics over a decade after the two women had been published in New York's *Trend* magazine as exemplars of the budding modern art scene (Burke 177). Robert McAlmon, whose *Contact* magazine chronicled the American chapter of Loy's career, records the artists' correspondence in his *roman à clef* of Village literary life, *Post-Adolescence*: "We'll have to form a union of women to show the men up," says Gusta (Loy) to Beryl (Barnes), "and make ourselves exhibits A and B" (Burke 295). Shortly before their cohabitation in Paris, Loy and Barnes' writings appeared in a particularly pivotal issue of *The Little Review*. The modernist art scene was embroiled in scandal and sought to defend itself from accusations of obscenity,[5] which to some called for a consolidation of the aesthetic, but Loy was particularly strident in providing "counterweights to the demand for facsimiles and

[5] In 1921 James Joyce's *Ulysses* was accused in court of being "so obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, indecent and disgusting" that it could no longer be distributed (Burke 288). The issue of *The Little Review* released between the hearing (which Loy attended) and the trial suddenly assumed new weight, becoming "a defense of Art" writ large (Burke 289).

stereotypes” (Burke 289; 214). She could be counted upon to resist the constraints of even the most radical schools of artistic thought.

Benjamin Ware wrote in 2017 that modernism maintains its political impact because “the world which it hints at – a world beyond exploitative labour and instrumental rationality – does not yet exist. This truth is both our tragedy and our starting point” (Ware 5-6). Modernism is characterized by flashes of utopian insight and was initially received with a sense of shock, reflecting a period of history in which, in Theodor Adorno's words, “Life has transformed itself into a timeless succession of shocks” (Adorno). Normalcy felt irrevocably disrupted by wars and metropolitan crowds, and each artist would have had their own perspective on which norms should be mourned, reconstituted, or abandoned.

Modernism is replete with depictions of fractured, essence-less subjects who are torn from pre-modern tradition and deeply disoriented. T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915), for example, sees the world in snatches of fitful observation and sees the passing women as disembodied eyes and arms. *Tentacular Modernisms* likewise explores the subjective experience of “fractured” modern subjects but moves past their failure to cohere and into the dynamism of incoherence. Mina Loy sardonically discards the idea of an un-fractured past while most of her contemporaries persist in mourning it. Where they perceive lack and breakage, she perceives fruitful, overlapping patterns, and a proliferation of nonhuman entanglements. From the perspective of her oeuvre, the idea of modern life as a waste land is in fact woefully conservative, a failure to embrace reconstructed meaning as meaningful.

The reconstruction of cultural meaning is a central area of overlap between modernism and SF. Both consider the way social and material environments condition

subjectivity, whether the context is World War I or a war between planets. They track how those conditions evolve, utilizing the turn of the century as a milestone and a stimulus to peer into the future. They question the assumptions of the present to foster new ideas; while SF authors explicitly defamiliarize human norms by imagining everything from invasive technologies to inter-species mergers, their modernist sisters warp the human image through stylistic innovation, distorting language and narrative structure beyond recognition. In other words, these are both discourses of estrangement.

Two decades after Darko Suvin famously named SF the literature of "cognitive estrangement," Carl Freeman revised his formulation to emphasize the principle of dialectic (Freeman 16). Freedman calls SF the paradigmatic genre for dialectical thinking and critical theory because of its sensitivity to actions and reactions, causes with unpredictable but transformative effects. Events reshape culture and culture directs events. Gerald Miller's *Exploring the Limits of the Human through Science Fiction* (2012) argues that the genre does more than reflect theory, "it enacts theory by both critically engaging existing theoretical ventures and creating emergent theoretical concepts" (Miller 3). Bringing abstract principles to life through narrative allows SF authors to work through their details; for instance, Sarah LeFanu reads Zoë Fairbairns' 1979 novel "Benefits" to not only explicate but also critically engage the Wages for Housework movement (LeFanu 73). For similar reasons, the science fiction critics Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon argue that this genre is often ahead of its critics' sociopolitical and ethical explorations (Hollinger & Gordon 2). I hope to substantiate this claim by tying early 20th century literature to theory up to 100 years in its future, framing the monstrous machinations of C. L. Moore as insurrections against patriarchal conditioning.

In spite of their mutual interests, feminist theory and feminist science fiction have a complicated history. Marleen Barr writes that "feminist theory (when it does not ignore feminist SF) very often views feminist SF as an unknown, terrifying, monstrous space and considers it to be mad, improper, unclear" (Barr xvii). Barr published *Feminist Fabulation* in 1992, two decades after the sub-genre of feminist SF was widely recognized in the 1970s, and though the climate has since improved, it was all the more contentious when C.L. Moore was publishing in the pulp magazines. Criticism saw in the sometimes grotesque nature of Moore's fiction "a woman writer alienated from herself" (Rosinsky qtd. in Bredehoft 370), with her alien functioning as a version of woman "seen darkly through the glass of misogyny" (Gubar 18). However, Moore has been cited as an influence by people who later became giants of feminist SF such as Octavia Butler, James Tiptree Jr. and Ursula Le Guin, suggesting that her experimentation was unrecognizable because it was ahead of its time (Bredehoft 369). Rather than a violation of some pristine concept of womanhood, I see in the Shambleau a violation of the restrictive boundaries designating socially authorized representations of femininity.

Such cultural violations are, in science fiction, very often directed at specific boundaries designating the subject, evoking anxiety and the promise of transformation. Technologies augment human capacities, monsters invade human bodies, and alien thoughts rupture human frameworks, staging humanism itself as a fragile ideology and a flawed one. Science fiction takes up the twentieth century's scientific and technological innovation as a myth system. If science at this time can be thought to "enchant the world" (Gomel 13), SF is a genre that explores the resultant mystifications and the weaving of new enchantments. Doing so with a prescient feminist sensibility means undermining the modernist myths that

reaffirm preexisting models of the subject. Feminist posthumanists Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti caution against science fiction that portrays “modern progress or technology as salvation from bodily vulnerabilities” because it implies that there is some “bounded, cerebral” self that could be scooped out of its context but retain its shape, disregarding subjectivity’s material and cultural construction (Åsberg & Braidotti 7). It is entirely possible to compose SF encounters that reify norms, or to experiment wildly with style and language without upending a narrative’s power dynamics. All too often, the humanist hero of any discourse subdues the monsters he meets, exploits as he explores.

To introduce the Enlightenment man, upon whom so much of contemporary subjectivity is still based, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno describe an explorer acting univocally upon everything he encounters:

> the hero of the adventures turns out to be the prototype of the bourgeois individual, whose concept originates in the unwavering self-assertion of which the protagonist driven to wander the earth is the primeval model […] the adventures bestow names on each of these places, and the names give rise to a rational overview of space. (Horkheimer & Adorno 35-38)

The hero’s rationality functions as a self-contained system, and the names he bestows never adequately describe the actual embodiment of each object. Tentacular modernisms are distinguished by a gendered investment in upending these power dynamics. They use language and art to pick apart humanist ideals, to expose the physical realities that do not correspond to the way they have been named.

This is the approach to language that I consider a materialist poetics, the privileged literary mode of tentacular modernists. In a way, they use language against itself. Words are

inherently representational and can never adequately capture reality; as Ferdinand de Saussure establishes in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), the link between signifiers and referents is arbitrary, determined by convention (de Saussure 854). However, the way we treat it still makes a difference, as people who "see nothing more than a name-giving system in language" are limited to a superficial knowledge of its potential (de Saussure 851). Engaging language as though it actually names or even controls the referent affirms the ego of the namer and crystallizes the name such that it is insensible to change. Materialist poetics engage language to destabilize belief in names. This approach has its own intellectual tradition, the legacy of Baruch Spinoza and Friedrich Nietzsche, taken up by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as many of the feminist materialist philosophers discussed already, and instead of the progressive naming of ever-more territory, it imagines cycles of naming, un-naming, and renaming that continually renew language's connection to embodied existence. I see this as the linguistic dimension of the estrangement that modernism and science fiction share, the methodology that ties their experimentations together and that also associates these twentieth century artists with the materialist theorists of today.

Particularly in his creative ventures, the Enlightenment man seeks to define his own essence. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (2017) describes attempts "to build a fortress of (human) self only to have its impossibility thrust upon us by the sheer ecological contingency of our existence as a species" (Clarke & Rossini 147). We build and invent and name to extend ourselves, but always others extend into us as well. Interpenetration is a fact of physical reality, as Donna Haraway writes in the *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003): "Earth's beings are prehensile, opportunistic, ready to yoke unlikely partners into something new, something symbiogenetic. Co-constitutive companion

species and co-evolution are the rule, not the exception […] There is no time or place at which genetics ends and environment begins" ("Companion" 32). Haraway gives the example of human gut tissue, which "cannot develop normally without colonization by its bacterial flora" (ibid.). This is the basis for her later claims that "storying cannot any longer be put into the box of human exceptionalism" if it is to do its job effectively (*Staying* 39). Haraway moves from observing biology to setting terms for language use, acknowledging how "storying" conventionally overwrites the nonhuman basis of its own conception by emphasizing humanity's autonomy at the expense of its connectivity.

What all of the texts I study have in common is that they estrange the objectification so fundamental to the way an individualistic culture understands interaction: a subject acting upon an inert object. The women who author this archive challenge cultural expectations of what an encounter entails, asking how contact with someone or something alien might "decenter the human by terminally disrupting the scripts of humanism," as Bruce Clarke writes of posthumanism (Clarke & Rossini 141). Where others see alien invasions, they see the potential for change. C.L. Moore's short stories are a direct confrontation of the humanist hero – the Shambleau unravels the space adventurer's expectations and then his bodily integrity, and "No Woman Born" (1944) confronts a scientist with the agency of something he sees as his invention. In a parallel motion, Mina Loy's *Insel* (1991) unravels the delusions of grandeur of an artist "too surrealistic for the surrealists" (*Insel* 104). These men are, in their own eyes, the protagonists of their stories; the character development in each case presents them as somewhat oblivious to the way the narratives recenter on feminized objects that gradually reveal their own power.

Modern man sees himself as self-made and establishes his identity through his capacity for control over the objects he reductively names. Studying the cultural myth called "autopoiesis," in which masculinity is narrated as man "literally produc[ing] himself" from nothing, the literary theorist Susan Buck-Morss describes the pervasive "fantasy that one can (re)create the world according to plan (a degree of control impossible, for example, in the creation of a living, breathing child)" (Buck-Morss 7-8). The texts I study subvert such mythos with tentacles that speak to an unconventional mode of connection, which registers as either the horror of inhuman otherness or the liberation of incredible mobility – perhaps both. The tentacular redefines the relation between the body and its environment as one of flexible, mutual influence navigated by an "active but not sovereign protagonist" (Barr 185); an augmentation of self that violates expected boundaries; autonomously moving components of a larger, distributed organism; suction that connects the organism to its material context. Tentacles' political implications hinge on whether their way of pulling components together is perceived as an act of mastery over those components or as the initiation of intimate relations amongst the heterogeneous, and here they are decidedly the latter.

The alien encounters I analyze dislodge the expectations about subjects and objects that reenforce individualism to the detriment of genuine interactivity. The authors narrate relationships amongst bodies and minds, as well as aliens, animals, and objects, with unusual sensitivity to the patterns of power distribution and the multidirectional flow of influence, reformulating the way the human connects to the world. Their characters are adjacent to but not quite human, and they gain something by casting off the shroud of humanity, inhabiting deviance as a perverse form of social power. Loy and Moore were iconoclastic feminists

inventing subversive ways of narrating subjectivity, each one avant-garde and speculative in her own right.

Artistic Freedom: Mina Loy

For the creative mind to achieve perfect freedom, it requires a blank object to reflect its projections. The canvas exists, we assume, to passively depict the artist's vision. But what if the canvas is textured and the painting takes on its contours? And what if the object has its own story to tell? Donna Haraway portrays innovative artistry that embraces the canvas' contributions, a collaboration between agents and material conditions. Instead of asking what can be made from pure imagination, she asks "how to live in the ruins that [are] still inhabited, with ghosts and with the living too" (*Staying* 138).

Materialist poetics challenge the expectation that artistry, or creation more generally, is an act of autopoiesis. Mina Loy's *Insel* (1991) brings the autopoetic myth to fruition in a uniquely modern way, via rambling hallucinations through the streets of Paris. *Insel* was published posthumously but it is presumed to have been written in the thirties. The eponymous character evolves beyond dependence on his body and into a purely abstracted realm in which he "had no longer need of larynxes to converse," a place where his "brain is a more exquisite manure" for growth than a womb (*Insel* 86). Through Insel, Loy evaluates the aesthetics and aspirations of her peers.

Artistic freedom, when framed as internal life imposed on the external, is a damaging delusion. Creativity is usually attributed to solitary genius, but even the most visionary individual's mind is produced and permeated by the social and material environment. To someone seeking purity, being situated could be seen as restricting. However, Mina Loy's

sense of artistry concerns itself with engaging limits, not escaping them. In this, she is not alone: “Every artist knows how far from any feeling of letting himself go his ‘most natural’ state is—the free ordering, placing, disposing, giving form in the moment of ‘inspiration’—and how strictly and subtly he obeys a thousandfold laws precisely then” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 100).

Mina Loy depicts one creator who tries to ignore reality (Insel), to shut it out in a frenzy of pure invention, and another (Mrs. Jones) who accepts reality into her creative process. Mrs. Jones takes a much more dynamic, adaptive approach, accepting the freedom to collaborate and to change her mind. While Insel is seeking “life without world,” Mrs. Jones chooses world (*Insel* 55). She refers often to her “everyday self,” which counsels her to move on without Insel despite the beautiful things he has shown her. Often her everyday self seems to be an inner voice that counterbalances her “astral inclination” – “‘How tedious,’ my everyday self recoiled, the lovely essence evaporating” (*Insel* 38; 50). Christina Brizolakis uses the terminology of “the everyday” to refer to an aesthetic category of experience that “escapes registration and eludes historical categorization” (Britzolakis 122). Precisely because they are taken for granted, shifting everyday realities function as a “utopian remainder – ‘what is left over’ in social organization,” and is open “to randomness, chance and surprise” (Britzolakis 124). Britzolakis writes about the everyday as an “ambiguously creative-destructive energy,” the chaotic process of life’s embodied unfolding in defiance of idealized reductions. Modernist literature renders the everyday newly legible through experimental forms of narration that “capture the fluid shifts of subjective perception” (Britzolakis 122). Loy’s modernism not only captures those shifts, it also shows how much is lost by ignoring them.

Mina Loy was a British poet who reached peak prominence after her arrival in New York in 1916. She traveled in the most influential artistic circles of her generation as a highly informed skeptic, an outsider in insider's clothing. Robert Conover, one of Loy's greatest champions in the academe, emphasizes her persistent fringe status: "One of the longest-surviving members of a pivotal generation of American poets, she was claimed by the Dadaists, Futurists, Imagists, Post-Decadents, Spectricists, Surrealists, and Vorticists. But she belonged to none of them" (Conover 117). She provides insight into each of these movements' ideals while seeming to see beyond them. Her artistry is unmistakably inflected by her peers, especially the Futurists and Surrealists, but her perspective differs meaningfully, as is apparent in her 1930 painting "Surreal Scene" [FIG 7]. The main figure's face is done in the style of Salvador Dali and portrays a woman's body being objectified as a canvas for art. The disembodied arms can be interpreted as a commentary on the fragmented women in Eliot's "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock," the "arms that are braceleted and white and bare" (Eliot). Loy is defying modernist art's gender politics with her own Surreal vision. Despite her distinctive point of view, she was all but forgotten for decades. Loy was neglected on canonical lists until the 1990s, at which point she was dubbed "the 'missing modernist,' the hidden link in the tradition of Modernist/Feminist poetics" (*Woman and Poet* 248).

Loy's poems created a dramatic sensation. Her 1915 publication in *Others* magazine in particular made her an extremely scandalous social figure, and the following year the *New York Evening Sun* described her as "the archetypal Modern Woman" (Burke 196). An early critic referred to Loy's poems as "the only 'science fiction' poems in the language" because of their "organic" expression of "the dynamics of the machine" (*Woman and Poet* 531). This

comment reflects the influence of Italian Futurism on Loy's work. She was drawn into Futurist discourse by a romantic affair with the founder of the movement, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, but she challenged its virile, aggressive, masculine image of the civilization to come. Marinetti imagined soldiers achieving immortality through technology, bodies becoming perfect machines. *Motociclista – Solido in Velocità* (*Biker, Solidified in Speed*) is a 1923 painting by the Futurist Fortunato Depero [FIG. 8]. The right angles and color scheme suggest that the body itself has become mechanical and impenetrable, and though the bottom right corner of Loy's painting replicates some of Depero's themes (the vehicles, the distorted human figures), it reverses their significance. For Loy, the woman's body is hybrid, clearly organic and also reshaped by technological and animalistic appendages. Depero reinforces humanity with metal while Loy chops it apart and puts it back together (and is that a tentacle on her dress?).

The bicycle woman from "Surreal Scene" is a perfect exemplar of Donna Haraway's theory of the cyborg, a precursor to tentacular thinking. The hugely influential "Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985) describes an anti-essentialist model of identity that crosses boundaries between the human, animal, and technological, an identity that manifests in the tools that extend the cyborg's capabilities and the kinships that proliferate in her environment. Alex Goody's *Modernist Articulations* (2007) recounts how the bicycle became a paradigmatic feminist technology in the early twentieth century with the "the visibility of the New Woman cyclist, in her divided skirt […] who was imagined and represented within ongoing discourses about women's independence, their sexuality and their relationship to technology" (Goody 110-1). This tool offered women a higher level of bodily independence, but for this very reason, it "challenges the traditional role of women in an androcentric (heterosexual,

reproductive) sexual economy" (Goody 110-1). Bicycles were therefore a charged subject matter in the cultural imagination, objects that colluded with women against objectification.

This connotation is entirely contrary to the Futurist utilization of mechanical imagery, which is meant to wipe out all of the vulnerabilities or contingencies of the masculine body. As modernist critic Maurizia Boscagli writes, the Futurists "disavow any dependence of the mechanical male body on the material conditions of its production," producing narratives that "replace, attack or elide childbirth and the laboring classes" (Boscagli 134). Loy satirizes "the flabbergast movement" in her poem "Lions' Jaws" (*The Lost Lunar Baedeker* 46). In this piece, "impotent neurotics" greet the arrival of a "manifesto / notifying women's wombs / of Man's agamogenesis" (*The Lost Lunar Baedeker* 47). The reference to asexual reproduction evokes the Futurists' idealization of total autonomy and their especial resentment of dependence upon women. The characteristic Futurist subject collides with matter in a sort of sublime transcendence but does not accept that he is constrained by matter. As the name implies, the Futurists saw the next chapter of humanity in their movement, but the striking parallel between Loy and Haraway's renderings of feminist identity suggests that an outsider's informed skepticism was more forward-thinking. Loy rejected the Victorian femininity with which she grew up, but she was also critical of the modernisms that sought to replace that identity category with Surrealist muses or Futurist machines.

Insel, Loy's only novel, satirizes contemporaneous modernist representations of human identity. She critiques society's status quo, which many have read as a response to her mother's rigid Victorian values, but she also critiques her peers' *reactions* to the status quo. The novel is a fictionalization of Loy's strange relationship with the German painter Richard Oelze, whom she briefly supported through poverty and drug addiction (Hayden xiv). Insel is

Oelze's proxy, and Mrs. Jones narrates her experience of being magnetically attracted to and altered by his visionary glow, a "secretive twinkle [that] had seeped into my eyes and lingered there," before deliberately detaching from him, "taking his fingers carefully apart, lifting their tentacular pulp from my wrist" (*Insel* 114; 81). The tentacular pulp creates a palpable change in Mrs. Jones that remains even after Insel is gone. Because she is so impacted by the "wasted pollen drifting off from the nuclear flower of his identity," she experiences "the "dislocation of my identity," encounters during which "my confines broke down. I lost contour," and afterwards she finds that these events "had set their mark upon me" (*Insel* 45; 114). Her artistry is born of interactivity, a creative vision born of hybridity so profound that is shakes her to the core, but Insel will never allow himself to be thus affected.

The narrative frames this relationship as the encounter of artist and muse. It pointedly echoes the 1928 novel *Nadja* by Andre Breton, in which a woman described as "mysterious" and "purely poetic" serves passively as an artist's inspiration until he abandons her to an insane asylum (Breton 64; 70). Nadja is the enabling canvas; she is helpless before the narrator's "faculty for making her think and do whatever [he] desire[s]," because of which "she is at [his] mercy" (Breton 79; 91). Just like Breton's artist, the character Insel from Loy's novel appropriates a feminine object as his canvas, except this time, she is the narrator and an artist in her own right. Mrs. Jones often points out Insel's tremendous dependence on her: "Perhaps in that moment before the door opened he recreated himself out of a nothingness into which he must relapse when being alone his magnetism had no one to contact" (*Insel* 31). These moments provide damning insight into the conditions of Insel's artistry. His attempts to disregard the material world actually render him incredibly needy. This is exactly why Insel's ultimate dream is to transcend canvases, and bodies altogether –

embodiment inevitably means connection. In Insel's idealization, Mrs. Jones is the object that allows *him* to create, and his creativity is represented as a means to escape his body.

On Loy's first page, Insel sells a painting to buy a set of false teeth. Here and throughout the novel, his artistry is a vehicle to supplement and eventually replace his body, which is described as a "dilapidated structure," "a wound up automaton running down," and an "animate cadaver" (*Insel* 3; 13; 50). His paintings gradually start to exceed the canvas and escalate into mirages, captivating, projected hallucinations pouring through "some leak in his psyche" (*Insel* 43). He experiences the influence of his environment as the pollution of his work's "stratospheric purity" and lunges into "the creative dimension where one can remain indefinitely—like a conscious rock—immovable" (*Insel* 22). To feel free this artist cannot feel oriented. His obsession with this purified creative dimension and the liberation from connection that it implies consumes him: "No rock, no root, no accident of Nature varied a virgin plain that had conceived no landscape, and I saw Insel reduced to the proportion he would have in the eye of a God—setting out—unaccompanied, unorientated, for here where nothing existed, no sound, no sun, reigned an unimaginable atmosphere he longed to breathe" (*Insel* 73).

Mrs. Jones concludes that "there was nothing, nothing, in all the world elementary enough to serve as object for such simplified observation as his" (*Insel* 123). While Mrs. Jones appreciates the beauty of his art, her everyday self is alive to the data disregarded when Insel chooses not "to perceive anything specifically," reacting to the elements of his environment "as brightly illuminated 'whats.' A reaction he accepted for entire comprehension" (*Insel* 44). He cares about the "whats" outside of himself only insofar as they spark his own invention, and disbelieves in anything that might be beyond him. From

her vantage point, Mrs. Jones can see the motivation behind his project but also the extent of his blindness: "*Your* way of being alive is a sequence of disappearances. You're so afraid of actuality'" (*Insel* 36). She lives in a reality he cannot recognize because "for him the story of the universe was blotted out by the gigantism of his meager individual experience" (*Insel* 49). Though the disappearing body manifests through a kind of artistic enchantment in Insel's case, this trope became popular in science fiction later in the century. The cyberpunk subgenre imagined bodies as obsolete technology; for texts such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) or Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992), as for Insel, disembodiment is an exhilarating freedom. Veronica Hollinger describes the disappearing body fantasy as a way for "the unstable subject to be restored to a unitary wholeness that excludes difference of any kind" ("Introduction" 76), a space where subjectivity can expand as it pleases, unimpeded by the responsibility and outside influence of cultural context.

Mrs. Jones ultimately gives up and declares, "If he preferred to attain perfection, I would let Insel loose to die as he pleased" (*Insel* 55). His idea of freedom, she sees, is not real, and though part of her craves that otherworldy beauty, her everyday self craves reality. She condemns the power dynamics of his artistry and embraces her own embodied existence. Insel has a hierarchical and detached relationship with his material life, "as if his visible person were a mannequin he operated on occasion," but Mrs. Jones wrestles playfully with her own body for agency (*Insel* 31). In one instance, Insel asks her for a favor, and she is torn about whether to say yes: "My lips opened automatically. 'Don't be fools,' I admonished them. 'Keep out of this. You'll get me into an unnecessary jam'" (*Insel* 21). Her lips, here, have a mind of their own. She also calls the "automatism" of shutting a door "stupendous" after overhearing a distinguished "authoress" describe the act as "so banal it is unfit for

publication" (*Insel* 32). Instead of dreaming of a Surrealist elsewhere, she looks at the stupendous in the everyday.

Loy's novel critiques Insel's aspiration to erase his body by presenting his experimentations in the transformative context of a skeptic's narration. In doing so, she illuminates the way Surrealists like Breton or Dali and Futurists like Marinetti or Depero suppress femininity and the vulnerabilities of embodiment to preserve an idealization of their own unfettered agency. At the same time, Mrs. Jones gets inspired by their innovation and churns that inspiration into a hybrid creation of her own. Mrs. Jones and Insel explicitly compare their artistic processes when they discuss their respective studios:

> "'So often at dusk I come here to stare at that white canvas,' he had told me dreamingly. 'I see all the worlds I could paint upon it. […] I can create everything. Then what thing? A thousand directions are open to me, to take whichever I decide—I cannot decide.' […] 'If the painting no longer 'goes' […] I shall do as you do. Write. What a profession. One carries one's studio about with one.'" (*Insel* 151)

Insel is so daunted by this problem of *the thousand directions*, as he calls it, that he never produces a painting. His frenzy for pure potential ends up being the antithesis of creation. Mrs. Jones, as a writer, is depicted as an artist embedded in the world, carrying her studio around with her while Insel is shut away on his own. Early in the novel she proposes to write a biography of Insel, and arguably, the book *Insel* is itself her product; her creative method appears to be much more effective.

By the end of the story, Mrs. Jones has determined that, beneath his elaborate daydreams, Insel is a mundane misogynist. She concludes that his "madness is something very beautiful," but "his adventures in the actual world had been of an excruciating banality"

(*Insel* 116; 113). Once she gains insight into Insel's pretensions "my loathing for the real man was unconcealed" and he registers to her in a totally different way; "for the first time I saw him as dangerous" because he no longer moved with "the airy step of the hallucinated—it was the pounding tread of the infuriated male" (*Insel* 143; 114). Not only is this personally appalling to Mrs. Jones, it also demonstrates that Insel's ethereal, modern, even futuristic presentations are a mechanism of gendered conservatism. As soon as Mrs. Jones' skepticism surfaces, he becomes flush with entitlement and rage, a "horrid guest, who somehow behaved like an alienated husband" (*Insel* 143). In one climactic confrontation, their antagonistic politics come head-to-head: "I had, he said, inflamed their rebellion by smiling at them. That was no way to handle negresses. 'What? You can sleep with them, but I can't smile at them. How do you work that out?' This muddled Insel, [who] instructed me, 'You know nothing of the etiquette of *my* underworld—its *laws*'" (*Insel* 69-70). Insel abides by manifold laws that he does not seem to comprehend, caught in webs of racist, sexist ideology that he accepts as binding. His grand renunciations of the material world are performed in desperation for idealized purity that amounts to bigotry, a humanist value system from which he can achieve no critical distance despite his apparent evolution. Insel's artistic ascendance, in its fidelity to a traditional, exclusive subject formation, is therefore a kind of misogynist decadence. He moves beyond a human body without moving beyond flawed humanist thinking. By the end, he appears "no longer human," but still, he is shackled to "all the hungry errantry of the human race" (*Insel* 81; 40).

In 2013 the "Visitation of Insel" section was identified by Sarah Hayden as an intended addendum to this novel. Two years after the events in the conclusion, Insel's disembodied presence appears without warning in New York "divested of those shreds of

flesh […] a recognizable 'invisibility' come to visit me" (*Insel* 159). His transformation is now complete – he has freed himself of the mortal coil – but Mrs. Jones gets the final word. She portrays this man who has finally succeeded in becoming a pure current of energy in the most grotesquely hybrid terms imaginable; he is a creature with an "antediluvian tail" who is "nuzzling the future" (recreating the duality in "Human Cylinders") and behind his "face of pinkish pulp" hides a "radio-receiver of cosmic urges" (*Insel* 161). By the time the text concludes, Insel's idealistically immaterial art has been contaminated, symbolically re-embodied by Mrs. Jones' narrative intervention.

Mina Loy's interpretation of embodiment is intrinsic to her poetic method, which intervenes in the functionality of idealism. She was known for "primordial pokes of simplicity" that she thought "might re-direct the universe," brazen gestures that unsettle norms (Burke 166). Loy's oeuvre abounds with primordial pokes, such as the poem "Parturition" (1914), which is a subversive, even graphic portrait of pregnancy. Robert Conover presumes this to be the first poem ever written about the physical experience of childbirth, making its publication in the magazine *Trend* "a significant event in the history of modern poetry as well as the literature of modern sexuality" (Conover 177). Consistently through her career Loy invites embodiment into the poetic process to explode idealism, which attempts to block such uncleanly aspects of femininity from view. Social ideals elide the "'excepted' woman […] not quite a lady" with whom Mina Loy identified (*The Lost Lunar Baedeker* 47-50). Her *Italian Pictures* (c. 1914), for instance, bring the exceptions to social rules into the forefront – "the women that society pretends do not exist; the laboring women, the poor, the dissatisfied wives, the sexually active" (Prescott 24) – and her poetics deconstruct ideals to make space for these outliers.

Loy integrates materiality into even the most abstract of realms in her treatise on "Modern Poetry" (1925). She makes her argument by way of a thought experiment, which is itself a particularly tangible way to assess poetics:

> Imagine a tennis champion who became inspired to write poetry, would not his verse be likely to embody the rhythmic transit of skimming balls? Would not his meter depend on his way of life, would it not form itself, without having recourse to traditional, remembered, or accepted forms? This, then, is the secret of new poetry. ("Modern")

Through her tennis-playing poet Loy imagines a dialectic between the physical rhythms of life and the logic of signification. Her version of modernist poetics attends to everyday embodiment and the mess it makes of idealism.

Monstrous Damsels: C.L. Moore

C. L. Moore wrote of the "Shambleau," an alien from Venus described as "obscene" and "unspeakable," that "she was the self I'd like to have been" ("Shambleau" 19; Yaszek and Sharp 165). When the Shambleau confronts the space-hero, she transforms the archetype, immersing him in her tentacled embrace. She uses his own construction of heroism against him, a meta-narrative in which the hero's narrative is exposed and interrupted, and thus the alien other is installed as an iconoclastic image of empowerment.

This 1933 story was one of *Weird Tales'* most highly regarded contributions and has been proposed as an alternate to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as the origin point for feminist science fiction. Moore, born in Indiana, was one of the very first women to publish in the pulp magazines, and "Shambleau" was her first publication. She started working on it

during typing practice for a bank job she took when the Depression cut short her time at Indiana University, where she had been studying literature (Footnote" 365). Moore's introduction in the anthology *Sisters of Tomorrow* (2016) describes "Shambleau" as a warning: "the dream of human control over the material world is, at best, just that—a dream that will inevitably be undone by the complexities of a vast and potentially hostile universe" (Yaszek and Sharp 165).

"Shambleau" recreates a classic image of monstrous femininity, Medusa. The species Moore calls Shambleau subverts the imagery of the original mythological monster, whose story is often read as a patriarchal parable. Whereas in the Greek version Medusa is driven away from society and beheaded, in this case, the Shambleau's influence seeps in and undermines humanity's stability. Moore begins by claiming that "the myth of the Medusa [...] can never have had its roots in the soil of Earth," suggesting that the Shambleau's species visited the planet in antiquity ("Shambleau" 1). This gesture explicitly positions her alien future in the context of the human past and adds the weight of history to the characters' relationships—we know from the beginning that the monster is supposed to lose her head.

"Shambleau" toys with its audience's expectations throughout, starting as a typical encounter between a macho swashbuckler and an exotic damsel and morphing into something grotesque. While visiting Mars for a shady job, Northwest Smith saves a mysterious girl from a mob and hides her away from the public eye. They share a rented room for a couple of days and Smith starts having unsettling nightmares. Hints of a subterranean horror story peek around the narrative's corners until they erupt at the halfway point and the rescued damsel becomes a monster. She covers him in her tentacles and he is defenseless, blindingly intoxicated as she feeds on him. They merge; all boundaries are

crossed. At the last moment, he is rescued by a friend, but whatever has been done to him is lasting.

The language at the beginning of the story insistently emphasizes the objecthood of the Shambleau, a "red running figure, dodging like a hunted hare" as she is pursued by a mob: "Smith had not seen her face, but she was a girl […] he pushed her gently into the corner behind him and jerked out his gun, just as the first of the running mob rounded the corner" ("Shambleau" 2). Anonymous, sexualized, and helpless, she watches from behind Smith as he struggles with the mob. When the mob cries, "We'll take care of her!" Smith responds, "I'm taking care of her," equating his patriarchal concern with their violent intentions ("Shambleau" 4). Then Smith escalates – "she's mine! […] And I'm keeping her!" – at which point the mob expresses "dread and incredulity" and retreats ("Shambleau" 4). The implication is that the mob already knows about the danger she poses to Smith, but they interpret his claim on her as some kind of perversion; "they were leaving his vicinity as swiftly as if whatever unknowing sin he had committed were contagious" and as they disperse and the Shambleau emerges, Smith knows "at a glance" that she is "not wholly human […] though the brown, sweet body was shaped like a woman's" ("Shambleau" 5). Her nonhuman femininity is composed through commodification, racialization, infantilization, animality, and an unspeakable sexuality, a wide array of discourses that have objectification in common.[6]

[6] The turban the Shambleau wears and her general presentation as an exotic mystery specifically invoke the early twentieth century preoccupation with Orientalism. This is something Surrealism was particularly guilty of – Andre Breton describes the "Orient" as the muse of Surrealism (Antle 5).

After thoroughly establishing her role, the narrative shifts from space adventure to alien invasion. A different side of the Shambleau comes to light in Smith's rented room. She literally and figuratively lets down her hair and is revealed as an otherworldly predator:

> it was a very ordinary thing for a girl to do—any girl, anywhere. She was unbinding her turban…
>
> From what he saw then Smith would have turned his eyes away—and he had looked on dreadful things before, without flinching—but he could not stir. He could only lie there on his elbows staring at the mass of scarlet, squirming—worms, hairs, what?—that writhed over her head in a dreadful mockery of ringlets. ("Shambleau" 18)

The narrative explicitly ties the Shambleau to normative femininity (ringlets) in the very moment it exposes her monstrous reality, observing as the ideal comes undone. After this dramatic disclosure, the power dynamics of the story are overturned. Smith is locked in the alien's tentacled embrace and their intermingling breaks down the fiction of their designated roles. The active hero and the passive damsel become one "mound like a mass of entrails" ("Shambleau" 23). The human and nonhuman reconstitute each other, creating a disorderly flux that feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz describes as a fundamental condition of life: "Not being self-identical, the body must be seen as a series of processes of becoming, rather than as a fixed state of being" (Grosz 12). Grosz writes about this process as the result of everyday interfaces with the environment, but here it is a revelation.

According to the Shambleau, enveloping Smith in her tentacles is both her nourishment and her form of language. She is feeding on him, implying that she is physically composed of these interactions with disparate species. At the same time, she is also speaking to him in her native tongue, implying that the interaction expresses or offers something of

herself. She is still referred to as an object, a “nameless, unthinkable *thing*…” but her hair crawls “with a sickening life of its own” (“Shambleau” 12; 18). In this figure, the line between inanimate and animate is blurred, and the Shambleau’s performance makes the most of this ambiguity. She poses as a passive, sexualized object and then emerges from behind that construct as an incomprehensibly alien agent. After surviving the Shambleau’s grasp, Northwest Smith is changed. He becomes the helpless, rescued party, but his savior does not arrive soon enough to prevent the Shambleau from leaving traces of herself behind. When he is found, "his face was that of some creature beyond humanity,” and he has nightmares about her for the rest of his life (“Shambleau” 23). The story ends with a demonstration of the fundamental shift in Smith’s cavalier character. His friend pleads with him – if you ever see one of her species again, kill it immediately! – and the only answer he can give is by no means reassuring: “’I’ll—try,’ he said. And his voice wavered” (“Shambleau” 32). The distortion of his expectations is destabilizing in a way violence itself is not and it wipes out his accustomed bravado. Even Northwest Smith, the swashbuckling hero, finds there is “some grinning traitor” within him that delights in his personal alien invasion; something in him that wants to be “a part of it” (“Shambleau” 21; 31). Medusa invades the boundaries of civilization and her influence can never be purged.

Moore’s “No Woman Born” defies a more recent version of civilization, starting with a poem by one of Mina Loy’s modernist contemporaries – 2000 years past publication within the story, but 10 years old for the author. James Stephens’ “Deirdre” reflects, in proper modernist form, on the tragedy of a lost epoch when representation and reality seamlessly aligned:

The time comes when our hearts sink utterly;

When we remember Deirdre and her tale,

And that her lips are dust…

There has been again no woman born

Who was so beautiful; not one so beautiful (“No Woman Born” 237)

This vision of feminine beauty’s extinct apex, set above and apart from the degraded women of the present, gives a gendered angle to the modernist preoccupation with historical rupture. In Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), the grandeur of the past is lost as tradition is shattered into “a handful of dust,” like the poetic object’s lips above. Moore’s story represents this classic modernist theme but the science fiction twist upends its valuation. For this Deirdre, tradition is not a source of nostalgia but a construct to be broken apart and reimagined. Moore warps Deirdre’s identity by robbing her of a human body.

The beloved starlet Deirdre is transplanted into an inanimate object after being rescued from her body, burned in a terrible fire. “No Woman Born” is the story of her caretakers’ anxious fretting about whether

> the mind inside the metal did not veer from its inherited humanity as the years went by. A dweller in a house may impress his personality upon the walls, but subtly the walls too, may impress their own shape upon the ego of the man. (“No Woman Born” 251)

Is Deirdre’s mind bending metal to its will, or is the metal capable of bending her mind? What would a mind shaped by such inhuman conditions become? The suggestion of mutual influence between a human subject and the object that houses it is devastating for Deirdre’s caretakers and turns the narrative into a horror story from their perspective. Moore leaves us

on a precipice, with "the distant taint of metal" already perceptible in Deirdre's voice ("No Woman Born" 288).

Most of the narrative is dominated by the men who consider themselves responsible for her: John Harris, a friend from her human life, and her new body's inventor, Dr. Maltzer. Both are profoundly distressed by their inability to read her after the transplant. Harris narrates the story in a state of mounting panic: "He even wondered whether, if her mind was as delicately poised as Maltzer feared, one would ever know whether or not it had slipped. There was so little evidence one way or the other in the unchanging outward form of her" ("No Woman Born" 271). The reader and other characters can only guess at Deirdre's inner experiences. Harris and Maltzer want her to be a stable, interpretable object despite her ongoing evolution and resent the fact that much of her is unavailable to them.

Maltzer has a particularly difficult time integrating Deirdre's agency because he sees her body as his own scientific creation. She experiences a double objectification as a woman and inert metal, a social object and a material object. However, the relationship these characters form, "the strange, cold, passionless intimacy" between the scientist and his object of study, reconfigures both parties ("No Woman Born" 239). Harris claims that "in a sense the Deirdre whom he saw in a few minutes would be Maltzer, just as he thought he detected in Maltzer now and then small mannerisms of inflection and motion that had been Deirdre's own" (ibid.). Working on her changes him and losing control of her destabilizes him.

Maltzer and Harris are consumed by anxiety about Deirdre's decision to return to the stage in her new form, but her performances are the strongest connection between her human and nonhuman lives. The instant of reversal that changes the entire social landscape in "Shambleau" also characterizes "No Woman Born" when Deirdre makes a spectacular return

to public life. She begins her performance by adopting the guise of "another shining column" adorning the theater, presenting herself as an object and then suddenly coming to life ("No Woman Born" 263). She toys with her audience in an elaborate play of shifting agency:

> She ended as inhumanly as she had danced, willing them not to interrupt her with applause, dominating them now as she had always done. […] But when she reached the head of the stairs she turned to face her audience, and for a moment stood motionless, like a creature of metal, without volition, the hands of the operator slack upon its strings. Then, startlingly, she laughed. ("No Woman Born" 265)

Deirdre occupies the roles of subject and object, recognizable as both without "being" either. She laughs at her ability to confound her audience's interpretations and disrupts their expectation that such roles correspond to some incontrovertible material reality.

After the performance Deirdre withdraws to her little farm in Jersey, where she is finally unsupervised. The narrative merely hints at her experiments, keeping knowledge of her true potential obscure, but as Harris waits for her, he "wondered what two weeks in a new environment would do to her untried body and newly patterned brain" ("No Woman Born" 271). In a different space, she accesses a different dimension of her self, a "strange little quiver of something—something un-Deirdre" that she seems to be encouraging to manifest ("No Woman Born" 257). Though her body is incapable of feeling, scent and taste, she suggests that it may be capable of unimagined senses that are yet to fully evolve, a new dimension of subjectivity engendered by her shifting embodiment ("No Woman Born" 285). Veronica Hollinger writes that "Deirdre is monstrous not because she is ugly, but precisely because her gleaming metallic body is so – inhumanly – beautiful. She is monstrous not because she has ceased to be feminine, but precisely because her performance of femininity

is so – calculatedly – convincing" ("(Re)reading" 30). She has learned to manipulate cultural narratives and see beyond them.

Deirdre's literally post-human art defies all onlookers' expectations. Harris anticipates an inhibited, awkward approximation of human dance, but her grace is superhuman; "it was humanity that seemed, by contrast, jointed and mechanical" ("No Woman Born" 264). Deirdre looks forward to inventing a new school of dance and setting new fashion trends; she can no longer dance *sur les pointes*, but she can "turn a hundred fouettés now without a flaw" ("No Woman Born" 253). Her companions read her deviance as vulnerability, but it is unmistakably recoded as flexibility and potential. They confer with each other fitfully over Deirdre's failure to understand how "frail" she's become, how "pitifully handicapped," though she constantly insists either that she has no handicaps or that, if she does, they are irrelevant ("No Woman Born" 260; 256; 279). Fixated on her departure from their definition of the "natural," the men are blind to her reality. Finally she unveils their mistake in a climactic demonstration of speed, strength and agency in which she saves Maltzer's life: "Do you still think of me as delicate? […] I could tear my way through these walls, I think. I've found no limit yet" ("No Woman Born" 284). Shedding human limits does not cripple but free her. She holds the power all along but patiently waits for her "caretakers" to come to terms with it (of which they are not really capable). Even her introduction—"'Well, John, is it I?' She knew it was" ("No Woman Born" 246)—seems to offer Harris an evaluative role in the test of her identity but is actually a test of him.

Maltzer, the inventor, sees Deirdre as all machine, while Harris sees her entirely through memories of her human life ("No Woman Born" 241; 255). Neither is able to see her as both and more. Criticism has sometimes considered this character to be an isolated

aberration, “unable to connect with other individuals *like herself*” [emphasis added] (Stevenson 94). In this assessment, Melissa Stevenson appears to be thinking of Deirdre as a modern Frankenstein’s monster, searching for a mate with a matching body. Though “No Woman Born” does gesture back to Mary Shelley, it insistently draws lines of connection between its monster and markedly *un*like bodies. Moore’s language frames the metal and the flesh Deirdre has inhabited as parallel appendages. Her mask is “enigmatic,” but so are “human eyes;” Harris “sat down bonelessly” in shock and, like her, “had no muscles;” as Maltzer builds her body up, “all flesh seemed to have dissolved off his bones,” suggesting an exchange (“No Woman Born” 243; 242; 259). Deirdre also describes how “ships and guns and planes” have personalities akin to her own, developed though “a sort of mental conception and gestation” (“No Woman Born” 249-50). As Haraway writes, affinity does not depend on identity, allowing for the development of such “unpredictable kinds of ‘we’” (*When Species Meet* 5), identifications that defy categorization.

Deirdre is excommunicated from the Woman category. Her tenuous relation to humanity is interrogated through her gender when the men declare, “She hasn’t any sex. She isn’t female any more” (“No Woman Born” 258). They assume public opinion will turn on her when her fans realize she cannot “compete” in the heterosexual economy (ibid.). However, once the reader understands that her appearance as a passive, feminine object was always a performance, we know just how little mastery the other characters actually exert upon her despite their paternalistic attitudes. Deirdre blows kisses to play into the audience’s expectations, but this corresponds to no essential identity on her part – she has no mouth! She wants to maintain her stage career because it is performance that will sustain her relationship with humans despite her nonhuman form. Deirdre can play as a woman, can drop humanity

over her “like a tangible garment” (“No Woman Born” 265), but never again can the reader or other characters accept her woman-act as deterministic of her reality.

C. L. Moore depicts identity as an artistic process of experimentation and reinscription. A metal woman fixates on artificial enactments of human activities, such as smoking a cigarette sans lips or lungs, rather than exploring her superhuman capacities, making familiar behavior foreign (“No Woman Born” 280). The Shambleau’s performance of docile femininity allows her to draw in prey, “just like a frog’s long tongue or a carnivorous flower’s odor” (“Shambleau” 30). Humanity itself is recreated through alien or artificial means, newly inhabited as a space of innovation. Though their fellow characters fixate on the unnaturalness of their bodies, frustrated by Deirdre and the Shambleau’s failures to perform as stable objects of interpretation, the reader is invited to interpret the hybrid body as a sign of the unacknowledged monstrosity within “human” identity, the chaotic interactivity of human and nonhuman embodiment.

Materialist Poetics

Plato’s *Republic* (c. 380 BCE), in a passage that provided an influential model for Enlightenment humanism, meditates on a cave full of prisoners in an extended, poetic allegory for human thought (despite having outlawed the poets). The world of physical manifestations is likened to shadows on the cave’s wall, reflected there for the prisoners by an inconstant flame and puppets, whereas the world of ideal concepts is likened to the sun. Knowledge can be based on unreliable material forces or based on a single, essential truth, options that are pitted against each other; the former robs the prisoners of the latter. The relation between these two poles is developed through the “practice of subsuming

multiplicities under a single form or idea and then calling them collectively by a single name" (Plato 285).

In this way, Platonic theory sets a precedent for the philosophy of language in which names "subsume" the differences amongst their referents. Material difference is flattened by the application of a single signifier to diverse bodies, with the concept of *leaf* "arbitrarily discarding […] the distinguishing aspects" of actual, physical leaves ("On Truth"). For Nietzsche, this linguistic equivocation sends humanity forever questing after "the 'leaf': the original model according to which all the leaves were perhaps woven, sketched, measured, colored, curled, and painted—but by incompetent hands, so that no specimen has turned out to be a correct, trustworthy, and faithful likeness of the original model" (ibid.). Nietzsche, working in the nineteenth century against Enlightenment idealism and its classical antecedents, interprets this quest as a tragic delusion, depriving us of our ability to appreciate or even perceive real leaves.

The real leaves are what is at stake in Mina Loy's tennis-playing poet or C.L. Moore's metal woman. Both trace the way physical bodies leave impressions on meaning-making forms, warping the mold where they do not fit tidily. Linguistic symbols function here to record the fluid interaction between variable manifestations of self that need not cohere into a single essence. Specifically, Loy and Moore destabilize the imposition of a Woman essence defined by its subordinate relation to masculinity. By estranging that category, tentacular modernists replace a version of relationality that ties things together by their contrast (man / woman, human / nonhuman) with a subversive version in which tying things together means extending and renegotiating them. Loy and Moore's counter-myths

enable an understanding of being *in relationship* that no story about artists and muses or heroes and damsels could describe.

Chapter 2

Objecthood and Entanglement: Djuna Barnes & Leonora Carrington

I am the woman – it is I – […]

A corpse that flames and cannot die –

A candle with the wick torn through –

These are the things from which I grew

– Djuna Barnes, "Love Song"

In 1917 Djuna Barnes was a young journalist covering the Coney Island amusement park. Of the Ferris wheel she wrote, "the inanimate objects are the only things that are animate" – the people are mechanized, poised to automatically react to the object's provocations (qtd. in Goody 90). Instead of perceiving humans manipulating world she perceives world manipulating humans, whipping subjects and objects into an indistinguishable whirlwind.

Barnes' rendering of subjectivity is steeped in objecthood, the mundane life of "things." To interpret a subject as a thing—as malleable, even programmable or trainable—presents a challenge to the human ego: the programmer, the holder of the reins. Humanity distinguishes itself from what it calls nonhuman to reaffirm its agency, a subjecthood that controls all objects, but in Barnes' work the nonhuman reemerges from within the subject. The woman from "Love Song," a poem in *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915), grows from a "corpse," profane materiality without its operator, a candle's wax body stripped of its flickering light.

The art and literature of Djuna Barnes and Leonora Carrington estrange the human subject defined by his mastery over objects by portraying both social and material objects

with eerie lives of their own. In tracing the overlap therein, these narratives explore the logic of cultural projections of passivity, the ideological structure of objecthood.

The protagonist of Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974), 92-year-old Marian Leatherby, is virtually valueless by her culture's standards. According to her family, she "can hardly be classified as a human being" (*Hearing* 15). Marian's body is read as a disposable object, institutionalized and inducted into a strict discipline of work until an apocalyptic event wipes out social order and a nonhuman collective gathers in the ruins. Marian's various companions and co-conspirators reject the atomizing value system associated with work and, after the end of the human world, they finally have space to play.

For Carrington, the crone represents "not wisdom or old age but the female who has passed beyond conventional expectations and models of femininity" ("El Mundo" 30). She rejected the social landscape of her upbringing, the value system that circulated through the finishing schools where her mother sought to "civilize" her for the marriage market (Angelis 33). She said that "fiction is a way of making your own personal geography," a discursive environment with unique affordances, and the Surreal spaces she creates in her work are populated by animated objects (Byatt xiv). The eponymous hearing trumpet gives Marian super-human senses, she describes her house as a part of her body, and a portrait captivates her and re-directs her life.

This motif—the animated object—appears in contemporaneous works such as Virginia Woolf's modernist short story "Solid Objects" (1918) or M.R. James' ghost story, "The Malice of Inanimate Objects" (1933), and it is distinctly unsettling in both. Woolf's protagonist is sifting through sand on a beach, deciding what shape to mold it into, when he is stopped by an attractive glass stone, "so hard, so concentrated, so definite" (Woolf 103).

Since he cannot reshape the object as intended, he brings it home, "delighting in the sense of power" he gets from curating what eventually becomes an unwieldy collection of random debris (Woolf 104). In the end, the objects' captivating influence over him comes at the cost of his career and relationships, leaving the story on a disturbing note. James' story is disturbing all the way through; it is about days when "our world has turned against us. I do not mean the human world […] No, it is the world of things that do not speak or work or hold congresses and conferences" (James). James describes "things," by which he means everyday items from a razor that nicks you while shaving to a step on a staircase that trips you, through their contrast to speakers and workers, who dominate objects with language or labor. The horror he expresses at the thought "that there is something not inanimate behind the Malice of Inanimate Objects" speaks to a deep cultural investment in the passive malleability of things (James).

Western philosophy and science have for centuries functioned in terms of a "knowing subject" and a "passive object" (Lykke 4), a worldview traceable back to Francis Bacon and made hegemonic in the Enlightenment. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) presents this deeply ingrained subject-object framework as reductive, even stifling: "The manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object, between the rational significance and its accidental bearer" (Horkheimer & Adorno 7). This narrative, premised on subjects and objects, is conveniently mapped onto gender roles. Simone de Beauvoir argues for the relevance of Hegel's "Lordship and Bondage" dialectic to gender relations in *The Second Sex* (1949) (de Beauvoir 99). In both arguments, the (masculine) subject depends on contrast with and mastery over (feminine) objects to consolidate his own identity.

This is the reason that objects' animacy appears so threatening: it destabilizes subject formation. Mel Chen's *Animacies* (2012) asks "how animacy is implicated in political questions of power and the recognition of different subjects, as well as ostensible objects" (Chen 9). Objecthood is a product of discourse and a political category; "the history of objects is a combination of intuitive phenomenologically acquired abstractions and socially acquired histories of knowledge about what constitutes proper 'thingness'" (Chen 5). Absolute passivity is a constructed role projected onto the nonhuman world to reify human agency. Even a step on a staircase wields a kind of influence.

In political life, objectification has everything to do with maintaining social order. Theorists of capitalism use the term "atomization" to refer to the production of bodies as objects that can be managed through social mechanisms (school, work, family, the prison system, etc.). As Leopoldina Fortunati describes in *The Arcane of Reproduction* (1981), atomization precludes collectivity. Capital replaces all value with exchange value, reduces "interpersonal relationships to relations of production," fixed models such as the family unit or the boss-employee relationship that divide people into their social roles in the process of connecting them to each other, which "underlies the growing isolation of individuals within capitalism" (Fortunati 25). People are divided into pieces and divided from each other to render them quantifiable and manageable, commodities on a vast market. Objects failing to perform passivity are seen as threatening to the whole operation, upon which order (supposedly) depends.

While Barnes and Carrington register the sense of discomfort with animated objects exhibited by their contemporaries, they do not seem to share it. Instead, they depict environments abundant with nonhuman beings that act upon each other unpredictably. Bruno

Latour writes in his anthropology of science *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) that modernity is "often defined in terms of humanism, either as a way of saluting the birth of 'man' or as a way of announcing his death. But this habit itself is modern, because it remains asymmetrical. It overlooks the simultaneous birth of 'nonhumanity' - things, or objects, or beasts" (Latour 13). Barnes and Carrington's work attends obsessively to characters' complicity with things, objects, and beasts, resisting humanism's divisions and developing their own way of inhabiting modernity.

The Hearing Trumpet and *Nightwood* are both organized by a sequence of entanglements—embodied, transformative relationships. Carrington and Barnes' depictions of relationality take into account the coexistence of myriad active bodies. Interaction becomes "intra-action," Karen Barad's neologism, which "signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (Barad 33). Barad's formulation accounts for the way characters such as Marian and Robin exist in and through their dense ecologies.

In Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936), we are introduced to Robin Vote through her intense and widely distributed relationships. Robin is always being pulled between her lovers Nora (who is usually read as Barnes' stand-in), Felix and Jenny, not to mention the animals, plants, dolls, and statues in her path. Erin Edwards explores this network of relations in her book, *The Modernist Corpse* (2018):

> Serving as the focal point of both male and female desire, Robin's queer sexuality undoes the universalism of heterosexual reproduction in the novel, but it is also

> involved in the larger project of undoing the human and humanist conceptions of the bi-gendered "Family of Man." Her reciprocal engagements with corpses, animals, plants, and other forms of nonhuman life exceed a bounded emphasis upon the species perpetuation of the human, defining her as a generative source of life that flourishes where traditional forms of reproduction fail in the novel. (Edwards 158)

Barnes models an interactive, malleable subjectivity. Her version of "woman" is not an ideal with rigid rules but rather an improvisational style of cultural engagement, an open-ended, artistic experiment with the discursive and material components of the environment.

Carrington's "What is a woman?" (1968) reads, "Fifty-three years ago I was born a female human animal. This, I was told, meant that I was a 'Woman.' But I never knew what that meant" (Ferentinou 113). She is told to seek the answer through men and childbirth but meets with more success when she abandons identification with the human, as in her painting "Portrait of Madam Dupin" (1947) [FIG.9]. Butterflies are a favorite motif for Carrington; she connects them to a goddess from Minoan civilization (Helland 58). This is just one of the many sources from which Carrington drew influence, including Celtic mythology (her mother was Irish), Gnosticism, Tibetan Buddhism, and the belief system of the indigenous Chiapas, "a series of continuous and overlapping narratives" that become a composite language ("El Mundo" 12). Madam Dupin is an amalgam of animal, plant, and human, dramatically reimagining the subject matter – the original Madam Dupin hosted a French literary salon during the Enlightenment. Carrington turns this famously beautiful high society woman into a hybrid creature, turns Madonna-and-child into mystery-and-monster. Though the butterfly-goddess reference suggests generativity, what this Dupin brings forth is a strange, nonhuman figure that feels disconcerting rather than abundant and wholesome.

This image resonates with Surrealist precedents such as Salvador Dali's 1936 cover for *Minotaure* magazine [FIG. 10], but while they both blend human and animalistic traits, Dali's instrumentalizes and sexualizes the body, surrounding it with sharp tools and invading it with hollow compartments. The contrast displays one way in which Carrington's art diverges from "kosher Surrealists," as she describes them in an interview (Angelis 40). The movement officially included no women during its first decade, but women were a common subject matter; in many cases Surrealism exhibited "a strong interest in erotic violence, misogyny, and woman as object or muse" (Helland 53). Meanwhile, Madam Dupin's direct gaze, neither confrontational nor passive, communicates nonhuman agency.

This painting also contains a hint of the "spatial dislocation and manipulation of scale and size" that Carrington tended to favor – the figure dwarfs the barren tree to her right, making her presence seem impossibly huge ("El Mundo" 14). I would compare this sort of defamiliarizing strategy to Barnes' elaborate, arcane language, which often detours into long ekphrastic[7] passages that demand rereading. Both artists narrate alienation, but they do so from within distinct modernisms. While critics such as Jacques Rancière consider Surrealism a vehicle of "countermodernity," others such as Susan Hiller see Surrealism as the "shadow side of modernism," its inseparable other half (Allmer 2). Each using its own language, Surrealism and modernism provoke a cognitive distancing that I consider speculative.

Barnes and Carrington may hail from different camps, but as women finding space for their own aesthetic agency amidst male-dominated communities, they share a liminal position that corresponds to their art's disregard of boundaries. Their fictions hinge on material entanglements that compromise the distinction between animate and inanimate,

[7] "Ekphrasis" refers to a written description of an art object.

subject and object. Both completed their most celebrated work as ex-patriots, becoming influential amongst the modernists in Paris (Barnes) and the Surrealists in Mexico (Carrington). The practice of cultivating home somewhere they are not-at-home speaks to their aesthetics, which settle deeply into unsettling landscapes. Rather than seeking shock-value or eroticizing difference, Barnes and Carrington embrace the potential of strangeness to destabilize the objectification of the nonhuman, which is so naturalized as to be invisible most of the time.

The animacy of objects challenges the social project to manage and hierarchically categorize all bodies, especially ones that read as feminine. Leonora Carrington uses the aesthetic language of the Surrealists to invest objects with their own, uncanny liveliness, and Djuna Barnes uses ekphrastic prose. Their protagonists are coopted by societal relationality—multiple lovers try to integrate Robin into a familial role, and the institution trains Marian to work—but they manage to escape. Even outside of such roles, these women, one queer and one elderly, are dehumanized by the exploitative power dynamics that characterize conventional reason. Thus, their animacy is read as enigmatic or irrational, but it has the potential to reconfigure relationality.

Inscrutable Objects: Djuna Barnes

Djuna Barnes narrates femininity through socially unsanctioned collaborations between the human and nonhuman. The poem "Crystals" reads bodies through images of objects and plants:

> Her lips flower-tarnished, her cheek-braids bulked in rust.
>
> Her shoulders as hard as a wall-tree, frosted with dust.

Precise bone clipped and grooved, and as sure as metal.

Leaves of flesh built high, like china roses, petal on petal." (*Repulsive* 43)

This figure is equal parts feminist subversion, science fiction hybrid and modernist experiment. Likewise, the character Robin Vote is described as a modernist automaton. She is in constant, compulsive motion and utterly without legible interiority.

Djuna Barnes enjoys a distinctive sort of obscurity, calling herself the "the century's most famous unknown" in one letter and quoting in another: "her work will not fall into oblivion—it was predestined for it from the outset" (Herring 295; Caselli 2). In reference to her 1914 article about forced feeding, Julie Taylor writes that "one finds not the cold and depersonalized 'modernist' scene of a patient 'etherised upon a table'" but the vital struggle of Barnes' body as it is strapped in and maneuvered (Taylor 16-7). Barnes reverses the significance of T.S. Eliot's notorious image of modernist paralysis by replicating it in her own fleshy, gendered style.

Alex Goody's *Modernist Articulations* (2007) describes *The Book of Repulsive Women* as "evidence of alternatives to the clean, straight aspirations of modern America" (Goody 39). However, Barnes quickly regretted publishing it, considering the book "a disgusting little item. At one time in the 1920s I collected as many copies as I could find and burned them in my mother's backyard" (O'Neal qtd. in Herring 306). With apologies to Djuna, her early poetry is too provocative to discard, presenting a femininity equipped with "chain-stitched" clothes and "poisoned heels" (*Repulsive* 17; 7). For some critics this grotesque presentation "portray[s] lesbian life in the most horribly negative terms imaginable" (Herring 88), but I read these poems as invocations of a dynamic reality that punctures normative discourse.

A few years after writing these pieces in Greenwich Village, Barnes moved to Paris and led a chic literary life as an ex-patriate for the next decade, becoming a recognizable figure in the explosive art scene of the time in her signature black cape (both "fashion and disguise") (Caselli 16). There, she was friends with Mina Loy, lovers with Marcel Duchamp, patronized by Natalie Barney and a patron to Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, a collaborator with T.S Eliot, and mildly antagonistic with Ezra Pound (whose attempts at seduction she rebuffed) (Herring 116; 134; 144; 190; 259; 289). She had an insider's perspective on a community defined, in Paris, by its outsider status. It was here that she wrote her masterpiece.

Nightwood is remembered as a cult classic. Its language is too rich to digest, and its plot meanders unpredictably in defiance of ingrained literary expectations. Flitting between locations in Europe and America, the text traces three amorous entanglements and their fallout alongside the notorious Doctor O'Connor, who seems to be tracing the characters' lives as well, providing commentary and timely introductions. Robin is constantly evading others' projections. One might think this would result in isolation, but in fact it is her rejection of each hierarchical encounter that enables to her to keep seeking forms of mutuality. Throughout the novel she forms affinities with nonhuman beings from fungi to statues, culminating in Nora and Robin's viscerally embodied reunion in the conclusion, mediated by Nora's dog. Robin's dance with the dog in *Nightwood*'s coda has been read as her "progressive descent toward animality" (Kannenstine 121) or evidence of her failure to attain "the human state" where "identity" congeals from the primordial soup (Frank 440). Such readings take at face value the boundaries that designate what it means to be human in the early twentieth century, but Barnes did exactly the opposite.

Though it is a *roman à clef*, no one key unlocks this novel, as any first-time reader is likely to testify. Its characters are all people who would have been seen as dangerous deviants by the fascist regime emerging in Europe at the very moment Barnes was writing—"a horrid sideshow of freaks," in T. S. Eliot's words (Eliot xxii). Jane Marcus was first to designate *Nightwood* a historical novel; in her 1989 essay "Laughing at Leviticus" she argues, "Barnes's portraits of the abject constitute a political case, a kind of feminist anarchist call for freedom from fascism" (Marcus 144). Barnes creates a space for lesbian lovers, a Jewish pretender to aristocracy, and a doctor who dabbles in feminine dress in a story set in Europe immediately prior to World War 2. Her embrace of abjection has consequences for both her subject matter and her rhetorical approach. Long-standing critical tradition fetishizes or pathologizes the inaccessibility of Barnes' writing, perhaps initiated by her early publisher Guido Bruno who "generally presented her as a risqué lesbian poet whom tourists would do well to read and gawk at" (Herring 215). In a challenge to this trend, the Daniela Caselli argues in 2009 that Barnes' is a fundamentally "improper modernism," a "still unacknowledged poetics" that has been read for generations as incoherence (Caselli 2). Her poetics addresses anyone unrecognized by cultural discourse, a motley community of misfits with their own, irrepressible creativity.

Nightwood's infamous coda exults in the dissolution of the human construct as Robin's performance of subjectivity becomes entwined with nonhuman others. She ambles through the countryside in aesthetic revelry:

> pulling at the flowers, speaking in a low voice to the animals. Those that came near, she grasped, straining their fur back until their eyes were narrowed and their teeth bare, her own teeth showing as if her hand were upon her own neck. (*Nightwood* 177)

Receptive and invasive, Robin's entanglement with her environment abides no segregations. This distributed love story culminates in a game of mirroring, playful embodiments of intimacy. When Robin finally erupts into a fit of barking alongside her erstwhile lover's dog, she relishes in the materiality of interaction itself. Joseph Frank, an early critic of *Nightwood*, claims that "the tension between the animal and the human is tearing Robin's life apart" (Frank 446), and though the tension is real, it is not indicative of a torn binary but a proliferation of dynamic bonds, a nonhumanist revelation. In boy's trousers, Robin romps and collapses with the dog, a microcosm of the whole novel: Nora, on the side-lines, witnesses Robin's interaction with difference, "the activation of two 'becomings-with'" (*Staying* 25). The coda's title, "The Possessed," can be taken as an invocation both of enchantment and of property (dogs are legally categorized as "chattel"). Robin rebukes the authority of the word over the body – the logocentric assumption that socially coordinated identities can be affixed to material entities and control their influence. Her affinity with the dog partly relies on their parallel situations as unruly bodies that have been interpellated into a position of attachment to Nora's desires.

Robin, the taciturn somnambulist, drives femininity beyond humanity and towards radical allegiances. We see her first lying

> on a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly over-sung by the notes of unseen birds […] The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea, making her seem as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire. Her flesh was the texture of plant life. (*Nightwood* 37-8)

The earth is made of flesh and human flesh is made of plant life, a disorienting "confusion" of categories. Robin exhales perfume, extending her self beyond her boundaries, and a layered exchange of nonhuman bodies and voices envelops her. She is presented through her own ecology, defined by her position within it. Robin's affinities go ever further to transgress the boundary of life itself; we also come to know her through her kinships with a world of lifeless things. Criticism of *Nightwood* often lights upon the doll that Robin gives to Nora, an inanimate testament to their love and "monstrosity" (*Nightwood* 151). Less commented upon is *Nightwood's* interest in statues.

The spectacle of an object come to life sets the tone of the book early on with a performance by "living statues," entertainment and decor at the Count's party (*Nightwood* 16). A statue links Robin and Nora:

> as her eyes moved over the façades of the buildings, searching for the sculptured head that both she and Nora loved (a Greek head with shocked protruding eyeballs, for which the tragic mouth seemed to pour forth tears), a quiet joy radiated from her own eyes; for this head was remembrance of Nora and her love. (*Nightwood* 65)

Robin mimics the statue's eyes and sees in it a materialization of her connection with Nora, an aspect of herself that resides outside of herself, displaced onto a Greek head. And conversely, a statue plays a role in tearing Robin and Nora apart:

> looking out into the garden in the faint light of dawn, she saw a double shadow falling from the statue, as if it were multiplying […] Robin's eyes and hers met. So they gazed at each other. As if that light had power to bring what was dreaded into the zone of their catastrophe, Nora saw the body of another woman swim up into the

> statue's obscurity […] her arms about Robin's neck, her body pressed to Robin's. (*Nightwood* 70)

Robin, like the statue, seems indifferent to Nora, unclaimable. Her demonstration that she is not Nora's anymore takes place in the statue's shadow, a nod to their shared impenetrability. Opaque and uncommunicative, Robin leaves Nora with empty hands.

The ensemble that gathers around Robin tries and fails to exert various types of mastery over her, imagining her as the object through which they can anchor their subjectivities. However, she is a blank slate who will accept no one's inscriptions, insistently maintaining her blankness. In an effort to "shape" her, Felix marries her and makes her pregnant (Frank 442), but he "was not sufficient to make her what he had hoped" (*Nightwood* 48). Nora yearns "to keep her" but learns that "there was no way but death" to do so (*Nightwood* 63). Jenny too ultimately admits that "she did not understand anything Robin felt or did," an "unendurable" marker of their affair's dissolution (*Nightwood* 177). Literally every statement Robin makes throughout *Nightwood* is an escape, a repudiation of some imposition, and her lovers come to be defined as characters by their unfulfilled desires. She is introduced while in need of medical attention, which she denies, claiming "I was alright" and sending her escorts away (*Nightwood* 39; 42). She curses at Felix and tells him to "Go to hell" while in labor, then abandons her child, saying, "I didn't want him!" (*Nightwood* 52-3) Slipping out of Felix's life and into another story, she meets Nora at a circus and urges this new co-conspirator to leave with her – "Let's get out of here!" (*Nightwood* 60) – before leaving Nora too: "In the doorway Robin stood. 'Don't wait for me,' she said" (*Nightwood* 64). Robin's history is a record of the people who want to read themselves through her, but she can never be fully described or possessed.

Each escape is characterized by Robin's wandering tendencies. Sometimes described as sleepwalking, Robin's compulsive walks are "intermittent" and "disinterested" (*Nightwood* 53). They seem more of a tribute to movement than the pursuit of any particular destination or purpose, a "formless meditation" that gives license to her thoughts, "in themselves a form of locomotion" (*Nightwood* 65). This is why Robin cannot be kept, even by love like Nora's: "In Nora's heart lay the fossil of Robin, intaglio of her identity, and about it for its maintenance ran Nora's blood" (*Nightwood* 61-2). Here, the true beloved object is an image of Robin that has been engraved upon Nora and which Nora alone nourishes, a shell that the real Robin evolved beyond and left behind. At the beginning of their relationship Robin and Nora are "apart from the world in their appreciation of the world," looking out from a circumscribed interiority with "their two heads and their four hands" (*Nightwood* 62-3), but the enclosure of their intimacy quickly becomes claustrophobic for Robin. This image resembles Aristophanes' treatise on love in the *Symposium,* which details an original state of wholeness in which two-headed, eight-limbed beings enjoy "terrible" "strength and power," provoking the gods into slicing these wholes into gendered halves that are possessed with a longing "to grow together" (Plato 47; 48). Nora imagines herself as having returned to a blissful state of nature in which Robin is literally encased within her body, the peak of proximity, but we can see the inevitability of their parting in this same instant. Aristophanes' vision is explicitly drawn from pre-history, and Barnes' novel, despite containing few actual dates, is firmly situated between World Wars. History will not stay contained in the margin, so utopian wholeness can never persist.

Barnes' friend and critic Emily Coleman referred to *Nightwood* as a "new kind of failure," critiquing its "lack of philosophy, its refusal to focus exclusively on the story of

Nora and Robin, its alleged inability to be a new Greek tragedy or a modernist Othello" (Caselli 167). I argue that the book articulates its love story, modeled on Barnes' real-life relationship with Thelma Wood, precisely by refusing to isolate it. Robin's three romantic entanglements gain significance through their juxtaposition; Felix Volkbein is the man Nora rescues Robin from and Jenny Petherbridge is the woman that steals her. They all become so intertwined that an account of any one of their identities would have to include the others. *Nightwood* establishes the meaning of each person, event or relationship through its manifestation within a populous context. Such relational thinking, as Coleman's comment suggests, is incompatible with conventional reading practices.

In one Doctor O'Connor's many rants, he articulates *Nightwood*'s logic, a materialist poetics. Over the course of his rambling tirade, the meaning of "night" takes on new valences in new environments. Rather than referring to one idealistic version of night that covers all land indiscriminately, the doctor perceives (in lavish detail) the many nighttimes of different lands—"the nights of one period are not the nights of another. Neither are the nights of one city the nights of another" (*Nightwood* 88). Barnes reinterprets the night by relating its situated manifestations, a dance of discourse and aesthetic experiences. "The night has been going on for a long time" and language has an "alchemy" that connects these disparate nights to each other, but it cannot iron out their diversity (*Nightwood* 120; 122). Characters emerge the same way:

> [Robin] recognized the doctor. She had seen him somewhere. But, as one may trade ten years at a certain shop and be unable to place the shopkeeper if he is met in the street or in the promenoir of a theatre, the shop being a portion of his identity, she struggled to place him now that he had moved out of his frame. (*Nightwood* 40)

The doctor is described as tapping into different aspects of his identity in different "frame[s]." Essentially, context acts like a prosthesis. What we call the self is, for Barnes, a flexible sequence of embodiments, erroneously perceived through logocentric mystification.

Despite her characteristic reticence, Robin's body is a loquacious object, and Barnes' prose performs the ekphrasis through which it speaks. When Felix is introduced to Robin, he feels that "he was looking upon a figurehead in a museum, which though static, no longer roosting on its cutwater, seemed yet to be going against the wind" (*Nightwood* 41). Early in their courtship she is described as "gracious and yet fading, like an old statue in a garden, that symbolizes the weather through which it has endured, and is not so much the work of man as the work of wind and rain and the herd of the seasons" (*Nightwood* 45). Instead of capturing some aspect of the surrounding world in an art object in the tradition of John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819), Barnes reads the body as an object to artistically uncover the influence the world has exerted upon it, positing ekphrasis as a tool through which a lived history can be reconstructed from a material form. Bodies are rendered as monuments, testimonies to personal histories that chronicle layers of varied influence, the mark of many sculptors.

Valueless Bodies: Leonora Carrington

Bodies, human and nonhuman alike, exceed and resist the narratives projected on them. However, managing bodies, particularly women's bodies, is a precondition for capitalist accumulation. Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) tracks the satisfaction of this condition through the witch-burnings that accompanied the transition from feudalism to capitalism. "Like the land, the body had to be cultivated," adapted to capital's needs,

which means that "those irrationalities were eliminated that stood in the way of the transformation of the individual and social body into a set of predictable and controllable mechanisms" (Federici 140; 144). If the irrational force of the body could be burned on a stake, a perfect labor machine would remain. Humanist ideals would burn away anything that registers as gendered, racialized, animalistic, or supernatural. The system of rationality that domesticates "all bodily powers into work powers" restricts potential under the pretense of harnessing it (Federici 140).

Leonora Carrington conceives an apocalypse that destroys such social mechanisms. The historical collapses into the speculative when an ice age reverses the planet's polarity, wipes out society, and an era of nonhuman camaraderie begins. Carrington's catastrophic imaginary challenges the common sense of the status quo as an absurdist delirium gradually overwhelms the narrative's grasp on "what you call reasonable" (*Hearing* 24). She depicts the break-down of societal management of the body, removing restraints on collectivity.

The Hearing Trumpet was written when the author absconded to Mexico in the 1940s, though ascertaining an exact date is difficult because the text was lost for years before being published in 1974 (Byatt vii). Carrington spent the late 30's in Paris with the Surrealist circle. After her lover Max Ernst was interned in a French concentration camp, she suffered a breakdown and her wealthy parents had her committed to an insane asylum, where she was treated with chemical shock therapy and pronounced "incurably insane" (Morris 74). She fled Europe to avoid further institutionalization; "she felt as if she was on the run from both Hitler and her father" (Moorhead). She would spend the next 60 years in Mexico painting and writing.

Carrington's protagonist too is institutionalized at the beginning of her novel. When the family decides to send her to a facility for elderly women, she is torn from her ecosystem:

> "The dreadful recurrent thought was first: 'The cats, what will become of the cats? then Carmella, what about Carmella on a Monday morning, and the red hen?' […] We connect ourselves with walls, roofs, and objects just as we hang on to our livers, skeletons, flesh and bloodstream. (*Hearing* 16-7).

To Marian, the red hen who lays an egg on her bed each morning is irreplaceable, and she continues thinking of him until late in the novel. Carmella is a cherished confidant thought to be based upon the painter Remedios Varo, with whom Carrington shared a collaborative friendship in Mexico ("El Mundo" 10). Marian's material and social environment constitutes her being – these connections exhibit most viscerally the value that capitalism is unable to register.

In a capitalist environment, everything is valued according to a quantitative appraisal as intrinsic value disappears into exchange value. Mark Fisher's unfinished introduction to *Acid Communism*, which he was working on in 2017 before his death, urges his readers to "focus on what capital must always obstruct: the collective capacity to produce, care and enjoy" (*Acid Communism).* His 2012 chapter "Post-Capitalist Desire" also centers joy by arguing that consumer capitalism's libidinal attractions must be met with "a counterlibido, not simply an anti-libidinal dampening" ("Post-Capitalist" 134). Fisher challenges the capitalist monopoly on pleasure, asking for a political movement that might "celebrate, rather than mourn, the disintegration of existing socialities and territorialities," and find in that disintegration new sources of joy endemic to an "alien future" ("Post-Capitalist" 133).

The joy Marian finds in people, animals, and objects emanates from her embeddedness in an interactive context. For her, n*othing* is seamlessly exchangeable because each thing's identity is influenced so profoundly by its context. She begins the novel with a community of kin at home, bonds intimately with the other inhabitants of the institution, and then welcomes another set of companions after the apocalypse, always extending herself in new directions. Carrington's Surrealism attends to the absolute specificity of each entity's embodiment and perceives the aspects of value for which exchange value cannot account. Not only perceives—relishes. Despite her family's insistence that her own body is useless and hideous, she takes great pleasure in it: "The fact that I have no teeth and never could wear dentures does not in any way discomfort me," the "short grey beard which conventional people would find repulsive" strikes her as "rather gallant," and she states that "I have a death grip on this haggard frame as if it were the limpid body of Venus herself" (*Hearing* 3; 5; 17). She is perfectly positioned to watch the world end and "[contemplate] the ruins peacefully" (*Hearing* 177).

The Hearing Trumpet luxuriates in aestheticized impressions of each material body's absolute specificity and in the self that is not-self, the power that is bound up in intimacies with external agents. Carrington presents such entanglements as a nonhuman sensorium, epitomized by Marian's hearing trumpet. This precious tool, a gift from Carmella, is essentially an external organ. Marian registers its "aesthetic presence" first, the beauty of its ornate motifs, and then adds that it allows her to hear what people are saying to her for the first time in years (which she really has not missed) (*Hearing* 3). She comes to rely on her hearing trumpet to "spy" on people, particularly her family, who presume that she is oblivious to their conversations. In other words, her inanimate appendage enables her to

navigate her environment with unexpected power, extending the affordances of her body. She is generally considered subhuman and, through her allies and accoutrements, gradually becomes more than human, a magical crone with an ensemble of co-conspirators. “The world had to be ‘disenchanted’ in order to be dominated,” and Marian re-enchants it (Federici 174).

Once displaced to the institution, she needs her collectives more than ever. Carmella explains that “institutions, in fact, are not allowed to *like* anything. They don’t have time,” and Marian is reluctantly integrated into their schedule (*Hearing* 17). Though he has the authority to regiment the movements of her body, inwardly Marian staunchly refuses to be “bettered” by the “Sanctified Psychologist” Dr. Gambit, who foists upon his residents a program called “the Work” (*Hearing* 42). The women are taught that only after years of toil can they hope to glimpse the meaning of the Work that is meant to save their souls. In practice, the Work entails controlled movements as well as severe emotional and spiritual control—the women are worked *upon* in the process of becoming practitioners of the Work. Dr. Gambit surveils each individual to cure them of their “psychic deformities” and “degenerate habits,” thereby increasing their “spiritual profit” (*Hearing* 57; 51). He especially condemns daydreaming as a drain on the women’s energy, energy that is needed for the Work (*Hearing* 73).

Marian suggests that Gambit is monetizing morality, pointing out that "all this talk about vicious greed no doubt helped the economy of feeding senile old women” (*Hearing* 61). She begins to foment rebellion amongst the residents, galvanized by her encounter with another influential object. The very moment in which Marian is first being introduced to the Work, she sees a large oil painting hanging in the dining room—this “meeting” between Marian and the painting initiates the chain of events that ends in the apocalypse. It depicts a

"strange and malicious" nun and, though she finds it implausible at first, Marian cannot shake the impression that the nun is winking (*Hearing* 36). The name Marian imagines for the nun, Doña Rosalinda Alvarez Cruz del la Cueva, inexplicably turns out to be correct, and she becomes increasingly preoccupied with uncovering the background of this woman whom she eventually considers "an old friend, an imaginary friend, of course" (*Hearing* 91). Rosalinda's official biography conceals a story of witchcraft and intrigue and the process of uncovering the shocking truth takes over Marian's narrative.

Rosalinda represents a transgressive playfulness that cuts through convention. As Abbess, she led her convent in orgiastic dancing, administered to them with her extensive knowledge of herbs, and roamed the countryside in the disguise of a bearded nobleman (*Hearing* 103). *The Hearing Trumpet*'s detour into the past as it pieces together Doña Rosalinda's story is also the beginning of its spiral into hallucinatory freedom. As Marian recovers hidden histories, coherent narratives fall apart in the present, punctuated by increasingly Surreal prose that accompanies the dawning of the apocalyptic event. We also find that Rosalinda was rereading history herself, researching the secrets of Mary Magdalene and the holy grail and disputing biblical narrative (*Hearing* 95; 115). Carrington suggests that coherence is a product of discursive worldbuilding that represses the material realities which contradict it.

The residents of the institution, emboldened by their research into Rosalinda, go on a hunger strike. Afterwards they can no longer be induced to Work:

> we have absolutely no intention of letting ourselves be intimidated by your beastly routine ever again. Although freedom has come to us somewhat late in life, we have no intention of throwing it away again. Many of us have passed our lives with

> domineering and peevish husbands. When we were finally delivered of these we were chivvied around by our sons and daughters who not only longer loved us, but considered us a burden and objects of ridicule and shame. Do you imagine in your wildest dreams that now we have tasted freedom we are going to let ourselves be pushed around once more by you and your leering mate? (*Hearing* 154)

The women take great pleasure in the disintegration of all recognizable structures of authority, private and public. They spin gleefully in circles, immersed in "the joy of rhythmic dance […] which poured energy into our decrepit carcasses" (*Hearing* 148). Dr. Gambit makes fresh appeals to them every day, but the collective is "unmovable," and they extend their rebellion to ever-wider contexts: "It is impossible to understand how millions and millions of people all obey a sickly collection of gentlemen than call themselves 'Government!'" (*Hearing* 149; 158)

The "small mutiny" Marian instigates is not depicted in terms of anger or violence, but rather, an effusion of joy that can no longer be suppressed (*Hearing* 65). Marian is portrayed with an internal buoyancy that is never dampened by her environmental obstacles. Her sense of humor in narrating even the most unpleasant occurrences dominates the tone, though it does cost her significant effort: "nobody understands my mortal fight to keep on my feet and not to lose my inspired joy of life" (*Hearing* 33). The "reasonable" people in the novel, primarily her family and Dr. Gambit, are the antagonists who make this struggle so difficult, whereas her delightfully unreasonable co-conspirators fuel her. Marian often expresses her appreciation for "that wonderful strange power" that "becomes manifested when I am in harmonious communication with some other inspired being like myself" (*Hearing* 33). While civilization holds sway, it restrains these communions, keeping her from

Carmella and the cats and the red hen, but afterwards no such restraint is possible (Carmella and the cats quickly join Marian's post-apocalyptic collective, but alas, it is too late for the hen).

The overthrow of Dr. Gambit's authority swells dramatically and spreads to a global scale. It is difficult to trace causality at this point in the novel, but the climactic moment of Marian's personal narrative correlates with the poles switching places, an ice age beginning, and most big cities being overrun by peaceful abominable snowpeople:

> Days and nights were distributed unevenly. The sun never reached its zenith but sank at about midday. The earth seemed to be limping around its orbit seeking balance in the new order. […] we saw no human beings, though there were plenty of birds and animals in the region. Deer, pumas and even monkeys had come from the mountains and wandered about in the region looking for food. We did not consider hunting them. The New Ice Age should not be initiated with the slaughter of our fellow beings. (*Hearing* 179)

The former residents of Dr Gambit's institution, including Carmella, the cats, a wolfpack and a werewoman, make a home in the rubble in a state of relieved hilarity. The final chapters crescendo into dizzying images of inter-species collectivity and a sequence of myths and conspiracies that tie everything to everything with manic certainty. A body made of millions of bees speaks prophesies and Marian is boiled into soup alongside one carrot and two onions, her "companions in distress" (*Hearing* 197; 176). The soup is Carrington's ultimate metaphor for nonhumanist identity, a space for the commingling of an eclectic collection of bodies whose borders decay as they soak in the richness of their peers.

Apparently, many similar mutinies are taking place across the world; the collective receives news of the Earth's few survivors, the bunker built to "shelter lives considered precious by the government," and its conquest by a coven of witches (*Hearing* 183). After the fall of social order, hierarchies that dictate the relative value of bodies lose their power. Marian complains at the beginning that her son "considers kindness to inanimate creatures a waste of time" with reference to herself, and relates more to her cactus, which "seems alive to me, so I feel I can also make claims on existence" (*Hearing* 12). Post-apocalypse, there is space for her private sense of relation to the "inanimate" to extend to the entire landscape. Social power has intervened in her communities and riven her connections over and over, but just as persistently, she creates new ones, new iterations of herself made possible by interactions with each new environment, and by the end these connections are allowed to flourish. The motive behind Marian's initial institutionalization is to prevent social contamination—her embodied defiance of norms is seen as unhealthy for the social body. This is a central preoccupation for every authority she encounters, from her son to Dr Gambit. The hysterical communion of the conclusion realizes their worst fears: a milieu in which humanity is completely overrun.

The figures in Carrington's "The Pomps of the Subsoil" (1947) may be overrun, but they are extended and enriched by their nonhuman imbrication [FIG.11]. Three humanoid women and a diverse array of bird species cluster around a young tree. Whitney Chadwick explains the title as a reference to psychopomps, a name for the many figures across cultures and time periods whose role it is to guide the dead to the underworld ("Pilgrimage"). The underworld connotation is reinforced by the nighttime setting, and taken alongside the almost ceremonial gathering to honor new life, the themes in this painting echo *The Hearing*

Trumpet. The novel starts late in the evening of capitalist civilization and Marian's collective escorts this world to its death in the interest of facilitating an otherworldly rebirth. In both works, beings merge into each other and their environment—this is the crucial reality that society fails to accommodate but which Carrington celebrates in her illustrations of post-apocalyptic possibility.

Karl Marx writes in his "Comments on James Mill" (1844) that, in an unalienated version of work, "Our productions would be so many mirrors reflecting our nature" – in Carrington's version, it is the nonhuman conditions of human life that we see reflected in post-apocalyptic production. Marian's playful internal world spills out and creates new conditions for the imagination:

> "Ice ages pass, and although the world is frozen over we suppose someday grass and flowers will grow again. In the meantime I keep a daily record on three wax tablets. After I die Anubeth's werecubs will continue the document, till the planet is peopled with cats, werewolves, bees and goats. We all fervently hope it will be an improvement on humanity" (*Hearing* 199)

After the cataclysms she has witnessed, Marian can finally visualize a livable future. Though her collective does not produce the kind of development that Dr. Gambit would recognize, it does continue to engage and rearrange the environment.

The book ends by emphasizing the efficacy of post-apocalyptic play. Marian has been yearning to travel to Lapland, a region of Finland, for her entire life. Restrained by financial concerns and then the borders of her institution, it appeared to be an impossible dream. However, she calculates that after the apocalyptic scrambling of time and space that de-standardizes daylight and switches the planet's polarity, her collective has ended up in the

very region where Lapland used to be. She closes the text smiling: “If the old woman can’t go to Lapland, then Lapland must come to the Old Woman” (*Hearing* 199). Marian does not get where she is going by progressing laboriously from point A to point B, but rather, by playfully reorganizing the world.

The slippage between Marian’s roles as, on the one hand, a seer or medium with extrasensory perception in the language of Helen Byatt’s introduction, and on the other hand, a wildly hallucinating old woman, is crucial to interpreting Carrington’s intervention (Byatt v). The reader is bombarded with absurdities that seem to emanate from the mind of a madwoman, taunted with reasons to dismiss her. This would effectively reenact the novel’s original trauma, the institutionalization that was meant to seclude Marian from the “healthy” population. However, her mischievous and uncivilized behavior are the exact variables that make her visions a poignant critique of convention; hers is a view from a systematically unacknowledged perspective. She evokes and challenges the reader’s compulsion to diagnose and dismiss, to reductively appraise—that compulsion itself is the obstacle her work confronts.

Ab-Homine

Robin barking with the dog, Marian soaking in the soup… these interactions eschew ingrained hierarchies and boundaries. Material bodies in these texts testify to the overlap of the many stories projected onto them, the discursive gestures that activate various potentials. In resistance to patriarchal assumptions about their own bodies, Barnes and Carrington insist that objects exceed the narratives of objecthood. The body’s animacy is often read as irrational and a threat to the body-as-machine, the cornerstone of the capitalist order of

society. Far from deterring our artists, this is the crucial power implicit in their aesthetic subversions.

Each protagonist is explicitly "outside the 'human type'—a wild thing caught in a woman's skin" (*Nightwood* 155). Their nonhumanism partakes of animal, plant, and inanimate collaborators, challenging the claim of humanist categories on material objects. Barnes and Carrington build value from unpredictable collaborations to unravel the social power of narratives that masquerade as absolute value systems. *Nightwood's* coda, for instance, is read by Caselli as

> an extraordinary literalization of the etymological meaning of the term 'abomination', which derives from the Latin verb abominari, from ab 'away, from' and omen, omin 'omen.' However, as the New Oxford Dictionary states, 'it was once widely believed to be from ab 'away from' + Lat. homine (from homo 'human being'), thus 'inhuman, beastly', and frequently spelled abhominable until the 17th century. (Caselli 181)

Caselli shows that Robin, driven by a compulsion to interact across segregating categories, is estranging her "humanity." Importantly though, this speculation also traces the cultural salience of a *mistake*. Interpretation takes a fanciful detour from etymology and proceeds to encode a mutated version of meaning that then wields its own influence, pushing the dialectical construction of social concepts to the forefront and showing that the links between those concepts and their referents are multiple and temporary.

Humanity has long been defined as a self-identical category, but Robin and Marian wear significations as unstable as in the case of "abomination." These novels reject relationality between lover and beloved, worker and worked upon, that depends on objectification. These social roles seek to freeze signification in one place, projecting

absolute passivity. Not even “things” are completely under human control, as Barnes writes in ““David Belasco Dreams” (1916): “do you realize that you are – we all are – working on perishable things? That the sheet the author writes upon is maturing under his pen? That the very canvas the artist is laying his brush upon is aging under the stroke? That the very vaults that we hide them in are aging, too, and that nothing can protect and guard anything forever?” (Barnes qtd. in Caselli 17) The canvas contributes to the art it holds, like language itself, a transformative medium for making meaning of human experience. For Barnes and Carrington, language is not a tool to impose order but “the museum of their encounter” (*Nightwood* 7), an artifact of their interactivity with the environment.

Chapter 3

The Estrangement of Futurity: Lilith Lorraine & Pauline Hopkins

"Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well."

- Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) was published with an illustration by the Renaissance artist Ambrosius Holbein, a woodcutting of More's fictional landscape [FIG. 12].[8] The map holds a secret: if one envisions the bottom ship as teeth, a human skull appears.[9] This is inevitably the story of utopia – the perfect plan turns out to be only human after all, a reflection of histories and biases rather than futures – and More's text, the apparent origin of the genre, announces this limitation visually.

It may be impossible to construct a genuine "elsewhere" from within a situated perspective, but then how can we see outside of our own situations? Utopian thinking can play a part in changing human imaginaries even without tapping into the truly ideal. Pauline Hopkins' and Lilith Lorraine's fictions place utopian ideas within the world to trouble the naturalization of the status quo while still resisting idealized alternatives, revising generic convention as well as conventions about how we relate to the future.

Utopia's founder "cut a channel fifteen miles wide where their land joined the continent," creating an artificial island to establish borders between the pure enclosure and outside contamination (More 31). A traditional utopia must be separated from the world to preserve its integrity. This is where it becomes incompatible with tentacular thinking, as "that

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[8] The image reproduced here is from the third edition of More's book, published in 1518. Both the original 1516 illustration and this one were made by Ambrosius Holbein.

[9] "The sixteenth century viewer might have perceived in the image the meaning that the Humanist Reformation text of the book was a product of man's mortal mind, rather than the eternal certainty of God, and that is why it is shown originating from within the skull of a man" (Bishop 111).

kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplace, entangled and worldly" (*Staying* 4). Hopkins and Lorraine portray utopian agents that estrange humanist reason, redirecting the narrative focus from the delineation of perfection to engagement with alien perspectives. Lorraine's utopian strangers intervene in Earth's social order, and Hopkins' protagonist becomes a stranger to himself when he travels through a utopian city. Meanwhile, More's narrative is related by a stranger who thoroughly explicates the utopian society to which he has traveled; utopia is not *there* for the diegetic or extra-diegetic audience to interact with but rather something remembered, something untouchable. In defiance of this tradition, Hopkins and Lorraine ask how projections of nowhere interact with situated knowledge.

Lorraine was among the first women to earn a reputation in the science fiction pulp magazines *Amazing Stories* and *Science Wonder Quarterly*, such a dramatic reputation that her speculative poetry ended up in an FBI file.[10] Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood* (1902-3) is an example of Afrofuturist fiction published over 90 years before Mark Dery coined the term (Womack 16). It recounts the discovery of a hidden, futuristic Ethiopian city that I read as a heterotopia. Both authors are attracted to drastic transformation and skeptical of proposed solutions to social problems. Above all, they critique interpretations of the future that amount to the uninterrupted progression of the present.

Cultural models of the future are shaped by present power dynamics. N.K. Jemisin's essay "How Long 'til Black Future Month?" (2013) points out the whitewashing in "The Jetsons" and its complete naturalization: "there's nobody even slightly brown in the Jetsons' world. […] Thing is, not-white-people make up most of the world's population, now as well

[10] As Lisa Yaszek and Patrick B. Sharp write, "to this day she is perhaps the only person whose FBI file includes speculative poetry as proof that she was an 'advanced radical'" (*Sisters* 106).

as back in the Sixties when the show was created. So what happened to all those people, in the minds of this show's creators?" The redaction of reality necessary to conceive the all-white future of "The Jetsons" reflects the way humanist culture perceives its own progress. In other words, this imaginary implies a simultaneous refusal to imagine, foreclosing Black futurity.

Jemisin's questions about "what happened" to make the world of "the Jetsons" possible introduce an issue central to utopian studies. She suggests an apocalypse, a pogrom, and segregation, each of which, if they had not been erased, would certainly compromise the show's relatively utopian presentation, its idealization of the nuclear family. Carl Freedman identifies a similar disregard for the transition into utopia that characterizes very different manifestations of the genre. He discusses pre-SF literary utopias like More's in connection to the utopian Socialism that Marx and Engels condemned:[11]

> both produce impossibly detailed abstract maps of a place (or rather a no-place) in which no one has ever stepped. Accordingly, both versions of utopia suffer from a metaphysical flatness or hollowness, from a failure of genuine concreteness: both tend to present themselves as, in Engels's phrase, the 'accidental discovery of this or that ingenious brain.' Though both manifest expressly collective concerns, both covertly depend on the perspective of individualism. (Freedman 95)

Utopia is an idea with no body, but that does not mean that it is free of the influence of the material world. Every utopian vision is determined by the positionality of the visionary and can never deliver on its promise of universal perfection. It can even result in Jetsons futures

[11] Marx and Engels condemned utopian Socialism in defense of their own, "scientific" Socialism.

in which white supremacy reigns unquestioned. The blueprint of utopia, then, is perhaps less interesting and revealing than "what happened" to make it that way.

The process of transformation is the emphasis in Lorraine and Hopkins' utopias. They take advantage of the way utopian thinking disrupts established norms without presenting utopia as a totality. A totality, in Frederic Jameson's words, is a "combination of closure and system, in the name of autonomy and self-sufficiency" (*Archaeologies* 5). In Hopkins and Lorraine's work, utopia fragments into pieces. The utopian agent in each of Lorraine's stories integrates themselves into everyday life, "something like a foreign body within the social" that causes change with each contact, and Hopkins' heterotopia offers "a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on" (*Archaeologies* 16). Jameson refers to the hint of elsewhere that appears here and now as a "utopian impulse,"[12] "a restricted space of Utopian investment" within a larger world, "a part which cannot be the whole and yet attempts to express it" (*Archaeologies* 4). Jameson generally denounces the impulse as "mere lure and bait for ideology" (*Archaeologies* 3), but this chapter's fiction suggests otherwise. A utopian totality seeks to overwrite the world as it is, perceiving reality as a passive medium to be ordered by the human mind. Instead, the utopian impulse interprets preexisting material conditions as something with which to interact, a changeable but influential variable. Introducing a fragment of utopia into a heterogeneous environment produces a narrative that acknowledges and works alongside the agency of materiality, acknowledging the messiness of reality instead of taming it. As Donna Haraway asserts, "we do not need a totality in order to work well" (Cyborg 173).

[12] Jameson uses this phrase in reference to Ernest Bloch, who is discussed below.

Thomas More's utopia is a totality sealed into an island, but there is a tradition of utopian thinking that pre-dates his and that "is not necessarily defined in terms of a geographical place or an idealized, mirror society […] Using More to define utopianism unnecessarily restricts all utopianism to a back formation of his 1516 work, at the expense of other utopian possibilities" (Lochrie 3-4). Karma Lochrie's *Nowhere in the Middle Ages* (2016) identifies precedent in pre-modern texts in which utopia is figured as "'glimmers of knowledge'[13] that potentiate futures as yet unimagined," from Medieval dream visions to travel narratives (Lochrie 14). The predominant theorist of utopian impulses is Ernest Bloch, whose *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1953-1959) explores how the principle of hope animates real-world phenomena from music to Nazism. He relates to utopia not as "mere chronological forecasting, or in mechanistic and philistine notions of bourgeois 'progress,'" but rather as "an ultimate horizon […] that, because it lies on the far side of a revolutionary social transformation, can only be glimpsed in anticipatory bits and pieces," which became an influential idea in the post-Marxist Frankfurt School (Freedman 74; 94). His work sifts through fragments of utopia, testing each of their unique implications rather than suturing them together into a coherent program. Bloch lay the groundwork for contemporary critics such as Russell Jacoby, whose *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for An Anti-Utopian Age* (2005) abandons utopian blueprints (which he sees as responsible for utopia's totalitarian reputation) in favor of "iconoclastic utopians," who are not creators of future paradigms but "protesters and breakers of images" (Jacoby xv).

Utopia appears in the Lilith Lorraine stories "The Jovian Jest" (1930) and "The Celestial Visitor" (1935) in bits and pieces; namely, in the form of alien strangers. Both

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[13] Lochrie is quoting from William Morris' *Dream of John Ball* (1888).

feature utopian agents who disrupt society. “The Isle of Madness” (1935) depicts a utopian totality that falls into ruins when alienness erupts from within humanity. Pauline Hopkins’ *Of One Blood* (1902-3) locates a utopian enclave in Ethiopia. This array of diverse experimentations enables an equally diverse set of effects: a utopian agent provides a dialectical model of change, a sparring partner; a failed utopia critiques existent models of change; the transformative impact of crossing into a utopian space implies that the social environment enforces our sense of what is possible. I read Hopkins’ construct, the city of Telassar, as a heterotopia, Michel Foucault’s term for a space with “the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (Foucault 3). Foucault’s examples range from brothels to prisons to museums, any site that is permeable (unlike utopia) but sufficiently bounded to establish an internal set of relations that deviate from external norms: “Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory […] Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (Foucault 8). Regardless of the diverse internal norms of the heterotopias he describes, the process of moving between sites where distinctive norms reign is, in Foucault’s eyes, “the greatest reserve of the imagination” (Foucault 9).

Each manifestation of utopian thinking has its own specific cognitive effects, and their potential to feed the imagination is particularly crucial at a time when many theorists decry the imagination’s atrophy. Mark Fisher defines “capitalist realism” as the widespread sense that capitalism is the only viable political and economic system possible, and Frederic

Jameson claims it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (*Capitalist Realism;* "Future City"). Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) demonstrates that the idea of a redemptive future (represented by the child who needs protection) is deployed to reproduce normative social relations at the expense of queerness. In these arguments, radical acts of imagination are stifled by the predominance of stories in which the future is an extension of the exploitative power dynamics that shape the present.

Darko Suvin, the theorist credited with introducing critical theory to SF, published a poem in *Science Fiction Studies* called "Growing Old Without Yugoslavia" (1994) that wishes for a world in which it might be possible to "die gladly." He mourns that it seems impossible because the "economics of life are all wrong," corrupting the fantastic imaginaries that are supposed to enrich tomorrow: "Even if we find anti-gravity it will be for blowing up babies" (Suvin 124). This bleak sense of determinism suggests that SF imaginaries could easily be coopted and would fail to enact the revolutionary newness they are supposed to represent. If progress is defined in terms of capitalist realism, or the normative family unit, or white supremacy, it is not about change but the ever-expanding reach of systems that stay fundamentally the same.

Hopkins and Lorraine write about change rather than progress. They address obstacles to imagining the future by using utopian thinking to disrupt readings of the present and past. Hopkins' novel engenders a renewed consciousness of history, dispelling "a History that we cannot imagine except as ending, and whose future seems to be nothing but a monotonous repetition of what is already here" ("Future City"). Traveling through a heterotopia allows the protagonist to re-read his family's history as well as world history and

from this new vantage point, the future looks different. Lorraine's stories point to the historicity of the present, its contingency and malleability. Nevertheless, Lorraine and Hopkins' work is future-oriented in that it addresses human reason's failures of imagination, framing "progress" as a self-perpetuating crisis with material consequences.

Working to extricate assumptions about progress means questioning how we fit into our historical moment. Elizabeth Grosz's *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (2004) argues that the purpose of political struggle is "bringing into existence futures that dislocate themselves from the dominant tendencies and forces of the present," which ruptures the perceived continuity of time: "[Time] is a kind of evanescence that appears only at those moments when our expectations are (positively or negatively) surprised" (Grosz 5). In these terms, utopian impulses function for Lorraine and Hopkins as "nicks, disruptions or upheavals—events that disrupt our immersion in and provoke our conceptualization of temporal continuity, events that also make up the unpredictable emergences of our material universe" (Grosz 5). These utopias are the untimely anomalies that make new trajectories possible.

The truly impactful aspect of utopian literature, then, is not the ideals expressed in its content but the process of transformation it narrates and performs. Utopia posits spaces in which history has ended such as the home-worlds of Lorraine's alien visitors and Hopkins' city of Telassar, which have reached states of timeless equilibrium. However, these are not the spaces in which the stories are centered; the point is the way contact with utopia affects reality. The narratives illuminate the fact that here and now, history is still unfolding, and it could be doing so in alien ways. In other words, Hopkins and Lorraine respond to the fraught

problem of conceiving the future through interactions with utopia. Encountering these alien ways of thinking becomes the ultimate resource for revitalizing an atrophied imagination.

Utopian agents make the naturalized seem changeable through estrangement. Bertolt Brecht's neologism *Verfrendung,* translated as 'estrangement' by Darko Suvin, was adopted in 1936 to replace *Entfremdung* or 'alienation'; Károly Pintér's *The Anatomy of Utopia* (2010) explains that 'alienation' was already a well-established philosophical concept "with an overwhelmingly negative meaning" whereas

> in Brecht's dramatic theory, on the other hand, estrangement functions as a positive idea, a ploy to create distance between the familiar reality and the observer and, as a result, make the familiar look strange, ironic, grotesque, unusual. The shock produced by such de-familiarization is a creative one, because it generates reflection, criticism and a new kind of insight in the observer. (Pintér 29)

Both of these terms imply a distancing effect that, for Brecht, is "necessary to all understanding. When something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world' it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up" (Brecht 71). Estrangement, however, implies an act of creation in addition to a kind of deconstruction. Achieving critical distance from human norms clears the way for a new knowledge of the nonhuman.

Estrangement is both the prying loose of what one knows and the introduction of something unknown. Patrick Parrinder's introduction to *Learning from Other Worlds* (2001) interprets estrangement in two steps: the apperception of something "external, independent and strange" and "the epistemological labour of bringing-to-knowledge […] a painstaking, unpredictable process, involving the twists and turns, the obstacles and dead ends typical of all intellectual enquiry" (Parrinder 6). Parrinder writes that the more we know about the

Moon, the less likely it is to "surprise and astonish us in the act of touching it," characterizing estrangement as "the result of coming to understand what is just within, and was formerly beyond, our mental horizons" (Parrinder 7). Estrangement is addition by subtraction, subtraction by addition. Jameson argues that SF performs "an essentially epistemological function," not because of the knowledge offered by a utopian vision "so much as its capacity to generate new ones"—the proliferation of imagination is contagious (*Archaeologies* xiv; xv).

Jameson's introduction to *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) ends with a declaration of "anti-anti-Utopianism" (*Archaeologies* xvi). The connotation of utopia was tainted in the twentieth century and, in the twenty-first century, "an age of permanent emergencies, more than ever we have become narrow utilitarians dedicated to fixing, not reinventing" (Jacoby ix). However, both Jameson and Jacoby (despite their differences) urge us to be as skeptical of anti-utopianism as we are of utopian blueprints. The response cannot be "to trade utopian dreams for home security systems" – culture needs a way to imagine what does not yet exist (Jacoby 148). The political role of narrative utopia is to bring the non-existent into reality; for instance, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) galvanized the women's movement by creating a space for ideas with no ready place in contemporaneous culture (March-Russell 65). Hopkins and Lorraine seem to express both that sense of possibility represented by utopia's political purposes and the threat represented by its proclivity to violent idealism. In their fiction, encountering utopian agents and passing through utopian spaces has an alchemical effect on the imagination, and the transformative interaction therein, rather than the utopian content itself, is the engine of the future.

Utopian Fragments: Lilith Lorraine

Lilith Lorraine (a daring[14] pseudonym adopted by Mary Maude Wright) interpreted her artistic production as the production of possible futures. She founded the Avalon World Arts Academy and the magazines *Different* and *Flame* to foster science fiction and speculative poetry, noting that she felt responsible for guiding the genre away from "editorial fetishes" and the "stereotyped and standardized" norms she saw forming ("Cracks" 315). Lorraine invested her considerable energies and incurred material sacrifice to "make the world safe for the poetic temperament" and push beyond the "tattered banner of the 'avant garde'" (*Sisters* 256; "*Different*" 324; 321).

Although at one point she included on a list of pet peeves "Poets who wail that they 'do not understand' modern poetry or any kind of poetry beyond the range of the ten-year old mind. (With apologies to the normal child of that age)" (Wright 28), Lorraine became virulently anti-modernist in the late nineteen-forties. A fellow science fiction writer, Stanton Coblentz, founded the League for Sanity in Poetry and recruited Lorraine to write in opposition to figureheads such as Ezra Pound (at whom the League's name was spitefully targeted) (Filreis 222).[15] Al Filreis' *Counter-Revolution of the Word* (2008) suggests that much of the anti-modernist sentiment in America was motivated by fear of Communist influence, an unexpected affiliation for Lorraine, who published a poem in the prominent Marxist magazine *New Masses* in August of 1929. She was apparently "zealous" in both projects; Filreis writes that her efforts on behalf of the League "constituted an all-out culture war" (ibid.).

[14] She took the name of Lilith, Eve's less submissive predecessor in *Genesis*, because she believed "no one else would have the daring to take it" (Wright 23).
[15] Ezra Pound was institutionalized at St. Elizabeths psychiatric hospital for twelve years (Sieburth xxxviii).

In her work for the League and in her science fiction oeuvre, Lorraine took the position of the everyday people, who she felt were excluded from the modernist movement. The avant-garde, in her eyes, had rejected the general populace in favor of rarified circles of society:

> I have declined to be impressed by the anti-poets whom the people have repudiated. It is not the chopped prose, the buzz-saw rhythms, and the intellectual vaporings of these hostlers of the stable of Pegasus that the soldier carries into battle, that the preacher thunders from the pulpit, that the child learns from his text-book, that the pilgrim hurls as a shining weapon at the fearful shapes that close around him in the Valley of the Shadows. (*Let the Patterns Break* 13)

In this impassioned rant (just one of the many that appear in her editorials), Lorraine demands that art intervene in life and claims that her own work responds to the "cultural starvation of the American people" ("*Different*" 321). Through an independent magazine, she felt that she was able to avoid both modernist pretensions and the influence of advertisers who "must please everybody" and who therefore create "nothing which will have other than dubious entertainment value to a people confronted with vast and terrible problems and who are desperately seeking for guidance in history's darkest hour" ("*Different*" 329).

Though Lorraine disparaged the high modernists, her work participates alongside theirs in a tradition that interrogates embodiment, social change and subjective experience from a feminist perspective. Utopia is fragmented in each of the pieces included here and its shard, embedded in culture, defamiliarizes and newly politicizes humanist norms. Her story "The Isle of Madness" (1935) introduces a society that emerges from the ashes of a utopia, and "The Jovian Jest" (1930) and "The Celestial Visitor" (1935) present utopian agents that

rearrange everyday realities, destabilizing stimuli with unwieldy consequences. Lorraine writes about crafted mirages, telepathy and projected hallucinations; she imagines scientific experiments that renegotiate embodiment, social innovations that redefine the subject, and alien visitations. In each case, utopian desires manifest through an interface with unruly materiality, leaving narrative space for the unpredictable. Traditional, hegemonic utopias depend on perfectly controlled boundaries, but these fragmentary utopias incorporate the unpredictable dynamics of a physical environment full of influences. Lorraine portrays the future as a dialectic between utopian dreams and chaotic, worldly rejoinders.

Humanity is not exceeded but imploded in "The Isle of Madness," in which a utopian enclosure turns to ruin without ever being breached. The humans who fetishize purity become inhuman hybrids despite their seclusion, and outcasts inherit the Earth. Published in 1935, the story begins in 1925, when "indisputable statistics" alert the American public to a grave epidemic that is spreading insanity ("Isle" 653). The mad are exiled to an island in the name of protecting the future, extracted from society and "left, as it was believed, to slay each other in their frenzy" ("Isle" 654). They live beyond the defended borders of civilization, and civilized peoples are instructed to "shun the Island as a deadly cancer spot. Not even airships could fly over it, no traveller must visit it, no ship must touch its shores!" (ibid.) At "the least sign of 'differentness'" a citizen could be excommunicated by "the All-Seeing Eye of the Guardians of Normality," which establishes a sealed totality and molds the remaining population, resolving "all our troubles […] all discontent, all inharmony" (ibid.). Essentially, "The Isle of Madness" makes the mainland a utopia designed to optimize sanity as defined by the all-powerful Machine Kings.

The inhabitants of the condemned island fail to die out as expected though, and it is their descendants whom Lorraine's story follows. It turns out that the mad have a different term for those deemed unfit; "They were geniuses, and genius had become anathema, synonymous with atavism" (ibid.). Banished geniuses and the island's native populace found a sort of inverse utopia of outcasts, eventually propagating a community "well-nigh immortal" for whom "Government was scarcely needed, for all were governed from within" ("Isle" 655). After many centuries of prosperity, during which time they "reached out to *other* worlds" but maintained complete isolation from the human mainland, the islanders decide to "go Outside" and see what has become of Earth ("Isle" 656; 657). As their expedition travels across Chicago, New York, and San Francisco, they find desolate ruins, savage human wolves, and a written testimony to society's complete collapse. Despite gargantuan efforts to purify civilization (or because of them), animality erupts from within human boundaries. There are extraterrestrials in this story, but they are not the source of the threatening difference—that source is deeply intimate and ostensibly contained, but nearly proves deadly. In the end, the island's explorers reestablish a colony in New York that starts to rebuild the civilized world.

Since mainstream culture in "The Isle of Madness" sought so stringently to "repress every departure from the so-called norm," it was considered by its champions to be a purified human domain ("Isle" 665). Even the exiles seem to consider it as such; they decline to leave their island for so long because "we wanted only to forget, to maintain, at any cost, our faith in humanity" ("Isle" 656). This faith in a perfected human enclosure is, however, misplaced, as upon reentering it they are greeted with "an alien atmosphere," exactly what one would not expect to find there ("Isle" 658). The island's expedition refers to the human descendants

they find as "The Things" and describes them as "grotesque humans, strangely doubled over and with thick matted hair, writhing snake-like from awful, jutting heads" ("Isle" 660). A cordoned-off society of impeccably normative humans still somehow produces something utterly bizarre, a discovery that horrifies the explorers, shattering the loyalty they still held for the world that rejected them. The Machine Kings' utopia attempts to control the future, but their purity fetish fails them. Only the outcasts are able to adapt.

In her capacity as editor of *Different,* Lorraine criticizes American schools that produce "zombies on their assembly lines," training each student to becomes an "efficient cog in the industrial machine" ("*Different*" 322). Such mechanism is dramatized in "The Isle of Madness," which begins in horror of "the swelling ranks of unskilled labor that feed the iron monsters with the flesh of their souls and the wine of their dreams," an image of the species as inert fodder, of the human mind as "a machine among machines" ("Isle" 653; 654). "The Celestial Visitor" and "The Jovian Jest" position people who are thoroughly mechanized by cultural structures in the path of utopian agents. Instability seems to be the express goal of these intrusive aliens, who arrive unexpectedly and disrupt everyday life. They do not seek to enforce any particular ideals, to control or perfect their new environments, but to stimulate unpredictable change and unsettle fixed value systems. These aliens act on behalf of the socially excepted to challenge humanism's obsession with control.

Lorraine's aliens intervene in human self-enclosure, bringing unwieldy others within the boundaries of society. Politicized idealizations such as the Machine Kings' perfectly sane society seek to dominate the uncertainties of the physical world, which inherently refutes control. Margaret Atwood refers to reality's resistant tendency as "lumpiness":

> Why is it that when we grab for heaven—socialist or capitalist or even religious—we so often produce hell? I'm not sure, but so it is. Maybe it's the lumpiness of human beings. What do you do with people who somehow just don't or won't fit into your grand scheme? All too often you stretch them on a Procrustean bed or dig a hole in the ground and shovel them into it. (Atwood 84)

Instead of refusing to acknowledge the lumpiness or trying to smooth it out, utopian narratives invested in the process of transformation integrate it into the agenda. Utopian agents in "The Celestial Visitor" and "The Jovian Jest" find themselves in a lumpy world and act within it.

"The Celestial Visitor" (1935) is the record of a visit that Zanor from Eutopia makes to Erath "(or Earth, as it's called by the inhabitants thereof)," the planet from which Eutopia's ancient founders fled as refugees ("Celestial" 1191). Zanor finds himself "too contented" in his home world, where he grew up "kn[owing] nothing of either misery or disease" (ibid.). Anxious to test himself, he participates in a scientific experiment that breaks apart his body's atoms and reassembles them in Louisiana. After trying to eat fruit that turns out to be cotton (he finds it bland), he encounters his first alien, who shrieks for the police:

> I also screamed with terror as I saw that face, for it was seamed and wrinkled and pitted like the mountains of the Moon. Never had I beheld such a repulsive spectacle. But imagine my horror when I learned later that such spectacles are common on Erath, and that what I saw was merely an old woman. ("Celestial" 1196)

Since Eutopians live for thousands of years, Zanor hastens to clarify that the woman is not old in years but rather, "old in fixed ideas, in ugly thoughts, and morbid, gnawing fears" (ibid.). He spends the rest of the story intervening in these fixed ideas by undermining private

property, questioning social hierarchies, and freeing the captive—prisoners, patients in an insane asylum and zoo animals—until finally he returns home "to avoid being mobbed" ("Celestial" 1206). Louisiana is thrown into disarray by the efforts of a utopian agent, whose naiveté with regard to human conventions leads him to "become a liberator" ("Celestial" 1205).

"The Jovian Jest" (1930) stands out for its strangeness even in strange company. A mysterious alien object, the "Nameless Thing," appears on Earth and shortly leaves again, but not before prying into human consciousness with its groping tentacles ("Jovian" 143). A crowd gathers to observe the inexplicable phenomenon and Farmer Burns charges for admission. Suddenly, a tentacle attaches to Bill Jones, a cattleman, and Professor Ralston, a noted academic, through whom it speaks of its own "amoeba universe" ("Jovian" 147). This temporary possession is how the nameless species explores and makes aliens' "knowledge a part of [its] own thought-content" ("Jovian" 148). In exchange, the Thing identifies humanity's most pressing hurdle, "nonsensical and inhibitory complexes," but assures the crowd that the species still has potential and must "forge on!" ("Jovian" 148) As its final act, the "Space-Wanderer" plays a great joke: it swaps the "educational appliances" of the academic and the cattleman, "rendering a tribute to 'innate intelligence' and playing a Jovian Jest upon an educated fool" ("Jovian" 149). The alien point of view reframes what is valuable about human knowledge, simultaneously rejecting the social hierarchies that manage it and embracing the potential of learning from an unfamiliar perspective.

Utopian agents tear what Lorraine calls "the thick veil of the commonplace" to effect radical but welcome change: "The old familiar stars no longer shine— / And I – and I – am curiously glad" (*Sisters* 258). Frustration with the norms of mainstream society runs through

all of Lorraine's work, with gender norms at the forefront. In "The Isle of Madness," for example, it is only after the outcasts are forcibly estranged from civilization that they begin to promote "judicious birth control," after which women, "freed from the curse of excessive child-bearing, expanded in intellect, and hand in hand with man, her helpmate and comrade, forged upward to perfect equality" ("Isle" 655). This utopian renewal arises from a community's exclusion from utopia, an inverse of humanity's idealized constructions.

Consistently in Lorraine's work, strictly human societies are shown to produce some version of ethical or literal ruin; humanity requires major intervention and is ultimately rescued by these unsettling alien jabs. "The Jovian Jest" shows cutting-edge human expertise completely at a loss when Professor Ralston of Princewell tries to address the crowd gathered around the Nameless Thing. The people are desperate for answers and the professor adopts an authoritative role to provide them, but he literally cannot finish his sentence: "'To me—and to my honorable colleagues (added as an afterthought) it is quite clear. Quite clear, indeed. We have before us a specimen, a perfect specimen, I might say, of a—of a—' He stammered in the presence of the unnamable" ("Jovian" 145). Science falters when faced with something that does not fit into its schema ("Jovian" 145). The limitations of human knowledge appear through "disbelieving scientists" in "The Isle of Madness" and a blustering Judge in "The Celestial Visitor" ("Isle" 654). These images of authority symbolically justify the entire cultural value system they are supposed to defend and control, and their instability threatens humanity with an identity crisis.

The Nameless Thing's jest, scrambling individuals' "thought-expressing facilities," is presumably an answer to the human complexes that it condemns ("Jovian" 149). Its intervention redirects the species' "progress" by helping humanity diagnose its ailments

rather than actually saving human beings from themselves. Referring to Professor Ralston, the Thing attributes humanity's stagnation to discourse that fails to productively engage reality:

> Now this creature that I am using is, as you might say, full of sound without meaning. His brain is a lumber-room in which he has hoarded a conglomeration of clever and appropriate word-forms with which to disguise the paucity of his ideas, with which to express nothing! ("Jovian" 146)

The Nameless Thing visits to provoke humans to think differently, which is uncomfortable but badly needed. "The Jovian Jest" leaves humanity reeling: "With their mass-consciousness practically annihilated before a deed with which their minds could make no association, the crowd could only gasp in sobbing unison" ("Jovian" 144).

Lorraine's aliens are clearly introduced to the reader as agents of utopian influence, but they are met with fear by the characters because they are so unrecognizably different. The Nameless Thing learns about the worlds to which it travels by building a new body out of elements of each foreign planet, literally remaking itself in relation to the environment's influence ("Jovian" 147). Its organs are "malleable" and "eternally changing" (ibid.), akin to the residents of Eutopia in "The Celestial Visitor," who disassemble and reassemble regularly for maintenance purposes ("Celestial" 1195). Alien embodiment is treated not as a static state but as a relational one, mediating subjects' conditions and being mediated.

The Nameless Thing and its spectators are both remade through their interactivity, as are the Celestial Visitor, the citizens of Louisiana and the outcasts on the Isle of Madness. Lorraine proposes a dynamic and open-ended relationship with the future to revise

expectations of progress and preserve space for the unpredictable. She foregoes the fantasy of control over humanity's next stage to embrace material flux.

The Politics of Potential: Pauline Hopkins

Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood*, serialized in *Colored American Magazine* from 1902-3, is simultaneously a Gothic mystery and an Afrofuturist utopia, a meditation on the past and on untried potential. An American's contact with a hidden city in Ethiopia (Telassar) disrupts the naturalization of racist ideology, making it seem strange. A perfect society integrates a haunted man and both are transformed.

Hopkins was one of the few African American women to earn a living as an author and magazine editor at the turn of the century (Knight 99). She contributed to collections such as *College of Life* and "Famous Men of the Negro Race," which were dedicated to reshaping received history (Knight 12). At a time when many of her peers were arguing for "the African American race's potential to succeed," she opted to highlight "evidence of the race's past and ongoing achievement" and critiqued the inequity of accepted standards of success (Knight 10; xi). Hopkins' work was "rediscovered" in the 1970s and she is considered among the first African American practitioners of utopian fiction.

A traditional utopia is sealed and static, removed from the fluctuations of history. When *Of One Blood* begins, no "alien foot" has crossed into the city of Telassar for six thousand years, but in the course of the narrative it rejoins the outside world (Hopkins 153). As a penetrable enclosure with its own, self-contained logic, Telassar is best seen as a heterotopia. Passing into and out of the range of Telassar's social codes stimulates the protagonist's capacity to imagine meaningful difference. He is an academic named Reuel

Briggs, who is introduced brooding in an armchair on a stormy November evening. He has concealed his African American heritage to protect his Harvard career and labored in poverty, catering to the rich and dull. In search of his fortune, he goes on an expedition to Ethiopian ruins. There he finds Telassar, named after John Milton's Eden – a highly advanced city of Black mystics (Hopkins 114). Despite the centrality of the city's futuristic science, *Of One Blood* does not actually portray the future. Rather, Telassar is ancient, offering an alternate version of world history. This heterotopia enables the reinterpretation of inherited stories that configure the current moment.

In addition to rewriting the history of civilization, the novel also rewrites Reuel's personal history. A family drama revolves around the buried secrets of his enslaved mother, Mira. She has two other children, one of whom becomes Reuel's wife Dianthe, while the other becomes his rival, Aubrey. Aubrey was raised by a plantation owner and his wife, covertly exchanged for their biological son as an infant. He lives as the "petted idol of a beautiful world" while his siblings confront a world of adversity (Hopkins 44). Though he has a close relationship with Reuel, Aubrey wants Dianthe, and "he had never denied himself anything that he wanted very much in his whole life" (Hopkins 40). He weds her coercively after sending Reuel away on his expedition, "chain[ing]" her to "loathsome luxury" (Hopkins 173). When the dust settles on this incestuous turmoil, we find that the hero, the love interest, and the villain are of one blood, though their roles in the story set them against each other.

A traumatic past can make the future unthinkable; this novel asks how the future can be conceived while the past is still present. Marlene Allen, a critic of African American science fiction, notes that even though it looks backward rather than forward in time, the Gothic is a familiar trope in Afrofuturist literature, "used as a method of signifying how

much the African American past continues even to this day to haunt black people and is projected to do so even in to the future" (Allen 96). The ghosts of injustices persist, which Hopkins represents with the appearance of literal ghosts. We also see the heavy influence of history in the bleakness of a present moment that seems devoid of potential. Reuel is suicidal when we meet him, and he travels to Africa in a state of personal and professional desperation. America is defined by "the march of progress" and "a busy future," which Reuel is barred from by his race, and Ethiopia is "that dark and unknown country to which Fate has doomed me" (Hopkins 93; 60). Africa is cast as a resource to be exploited and a mystery to be solved – fodder for others' progress. Reuel's expedition follows the same route that "many illustrious explorers" have used to "attack" Africa, literally placing him on a colonist's path (Hopkins 79).

The very first chapter presents the future of African Americans as a problem to be solved; her novel clearly articulates and then defies this framing of Black potential (Hopkins 9). The genre of Afrofuturism is an answer to renderings of progress in which difference is erased. Hopkins counters the rhetoric of foreclosed futures by attributing the gift of prophesy to descendants of Telassar. Her pointed reversal is introduced in a story from the Antebellum period. A plantation owner instructs the enslaved woman who turns out to be Reuel's mother, Mira, to perform prophesy for his guests as a party trick:

> It was about two years before the civil war, and our people were not expecting war; thinking that all unpleasantness must end in their favor, they gave little heed to the ominous rumble of public opinion that was arising at the North, but went on their way in all their pride of position and wealth without a care for the future. […] When the feasting and mirth began to lag, someone called for Mira—the maid—and my father

> sent for her to come and amuse the guests. […] 'Tell the company what you see, Mira,' commanded my father. 'You will not like it, captain; but if I must, I must. All the women will be widows and the men shall sleep in early graves.' (Hopkins 50-1)

In Mira's shocking prediction, it is her privileged audience whose future is problematized, while she has unique access to their destinies. The precarity that pervades Mira's entire life is suddenly extended to her oppressors (Hopkins 51). Tragically, Mira is unable to live the futures she sees. She is sold after this incident and reappears in the narrative only as a ghost who provides guidance at important junctures.

With her enslaved prophet, Hopkins asks whether looking ahead, as utopian literature often does, truly changes the present. Mira offers crucial knowledge to her audience but their narrow-minded way of perceiving it (a commodity that has failed to entertain) prevents this miraculous insight from doing them any good. The target of Hopkins' critique is the naturalized expectations that spoil this chance to avoid a preset fate, keeping the guests trapped in futureless roles like the one they impose on Mira. Because they are myopic about their own cultural expectations, they are blind to reality and impervious to change. It is their dehumanizing mode of interpretation that ultimately seals them in echo-chambers, a way of thinking that only perceives what it expects.

The reason of Reuel's time and place denies many of his realities even before he discovers a city that is not supposed to exist: "I have never believed that the whole mental world is governed by the faculties we understand, and can reduce to reason or definite feelings. But I will keep my ideas to myself; one does not care to be laughed at" (Hopkins 22). His own identity as a Black academic is a contradiction by society's standards, forcing him to conceal his heritage to advance his career. He also subverts reason professionally as

an expert on the "'absurdities' of supernatural phenomena or mysticism, best known to the every-day world as 'effects of the imagination,' a phrase of mere dismissal […] All the while, however, the phenomena are there, lying broadcast over the surface of history" (Hopkins 2). Reuel often asserts that society buries or delegitimizes phenomena that flout its assumptions. His skepticism about the intellectual mastery of the "favored elect" elicits ridicule from his peers, but once he enters Telessar, his doubts are confirmed (Hopkins 33). What his society accepts as reasonable is clearly not the extent of what is real.

Hopkins embraces the impossible to refute the authority of cultural narratives about what is possible for whom. Mystic methods intervene when society fails; at the end of the novel, the villain's wealth and status allow him to escape legal punishment for his crimes and justice is achieved through a climactic demonstration of mesmerism's capacities. Reuel works on the fringe of sanctioned knowledge production, tapping into power that resists socially authorized ways of interpreting the world. When he arrives at the Ethiopian ruins, accepted knowledge is insufficient once again as his team's extensive scholarly investigation cannot get them into the hidden city. It is not until Reuel roams the pyramids alone one night that he accidentally finds himself in Telassar. He is knocked unconscious and awakens to find himself in a dazzling room full of Black people whose widely varied appearances the narrative details extensively, declaring them all "perfect" (Hopkins 113). Reuel finds more treasure than he ever dreamed of, but not in the form of the relics he sought. He learns that the so-called modern world is in its "infancy" in comparison to this hidden society, which has wealth and knowledge beyond his imagination (Hopkins 119).

Telassar represents a history that Western ideology denies. The ancient city was part of a prosperous civilization in Africa and the Middle East, "the pioneers of mankind in the

untrodden fields of knowledge" (Hopkins 98-9). The people of Telassar withdrew from the rest of humanity thousands of years ago to escape violence, locking away their rich mines and the records of their greatness. These revelations challenge basic tenets of Reuel's education. In disbelief, Reuel asks himself what the Harvard professors back home would say to the spectacles he witnesses (Hopkins 145). Even the landscape refutes the stories about it: "Reuel noticed that this [view of Telassar] was at variance with the European idea respecting Central Africa, which brands these regions as howling wilderness or an uninhabitable country" (Hopkins 134). A closer inspection forces him to realize that his ideology does not correspond to reality, and in fact, the landscape is quite beautiful.

The consciousness of history that Reuel gains in Telassar is a consciousness of the ideologically driven ways that history has been narrated. It also implies a sensitivity to the present's constructedness—this too is a moment held together by infinite contingencies. Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1942) describes the "inconspicuous" transformations the past undergoes as the present sheds new light on it and issues a challenge to "brush history against the grain" (Benjamin 255; 257). Reuel learns to reinterpret the way past events fit together with awareness that accepted history has been shaped by the "victors," the "heirs of those who conquered before them" (Benjamin 256). Reuel's introduction to perspectives on history that power has occluded radically transform his understanding of social power.

One of Reuel's most impactful moments is when he must explain the stigma against African Americans to the inhabitants of the perfect city. They listen with concern while he describes racist norms, confessing that in his home, the same attributes Telassar prizes are read as a "disgrace" (Hopkins 129). This conversation defamiliarizes Reuel from his own

marginalization, allowing him to glimpse a perspective from which racism is unfamiliar, bizarre. The experience is a turning point in his arc, and he is not the only character to have his worldview upended. A significant subplot concerns Charlie Vance, a "spoiled darling of wealth and fashion" who accompanies Reuel on his African journey (Hopkins 149). Charlie utters the novel's only slur in reaction to stories of Ethiopia's ancient grandeur, and when he first meets someone from Telassar, he assumes the man is a "lunatic" (Hopkins 154). Disoriented by his discovery that the city is both real and incredibly advanced, Charlie is stricken silent: "He had suffered so many shocks from the shattering of cherished idols since entering the country of mysteries that the power of expression had left him" (Hopkins 101). His voice is temporarily lost, and Reuel too is "awed into silence" (Hopkins 145). What they learn unsettles their very identities and when they speak again, it is with changed voices.

Charlie matures through his adventure; Hopkins even suggests that he would have had real potential "if he had been poor and forced to work for a living" (Hopkins 152). He follows Reuel into the pyramids with Jim Titus, an African American introduced as his servant, and their shared hardships bond them on the threshold of Telassar: "Where was the color line now? Jim was a brother; the nearness of their desolation in this uncanny land, left nothing but a feeling of brotherhood" (Hopkins 65; 159). The uncanniness of the environment dislodges the characters' training and allows them to interact on new terms. Faced with situations his culture considers impossible, Charlie reevaluates all prior assumptions. Hopkins depicts the estrangement of racial logic by displacing Americans in an Africa that defies their pre-conceptions.

Reuel has spent most of his life dreading the possibility that his "dark secret" might come to light. When his peers make uninformed guesses about his enigmatic origins, Reuel

nervously covers up his history, never guessing that there is another layer to his family's past that would recontextualize everything. He anxiously anticipates being placed on the "other" side of the color line, but instead the color line itself is totally undermined. The real discovery is not that Reuel is Black but that Blackness is, in Ytasha Womack's words, "a technology" (Womack 27). Womack's book *Afrofuturism* (2013) describes race as a mechanism of social performance, a way of determining a body's "movement, access, and privileges" (Cauleen Smith qtd. in Womack 137). Afrofuturists consider how to reprogram this technology, making aesthetic and critical interventions in racial discourse. Hopkins interrogates reason and history to signify an iconoclastic sense of Blackness, which Reuel brings to life when he returns to America with new knowledge and powerful allies. This trip is not exactly a victory lap as he does not make it home in time to save Dianthe from Aubrey, but he punishes the guilty and remarries in Telassar.

Near the end of the novel, Reuel sits on a throne "gazing hopelessly into the future" and recites a passage from the play *Julius Caesar*—"The evil that men do lives after them" (Hopkins 163). Hopkins re-frames Shakespeare's line for the post-reconstruction era, asserting her country's obligation to "pay the great debt" owed to the formerly enslaved (Hopkins 11). In his article on Hopkins and Sutton E. Griggs,[16] Daniel Fladager writes that these authors "break the common mold of utopian fiction, focusing as much on the past as on the future, and revealing the ways that collective trauma can resonate through the present" (Fladager 252). No longer safely secluded, Telassar has to reconcile with the brutality of Reuel's past, the legacies of slavery that his family still carries, and thus the view from the throne is not utopian.

[16] Sutton E. Griggs wrote *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), which concerns the founding of a utopian African American nation in Texas.

Instead of concluding with the weight of history or an image of the future, Hopkins ends her novel with a dynamic, uncertain present. The entire text is related in past tense, but on the final page, it abruptly shifts to present tense. As Reuel presides over Telassar,

> his days glide peacefully by in good works; but the shadows of great sins darken his life, and the memory of past joys is ever with him. He views, too, with serious apprehension, the advance of mighty nations penetrating the dark, mysterious forests of his native land. 'Where will it stop?' he sadly questions. 'What will the end be?' (Hopkins 193)

Despite his newfound power, he is mired in unresolved questions. He defeats the villain, Aubrey, but when a companion expresses satisfaction that justice has been done, Reuel "spoke not one word" (Hopkins 192).

This ambiguity certainly does not offer the reader any closure, but it does follow a pattern that Alex Zamalin writes about in *Black Utopias* (2019). Zamalin notes that certain of Hopkins' contemporaries depicted Africa as a "premodern place in which there was virtually nothing" (Zamalin 11). Upon initially arriving in Africa, Reuel himself says, "Here there was no future" (Hopkins 93). In this context, incredible imaginaries about Ethiopia's unseen power work as a way of "keeping alive a horizon, which would exist as unfulfilled possibility" (Zamalin 14). This horizon is contested at the end of Hopkins' novel, but Reuel's speculative experiences have transformed the futureless void he faced at the beginning. He reclaims his sense of potential and disrupts the deterministic ideology that attempts to foreclose Black futurity.

A Future in Flux

The open-endedness of "The Celestial Visitor," "The Jovian Jest," and *Of One Blood* creates the opposite effect of utopia proper. Usually, utopia indicates a site where the world is managed according to some ideal that provides order, whereas here utopia is what throws the site into chaos. Utopian impulses resist the power dynamics that inform conventional readings of "progress"; they do not supply answers about what happens next but rather pose questions about what we hope for and why.

Hopkins and Lorraine's fictions work to extend the visible horizon of possibility. To make alien futures seem possible, they estrange the humanist reasoning that designates our expectations. Imagining such futures is a matter of tearing down those vestiges of the past that restrict the view, ideals that foreclose other potentials and reproduce historical violence. When these authors introduce utopian impulses into narratives of the past and present, they position the future as a product of interruption.

This chapter is about agents from "elsewhere" that dislodge vestiges of history; in this one idea, we traverse ghost stories and alien invasions. As China Miéville explains, "Hauntology and Weird are two iterations of the same problematic – that of crisis-blasted modernity showing its contradictory face, utterly new *and* traced with remnants" (Miéville 128).[17] Although modernity's vast destabilization was often experienced as a threat (these genres are both overtly horrifying, after all), Lorraine and Hopkins suggest that it also represented a sense of opportunity from the perspective of anyone excluded from normative visions of progress.

This opportunity, the glimmer of utopia, cannot be taken advantage of by those who try too hard to master chaos. As a totalizing blueprint, utopia will always fail. It cannot

[17] Though the genre of weird fiction is not equivalent to SF about aliens, "The Jovian Jest," with its tentacles and its tendency to afflict characters with horrified awe, is well described by the label.

entirely escape its human origins, and it can never enforce idealizations in a material world. As a provocation, though, a fragment of utopia is the “nick” in time that brings historicity to consciousness. Instead of attempting to control it, Hopkins and Lorraine incorporate the chaos, putting the “lumpiness” of reality in conversation with agents and spaces that stimulate change and placing more faith in the conversation itself than in anyone’s agenda.

Chapter 4

Decolonizing the Alien Encounter: Naomi Mitchison & Jean Rhys

"If we cannot overcome the relations of force and authorisation implicated in 'knowing' itself, then is the answer to come to know how not to know?"

- Sara Ahmed, "Who Knows?"

How might established knowledge get in the way of interacting with the unknown? Donna Haraway offers the example of Barbara Smuts, a primatologist who went to Kenya in the mid-1970s to study baboons. The knowledge she arrived with was an obstacle she learned to overcome by attuning her sensibilities to nonhuman signals.

Smuts' different approaches to seeking knowledge produced quite different results. Contact with the baboons forced her to question scientific methods: "Trained in the conventions of objective science, Smuts had been advised to be as neutral as possible, to be like a rock […] The scientists could query but not be queried," and the baboons were "unimpressed," to put it lightly—"Ignoring social cues is far from neutral social behavior" (*When Species Meet* 23-4). To mollify the objects of her study, who were increasingly unsettled by their rude guest,

> Smuts began adjusting what she did—and who she was—according to the baboons' social semiotics directed both to her and to one another. 'I… in the process of gaining their trust, changed almost everything about me, including the way I walked and sat, the way I held my body, and the way I used my eyes and voice. (*When Species Meet* 23-4)

Smuts retrained herself to react to the beings she confronted, molding her behaviors around an unpredictable, embodied experience. Instead of seeking facts to fit a predetermined

framework, learning from a position of exploitative power, she shapes her framework in response to what she finds. Encountering nonhumans transforms her expectations of how to learn from them, raising a host of questions: how do particular ways of inhabiting bodies facilitate or occlude particular kinds of knowledge? How does the material, aesthetic environment condition communication? And what makes the transformation of expectations possible?

Literary portrayals of the embodied experience of encountering the nonhuman provide cues to destabilizing colonizing knowledge practices. Jean Rhys, who went from underrated modernist to post-colonial luminary, and Naomi Mitchison, a celebrated writer of historical fiction who turned to feminist SF, depict entanglements with the nonhuman that rescript subjectivity. The protagonists of *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) start from the premise that they cannot know their conversation partners from within their initial epistemic frames. This premise is key to pushing their internal boundaries—it is difficult to be curious about what one has already quantified. Rhys explores the contact between Antoinette, her physical environments in Jamaica and Dominica, and her domineering British husband, while Mitchison explores the contact between Mary and a series of alien species. They weave their characters' incomplete sets of knowledge together, depicting the limitation of each and the dangers of epistemological hubris. In each case, established knowledge needs to be dismantled if the characters are to become acquainted with someone new.

The notion that unlearning might contribute to knowledge production flies in the face of the Western philosophic tradition, in which knowledge "spread[s] in ever-widening circles," attempting to fulfill a "craving" for explanation and perfect humanity's grasp on its

environment (Nietzsche 98). Compulsively amassing knowledge is a colonialist enterprise, and the 1960's saw colonial politics taking up space in the Caribbean and reaching eagerly into outer space. In this cultural moment between the peaks of modernism and postmodernism, early science fiction and the feminist SF upsurge, Mitchison and Rhys write about the promise and the risk of intimately engaging the alien.

The alien is the nonhuman figure par excellence. It is fundamentally a relational term; E.T. is not an alien when he's at home. The word derives from the Latin *alius,* meaning "other" or "different," and though it has been used in reference to a stranger or foreigner since the beginning of the fourteenth century, its extraterrestrial connotation starts appearing in dictionaries in the twentieth century (OED). Studies such as John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of SF* (2008) and Jessica Langer's *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (2011) have explored the overlap between science-fictional and post-colonial 'alien' encounters, with the glaring difference being that the latter group is composed of *Homo sapiens*; "However, colonial discourse has often placed the human other in a similar position to the science-fictional other, in that it has 'dehumanized' or significantly 'alienated' the colonized: this distinction is therefore elided" (Langer 85). Many SF narratives borrow (consciously or unconsciously) from history, either reenacting or directly challenging those historical configurations of alienness.

Ted Chiang's short story "The Great Silence" (2015) is written from the perspective of a parrot observing humanity's desire to contact extraterrestrial intelligence: "We're a non-human species capable of communicating with them. Aren't we exactly what humans are looking for?" (Chiang). Because humanism reads animals as objects, their nonhuman intelligence registers as alien, and indeed, the parrot is the only alien that appears in this

piece of SF. A reading of nonhuman others as dehumanized objects, humans-minus-consciousness, is profoundly limiting, so Haraway concludes that "a coherent conversation between people and animals depends on our recognition of their 'otherworldly' subject status" ("Otherworldly" 178). The reward for delinking from humanist knowledge is recovering a sense of the nonhuman's otherworldliness. Fictionalizations of alienness are a vehicle through which to renegotiate the human relation to anything designated nonhuman, including aliens much closer to home. *Aliens and Others* (1993) by Jenny Wolmark argues that feminist SF invests the alien "with new and different meanings which undermine ostensibly clear-cut distinctions between self and other, human and alien," and *Alien Constructions* (2006) by Patricia Melzer sees SF texts as "'case studies' of how feminist theories 'work'" (Wolmark 2; Melzer 11). Each alien has their own way of inhabiting this charged role.

Alien encounters in Rhys and Mitchison's novels estrange human ways of knowing. In their depictions of alien figures, these authors resist "the valorization and prioritization of the *particular type* of knowledge produced by colonial powers, at the expense of indigenous and colonized methods of knowledge production" (Langer 83). Engaging alienness through colonizing narratives about progress and expansion into the unknown has violent consequences. Decolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter, whose critique of "humanness" is explicated in *On Being Human as Praxis* (2015), argues for "the conceptual 'erasing' of the figure of Man" (Wynter qtd. in Walcott 199). Using a culturally sanctioned "figure of Man" as a naturalized, universal standard "conceals —but does not necessarily expunge—relational possibilities," ways of knowing without colonizing, which might redraw the boundaries of community (McKittrick 8). Cultural history contextualizes who we are, how "we" is

consolidated, and as Wynter explains, those coded as outside "the sanctified universe of obligation" are subject to "genocidal effects" (Wynter and McKittrick 44-5). Drawing out alternate relational possibilities requires forgetting the knowledge Man uses to manage the world and learning how to know differently.

The field of feminist science studies has worked to identify the weaknesses of Western epistemology. These theorists critique what they call the masculinist objectivity, which makes supposedly permanent, universally applicable truth-claims. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Scandalous Knowledge* (2005) suggests an alternative construction of knowledge that acknowledges both a material basis and a social investment.[18] She argues that a fact must be in "harmony" with prevalent thought paradigms "to be even perceptible" (Smith 49-50); the facts a community picks up on are those that align with its goals and methods. There are, then, imperceptible facts for every community, every positionality, and "the establishment of a truth as such—can never be presumed accomplished once and for all" (Smith 48). The presumption that knowledge attained in one context need not be questioned in other contexts is a critical mistake.

Knowledge systems are produced by particular conditions, actions and reactions, and they also predispose their disciples to a set of actions and reactions. Embodied behaviors and epistemological products are entwined:

> categories are not abstract, neutral, inert containers but shifting tendencies to perceive and respond in some ways rather than others. Thus, in distinguishing a being as 'wild

[18] Smith identifies this category of relativism in early 20th century cultural production: "Einstein and Lenin, Woolf and Stravinsky, Joyce and Picasso: pre-postmodern relativists all! Regarded retrospectively, the early twentieth-century critiques of objectivist, absolutist, universalist assumptions in historiography and epistemology, along with the elaboration of alternative concepts, models and accounts in those and related fields, were exceptionally intellectually fertile" (Smith 30).

> beast', 'domestic pet', 'livestock' or 'fellow-creature', we tap into a set of attitudes and expectations that are also bodily inclinations – for example, to approach or flee, capture or rescue, eat or feed it. (Smith 155)

Knowing these animals supposedly justifies treating them in different manners. However, treating them differently might well facilitate new and different knowledge of them. All knowledge is implicated in some practice, and the knowledge a culture invests in determines who is exposed to the most vulnerability.

Managing vulnerability is one of knowledge production's primary objectives; we seek to know the world to identify what within it represents a threat, which snakes are poisonous and which are benign. However, in *Bodies of Water* (2016), feminist posthumanist Astrida Neimanis writes that "risk is incalculable," impossible to avoid or control, which alters her approach to knowledge:

> knowing a body is never an exercise in certainty – certain boundaries, certain relations, certain transits, certain outcomes. A posthuman politics of location must give up the will to mastery, even of our own subject-selves, [demanding] a way of being responsible and responsive to our others. (Neimanis 38)

Given that knowledge is always, to some extent, provisional, risk is always in play, and the encounters detailed here are particularly risky. When the novels' protagonists acclimate to the knowledge of nonhuman others, they allow their new companions to become a part of them, an intimate relation with tangible consequences. These interactions have both emancipatory and threatening potential—change is always an invitation to uncertainty. Mary and Antoinette, being shaped by their experiences with the unknown, must therefore surrender control over who they become.

Putting a post-colonial episteme into practice starts through curiosity in these novels, attentive observations of the alien's orientations and affects. Donna Haraway portrays curiosity as a fundamental if simple obligation of "companion species," one that much of Western philosophy has not met. In *When Species Meet* (2008) she retells a story from a lecture by Jacques Derrida in which the philosopher was confronted in the bathroom by his cat, who wielded a penetrating nonhuman gaze. Naked and vulnerable, he recounts feeling ashamed, "but also ashamed for being ashamed" (Derrida 372). Derrida notes how inappropriate his culturally entrained reaction is but he gets lost in himself anyway, multiplying his humiliations. In Haraway's telling, Derrida "did not fall into the trap of making the subaltern speak," but neither did he succeed in becoming curious: "he did not seriously consider an alternative form of engagement either, one that risked knowing something more about cats and *how to look back,*" which deprives him of what the cat was "perhaps making available to him in looking back at him that morning" (*When Species Meet* 20).

Mary and Antoinette encounter the nonhuman during moments of reverie in which they seem to forget themselves. Forgetting their cultural expectations allows them to *look back* and be meaningfully influenced by the nonhuman. Reanimating such relational possibilities demands making a craft out of forgetting, cultivating a state of responsive unknowing. In Wynter's terms, Rhys and Mitchison imagine "delinking […] from the knowledge systems we take for granted (and can profit from) and practicing epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo 107). Wynter attributes "the very real possibility of thinking and acting outside the limits of any specific culture's self-understanding" to those with whom one *shares* an understanding (Sharma 170) – in Donna Haraway's terms, one's kin help to

determine how and what one knows. Haraway writes about kin as “a wild category” that troubles cultural distinctions by drawing connections between entities with different labels (*Staying* 2). She contrasts “Godkin” with “oddkin” to resist any implication of biological determinism and argues that kinships work to establish “to whom one is responsible” (ibid.). Forgetting opens the door to new kin and being changed by them revitalizes a fixed epistemology.

Jean Rhys and Naomi Mitchison write novels that know how not to know. The protagonists delink from their prior knowledge systems through absorption in embodied contact with alien kin. These novels depict “epistemic disobedience” in nonhuman encounters as Antoinette and Mary form connections with otherworldly others, both those they find in space and more mundane Earthlings, with whom they develop aestheticized, embodied, relational modes of knowing. Neither Antoinette nor Mary can change themselves by somehow transcending their situated histories, but they do risk being recreated by their environments. Such recreation is often a conduit for violence in these texts, even if it has emancipatory potential as well, and every act of communication is also a negotiation of power dynamics. *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* demonstrates the promise of exploration, the change of which norms and expectations are capable, and *Wide Sargasso Sea* depicts the lived experience of those subjected to exploration and the painful inadequacy of knowledge that merely assimilates. As the distinction between knower and known is blurred, new narratives of nonhuman contact become possible.

The Epistemics of Contact: Naomi Mitchison

It is perhaps appropriate to view Naomi Mitchison's literary perspective as a creative outlet from a lifetime of meticulous observation. She was born in 1897 and died in 1999, witness to the entire 20th century. Mitchison has been called "the Virginia Woolf of science fiction"[19] and saw herself contributing to a "generation of intelligentsia"—"D.H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Aldous Huxley, Robert Graves—these are all of my profession, of course. I am less obvious because my stuff is disguised!" (Benton 51) She inherited a scientific legacy from her prominent family, her first publication was a paper (written with her brother J.B.S. Haldane) on the genetics of small mammals she observed for years,[20] and she participated in Mass Observation,[21] a "science of ourselves" (*Among* 15). After cultivating a wealth of public respect in historical fiction and freelance journalism she burned through it all by publishing *We Have Been Warned* (1935), a radical, vulgar novel, at a time when feminism was dangerously out of favor.[22] As Mitchison herself professed, "It is always a bore being ahead of one's time" (*Among* 181).[23]

[19] However, Gill portrays these women as being quite critical of each other in reality: "when explaining her decision to write *The Bull Calves* in dialect, Mitchison contrasts her writing with Woolf, whom she describes as an exponent of the English literary tradition" (Mitchison, 1947: 411). Woolf, on the other hand, is simply disparaging about Mitchison, describing her as "the rather sordid fat . . . greyfaced intense Naomi'" (21 November 1935; Woolf, 1977-84: vol. IV: 354) (Plain 141-2).
[20] "She worked at the forefront of genetics before the field had been recognized as such, even co-authoring an early paper on genetics, and she reared mice and guinea pigs for genetic experimentation" (McFarlane 278).
[21] "Mass-Observation was set up in 1937 by Charles Madge, Tom Harrisson and Humphrey Jennings. The idea was to carry out a major investigation into the lives of ordinary British people," an alternative to official history composed of diary entries (*Among* 23).
[22] Writing in 2019, Julia Chan argues that *We Have Been Warned* (1935), the book that was received so disastrously, "exemplifies a modernist feminist aesthetics by returning the female body in pain to the scene of its violation and exclusion," combatting social erasure by aesthetically exploring hidden material experience (Chan 47). In her own time, however, Mitchison's fiction set in the present day was taboo—her ideas needed the estrangement of a historical setting to be palatable.
[23] Rejection and her own evolving taste led her to intentionally steer away from London's aesthetic standards and, instead, she became an important figure of the Scottish literary Renaissance. However, despite her turn away from modernist hubs, Mitchison's children were tutored by a young W. H. Auden, with whom she exchanged manuscripts, and she enjoyed long friendships with many other well-known figures of the movement such as Stevie Smith and Wyndham Lewis (Hardy).

Mitchison saw her writing as a political, worldly exercise in contrast to her perception of modernist peers: “can writing be ‘pure’, like ‘pure’ science? Perhaps some of the experimenters. Gertrude Stein, Joyce – and at the moment I simply can’t feel they matter two pins” (Benton 99). Her own fiction is more of an applied science, one particularly focused on cross-cultural interaction. She became an active political figure in the Scottish Highlands and in the Bakgatla tribe in Botswana, traveling between them, advocating for both communities, and “seriously disturb[ing] the official British colonial presence” into her 90s (Calder 223). Accordingly, whether the context was Africa, ancient Scotland or outer space, Mitchison’s fiction was consistently organized around “a colonizing power and native resistance. She had often contrasted, with sympathy, value systems that failed to mesh” (Calder 452).

In *Memoirs of a Spacewoman,* Mitchison brings her firsthand political experience to bear in an alien future, posing the question of whether it is possible to explore without colonizing, contact the unknown without imposing upon it. Written between the Scottish and African stages of Mitchison’s literary journey, it is a knot of linguistic dilemmas.[24] This anthropological science fiction novel is an episodic record of a communication expert’s attempts to establish relations with various newly discovered alien worlds. As Mary stretches herself to converse, she finds herself in fascinating new contortions, provocative entanglements that change what she knows to be true. Instead of anthropomorphizing each environment, she becomes alien alongside a series of strangers.

Memoirs follows in a long history of SF exploration narratives: Mary surveys one planet after the next, observing its flora and fauna and striving to communicate with

[24] As Gavin Miller points out, this text is “amongst that apparently small group of sf novels that refuse, in Fredric Jameson’s words, to ‘skip over the linguistic dilemmas… either by omitting the intricacies of linguistic categories as such, or by having the aliens learn English instead’” (Miller 254)

whomever appears to be sentient. Her second expedition introduces a conflict between Terran culture's two most emphasized values: non-interference and discovery. She visits a species called the Epsies and realizes with dawning dismay that their civilization has a sinister underbelly. Mary is expected to steel herself to the suffering of a species the Epsies have brutally colonized, watches as these helpless Rounds are corralled and drained of life essence, and bears witness as they die, "leaving the agony with me" and nearly ending her career prematurely (*Memoirs* 36). Her desire to know draws her into politicized relationships that she cannot disavow, and for years she bears "deep shame" as she ruminates on what she could or should have done (*Memoirs* 38).

However, on the butterfly planet she is cast in the opposite role. One of Mary's protegees becomes so enmeshed with the caterpillar species that she murders her new friends' bitter enemy, the most beautiful and exalted of the butterflies. Mary is as horrified by her peer's intrusion as she was horrified but her own failure to intrude on Epsilon. The novel never unties this knot; knowledge, power and intimacy are inextricable. Referencing *Memoirs,* Donna Haraway asks, "how could conversation occur, in any form, if the rule of noninterference were to be strictly interpreted? The question of power cannot be evaded, least of all in 'communication'" ("Otherworldly" 181).

Terran crews explore in search of new knowledge but in constructing that knowledge, they create relationships that inevitably cross the line that separates them from those they come to know. Working through their contradicting commitments, the Terran explorers implicitly redefine communication. Here, meaning is not *conveyed* – communication is not a transfer of content in *Memoirs* but an embodied performance; knowledge is not a way of

mastering material but an artefact of that performance. And for better or worse, there is knowledge humanity still cannot know, voices they still cannot hear.

Mary's vocation and her civilization's way of life are shaped around the project of communication, and this project is shaped around its limitations. She presents (without embarrassment) communications problems that "I did not manage to solve at all completely. There are plenty of them still," and confides that certain locations are carefully avoided by her advanced fleet of explorers (*Memoirs* 67; 72). Because Mary's knowledge of each situation depends on her position within it, she is never able to access all of the sides to the story. As Donna Haraway argues in "Situated Knowledges" (1988), all vision is embodied, enabled *and* limited by its material conditions. Accepting this limitation means "becom[ing] answerable for what we learn how to see," the "translations and specific *ways* of seeing" through which we compose knowledge, and rejecting masculinist objectivity, a delusion of universal access and comprehensive explanations—of Man mastering matter ("Situated Knowledges" 190). The only knowledge paradigm that makes any sense, Haraway insists, is situated, bound and bodied.

Despite Mary's experiences to the contrary, there are Terran explorers who exemplify masculinist objectivity. Most alien species are much more sympathetic and comprehensible to Mary than the Ministry people of her own planet. The Ministry explores in order to collect rare and valuable minerals, sometimes at the expense of learning what the specimens were in their home-worlds, "what their use was, and to what or whom" (*Memoirs* 75). Of their sort of knowledge our communications expert confesses, "I couldn't make it out myself; they used the most stupidly round-about terms" (*Memoirs* 80). Without specimens' context—the ecologies of which they are a part, their relationships and material conditions—the Ministry's

knowledge about them is impoverished, potentially dangerous (as explorers' misreadings often are), and exploitative.

Mary's own method is the exact opposite: she is entirely driven by the epistemological value of material context. Her aesthetic observations of the nonhuman initiate an interactive, embodied construction of knowledge. Mary mirrors nonhuman behaviors to learn from her new kin and acclimates to their patterns. She attunes herself to appreciate their pleasures and share their pain. In the graft incidents (which I will return to later), she invites an alien into her body and comes to think of it as a part of herself. Her unpresumptuous approach to knowing those she comes across primes her to be transformed by her experiences with the intertwined caterpillars and butterflies, the violent Epsies and the colonized Rounds. Mary's epistemology depends on both body and mind, accessing contextual understandings that do not fit into Enlightenment models of knowledge: "The standardization of the intellectual function through which the mastery of the senses is accomplished, the acquiescence of thought to the production of unanimity, implies an impoverishment of thought no less than of experience; the separation of the two realms leaves both damaged" (Horkheimer & Adorno 28). Mary meets the challenge of communicating with aliens by integrating a sensitivity to the material environment into her knowledge production.

Her encounters make her an alien to herself. Aesthetic immersion in the material environment allows Mary to perceive the worlds she explores with new eyes. Along with each new alien she encounters a new set of knowledge and behaviors that pushes her boundaries. There is an infrared color on the butterfly planet that the Terrans cannot see, but which "was difficult to look at, giving one a kind of visual shock" (*Memoirs* 108). Straining

at the edge of their limits, the explorers are affected by what they are unable to understand or even properly perceive. They must contrive ways of responding to such inexplicable stimuli, and these experimental strategies transfigure the Terrans' scientific exploits.

The aliens Mary studies share with her no language nor history, but her training in estrangement allows her to communicate without having knowledge in common. Mary devotes years to refining her communication skills, which demands the utmost intellectual flexibility— "One reads and watches, one steeps oneself in 3D and 4D; one practices detachment in the face of apparently disgusting and horrible events; one practices taking bizarre points of view" (*Memoirs* 7). She cannot take her own culture's expectations at face value to be able to take on useful impressions of other cultures. Her mentor describes this process as stripping away an explorer's very being: "Out of the very bottom, when the moral and intellectual self one so carefully builds up has been pulled down, when there is nothing between one and the uncaring trampling foot of reality, then one may at last and genuinely observe and know" (*Memoirs* 38-9). Communication, in this portrayal, is premised on the assumption that one's explanations have no claim on the other, a humbling thought.

This training disposes Mary to forget knowledge when necessary. She chooses not to lead crews because "I know I would forget about my expedition if I came on a really interesting communications problem" (*Memoirs* 5); essentially, she refuses promotions to protect her ability to forget everything at a moment's notice. To engage the spiral entities, she intentionally cuts herself off from the other explorers, cultivating circumstances that enable her to be distracted from her humanity (*Memoirs* 11). When she finds that spiral naming practices are incompatible with Earth's, Mary forgets her own name. After prolonged exposure to spiral thinking she becomes incapable of making binary decisions—T'o, the man

she has grown to care for, asks her to have a baby with him, but she bungles the proposal: "I had supposed myself to have made up my mind about him. But who was I? What my mind? […] I couldn't get back to myself. I couldn't speak. I couldn't say yes" (*Memoirs* 18, 22).

Mary works herself into a state prone to such significant acts of forgetting through absorption in aesthetic observations. When she hits a block early in her encounter with the spiral entities, she makes the decision to "go around on hands and knees so as to be at the same aesthetic level as the rest of the inhabitants. Had I not done so, I would probably not have realized the nature of some of the movable artifacts. […] And suddenly my aesthetic admiration appeared to meet an echo. I realized I had got through" (*Memoirs* 15). This is the turning point, the most difficult stage of encountering a new species, because "once one saw what kind of rapport should be looked for," the data can be more straightforwardly assembled—it is the relevant *mode* of interaction that Mary must somehow divine first, without knowledge to guide her (*Memoirs* 16). All of the mathematical and technological knowledge production that emanates from the spiral-Terran encounter issues from this initial, aesthetic relation on all fours.

Mary's approach may have seemed an absurd departure from human norms, but it allowed her to literally see the landscape from a different point of view, which then leads to her breakthrough. These breakthrough moments are often aesthetically motivated, as in the case of the caterpillars:

> A great deal of their pleasure consisted in eating and evacuation. There was normally a good deal of waste cellulose in their food, which came out in pellets of several dark and shining colours. These formed the basis of quite elaborate pattern structures, which obviously gave great aesthetic pleasure to those who arranged and those who

> came to look at them […] When they saw that we were interested, the caterpillars made room for us, and it was at these times we managed our earliest successful communications. (*Memoirs* 92)

Attending to shared pleasures and interests, particularly aesthetic ones, seem to hold space for very different beings to interact. The performance of communication, the shape and texture of communication as a form rather than a transparent vehicle for content, takes center stage. "Knowledge of other sciences can be borrowed or shared, but communication is essential," an exchange with experiential value outside of its transfer of knowledge (*Memoirs* 7).

Physical circumstances mediate communication and make it fundamentally unpredictable. Even after years developing expertise in "feeling out" alien species, Mary considers it to be "quite uncertain on any expedition which of a team will be the one to have this sympathy or empathy with other forms of life which we still tend to call 'instinctive.' But it usually happens, and is extremely important and useful" (*Memoirs* 92). Learning is a process of becoming sympathetic to particular facts within a broader narrative, particular agents within a field of distributed causality. This is why, in Haraway's reading of *Memoirs*, "Knowledge would not come from scientific detachment but from scientific connection," associations that enable some insights and not others ("Otherworldly" 180).

The connection that forms between Mary and her grafts utterly warps her perspective. She participates in an experiment in which alien tissue is sutured to her thigh, a symbiosis that prompts her to lose track of herself on an existential level: "Yes, I had been somebody else. Somebody, from a scientific point of view, delinquent" (*Memoirs* 175). Her expeditions are motivated by gaining knowledge for science, but the science of her home-world is unable

to accommodate some of the knowledge she acquires. This changes Mary, making her temporarily "anti-scientific" and "highly suspicious of all tests" (*Memoirs* 161; 158). She becomes an agent unbound by Terran science and therefore unknowable through Terran means, a disturbing transition for her peers to observe (especially when she bites them), but Mary embraces the "complete character change" her graft produces—"I wanted it" (*Memoirs* 163). This episode illustrates the risk inherent in transforming alongside aliens. The danger that she might forget aspects of herself is very real, perhaps even unavoidable. Each additive encounter refashions her in a manner that she cannot control.

The varieties of knowledge Mary gains throughout her explorations are artefacts of her connections, vestiges of her conversations. On each planet she sifts through her own internal archive in search of a unit of meaning compatible enough with whatever is in front of her to function as a translation, and establishing that compatibility is itself an event in discourse:

> I might, I think, manage to communicate the peculiar beauty of the flowers we found on the brim of the cleft. But it would take time. English would not in any case be the right Terran language in which to express it. […] One might make the attempt in neo-Sanskrit. Let me merely say that those wavering and delicately winged blossoms were raising my pulse and respiration rate. (*Memoirs* 90)

A potential kinship between neo-Sanskrit and the alien flowers makes use of the language's history but pushes beyond it, asking neo-Sanskrit to move in ways it never could have on Terra. As Walter Benjamin writes, a successful translator "must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language" (Benjamin 81). The alienness of the flower on the brim of the cleft, upon entering into neo-Sanskrit, leaves a mark, making the act of

translation a transformative phenomenon, giving “in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one” (ibid.).

Likewise, Mary’s many translations transform her continually. Her kinships stretch her capacity for knowledge which, in turn, stretches her subjectivity until she no longer fits the human model. Musing about her future, she contemplates what she may someday become: “An aged explorer has so much experience, has seen and had to think about so much that he or she is as impressive as the great religious and political buildings of the Terran and Martian past, many angled, lovingly decorated, full of spaces for intense and special uses” (*Memoirs* 135-6). Even partial, fleeting connection is transformative, and thought is shaped by the body that thinks it, the environment through which it circulates. Mary’s story *is* the stories of those she meets, the many ways in which she has developed and mutated in relation to an alien’s sense of subjectivity.

This simultaneous appeal to the senses and epistemology is fundamental to what makes science fiction an impactful genre. Gregory Benford writes that while we can deduce “conceptual knowledge” from the figure of the alien, we must also see them as “an excitation, captivating and enthralling”— “The alien in SF is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question” (Benford 15). Mary’s narrative amplifies the sensuous dimension of alien contact in resistance to colonizing epistemes.

To Not Know: Jean Rhys

While Mary plays the role of receptive knower, Antoinette of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is constantly being read, providing insight into the other(ed) side of the equation. As an object of colonial discourse, Antoinette spends her life dodging exploitative interpretations, giving

her a unique perspective when it comes to her own constructions of knowledge. Modes of acquiring knowledge are, in both novels but especially for Antoinette, a matter of life and death.

Jean Rhys was a lifelong student of colonialism, and her literature captures the experiential content that does not fit into a colonizing epistemology. From her birth in 1890 until 1907, Rhys lived on the island of Dominica, part of the Caribbean archipelago, which has been called a "workshop" for the exchange of cultural influence in post-colonial theory (Mardorossian 4). While traveling in Europe as a young woman, she began to whisper habitually to avoid drawing attention to her accent; she was uncertain of whether to call herself West Indian at all after many years abroad; even in Dominica she was, as a white Creole woman, read as a liminal figure (Carr 117; 17; 24).

Wide Sargasso Sea's success earned Jean Rhys a legacy in Caribbean and post-colonial literatures and, at the same time,[25] an overdue reputation as a high modernist (Ashcom 7), though of the latter she said repeatedly that it was "too late" to do her much good (Pizzichini 291). She was, in Shari Benstock's words, an "outsider among outsiders" (Benstock 448), and *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the life story of another outsider.[26] Antoinette moves around Caribbean islands and ultimately to England with her vindictive, unnamed husband (Rochester)—she is *Jane Eyre*'s madwoman, before the attic. With this novel, Jean

[25] The paradigms of postcolonialism and modernism are often presented as "mutually exclusive" but in this text they unmistakably converge (Konzett 133).

[26] Jarring experiences of alienation seem to have informed the whole of Rhys' biography as well as her oeuvre, and the overlap therein has been a matter of much scholarly interest. Critics of her early work dismissed its literary value because "a woman who 'wrote almost exclusively about herself,' as Rhys was so often said to do, was not, it was assumed, in the intellectual class to be considered a modernist. Good at emotion, poor on ideas" (Carr 7). David Plante's oft-quoted memoir *Difficult Women* (1983) claims she could not even read many of her modernist contemporaries (for which Helen Carr presents ample counterevidence) (Carr 9).

Rhys critiques Charlotte Brönte's early feminism, which pits Jane's virtue and agency against an animalistic, racialized other that must erupt into flames for Jane to thrive.

Rhys's radical revision of a literary classic is an early example of "writing back" to the canon, which became a widespread technique in later postmodern feminism through the work of authors like Angela Carter.[27] As Helen Carr argues, Rhys's creolization of *Jane Eyre* was prescient, but early feminist thought was "not yet ready to take on Rhys' world where economic, racial, class, colonial and sexual oppressors all trample the disadvantaged" (Carr 101; 11). Rhys' explicit solidarity with her "brother Doormats," referred to by Ford Madox Ford (her intellectual ally and sometime lover) as a "passion for stating the case of the underdog" (Benstock 450), makes her literature's worldview particularly provocative today. Her writing on behalf of "those who belong nowhere, between cultures, between histories, describes an existence which is becoming paradigmatic of twentieth-first century life" (Carr xvi), a recitation of mobility that is both markedly modern and increasingly relevant.

Wide Sargasso Sea is structured by the clash of knowledge systems. As an object of Rochester's narration, Antoinette is interpolated as Bertha, a name she resents. Meanwhile, her narration provides no designation whatsoever for him, neither able to know him nor ignore him. The disconnect between their knowledge systems leads to major challenges when it comes to communication:

> She was undecided, uncertain about facts—any fact. When I asked her if the snakes we sometimes saw were poisonous, she said, 'Not those […] but how can they be sure? Do you think they know?' Then, 'Our snakes are not poisonous. Of course not.' (Rhys 52)

[27] Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) rewrites classic fairy tales.

Unwilling or unable to fix her interpretation of the snakes with a decisive portrayal, Antoinette frustrates Rochester's attempts to master his new situation. In her own relations with the nonhuman, she undermines the colonizing knowledge of her husband-turned-captor.

The knowledge systems in conversation here manifest most clearly through each character's relation to the environment. When Rochester focuses on his aesthetic perceptions, he does so in order to make judgments about what he sees: "It was a beautiful place—wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, 'What I see is nothing—I want what it *hides*—that is not nothing' (Rhys 51-2). In perceiving the landscape, he recharacterizes it according to his own personal drives, exoticizing, desiring and repelling, which leads him to fantasize about penetrating it to expose some valuable kernel of knowledge. His cultural training has instilled in him an "unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it" (Nietzsche 95-6).

By contrast, Antoinette's narration is principally composed of her aesthetic observations themselves, records of the impressions of her senses. In an unassuming but key moment of her childhood, she wanders "to parts of Coulibri that I had not seen, where there was no road, no path, no track,"

> And if the razor grass cut my legs and arms I would think 'It's better than people.' Black ants or red ones, tall nests swarming with white ants, rain that soaked me to the skin—once I saw a snake […] Watching the red and yellow flowers in the sun thinking of nothing, it was as if a door opened and I was somewhere else, something else. Not myself any longer. (*Rhys* 16)

She records color and motion, feeling and a sense of space; what *she* sees is not nothing. Bodies interpenetrate throughout her reflection as rain merges into skin and ants emerge out of nests, portraying the whole scene as a web seething with codependent entities. Antoinette accepts the way that these others literally cut into her because their company also offers her a respite from her overdetermined life.

This youthful exploration is one of Antoinette's most liberatory experiences; she is temporarily free of people's readings of her, not an object of knowledge but a co-creator. Grounded in the details of her physical environment, she reorients her perspective in alignment with nonhuman kin, which allows her to access a different aspect of herself. Her transformation here should be read in relation to her objectification elsewhere, a rebellion and a compensation. When Rochester expresses that the Dominican environment "is my enemy and on your side," she corrects him: "It is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else" (Rhys 78). Despite its indifference, she engages and grows alongside the "something else," which is Rhys's phrase for both the physical landscape and whatever Antoinette becomes alongside the ants and flowers, establishing even more firmly the affinity between her subjective change and her nonhuman environment. Its alienness is what enables the landscape to temporarily rescue her from her human ways of knowing.

As "something else" Antoinette escapes the self that is known to be "wild" and "worthless" (Rhys 15); she escapes the Bertha that is an object of social interpretation. This is a coping mechanism she found "long ago when I was a child. I loved [this place] because I had nothing else to love," kept company with gardens and mountains that helped her recover from the company of people (Rhys 78). When she is woken by a nightmare in her youth, her

mother sighs and accuses her of frightening her infant brother. Antoinette lies awake thinking, “I am safe. There is the corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe” (Rhys 16). She soothes herself through her kinship with the environment, turning away from being read as the source of her brother’s fear and her mother’s ire and towards an act of reading in which she is unobtrusive, a small body surrounded and protected by larger, nonhuman bodies.

Others’ smothering constructions of Antoinette are ultimately fatal in this story. However, her moments of nonhuman connection are critical for any assessment of the novel’s power dynamics. Though Rochester may treat her as an object of colonial knowledge the narrative itself does not; it treats her as a mobile, malleable consciousness that has been shaped violently by human knowledge and so flees into nonhuman relationships, where she creates a less constricting way of knowing and being. The colonial knowledge system is always closing in on her and trying to pin her down, but she maintains a state of unknowing by clinging to artefacts she can touch, beings she can observe, aesthetics evoked by bodies in conversation. Change always takes place in a power relationship, whether it be an exploitative one such as Rochester’s relation to Antoinette, renaming her with complete neglect for her perspective and history, or a sustaining relation such as Antoinette’s comingling with the ants and snakes, the gardens and mountains. In the latter set of encounters, she can forget the colonial script for brief but influential moments in which she knows herself to be “something else.”

While Mary from *Memoirs of a Spacewomen* trains arduously to relinquish her mastery of herself, Antoinette is never afforded it in the first place. Antoinette is transformed

in relation to influences outside of her on a regular basis, and usually it is a violent affair. Her story begins with her family's "white" status being revoked— "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks" (Rhys 9)—mutating her sense of herself and inviting a new level of precarity into her life. Suddenly an accepted, unexamined pillar of her identity is revealed as an exercise of power. Antoinette's experiences and environments shape what she knows and who she becomes, but these changes are often terrifying and profoundly destabilizing. The prisoner of Thornfield Hall would likely not affirm certain decisions made by the woman in Dominica, or even the girl in Jamaica. Sometimes drunk, paranoid, and scornful, she explicitly references the limitations of her own memory and expects to be misinterpreted (Rhys 31; 18).

And indeed, she has been. Many of Jean Rhys' protagonists are accused of reproducing rather than defying clichés of the feminine (Emery 164).[28] They are read as fatally passive,[29] contributing to their own oppression, irrational and flighty, obsessed with commodities and aesthetics. Antoinette's racial identity is also a fraught topic within the novel; as a white Creole woman in post-slavery Jamaica, Antoinette bears a history of complicity in oppression alongside her history of victimization. In this character, discourses overlap and interrupt each other, and Antoinette shifts along with them. Her portrayal fluctuates before the reader's eyes, demanding "new reading strategies that emphasize not *whether* but *when* characters are 'black' or 'white'" (Mardorossian 16). In *Reclaiming Difference* (2005), Carine Mardorossian shows how Antoinette's racial and gender identities

[28] "Rhys and her writing came to be seen, depending on the reader's view of Women's Liberation, as emblematic either of women's oppression or of their self-pity" (Carr 4-5).
[29] Lucy Wilson argues that Antoinette "is powerless to alter her condition"; the text's "ultimate betrayal" is her acceptance of imperialist culture and "her inability to choose personal integrity over financial dependency," and it is "her own passivity [that] brings her to England and leaves her with no options except death" (Wilson 440; 444; 442).

are mobilized according to her transgressive behavior, drawing focus away from her contested ancestry and towards her navigation of a highly charged political terrain.

Her way of navigating is to avoid being fully understood by anyone, even herself. Antoinette is an expert at evasion: "*as soon as she can walk she hide herself if she see anybody*"; she disavows the possibility of understanding: "I am sorry. I don't understand you. I know nothing about you, and I cannot speak for you"; she resists her captor's urgent attempts to draw her out: "(*Force her to cry and to speak*) 'But she won't'" (Rhys 57; 103; 93). Though she is often an object of spectacle, she dramatizes the incompleteness of knowledge, her own and her husband's. Opacity, as theorized by Caribbean theorist Édouard Glissant, is "a positive value to be opposed to any pseudo-humanist attempt to reduce us to the scale of some universal model" (Glissant 162). This state of unknowing resists attempts at mastery, demonstrating that some content cannot be accommodated by epistemic models that claim to accommodate everything.

The narrative's most powerful omission occupies the last page. Antoinette dreams she has burned down Thornfield Hall and plummeted to her death, wakes with a new sense of resolve, and creeps "along the dark passage," candle in hand (Rhys 112). The fatal outcome of Antoinette's walk is predetermined by *Jane Eyre,* cemented in literary history before *Wide Sargasso Sea* even begins. However, we do not see this outcome realized. There is a gap between the end of Rhys's narrative and the culmination of the plot, which leaves the reader on an ambiguous note. The majority of critics, including Walton Look Lai and, years later, Sandra Drake, read Antoinette's suicide as a moment of redemption, allowing her to achieve "personal and cultural liberation;" "her own soul rises up as it blooms" (Drake 195; 203). Gayatri Spivak, on the other hand, famously reads Antoinette's death as an allegory of

imperialist violence (Spivak 251). I argue that if Antoinette achieves any kind of liberation, it is through the non-depiction of her suicide, not the suicide itself. The incident is not defined so she is not defined by it, whereas in *Jane Eyre* this incident is equivalent to Bertha's identity; it is how her story, long kept secret, becomes known.

When Antoinette is cloistered in the attic at the end of her life, studying her red dress from home is her last solace.[30] Disoriented and disconsolate, she revels in the garment's sensuous details, which reorients her in relation to this one piece of an otherwise inaccessible reality. Her relationship with the dress grounds her in a different experience of being herself:

> Time has no meaning. But something you can touch and hold like my red dress, that has a meaning. […] The scent that came from the dress was very faint at first, then it grew stronger. The smell of vetivert and frangipanni, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain. […] I was wearing a dress of that colour when Sandi came to see me for the last time. (Rhys 109-110)

Smelling the fabric and nostalgic hints of the environment that cultivated it, Antoinette loses herself in rumination when living her own life is most unendurable. She is transfixed by the dress's material contours just as she was by the ants in her youth, letting herself get carried away by the affective affordances of an inanimate object. The memory of Sandi that handling the dress conjures is a precious one; it gestures to the potential life she could have led with

[30] Analyzing Rhys' corpus as a whole, Erica Johnson notes a pattern of such unexpected alignments amongst her protagonists: "This outsourcing of identity to machines, mirrors, mannequins, dolls, kittens, horses, zombies, and so forth, may be in part a defence mechanism against the oppressive conditions under which they live, but one effect of Rhys's portraiture is that she pushes the boundaries of the body and of the subject" (Johnson 209).

her secret lover, an escape she declined to make when she had the chance. Touching the fabric brings her back to a time when freedom was still conceivable.

Sensory experiences of a material context cannot be reduced to an idea. Therefore they are not exactly communicable, but they do set the stage for communication; every interaction is mediated and conditioned by bodies with sensations. By focusing her attention on the feeling of the razor grass on her legs and the rain on her skin, the color of the dress and the ants and the flowers, Antoinette privileges that irreducible specificity over the data that could be extracted from the environment. In fact, the notion that these material bodies could be rendered interchangeable is, for her, the height of treachery: "But I held the dress in my hand wondering if they had done the last and worst thing. If they had changed it when I wasn't looking. If they had changed it and it wasn't my dress at all—but how could they get the scent?" (Rhys 110) Fear of such a conspiracy keeps her paranoid and drives her back to aesthetic wallowing as she reassures herself that her history is still her own, even if nothing else is.

Counterintuitively, this attention to specificity is exactly where Antoinette fails in certain cultural interactions. Recognizing no one as she stares out at the group of Black islanders who burn her childhood home, Antoinette says, "They all looked the same, it was the same face repeated over and over" (Rhys 25). The sensitivity she displays in her observations of objects, plants and animals is not extended to these persons; the characters' histories and cultural positions relative to each other have erected perceptual barriers. She does not push against this particular barrier and instead, she retreats into her garden, or into her kinship with the doomed parrot Coco, whose fate mirrors her own.[31] Antoinette can

[31] "Antoinette's model in the decisive Coulibri scene can be seen to be not so much the ex-slave underclass, as Coco, her mother's parrot, who, like Antoinette, perishes in a fire" (Brown 582).

forget what humanism has taught her about some of her neighbors and not others, can lose herself in memories and relationships that morph her subjective space but cannot purge her ethical complicity.

Thrown into a politically volatile situation that deprives Antoinette of any agency over her own self-definition, she is forced to improvise compensatory strategies through which to know herself, which consistently involve her physical environment. The knowledge she does develop of her identity is emphatically not portrayed as a mode of mastery. She completely forgets attacking her stepbrother with a knife and biting his arm and she never finds out how her mother dies (Rhys 108; 36). Her history is a tapestry of blank spaces woven together. While forgetting the ways she has been known allows her to change alongside nonhuman companions, it is also indicative of her profound instability, especially since she does not seem to control what she forgets any more than she controls the other influences that shape her life. Antoinette's risky reality transforms her violently and then she learns to transform again to soothe her wounds, making her a fluid, undefinable character.

Whereas the unreliability of *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s narrators is often understood as a strategy to provoke the reader into a "constructive role, like a jury" (Voicu 93), any attempt to scrutinize the "whole story" and judge the outcome is necessarily halted before it can invade the site of Antoinette's subjectivity. This is Rhys' way of doing justice to the irreducible specificity of a material context that is never fully rendered. Antoinette's evasions and deviations push back against epistemological mastery, forcing the audience to come to terms with not knowing.

Nonhuman Knowledge

Making is cyclically entwined with unmaking; "progress" is not about amassing and expanding but is rather a matter of questioning which past constructions are still useful in new contexts. Mary and Antoinette take advantage of nonhuman contact as an event with the potential to help them delink from colonialist knowledge. Their relationships with the nonhuman are transformative. Both women take on nonhuman characteristics such as biting people who are ostensibly trying to help them. This process is neither rational nor neat, but the embrace of becoming-alien enables humanity to meaningfully change.

Life exceeds the knowledge that attempts to describe and control it, and Rhys and Mitchison give shape to that excess with the winding, discontinuous structure of their fictions, which seek to speak from many (but not all) positions. In Rhys' creolization of *Jane Eyre* and Mitchison's decolonization of exploration, delinking from humanist knowledge makes the protagonists alien to themselves. The process of delinking from naturalized cultural narratives, rendered here as an aesthetic correspondence, teaches them to acknowledge that "the world encountered in knowledge projects is an active entity": "Actors come in many and wonderful forms. Accounts of a 'real' world do not, then, depend on a logic of 'discovery', but on a power-charged social relation of 'conversation.' The world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favour of a master decoder. The codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read" ("Situated" 198). Replacing "discovery" with "conversation" sets new conditions for alien encounters. Neither party is wholly subject or object in the interaction, discoverer or discovery, and the hope the unknown represents becomes less a product of the desires projected on it than a product of the interaction itself.

As the ultimate human art form, knowledge production is a craft that needs to be grounded in nonhuman realities, as Karen Barad elaborates in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*

(2007): “practices of knowing cannot fully be claimed as human practices, not simply because we use nonhuman elements in our practices but because knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part. […] We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are *of* the world” (Barad 185). Science fiction and post-colonial literature contribute different perspectives on engaging the alien that are both necessary to demonstrate the power dynamics inherent in the term, and the conversation between them works to extricate knowledge production from autopoietic human practices.

Mary painstakingly learns to surrender mastery of herself and forgets her own name; Antoinette is not afforded mastery in the first place and is exploitatively renamed. As a result, they develop ways of knowing that do not depend on mastery at all. They react to the bodies in the environment rather than their preconceptions, artistically recreating their worldviews with each new introduction. Communication, whose task it is to leap between worlds, does not simply move knowledge around—it is a performance through which kin rewrite each other.

IMAGES

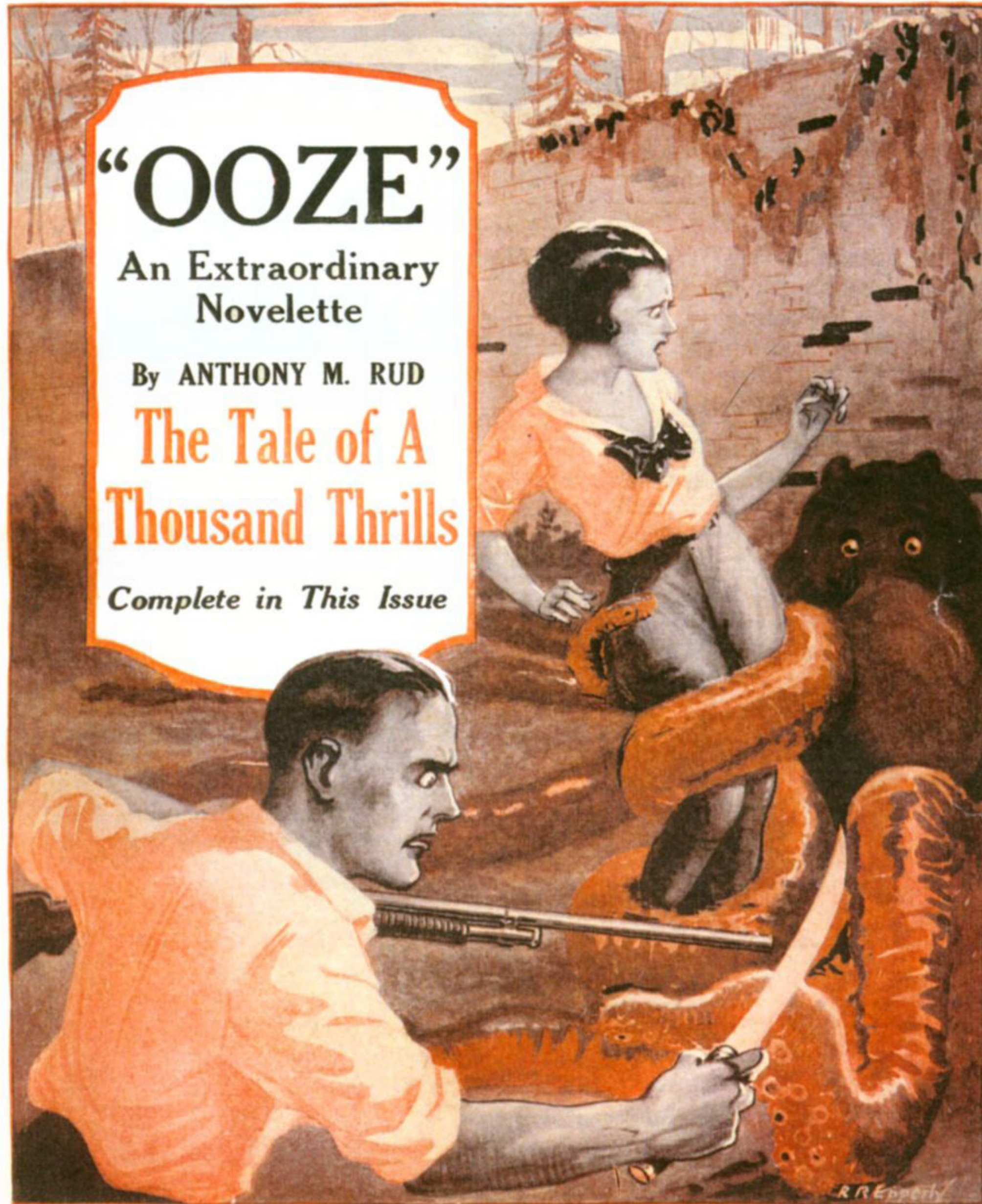

FIG. 1: Epperly, Richard. *Weird Tales* cover, Mar. 1923.

FIG. 2: *Book of Repulsive Women*

FIG. 3: *Book of Repulsive Women*

FIG 4: Keller, George F. “The Curse of California.” 19 August 1882.

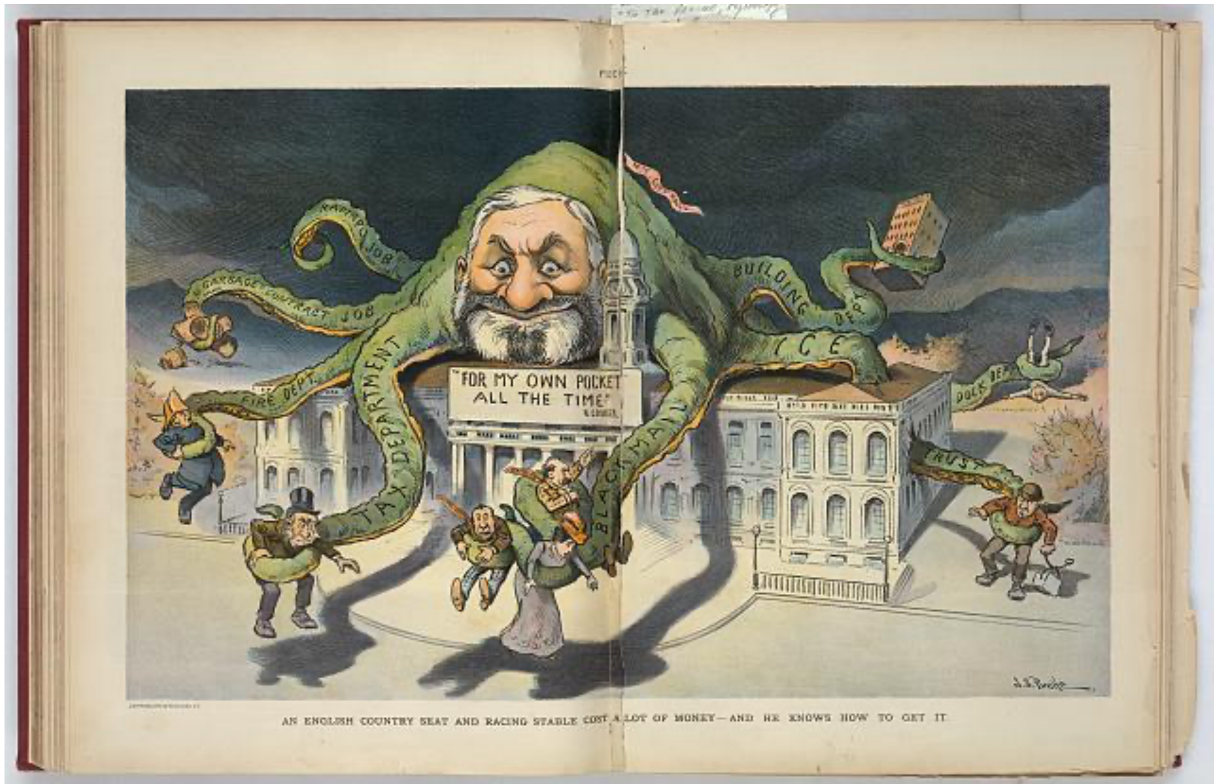

FIG 5: Pughe, Pughe. "An English country seat and racing stable cost a lot of money - and he knows how to get it." 23 Oct. 1901.

FIG. 6: "The Devilfish in Egyptian Waters," 1882.

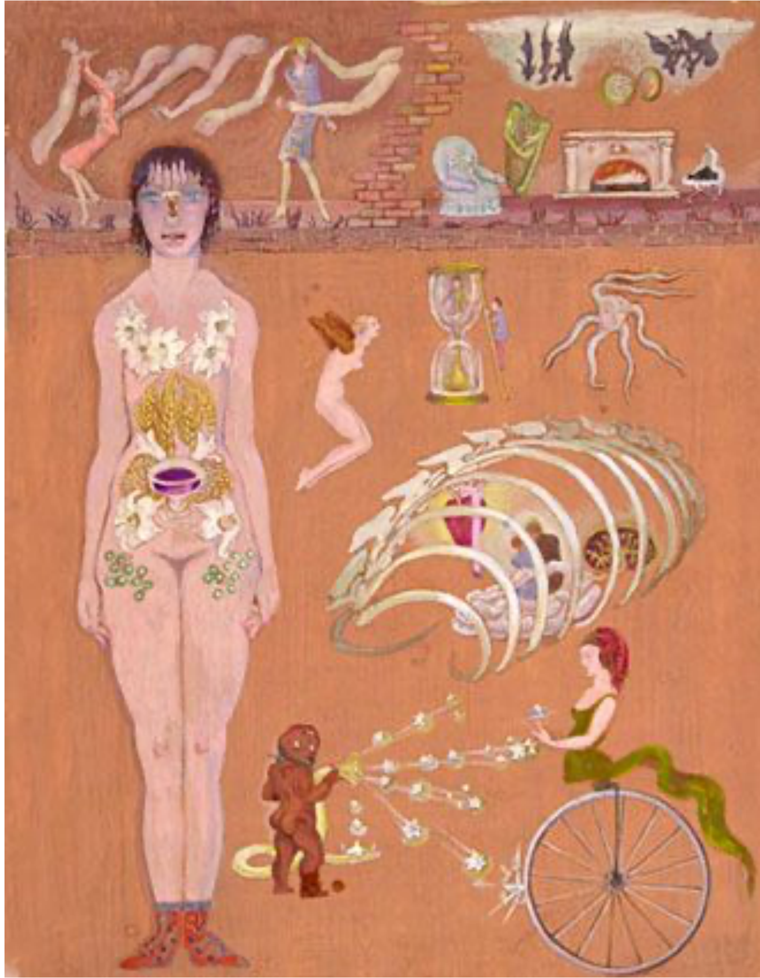
FIG 7: “Surreal Scene,” 1930.

FIG 8: Depero, Fortunato. “Motociclista – Solido in Velocità,” 1944.

FIG 9: “Portrait of Madam Dupin,” 1947.

Fig. 10: Dali, Salvador. *Minotaure* cover, 1936.

FIG 11: “The Pomps of Subsoil,” 1947.

FIG 12: Holbein, Ambrosius, “Utopiae Insulae Tabula.” December 1518.

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