Weirding the Other — Transgressing Toward Inhumanity

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2025

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Creative Writing and Poetics

University of Washington

Abstract

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This critical essay positions marginalized others as weird and inhuman others, exploring both the weirded experiences of an othered life and the potential for weird others to achieve radical alterity by relinquishing the fight for humanness, and instead finding kinship with the inhuman, and the further weird. This essay engages with seminal critical works regarding the weird, as well as contemporary fiction novels that are widely considered to demonstrate the weird, *The City & the City* by China Miéville, and *The Ballad of Black Tom* Victor LaValle. In addition, I put forth *The Man Who Lived Underground* by Richard Wright and Henry Dumas' short story, "Fon", as illustrations of weirded marginalized experiences.

2020

2020 was a year of upheaval, death, decay, and new understanding. It was a year that for many hardly felt real at all, marked by uncertainty, amorphous fear and confusion. Millions of people quarantined, and became isolated, forced to remain in their dwellings for the good of others. Many revolted against mask mandates they interpreted as stripping them of their freedom of expression, their identities, their consent. Not much changed for me that year; I could not relate to the jarring feelings of grief and anger, desperation and exhaustion and disappointment that seemed so new to so many people. I had been in relative isolation for nearly seventeen years. In 2020, I watched from a house hidden in the hills, with my dying dog and a man who insisted I was not black, and should not feel anything in response to what I saw. It was not my world. It hadn't been for a very long time. When I left him in 2021, that world (this world) was strange to me. I didn't know what I was looking at. I had lost grasp of my surroundings, I had lost time, I had lost any sense of myself. I emerged unsure what to call myself, even. I knew my name in print, but I had been called "girl" and "woman" for so long the words had lost their meaning. I couldn't tell anyone where I was from, or why I had left. It's this estrangement, the overwhelming nature of it, that I began with

when I began to write because even the most basic immutable facets of myself had been smoothed over, and all I knew was the separateness of myself in relation to everything else.

As I approached the borderspace between the world I knew and otherwise, my sense of reality was challenged, undermined, and revealed as distressingly unstable, requiring me to probe the unreality of my experience. But I think it's important to note that the world I was entering was not any more "real" than the one I was leaving; this "empirical" reality revealed my own weirdness as someone with experiences of blackness as a mixed race person, of domestic abuse, and of homelessness. I became a representation of the world not being as it seems, a weird agent of "unworlding" (Fisher 48) that evoked discomfort, anxiety, and sometimes outright dismissal. I sucked the air out of the room, filled it with an "ambient discontent…a hazy malaise" (50) as alien and alien-making, uncanny, and feral. I'm focusing on weird fiction because I think the aesthetic effects best represent my embodied experiences of otherness. When I speak of the other, I mean the stranger, the foreigner, the unknown, the "them" as positioned opposed to "us", the margins that limn the dominant center. The weird provides me with a mode to write in a way that amplifies a sense of estrangement, of not being, of being out of place, of being no one, and of unmeaning to explore experiences that are

rarely represented in weird fiction, or as weird at all. In doing so, I validate my own sense of otherness, striving toward a radical alterity in becoming "abcanny" (Miéville 382), and resisting domestication through acceptance of inhumanity and its transgressive, estranging grotesque of "interspecies entanglement and reproductive displacement, an inquiry into the unrealized lifeworlds that form the background of the everyday" (Ahuja 372). The inhuman describes those "extracted" from the human classification as defined by Eurocentric ideals, and tied materially to the indifferent cosmos that define our experience of the weird.

The Weird — *"I know it when I feel it"*

Mark Fisher's work, *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), provides a way of identifying and analyzing the weird as both an affect and a mode separate from the Freudian "unheimlich", the uncanny or "unhomely", though they are often concomitant. The weird is an atmosphere, characterized by dread (fear of the unknown, inexplicable, and formless), disgust, an irruption of one world into another (the former being that "which does not belong"), and is often traced back to H.P. Lovecraft who formalized the weird tale. In a traditional Lovecraftian story, there is an irruption of real externality into the familiar interior, twists in the structure of time, indescribable (yet described) entities,

invented historicity, a shared mythos, and an eventual and inevitable psychiatric break in response to contact with knowledge beyond human experience. Fisher also regards the cognitive estrangement in weirded narratives as an "unworlding" (48) — the degrading of any sense that there is a 'fundamental' level that authenticates what is real. The cognitive weird is not seen or experienced, but a cognitive effect produced by depriving a formal realism of any feeling of reality. The grotesque in the weird provokes disgust at its porous boundaries of the human, the animal, and the vegetal that indicate insecure boundaries of self and "other", the known and otherwise. The weird, though, resists codification; it is formless, and transgresses genre. But it remains a distinct atmosphere — "I know it when I *feel* it" (Vandermeer 2012).

Otherness

Lovecraft is, for many, synonymous with weird fiction, but he was not the progenitor of it. Weird fiction itself is a response to gothic literature, in which domestic anxieties manifested in the return of past horrors and transgressions in the form of ghosts and hauntings. At the forefront of the transition from gothic fiction is Edgar Allan Poe, who wrote gothic ghost stories, gothic satire, as well as "proto-weird tales" that explored "a kind of dissolution of the self brought about by aestheticised disgust"

(Newell 25). Toni Morrison featured Poe in her work, *Playing in the Dark,* a case study into the construction of blackness as otherness in the white imaginary. Morrison equates the gothic with romance in American literature, and (though not by name) identifies weird elements within romantic narratives — "fear of boundarylessness…of aggression both external and internal," though they end unweirdly in "the opportunity to conquer fear imaginatively and to quiet deep insecurities" (81) about their new freedoms as Americans. The opposite of freedom manifested in the Africans they enslaved, thereby rendering the African (and blackness, darkness) as the "other" in constant opposition to burgeoning constructions of American identity. Morrison finds the result in Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), in which "images of impenetrable whiteness…appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control" (80).

In terms of art at large, this treatment of blackness precedes and succeeds Poe. Black rectangles have appeared in the pages of books of devotion, novels, elegies, and within art movements for centuries. According to Andrew Spira, "the fervent sophistication of black pages" in eighteenth century mourning texts re-emerged as black rectangles in the nineteenth century in public exhibitions. In 1882, Paul Bilhaud exhibited his painting *Combat de Nègres pendant la nuit* or "A Combat of Negroes at

night", inspiring Alphonse Allais' *Combat de Nègres dans une cave, pendant la nuit* or "Negroes fighting in a cave at night" in 1897, and reappearing in Kasimir Malevich's 1915 avant garde *Black Square,* hailed as "one of the most extraordinary paintings ever produced" (Spira). In 2015, researchers found beneath the cracked black paint of *Black Square* the inscription "Negroes Battling at Night" (Nechepurenko 2015), revealing a seemingly unbroken tradition of depicting black bodies that "appear to become seamlessly undifferentiated from darkness and violence" (Spira). It's unclear how aware Lovecraft was of art outside of the weird tales that came before his own, but his fear of blackness and its unfathomability evokes the same abstractness in his work. Though cosmic horror is a defining feature of weird fiction as truly alien entities supposed as so removed from humanness as to be indescribable and unknowable, Lovecraft subsumed his portrayals of people of color into illustrations of cosmic horror and into the very atmosphere of his narratives, so to excise Lovecraft's racism and other bigotries from his works is to whitewash the weird. I would like to look at the process by which those marginalized have always been part of the weird.

The City & the City

Before I knew weird fiction existed, I read China Miéville's novel, *King Rat* (1998), and I found it exciting, subterranean, and strange in a way I related to. I've read many of his novels since, but I think *The City & the City* (2009) is the most explicit demonstration of weird marginalization.

The City & the City is a dry blend of noir detective fiction and politically transparent weird fiction that explores the socially constructed and reinforced boundaries that separate entities, and the institutionally structured process of othering. The weird elements emerge through a Lovecraftian style "fascination," a preoccupation that "transforms an object that usually causes displeasure into a 'Thing' that is both terrible and alluring" and no longer either wholly positive or negative (17). The novel is set in two cities that occupy the same physical place, Besz and Ul Qoma. The space the cities "share" is crosshatched, but there are areas that are only the territory of one city or the other. Citizens of both are legally required to "unsee" the other city and its citizens. They *can* see each other (there are no invented fantastic species in this novel), but doing so is illegal, the crime of "breach" that constitutes "border-perforating catastrophes" (78) , that is punishable by an enforcement entity called "Breach", theorized to occupy the space between cities—both iterations the weird's tell tale

"irruptions". The work this novel does is possible because the conceit is so obvious, yet not too explicitly familiar. Besz and Ul Qoma could be virtually any pair of cities, countries, continents, neighborhoods—or one/parts of those. Miéville blurs the definable features of lived experience in either city, a use of cognitive estrangement which "exposes and destabilizes the compulsion of the human gaze to colonise its surroundings" (Ulstein 51).

Though considered a "New Weird" author seeking to recontextualize cosmic dread for contemporary anxieties, Miéville's novel incorporates the weird in a classical way, informed by Arthur Machen, H.P. Lovecraft, Edgar Allan Poe, Algernon Blackwood, and others. The "old" weird and the new are informed by anxieties produced by trauma, "a sort of transcendental shock effecting ruptures in the fabric of experience itself" (22). For Lovecraft, the trauma of World War I transmuted apocalyptic connotations of difference into his immobilizing fear of people of color, and for Jeff Vandermeer, a New Weird author, climate anxiety reframes and decenters human influence within deeper, more complex ecologies. In this tradition, the weird appears as a destabilizing influence upon the human characters' experience or perception of the nonhuman world, which is not empathetic to humans, and has its own inscrutable motivations. The nonhuman it is othered to the point of causing madness in the humans

who interact with it. I submit my own trauma relating to intimate partner violence, anti-blackness, and homelessness in the same tradition to highlight that what is missing from weird works is any complex representation of marginalized people.

Anti-blackness and abuse

There is a special sort of dismantling that occurs during a relationship defined by intimate partner abuse. When it occurs within an interracial and heterosexual relationship, it is institutionally guided and upheld in several ways. The partner I was with beginning when I was seventeen is a white cis straight man. When we met in the early 2000s, he was twenty-five and held tightly to a host of bigoted beliefs. I do understand now that there were many contributing factors to our meeting. My childhood exemplifies the ways in which "the production of space is tied to the production of difference" (3). I was raised by a black woman from the South who believed she had to subjugate her blackness, to revere and uphold whiteness as an ideal, whose marriage with my father ended because of his family's objections to her blackness, and whose children were subsequently mistreated and othered by their father. She raised me in white, affluent neighborhoods where the only life I knew was as a conspicuously brown child, in/visibly transient, palpably starving.

Marginalized experiences like this challenge a Western understanding of individual agency under structural pressure, assuming every person can navigate these structures of "reality" by the same means and to the same effects. Our unrealism as others "registers tears in the fabric of generic and social realities" and "interrogates the security of categories of the real and the unified, nostalgic vision of totalizing, moral and hierarchical forms"(Botting 184). Sylvia Wynter speaks of the Conceptual Other in "No Humans Involved", and though her points speak to the otherness of the black jobless people in the inner city, I think they can also be useful in framing homelessness as a "liminal category of *les damnés*" (13) or as a state in which there are "no humans involved" as a result of a *"misrecognition of human kinship"* (15) that others people in the lower class. This liminality is inherent —a life defined by homelessness is less lived and when we die (by any means whatsoever), we are "less-dead" (Egger 74). Homeless others are both spectral and haunted, subject to an "unseeing", existing as both subjects of charity and monstrous "psychological manifestations of some crisis" (Mukherjee & Ghosh 80). The association of homeless people with urban spaces and materials renders them both organic and inorganic, both individuals and appendages of an unfathomably larger threatening body. Tentacular. Breach.

Living in those alienating communities erased my family's "place within a community of [our] peers, [our] black interiority…forced into a social world that dehumanizes [us]" (Dunning 50). We knew no one like us. I was without a home and without whiteness, and so I was perpetually out of place. When I met my former partner, he was whiteness and he was a home, and in that white home, I was broken down into parts, humiliated and dehumanized. In these experiences, "blackness bends reality in such a way that the whole incident becomes weird, characterized by a creeping dread" (Dunning 45). My fear of being noticed as homeless and not white grew to outsized proportions, spilling over into fear of a pain I couldn't know the shape of until it came, and I became convinced that I was always doing the wrong things. And there's everything that fills in the long moments of almost two decades of our lives, the smaller insidious strains and the larger painful punctuations that I can't address here. I went a little mad.

Black Weird Literature

The Man Who Lived Underground

In Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground,* the dismantling of Fred Daniels is institutionally validated. Fred is a black man leaving work to join his

pregnant wife at their home, who finds himself racially profiled by police and falsely accused of murdering a white couple. He is then arrested, tortured by police, and coerced into signing a false confession. This dehumanizing encounter leads him to seek refuge in the sewer system, resulting in his being pushed further into otherness, forced to traverse contrasting worlds. The subterranean world Fred retreats into has very little to authenticate itself as part of the real, but soon the "real" world he's left (and eventually returns to) is afflicted with the same loss of authentication. Fred's "movement across the boundary of a semantic field" is allomorphic, and that movement is signified by "an ontic change in the character/agent's reality either because of his displacement in space and/or time or because the reality itself changes around him" (Suvin 70-71). Just as in *The City & the City,* in which Tyador is changed by his travel into a city he's been taught to unsee, Fred's transgressions result in an ontological anxiety progressing into an ontic change that reflects which world he currently inhabits.

Fred's blackness conjures the novel's unreality, the strange loops of wrongness, and his liminality as he ends up "between that terrifying world of life-in-death above him and this dark world that was death-in-life here in the underground" (133), and each world he's occupied has become denaturalized. When he emerges, he isn't even really Fred Daniels anymore, validated by the policemen he meets who refuse to arrest him.

Perhaps, what ultimately authenticates the surface world —the "real" world—is that when he is finally recognized, the original arresting officers shoot him dead to hide their mistake of his reality-degrading arrest. If anything, "the empirical world of common sense" that exists for Fred at the beginning of his story is destroyed, and "replaced by a hypernaturalism —an expanded sense of what the material cosmos contains" (Fisher 18).

The Ballad of Black Tom

The quiet legacy of Wright's novel lives on in so many places, and in Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016). LaValle reimagines Lovecraft's short story "The Horror at Red Hook" (1952), in which a white police detective investigates the mysterious and erratic (and also white) Robert Suydam, in the process coming into contact with the occult in a neighborhood of Brooklyn, NY where Suydam pursues immortality. Lovecraft uses blackness and darkness interchangeably, and often to describe the atmosphere surrounding Robert Suydam, including the many "dark men" that surround Suydam and act as agents of the weird, further denounced as "the blackest and most vicious criminals of Red Hook's devious lanes". As well, the "evil spirit of darkness and squalor broods on amongst the mongrels in the old brick houses" in Red

Hook , and later, the "seas of dark, subtle faces" were a "thing of nightmare, and eldritch portent", and "dark foreign faces…eat so deeply into [Malone's] soul". It is clear that blackness is the story's most estranging element and its central horror; its presence Lovecraft's "white terror sublimated under the sign of blackness" (Dunning 48).

LaValle gives voice and dimension to the people of color that Lovecraft feared, vilified, dehumanized, and reduced to horrific atmosphere. LaValle reorients the story to follow his own invented black character, Tommy Tester, who lives with his father in Red Hook, and gets by in ways that are ethically blurry and supernatural-adjacent, but essentially harmless. Under the guise of hiring Tommy Tester to perform for his white guests, Richard Suydam instead exposes him to a cosmic and monstrous entity, the Sleeping King, and explains his desire to wake it so that all who've been subjugated will be "free". Caught between the doggedly prejudiced Malone who is convinced Tommy is up to something, and Suydam's hubris, Tommy's father is shot and killed by police, and Tommy is thrust into fugitivity, becoming Black Tom to accept his inhumanity. In doing so, he accepts kinship with the weird, cosmic horror that inhabits Red Hook.

In both this novel and his short story "Up From Slavery" (2019), LaValle not only subverts the Lovecraft mythos, but he also performs in a tradition and lineage of Black science fiction. Booker T. Washington's 1901 autobiography, from which LaValle

borrows the title for his short story, is arguably a work of futurism. W.E.B. DuBois wrote a more overt science fictional work,"The Comet" (1920), speculating the conditions in which a black man and a white woman could pursue a romantic relationship (in a dark basement when a comet devastates New York). Henry Dumas' short story "Fon" (1970) follows its titular character as he is pursued by a lynch mob who accuse him of throwing a rock through a white man's windshield, though Fon knows the rock has come from the sky. The cosmic implications are laterally significant to the horror of racial violence, and exist in the kinship with weird others (interstellar and geological).

LaValle performs the weird more effectively than Lovecraft's originals simply by presenting an empirical realism to give a sense of scale to the weird. The anxiety, fear, and existential dread are all the more palpable in both works because they are rooted in the real "transcendental shock"; the realism sets up an "ontological interregnum" in which the unworlding occupies an symbolically unresolved space, and dread is amplified by that tension (50). As well, the Black Weird of these works highlights "the violation and absurdity of (white) racism as experienced from within a black worldview" (48), creating a sense of "double estrangement" that Joy Sanchez Taylor characterizes as the juxtaposition of Suvin's cognitive estrangement with DuBois's "double

consciousness"(7) that people of color are forced to view themselves through a white lens. LaValle and Wright demonstrate that the surreality of black experience is that blackness itself undermines a prevailing understanding of reality, and reveals its instability in that the rules of reality can be so totally altered by racism. Further, one's real experience of this will be constantly and consistently questioned because of its failures of logic.

These works have provided me with sharper clarity of the weirdness of an othered life. What separates the anxiety in the atmosphere of these works from mere horror is that the object of anxiety is faceless, mutating, relatively unknown. The threats are abstract, multiplied, unstable, everywhere and nowhere. Both Fred and Black Tom become estranged from humans as a species, and their inhumanity indicates that the cosmic horror inherent in weird fiction is as terrestrial as much as it is otherworldly.

The Cosmic

Weird fiction cannot be extricated from the very familiar politics of our societies, and Miéville points out that "all that ecstatic collapse of the subject position—is predicated on master-race ideology…this is why you don't get to escape it by saying 'well, we're not really talking about humans'" ("AFTERWORD" 241). On the surface, the

cosmic element of cosmic horror is considered completely separate from the geological. However, Kathryn Yusoff asserts that "cosmic materialisms stretch the reach of the universe and return in the shared quotidian of minerals and bodies against and as the cosmic storm" (43). Humans are cosmic material, and live in it. Geology "extends, calcifies, and corrals [life] into affiliation with the cosmos, deep earth" (43). As for the inhuman, colonizing forces rendered people of color as "extracted others" by classifying them as natural resources and chattel. The cosmic dimension of the inhuman is that the resistance to these classifications "creates intimacies with the inhuman outside of forced categories" and the materiality of the inhuman "holds itself open against enclosure" (51).

Unreality

The most dangerous time for a woman in an abusive relationship is when she is leaving; black women are six times more likely to be killed by their partner than other races/ethnicities (Waller et al. 2020); if a woman is strangled by her partner, she is 750 times more likely to be killed by that partner within the same year, and the risk increases with every subsequent incident (Glass 2008). It can feel like fate—in the classically *wyrd* sense—an inevitability that resists control. This feeling is even further

disorienting when navigating weird embedded worlds —even if you manage to leave, you will die over and over in your dreams. When I left, my nightmares increased a thousand fold. Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) describes a set of symptoms resulting from prolonged traumatic experience, including "flashbacks, nightmares, repetitive and distressing images or sensations, physical sensations, such as pain, sweating, feeling sick or trembling" (NHS 2022). Even while I was in the relationship, I experienced all of these to some extent, but their intensity increased exponentially when I left for good. The flashbacks are visceral —the smells, sounds, images, emotions all return. In nightmares, these are amplified and distorted, they circle and fold back on themselves, and it all remains after waking. When I left, I experienced a weird un-worlding, a dis-embedding (53) from the simulated world created for me; the nightmares no longer felt contained, and I had no one to authenticate my reality for me. But he wasn't the weird thing, I was. I lived in both worlds, and I was the doorway between them. The dreams weren't just somatic flashbacks —they were re-interpretations of sensation and emotion, all manifesting and culminating in the same inevitable *wyrd* end. I was living in these dreamlands, and a thousand others, in a constant state of dread. These constant oneirological transgressions are a weird *both-*

and in which I was "*both* material *and* immaterial" (Poller 1268). I was both embedded and detached, both the revenant irrupting out of dream and the haunted.

"Paradox of Legibility"

"Women navigate a paradox when they become survivors: they must tell stories of psychological recovery, even as those stories obfuscate the very infrastructure of violence...the medicalization of institutions surrounding domestic violence creates conditions under which women must prove their survivorhood, performing psychological recovery to achieve institutional legibility" (Sweet 1)

When I left my ex in January 2021, the unreality of my lived experience persisted. There was no way to explain to anyone what had happened, and the few times I attempted to, it was like a story, like I was recounting a cautionary tale in fable, and it was received that way. I had lived according to cosmologies invented by someone else, who shaped and controlled my world. I felt alien, and feral, with no language to describe my life or my self. There is no instruction manual I could write for surviving a family annihilation. There is no way for me to make legible the language I learned to survive, by making myself small enough to thread a needle, by flattening the affect of my voice,

by hyperfixating only on him and his every need. If reality is language, my reality was him and it's nothing comprehensible.

When I was still in it, I thought no one cared about people in my position unless they'd escaped and survived, having clawed their way out of danger to become something dignified and familiar, a complete story. It turns out, even when you've escaped, it doesn't matter. The result is immaterial. If you're lucky, your story is told on a podcast, but that's usually only if you're also very unlucky and dead. If you aren't hurt enough, there's nothing to see. If you're too hurt, it hurts someone else to look at and you should probably apologize. You are a weird contaminant of an unintelligible world.

Collage

Anti-blackness is a "spatial practice" and functions by positing blackness as perpetually "out of place" or as "placeless" (Hawthorne 5), evoking Lovecraft's own titles, "Color Out of Space" and "The Shadow Out of Time" which Fisher attributes to weird irruptions (20), referring to things that are "'cut out' of their proper place" (21) like montage or collage, and even further, signifying "that which is beyond…as we ordinarily understand and experience it" (21). Thus, being black in America (being homeless, and

being isolated by intimate partner violence) is an experience of being weird, an alienated existence shaped by the perception of being weird.

With this collage interpretation in mind, I offer an exploration of Wangechi Mutu's work as a model of how I want my own work to decenter or trouble the center of horror, dread, and anxiety in the weird. Mutu's collage work, in its grotesque porosity and destabilization, is weird work. She "employs assemblage and collage techniques as a kind of refusal to answer", "a resistance to these processes of engulfment and excretion", with a grotesque quality that could be read as "a study in that process whereby black female flesh is cannibalized and digested with the animal, plant, and machinic images" (Cervenak 394). *Pretty Double-Head* (2010) shows how collage as a form can "disturb the notion of a center…to conspire against the conditions of communion" and exist as "assemblies resistant to enclosure" (395). Doing so is a recovery of black life, and "its right to dis/assemble, to undo, and work through" (397), and a resistance to composition as a "heteronormative and ableist process" that disavows a "disorderly array of possible human desires and embodiments" (McRuer 150). Cervenak invokes Fred Moten to describe Mutu's work as a "fugitive field of unowning" (397).

I write my experience of illegibility and of horrors eclipsing horrors, but mostly I write what I see in my head and what I've felt, and I have found that, often, to describe those as specifically as possible, I am drawn farther away from the literal things I'm describing. Octavia Butler describes something that's perhaps similar in a 1991 interview with Samuel Delany, a "primitive hypertext" which she describes as having several books on disparate subjects open around her house and bouncing from one to another again and again, as the ideas bounce off each other in her head. Harrison Rae relates primitive hypertext to an excerpt from Virginia Woolf's *Street Haunting: A London Adventure* (1930), in which "objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our experience", and explores primitive hypertext as a decompositional tool of creative resistance, "resisting linearity…resisting things making sense and being computable" (2023), resisting a "grid of discipline" that constrains our lives and self expression (De Certeau).

I've realized that I have used darkness as refuge for a long time. In moments of panic, I retreated to a windowless bathroom where I felt I could breathe. The alternative was that the person I lived with would hold me, and squeeze me, until I (could slow my breath and still my body enough that he would believe I had) calmed down. Then, years

later, when our situation stabilized, I would imagine a blackness oozing over my vision, overtaking everything. In 2014, I wrote a story in which motes of dust collect in the eyes until you "accept the nothingness and become it, joining the void". In 2017, I wrote "And clouds / on clouds / on clouds on clouds / make the sky / go black". For a while, I thought it was an ideation in response to living (see above), but now I think it was meditation on something infinitely more expansive than the enclosure I knew. Blackness held possibility, and my brain had finally found a way to conceive of an otherwise. And maybe it was a place to hide, maybe it was safe. A field of blackness has no center, it is empty and it is full. I can't be seen, but I can't be unseen. I am myself, I am something else, and I am nothing. The black rectangles of yore weren't all terrible — Robert Fludd's 1617 astronomical notebooks feature a black page with the inscription "*Et sic in infinitum*" or "And so on to infinity". Turning to Mutu's sculptures, *Mama Ray* (2020) and *Crocodylus* (2020) look like they both emerge and are on the cusp of being reabsorbed by this infinity.

Cecilio M. Cooper's exploration of Vantablack (an exclusive, commodified superlative black synthetic coating) comes to similar conclusions, that blackness serves as a "fecund seedbed for lifeforms" and is "a subsurface phenomenon that iterates a

spectrum of vitality via spiritual liminality and organic putrefaction" (3). The formlessness of blackness indicates its "capacity for entropic disaggregation wherever it manifests". Zakiyyah Iman Jackson identifies blackness' "ability to modulate its own reflection and absorb light", its "incalculable density as well as a multidimensionality with the power to modify and conceal" (144]. Jackson's work occupies the intersection of afropessimism and queer negativity and inhumanism, exploring the ways in which humanness is defined by anti-blackness, stating that "the spectacle of 'realness' swallows transness as it does blackness" (140). Weirdness and blackness insubstantiate that spectacle of reality, moving toward the inhuman.

Weirding

Contemporary weird authors seek ways of accepting and cultivating an openness, a porousness, to the Other in this Anthropocene, "a period imbued with ecological anxieties and often experienced as a 'dis/orientation'", in which the effects are heterogeneously inequitably distributed (Turnbull et al. 1212). This approach necessitates incorporating other ways of knowing, of kin-making, and of identifying true externality. In this way, Weird texts perform social justice work in the same way that Afrofuturists like adrienne marie brown and Ytasha Womack suppose that sf

should, and they also act as "manuals which can contribute, and do work, rather than simply being reflective of culture" (1220). These works respond to ecological disorientation with horror and fascination, and show us how contact with the Weird can be generative as we shift to "learning to relate to difference and socioecological change not as monstrous and horrific, but as both productive and unsettling" (1208). This is what I am most interested in —contrasting optimistic futurist imaginings with those that both "stay with the trouble" (Haraway), in the muddy muck of the weird here now, and use dread as a speculative force. The weirdness of marginalized experience cannot be understated, and to draw those experiences and epistemologies to the surface through the strange loops of counter memory is to rescue the weird as well. There are indigenous ontologies that attribute sentience, agency, and "relational capacity" to "many 'inanimate' entities" (Luciano & Chen 195), and to accept otherness and inhumanity that disorient from the center becomes generative in processes that undo "connections and relations, which simultaneously affords opportunities for forging new ones and building new, more socially and ecologically just worlds" (1215).

Weird decay

I am a child of the dispossessed, an outcast and a refugee. An outcast bore me, and I am not certain I could be anything else. She was a compulsive, obsessive writer, and when she died, there were boxes and boxes of her writing, devolving and distorted from the traumatic unworlding of chronic othering.

"And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read."

—Alice Walker

"In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens"

My first memories are of living in Arkansas, in the same house she grew up in. The very first memory was my great grandfather in his casket in the small wooden church that stood beside the bayou, and the next is searching for plastic easter eggs in the graveyard in front of that church. Then, an enormous snapping turtle as big as me in our yard. Sitting in a canoe with my father in the bayou in the shadows of curtains of moss, eating hot fries and surrounded by water I could not drink. These images and atmospheres have been seeded since the beginning.

Tangible, paradigm-shifting progress has been achieved by asserting that the other is human, by vigilantly and constantly reiterating and reaffirming our humanness. Black queer joy and erotic power have transformed generations who have come to know the collective power of identifying and celebrating with those that are like them. But the idea of "transcending" black (and otherwise) trauma engages in the same destructive binaries, not the least of which is that there is only a before and an after, a pre—and post-, human and not, and that these are defined. A key part of the real processes of the metamorphosis (as emblematically appropriated by countless progressive movements and organizations) is the deliquescence, the decomposition of material into immaterial, the formless rearranging of matter, the energy and the loss. Decay is unsightly, inducing revulsion because of its state as a threshold with its own agency, and dread in its signification of death and a lack of agency; it is explicitly weird in its unpredictability, its ungraspability, its formlessness. bell hooks said that if you can only see the margins as a place of despair, then that is an issue of imagination; that marginality is "much more than a site of deprivation...it is also the site of radical possibility, a place of resistance" (20), and I feel the same about the magic of decay. The margins I occupy are a grotesquely porous place, expansive and blurry, where the weird irrupts blooming into the ordinary. But it isn't without deep discomfort. My traversing of worlds has revealed

the nonlinearity of my experience; as much as I'd hoped, it isn't only onwards and upwards. I keep living and re-living, caught in strange loops, mired in the *wyrd*. I know community is important, but I don't know how to be part of one. I still don't know how to describe myself. I remain feral. I am porous to a fault, conditioned to keep nothing to myself with an overdeveloped ability to suspend my disbelief. Where do I find a litany for surviving a survival? Sometimes, metamorphosis fails. Sometimes, you get stuck in the moult. You become something you didn't expect.

"There again is that notion of kind of being an alien who's just giving birth to herself."

bell hooks

Even so, I would like my stories to lean into that discomfort of weird marginality even further. To lean away from portrayals domesticated by the gaze of the center, and to illustrate unsettled, unsettling experiences so specifically that they become even more estranging, to "culminate in a kind of excess of exactitude that itself adds up to something beyond representation" ("AFTERWORD" 232). To witness decay as reality melts around us, to examine the rot. Because I have seen people I love decay and I know that it means something, that it is for something. I know that it is just as important as the skyful of bright death that signals to us each night from aeons ago. I'm not striving for humanness. I'm not trying to prove blackness, homelessness, or abuse victims have

stories worth looking at on the basis of being human because Eurocentric classifications of humanness do not include these identities or experiences. Inhuman others have been separated from humanness like the tentacular was amputated from the elusive cephalopod co-opted as a symbol of the weird. I'm striving to tell inhuman stories because the inhuman is not a static category, rather it is "a process, an unfolding"(Luciano & Chen 190), keeping weird inhuman stories undomesticated by lenses of colonialism that would interpret and ossify our unreality for us.

The weird grotesque offers itself as collage, resisting codification with infinite and formless permutations and multiplicities of capacity. As a tool for achieving kinship with other Others, the grotesque's "disarticulation…results in an altogether different democratic flexibility in which nothing is incompatible with the Other; everything co-exists, collides, and coincides" (Mukherjee & Ghosh 66). If there is any sense of hope in my stories (it's probably an accident, but) it is this possibility that the grotesque offers. I may have acquiesced to something terrible once, but I also acquiesced to the possibilities of new kinships. Maybe it's another trauma bond, but I feel most like myself when I am with those others; I learned them in a way that was my own. "I am They" (16), I am lichen, I am palustrine and passerine, I am coleopteran, I am loam, I am plasmodial slime, and I have Others more to learn.

The most vulnerable among us often choose this path of radical otherness, leaning into the dread we induce with our presence, leaning on kinships with more othered Others. Though the weird resists codification, as I think I should as an Other, a critical component of the weird is a particular kind of awe that the other induces a dreadful fascination —the "bad numinous". The grotesque that spurs this dread offers a tool of radical alterity and illegibility, providing a method of revoking the meaning assigned to monstrous others, to meaningfully "un-mean" (Miéville 382). When I had just left, when I was learning to be a person again, probing the membranes of my reality, and realizing just how feral I remained, I found these words that have become a tattoo in the rhythms of my brain, and I hope their dreadfulness thrums in the background of all my writing. Sasha Colby, Hawaiian trans activist and drag queen, said "If you're not on my level, you can't see me…All you see is my shadow. All you are is afraid." No more Eldritch, cosmically horrific words have ever been spoken; and with them I was able to widen the tear I'd opened in the veil.

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